

Usage of Countable and Uncountable Nouns by Japanese Learners of English

—Two Studies Using the ICLE Error-tagged Japanese Sub-corpus—

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Abstract

This paper discusses two studies which examine the usage of countable and uncountable nouns in the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus. The first study examines major tendencies in the misuse of countable and uncountable nouns as found in the above corpus. Next, the second study examines how learners lexically determine that a noun can be used in both countable and uncountable forms. As a result, errors are classified into 3 types: errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun, errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun, and errors occurring when deciding between countable and uncountable nouns depending on the context. Based on the results of the second study, errors related to determining when to use a noun as countable or uncountable depending on context account for over 60% of the errors revealing a major tendency in the misuse of these nouns. It indicates that Japanese learners of English tend to have a fixed notion that specific nouns, especially abstract nouns, are uncountable. Results of the two studies suggest that recognition of countability or uncountability by Japanese EFL learners may be affected by the concept of a noun's concreteness or abstractness.

1. Introduction

For Japanese learners of English, the concept of countable and uncountable nouns is difficult because it has no grammatical equivalent in Japanese. These studies use an error-tagged sub-corpus, part of the Japanese learners' written corpus of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), to examine the usage of countable and uncountable nouns with a focus on examples of their misuse in the corpus. They, however, are more a preliminary study of the general misuses of countable and uncountable nouns appearing in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus rather than a full-fledged study of the use of countable and uncountable nouns by Japanese learners of English.

2. Literature Review

First, we would like to look at how the countability of nouns in English is described in usage and grammar books, reference books for learners, and similar works.

The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999: 243) states that "The use of a noun as countable or uncountable is lexically restricted, and the difference in meaning varies to a large extent with the individual noun.... Many nouns, which are countable in

their basic meaning have uncountable uses.” Moreover, many nouns are not specifically classified as countable or uncountable; rather, a noun that is normally considered uncountable can be used as a countable noun depending on the context and vice versa.

A Comprehensive Descriptive Grammar of English (1991: 39) states that “Nouns are used either as count nouns (countable nouns, countables) or as mass nouns (uncountables). A mass noun refers to a continuous (homogeneous) entity. This means that the referent is ‘the same all the way through,’ so that the noun can be used not only to indicate the referent as a whole, but also to refer to portions of it.” Examples of uncountable nouns include “beer,” “money,” “gold,” “love,” “light,” “English,” “work,” “news,” “advice,” “courage,” “information,” and “knowledge”. In contrast, *A Comprehensive Descriptive Grammar of English* states with regard to singular countable nouns that “A singular count noun refers to a discontinuous (heterogeneous) object. This means that the noun can refer to the object (unit) as a whole, but not to parts of it.” Examples of this type of noun include “book,” “bill,” “chair,” “John,” and “pencil.” In addition, *A Comprehensive Descriptive Grammar of English* explains that “With count nouns, quantification means references to a number of units. Count nouns can therefore occur in the singular or in the plural.” Moreover, *A Comprehensive Descriptive Grammar of English* states that “The same noun can sometimes be a count noun in one meaning and a mass noun in another.” For example,

- a. Window-panes are made of *glass*. (mass noun)
- b. The table was full of empty *glasses*. (count noun)
- a. There is a little *truth* in this theory. (mass noun)
- b. This theory runs counter to the fundamental *truths* of modern science. (count noun)

(Declerck, 1991: 40)

Moreover, Mizuno (2000: 170), drawing upon Jespersen’s *Essentials of English Grammar*, defines a countable noun as a ‘thing word’ that is concrete and has form; such ‘thing words,’ he continues, include physical entities such as “boys” and “cars” as well as non-physical entities such as “words,” “ideas,” “events,” and “laughs.” In contrast, an uncountable noun is a formless ‘mass word’ that is universal and abstract. These ‘mass words’ also include physical entities such as “water,” “butter,” “tea,” and “air” as well as non-physical entities such as “leisure,” “music,” “success,” and “safety.”

In addition, caution is required with regard to noun countability because in reality quite a number of nouns can be used as countable or uncountable nouns. In the example below, “fish” in a. is considered a ‘mass word’ with universal and abstract continuity, so it is an uncountable noun. In contrast, “fish” in b. is an example of a noun of multitude; the object as a whole is initially considered a continuous collection but at the same time individual members of the collection are also perceived, so the noun takes a plural verb.

- a. I like *fish* better than meat.
- b. Are there *fish* in the moat?

