

# Noun Countability and English-Language Pedagogy in Japan: A Re-exploration

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Linguistic interference, or negative transfer, in the acquisition of a second language is, by definition, caused by differences between the learner's first language (L1) and the second language (L2) being acquired, but not all differences are equal. Some profound differences between languages, differences that form the bases for fundamental language typologies, have little practical effect on language acquisition. In terms of basic sentence structure, for example, English and Japanese—the only two languages to be considered in detail in this paper—belong to fundamentally different categories, with English being a subject-verb-object (SVO) language, in which the verb typically comes before the direct object, and Japanese an SOV language, with the verb being sentence-final. A related syntactic difference between the two languages is the position of noun-modifying clauses, with such clauses coming after the head noun in English and before it in Japanese. But even though such differences are manifested in most sentences that are spoken or written in the two languages, they cause no significant difficulty to speakers of one language who have set out to learn the other. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that English-L1 speakers learning Japanese, once they have acquired the very basics of the language, never mistakenly form a Japanese sentence with the main verb before its direct object, and that Japanese-L1 speakers at a similar level never make the corresponding mistake in English. From the practical perspective of learners, these major typological differences between the languages are trivial.

In contrast, many trivial linguistic differences cause chronic problems for language learners. The fact that Japanese, for example, makes a phonemic distinction between short and long (or, in

some accounts of the language's phonology, single and double) vowels, such as that between /kose:/ "individuality" and /ko:se:/ "structure," or that English makes a distinction between rhotic and lateral liquid consonants, as in /raɪt/ "right" and /laɪt/ "light," seems of little consequence linguistically but causes continuing headaches for adult L1 speakers of one language using the other, even those who have spoken the target language for decades. At the grammatical level, differences that are quite simple to explain, such as the distinction in English between singular nouns to indicate the quantity of one and plural nouns to indicate quantities of two or more, or the use of the Japanese perfective verb form (usually called, somewhat misleadingly, the "past tense") to indicate completed actions, can also be chronically difficult for L1 speakers of the other language to acquire.

Language educators, of course, are well aware of which parts of a language are most difficult for their students to learn, and they naturally devote more time and energy to those areas. The English verb system, for example, contains a fair amount of morphological irregularity in the present, past, and perfect forms (*go, went, gone; drink, drank, drunk; etc.*), and so beginning and immediate students are often drilled in those forms; as a result, Japanese speakers who have learned English through the standard secondary-school curriculum usually do not have a serious problem with those verb forms and are generally able to correct their own careless mistakes. Some areas can be more intractable, however. For example, the distinction in Japanese grammar between topic and subject, as represented by the particles *wa* and *ga*, can be very difficult for adult English-L1 learners of the language to master, just as the distinction in English between definite and indefinite noun phrases, as represented by the articles *the* and *a/an*, is notoriously difficult for Japanese-L1 learners of English. These two grammatical distinctions are troublesome partly because of their complexity; entire books have been written to describe the many categories and exceptions in the usage of Japanese particles and English articles (see, for example, Chino, 1991; Noda, 1996; Brender, 1989; Higuchi, 2003), something not necessary in the case of English irregular verbs, which can be listed exhaustively in a few pages. But their intractability for adult language learners results less from the many special

cases and more from their close and subtle interaction with discourse issues, particularly the speaker's assumptions about the listener's expectations and/or knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Because those assumptions depend on the constantly-changing discourse context, it is difficult to reproduce or practice them in simple drills.

One grammatical distinction that has seemed to the author to be particularly troublesome for Japanese-L1 learners of English is that between countable and uncountable nouns. When, over the past two and a half decades, I have corrected English texts written by Japanese speakers, the second most common systematic error, after articles, has seemed to involve noun countability, and when asked to write about common mistakes made in English by Japanese speakers I have made countability one of my main topics (Gally, n.d.; Critical Writing Program, 2005; Gally, 2007). However, I have noticed that other English-L1 language educators in Japan do not seem as concerned about this issue as I have been, and I have begun to wonder if my focus on noun countability might have been more of a personal obsession than a genuinely serious problem for Japanese learners of English.

