

The Study of EFL Learners' Lexical Errors in English L2 Classes

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Abstract

A crucial part of building vocabulary in a foreign language is to understand lexical errors. Among these mistakes, non-transfer errors are commonly found at all levels of language proficiency, while the incidence of transfer-related errors generally diminishes as proficiency improves. Besides their vital role in the comprehension of language acquisition (especially in the context of second or foreign language learning) errors have significant implications for the various communicative tasks that learners engage in and the effects their errors can have when conversing with native speakers of the target language. To grasp the characteristics of lexical errors, it is essential to utilize a thorough and structured classification system that recognizes the intricacies involved in ESL/EFL students' word choice processes. The author of this study sought to examine the frequent lexical errors encountered by EFL learners and to offer solutions for mitigating this challenge. From the author's viewpoint, the lexical errors made by students in EFL courses prompted an inquiry into the root causes of these errors. The outcomes of this research can guide the creation of corrective classroom activities that assist EFL learners and enable students to use vocabulary correctly in their English lessons.

Keywords: EFL learners, English, L2 classes, lexical errors, vocabulary

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1. Introduction

Errors are frequently associated with cognitive factors, highlighting the mental processes that learners utilize when developing rules. Nevertheless, they can also be viewed as motivated by the necessity to convey information, demonstrating the utilization of available resources to articulate a message. Errors are crucial not only in the broader examination of language acquisition but also specifically within the context of second or foreign language learning. Furthermore, they are important concerning the various communicative tasks that learners engage in and the effects these errors may have on their interactions with individuals who are fluent in the language you are aiming to learn.

Keshavarz (2012) suggests that once errors are recognized, they should be categorized based on their linguistic characteristics. This approach facilitates a clearer understanding of the elements of the target language that could pose challenges for learners. In this context, researchers largely concur on the important impact of lexis in language learning and teaching. Understanding vocabulary in a second language (L2) is crucial for advancing L2 proficiency (Satti Hamad & Yassin, 2015).

Lexical errors are an unavoidable aspect of the journey toward acquiring vocabulary in an L2, serving as evidence of this process. Scholars have utilized the errors in word choice made by L2 learners to develop assessment criteria for evaluating L2 competence and lexical knowledge (Engber, 1995). Verhallen et al. (1989) emphasize the importance of lexical knowledge in learning and communicating in a foreign language, asserting that it is one of the key factors determining academic success. While many L2 educators find their students' incorrect word choices amusing, Zughoul (1991) notes that these erroneous lexical selections often result in humorous utterances that are not easily understood.

A comprehensive understanding of lexical errors requires a robust and detailed classification system that acknowledges the intricate nature of word selection by English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This necessity motivated the investigators in this research, who aimed to update the classification suggested by Hemchua and Schmitt (2006). The revised taxonomy aims to assist ESL/EFL researchers in analyzing word choice errors, categorizing these mistakes, exploring their origins, and

ultimately suggesting teaching strategies that could effectively benefit both ESL/EFL students and educators.

2. Literature Review

Many research studies have explored the errors in the field of vocabulary made by EFL learners. Hasrol et al. (2015) identified that the three most common lexical errors found in the guided academic essays of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students were incorrect word usage, omissions or incompleteness, and spelling mistakes. They established that errors are not a uniform phenomenon and argued that pinpointing the exact origins of lexical errors is challenging. Language serves as a representation of various perceptions of reality, which are shaped by beliefs, cultural factors, and linguistic norms. This variability is even more pronounced in multilingual environments (Carrió & Maria, 2013).

Agustín Llach (2013) points out that learners of English often make lexical mistakes, which are frequently a result of directly translating from their native language (L1), emphasizing the role of interlingual interference. Nevertheless, Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) discovered that L1 transfer is not the main cause of these errors. Additionally, the types of lexical errors can be affected by the students' fields of study (Akande et al., 2006).

