A Real Dilemma: Countable or Uncountable?

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ABSTRACT— *This study examines the second language (L2) acquisition of English nominal system and the count/mass nouns by Turkish learners. The aims are (1) to examine the percentages of success in the usage of the count/mass nouns at different levels, (2) to identify the errors regarding the numbering system and the count/mass distinction in the sentences and compositions the learners have produced, (3) to provide possible explanations for the causes of the errors the participants produced. In English, there is a difference between singularity and plurality at the lexical level. On the other hand, when the number system of Turkish is considered, a different paradigm is observed. Related to the count/mass nouns, unlike English, there is no grammatical distinction between countable and uncountable nouns in Turkish. 90 students at prep-class from engineering department at the levels of beginner, pre-intermediate, and intermediate were tested via a translation task and the participants' paragraphs written in a quiz.*

Keywords— Nominal System, Count/Mass Nouns, Negative Transfer

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recent studies have indicated that nominal countability is problematic for foreign language learners especially for those whose native language does not have the corresponding function systems. In the field of second language (SLA), research on foreign learners' difficulties with nominal numbers and the count/mass distinction in the language have been conspicuously lacking. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the nominal system of Turkish with particular reference to number and the count/ mass distinction in both English and Turkish. By investigating these issues, this study attempts to explore the problems incurred by foreign learners' misconceptions of nominal countability and of the count/mass distinction in foreign sentence and text production.

The roots of the studies on the nominal system and the count/mass distinction go back to Link (1983) and Gillon (1992, 1999). However, Chierchia (1998ab, 2003) conducted a series of work to investigate the nominal system and the count/mass distinction of such languages as English, Chinese and Italian. As a result of these studies, he proposed that count nouns have a clear lexical distinction between singularity and plurality (1998a, pp. 53-54). That is to say, singular count nouns are always singular and plural count nouns are plural, which makes singulars and plurals distinct in terms of number. Mass nouns, however, come from a lexicon with plurality already built in. This means that mass nouns are in fact lexically plural whereas count nouns are lexically singular and get pluralized by way of the pluralization rule.

The discussion above illustrates that there is a distinction between nominal like *toy* and *toys* in English in that the former denotes sets of singularities whereas the latter denotes sets of pluralities. In Turkish, however, a nominal encodes nothing in its bare form in terms of singularity and plurality in the language. In other words, in Turkish there is no lexical difference in terms of number as far as bare nominal are concerned. As Schroeder (1999), Corbett (2000) and Gorgulu (2010) indicate a bare noun is always ambiguous if it denotes singularity or plurality. This situation is exemplified by Gorgulu with the following sentences:

1a. Bahçe-de   *kopek*   var.
    Garden-LOC   dog   exist
 'There is a dog/are some dogs in the garden.'
1b. Dün   gece   ev-e   *hırsız*   gir-miş.
    Yesterday   night   house-DAT   thief   break into-EVID
    'It seems a thief/thieves broke into the house last night.'

Gorgulu (2010) explains the ambiguity in the sentences above as in the following way:

What is interesting is that the sentence (1a) is true if there is only one dog in the garden. It is also true if there is more than one dog in the garden. In other words, the bare noun *kopek* 'dog' does not give information about the number of the dogs in question. Similarly, the sentence in (1b) can be uttered if there is only one thief or more than one thief that broke into the house. This should be taken as showing that bare nouns are in fact *number-neutral* in Turkish. In other words, a bare nominal does not encode anything in terms of singularity and plurality of an entity in question. (p.5)

In contrast to bare nominals, a noun which is derived from its singular counterpart through plural formation denotes only sets of pluralities. That is to say, while the bare noun *kitap* 'book' denotes sets of singularities plus sets of pluralities, a noun with plural marking *–LAR* such as *kitap-LAR* 'books' is obligatory interpreted as denoting plural entities as shown in the sentences (2a) and (2b).

> 2 a. Masa-da *kitap* var.
>   table-LOC book exist
>   'There is a book/are books on the table.'
>
> 2b. Masa-da *kitap-lar* var.
>   table-LOC book-PL exist
>   'There are books on the table.'

In (2a), the number of the books on the table is not specified in the sentence. The structure in (2a) is true if there is one book or more than one on the table as the number is neutral in the extension of the noun *kitap*. In contrast to this, the sentence in (2b) is true only in those instances where a plurality of books has been on the table. In order to make a clear-cut distinction with respect to number in a given structure, the noun co-occurs with the indefinite determiner *bir* 'one' which is in fact a numeral. For instance:

> 3 a. Masa-da *bir* kitap var.
>   table-LOC one book exist
>   'There is a book on the table.'