In this brief, informal study, therefore, I have decided to re-examine the importance of noun countability to the ability of Japanese learners to write English communicatively and accurately. The language examples considered here are scientific papers written in English by first-year undergraduates at the University of Tokyo. These samples were chosen partly because the students, as a group, can be considered to be successful products of the orthodox English education system in Japan, that is, the standard secondary-school curriculum supplemented, in many cases, by private preparatory-school lessons aimed at enabling the students to pass the entrance examinations of selective universities. The papers are also appropriate samples because the students had rewritten them several times, so careless errors—that is, the mistakes the students could have corrected themselves—should have been mostly eliminated, leaving only mistakes that indicate the students' incomplete acquisition of English. The results of this very preliminary investigation, it is hoped, will suggest the extent to which noun countability should or should not receive greater emphasis in English language education in Japan.

## Context and Meaning

It is somewhat misleading to speak of English nouns as being countable or uncountable. Rather, as pointed out by Allan (1980), countability is a property of the grammatical context in which a noun is used. Most nouns can be used in both countable and uncountable contexts, with some nouns being used more easily in one of those contexts than in the other.<sup>2</sup> There also exist contexts in which the countability of a noun cannot be determined.

These three categories can be summarized as follows:

	Grammatical Contexts	Examples
Countable	After an indefinite article After <i>another, each, either, every, neither, one</i> In plural form	<i>a lengthy <u>book</u>; an <u>apple</u></i> <i>another <u>day</u>; every <u>person</u></i> <i><u>books</u>; several <u>phenomena</u></i>
Uncountable	In singular form without a preceding article, determiner, or possessive In singular form following <i>enough, little, much, sufficient</i>	<i>filled with <u>water</u>; a piece of <u>equipment</u></i> <i>enough <u>food</u>; sufficient <u>explanation</u></i>
Undetermined	In singular form following <i>the, this, that</i> , or a possessive In singular form after <i>all, no, some</i> Adjectivally in singular form before another noun In titles from which articles are omitted	<i>the <u>oversight</u>; that <u>order</u>; their <u>interest</u></i> <i>There is no <u>cake</u> on the table.</i> <i>an <u>order</u> problem</i> <i>“<u>Report on Light in Ceiling of Auditorium</u>”</i>

Dictionaries targeted at learners of English often indicate whether particular headword nouns can be used in countable contexts, uncountable contexts, or both, but it should be noted that these are indications only of the general tendency. Many nouns marked in dictionaries as being in only one countability category can, in special cases, be used in the other as well. For example, the names of the chemical elements are indicated in dictionaries as being uncountable, but in scientific contexts they

can also be used countably (as in *The water molecule contains two hydrogens and one oxygen.*). Even singular proper nouns (*John, Russia, etc.*), which are generally regarded as uncountable, are sometimes used in countable contexts (*He doesn't look like a John to me.; It would have taken several Polands to defeat a Prussia.*).<sup>3</sup> Some nouns, though, like the countable *chair* and *cup* and the uncountable *equipment*, are employed by native speakers of English in the opposite context only in nonce usages (*We don't have enough chair for a big man like him to sit in.*).

Fluent speakers of English, of course, learn the countability categories of particular nouns not from dictionaries—in fact, dictionaries aimed at native speakers of English do not even indicate countability—but from noting, when hearing or seeing a word used, what countability category is indicated by the context. As in the case of definite and indefinite articles in English (Gally, 2009c), the countability of nouns is generally ignored in the school and other prescriptive grammars through which most English-L1 speakers acquire their conscious knowledge of the language's grammar. Nevertheless, the countability category favored by any particular noun is remarkably consistent in the speech and writing of L1 speakers of the same English dialect, suggesting that the category is acquired simultaneously with the word's pronunciation and meaning.

Countability is important for communication because, when a noun can be used either countably or uncountably, its meaning is usually different in the two contexts. It is here that countability raises its greatest difficulty for learners of English, for the manner in which the meaning varies can itself vary greatly depending on the particular noun. Occasionally, the countability-dependent meanings can be predicted from the noun's referent. The names of animals that are eaten by human beings, for example, are countable when referring to the entire animal (*a chicken; six monkeys*) but uncountable when referring to the meat of those animals (*I don't like chicken.; People in some countries eat monkey.*). Similarly, names of fruit are countable when referring to whole fruit (*He ate three oranges.*) but uncountable when referring to their flavors or colors (*She tasted orange in the cocktail.; Orange was chosen for the wallpaper.*).

