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ABSTRACT NOUNS IN L2 ENGLISH ARTICLE USE

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YUE SHI

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ABSTRACT NOUNS IN L2 ENGLISH ARTICLE USE

By

Yue Shi

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ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT NOUNS IN L2 ENGLISH ARTICLE USE

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The present study aims to investigate the influence of both countability and semantic context on learners' article choices before abstract nouns, with a focus on the potential interaction between them. An elicitation task was created using three different types of nouns (count, noncount, and both) within two semantic contexts (definite and indefinite). Chinese participants completed the elicitation task and rated the confidence of their article choices. A subset of the participants were interviewed to reflect on their choices. The results indicate that when Chinese ESL learners use English articles before abstract nouns, they tend to be more accurate with [+countable] nouns and [+definite] nouns, while making more errors with [-countable] nouns and [-definite] nouns. Their self-rated confidence scores do not correlate with their test scores. When asked to explain their decisions, learners mostly refer to semantic context as the reason why they choose a certain article. The interaction between countability and semantic context was not found in the present study.

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Introduction

Because of its high complexity, the English article system, which includes the indefinite article *a(n)*, the definite article *the*, and the zero article Ø, is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL learners. Historically, it has often been considered very difficult, if not impossible to teach (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). A survey conducted by Covitt (1976) ranked the teaching of English article system first among difficult tasks for ESL teachers. Quite a few ESL instructors have explored different approaches and techniques for teaching article usage and examined the effectiveness of such instruction (Master, 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1994, 1995; McEldowney, 1977; Pica, 1983; Whitman, 1974); while others (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Tarone & Parrish, 1988; Thomas, 1989) have investigated the acquisition of English articles from a linguistic perspective.

Due to the extreme complexity of the English article system, this study attempts to examine only one aspect of its usage – how abstract nouns affect learners' article choices. The goal of the present study is to determine for native speakers of Chinese, a language that lacks articles, what patterns and errors can be identified when they use articles before abstract nouns, and what accounts for their choice – noun countability, semantic context, or the possible interaction between the two. Although this study is limited in its theoretical frame, it could still contribute to a better understanding of how ESL learners with one particular L1 background process a difficult aspect of English article use.

Theoretical Background

The English article system has long been a subject of interest for linguists, given its complex usage and the difficulty involved in analyzing it. It is considered especially difficult for learners whose first language (L1) does not have articles, as research has shown that articles are particularly difficult for learners to acquire when their L1 lacks a similar grammatical system, such as Chinese, Japanese and Russian (Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Maldonado 2008, Zdorenko & Paradis 2008). Consequently, a number of studies have been conducted to offer descriptive accounts of how ESL learners from article-less L1 backgrounds learn and use articles in their interlanguage (Bergeron-Matoba, 2007; Butler, 2002; Mizuno, 1999; Parrish, 1987; Robertson, 2000; Yoon, 1993; Young, 1996).

Although some earlier studies made significant contributions to the understanding of the topic, Bickerton's (1981) work is arguably the most important and enlightening, as it renders a new and unique systematic approach to the analysis of the use of the English article system. According to Bickerton, the use of the English articles – *a*, *the*, and Ø – is governed by the semantic function of the noun phrase (NP) in discourse. The classification of the semantic function of an NP is determined, he argued, by two binary discourse features: (a) whether a noun is a specific referent (+SR, -SR), and (b) whether the hearer knows the referent (+HK, -HK). Based on such an analysis, there are four possibilities for NP reference.

Type 1 is (-SR, +HK), also known as "generics", where *a*, *the*, or Ø, can all be used. For example, *a/the snake is a dangerous animal/snakes are dangerous animals*. Type 2 is

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(+SR, +HK), where *the* is required, as in the example *Can you feed the dog, please?* Type

3 is (+SR, -HK), which calls for *a* or Ø, as in *I bought a new cell phone today.* Type 4 is

(-SR, -HK), where *a* or Ø is used. For example, *Do you have a pencil I can borrow?* This

classification is employed by Huebner (1983) in his famous semantic wheel model

(Figure 1).
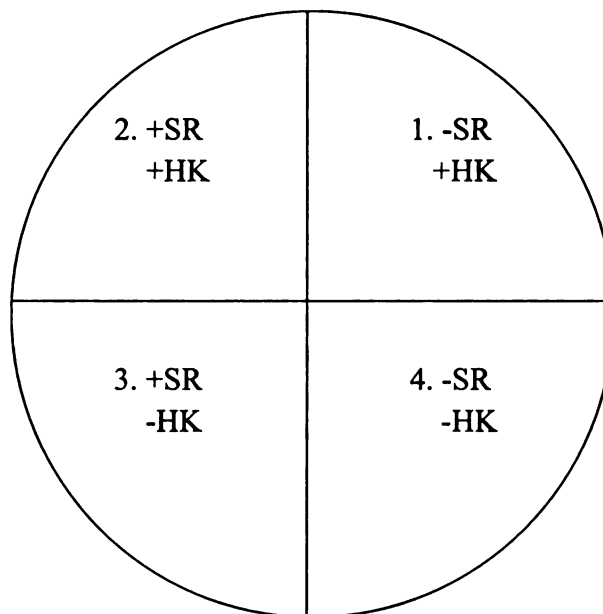
Figure 1. Huebner's (1983) semantic wheel (p. 133).

Recent studies have replaced the classification scheme of HK and SR with one of

definiteness and specificity. Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) defined the terms as follows:

definiteness occurs when "the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique

individual in the set denoted by the NP," and specificity occurs when "the speaker intends

to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP and considers this individual

to possess some noteworthy property" (p. 5). A definite NP requires the article *the*, and an

indefinite NP requires the article *a*. The feature definiteness considers both the speaker

and hearer, and specificity considers the speaker only. The two features are combined to produce four different contexts as shown below.

1. [+definite, +specific]: *the*

   I ordered an orange juice, but I think something is wrong with the juice.

2. [+definite, -specific]: *the*

   I would like to interview the winner of this year's American Idol, whoever it is.

3. [-definite, +specific]: *a*

   A friend of mine is coming to see me tomorrow.

4. [-definite, -specific]: *a*

   I want to buy a gift for John's birthday. What do you think I should get him?

English articles do not encode the feature specificity. As the above examples have shown, only the feature definiteness determines the article use, regardless of the values of specificity. According to Ionin et al. (2004), languages can be divided into two groups: article grouping by definiteness, as in English, and article grouping by specificity, as in Samoan. As the article choice parameter is not relevant to article-less languages, L2 speakers of English from article-less L1s might exhibit fluctuations between the definiteness setting and the specificity setting before they would ultimately settle for the proper setting of English. This claim is called the fluctuation hypothesis (FH). This kind of fluctuation between definiteness and specificity in article choices is also identified in L1 Russian speakers in Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado (2008) and L1 Japanese speakers in Snape (2005).

