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Noncount Nouns and the Pedagogical Implications to Portuguese Learners

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Abstract

This paper delves into the pedagogical implications attached to the teaching of noncount nouns to Portuguese speaking students receiving EAP instruction in ESL or EFL settings. Results of research cited within this paper indicate that EAP students tend to make certain types of errors, which are thoroughly discussed. Research includes the practical applications of findings and their relevance to ESL or EFL teachers.

Introduction

The concept of countability and non-countability is a difficult one for ESL and EFL students to grasp. This paper presents an analysis of teaching and learning such concepts and an explanation as to why Portuguese-speaking learners grapple with them.

The attainment of authentic language in social and cultural settings has urged scholar and educators to transition from audiolingual and grammar-translation methods to communicative language teaching (CLT) (The Internet TESL Journal, 1999, para. 2), in other words, from a form-oriented to a use-oriented approach (Celce-Murcia, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001). However, in the 1970's (Ellis, cited in The Internet TESL Journal, 1999, para. 2), teachers favored a meaning-only approach at the expense of form. As a result, students could produce extemporaneous speech that lacked accurate linguistic form.

Nowadays, the focus has been on global and integrative tasks rather than on discrete aspects of grammar (The Internet TESL Journal, 1999, para. 2). Still, teachers face a dilemma when teaching L2: students need to know the grammar rules, which they will be tested on, and to spontaneously communicate in L2. Thus, there is a need to equate *meaning* and *form*. Research (Spada & Lightbown; Lightbown, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) has shown that teachers who focus on form increase students' communicative competence far more than the ones who never do or do so in isolated contexts. However, the focus should be done "within a meaning-based or communicative approach" (p.251). Therefore, the activities in this paper will be presented within a context from which the form will be extracted.

This paper was envisioned for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students in ESL or EFL settings whose first language is Portuguese. First, it presents the differences between

Portuguese and English followed by the instructional plan and, finally, the views of an experienced Brazilian EFL teacher on the topic.

Differences between Portuguese and English

Even though there are uncountable nouns in Portuguese, it is not relevant that some nouns are not usually used in the plural form (e.g.: money). Unlike in English, there are far less grammatical implications when dealing with a noncount noun. In Portuguese, the plural morpheme is added to the quantifiers and determiners and the verb agrees in number with the noun phrase.

<u>Portuguese</u>	<u>English</u>
<i>Pouco</i> dinheiro foi economizado este ano	<i>Little</i> money was saved this year.
<i>Poucos</i> carros foram roubados este ano.	<i>Few</i> cars were stolen this year.
<i>Muito</i> equipamento foi comprado.	<i>Much</i> equipment was bought.
<i>Muitos</i> equipamentos foram comprados.	<i>Many pieces of</i> equipment were bought.
<i>Este</i> conselho é muito bom.	<i>This</i> advice is very good.
<i>Estes</i> conselhos são muito bons.	<i>These pieces of</i> advice are very good.
<i>Uma</i> informação que me ajudou.	<i>A piece of</i> information that helped me.
<i>Um</i> as informações que me ajudaram.	<i>Some pieces of</i> information that helped me.

In addition to this, the fact that some noncount nouns in English are considered count in Portuguese, make the language acquisition much more challenging. Table 1 presents a list of some of such nouns:

Table 1. Noncount nouns in English that are count in Portuguese

INGLÊS	PORTUGUÊS
<i>information</i>	informações
<i>knowledge</i>	conhecimentos
<i>interest</i>	juros
<i>advice</i>	conselhos
<i>equipment</i>	equipamentos
<i>furniture</i>	móveis
<i>real estate</i>	imóveis
<i>vacation</i>	férias
<i>medicine</i>	remédios
<i>fruit</i>	frutas
<i>bread</i>	pães
<i>music</i>	músicas
<i>microwave</i>	microondas
<i>software</i>	programas de computador

(Schütz, 2002, p. 3)

Working with Portuguese students and being a Portuguese speaker myself has given me enough experience with how crosslinguistic influence (Frankenberg-Garcia, 2000, p. 2) mark a Portuguese speakers' linguistic repertoire. According to research (Kellerman, cited in Frankenberg-Garcia, 2000, p.2) this is more likely to happen in areas where Portuguese and English appear to be very similar but are not, such as noncount nouns. Therefore, it is very common to hear a Portuguese speaking student say “¹*The furnitures were damaged during the

¹ Note: (*) indicates inaccuracy.

move”. It is less likely, however, to hear “*Would you like some meats?” because, like in English, most foods are uncountable.