It is essential to recognize that pinpointing the fundamental reasons for errors can often be inaccurate and difficult (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006). As a result, the classification of errors may differ among scholars studying EFL. Recent studies underscore the importance of vocabulary, highlighting that both lexical and grammatical components present significant difficulties that learners need to overcome at various stages of language development (Al-Jarf, 2000; Carrió & Mestre, 2010; Carrió & Seiz, 2000; Levison et al., 2000). Furthermore, these research findings suggest that analyzing lexical errors is particularly advantageous in the realm of second language acquisition (SLA), and there is a consensus that errors should be regarded as chances for enhancement rather than as undesirable results.

It is believed that compiling a collection of lexical errors could enhance the understanding of conceptual implications in SLA, as well as in student growth and development, and in the design of courses and materials (Hunston & Francis, 2000; Krishnamurthy & Kosem, 2007; Nelson, 2006). Therefore, gathering a corpus of lexical errors

may help determine why the concepts being communicated are not universal and are influenced by cultural understandings.

Sheorey (1986) approached the topic from a different angle by examining the differences in how native and non-native ESL teachers from India and the United States view errors. She noted that native teachers consider "lexical errors to be judged significantly more serious than non-native teachers" (p. 309). A potential reason for this finding is that non-native speakers might not understand the finer subtleties of the language as well as native speakers do.

2.1. Lexical Errors

Lexical errors represent a specific category of mistakes that, although they outnumber grammatical errors, have been somewhat overlooked (Bouvy, 2000; Lennon, 1996; Meara, 2009; Vázquez, 1992).

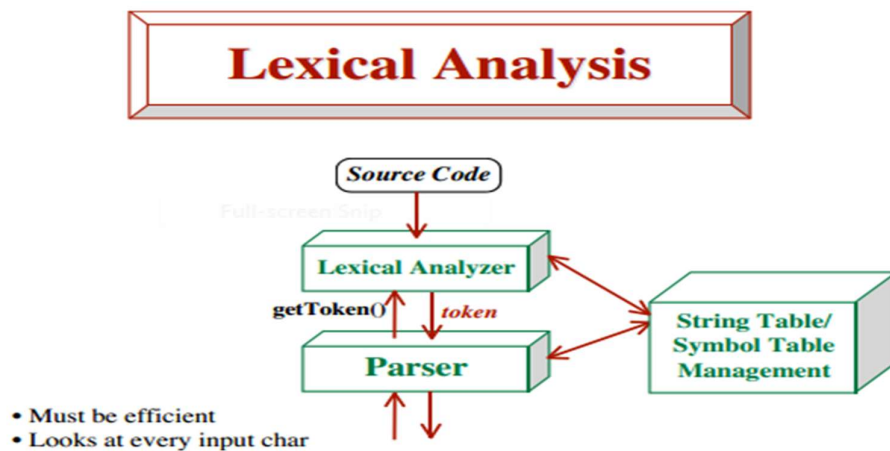
Researchers reference the unpredictable and non-systematic aspects of the lexicon. Warren (1982) discusses the lexicon's role in their grammatical framework. Morphology and syntax are frequently viewed as more structured and rule-based compared to lexis, leading to a lack of research centered on lexical mistakes (Corder, 1973). In a similar vein, Warren (1982) points out that lexical items generally display unique, non-generalizable aspects of language (p. 209); nevertheless, she found that it is indeed feasible to categorize a small number of distinct forms of lexical errors. More recently, Ambroso (2015) highlights the intricate and, at times, irregular connections between elements within the lexicon, asserting that context and the communicative situation are essential for identifying the appropriate use of the lexical system (Lennon, 1991).

Even so, all writers discussing lexical mistakes regard systematicity as a key feature of errors (Taylor, 1986). Lexical errors are not merely incidental or random; rather, they arise from systematic causes that can be analyzed through language samples. Indeed, many authors strive to uncover these causes and, in doing so, provide a clearer explanation for the identified lexical errors. Lexical errors can be elucidated and subsequently categorized, with these explanations claimed to be applicable to varying degrees (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006).