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) classified the English article system by combining semantic context with noun type. Since all English nouns are either common nouns (e.g., boy, country, dog), or proper nouns (e.g., Adam, Mary, China); and all common nouns are either count nouns (e.g., book, shirt, theory), or noncount nouns (e.g., water, clothing, furniture), they classified the English article system as shown in Figure 2.
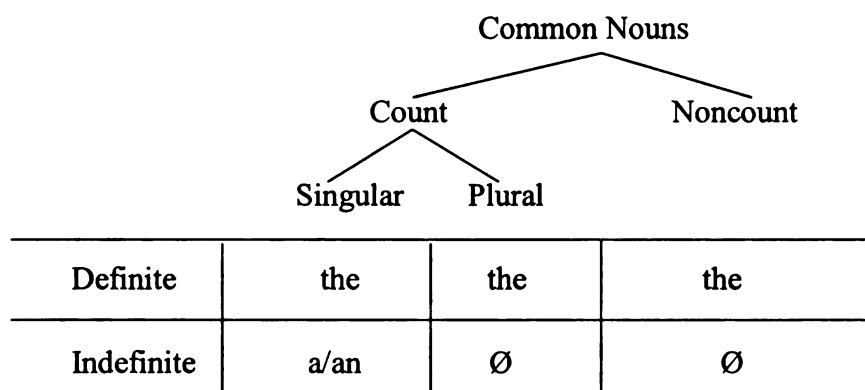
```
                    Common Nouns
                   /          \
              Count            Noncount
             /     \
      Singular      Plural
```

	Singular	Plural	Noncount
Definite	the	the	the
Indefinite	a/an	Ø	Ø

Figure 2. Adapted from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999) classification of English article system (p. 272).

However, while much research on L2 English article acquisition has considered the role of semantic context, namely the features of definiteness (or HK) and specificity (or SR), there has been less consideration of the role countability plays in English learners' usage of articles. It has always been clear that semantic context is not enough to determine correct article uses in English, as the definite article *the* is reported to be the easiest among the three articles to acquire because, in theory, it can be used with singular or plural nouns and count or noncount nouns, while the indefinite article *a* is only used with singular count nouns (Butler, 2002; Hawkins, 2001; Lee, 2008; Master, 1990; Park, 2005). As indicated in a longitudinal study conducted by Parrish (1987) with a Japanese

learner of English, the definite article seems to be acquired before the indefinite article. Thomas (1989) also found that the correct use of the indefinite article was delayed. As English learners start to use *the* more frequently, they have been found to go through a period of overgeneralization of the definite article (Hawkins et al., 2006; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Zegarac, 2004).

Among those who directly addressed the role countability plays in L2 learners' production of articles, Master (1987) asserted that countability "appeared to cause the most persistent difficulty in article acquisition" (p. 181). Yoon (1993) found in L1 Japanese speakers a correlation between intuitive countability judgments made for nouns presented with no context and article decisions made later on a gap-filling task. Butler (2002) found that lower-level learners were unaware of nouns that could be countable in one context and uncountable in another. In addition, participants across proficiency levels "often cited the difficulty of determining countability for indivisible entities" (p. 471) such as nouns like *theory* or *atmosphere*. Hiki (1991) found that L2 English learners made most countability misjudgments with abstract nouns on an editing task and were least accurate in article use with abstract nouns on a writing task.

The term abstract is here understood as a feature which signifies that the referent of a noun is not clearly discernable as a discrete object or entity (Trenkic, 2008). For example, for abstract nouns (*life, mood, imagination, taste, atmosphere*), it is difficult to visualize them as individuals. Some researchers (Butler, 2002; Hiki, 1991; White, 2009) believe that learners will as a result make more errors with abstract nouns. However, no

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studies have exclusively looked at abstract nouns while investigating learners' article use.

The studies cited above rarely linked the NPs' count status and semantic context. Yoon (1993) and Hiki (1991) did not look at article choices in definite contexts. Butler (2002) discussed learners' misjudgment of countability, but did not report the semantic contexts in which NPs were presented. Although Young (1996) found that learners tended to mark NPs with singular count status with *a* and NPs with noncount status with Ø, it was unclear if this tendency was detected in both definite and indefinite contexts.

Snape (2005) included noncount nouns as well as singular and plural nouns in an elicitation task similar to the one used in Ionin et al. (2004). As predicted by the FH, the Japanese participants exhibited variation between *a* and *the* before singular nouns and variation between *the* and Ø before plural nouns in the [-definite, +specific] context. However, for noncount nouns in the same context, variation was found between *a* and Ø. The author interpreted the result to indicate that the learners had correctly based their article decisions on [-definiteness] but failed to determine the NPs' count status. More interestingly, the Japanese participants in Snape (2005) also showed variation between *the* and Ø before noncount nouns in the [+definite, +specific] context. Snape accounted for this result as L1 influence, given that Japanese does not distinguish between count and noncount nouns. Thus Japanese participants may have paid too much attention to the determination of count status and their uncertainty over noun countability distracted them from considering the semantic context of a NP. The same explanation could also apply to the previous variation between *a* and Ø, where Ø choices in the [-definite, +specific]

context may have had nothing to do with judgment of [-definiteness], but could have been the result of learners' fluctuation between exclusive attention to count status and attention to semantic context.

White (2009) found that both noun type and semantic context were significant predictors of indefinite article choice and zero article choice, whereas only semantic context was significant in predicting definite article choice – noun type did not favor or disfavor this choice. He asked 41 advanced-level ESL learners from article-less L1 backgrounds to participate in a forced-choice elicitation test. The participants were asked to read short dialogues and choose *a*, *the*, or Ø for target items, and then to explain their choices and rate the degree of confidence for each choice. Each item was one of three noun types (imaginable count, abstract count, and noncount) within one of four semantic contexts ([+definite, +specific], [+definite, -specific], [-definite, +specific], and [-definite, -specific]). White found three common errors in the results: 1. choosing zero articles for nouns identified as noncount in definite contexts, 2. identifying abstract count nouns as noncount, and 3. identifying noncount nouns as count. In explaining those errors, White argued that abstract nouns created more difficulty for learners to judge countability; he also adopted Snape's (2005) assertion that learners would at times pay too much attention to countability and forget to look at semantic context.

Finally, since the present study aims to look exclusively at How Chinese speakers use English articles, it is important to briefly introduce how similar linguistic aspects function in Chinese. Many researchers have classified Chinese as a language that does

not have articles (Robertson, 2002; Trenkic, 2007), but there are noun modifiers that have similar functions (Li & Thompson, 1981). According to Li and Thompson (1981), a Chinese noun phrase in context is either referential or nonreferential, with the difference being if the noun phrase is used to refer to an entity. Referential NPs generally carry a pre-noun modifier, while nonreferential NPs do not. This is demonstrated in example 1 and example 2.