In her study, Frankenberg-Garcia (2000, p.5) also states that Portuguese learners tend to use more nouns in writing than English speakers do. Therefore, it is probable that Portuguese learners encounter a lot more instances when they have to deal with noncount nouns. Besides, she supports that students must be made aware of the possible Portuguese – English crosslinguistic influences. Obviously, this is more likely to occur in the EFL classroom because the teacher’s knowledge of the language and the similar problems learners deal with.

Finally, quantifiers (e.g., *few, a few, little, a little*), determiners (*the, a, an, this*); countable/uncountable nouns (e.g., letter, mail) and verb agreement (singular/plural) are in the first group of errors (Hinkel, 2004) in academic writing. Hence, these are the problems we will be addressed in this paper.

Instructional Plan

Determiners and Quantifiers

Ellis and Schmidt (cited in Hinkel, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2001) advocate that noticing grammatical structures, their uses and meanings and the contexts in which they occur promotes effective learning. I have selected an article titled “The Doctor’s Dilemma” by Sissela Bok (Raimes, 2003, p. 45) that delves into noncount nouns and the use of determiners by presenting a three-step, detailed prompt. This following activity is suitable for upper-intermediate level students:

“Should doctors ever lie to benefit their patients – to speed recovery or to conceal the approach of death? In medicine as in law, government, and other lines of work, the requirements of honesty often seem dwarfed by greater needs: the need to shelter from brutal news or to uphold a promise of secrecy; to expose corruption or to promote the public interest. (...)”

The analytical questions that follow this activity are:

“ 1. If you write down in a list the words *doctors*, *patients*, *recovery*, *approach*, and *death*, you are writing down the common nouns in the passage. Continue listing all the nouns throughout the rest of the passage. Do not include nouns used to modify other nouns, such as *family* in *family vacation* or *patient’s own sake*, and do not include any *-ing* forms.

2. You should have a list of 40 words. When you examine them, you will find that some are singular in form, and some are plural. How many of the 40 nouns are plural, and which ones are they? Take care here: The passage includes some nouns that end in *-s* but are not plural in form.

3. Which of the nouns listed are preceded by *a* or *an*? Write down the complete noun phrases in a list, for example, a 46-year-old man. Which of the nouns are singular in form and have no marker preceding them, that is, no words such as *a*, *an*, or *the*, or words like *this*, *that*, *my*, or *his* (called *determiners*; see chapter 6)? Write them down in another list. With other students, examine your two lists. Can you speculate as to why the marker *a* occurs with the nouns in one list and not the other?”

After students have finished, I will ask them to discuss what other determiners (or quantifiers) can precede the nouns they have on the list. I will do so because it is a time saving strategy and motivating for students if we build upon what their existing knowledge. Then, I will

have them look at the following table that gives examples of countable and uncountable nouns and the possible determiners and quantifiers:

Table 2. Common determiners that precede a noun phrase

	Countable	Uncountable
Singular	a ring the ring one ring each ring every ring	jewelry the jewelry some jewelry a lot of jewelry not much jewelry a little jewelry a great deal of jewelry
Plural	rings two rings some rings several rings a lot of rings not many rings a few rings a large number of rings	

(Raimes, 2003, p.46)

In order to make the above information more accessible and organized in different ways to suit different learning styles, students will complete Table 3, which deals with articles, and then follow the model and do the same with the quantifiers from the above table plus the elicited ones. This may also help students develop autonomy and responsibility for organizing their own material.

Table 3. Model on how to organize determiners and quantifiers

	a, an	the	this, that	these, those	no article
Count singular					
Count plural					
Noncount					

(“Count and noncount nouns (with Plurals, Articles and Quantity Words)”, 2004, para.4).

Editing their own writing is a valuable skill for academic writers (Hinkel, 2004). A technique commonly used for practice is *peer response*. Nevertheless, many authors (Carson & Nelson; Hinkel; Hyland, cited in Hinkel, 2004) caution against using such technique due to negative affective and social results. Thus, I selected a description, which is a common genre in academic reading, from a book that contains errors with countable and uncountable nouns. “The errors occur with singular/plural form and with the use of appropriate markers (determiners) that go with nouns.” (Raimes, 2004, p. 55).

“Beans’s market is filled with lots of different kinds of grocery products. It has an attractive decorations. The signs help the customers find their supplies. In the store, they sell rice, pet food, cookie, beer, salad dressing, soy sauce, oil, and many other product. (...)”

