

Teaching English at Tertiary Level: Frequency of Common Lexical Error in EFL Learner

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Abstract: Lexical error is an inevitable process of second language vocabulary acquisition, and as such they are evidence of that process. Lexical errors serve to evaluate lexical and general, of the learners in different language skills and to measure the quality of their writing. The present paper examined the common lexical error produced by EFL learner and will propose some remedy to overcome this problem. From the author's experience as a teacher in an English Foundation course in a private University, Lexical error in English writing made by students inspired her to investigate the factors that make students commit lexical errors. The investigation will only focus on common errors in the meanings and word usage in learners' writing. The findings of the investigation will be used to develop remedial class activities for the benefit of EFL learners and help students use lexical items appropriately in their writing.

Key Words: lexical, error, context, denotative, deviation.

Introduction

Writing is one of the most difficult skills for learners. The importance of vocabulary in second language writing is widely important. One of the problems they often encounter is lexical error, but there has been relatively little research into the lexical errors learners produce when writing in their second language. Bengali EFL Learners also experience this serious problem when they write English. This paper investigates the lexical errors found in the first year students of different departments of a private university in Bangladesh at Green University. The purposes of the study were to indicate the frequency of common lexical errors in students' writing; to find out the possible causes of university students' error; and to propose classroom activities for remedial teaching to help EFL learners overcome the problems in their own errors and raise their lexical awareness in the appropriate use of English words.

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Review of Related Literature

Didacticas (2005: 132) identifies 'lexical errors' as the deviation from lexical norm as it appears in dictionaries and two main structural patterns: spelling errors and errors in word choice usually underlie the nature of lexical error'. While the term 'deviation' is used to describe any word, sentence structure which does not conform to an appropriate use in a particular discourse community (Richard et al 1992: 105), the term 'norm' is considered appropriate in speech or writing for particular situation or purpose within a group of English speakers (ibid: 248).

The study of lexical errors becomes important because it reveals learners' language knowledge. The speakers of English faced with learner errors normally rate lexical errors as more disruptive and more serious than grammatical errors because they impede readers' comprehension. In this research, the scope of 'lexical errors' is limited only in incorrect word choices, and inappropriate collocation which fail to convey the correct meaning in students' English writing.

An example is as follows:

There are many works (jobs) in the city.

The sentence is incorrect because the word 'work' in this context does not represent the employment opportunity as in word 'job'. It shows that language learner has no understanding of the difference of these words.

Based on many scholars (e.g. Ellis 1985, Singleton, Ferris 2002, and Mongkolkasem 2003), it seems appropriate to distinguish lexical errors which effect comprehensively into Grammar-based lexical errors and semantic-based lexical errors.

This study will only investigate and focus on the semantic-based lexical errors of Bengali learners in collocation, and word choice so as to find out common lexical errors in learners' writing, and appropriate awareness raising activities.

To explain possible factors affecting word choice errors in language learners' English written texts, Hedge (2000: 111) points out the limitation of vocabulary knowledge and lack of usual attention to vocabulary choice would lead readers to question what writers would like to say in their work. Jiang (2000: 61) also suggests that lexical errors can happen in English writing when EFL learners choose and utilize L2 words on the basis of their L1 translation.

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From the differences between Bangla and English, most of the Bengali learners' lexical errors in writing seem to indicate the result of literal translation from Bangla into English and can arise in the situation that learners' language has no distinction in meanings and using a particular word as compared with native speakers (Altenberg and Granger 2001: 173).

To help learners understand how words can be used, Wills (1996) suggests that language teachers should provide language awareness activities that draw learners' attention to particular features of word use and meaning in L2 context. Moreover, any remedial classroom activities designed should require learners to choose the right word choices in expressing the intended information, help them to find the compatible collocation of words, and involve learners' understanding in the difference in the uses and meanings of words between English and Bangla.

Research Questions of the Study

This case study sought answers to the following research questions:

- Which areas of lexical errors are found most frequently in English writing of first-year students at Green University?
- What factors generate 1st year students' lexical error in writing?
- How classroom activities can be developed for remedial teaching to help language learners and become aware of their own lexical errors and remedy them/

The Subjects

The total of 155 subjects participated in the study. They were from the 1st year students of different departments (Dept. of English, Dept. of Sociology, Dept. of Textile, Department of EEE and Dept. of BBA) who have Fundamental English Course in First year at Green University of Bangladesh. The subjects' age varies from 19 to 21 years. Prior to their study in Fundamental English, majority of the students have been studying English for 12 years which is up to the completion of their Intermediate.

