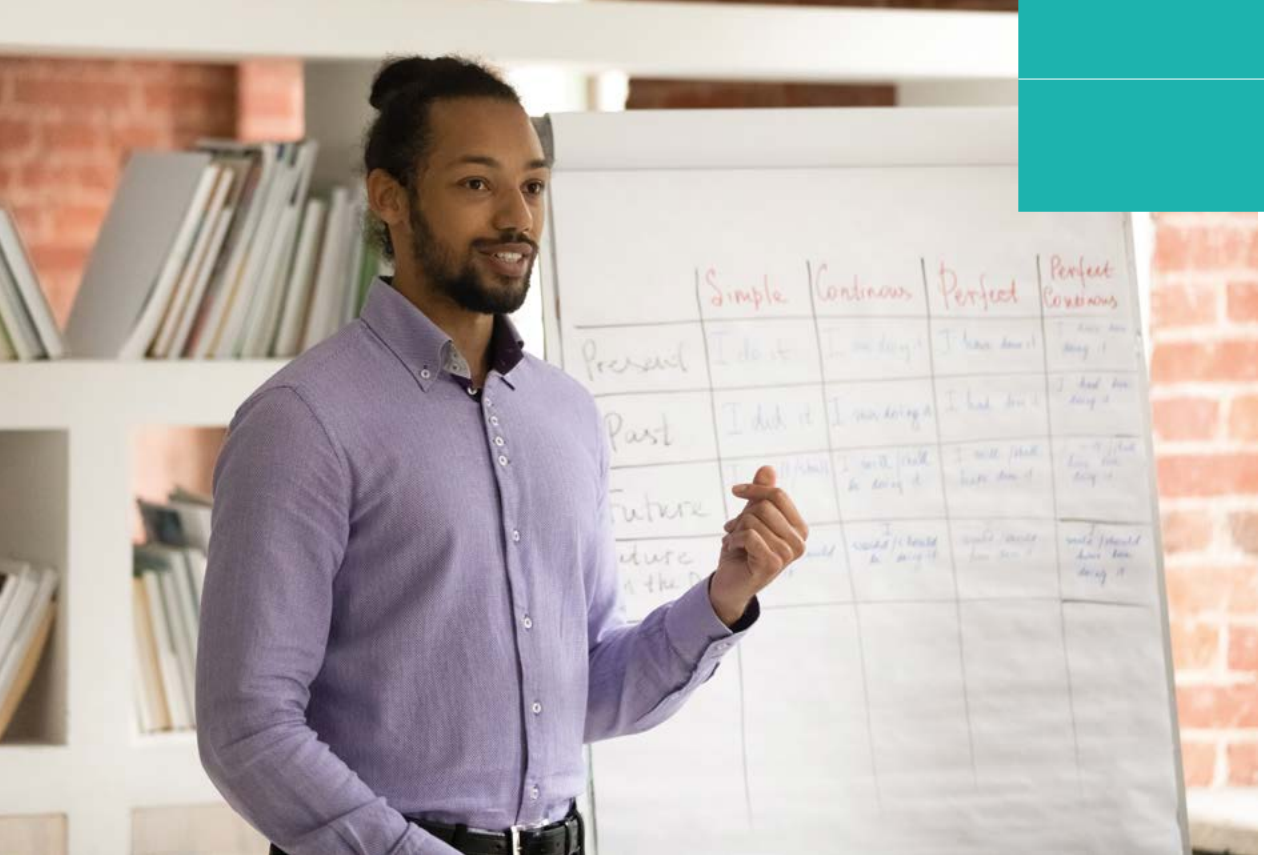

Rethinking the count-mass distinction beyond the canon of ELT grammar

Eloy Romero Muñoz

looks again at this grammar point.

How the canon teaches the count-mass distinction (CMD)

If you asked 10 different teachers of all ages and experience levels to characterise the CMD, they'd probably come up with a version of this rule of thumb:

> Countable nouns take *a/an*, plural 's' and can be counted (one apple, two apples).
>
> Uncountable mass nouns take *some*, have no plural and can't be counted (*milk, furniture*).

If you asked them to elaborate, they'd probably add that learners should be given a list of each type of nouns and told to memorise so-called 'exceptions' such as: *advice*, *information* or *furniture*, preferably contrastively with their mother tongue language.

> "Countable nouns have boundaries in the broadest sense of the term – uncountable nouns do not."

Is it a coincidence that what I described above is almost identical to what you'd find in Murphy's (2019) *English Grammar in Use*, arguably the best-selling self-study ELT grammar book? Is it probable that you can find similar rules in most, if not all, popular ELT textbook series? Don't bother looking, this is a rhetorical question.

In English language teaching, certain grammar points have become so entrenched in syllabuses and coursebooks that they feel inevitable. Burton (2020) calls this the ELT canon of grammar: an unofficial but widely recognised catalogue of rules and structures that determine what is taught and in what order. This canonical syllabus is typically presented in the form of a priori rules and further sequenced into 'grammar McNuggets' (Thornbury, 2010), which are short, pre-packaged, bite-sized grammatical activities.

What is wrong with the canon – and can we fix it?