Uncountable nouns

Based on the fact that there are several nouns that are perceived as an uncountable in English but countable in Portuguese, students should be provided with memorable, contextualized practice of such nouns.

Even though humorous materials are not considered “academic”, using an activity where uncountable nouns are inserted in jokes or anecdotes (Woolard, 1999, p. 46) can be an effective way of teaching noncount nouns because students can share them with others, when they will have spontaneous practice. It is also an extraordinary affective strategy because it will motivate students, especially considering EAP students` age group.

“Complete the jokes using one of the following words:

weather furniture information progress

traffic scenery advice luggage

Do you have any,sir?

Yes, I`d like this small bag to go to Moscow and I`d like the large bag to go to New York. I`d also like my suitcase to go to Paris.

But sir, Beranti Airlines can`t do that!

Why not? You did it last month when I flew with you. (...)”

Follow up activity:

“I`d like some information about holidays in Antarctica. Make up some true sentences about yourself with the pattern: I`d like some information about.....”

As a follow up activity, I will ask students to request information about amusing things (or not, depending on the tone and focus of the class). For instance, “I`d like some advice on my athlete`s foot” or “I feel I need to make some progress in pronunciation”. Alternatively, students can share jokes that have noncount nouns.

Since the target learners are EAP students, they might profit from learning that many uncountable nouns can be categorized. Some of these categories contain words that they

may appear frequently in academic speech and writing. They belong to the following categories: names of subject of study, abstract nouns, gases, liquids/fluids, diseases, solids/minerals, and natural phenomena (Byrd & Benson, 2001).

“(...) Here are some categories for analysis of noncount nouns. Add other words that you and you fellow students know belong to each group.

1. Things that come in very small pieces: *rice, salt, sand*

2. Wholes made up of similar parts (the parts are often count nouns): *food, furniture, luggage*

3. Names of subjects of study: *ESL, biology, mathematics*

_____ (...)”

Subject-Verb Agreement

Another area academic ESL students find problematic is verb agreement when the noun phrase contains a noncount noun. In order to tackle this problem, I will have my students complete the following activity and come up with an explanation for their choice. Further, students will work in pairs in order to come up with changes they will have to make in order for the noncount nouns to agree with the verbs in the plural form (e.g., Here *are* some *pieces of* news).

Since the context is very closely related to what students might encounter in academic texts, I believe it would be worthwhile expanding the activity by having them use the noncount

nouns agreeing with a verb in the singular or plural form in a context they are familiar with (e.g., Recent *research shows* that ESL learners understand better when they have background knowledge). I particularly like the following activity (Danielson & Porter, 1990, p.215) because the sentences are in a meaningful context rather than in isolation.

- “1. Here is/are some bad news for you.
2. Recent research shows/show that coffee may be harmful to your health.
3. The evidence is/evidences are that caffeine causes tumors in mice.
4. Of course, more work is/works are needed to prove that caffeine is harmful to humans.
5. Nevertheless, my advice is/advice are to cut down on coffee, tea, cola drinks, and chocolate.”

Eliana Hirano`s Experience.

Eliana Hirano is a Brazilian ESL teacher who worked for Cultura Inglesa, São Paulo, Brazil where she mainly taught ESP in business and medicine for seven years. The course she taught included grammar and was tied to speaking, listening, reading and writing.

She pointed out that Portuguese speakers in general have difficulty understanding and internalizing the nouns that are countable in Portuguese but uncountable in English. Another problem is what quantifiers and determiners precede uncountable nouns (e.g., *a piece of information*, why not *a piece of knowledge*?) There are also some nouns that are very close in meaning but that are not classified the same (e.g.: *problems* but not *troubles*?).

When asked about publications that might help Portuguese speakers achieve their communicative goal as far as noncount nouns, she referred me to Ur (1992) and Murphy (1991),

pointing out that since grammar is decontextualized in the latter, she gave preference to the former.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to touch upon the problematic grammatical patterns that are related to noncount nouns when taught to EAP students. My intention was to present a plan that balanced meaningful communication and form.

Noncount nouns is a grammatical aspect that is challenging for Portuguese learners and need to be presented memorably and with a communicative context where meaning and form go hand-in-hand.

It is important to stress, however, that Portuguese, like English, has a variety of dialects. I primarily based this paper upon my experience with Brazilians. Besides, it cannot be assumed that all Portuguese speakers will experience the same problems with noncount nouns.

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