

The count-mass distinction and English articles

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This talk explores second language (L2) acquisition of the count-mass distinction in English and argues for its importance in the studies of article acquisition. While L2 article use has extensively been discussed in terms of semantic contexts (i.e., definiteness, specificity) and L1 effects, such factors as input and lexical information of nouns have not been given much attention in the literature. This talk first summaries previous research on English article acquisition to emphasise persistent difficulty with the count-mass distinction over definiteness experienced by proficient learners (Hiki, 1990; Akamatsu, 2011; Ogawa, 2014). It then addresses the acquisition issues of abstract nouns, for which L2 learners often have trouble choosing correct articles, especially indefinite ones (a/an or zero \emptyset) and demonstrates what might cause the difficulty. In particular, the lexical-semantic property of boundedness will be examined as a potential factor to influence the countability of abstract nouns (Brinton, 1998; Paradis, 2001; Lee Amuzie & Spinner, 2013). The talk also looks into the claim that learners regard noun countability as a fixed notion and rely on their intuition to determine the countability of nouns in context (Yoon, 1993; Butler, 2002). In conclusion, potential learning problems of the count-mass distinction in the L2 and related theoretical issues in article acquisition will further be discussed.