Referential:

(1) Wo   you   yi   ge   jiejie.

    I   have   one   CL   sister

    "I have a sister."

    CL = classifier

Nonreferential:

(2) Ta   shi   laoshi.

    he   is   teacher

    "He is a teacher."

In the first sentence, *jiejie* (sister) refers to a specific person, thus it carries the modifier *yi* (one); in the second sentence, *laoshi* (teacher) is not used to refer to any particular person, but rather to describe a quality of the NP. As a result it does not carry a modifier. Furthermore, referential NPs can be either definite or indefinite: a definite NP carries a demonstrative modifier, while an indefinite NP carries a numeral modifier. This is shown in example 3 and example 4.

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Definite:

(3) Gei   wo   <u>nei</u>   ben   shu.

    give   me   that   CL   book

    "Give me that book."

    CL = classifier

Indefinite:

(4) Wo   he   le   <u>san</u>   bei   shui.

    I   drink   AM   three   cup   water

    "I drank three cups of water."

    AM = aspect marker

In the first sentence, *shu* (book) is definite and carries the demonstrative modifier *nei* (that); in the second sentence, *shui* (water) is indefinite and carries the numeral modifier *san* (three). However, it should be noted that being referential or not is not a quality of a NP, as it depends on the intention of the speaker, so it varies from context to context. Furthermore, it would be wrong to assume that the demonstrative modifier *nei* (that) is equivalent to the English article *the*, as it is not obligatory in all definite contexts. That is shown in example 5:

(5) Wo   shangzhou   mai   de   pingguo   huai   le.

    I   last week   bought   RM   apple   bad   AM

    "The apple I bought last week is bad."

    RM = relative marker; AM = aspect marker

Po-Ching and Rimmington (1998) noted that the use of demonstrative modifiers *zhei* (this) or *nei* (that) indicates definite contexts, while the use of numeral modifier *yi* (one) indicates indefinite contexts, but if these modifiers are required in a certain context depends on various factors such as the presence of adjectives or pronouns.

The above examples also show that countability is not marked in Chinese, as both count nouns (e.g., *jiejie* "sister") and noncount nouns (e.g., *shui* "water") can take numeral modifiers.

In summary, studies (Butler, 2002; Hiki, 1991; White, 2009) have stressed abstract nouns as the problem for learners with article-less L1s in judging countability of NPs. While many other studies looked at NPs' count status and semantic context individually, Snape (2005) and White (2009) found interaction between the two aspects. Their work is the main inspiration of the present study.

Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the influence of both countability and semantic context on learners' article choices before abstract nouns, with a focus on the potential interaction between them. An elicitation task was created using three different types of nouns (count, noncount, and both) within two semantic contexts (definite and indefinite). Count nouns are nouns that are usually countable (e.g., *idea, strategy, possibility*); noncount nouns are nouns that are usually uncountable (e.g., *help, research, advice*); "Both" nouns are nouns discussed in Butler (2002) that can be countable in one context and uncountable in another (e.g., *work, time, experience*). Chinese participants completed

the elicitation task and rated the confidence of their article choices. A subset of the participants were interviewed to reflect on their choices. The data from these tasks were analyzed in order to answer the following research questions.

1. When encountering abstract nouns, how do noun countability and semantic context affect learners' accuracy rate in using articles? Do they perform better with count, noncount, or "both" nouns; in definite or indefinite contexts?

2. How do participants rate the confidence of their article choices with different countability types and semantic contexts?

3. What accounts for their choices – noun countability, semantic context, or something else? Do they emphasize one aspect and overlook another? Or is there an interaction between them?

Hypotheses

For RQ1, it was hypothesized that learners would make more errors with noncount nouns and "both" nouns, and be more accurate with count nouns. Snape (2005) accounted for learners' errors with noncount nouns as failure to determine the NPs' count status. Butler (2002) reported learners' problems in knowing that nouns can be countable in one context and uncountable in another. Thus these misjudgments are expected to lead to more errors from learners. Also according to Hiki's (1991) finding that L2 English learners had the most problems determining the countability of abstract nouns, the participants were expected to show variation between *a* and Ø when they made errors. With regard to semantic context, it was predicted that learners would have higher

accuracy rate in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts, because *the* can be used with nouns of any count status and is thus arguably the easiest among the three articles to acquire. Both Parrish (1987) and Thomas (1989) found that the correct use of the indefinite article was later than the definite article. Many researchers (Hawkins et al., 2006; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Zegarac, 2004) reported that learners have the tendency to overgeneralize the definite article. Thus the most common error here is expected to be learners choosing *the* for indefinite contexts.

For RQ2, due to previous findings on learners' difficulties in determining noun countability (Butler, 2002; Hiki, 1991; Yoon, 1993), learners were expected to have more uncertainty with noncount nouns and "both" nouns. This uncertainty was expected to translate into lower confidence ratings for article choices with these noun types. Learners were also predicted to be less confident with indefinite contexts since using *the* was reported to be easier for them.

For RQ3, it was predicted that noun countability and semantic context would emerge as the most mentioned reasons by learners in explaining their article choices (compared with other possible responses, such as first/second mention). Semantic context was expected to appear more frequently because when learners judged a semantic context to be definite and therefore used *the*, there was technically no need to mention noun countability. In addition, given Snape's (2005) and White's (2009) findings that learners may at times pay too much attention to count status and as a result neglect to look at

semantic context, it was also hypothesized that learners would use noun countability to explain their (incorrect) *a* and Ø choices in definite contexts.

Method

Participants

Participants are 25 English as L2 learners from China who are enrolled as full-time students at a large Midwestern university. None of them were taking ESL classes at the time of the experiment. A language background questionnaire was used to ensure that the participants had reached college-level English proficiency and had relatively similar amounts of exposure to English. Their information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participating Students

Chinese participants	N=25
Gender	
Female	16
Male	9
Average age	22 (Range: 18-27)
Average years of living in the US	2 (Range: 1-5)
Average TOEFL iBT score	91 (Range: 64-109)

Test Instruments

The test instruments, which included a forced-choice elicitation task and a confidence rating task, were constructed to test participants' article knowledge and how confident they were with their article choices (see Appendix).