As regards the sex variable, it should be noted that male subjects totaled 113, (72.9%). ON the other hand, the other (27.1%) female participants constituted the case study. It can be concluded that male subjects overweigh female participants in number.

Materials Compositions

Paragraph

Two written compositions were used for the study as elicitation procedure to obtain real language from subjects. Participants were allotted a total 30 minutes to complete each composition task. The composition task consisted in a paragraph about the “Necessity of learning English in the context of Bangladesh” and an essay about the “Memorable event of your life.”

Story writing

The students were distributed a picture containing different characters and situations. They were given some clues to develop a story from the picture. 60 minutes were allotted to write a story from that picture.

Procedure

Students’ exercise sheets are essential and useful source for the study of lexical error analysis because they can write freely while they practice in the classroom and write seriously in their exam script. Subjects had to respond to the data elicitation tasks by following the steps collected in the instruction and completion of the activities, writing a paragraph, essay or story.

Data Analysis

The data collected were subjected to an analysis involving classification of lexical errors and explanation of the possible causing errors in students’ English writing for classroom practice. It should be noted that the group types of lexical errors came from the analysis itself and one type of error is regarded to be common if the majority of the students made that particular lexical error.

After data were collected as a primary step, paragraph and the story were read at least twice and scrutinized for lexical errors. Lexical errors were spotted within the larger context in which they were immersed. Repeated errors were not collected. Thus, any word containing a misinformation, not being English or not applying to native like use was considered unacceptable. Amount of lexical errors was then implemented, so that percentages of lexical errors could be obtained.

Findings

The data analysis produces the following findings:

Table 1, The erroneous sentences found in the subjects’ writing

Types of lexical errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Word choice	55	80.88%
Collocation	04	5.88%
Other errors	09	13.23%
Total	68	100.00%

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Note: The total number of students = 155; the total number of lexical errors collected from the paragraph practice in classroom and story writing in midterm examination held on Summer Semester 2012 at Green University.

The finding shows that errors in word choices are the most common in their paragraph and story writing and indicate that students have difficulties in using appropriate lexical choices in their writing.

As shown in the table below, the result of this analysis reveals word choice errors found in five major types, namely incorrect choices of verbs, nouns, adjective, adverbs, and prepositions.

Table 2, The erroneous sentences of word choices found in the English Foundation Course

Word choice error type	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Incorrect choice of Verb	28	50.95%
Incorrect choice of Noun	15	27.27%
Incorrect choice of Adjective	06	10.9%
Incorrect choice of Adverbs	04	7.27%
Incorrect choice of Preposition	02	3.63%

Note: The total number of students= 155; the total number of word choice errors= 55.

Although the number of incorrect choices found in the areas of noun, adjective, adverb, and prepositions are less than the errors in choice of verb, it can affect readers' understanding.

Implication and Suggestion of Language Teaching

The findings of the study clearly indicate that most students have great difficulty in using appropriate word choices to convey the intended information resulting from literal translation, different concepts in lexical semantics, limited vocabulary knowledge, and careless vocabulary choices. Although most of Bengali EFL learners seem to understand the denotative meaning of common English verbs out of the context quite well, they may not know how to use words and fit in a particular context. Therefore, teachers should use class activities to encourage learners to do self correction and have a choice to discuss differences of word usage in both Bangla and English.

To help Bengali learners to have clear understanding of word meaning and become aware of different concepts in the use of common English verbs, teachers may use jokes more humors in language activities to develop appropriate awareness. Moreover teachers may illustrate with clear-cut examples why particular lexical errors can greatly affect communicative efficiency of the target message students want to convey in their writing.

Recommendation for Further Study

Suggestions for further research are proposed to broaden replications of this study. Consideration should be given to a large number of the subjects, more varied writing samples, assigned writing tasks in the classroom, and a longer period of study to ensure greater reliability for results to be obtained.

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