When the sentences (2a) and (3a) are examined, it is clearly seen that the difference between (2a) and (3a) is that in (3a) the noun is not in its bare form and takes a numeral, which always denotes singular entities. As a result, the noun is interpreted as singular only. On the other hand, unlike their English counterparts, nouns in Turkish do not take plural marking when modified by numerals greater than one such as *iki* 'two', *beş* 'five', and *on* 'ten'. In fact, the co-occurance of the noun with the plural suffix is considered ungrammatical. This contrast is exemplified with the following sentences below:

> 4 a. Masa-da *iki / beş / on* kitap var.
>   table-LOC two / five / ten book exist
>   'There are two / five / ten books on the table.'
>
> 4 b. *Masa-da *iki / beş / on* kitap-lar var.
>   table-LOC two / five / ten book-PL exist
>   'There are two / five / ten books on the table.'

As Corbett (2000) argues that there is a difference between singularity and plurality at the lexical level in English. On the other hand, when the number system of Turkish is considered, a different paradigm is observed. The difference is clear in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The representation of number in Turkish and English

English		Turkish	
Singular	**Plural**	**Singular / Plural**	**Plural**
table	table-s	masa 'table'	masa-lar 'tables'
car	car-s	ağaç 'tree'	ağaç-lar 'trees'
man	men	insan 'person'	insan/lar 'people'
child	child-ren	kedi 'cat'	kedi-ler 'cats'

(Gorgulu, 2010)

Table 1 illustrates that the difference between *table* and *tables* is number-related. *Table* is taken to be singular while *tables* is plural. That is, different forms encode the difference in terms of number and make a clear-cut singular/plural distinction in the language. However, when the mechanism in Turkish is considered, Table 1 shows that the number distinction between singulars and plurals is not so clear-cut.

Another claim of this paper is concerned with the count/mass distinction in the language. In English, nouns are categorized into several groups according to certain criteria. Among such classifications is the division of count nouns and mass nouns. While count nouns have such features as plural forms and ability to take the indefinite article a/an, non-count nouns are generally considered to be simply the opposite. In English, there is also another group of nouns which are used as both countable and uncountable according to the context they are used in. However, in the present study the nouns which are considered as mass nouns cannot be used with the plural marker. For instance, mass nouns like 'meat, snow, rice, information' do not co-occur with the plural marker in the language.

On the other hand, it has been previously claimed in the literature that there is no grammatical distinction with respect to count/mass in Turkish (Göksel and Kerslake, 2005; Kayadelen, 2007). In other words, in Turkish almost any noun, regardless of whether it is count or mass can appear with the plural marker in the language. For instance:

> 5 a. Arda   dergi-ler   oku-du.
>   Arda   magazine-PL   read-PAST
>   'Arda read magazines.'

> 5 b. Mağaza-da çok güzel takılar var.
>   shop-LOC very good jewelry-PL exist
>   *There are very good jewelries in the shop.'

When the sentences (5a) and (5b) are analyzed, it is seen that there is no grammatical distinction between countable and uncountable nouns in Turkish since the plural suffix (-lAr) can appear with the noun in the language. The countable noun *dergi* 'magazine' takes a plural suffix *–lEr*. Here, the vowel of the plural suffix is subject to vowel harmony that appears as either *–ler* or *–lar*. Similarly, in (5b) a mass noun *takı* 'jewellry'co-occurs with the plural suffix *–lAr*. Although the sentence (5b) is grammatical in Turkish, its counterpart in English is considered ungrammatical.

As a result of the differences between English and Turkish mentioned above, Turkish learners constantly show uncertainty regarding the concept of countability and find it hard to identify whether a noun is countable or whether it takes a plural marker. Native speakers may be unaware of judging the countability of a noun, but foreign learners likeTurkish learners have to memorize the corresponding grammar rules in this respect and use them consciously to maintain accuracy and fluency in their writing. For example, 'experience, information, advice' are uncountable in English, but countable in Turkish. So it is common for Turkish learners to write sentences like 'I love your *furnitures*' or 'She needs a lot of *informations* about this topic.'

Therefore, the purpose of this study is (1) to identify the errors regarding the numbering system and the count/mass distinction in the sentences and compositions the learners have produced, (2) to provide possible explanations for the causes of those errors, (3) to identify the role of the first language in the L2 acquisition of the count/mass distinction.

