



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Language acquisition – English nouns

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### Abstract:

In every language, nouns represent the most important grammatical category. In English, nouns form the biggest category of words from the English vocabulary. In fact, English nouns represent the most frequent lexical word class. This means that in English, every fourth word that is being used is a noun. The acquisition of as many English nouns as possible is essential for those who desire to learn English.

English nouns are as important as English verbs. Nouns are used in the construction of sentences and phrases; nouns offer us a clear view of *the performer* of a certain action. *The performer – the noun* stands for: a person, an animal, a place, an object, an idea or an event. In fact, according to many linguists, identifying and retaining English nouns does not create problems to English learners. Nevertheless, "... learning how to use nouns with other words (especially determiners) in noun phrases is an important source of difficulty. Learners of English need to recognize nouns and to know what other words they go with, e.g. they need to know they can say *this pen* and not *this write*. "(Kennedy, Graeme, 2003:142)

English nouns can be analyzed from a semantic, grammatical and phonological point of view. In English we can distinguish the following categories: common, proper, collective and abstract nouns. Moreover, English nouns are also divided in countable and uncountable nouns. This article will offer a detailed description of the English nouns.

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## Language acquisition – English nouns

English nouns form the biggest category of words from the English language vocabulary. Due to the fact that English nouns are so numerous, English learners should know how to form their plural and how to use them in sentences or phrases (word order). Even though: “Today’s generation talks in hyperlinks, greets and video calls on WhatsApp, shares pictures through Facebook or talks face to face using Skype and basically all and any of the technological resources accessible today: iPhones, iPads, digital textbooks, social media, blogs, vlogs, wikis.” (Bărbuceanu, 2021:70), it is important to insert grammar rules in writing as well as in free speeches.

Moreover, the teaching process should be able to adapt to different situations – some of them even extreme. An extreme situation took place in 2020 when the entire world had to face a new and dangerous pandemic. COVID-19 was the cause of major changes worldwide. Factories, companies and institutions were closed and people had to stay indoor – to work and study from home. School and universities transferred their classes and courses in the online environment. Web applications were used by teachers and pupils in order to connect themselves. Information and knowledge was transmitted via the Internet. English classes and courses also went online and grammar was explained through PowerPoint presentations. Therefore, English teachers could agree with the fact that: “ If, before the pandemic, we focused chiefly on books, courses and other hardcover materials, now, we are sending tremendous amounts of linguistic and cultural data at the click of a button to students living thousands of kilometers away. Online teaching has opened the doorway not simply to our versatility and resourcefulness as language educators, it has also improved the professional competence of our students.”(Lăpădat, Lăpădat, 2020:140)

### Teaching English nouns

Even if teaching English nouns has a quite straightforward approach considering that visual materials can be used. These materials had a perfect adaptation during the pandemic because English teachers had the opportunity to use them online. To distinguish between a singular and a plural English noun is quite simple in English because in most cases we normally add an ‘s’ at the end of the singular noun (e.g. boy-boys, house-houses, mask-masks, etc). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Nouns that end in ‘sh’, ‘ch’, ‘s’ or ‘x’ tend to form the plural like this: bush – bushes, church – churches, bus-buses, class-classes, box-boxes, etc). Another important exception is represented by irregular nouns (e.g. man-men, woman-women, tooth-teeth, sheep-sheep, child-children, mouse-mice, foot-feet, person-people, fish-fish, etc).

Another interesting thing is that most English nouns do not have grammatical gender. The nouns that refer to people do not have separate forms for men and women (e.g. we say *teacher* even if it is a male or a female, we say *student* for male and female, we say *doctor, lawyer, hairdresser*, etc, for male and female). However, there are some nouns that have two versions – for male and female (*actor/ actress, chairman/ chairwoman, steward/ stewardess, waiter/ waitress*.)

When it comes to class and material management, English teachers have different ways of organizing the curriculum. Nowadays, English teachers have access to many books, manuscripts and other materials that are meant to help them in the classroom and to offer reliable models in the process of teaching. For a better understanding, English teachers can teach grammar in a structured way with key information and many examples. In fact, grammar can be compared with logic and

mathematics. Teaching English grammar develops certain skills for the learner. The learner first listens to the information, takes notes, communicates with the teacher based on the new information that he receives reads and afterwards writes in English. To write even the shortest sentence in English, the learner has to be familiarized with the English grammar. Correct sentences led to correct paragraphs and these led to correct essays in English. In order to reach this point, the English learner has to be active during English classes. This way, the teacher can test his accuracy and correct possible errors so that they do not turn into bad habits.

Even if some scholars view “language as a meaning-based system of communication, not an abstract structural conceptualization....Communicative approaches reasoned that because most L2 students are learning a language for purposes of communication, the content of a communicative language course should be organized around semantic notions and social functions (Wilkins, 1976) and not around linguistic structures and grammar”(Celce- Murcia, 2015:7), English grammar remains important for a good communication.