In many other cases, however, the differences between the countable and uncountable meanings of any particular noun

cannot be predicted, as those meanings are peculiar to the noun. In the following examples, written by the author and taken from Critical Writing Program (2005), [C] indicates the countable usage and [U] the uncountable:

**night** [C] the dark period of a particular 24-hour day. *I stayed up two nights to finish my term paper.*

**night** [U] the period of each 24-hour day when the sky is dark. *Night is an exciting time for me.*

**government** [C] the people who have the power to manage and control a country. *The election brought a new government to power.*

**government** [U] the process of managing and controlling a country. *An essential component of a stable society is good gov-ernment.*

**language** [C] a particular system for communicating through creative combinations of words and symbols. *Few people speak more than two or three languages.*

**language** [U] the use of words and symbols in creative combinations for communication. *Researchers do not yet agree on whether any nonhuman animals have language.*

**light** [C] a device that produces the medium by which people and animals see. *We installed six new lights in the garage.*

**light** [U] the medium by which people and animals see. *There is not enough light in the garage to read.*

**face** [C] the front part of a person's head. *You could see the embarrassment on their faces.*

**face** [U] a person's honor or reputation. *He suffered a serious loss of face when the project he had sponsored failed.*

**room** [C] an enclosed area inside a building. *Our apartment has four rooms.*

**room** [U] available space. *There is no room here for another desk.*

**interest** [C] a topic that one enjoys studying and thinking about. *Her interests include sumo and the history of the saxophone.*

**interest** [U] a percentage paid or charged on money borrowed or lent. *The church does not charge interest for loans to its members.*

**order** [C] a request to purchase something. *The waiter took seven orders in just five minutes.*

**order** [U] the state of being arranged in a regular fashion. *The office manager wants all documents to be kept in good order.*

**matter** [C] an issue, problem, or task. *I have to clear up several important matters before I can take a vacation.*

**matter** [U] the material of which the universe is made. *Astrophysicists believe that matter originated in the Big Bang.*

In some of the examples above, such as *language* and *government*, it might seem that each countable-uncountable difference is similar, that is, merely a difference between a specific instance of an entity and that entity in general. However, each case has unique characteristics. It would be very difficult for a naïve learner to predict, for example, that if *language* [U] refers to the general concept then *language* [C] must refer to a system of communication such as French or Swahili; it would be equally reasonable to guess that *language* [C] means “a word” or “a message.” Similarly, *government* [C] might be guessed incorrectly to mean “a particular application of management or control on a national level, such as a law or regulation.” In the case of words like *order* and *matter*, guessing even roughly the meaning in one countability category from the meaning in the other would be impossible. In every case, each meaning must be learned separately.

It is true that, when an L2 speaker of English uses a noun in the wrong countability category, the discourse context is often sufficient to prevent misunderstanding. In a conversation about pets, for example, if an L2 speaker says *I like cat more than dog*, the listeners will understand, perhaps without even noticing the mistake, that the speaker is referring to living animals, not to meat taken from animal carcasses. In writing, however, such mistakes can be more serious, as they can make the text seem awkward, unnatural, or even comical to readers. An academic paper submitted to a journal with many countability errors, for example, is likely to be rejected on language grounds alone, even

if the content is perfectly understandable.

Furthermore, genuine misunderstandings occasionally can occur. A few years ago, in a conversation in English about Japanese and American higher education, a Japanese undergraduate asked me, "I hear that universities in the United States have better scholarship than in Japan. Is that true?" I launched into what I hoped was a fair-minded response about the difficulty of comparing the quality of learning and research between two countries as a whole and about the overall worth of Japanese research universities in comparison to American. Only when my interlocutor, looking increasingly confused, rephrased his question to mention money did I understand that his intended meaning had been "... have better scholarships . . ." Because he had used the word *scholarship* in an uncountable context, I had interpreted the word in its uncountable meaning ("learning and research"); the student's intention, though, had been the countable meaning ("money provided to university students to support their studies").