The elicitation task contained a total of 18 short dialogues, all of which used abstract nouns as target NPs and each was designed to elicit a particular article (*a*, *the*, or Ø). The indefinite article was displayed as *a/an* so that no choice was required based on phonological features. Each of the three noun types contained six target items. Type 1 (count nouns) was comprised of *idea, rumor, possibility, suggestion, strategy*, and *surprise*; type 2 (noncount nouns) was comprised of *research, safety, help, violence, advice*, and *hospitality*; type 3 ("both" nouns) was comprised of *life, time, liberty, culture, work*, and *experience*. All of these 18 NPs were randomly placed in two different semantic contexts (definite and indefinite), so that participants were exposed to issues of both countability and definiteness while completing the task. Table 2 shows the distribution of target items in each of the six categories formed by both features.

Table 2

Words Chosen for Elicitation Task

	Count	Noncount	Both
Definite	rumor, suggestion, strategy	safety, help, hospitality	time, culture
Indefinite	idea, possibility, surprise	research, violence, advice	life, liberty, work, experience

The confidence rating task requires participants to note their confidence levels for the 18 article choices. Confidence for each decision is expressed by marking one of the three possibilities:

1. I am not confident at all with my choice. My answer is a guess.

2. I am somewhat confident with my choice. My answer may be right.

3. I am very confident with my choice. My answer is definitely right.

Interviews with some of the participants were also conducted in order to give them a chance to reflect upon their own article choices and to explain their strategies for article use. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Procedure

All 25 participants met individually with the researcher for the experiment. Each participant was given 20 minutes to complete the forced-choice elicitation task and the confidence rating task. The instruction of the test paper did not explicitly state whether participants should rate confidence after they completed the whole test or if they should do so after each item, but in reality all of them chose to give their ratings after each item. The test papers were collected by the researcher when both tasks were completed.

Personal interviews were conducted with 12 selected participants directly after they finished the test papers in order to find out what had accounted for their article choices. The data gathered from the interviews was intended to be discussed in a more descriptive manner rather than as a quantitative analysis, which was why only a subset of participants were interviewed. The selection of the interviewees was based on the amount of time they had available for the experiment, without regard to their personal and academic information. The format of the interview was similar to Butler's (2002), where the researcher went through each item one by one with the participants, asking them to explain why they had chosen a certain article for each dialogue. The interviews were

conducted in Chinese rather than the target language so that the participants could accurately describe their decision-making process to their full knowledge. Their oral responses were recorded for coding and further analysis.

Data Analysis

To address RQ1, tables were created to show the full distribution of learners' article usage throughout the 18 test items. The tables were made based on the six categories formed by countability/semantic context of NPs and were designed to display how many participants made the right choice for each item as well as the articles they chose when they were wrong. A correct rate was calculated for each NP category to find out how noun countability and semantic context affected learners' performance in choosing articles. In order to determine if there was a significant difference in correct rate between NP categories, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed using SPSS.

To address RQ2, participants' confidence ratings, which had been marked on a 1-3 scale, were computed as values given to each test item. A Pearson product moment correlation (Pearson's r) was first performed to see if there was a correlation between learners' test scores and confidence scores. Similar tables were then created to show the distribution of learners' confidence scores in each NP category. A total confidence score was calculated for each NP category to find out how noun countability and semantic context influenced learners' confidence in choosing articles. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in confidence scores between NP categories.

In order to address RQ3, participants' oral explanations were transcribed and coded as reference to *definiteness*, *countability*, *first/second mention*, *NP modifier*, *feeling*, and *not sure*. These six categories were developed based on learners' responses, after examining the data. *Definiteness* and *countability* refer to learners' responses that directly addressed NPs' count status and semantic context. This includes cases where variations of the words "definiteness" and "countability" were counted as if they belonged to the bigger categories. For example, "*it's just any one out of many*" was counted as referring to *definiteness* and "*the word is singular*" was counted as referring to *countability*. *First/second mention* refers to learners' explanations that a certain article was chosen because the NP was mentioned for the first/second time. *NP modifier* indicates learners' belief that a NP's adjectival modifier was the reason why a certain article was required (e.g., *the right strategy*). *Feeling* refers to learners' responses that did not mention a specific reason for an article choice but stressed the choice felt right. *Not sure* includes cases where learners simply said "*I don't know/I'm not sure.*" The total number of how many times each reason was mentioned were calculated to see the general trend of what learners used to explain their article choices. Individual responses will be looked at for particularly interesting learner errors which may suggest any neglect of countability or semantic context, or any interaction between them. Special attention will be paid to if, according to Snape (2005) and White (2009), learners would sometimes get too distracted by count status and thus forget to look at semantic context. This will be discovered by looking at if learners would use noun countability to explain their *a* and *Ø* choices in

definite contexts.

<div align="center">Results</div>

RQ1: When encountering abstract nouns, how do noun countability and semantic context affect learners' accuracy rate in using articles? Do they perform better with count, noncount, or "both" nouns; in definite or indefinite contexts?

When it comes to learners' general performance on the forced-choice elicitation task, their scores are displayed in Figure 3.

Mean = 13.72
Std. Dev. = 1.595
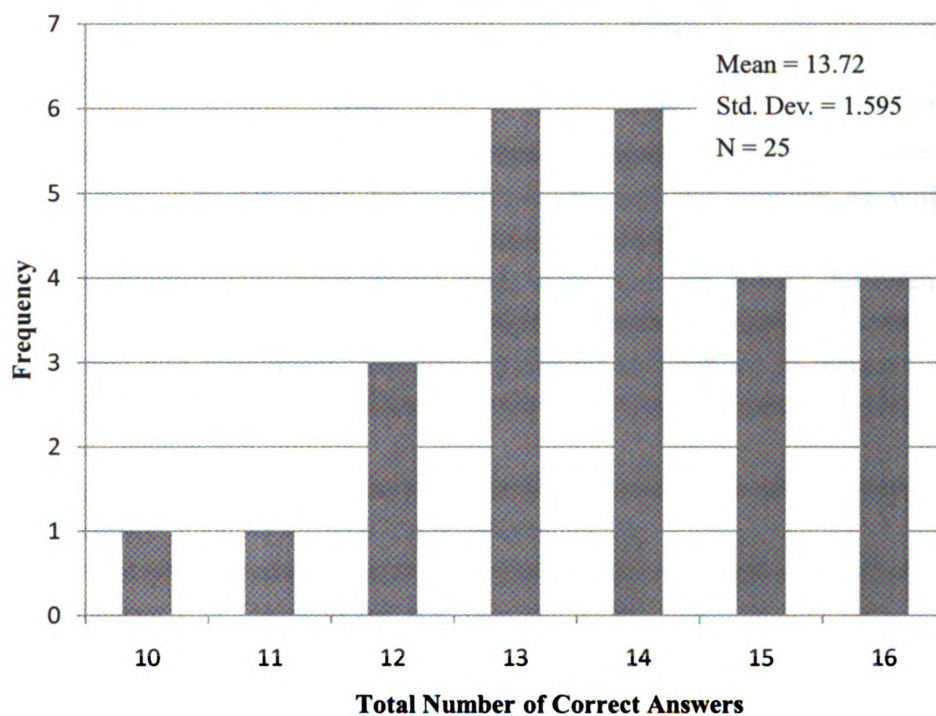N = 25

Total Number of Correct Answers

Figure 3. Test scores.

