

# How Japanese Learners Use English Articles in Sentences With *Be* in Contrast to Sentences With Other Verbs

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It is a general rule that English singular countable nouns co-occur with determiners. However, Japanese learners frequently make errors when using unmarked countable nouns in English sentences. These mistakes are exemplified by the omission of necessary articles from singular countable noun phrases. This problem has been recorded by various researchers, but still some issues relevant to errors involving the omission of necessary determiners remain. In this study, an experiment was conducted to investigate incidences of article omission in sentences or clauses involving the verb *be* in contrast to sentences or clauses involving other verbs. The results showed that errors are more prevalent in the sentences that contain *be*. In further investigation, the possibility that errors are due to the students' images of nouns in the *be* sentences as those of abstract concepts rather than specific ones was explored. Results indicated that this may be the case.

*Keywords:* articles, determiners, sentences with *be* verbs, sentences with other verbs, Japanese learners

## Introduction

There are no articles in the Japanese language, and so English articles are difficult language items for Japanese learners. Various studies have investigated Japanese learners' acquisition of English articles (Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Thomas, 1989; Asano, 1996a, 1996b; Takahashi, 2000; Butler, 2002; Lauer, 2012; Teng, 2012). Most of the studies show that Japanese learners tend to incorrectly omit necessary articles from noun phrases. It is generally considered that most mistakes in omitting articles are caused by learners' misidentifying English countable nouns as uncountable ones. In addition, Butler (2002) argued that specificity was also an important reason why Japanese learners omitted necessary articles from noun phrases. The present study was initiated due to a classroom observation by the author that Japanese learners appeared to miss the necessary articles from noun phrases in sentences with *be* verbs. In contrast, they do not appear to make so many same mistakes with the nouns in sentences with other verbs. Little research has been done in this area, and so the study is undertaken to test the hypothesis that errors of article omission with singular countable nouns are more prevalent than with other verbs and to investigate the issue of specificity.

It is a general rule that unmarked countable nouns do not exist in English sentences. This means English singular countable nouns are usually determined in sentences. Teng (2012) named this rule DN (determiner + noun), and it will be referred to as DN in the rest of this paper. Consequently, in this paper "missing necessary

articles” means incorrectly using unmarked countable nouns. Therefore, a discussion of this issue is closely associated with Japanese learners’ use of articles. If Japanese learners really do have a tendency to omit articles in sentences with *be* more often than in the sentences with other verbs, is the reason for this error related to the learners’ understanding of countability and specificity?

### Method

In this study an experiment<sup>1</sup> was conducted involving 61 participants from a Japanese public senior high school. They had studied English for five years and acquired a basic knowledge of articles. They were tested with a questionnaire which consisted of translation questions. The participants were asked to translate the following three Japanese sentences into English.

- (1) 私は学生です。私は医者になりたいです。(我是学生，我想当医生。)
- (2) コップは安い、皿は高い。(茶杯很便宜，但是碟子很贵。)
- (3) お茶を飲むとき、私はコップを使います。(喝茶时我用茶杯。)

These sentences can be translated as follows:

- (1) I am *a student*. I want to become *a doctor*.

- (2) *A cup* is cheap, but *a dish* is expensive.

*The cup* is cheap, but *the dish* is expensive.

*Cups* are cheap, but *dishes* are expensive.

- (3) I use *a cup* to drink tea.

I use *the cup* to drink tea.

I use *cups* to drink tea.

The translations above are used to show the possible types or structures of the investigated noun phrases.

In the three sentences, there are five items (nouns) to be investigated. These are 学生 (*student*), 医者 (*doctor*), コップ (*cup*), 皿 (*dish*), and コップ (*cup*). All of them should co-occur with a determiner or be used in plural forms. For example, コップ (*cup*) should be translated as *a/the cup* or *cups*. Because this study was designed to investigate the ways in which the learners understand DN, the data were analyzed according to three categories. These are: the number of participants using the naked singular type for the noun, the number of participants using other types (*a/the* + noun, or plural form), and the number of invalid answers. The results for every item (noun) are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

*The Number of Participants’ Answers for Each Category*

	Student	Doctor	Cup (2)	Dish	Cup (3)
Naked	16	8	17	15	5
Others	45	53	44	44	56
Invalid	0	0	0	2	0

From Table 1, it can be found that the numbers of naked countable nouns in the *be* sentences or clauses, the *student* in sentence (1) ( $16/61 = 26.2\%$ ), the *cup* in sentence (2) ( $17/61 = 27.9\%$ ), and the *dish* ( $15/(61-2) =$

<sup>1</sup> The data of this experiment were also used in Teng (2012). However, with a research aim different from that of Teng (2012), this study’s analysis on the data is also different from analysis of Teng (2012).