## Countability and English-Language Education

Learners of English who wish to speak and write English as naturally and accurately as possible therefore need to acquire the grammar and semantics of countability. Specifically, they need to know the appropriate syntactic contexts for countable and uncountable usages of nouns, and they need to know each noun's meaning in those contexts. In Japan, the general rules are covered in the grammatical supplements to some English-Japanese dictionaries and in student grammars of English (such as, for example, Watanuki, Miyakawa, Sugai, & Takamatsu, 2000, pp. 81–83), and with practice a diligent student can acquire those rules adequately. To apply those rules, however, learners must have learned the preferred countability categories and the countability-dependent meanings of each English noun that they use. In this regard, English pedagogy has seemed to me to be inadequate. Although the English-Japanese and English-English dictionaries used by Japanese secondary-school students do mark the countability of nouns, many textbooks and vocabulary books do not. For example, in one of a popular series of vocabulary books used by students studying for entrance examinations, the

nouns *room*, *interest*, and *order* are treated as follows (Hitosugi, 2005). (The English words given in brackets are my translations of the preceding Japanese word or words. Pronunciations, cross-references, information about other parts of speech, and Japanese translations of example phrases and sentences have been omitted.)

**room** 空間 [a space]、場所 [a place]; 部屋 [an enclosed area inside a building]; 余地 [available space]、可能性 [a possibility]. *give room to ~. There is room for ~. That old chest of drawers takes up too much room.*

**interest** 利子、利息 [a percentage paid or charged on money borrowed or lent]; 興味 [a topic that one enjoys studying and thinking about]、関心 [concern, attention]; 重要性、重大性 [importance]; 利益 [a benefit]、ため [a purpose]. *an interest rate. a matter of great interest. I have been paying 3 percent interest on the housing loan.*

**order** 順序 [a sequence]; 秩序 [the state of being arranged in a regular fashion]; 注文 [a request to purchase something]; 命令 [a command]. *in alphabetical order.*

A student acquiring vocabulary from this vocabulary book can, if sufficiently sensitive to the differences between countable and uncountable nouns, infer from the example phrases and sentences that the “available space” meaning of *room* is uncountable, but no information is provided to show that *room* is countable when used in the meaning “an enclosed area inside a building.” Similarly, the countability category can be inferred for two senses of *interest* (“concern, attention,” from the second example, and “money paid on a debt,” from the third) and for one sense of *order* (“a sequence”), but not for the other senses. In any case, few Japanese secondary school students are knowledgeable enough about countability categories to make even those inferences.

Of course, grammars, textbooks, dictionaries, and vocabulary books are not the only sources of knowledge about a second language’s grammar and vocabulary. As students are exposed to their L2 through reading and listening and as they practice their skills through speaking and writing, they also acquire knowl-

edge about the language unconsciously, in a manner similar to that employed by native speakers. In fact, one might even say that the goal of second-language education is to give learners enough basic conscious knowledge about a language so that they can continue to learn unconsciously through real-life exposure to and use of that language. If an important component of the language can be acquired by intermediate or advanced learners on their own, then there might be no need to teach and drill it intensively at an earlier stage. On the other hand, if a component of the language is resistant to unconscious acquisition by adult learners—as the discourse-dependent usages of particles in Japanese and articles in English seem to be—then explicit explanations and drilling would seem to be necessary if learners are to acquire that component. The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate whether countability is a component of the latter type, that is, to determine whether more attention should be paid to countability at the beginning and intermediate stages of English-language learning in Japan or whether such additional efforts are unnecessary.

The texts examined for this study were chosen randomly from among papers written by first-year undergraduate science students at the University of Tokyo for the Active Learning of English for Science Students (ALESS) course during winter semester 2008–2009 and summer semester 2009–2010. During this required one-semester course, which is taught to groups of about 15 students each by 10 English-L1 teachers and is conducted entirely in English, students learn the basics of academic and scientific research-paper writing and oral presentation, they design and implement a simple scientific experiment, and they write a research paper in the standard introduction-methods-results-discussion format about their experiment and give a five-minute class presentation on the same topic. (For more information about the ALESS program, see Gally, 2009a, 2009b.) The course takes a process-based approach to writing: each section of the paper is rewritten several times based on in-class peer review, teacher comments, optional consultations with graduate-student tutors at a pilot writing center associated with the program, and the students' own reconsideration of the content; the teachers and tutors do not, as a rule, provide line-by-line error correction on either the drafts or the finished papers. These

papers should therefore be a good representation of the most accurate English—that is, the English most free of careless errors—that successful products of the Japanese secondary education system can produce. If the papers show that insufficient acquisition of countability seriously interferes with understanding or English-L1-speaker acceptance of the students' writing, then greater emphasis on countability in English-language education in Japan would seem to be necessary. If, on the other hand, countability errors are relatively insignificant, then the issue would presumably not require additional attention.