As shown in Figure 3, most participants did relatively well in the task, with 20 of them scoring above 12 (18 is a perfect score) and none with a score lower than 10. However

none of the participants received a perfect score and the best among them had 2 items wrong.

When the 18 items were divided into 6 categories formed by the count status and definiteness of the NPs, the correct rate for each NP category is displayed in Table 3, which shows how noun countability and semantic context affected learners' performance in choosing articles.

Table 3

Correct Rate

	Count	Noncount	Both
Definite	75%	88%	88%
Indefinite	93%	44%	77%

A two-way ANOVA with both countability and definiteness as within-subjects variables (countability has three levels: count, noncount and "both"; definiteness has two levels: definite and indefinite) indicates significant differences in learners' scores with both factors.

Countability: $F\ (2, 48) = 10.67; p = .000; \eta_p^2 = .31$

Definiteness: $F\ (1, 24) = 11.64; p = .002; \eta_p^2 = .33$

Post-hoc shows that with countability as the factor, learners' scores with count nouns are significantly higher than their scores with noncount nouns (p = .001), but the difference between count nouns and "both" nouns is not significant (p = .484). At the same time, learners' scores with count/noncount nouns are significantly higher than their

scores with noncount nouns (p = .012). When definiteness is the factor, Post-hoc shows that learners performed significantly better in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts (p = .002).

RQ2: How do participants rate the confidence of their article choices with different countability types and semantic contexts?

Learners rated their confidence for each item on a 1-3 scale. A Pearson product moment correlation (Pearson's r) was first performed to see if there was a correlation between learners' test scores and confidence scores. The result indicates that there was not a significant correlation between the two scores (r = .190, n = 25, p = .364, two-tailed).

Again the 18 items are divided into 6 categories formed by the count status and definiteness of the NPs, and a confidence score was given to each NP category to find out how noun countability and semantic context influenced learners' confidence in choosing articles. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Confidence Score

	Count	Noncount	Both
Definite	203	186	194
Indefinite	185	192	181

A two-way ANOVA with both countability and definiteness as within-subjects variables shows that learners' confidence scores do not differ significantly when

countability is the independent variable (F (2, 48) = .993, p = .378, η_p^2 = .04). However, when definiteness is the factor, there is a significant difference between learners' confidence scores with definite contexts and indefinite contexts (F (1, 24) = 7.143, p = .013, η_p^2 = .23). Post-hoc also shows that learners were significantly more confident in definite context than in indefinite context (p = .013).

RQ3: What accounts for their choices – noun countability, semantic context, or something else? Do they emphasize one aspect and overlook another? Or is there an interaction between them?

Participants' oral responses were coded and categorized based on different references they used to explain their article choices. The total numbers of how many times each reason was mentioned were then counted and the results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Learner Responses

	Definiteness	Countability	1st mention	Modifier	Feels right	Not sure
Count/def	17	2	9	0	4	1
Count/indef	16	4	3	0	6	5
Noncount/def	17	3	3	1	6	3
Noncount/indef	10	12	6	0	3	5
Both/def	14	3	0	1	4	1
Both/indef	21	10	1	0	8	8
Total	95	34	22	2	31	23

The results show that learners mainly referred to the definiteness of a NP when they were asked to explain their article choices, with five other reasons mentioned at various times. Definiteness is also the predominant reason for choosing an article in each NP category with the exception of noncount/indefinite NPs, where countability was referred to most frequently by the learners.

In addition, the types of learners' errors were looked at in order to help understand the causes of those errors. Calculations were done to show that when *a*, *the*, and Ø were correct answers, respectively, how many times learners made the right choices, and when they did not, how many times they chose each wrong answer. The results are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6

Error Types

	Correct answers		
Answers given	a (N=125)	the (N=200)	Ø (N=125)
a	**117**	18	36
the	3	**163**	26
Ø	5	19	**63**

Note. 1. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.
2. N refers to the total times when each article was the correct answer.

In the present study, when the correct answer is *a*, the choice of *the* is viewed as learners' problem with definiteness, and the choice of Ø is viewed as learners' problem with countability; when *the* is the correct answer, the choices of both *a* and Ø are viewed

as learners' problem with definiteness; when Ø should be chosen, the choice of *a* is viewed as a problem with countability, and the choice of *the* is viewed as a definiteness problem. This reasoning is in line with Snape's (2005) and enables the researcher to draw conclusions on how NPs' count status and semantic context influence learners' performance in using articles. Thus, a simple calculation of Table 6 shows that among the 107 total errors made by the learners, 41 (38%) of them are countability errors, while 66 (62%) of them are definiteness errors.

Discussion

General Implications

For RQ1, the results are largely in line with the hypotheses in showing that learners had more problems with noncount nouns and indefinite contexts (see Table 3). A significant difference was found in learners' performance between count and noncount nouns, which echoes Snape's (2005) finding that learners generally have greater difficulty judging the countability of noncount nouns. It should be noted that Snape (2005) only looked at concrete nouns, so the present study shows that the same pattern could also be found with abstract nouns. However, learners seemed to perform equally well with "both" NPs, as no significant difference was found between the count and "both" categories. This differs from the hypotheses and Butler's (2002) finding that learners would have problems knowing some NPs can be countable in one context and noncount in another. In

the present study learners seemed to have few problems with those nouns since they did significantly better in that category than with noncount nouns. This may have something to do with particular lexical items in that category, which will be discussed with learners' responses below when each category is analyzed. At the same time, the results yield the same finding in Liu and Gleason (2002) that learners' accuracy rate is higher in definite context than in indefinite context because *the* is easy to choose (both correctly and incorrectly) as it spares learners the burden of having to deal with the NP's count status.

For RQ2, the results of the present study are surprisingly different from the hypotheses and previous studies. No significant correlation was found between learners' test scores and confidence ratings, which means that learners were not less confident in test items they made the most errors with. This can be interpreted as showing that learners strongly believed in some of the wrong judgments they made and were not hesitant with their choices. Both Hiki (1991) and Yoon (1993) found greater uncertainty among learners with noncount nouns, thus learners in the present study were expected to present lower confidence ratings with noncount and "both" nouns than with count nouns. But again that was not proved to be true in the results (see Table 4). The same explanation could also apply here: the fact that learners make errors with one NP doesn't necessarily mean they perceive that NP to be difficult. The typical example in the present study is *research*. 19 out of 25 participants chose *a* for this item and 17 of the 19 gave it a 3 (most confident) as their confidence rating. The reason why learners overwhelmingly perceived *research* to be countable will be addressed below. At the same time the only significant

difference in confidence scores was found between definite contexts and indefinite contexts. This can be interpreted as learners' ease with *the* translated into greater confidence when choosing it.