As other parts of English grammar (beside the verb), nouns can be taught in one or two English classes and they can be tested through different activities. “Exercises play an important role in teaching. They are the means by which a teacher can conduct learning processes by focusing on certain language elements such as grammatical structures, vocabulary, etc. through giving a suitable exercise.”(Griese, 2005:3)

### Categories of English nouns

Like in any other language, in English, each word from a sentence has a function. Depending on the work that words do in a sentence, they are divided into different categories. These categories are called *parts of speech*. In English, the most numerous part of speech is represented by the noun. English nouns are classified in various ways and sometimes these classes contrast with one another. We encounter:

- **Proper Nouns** – they name a specific person, place, institution, organization, name of a publication, etc (e.g.: Mary, Tom, Albert, John, England, Stonehenge, etc). Proper nouns are always capitalized. However, in English, we say: the USA (United States of America), the People’s Republic of China, the United Arab Emirates and the URSS (this last one is the abbreviation from French: *Union of Socialist Republics*). A particularity of English proper nouns is that the days of the week are considered proper nouns (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...), the same goes for the nationality of a person (French, Italian, Portuguese...). This is an important particularity and English learners should adapt to it. If, for example:

**e.g.** (in Romanian) Voi termina articolul acesta martea viitoare. / În seara asta am mâncat la un restaurant *italienesc*. → (in English) I will finish this article next Tuesday./ This evening we ate in an *Italian* restaurant.

- **Common Nouns** – they refer to things and not to people. They can be concrete or abstract (e.g. *man, woman, desk, computer, book, article, chair, furniture, kitchen, seaside, mountain, valley, country, fruit, grape, seed, cat, dog, etc.*)

English nouns can also express intangible things – **Abstract Nouns** – that express feelings, processes or activities. **Abstract Nouns** define the things that we can not touch, see or hear: (e.g. *happiness, work, friendship, compassion, determination, communication, motivation, etc*). In fact, in English some *abstract nouns are created*

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from *concrete nouns* (child-childhood, king-kingship, brother-brotherhood, friend-friendship, man-manhood, member-membership, neighbor-neighborhood, etc).

From verbs we can also obtain abstract nouns (think- thought, behave-behavior, know-knowledge, laugh-laughter, marry-marriage, etc)

Other abstract nouns are created from adjectives by adding the suffix –ness (sad-sadness, happy-happiness, kind-kindness, weak-weakness, great-greatness, etc). Some abstract nouns can, in some cases, be difficult to recognize because they can function as other parts of speech.

Abstract nouns have the same rules as all the other nouns. They can work as subjects and objects and they can take the possessive form (*childhood's innocence, anxiety's signs, maturity's test, etc*). Abstract nouns can have singular and plural forms, the English learner has to pay attention if the abstract noun is countable or uncountable. Generally, if an abstract noun refers to an entire system or process, it is uncountable:

e.g. *Information is the key to success. / Knowledge has such a vast meaning that it is difficult to define it. / Progress is necessary in our society.*

English abstract nouns are mainly used in philosophical conversations, in books, quotes, etc. *Defining abstract nouns* is a challenging process because unlike a concrete noun like chair ( we can see it, describe it, touch it), abstract nouns like happiness, sadness, pride, etc – all of them are difficult to define and the feeling that they stand for can only be described in quotes, complex sentences or even short paragraphs.

Another category is represented by **Concrete Nouns** and they name the things that we can touch, see, hear or smell: (e.g. *car, table, spoon, landscape, movie, actress, etc.*).

e.g. *with concrete nouns: Their movie was released in March 2001. / After the storm we saw a rainbow in the sky. / Your soup was very tasty. / His classmates encouraged him to take part in that activity. / The engine of your car makes a terrible noise.*

However, distinguishing between an abstract and a concrete noun may be difficult at times and English learners should pay attention to the entire context:

e.g. The painter said that his last work of art required many hours and hard work. (in this case the noun work in the beginning is a concrete noun because it refers to a piece of art that can be seen, touched; the noun work at the end of the sentence stands for the effort of the artist and therefore is an abstract noun).

We can also distinguish **Collective Nouns** which stand for "... a name given to a group (or collection) of persons or things as a single group or entity." (Ace, Subbotin, 2014:24) in the category of collective nouns we can include words like: *crowd, team, army, police, family, herd, etc.* Usually, collective nouns take a singular verb, but in some cases, depending on the context, they can take a plural form. A singular verb is required when the group/ entity act together and a plural verb is required when the members of the group/ entity act separately.

e.g. *with collective nouns: The team of players was disappointed by the result of the match. / Everyone in the audience applauded his amazing performance. / The band of musicians sang their latest single. / They family is concerned about his reaction. / The family are taking separate decisions on this matter.*

However, in general, collective nouns require a singular verb and a singular pronoun if we refer to the collective noun in another sentence:

e.g. *The jury* deliberated on that case. *It* asked for many testimonies in order to take a final decision. / The Romanian *team* is decided to win. *It* wants to prove *its* performance. In addition, in English, collective nouns can take the plural form – we can say: *teams, families, juries, crews, clubs, audiences, classes, etc.*

Most of the collective nouns exercises are those *fill in the blanks* type. The English learner has to get accustomed with expressions like:

e.g. *choir of singers*, *flock of sheep*, *fleet of ships*, *class of students*, *basket of fruits*, *army of soldiers*, *litter of puppies*. Of course, there are multiple combinations depending on the context.