(Mizuno, 2000: 172)

The final description of noun countability cited here is from Ishiguro's *Comprehensive English Forest* (2003: 431–432), a reference book for learners of English. In *Comprehensive English Forest*, Ishiguro classifies common nouns (nouns that can be used to commonly represent things or people of the same type) and collective nouns (nouns referring to a collection of people or things) as countable nouns. He states, however, that material nouns (nouns referring to a substance without a definite form), abstract nouns (nouns referring to something abstract and without concrete form), and proper nouns (nouns referring to something specific like a person or place's name) are uncountable nouns.

Additionally, the explanation in *Comprehensive English Forest* states that caution is required since a noun need not necessarily belong to one category or the other and can be a countable or uncountable noun depending on meaning.

With regard to noun countability, such usage and grammar books, references for learners, and similar works differentiate between countable and uncountable on the basis of whether or not something has a concrete form or if it can be perceived as the one despite being a word that expresses an abstract concept. Moreover, these works also call for caution when the same noun can be used in both countable and uncountable forms. Referring to the descriptions of nouns in these usage and grammar books and similar works, this paper seeks to study the usage of countable and uncountable nouns in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus.

3. Data Used

The ICLE project has collected argumentative essays by advanced learners of English with different mother tongues from 21 countries around the world. A sub-corpus of this project is a written corpus by Japanese learners of English (over 200,000 words). Over 50,000 words were randomly selected from this corpus and errors were tagged with specific error tags to produce an ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus that was used in this study. Detailed items regarding tagging have been agreed upon in order to allow international comparison of error-tagged corpora among some of the participants in the ICLE project. The ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus also followed these steps, and tagging was done per the steps below.

- 1) Over 50,000 random words were selected from the Japanese corpus to produce an ICLE sub-corpus.
- 2) Native speakers of English read through the corpus, noted errors, and made corrections.
- 3) Errors noted in sub-corpus files were tagged using designated error tags and corrections

were entered.

- 4) The error-tagged corpus was re-read and inspected to verify that corrections by the native speakers of English had been accurately entered in the sub-corpus.

The overview of the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus is shown in Table 1.

Error tags for the error-tagged sub-corpus were generally classified into 8 types. With the amount of total errors representing 100%, respective quantities of errors in ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus were compared, as shown in Table 2.

Errors with countable and uncountable nouns as were covered in this study were classified as lexico-grammatical errors, the eighth category in the table below. These lexico-grammatical errors accounted for 8.17% of total errors. Mis-combination of prepositions with adjectives, nouns, complement phrases/clauses, and intransitive verbs in particular was frequent, and misuse of countable and uncountable nouns was also often observed.

Table 1 Overview of the ICLE Error-tagged Japanese Sub-corpus

Type of corpus	Argumentative essay
Total number of words	53,573
Total number of files	103
Total number of errors	7,524

Table 2 Comparison of ICLE Error Tag Classifications and Respective Errors

(1) Formal Errors	6.25%	Errors in form or spelling
(2) Grammatical Errors	42.53%	Errors with articles, adjectives, nouns, verbs, auxiliary verbs, other parts of speech, etc.
(3) Lexical Errors	16.25%	Errors with conjunctions, conjunctives, idioms, or other word selection
(4) Punctuation Errors	7.32%	Omission or unnecessary inclusion of punctuation marks
(5) Register Errors	0.78%	Phrases or expressions inappropriate to an argumentative essay
(6) Style Errors	10.39%	Sentence that is incomplete or unclear
(7) Word Errors	8.29%	Omission or error in word order
(8) Lexico-Grammatical Errors	8.17%	Errors with an adjective and the complement that follows; a preposition or conjunction and the complement that follows; a noun and the complement or preposition that follows; countable and uncountable nouns; a preposition and the complement that follows; or a verb and the complement or preposition that follows

4. Analysis of Data

A search using *WordSmith Tools* for text analysis identified 180 examples of the misuse of countable and uncountable nouns in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus.

As mentioned, descriptions with regard to noun countability in usage and grammar books, references for learners, and similar works differentiate between countable and uncountable on the basis of whether or not something has a concrete form or if it can be perceived as the one despite being a word that expresses an abstract concept. Moreover, the above mentioned works also advised caution when the same noun can be used in both countable and uncountable forms. The first study examined major tendencies in the misuse of countable and uncountable nouns found in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus. Then, the second study examined how learners lexically determine that a noun can be used in both countable and uncountable forms. Finally, the researcher attempted to analyze misuse of countable and uncountable nouns by Japanese learners of English.

4.1. Types of Errors with Countable and Uncountable Nouns

In the first study, all examples with an error tag for countable or uncountable nouns were further checked manually in order to provide detailed analysis of errors with countable and uncountable nouns in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus. As a result, errors were classified into 3 types: errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun, errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun, and errors occurring when deciding between countable and uncountable nouns depending on context. For convenience, these categories were designated from A-C.