2. METHOD

2.1Participants

This study covers 90 freshmen students who are registered at Foreign Language Education Center (YADYO) at Çukurova University and they were all learning English at different levels: 30 beginner (L1), 30 pre-intermediate (L2), and 30 intermediate (L3). They were all from engineering department. Since engineering departments use English as the language of instruction, students were required to study English intensively for one academic year with a workload of twenty four hours a week before starting their degree programs.

2.2 Material

The instruments used as research tools in this study were a translation task and the participants' paragraphs written in a quiz. The translation task consisted of 20 Turkish sentences which include countable and uncountable nouns. The participants were asked to translate the given Turkish sentences into English.

The second instrument used in this study was the participants' paragraphs written in a quiz. The participants' paragraphs were used for the examination of the participants' errors while using countable and uncountable nouns in sentences and the discussion of the sources of these errors. Identifying the participants' errors is not an easy task for a

nonnative researcher. Therefore, in the process of detecting the participants' errors regarding the countable and uncountable nouns, several dictionaries were used as references to analyze the errors.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter discusses the results of collected data. The first section presents the percentages of each group's responses to the translation task. The second section points out the errors related to the countable and uncountable nouns in the participants' writing and the possible sources of these errors.

Research Queation 1: What are the percentages of success in the usage of countable and uncountable items at different levels?
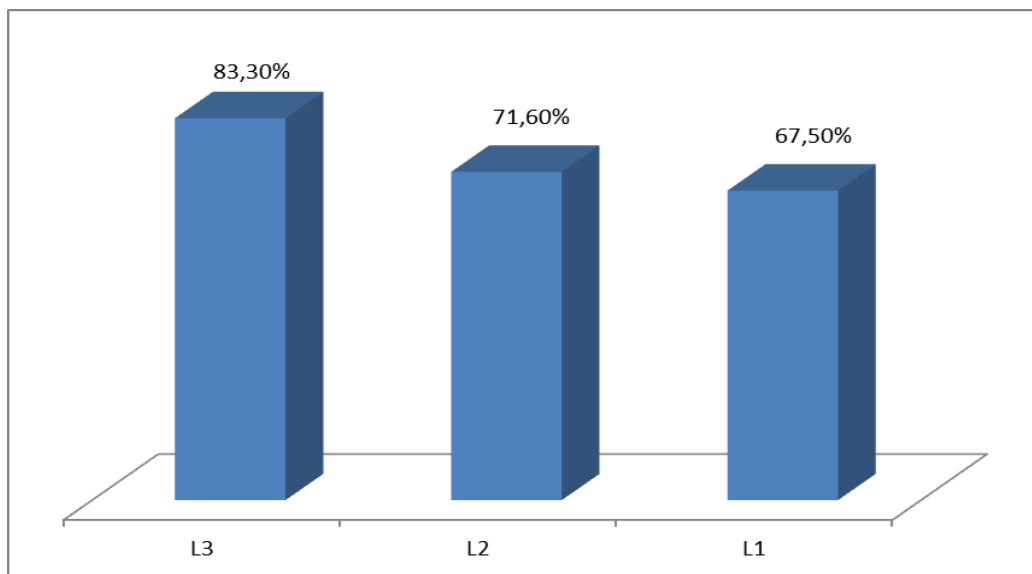

Figure 1: Success percentages in countable items according to the level of the students

Figure 1 shows the percentages of success in the usage of countable nouns in the translation task. As depicted in figure above, the rate of the correct translation of the countable items at three levels decreases across the groups along with the participants' levels of English language proficiency.
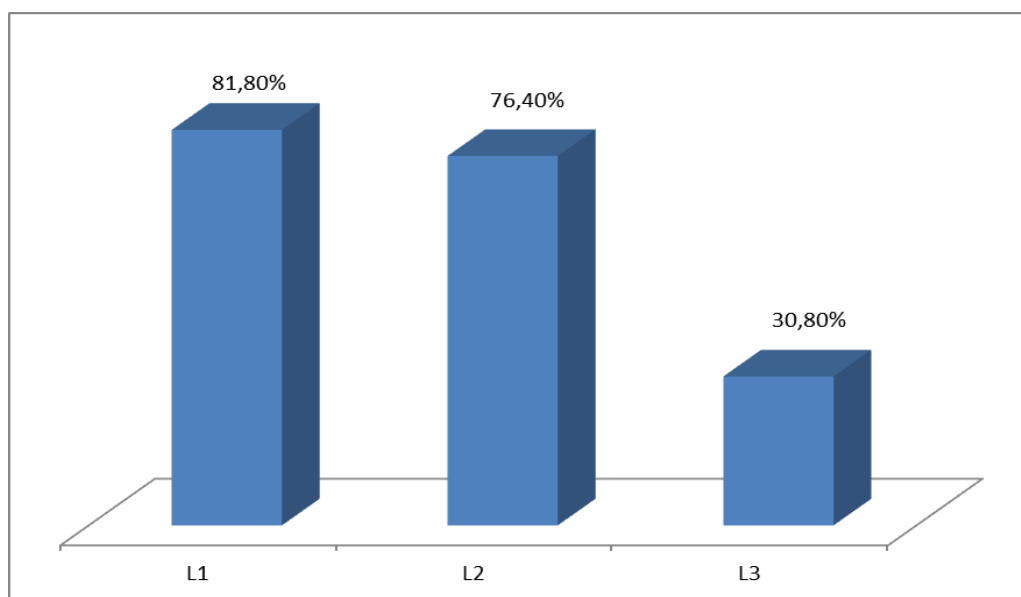