Lennon (1996) states that if any prefix of the input string does not constitute a valid token, a lexical error is detected. When this situation arises, the lexer typically signals an error. At this point, it may either cease reading the input or continue with lexical analysis by ignoring characters until a valid prefix is identified. Essentially, when the lexer encounters an error, the component consuming the tokens generated by the lexer (e.g., the remainder of the compiler) is generally unable to produce an accurate result. However, the compiler may attempt to identify additional errors in the rest of the input, thereby enabling the user to pinpoint multiple errors within a single edit-compile cycle. It is essential to recognize that there are some errors that could be false positives triggered by the initial lexical error, meaning the user must evaluate the accuracy of each error message beyond the first, as only the first message is guaranteed to be a valid error. Nevertheless, this method of error recovery has been found to enhance productivity when the input is large enough that restarting the lexer from the beginning would incur significant time delays, as it helps uncover more errors in a shorter period. In this context, Figure 1 illustrates the lexical analysis process.

Figure 1

Lexical Analysis (Porter, 2005)



2.2. Lexicon Organization and Relationship in L1 and L2

Understanding the organization and retrieval of lexical items can offer important perspectives on how vocabulary is acquired and which teaching approaches are most effective. Three main viewpoints seek to clarify the organization of the lexicon in both first language (L1) and L2

contexts, emphasizing the kinds of relationships established among stored lexical items (Agustín Llach & María, 2011).

The initial viewpoint (Meara, 1983) suggests that the organization of the lexicons in the L1 and the L2 is inherently different. It suggests that the L1 lexicon is mainly organized based on meaning, whereas the L2 lexicon tends to be more phonologically oriented. The second explanation regarding lexicon organization posits that even novice L2 learners create some lexical entries through semantic connections. This viewpoint argues that the lexicons of both the L1 and L2 function in essentially the same manner. The quantity of words a learner has absorbed into their lexicon (i.e., the total vocabulary size) and the degree of integration of each specific word (i.e., the familiarity with that word) can influence the types of associations formed, as well as the characteristics of the individual words themselves (Ellis & Beaton, 1993; Nation, 1990; Ringbom, 1983; Singleton, 1999; Wolter, 2001).

There is a third approach to understanding lexical organization and access that is based on the difference between production and comprehension. Some scholars (e.g., Channell, 1988) contend that in the process of production, words are retrieved through their semantic links, whereas in comprehension, the way the lexicon is structured and accessed is shaped by formal (phonological/orthographic) relationships between words, relevant to both L1 and L2. This framework indicates that during production, words are arranged into semantic networks, while for comprehension, lexical items are categorized into formal (phonological/orthographic) networks. Advocates of this approach argue that the lexicons of both L1 and L2 function in a similar manner and share a common organizational structure.

In his analysis of speech mistakes in L1 and L2, Channell (1988) determined that the lexical errors produced by both groups were alike, indicating that, to a degree, the lexicons of L1 and L2 reflect one another and are organized in a similar fashion, with words systematically arranged according to phonology and connected through semantic relationships (Coady et al., 1995; De Groot, 1993; Singleton, 1999). This brings up a question:

The lexicon is generally characterized as the mental collection of words or lexical elements that a language speaker has, which they can recognize and use proficiently in communication (Cervero & Castro, 2000, pp. 189-193). It is reasonable to assume that if someone is multilingual, they will have a separate lexicon for each language they know.