A: Sample errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun

- 1) They can use English and read *literatures* in English.
- 2) Certainly, having a lot of *vocabularies* are very useful.
- 3) One of the demerits is annoying *mails*.

B: Sample errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun

- 4) He was taken to the *headquarter* for interrogation.
- 5) I want to use *task* in everyday English lessons.
- 6) We do not have the accurate knowledge about the *effect* of radiation.

C: Sample errors when deciding between countable and uncountable nouns based on context

- 7) We must have freedom of expression and *moral*.
- 8) My opinion is that government should regulate *contents* from servers in Japan.
- 9) To be able to use English will lead to understanding different *culture* of the world.
- 10) We do not need special *regulation* for the Internet.

4.2. Study 1: Frequency of Errors by Type

In Study 1, the frequency of each of the 3 types of errors, categories A-C above, was studied. On the basis of this frequency, Table 3 was created and errors were classified by frequency.

Table 3 Proportions of Errors with Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Type of error	Error frequency	Percentage
A: errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun	31	17.2%
B: errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun	34	18.9%
C: errors when deciding between countable and uncountable nouns based on context	115	63.9%
Total	180	100.0%

Results of analysis indicated that, as shown in Table 3, Category C, i.e. errors deciding whether a noun should be countable or uncountable depending on meaning, resulted in 115 errors in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus used in this study; this category accounted for 63.9% of all countable/uncountable errors. This was followed by Category B, errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun, which resulted in 34 errors and accounted for 18.9% of all countable/uncountable errors. Category A, i.e. errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun, resulted in 31 errors and accounted for 17.2% of all countable/uncountable errors.

Based on results of Study 1, errors related to determining when to use a noun as countable or uncountable depending on context accounted for over 60% of the errors with countable and uncountable nouns in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus, revealing a major tendency to misuse these nouns. Apparently this category of misuse is the result of the relative lack of differentiation between countable and uncountable nouns in Japanese. Another possibility is also that, despite the emphasis on the meaning of a noun in English education in schools, the need to differentiate between countable and uncountable forms of that noun depending on context is not adequately taught. Moreover, whether a noun is singular or plural is often determined based on context in Japanese, but in English a noun functions differently depending on whether it is countable or uncountable. Thus, this aspect often results in mistakes by Japanese learners of English to the extent that they are unaware of the concept of the number of a noun in English, and it is also linked to their tendency to err particularly with a noun that can be used in both countable and uncountable forms when determining which form to use based on meaning.

4.3. Study 2: Lexical Determination of Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Next, Category C, which accounted for over 60% of all countable/uncountable errors, was examined in detail in order to study how learners lexically determine the countability of a noun in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus. This category involves errors when deciding whether a noun is countable or uncountable depending on meaning and resulted in 115 errors. This study was conducted per the steps below.

1. All 115 errors, resulting from which form of a noun to use based on context (Category C) classified in Study 1 that have both countable and uncountable forms were selected.
2. The noun used and its misuse were identified and the frequency of errors was examined.
3. As a result, a list was made of the 29 nouns identified (see Table 4), and errors using a countable noun in a context where an uncountable noun should be used were classified as A Errors while, conversely, errors with an uncountable noun where a countable noun should be used were classified as B Errors.
4. As mentioned, with regard to noun countability, usage and grammar books, references for learners, and similar works differentiate between countable and uncountable on the basis of whether or not something has a concrete form or if it can be perceived as the one despite being a word that expresses an abstract concept. Thus, the misuse of a countable or uncountable noun was examined with regard to whether it was related to the abstractness or concreteness of the noun.

Based on the results of Study 2, the 29 nouns identified all had countable and uncountable forms; 24 nouns expressed a completely abstract concept while 5 nouns had a concrete meaning in addition to an abstract concept. Of the errors with nouns that can be used in both countable and uncountable forms, 9 were A Errors using an uncountable noun as a countable noun and 20 were B Errors using a countable noun as an uncountable noun. Worthy of attention is the fact that B Errors, i.e. considering a countable noun to be uncountable, were more prevalent than A Errors, i.e. using an uncountable noun as a countable noun. In English, many nouns are countable despite representing an abstract concept, but in the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus, abstract nouns such as "activity," "criticism," "culture," "effort," "feeling," "image," "language," "moral," "opportunity," "penalty," "possibility," "possession," "reason," "regulation," "right," "situation," "skill," "standard," "thought," and "tradition" that can be treated as countable nouns depending on context were used in the singular as uncountable nouns. These examples indicate the tendencies of Japanese learners of English, who are prone to perceive abstract nouns as uncountable nouns. Words such as "accessibility," "culture," "feeling," "image," "moral," "penalty," "situation," "skill," and "standard" are firmly established in Japanese as well,