### In Lieu of a Methodology

Because the purpose of this study was assess the current status of a select group of students' ability with regard to one aspect of English grammar in light of the author's previous impressions of that ability, the method employed was qualitative, even impressionistic. I read through the selected texts carefully, looking for countability errors, especially those that might interfere with understanding, and assessed holistically the significance of those errors in comparison with other language issues in the papers, including other grammatical features, vocabulary choice, and naturalness.

To illustrate this (non)methodology, the following is my analysis of the opening paragraph of one student paper.<sup>4</sup> The nouns that should be countable based on the syntactic context are marked with a single underline, the uncountable nouns with a double underline, and the undetermined nouns with a wavy underline. The pronouns *one* and *this* are ignored, and *acidity* in the phrase "the mode of the distribution and acidity" is marked with a question mark because it is unclear whether or not the noun is meant to be modified by one of the preceding definite articles.

The effect of <sup>(1)</sup>acid rain on <sup>(2)</sup>plants is widely recognized as one of the natural <sup>(3)</sup>phenomena. For example, the destruction of a <sup>(4)</sup>rain forest has occurred due to this effect. However, the correlation between the degree of <sup>(5)</sup>acidity and the growth of <sup>(6)</sup>plants, and the exact amount of <sup>(7)</sup>pH which exterminates the <sup>(8)</sup>plants are not clear. In this research, two

<sup>(9)</sup>kinds of <sup>(10)</sup>plants were grown in the different acidity of <sup>(11)</sup>liquid for ten <sup>(12)</sup>days. The <sup>(13)</sup>results showed the same shape of <sup>(14)</sup>distribution of <sup>(15)</sup>plants stem <sup>(16)</sup>length, although there were <sup>(17)</sup>interrelationship between the mode of the distribution and <sup>(7)</sup>acidity. This may indicate that there is the strong individual influence on <sup>(18)</sup>plants. The <sup>(19)</sup>results of this research may be applied to <sup>(20)</sup>anticipation of <sup>(21)</sup>productivity of <sup>(22)</sup>crops under <sup>(23)</sup>acid rain.

As indicated by the superscript numbers, 23 nouns in this paragraph are used in countability-determined contexts. For example, (2) and (3) are marked as countable because the nouns are plural and (4) because the noun comes after the indefinite article *a*, and (1) and (5) are marked as uncountable because they are singular nouns without preceding articles, determiners, or possessives.

Several likely grammatical errors involving articles or plurality—factors that are related to countability—can be observed here. While the judgments of native speakers might vary, most would probably agree that, in this context, *one of the natural phenomena* at (3) should be the indefinite *a natural phenomenon*; this should not be considered a countability error, however, as the plural *phenomena* can occur after the definite article *the* as it does here. The singular countable *a rain forest* at (4) is problematic in terms of meaning, as it seems to suggest that only one rain forest has been affected by acid rain; either *rain forests* or the uncountable *rain forest* (meaning “rain forests in general”) is probably more correct in terms of meaning. The plural *plants* used as a modifier at (15) should probably be either the singular *plant* or the possessive *plants’* or *the plants’*; it is unclear which is meant by the writer. The insertion of *the* before both (20) and (21) seems desirable to me, but the omission of the definite article in such contexts is occasionally seen in edited scientific writing; in any case, both *anticipation* and *productivity* are normally uncountable, so their use in their original contexts does not raise any countability issues. (Semantically, *prediction* would be more appropriate than *anticipation*.) The only clear countability error in this passage is (17), as *interrelationship* is normally countable; because the verb *were* is plural, however, it is not clear from this paragraph alone whether the student’s mistake was the use of a sin-

gular countable noun without an article or the omission of the plural suffix *-s* after *interrelationship*. In any case, the use of *interrelationship* as an (apparently) uncountable noun does not seem to be a serious mistake, as no misunderstanding is likely to result.