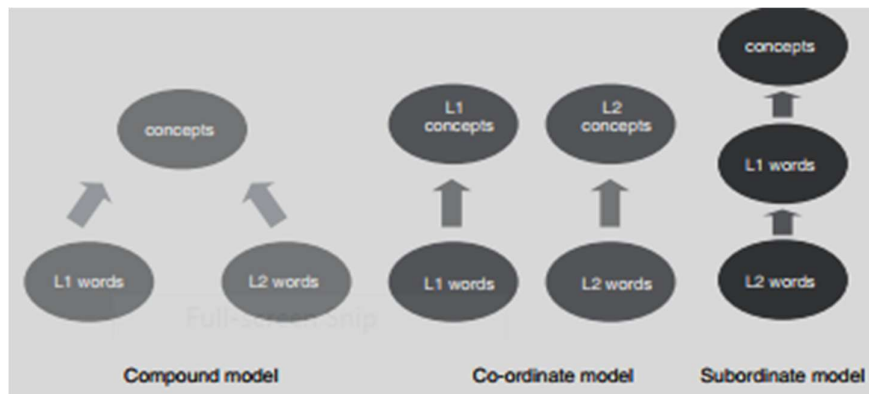
However, the reality is quite complex, with various inconsistencies regarding the existence of and the connections between these lexicons.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the subjects of lexical processing, organization, and access (see, for instance, De Bot & Schreuder, 1993; De Groot, 1993; Ecke, 2001; Hatzidaki & Pothos, 2008; Singleton, 1999; Wolter, 2001). Weinreich (1974, pp. 9-10) examined the interaction between two language systems in the mind of a bilingual learner. He outlined three distinct approaches to understanding the relationship between the lexicons of L1 and L2:

- (1) Coordinate, where two separate form-meaning associations are present at the same time in the learner's mind;
- (2) Compound, where bilingual individuals possess a single concept linked to two different terms; and
- (3) Subordinative, in which the L1 word form acts as an intermediary between the L2 concept and the L2 word form.

Figure 2

Illustration of the three models of L1 and L2 lexicon relationship



The information is illustrated in Figure 2. Weinreich (1953, 1974) argues that the different types of links between L1 and L2 lexicons are dynamic and can be affected by the learner's experiences with the L2. Additionally, various forms of lexical organization may exist concurrently within the same person. Further research (De Groot, 1993) has backed this idea, linking subordinative connections to lower L2 proficiency and compound structures to higher

L2 proficiency. Besides proficiency levels, additional elements that could influence the relationship between L1 and L2 lexicons include the perceived formal or semantic resemblances between equivalent L1 and L2 terms, the context in which the word was learned (particularly, the method of learning) (Singleton, 1999, 2000), and the direction of access (from L1 to L2 or from L2 to L1). It can be concluded that the process through which children learn L2 vocabulary is likely to have similarities with the previously discussed adult process.

2.3. Classification of Lexical Errors

The following section elaborates on how the taxonomy developed by Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) was modified to create a taxonomy of lexical errors. This classification is split into two main categories: formal and semantic. Formal errors are further classified into three key categories, which are subdivided into eight subcategories. In contrast, semantic errors are organized into four main categories, which are divided into thirteen subcategories. Consequently, the classification encompasses 21 specific subcategories of errors in lexical issues (Shalaby et al., 2009).

2.3.1. Formal Errors: Issues with Misselections, Misformations, and Spelling

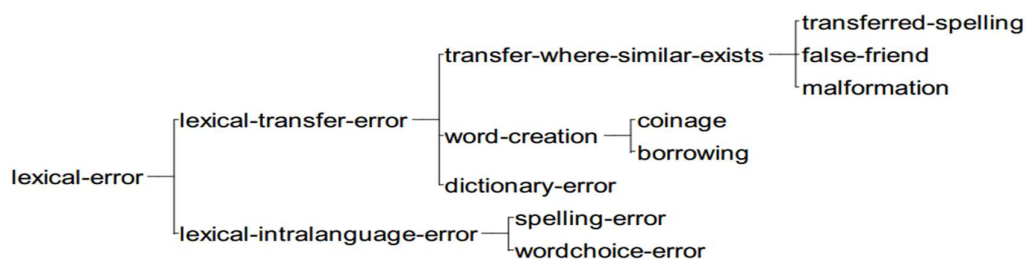
It is categorized into three primary types: misselections, misformations, and spelling mistakes. The misselection category is further divided into three subcategories: incorrect suffix usage, incorrect prefix usage, and false friends. Shalaby et al. (2009) chose not to include the vowel-based and consonant-based misselection error subcategories from Hemchua and Schmitt's classification, as they felt these would fit better under the category of spelling errors. The misformations category includes two subcategories: borrowing and coinage. The term "claque" was replaced with a more transparent term—translation from L1—and categorized under semantic errors as a subcategory of confusion of sense relations. The category of spelling mistakes consists of three subcategories: errors that hinder understanding, errors that create incorrect meanings, and errors stemming from L1 interference. The researchers identified the subcategories of spelling errors that they deemed to be the most overriding.