Table 4 Examples of the Misuse of Nouns with Countable or Uncountable Forms

Examples of misuse	Type	Frequency	Noun abstractness/concreteness
1. activity	B	3	abstract
2. attachments	A	1	abstract/concrete
3. contents	A	7	abstract/concrete
4. criticism	B	1	abstract
5. culture	B	5	abstract
6. effort	B	2	abstract
7. evidences	A	2	abstract
8. feeling	B	7	abstract
9. image	B	2	abstract
10. influences	A	5	abstract
11. informations	A	5	abstract
12. lands	A	18	abstract/concrete
13. language	B	3	abstract
14. moral	B	2	abstract
15. regulation	B	3	abstract
16. opportunity	B	2	abstract
17. penalty	B	3	abstract
18. possibility	B	3	abstract
19. possession	B	2	abstract/concrete
20. powers	A	3	abstract
21. practices	A	5	abstract
22. reason	B	8	abstract
23. right	B	8	abstract
24. situation	B	3	abstract
25. skill	B	3	abstract
26. standard	B	2	abstract
27. thought	B	3	abstract
28. tradition	B	3	abstract
29. wills	A	1	abstract/concrete
Total	A 9, B 20	115	abstract nouns 24 abstract/concrete nouns 5

*A indicates misuse of a countable noun in the context of an uncountable noun while B indicates misuse of an uncountable noun in the context of a countable noun

and learners may have simply substituted the Japanese usage, which does not take the plural, for the correct English. In addition, an interesting fact is that the 29 misuses in Table 4 of a same noun with countable or uncountable usage include no misuses whatsoever of a completely concrete noun.

With regard to the definition of abstract and concrete nouns, Declerck (1991: 40) stated that "There are concrete nouns and abstract nouns. The former denote physical entities (persons, animals or things) that can be seen and touched; the latter denote notions that cannot be thus perceived because they have no physical shape."

Based on such an explanation, however, a noun in English is not specifically classified as countable or uncountable; instead, a wide variety of countable nouns that are also abstract nouns exist. Native speakers of English are expected to intuitively determine whether a noun is countable or uncountable in accordance with context. Based on results of Study 2, however, misuses of nouns that are countable as uncountable nouns, despite their representing abstract concepts, accounted for 20 of 29 errors (about 2/3) listed in Table 4. This thus indicates that Japanese learners of English tend to have a fixed notion that specific nouns, especially abstract nouns, are uncountable.

Mizuno (2000: 167) stated that "Learning a second or foreign language is the very process of learning an unknown language through conscious empathy with the speaker of the target language and unceasing self-correction." Mizuno's description related to learning articles, but the same can probably be said with regard to recognizing the countability or uncountability of nouns. Intuitive ability by native speakers of English to determine countability or uncountability cannot simply be reduced to the abstractness or concreteness of nouns. Determining that a noun is countable, for example, when it lacks concreteness but has a clear start and finish, like with time and feelings, is a sense mastered unconsciously by native speakers of English. In order for Japanese learners of English to acquire this sense, they need a clearer awareness that the same noun can be either countable or uncountable and that the form used depends on context, as indicated by the results of Study 2.

5. Topics for the Future

Results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that recognition of countability or uncountability by Japanese learners of English may be affected by the concept of a noun's concreteness or abstractness. Needless to say, however, the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus used in these studies does not necessarily reflect the complete knowledge of Japanese learners of English with regard to noun countability. In addition, results of Study 2 indicated that learners were prone to consider abstract nouns as uncountable nouns based on examples of their misuse in the corpus, but this finding applies to errors appearing only in context. To obtain more accurate data, nouns misused by learners must be individually culled and how their concreteness or abstractness was determined must also be studied. In that sense, the current study using only the ICLE error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus did not allow sufficient analysis of how Japanese learners of English perceive the countability or uncountability of nouns. This study remains a preliminary study in that it presented data on errors

appearing in the corpus and discussed findings based on results of analyzing those data.

While the current study covered only the ICLE Japanese sub-corpus, a topic for the future is comparative analysis using ICLE error-tagged sub-corpora with different linguistic backgrounds to see if usage of countable and uncountable nouns by Japanese learners of English appears in sub-corpora of English learners with other mother tongues backgrounds. Such analysis may help to further clarify the characteristics of interlanguage among EFL learners.

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