

Countable / Non-countable Nouns in English

You notice that your students are still having difficulties with subject-verb agreement and you suspect that their problem may lie in their inability to recall which nouns are countable i.e., those which add –s to indicate plurality, and those which don't add –s (non-count/mass) nouns to show plurality.

There are several patterns, taken from the following texts, to keep in mind when teaching these patterns (Butofsky & Rapaport-Buchwald, 1979; Kane, 1983; King & Stanley, 1989; Norton & Green, 1983; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; Wardhaugh, 1995).

1. **Countable nouns:** *teacher/teachers, drawing/drawings, glass/glasses*

Exceptions: *man/men, woman/women, child/children, tooth/teeth, mouse/mice, foot/feet, goose/geese, ox/oxen; sheep, moose, deer, grouse, fish*

Typical descriptive words (quantifiers) used with countable nouns: *few, fewer, several, the, both of, any, some, all, many*

2. **Non-countable nouns:**

information, advice, furniture, coal, hydrogen, sugar, water, money, carbon, gas, companionship, moisture, accounting, warmth...

A partitive construction shows countable detail:

a piece of information/advice/furniture, a pair of binoculars/scissors/trousers, pants, a drop of water/rain/coffee...

3. **Frequent EFL count/non-count confusions:**

advice, anger, applause, behaviour, chaos, chess, conduct, courage, dancing, education, furniture, harm, homework, hospitality, information, leisure, melancholy, moonlight, parking, photography, poetry, progress, publicity, research resistance, safety, shopping, smoking, sunshine, violence, weather



4. Collective nouns typically used in the plural:

fish, police, graffiti,

Collective nouns typically used in the singular:

(animals) herd, colony, army, troop, swarm, flock, gang, drove, rabble, pack, team, mob, yoke, nest...

(people) faculty, troupe, squad, staff, posse, choir, audience, band, gang, bevy, gaggle, flock, den, network, company...

5. Nouns which appear to be plural but are in fact singular:

news, phonetics, billiards, Linguistics, Mathematics, Physics, Informatics, Electronics, the United Nations, the United States, the Netherlands, Brussels...

6. Plural nouns without a singular equivalent (frequently used with a partitive):

pincers, tweezers, tongs, trousers, scissors, tights, spectacles, pyjamas, binoculars, jeans, shorts, scales, premises, arms, spirits, surroundings, troops, earnings, means, funds, looks, minutes (agenda)

Here are some exercise types and ideas which you can use to test countable/non-countable understanding among your EFL students:

Exercise 1: As in the following 10 sentences, write out your own sentences in which a mixed group of both countable/non-countable nouns is presented.

Choose the correct form of the verb for each of the following:

1. Although our lines had been cast for the last three hours, the fish (isn't, aren't) biting.
2. The advice which we have gotten concerning the accident (suggests/suggest) that we need to contact a lawyer as soon as possible.
3. (There was/There were) so much damaged furniture left behind.
4. Isn't it a proverb in most cultures that the love of money (is, are) the root of all evil?
5. While Accounting (does not, do not) vary generally from country to country, there are distinctive European, Asian, and North American guidelines for quarterly reporting.
6. The information contained in these binders (is, are) too voluminous for immediate inputting.
7. The police (was, were) called immediately after the burglary.
8. Happiness (seems, seem) like a butterfly which if chased will always elude; but if expected, will soon alight.
9. Snake-bite specialists frequently distinguish between poisons, which (is, are) toxic when eaten, inhaled, or swallowed on the one hand, and venom, which (is, are) toxic only if injected on the other.
10. Moose, which (were, was) introduced in recent years to Newfoundland, (have, has) multiplied and become problematic as there are no known predators on the island.

Exercise 2: Write the following countable and non-countable nouns in the correct column:

friendship	conclusion	condensation	cyberspace
cheerfulness	information	formula	phenomenon
attitude	television	hydrogen	happiness
courage	antenna	hope	refusal
equipment	elevation	aluminum	police

Countable	Non-countable

Exercise 3: Write out sentences with words that are known to cause confusion for EFL students because they are often plural in the L1. Ask your students whether these nouns are translated as singular or plural in their L1.

1. The smoking in the first-class railway car (continue, continues) to bother other passengers.
2. The resistance to the introduction of a new security procedures on the fourth floor (was, were) obvious in view of the dismayed expressions.
3. Significant research (have, has) taken place in recent years seeking to explore the effects of wind-turbine vibration on the sleep patterns of nearby residents.
4. Chess (become, becomes) particularly compelling at the end-game stage.
5. Technological progress (increase, increases) the likelihood that mankind will experience both additional benefits and dangers.
6. "Homework (make, makes) pupils realize that learning does not take place only at school!"
7. Everybody knows that advice (are, is) valued only when requested.

8. The weather (are, is) keeping everyone in.
9. In this era of celebrity worship, some paparazzi believe that (there is, there are) no such thing as bad publicity.
10. Their various behaviors throughout the evening (was, were) indistinguishable from everyone else's.

Exercise 4: English is rich in terms used to describe various groupings of both animals and people. Go online to find some additional terms to reinforce in your students' minds how distinguishing between singular and plural is an important process in English.

This two-part structure i.e., [an "x"] [of "y"] is a good opportunity for the teacher to discuss with an advanced class the difference between a prescriptive vs. a descriptive approach to grammar. A prescriptively oriented teacher will insist on teaching students about the underlying logic of the sentence e.g., *None of the children is ready* whereas a descriptively oriented teacher will likely focus on the situational appropriateness of the sentence e.g., *None of the children are ready*.

1. A clutch of lawyers (stand, stands) ready each morning to deal with the public and their inquiries at Old City Hall.
2. Any gang of prisoners (require, requires) extensive supervision.
3. The faculty (is, are) are of the opinion that academic freedom outweighs all other considerations in this matter.
4. If you've got your binoculars with you, you may see a pod of whales, which (has, have) just come to the surface.
5. The passel of tourists (was, were) just rounding the corner when the street was sealed off.
6. Veterans take pride in Shakespeare's reference to the loyalty that any band of brothers (reserve, reserves) for its own.
7. Great expense and attention will be devoted to debugging, securing, and improving a network of computers which (serves, serve) over a million customers daily.
8. There will be, unfortunately, an inevitable chorus of criticisms that (drown out, drowns out) any reasonable suggestion at this point.
9. When diamonds were discovered at Kimberley in the late 19th century, President Paul Kruger predicted that the horde (was, were) an ill omen for his country.