In this way, a total of 40 student papers containing about 45,000 words of text were read carefully to assess qualitatively the frequency and seriousness of countability errors. A handful of the papers examined were ignored because their overall language level was too low to separate countability issues meaningfully from vocabulary, number, and other problems; for those students, the assigned task seems to have been too challenging for their current English ability. Another handful of papers had no serious English problems whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> Most of the papers examined, however, while understandable, exhibited a significant number of grammatical and other language errors. The following are 10 typical examples, taken from 10 different papers, with countability errors marked in bold.

- (1) To test the relation between the concentration of alcohol and its burning, 99.5% C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O was prepared because it is main **component** of liquor and **new car's** fuel.
- (2) Generally, a material that contains larger **amount** of air is more efficient at insulating because the heat has more difficulty in traveling through the air than through material
- (3) Through this experiment, they proved that apples secrete ethylene and it hastens the separation of **camellia's** leaves and stems.
- (4) To test whether **slug** has learning ability, I set up the passage that was divided into two, and I had a slug walk on this.
- (5) The result indicates that **battery** in lower temperature save more electricity.
- (6) The result of this experiment shows that spring **constant** decreases as **diameter** of **spring's** ring increases, and this relationship might be approximated with a power law of the diameter.
- (7) The vessels got some constant light from fluorescent **lamp**.
- (8) This means that the intermolecular force between **mole-**

**cule** of water and oil is weak.

- (9) Theoretical **system** of thermodynamics shows that specific heat at constant volume is described as  $\partial U \partial T$ .
- (10) To find out the relationship between **wavelength** of colors and the absorbance of sunlight, I used glasses, tap water, origami, and thermometers.

A common characteristic of all of these mistakes is that a singular noun has been used in an uncountable syntactic context in a meaning which requires a countable or undetermined context. In (1), for example, *component* in the sense of “a part of a larger whole” is a countable noun and is marked as such in learners’ dictionaries, but the syntactic context of the noun phrase which it heads—that is, not being preceded by an article, determiner, possessive, etc.—is appropriate only for uncountable nouns. This same error is repeated in all of the other examples highlighted above.

The reasons the writers made these particular errors are unclear, but some possibilities come to mind. Several of the nouns, such as *amount*, *constant*, *diameter*, *system*, and *wavelength*, are abstract; learners who have been taught or have noticed on their own that abstract nouns are more often uncountable than concrete nouns are might make the reasonable, though incorrect, assumption that these nouns are uncountable as well. This explanation seems particularly likely in the case of (10), because, as shown by the correct use of *glasses* in the countable meaning of “a beverage container made of glass,” of *tap water* and *origami* in uncountable contexts, and of *thermometers* countably, the writer seems, in general, quite sensitive to issues of grammatical number and countability.

However, incorrect inference from an noun’s abstractness would not explain the mistaken uncountable use of the singular *slug*, *battery*, and *lamp*, which refer to concrete objects. In the case of (5), the use of *battery* in the singular might be a careless plurality mistake, because the verb that *battery* controls (“save”) is plural and because the writer used *batteries* appropriately in other nearby sentences. The omission of *The* from before *theoretical system* in (9) might have been careless as well (rather than a mistaken inference from the phrase’s abstract meaning) as the writer did use the definite article with the same phrase elsewhere in the

paper.

In some cases, the mistakes might have resulted in part from the writers using words that they have only recently learned and about which they have little or no exposure-based knowledge. Nouns like *camellia*, *slug*, and *wavelength* do not appear on most word lists used as the basis for high school textbooks, vocabulary books, and university English examinations in Japan, so the writers might have learned them from Japanese-English dictionaries or online glossaries, which often do not mark countability of English nouns, while writing their papers.

Among the papers examined, only one apparent instance of the opposite countability error—an uncountable noun used in a countable context—was noted:

- (11) And, if they [athletes] find best movements, they will do better **performances**.

In the context of this paper, which compared the velocity of baseballs thrown overhand and underhand, the uncountable *performance* (“the degree of skill or success with which something is accomplished”) would be more appropriate than the countable (“a demonstration of skill, art, or entertainment in front of an audience”). A reader not accustomed to interpreting the intended meanings of countability errors might be misled by this mistake. This was the only instance found, in any of the surveyed texts, of a likely misinterpretation of meaning resulting from a countability error.