For RQ3, it was predicted that learners would mostly turn to noun countability and semantic context in explaining their article choices, with semantic context mentioned the most. The results largely echo the hypotheses (see Table 5). It should be noted that when asked to orally explain their decisions, participants almost never mentioned more than one reason. It is understood that this doesn't necessarily mean they only thought about one reason when they completed the test (e.g., a participant may have thought about both countability and definiteness but only commented on definiteness), but it would at least prove that learners overwhelmingly thought definiteness was more worthy of mentioning than countability as well as any other issues. This is not surprising because when *the* was the correct answer, there was technically no need to mention countability. This also seems to counter Snape's (2005) and White's (2009) assertions that noun countability would at times distract learners from paying attention to semantic context. However, a closer look at the results shows that the only time learners mentioned countability more than definiteness occurred with noncount/indefinite NPs, where they made the most errors by misjudging the count status of *research* and *advice*. This at least seems to indicate that certain lexical items, whose count status was proved to be the most difficult for learners to judge, did draw their attention to countability.

But is it enough proof that there is a link between countability and semantic context?

A focus of the present study is to investigate if an interaction exists between the two aspects. Both Snape (2005) and White (2009) gave an affirmative answer to that question, arguing that when their participants incorrectly chose Ø before noncount nouns in definite contexts, they paid too much attention to the judgment of the nouns' countability and therefore forgot to consider definiteness. Their conclusion was when a NP's count status is difficult for the learners to decide, it will distract them from looking at its semantic context. However, it is hard to be sure about when participants chose Ø over *the* in definite contexts, if they really did not look at definiteness, or they did and simply decided it was indefinite. It is impossible to know without actually asking the participants what they were thinking when they made certain choices. That is why the present study adopted the after-test interviews, which allowed the researcher to see if there were any cases where participants chose *a* or Ø in definite contexts and only mentioned countability while explaining their choices. Those cases were not found in the present study, which does not support Snape's (2005) and White's (2009) assertion that such interaction exists between countability and semantic context.

So what are the reasons behind learners' errors in the present study? It has been found that the reasons vary with different lexical items. In order to answer that question, each NP category will be discussed separately.

Count/Definite

Table 7 displays all 25 learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the

count/definite NP category. Previous findings have shown that with the NPs being both countable and definite, this should be a category learners felt most comfortable with. This seemed to be true for *rumor* and *suggestion*, where learners made very few errors and rated their confidence high. However, the case was very different with *strategy*, which elicited much more learner errors and received much lower confidence ratings. The variation was found between *a* and *the*. In order to discover the reason behind this result, the original test item needs to be looked at.

5.

Charles: I just watched the President's address on health care reform. I think it was

pretty good.

*Brandon: I agree. I think talking to people directly was (a, **the**, Ø) right strategy to*

adopt.

17 out of 25 participants misused *a* for this item, which clearly indicates that their problem lies in the judgment of definiteness of the NP *strategy*. White's (2009) participants were found to have trouble classifying abstract nouns as countable, which was not the case here. A look at participants' explanations for this item reveals that only 2 participants out of 12 interviewed mentioned countability as the reason why they chose *a*, which again differs from the previous hypotheses that learners' disproportionate attention to countability would lead to insensitivity to semantic context. In other words, learners successfully determined that *strategy* was countable, but most of them failed to judge the semantic context as definite. One learner explicitly used "first mention" in explaining her

article choice, arguing that the correct answer should be *a* because *strategy* was being

mentioned for the first time.

So why didn't learners in the present study think *strategy* was definite? How is this

item different from those of *rumor* and *suggestion*? The reason may be the modifier

"right". Even though none of the participants interviewed said anything about the

influence of a modifier regarding this item, Trenkic (2007, 2008) found a higher degree

of accuracy of article usage when nouns were not modified by adjectives. When nouns

were modified by adjectives, the participants made more errors in article uses. So the fact

that learners in the present study misjudged the semantic context of *strategy* might have

nothing to do with countability, but rather due to the burden of having to express two

pre-noun modifiers at the same time.

Table 7

Count/Definite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Rumor	0	**25**	0	0	4	21
Suggestion	1	**24**	0	0	4	21
Strategy	17	**7**	1	0	14	11

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

Count/Indefinite

Table 8 displays learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the

count/indefinite NP category. It is obvious from the results that learners did quite well when the NPs were both countable and indefinite. Once more they seemed to have no problem classifying abstract nouns as countable. Learners were less certain about their choices with *possibility* and *surprise* than with *idea*, but they made mostly accurate choices regardless. Previous analysis has proven that learners' test scores and their confidence ratings in general do not correlate, which is in line with results in this particular category where learners might feel an NP is difficult but are still able to judge its countability and semantic context correctly.

Table 8

Count/Indefinite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Idea	**25**	0	0	1	2	22
Possibility	**22**	1	2	3	13	9
Surprise	**23**	0	2	3	11	11

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

Noncount/Definite

Table 9 displays learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the noncount/definite NP category. This is the most uniform category in the present study because participants gave the exact same performance with the 3 NPs in the category. The indefinite article *a* was never chosen by the learners, which highlights their perfect

judgment of the count status of the 3 testing words. Countability was only mentioned 3 times when learners explained their article choices, while definiteness was referred to 17 times in comparison. This again yields little evidence that learners' consideration of countability would make them insensitive to semantic context. One interesting response came with the word *safety*, in the following dialogue:

8.

Jordan: How did that meeting go? Did the parents say anything special?

*Brian: Yeah, most of them were just concerned with (a, **the**, Ø) safety of their*

children in the neighborhood.

This participant explicitly said the reason she chose *the* was because the word *safety* has a "modifier" after it. This strategy was discussed in Liu and Gleason (2002) as a useful tool in determining an NP to be definite. However, in the present study "having a modifier" was only cited twice as an explanation to article choices, which clearly shows that the majority of learners are very much unaware of this tactic.