This 'divide and conquer' approach has many advantages, of course, it is neat, predictable, commercially safe and easy to teach. It further emphasises memorisation over reasoning, which means learners can easily pass standardised exams. Focusing on the mechanics of language in such a surface-level, morphosyntactic way risks ignoring *why* language does what it does. How so? The canon of ELT grammar treats the CMD as a fixed property of the noun, not as a choice speakers make. And this is fundamentally ill-advised. Let's take an example to illustrate our point. If you take a cup (the object), few will argue against the fact that it is countable:

Figure 1: Example illustration

Canon / rules-based presentation	Conceptual presentation
Rule statement: countable nouns can be counted (*one apple, two apples*); uncountable nouns cannot be counted (*milk, furniture*).	Core idea: nouns can be seen as 'bounded' (separate units) or 'unbounded' (a continuous whole). The choice depends on how we view it in this moment.
Lists of countable vs. uncountable nouns	Conceptual exploration: learners sort pictures or objects into 'bounded' vs. 'unbounded' groups and discuss why (tea in a cup vs. spilled tea).
Memorise exceptions (*advice, information, furniture*)	Reason through meaning: show why *furniture* is a whole (unbounded) but *chairs* are countable parts; learners visualise or draw each.
Minimal explanation of partitives (*a piece of, a bottle of*)	Make it tangible: use real objects or gestures to show how partitives create boundaries (*a pinch of salt*).
Isolated examples	Authentic, themed contexts: cooking recipes, cafe menus, packing lists; learners notice how the same noun can switch category (*two coffees* vs. *some coffee*).
One-off presentation	Recycling in varied topics: return to the CMD in coursebook units on shopping, travel and science experiments, each time linking meaning and context, not just form.
Start with morphosyntactic aspects (pluralisation, articles)	Start with underlying conceptual distinction, then (and only then) move on to morphosyntactic aspects (pluralisation, articles).

Figure 2: Presenting rules versus exploring concepts

a cup, two cups, many cups. However, if you smash that same cup on the floor, it suddenly becomes uncountable as in '*there's a lot of cup to vacuum*'. The cup hasn't really changed, but the way you look at it has.

One way forward is to move the CMD out of the grammar of 'rule plus exceptions' box and into the realm of grammar as means of conceptualisation. Of course, some ways of conceptualising reality are more natural than others. Take this illustration (Figue 1), for instance.

The picture depicts birds flying over a house. Alternatively, and less likely, you might say the picture depicts a house under flying birds. Both assertions are correct, but the first one is more natural than the other one. Linguists use the word 'prototypical' to refer to such instances. And yes, some usages are more prototypical than others. If we go back to our cup, it is often just a good ol'cup. However, in some specific situations, you may decide to view it differently. That's conceptualisation for you.

How does such a conceptual approach work?

In a recent classroom study, the CMD was reframed using conceptual rather than morphosyntactic principles. The starting point was to say that the CMD is a continuum. Nouns can be both count and mass, depending on how you choose to conceptualise them. Such conceptualisation relies on two simple but powerful insights from linguistic research: boundedness and compositionality. Countable nouns have boundaries in the broadest sense of the term – uncountable nouns do not. A cup, when it is broken, ceases to be a cup. You can further draw a cup, but can you draw tea, water or sand? Uncountable nouns are homogeneous: parts and the whole are the same. The tea that you have in your cup or the tea that you spill on the table are essentially the same thing.

What changes in practice?

Here is a side-by-side explanation (Figure 2) detailing how a conceptual approach to grammar differs from the canon of ELT grammar.

A gift that keeps on giving

The conceptual principles we just outlined can be used to explain other grammatical phenomena that are admittedly never discussed together in ELT textbooks because we tend to artificially compartmentalise grammatical categories. For instance, the notion of the progressive aspect that is so central to English grammar is best approached via boundedness rather than 'ongoingness', as is usual in ELT textbooks. Using Niemeier and Reif's (2008) metaphor, we can say that the progressive is like zooming in on an action with a magnifying glass, thereby ignoring its beginning and/or its end.

Principles for redesigning grammar instruction more broadly

The CMD example is one case of a broader shift from rules to reasons. Similar principles can be applied to other grammar areas.

- Start with meaning and connect form to a communicative purpose.
- Make it visible and/or tangible: use images, gestures or, better still, real objects.
- Show contrasts in context and make learners experiment with different ways of conceptualising the same thing.
- Encourage noticing: let learners explore patterns before confirming them.
- Recycle in varied situations: revisit the form in different topics and registers.

The progressive as a way to erase boundaries	Simple as a boundary-making arrangement
	

Figure 3: The progressive versus simple tense

Conclusion

The ELT canon's familiar, rule-based treatment of the count-mass distinction is tidy but offers limited bang for the buck. By shifting to a conceptual approach, we can give learners tools to understand and manipulate grammar in real time, not just reproduce it in a test. If learners see the logic, they won't need the list.

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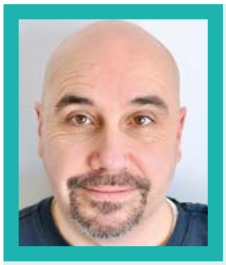

Eloy Romero Muñoz is a certified English and Dutch teacher. He currently teaches at the École Royale des Sous-Officiers (Campus Saffraanberg, Belgium) and also at the University of Mons. He holds a PhD in English and Applied Linguistics from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3, France). His research interests include applied cognitive linguistics (especially for TESOL), teaching materials development, pedagogical grammar, the research-pedagogy interface, and language teaching policy. His ORCID number is 0000-0002-5320-7377. He also has a ResearchGate profile where he regularly interacts with the research community: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eloy-Romero-Munoz-2.