## Conclusion

The results of this informal study cast significant doubt on the validity of author’s long-held impression that a relative disregard for noun countability in English education in Japan results in excessively delayed acquisition of this grammatical feature by students who have gone through the standard education system. While countability mistakes were found, they were vastly outnumbered by other errors, and only one case in which readers might misunderstand the writer’s intention due to a countability error was noticed. No support was found for a recommendation that greater emphasis should be placed on noun

countability in beginning or intermediate English-language instruction to Japanese-L1 learners.

Some other types of errors, though, do raise concerns. Many of those other mistakes involved matters that are notoriously difficult in any case, such as word choice or definiteness. But, as shown in the examples quoted in this paper, a relatively simple component of English grammar, one that is related to countability, was involved in a large number of careless mistakes. That component is the distinction between singular and plural in nouns and verbs and the related issue of number agreement. As noted by Takada (2004, p. v), even at selective Japanese universities undergraduates who have studied English for six years or more before entering university frequently make number-agreement and other plurality-related mistakes. The following are a few examples, each taken from a different ALESS paper:

This experiment tested the hypothesis that all ions prevent apples from being discolored and that **nonionic substance don't** keep apples from being discolored.

**Each plants** respond just a little to the light.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to know that **ash have** the nature that promotes combustion.

That suggests that the greater **amount** of light more strongly **inhibit** the stalks to grow.

Also, the **spiders tends** to move quickly and rip holes on the web after consumption [of] alcohol.

**Komaba** also **use** much energy for research and education. In spite of that, Komaba seems as cool as parks.

The frequency of these number mistakes can be explained by the fact that Japanese does not mark most nouns for number and has no number marking of verbs at all; in other words, the lack of grammatical number in Japanese interferes with learners' acquisition of that component in English. However, unlike the semantic component of noun countability, the complexity of which necessarily delays its acquisition, number agreement in English

is, for the most part, simple, even mechanical. Particularly in texts that are repeatedly revised, as in the case of the papers written for the ALESS class, it should be possible for students to eliminate nearly all such number agreement errors on their own. The fact that they do not suggests that more practice in the rules of English grammatical number is needed at the high school and university levels. Such practice might improve writing accuracy in the closely related area of countability as well.

## Notes

1. Stated briefly, one major discourse-dependent difference between *wa* and *ga* hinges on the writer or speaker's assessment of what the reader or listener expects to be told at that point in the discourse, while a major difference between *the* and *a/an* hinges on an assessment of what the reader or listener already knows. It seems that native speakers of one language, habituated to assessing unconsciously in real time either the listener's current desired knowledge or current actual knowledge, find it very difficult to acquire the ability to make the opposite assessment automatically as required by the other language.
2. In the paper cited, Allan describes several countability tests that, when applied to the use of nouns in his dialect of English, imply the existence of eight levels of countability. For the sake of simplicity, and because, as Allan notes, the exact number of levels is likely to vary among dialects, in the present study I will speak only of countable and uncountable contexts, ignoring the finer gradations, and will use the terms "countable noun" to refer to "a noun that, in a particular sense, is normally used only in countable contexts" and "uncountable noun" to mean "a noun that, in a particular sense, is normally used only in uncountable contexts."
3. Allan (1980) argues that, once it is used in a countable context, a noun ceases to be a proper name, as it no longer "uniquely labels and guarantees the existence of the referent or set of referents (in either the real or a fictional world)."
4. The authors of all papers examined for this study gave written permission for their texts to be used and quoted in studies such as this as long as their anonymity is preserved.
5. Because of academic issues related to grading and to the lower-division students' competition for promotion to the upper division, it is not possible to track ALESS students into different classes according to their language ability. While the ALESS curriculum does seem to be appropriate in terms of difficulty for most of the students, a minority

would probably be better off in more basic classes. In contrast, a few students possess native or near-native English ability, often because they have received at least part of their education in schools, either in Japan or elsewhere, where the language of instruction was English. Although the course is not challenging for these students in a linguistic sense, it is nevertheless hoped that they benefit from exposure to new knowledge regarding the structure of scientific papers and other topics covered in the course.

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