Countability of nouns and the use of articles in EFL classrooms

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One of the toughest challenges with learning English for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is its distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. This challenge is more pronounced for learners whose first languages are article-less. The research questions included: 1) What aids are usually used by learners in Taiwan in order to learn countability in English: translations, dictionaries, or grammar books? 2) What kind of nouns do they find most difficult to comprehend and use: count, mass, abstract nouns or others? 3) Will the explicit instructions enriched with the cognitive clues that emphasize the construal aspects of countability, help them learn countability better which in turn enhance the awareness of the use of articles (a/an, and the)? And 4) Whether a learner's English proficiency level will impact the outcome of learning. 83 college students of pre-intermediate level from an English Department completed the study. Convenient sampling technique was applied to recruit participants from four different writing classes for two experiments. In experiment one, a first year writing class and a second year writing class were selected to be the experimental groups. In experiment two, another first year writing class and a second year writing class were selected to be the control groups. The experimental groups were treated with instructions under the framework of cognitive semantics whereas the control groups were instructed with more conventional terminology and explanations. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed. For the first two questions, a set of qualitative data was generated from learners' self-reports. Then quantitative data was elicited by a pre- and post-test of a countability judgement test (Tsang, 2017) along with a recognition/correction test that consisted of a 341 words essay written by a student of similar proficiency background who did not participate in the study. Results demonstrate that the majority of the participants had not learned countability systematically before the treatment. They also did not know that mass nouns are flexible, depending on the 'boundedness' or 'atomicity' of an object or concept. The statistically analysis on the countability judgement test shows a significant progress at the post-test (p < .001 and p = .001) for both the experiment groups, and there is no significant difference between these two groups. The control groups made progress but not at a significant level. As for the recognition/correction test, both experimental groups made statistically significant progress (both p < .001). For the control groups, the first year participants' progress was not statistically significant; yet that of the second year was significant (p = .004). The difference between this group and the first experimental group was not significant but with the second year experimental group the difference was statistically significant, meaning that the experimental group performance was better. Such results suggest that explicitly teaching countability and the use of articles under the cognitive semantics framework, learners retained what they learned better and seemed to do better in the use of articles in judging definiteness, specificity and genericity. However, qualitative analysis of participants writing samples before and after interventions did not show significant changes in the use of articles in all groups. Subsequently error analyses highlight the difficulties many EFL learners face in acquiring English articles.

References
Tsang, A. 2017. Judgement of countability and plural marking in English by native and non-native English speakers. *Language Awareness, 26(4)*, 343-359.