Table 9

Noncount/Definite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Safety	0	**22**	3	4	4	17
Help	0	**22**	3	3	6	16
Hospitality	0	**22**	3	1	13	11

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

Noncount/Indefinite

Table 10 displays learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the noncount/indefinite NP category. This is the category where learners in the present study made the most errors and provided the most interesting responses. First of all, the majority of learners made wrong article choices with *research* and *advice*, but not with *violence*, even though the 3 words share the same features in terms of count status and semantic context. When they did make errors, the variation was predominantly between *a* and Ø, which is a clear indicator that the problem lies in the judgment of countability of those two words. Second of all, learners' confidence ratings were not lower in this category in comparison with other categories. In fact with the NP *research* – the word eliciting their worst performance among all 18 NPs – 17 out of 25 participants were "very confident" with their article choices. Furthermore, this is the only category where countability was cited more by the learners than definiteness as the reason in explaining their article choices, which proved that learners did pay more attention to countability with this category, but they failed to determine that *research* and *advice* were noncount nouns.

So why were most learners aware that *violence* was uncountable, but not *research* and *advice*? Many researchers (Bergeron-Matoba, 2007; Butler, 2002; Mizuno, 1999; Parrish, 1987; Robertson, 2000; Yoon, 1993; Young, 1996) have suggested strong L1 transfer effect in how learners use articles. Robertson (2000) particularly found that

Chinese ESL learners would often omit articles because their L1 is article-free. In the present study, Chinese participants overused articles rather than omitting them, but the explanation could be the same. According to Li and Thompson's (1981) work, in Chinese if a noun is referential in a context, it generally carries pre-noun modifiers; if a noun is used in a nonreferential way, it usually does not. Among the three test items in the present category, a difference was discovered regarding this particular issue.

7.

Dan: It's been about six months since you began your Ph.D. program. What have you been doing?

Caitlin: Well, I am doing (a, the, Ø) research on water pollution.

10.

Calvin: That guy is totally annoying. Maybe I should go beat him up.

Tara: I understand how you feel. But you should know that (a, the, Ø) violence is never the answer.

11.

Jason: You look very confused. Is everything okay?

John: I'm trying to draw a poster for the meeting next week, but now I need (an, the, Ø) advice on how to make it look better.

In test items 7 and 11, the speaker was using *research* and *advice* to refer to specific entities – research that Caitlin was doing on water pollution, and advice that John was seeking to improve his poster. However, in test item 10 the speaker was only using

violence to make a general comment. Thus in Chinese *research* and *advice* would be referential in this case and carry pre-noun modifiers, while *violence* would be nonreferential in the sentence and does not have a pre-noun modifier. So it is possible that this knowledge translated into learners' belief that these two words would require an article in English. What might have made it even more confusing for the learners was the word *suggestion*, which has the same meaning in Chinese to *advice* and also appeared in the study as a test item, but is a countable noun – learners might think these two words share the same count status.

In order to further investigate if L1 transfer is at work, all 18 test items were translated into Chinese to see if any of them would require a certain pre-noun modifier because the nouns were referential in the contexts, and how that might have influenced learners' English article choices. Attention was paid to if it was more likely for the learners to choose *the* when the demonstrative modifiers *zhei* (this) or *nei* (that) were required, and to choose *a* when the numeral modifier *yi* (one) was required. It turned out that 4 out of 18 test items would carry a pre-noun modifier in Chinese, with test item 2 requiring the demonstrative modifier *zhei* (this), and test items 3, 6, and 18 requiring the numeral modifier *yi* (one). It should be noted that the correct article choice for test item 2 was *the*, while the correct answer for test items 3, 6 and 18 was *a*. Learners' accuracy rates for these 4 test items were 100%, 88%, 92% and 92%, respectively, which was considerably higher when compared with other test items which were nonreferential in the equivalent Chinese sentences and did not require a pre-noun modifier. While the

limitation of this calculation is obvious, due to the small sample size and the fact that it was based on translation, which can be structured differently by different people, it could at least provide some evidence that L1 transfer effect might have attributed to learners' article decisions in the present study by making it more likely for them to use articles before nouns that would require pre-noun modifiers in Chinese contexts.

Table 10

Noncount/Indefinite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Research	19	2	**4**	1	7	17
Violence	2	1	**22**	1	11	13
Advice	15	3	**7**	0	11	14

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

Both/Definite

Table 11 displays learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the both/definite NP category. Previous analysis has shown that learners' article choices tended to be more accurate when the NPs could be both countable and uncountable, than when the NPs were strictly uncountable, even though their confidence ratings did not significantly differ between these two categories. Learners seemed to have no problem at all deciding that both *time* and *culture* in their respective contexts were uncountable, since *a* was never chosen. Some variation was detected between *the* and Ø with the NP *time*, indicating that

the problem was solely about definiteness. Butler (2002) found that learners would have problems knowing some nouns can be countable in one context and uncountable in another, which usually leads to learner errors. However, in the present study both *time* and *culture* were presented in contexts that called for their uncountable forms, which learners were apparently more familiar with. This could explain their perfect judgment of countability in this category, as they did not have to consider the fact that the NPs also had a countable form.

So why did *culture* seem more "definite" than *time*? Since 25 out of 25 learners correctly chose *the* for *culture*, but only 16 did so for *time*.

14.

Chris: I have been practicing for so long. When do I get to play?

*Brandon: Be patient. You will get your chance when (a, **the**, Ø) time is right.*

16.

Charles: So tell me, what do you like the most about the summer in China?

*Brandon: I would say that I enjoyed (a, **the**, Ø) culture most. Chinese people live*

very differently from us.

In test item 16, the definiteness of the NP *culture* could be easily discovered from the dialogue, since *culture* obviously referred to Chinese culture. In test item 14, what *time* referred to was more difficult to objectify. Trenkic (2008) suggested that learners with article-less L1s may understand the definite article as signifying that which is identifiable and the indefinite article as signifying that which is unidentifiable. But sometimes they

fail to understand that the determination of identifiability is up to the speaker's assumption of the hearer, not themselves. In this case some learners might decide *time* was not definite because they themselves were not sure what it referred to. The same point could be proven by learners' responses in the interview: 10 of them said they chose *the* for *culture* because it was definite, but only 4 of them said the same thing about *time*. Their uncertainty over *time*'s semantic context evidently led to more errors with this NP.

Table 11

Both/Definite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Time	0	**16**	9	2	10	13
Culture	0	**25**	0	0	8	17

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

Both/Indefinite

Table 12 displays learners' article choices and confidence ratings of the both/indefinite NP category. The results once again showed learners' nearly perfect judgment of count status of the 4 NPs, with the variation between *a* and *Ø* being close to none. This is in line with the participants' good performance with NPs that can be both countable and uncountable. The NP that stuck out with more learner errors was *work*, where variation was found between *the* and *Ø*. The test item is shown below:

17.

Mike: Do you have a role model?

Lauren: My father. He is one of those down-to-earth guys who just enjoy (a, the, Ø)

work and put their hearts into it.