Figure 2: Success percentages in uncountable items according to the level of the students

When we examine Figure 2 above, we observe that although the level of language proficiency of L1 group is lower than L2 and L3 groups, the percentage of their success is strikingly higher.

Research Question 2: What are the sources of errors regarding the countable and uncountable nouns?

In order to gain appropriate materials and to teach EFL learners more effectively and efficiently, the researcher needs to investigate and understand why the participants made errors while using countable and uncountable nouns.

In analyzing the participants' errors, firstly 90 written paragraphs were collected in a real class setting. The participants' paragraphs were important for the study since the subjects did not focus on the countable and uncountable nouns as they did in the translation task. The participants' paragraphs were checked by the two researchers. This was to prove that all errors regarding the countable and uncountable nouns had been identified. As a result of this examination, 95 errors were identified. When these errors were analyzed, it was seen that the majority of errors were caused by the inference of their mother tongue, Turkish. In this study, Turkish transfer has a negative effect on students' performance of countable and uncountable nouns. Here are some examples:

Table 2: Incorrect Sentences with countable nouns and their correct counterparts in English and Turkish

Participants' sentences from their paragraphs	Correct forms in English and their counterparts in Turkish
…people who live long will have *a lot of disease*.	a lot of diseases-PL birçok hastalık-SING
There are *a lot of reason* why people want to live long.	a lot of reasons-PL birçok sebep-SING
My mother stayed in a hospital for *two week*.	two weeks- PL iki hafta-SING
We want to visit *a lot of place*.	a lot of places-PL birçok yer-SING
The television has *more than one hundred channel*.	more than one hundred channels-PL yüzden fazla kanal-SING
Television and radio have a few *difference*.	a few differences-PL birkaç farklılık-SING

From the sentences the participants produced, it can be said that while making sentences in English, the participants did not add plural marking to the noun although the noun is modified by 'a lot of, a few' or numerals. At this point, the participants made a negative transfer from their mother tongue because in Turkish the co-occurance of the noun with the plural suffix is considered ungrammatical in this type of sentences.

Table 3: Incorrect Sentences with uncountable nouns and their correct counterparts in English and Turkish

Participants' sentences from their paragraphs	Correct forms in English and their counterparts in Turkish
She has got blue eyes and red, curly *hairs*.	curly hair-SING kıvırcık saçları-PL
You can see *their happinesses*…	their happiness-SING onların mutlulukları-PL
She always forgets to do *her homeworks*.	her homework-SING ödevlerini-PL
I am very happy for *her helps*.	her help-SING yardımları-PL
I had *all informations* about him.	all informatioSING tüm bilgiler-PL

All the examples given in Table 5 proposed that the participants' mother tongue influenced their usage of uncountable nouns. Although the nouns such as *hair, happiness, homework, help and information* are uncountable in English, the participants pluralized these nouns as they were used in Turkish.

Finally, we have examined the participants' paragraphs and observed that for Turkish learners of English, the concept of countable and uncountable nouns is different because it has no grammatical equivalent in Turkish.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude the above research, EFL students make errors while using countable and uncountable nouns because of the interference of their mother tongue, Turkish. In other words, the analysis of the participants' errors revealed that interference form Turkish is clearly the major source of difficulty for them. Pedagogical suggestions are provided for EFL teachers and learners including learners' awareness of countable and uncountable nouns and reinforcing the differences between L1 and L2. The implication is that a contrastive study of the wrong sentences produced in the target language and the corresponding versions in L! and L2 will help students overcome a great part of the errors they make. by way of the pluralization rule.

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