### Countable and Uncountable English Nouns

At the same time, all English nouns are divided in two categories. This is the most important grammatical distinction for English nouns:

- Some English nouns can be counted (**Countable Nouns**). Most of these countable nouns are regular meaning that they express the singular by the stem form and the plural is formed by adding +s to the stem.  
e.g.: *one house-two houses*, *one mirror – two mirrors*, *one ring- two rings*, *one driver-two drivers*, etc.
- We have to mention that some countable nouns have a totally different form for the plural so they have to be learnt separately.  
e.g. *a mouse – some mice* ; *one child – two children* ; *a leaf – some leaves* ; *one tooth – two teeth* etc.

Countable nouns have a plural form, they can be accompanied by determiners like: *few*, *several*, *many*, *these*, *those*, etc. For the singular form, countable nouns should be accompanied by the article or a determiner. For example, the following sentences are wrong:

*She is woman.* - *She is a woman* (the correct version) or

*She is woman who came yesterday – She is the woman who came yesterday.* (correct version)

*You open book at page 193.* – *You open that/ this/ the book at page 193* (the correct version).

Nevertheless, English nouns can function by themselves without a determiner. This happens when they refer to the entire category that they define:

e.g. Cats sleep more than 5 hours per day. / Roses can be found in most Romanian gardens. / Dogs are wise animals. / Women like flowers.

- Other English nouns cannot be counted (**Uncountable Nouns**). These nouns are always considered to be singular because they have no plural form. This rule applies even to those uncountable nouns that end in s (news, physics, progress or aerobics). We do not use the articles *a* or *an* with uncountable nouns and we do not use numbers because English uncountable nouns are not easily divided. Uncountable nouns are viewed as an entire mass.

e.g. of uncountable nouns : *advice*, *progress*, *furniture*, *news*, *money*, *food*, *milk*, *sugar*, *honey*, *meat*, *salt*, *rice*, *chaos*, *homework*, *butter*, *oil*, *tea*, *spaghetti*, *thunder*, *cheese*, *hair*, *flour*, *pepper*, *weather*, *wood*, *traffic*, *money*, etc. *These examples of uncountable nouns can be included in separate categories: groups or collections of things, abstract nouns, food and drinks, materials and substances and words for weather.*

*Sentences with uncountable nouns: Water is essential for human life. / The weather is perfect for a summer holiday. / Her hair is long and curly. / - Can you pass me the sugar, please? / Fish is healthy when eaten with salad.*

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In fact, this is the most important distinction for English nouns: countable and uncountable.

e.g. If for a countable nouns we say : In this house there aren't as many chairs as in yours. For the uncountable nouns we say: In this house there isn't as much furniture as in yours. The differences between these two sentences are in term of verb (aren't, isn't) and the determiner (many, much). The type of noun plays an important role and affects other parts of speech. The same happens in the next example:

Your biscuits are in the schoolbag. / The food is excellent in this restaurant.

In the case certain uncountable nouns we can measure them by using: *a liter of milk, little/ more/ some/ any sugar, a teaspoon of honey* or *a bottle of juice*. The same situation applies for: oil, tea, spaghetti, meat, salt etc; the determiner differs depending on the context and on what the speaker wants to communicate.

Due to the fact that we cannot count these nouns, we can measure them in other ways. Uncountable nouns can be measured in quantities, containers and units – *a liter of water, a kilo of meat, one piece of paper, a lot of patience*, a slice of bread, a piece of furniture, etc. Nevertheless, in most English texts there are four times more countable nouns than uncountable nouns. Another tricky situation is that in English many nouns can be used as countable nouns and they can also be used as uncountable nouns depending on the context and meaning:

e.g. He like coffee in the morning. / He drank two coffees yesterday.

He drinks orange juice in the morning. / I bought some juices. (Different type of juice)

(*Change of meaning*) There is too much light in this room. / We have four lights in the bedroom (*lamps*).

He told us some of his experiences (things that happened to him) from his last travel. / She had a lot of experience when she applied for that job.

### Conclusions

English nouns represent a vast field for study and practice. The most important thing is that English learners have to pay attention to the context before analyzing or using a certain noun. We can consider that English grammar's aim is to turn skilful pupils into skilful users of English language. Learning English grammar means to achieve the skill of building personal correct structures in English.

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