25.4%) are greater than those in the sentences and clauses involving other verbs, *doctor* in sentence (1) ( $8/61 = 13.1\%$ ) and the *cup* in sentence (3) ( $5/61 = 8.2\%$ ). The results also show that where participants use naked countable nouns in the *be* sentences or clauses they do so in very similar proportions (26.2%, 27.9%, and 25.4%). Thus, it is probable that there is no difference between these countable nouns in relation to participants' understanding of DN. An  $\chi^2$  test was used to check if there is a statistically significant difference in using naked nouns and other forms (except the invalid ones) between the countable nouns in the *be* sentences and clauses and the countable nouns in the other verb sentences and clauses. Because *student* and *doctor* can be categorized as occupational identities and the investigated nouns in sentences (2) and (3) are the same, *cup*, it was judged appropriate to test the difference between the pairs. The test results show that there is significant difference between the *cup* in sentences (2) and (3) ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.482, p < 0.05$ ). But there is no significant difference between the *student* and the *doctor* ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.542, p > 0.10$ ). This lack of significance may be due to the closeness of meaning between *be* and *become* in the sentence.

### Discussion

Why do Japanese students tend to incorrectly use naked countable nouns in *be* sentences and clauses more often than other verb sentences and clauses? In this study, the possibility that the Japanese learners' image of the noun as an abstract concept rather than as a specific object is examined as a reason for the omissions. In English, singular countable nouns are usually determined by articles or other determiners, even if the noun is used to express an abstract meaning such as a category. However, if it is considered to be an abstract concept, this may lead Japanese learners to use the naked type of a noun phrase. In learners' minds, the noun may be potentially more strongly associated with the concept of a category in the *be* sentences than in the other verb sentences. To explore this hypothesis, a survey was conducted in which the experimental sentences (1), (2), and (3) were shown and participants were asked which nouns in the two pairs of the *student* and the *doctor* in sentence (1), and the *cup* in sentence (2) and the *cup* in sentence (3) had a stronger image of a specific object. The interviewed participants were 40 Japanese first-year students at a national university. Thirty-six participants answered that *doctor* had a stronger image of a specific object than *student* in contrast to four participants who answered that *student* had a stronger image. Thirty-five participants answered that the *cup* in sentence (3) had a stronger image of a specific object than in sentence (2), and five of them had the opposite view. A binominal test was used to analyze if there was a significant difference between these numbers in judging a stronger specific object image between *student* and *doctor*. The result is  $p < 0.01$ , and this means the participants significantly tend to get a stronger image of a specific object in relation to *doctor* which is in the *be* clause. It was also confirmed that the participants had a stronger image of a specific object with the *cup* in the other verb sentence (3) than the *cup* in the *be* sentence (2) which was significant in a binominal test ( $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, the results indicate that Japanese learners tend to use unmarked nouns in *be* sentences, because they treat the noun as an abstract category rather than a specific object and so they omit articles from the noun phrase. In the participants' answers, if participants used articles, most of them used the indefinite article *a*. In some of the test sentences, the nouns can only be determined by *a*, as in the *student* and the *doctor* in sentence (1), but the other countable nouns that were investigated can also be determined by *the* or the plural form. In general, *a* is first introduced to learners with the meaning of *one*. Because of the primacy effect, it may be associated with a strong image of *one* in Japanese

learners' minds, and so they tend to omit *a* from both abstract nouns and uncountable nouns. Plural forms are obviously associated with countable nouns. It is possible that the use of the definite article *the* is so strongly associated with the indefinite article that a noun with little or no image of a specific object (or a countable noun) is not associated with *a(n)* and consequently not associated with *the*. Such factors may cause Japanese learners to use the unmarked countable nouns in *be* sentences.

### Conclusions

In English, there are almost no naked countable nouns in natural sentences. If we use a naked countable noun in an English sentence, in most cases it will not be a correct expression. The basic principle is that an unmarked countable noun needs to be adapted, such as being determined by an indefinite or a definite article, or being changed into its plural form. However, even though this is a basic principle, Japanese learners often make mistakes in relation to it. This study has focused on comparing Japanese learners' incorrect use of naked countable nouns in the context of *be* verbs and in the context of other verbs. The comparison is relevant to how the learners tend to use English articles. Through an experiment using translation, results indicate that teenage Japanese learners tend to consider the noun in *be* sentences as an abstract noun more often than the noun in other verb sentences. This may be one of the reasons for Japanese learners using more unmarked nouns in *be* sentences. Although these results may be considered tentative, a pedagogical implication is that, in the teaching of articles, teachers should emphasize that even in the case of singular countable nouns that do not refer to a specific object, an article is still necessary. Teachers could also stress that articles in sentences and clauses with *be* verbs are often incorrectly omitted. The author of this paper believes that the results of this study may also be relevant for Chinese learners of English, whose language does not have articles either.

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