14 participants chose *the* for this item, apparently believing that *work* was definite. Their confidence rating for this item was also lower than the other 3 NPs in this category, indicating the difficulty learners had in determining the NP's semantic context. The reason why many learners thought *work* in the dialogue was definite may be similar to the reason with the NP *time*: learners misjudge the definiteness of a NP by letting their own identifications of what a NP refers to decide their article choices. One learner provided an especially interesting response during the interview: "I think *work* is definite because it refers to 'my father's work'", she said, "but that's what I think. I don't know if that's what Lauren meant… I'm not sure."

Table 12

Both/Indefinite

	Article choice			Confidence rating		
	a	the	Ø	1	2	3
Life	**24**	0	1	1	8	16
Liberty	0	6	**19**	4	7	14
Work	0	14	**11**	4	11	10
Experience	**23**	2	0	2	5	18

Note. Bold font reflects accurate article choices.

In the end, the present study exclusively looked at learners' performance with abstract nouns, since no studies have done so before. While that makes it impossible to compare the potential differences in learners' performance between abstract nouns and concrete nouns, it is valuable in showing that some previous findings by other researchers could also stand with the present study. Snape's (2005) participants made more article errors with noncount nouns than with count nouns when encountering only concrete nouns, which also emerged as a finding in the present study with only abstract nouns. Butler (2002), Hiki (1991) and White (2009) stressed the role abstract nouns play in leading learners to make countability errors – the same kind of errors were also identified in the present study.

Conclusion

The present study shows that when Chinese ESL learners use English articles before abstract nouns, they tend to be more accurate with [+countable] nouns and [+definite] nouns, while making more errors with [-countable] nouns and [-definite] nouns. Their self-rated confidence scores do not necessarily reflect the real problems they face with difficult NPs, as they are at times more confident with less accurate article choices. When asked to explain their decisions, learners mostly refer to semantic context as the reason why they choose a certain article, though it says little about whether or not their decision-making process normally does not involve count status, since they made more errors with definiteness than they did with countability.

Previous studies have cited the judgment of countability as the most persistent problem in learners' article use (Butler, 2002; Master, 1987; Yoon, 1993), especially with abstract nouns (Hiki, 1991). However, the present study has suggested that semantic context causes equally as many problems, if not more, as countability does. Both Snape (2005) and White (2009) concluded that learners' exclusive attention to countability is the main cause of many learner errors with articles, but little evidence was found in the present study to support that assertion. Instead, learner errors seemed to result from L1 transfer effect, the presence of adjectival modifications, and false conception of definite/indefinite identification, though more evidence is needed to support those assumptions. The study once again shows the extreme complexity of understanding how ESL learners make article choices.

Limitations and Future Studies

Among the shortcomings of the present study is the small number of NPs in each countability/definiteness category. Having more target items on the elicitation task would enable a more confident interpretation of the quantitative results. For example, it is hard to determine if learners' poor performance with the noncount/indefinite NPs was solely due to the influence of semantic features and noun types, or simply the unfamiliarity with particular lexical items including *research* and *advice*, since there were only 3 NPs in that category. A greater number of target items in the future studies would allow for more certain conclusions regarding noun countability and semantic context.

Another limitation may be the fact that when learners were interviewed about their

article choices, they tended to give the shortest possible answers so that their responses might not fully reflect the whole picture of their decision-making process. An alternative approach is for participants to complete the elicitation task while following a think-aloud protocol. This measure may shed more light on learners' thinking process.

APPENDIX

English Article Tasks

Instructions:

1. You have 20 minutes to finish the tasks.

2. Please read the following short dialogues and circle the proper articles (a/an, the, or Ø) for the nouns.

3. After you finish, please rate how confident you are with your choice on a

   1 to 3 scale as shown below. Please write down the number next to each

   dialogue.

     (1). I am not confident at all with my choice. My answer is a guess.

     (2). I am somewhat confident with my choice. My answer may be right.

     (3). I am very confident with my choice. My answer is definitely right.

1. Bob: Our TV is still not working. Do you know how to fix it?

   Mike: I don't know. Maybe when James comes home, we can come up with (an, the, Ø) idea.

2. Jenny: I have heard that John and Jennifer are back together. I just can't believe it.

   Serena: Where did you hear (a, the, Ø) rumor? That's so not true!

3. Dave: Hey, how do you think our football team will do at the end of the season?

Jared: I'm not sure yet. Going to a game in the final round is definitely (a, the, Ø) possibility.

4. Mary: I'm going to talk to my advisor about the study abroad program.

Chris: I wouldn't count on what she says. (A, The, Ø) suggestion she gave me last time totally didn't work.

5. Charles: I just watched the President's address on health care reform. I think it was pretty good.

Brandon: I agree. I think talking to people directly was (a, the, Ø) right strategy to adopt.

6. Chris: So you really didn't know there would be a birthday party waiting for you at home?

Blair: Not at all. That was (a, the, Ø) total surprise.

7. Dan: It's been about six months since you began your PHD program. What have you been doing?

Caitlin: Well, I am doing (a, the, Ø) research on water pollution.

8. Jordan: How did that meeting go? Did the parents say anything special?

Brian: Yeah, most of them are just concerned with (a, the, Ø) safety of their children in the neighborhood.

9. Maria: I'm sorry you had to go through that entire process at the university. I know that's very complicated.

    Jacob: It's okay. The staff there were very nice and offered me exactly (a, the, Ø) help I needed.

10. Calvin: That guy is totally annoying. Maybe I should go beat him up.

    Tara: I understand how you feel. But you should know that (a, the, Ø) violence is never the answer.

11. Jason: You look very confused. Is everything okay?

    John: I'm trying to draw a poster for the meeting next week, but now I need (an, the, Ø) advice on how to make it look better.

12. Sally: I heard you went to spend Thanksgiving with your roommate's family. How was it?

    Jake: It was great. His parents treated me like their own son and I really appreciated (a, the, Ø) hospitality.

13. Bob: Do you usually get up this early to exercise?

Mike: I do. Living (a, the, Ø) healthy life is very important to me.

14. Chris: I have been practicing for so long. When do I get to play?

Brandon: Be patient. You will get your chance when (a, the, Ø) time is right.

15. Grace: How was your history class today? What did you learn?

Karen: Well, we learned that (a, the, Ø) liberty is something our forefathers fought for

and thus is very precious.

16. Charles: So tell me, what do you like the most about the summer you spent in China?

Brandon: I would say that I enjoyed (a, the, Ø) culture most. Chinese people live very

differently from us.

17. Mike: Do you have a role model?

Lauren: My father. He is one of those down-to-earth guys who just enjoy (a, the, Ø)

work and put their hearts into it.

18. Andrea: Did you have fun at Disney Land?

Mark: I did. We don't have that in our country. It was (a, the, Ø) unique experience.

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