2.3.2. Semantic Errors: Confusion of Sense Connotation, Collocation, Relations, and Stylistic Errors

The confusion in sense relations is categorized into eight subcategories: using a general term when a specific one is more appropriate; overly specific terms; incorrect co-hyponyms; nearly synonymous terms; direct translation from the L1; binary terms; inappropriate meanings; and distorted meanings. The first four subcategories are based on the framework established by Hemchua and Schmitt (2006). The subcategory related to confusion with binary terms is rooted in Zughoul's (1991) classification, whereas the inappropriate meaning and distortion of meaning categories were introduced by the current researcher. Furthermore, the category of stylistic errors contains three subcategories: excessive wordiness, incorrect use of compounds, and circumlocution. Verbosity is part of the taxonomy by Hemchua and Schmitt, while circumlocution is addressed in Zughoul's (1991) study. Although the classifications formulated by these two scholars encompassed only one or the other of these two subcategories, Mediero Duran (2009) suggests that lexical errors compel learners to develop a clearer understanding of more complex areas. He categorized lexical errors into the following types (figure 3):

Figure 3

Categorization of Lexical Errors



2.4. Background Information of EFL Learners in Iran

The instrumental motivation of Iranian learners is reflected in their choices of learning strategies and their views on different types of ESL classroom activities. Besides motivational factors, various other elements could impact language acquisition, including a process of trial and error that occurs consecutively. Numerous studies have indicated that while children tend to acquire their L1 with relative ease and almost effortlessly, they frequently face difficulties and make mistakes in learning a second or foreign language. Considering the insights from first language acquisition (FLA), it is helpful to examine how the L1 influences L2 learning, as this understanding can ultimately enhance teaching and learning processes. Corder (1971) notes

that language teaching must collaborate with, rather than oppose, natural processes; it should facilitate and accelerate learning instead of hindering it.

Indeed, acquiring a foreign language in Iran should be viewed as a developmental journey during which learners will inevitably make mistakes that are crucial to their learning process. Corder (1971) argues that it is essential to categorize and analyze these errors made by learners, as well as to investigate the psychological mechanisms that underlie their occurrence. Consequently, error analysis is vital for understanding the processes of second or foreign language acquisition in all non-English-speaking countries, particularly in Iran. Therefore, it is important for Iranian educators to recognize and seek to explain the reasons behind students' errors. However, they should also consider that lexical errors tend to decrease as learners progress, both in terms of their frequency and overall error rate.

3. Iranian EFL Learners' Lexico-Semantic Errors

Language acquisition in Iran, similar to that in other nations, inherently involves making mistakes. Historically, language educators have viewed mistakes made by their students as negative occurrences to be avoided at all costs. However, over the past fifteen years, scholars in the field of applied linguistics have begun to regard these errors as indicators of a creative learning process, where learners engage in hypothesis testing and utilize various strategies while acquiring an L2 (Touchie, 1986).

Errors made by Iranian EFL learners have consistently held significance for educators, curriculum developers, and assessment creators. It is widely recognized that examining the mistakes made by learners can provide vital information for creating appropriate resources and effective teaching strategies, as well as for designing assessments that cater to diverse groups of learners at different levels of SLA (Keshavarz, 2012).

ESL/EFL educators and researchers face the challenge of addressing their students' incorrect lexical selections, often feeling uncertain about where to begin. Additionally, lexical errors are quite common. To address this problematic area, it is essential for teachers to specialize in the sources and kinds of these errors, as this understanding will help them comprehend the cognitive processes that lead to such mistakes. This awareness, in turn, will enable teachers to effectively address these issues during lessons.

Keshavarz (2012) asserts that lexico-semantic errors are related to mistakes associated with errors tied to the semantic features of lexical items, as illustrated in the examples below:

- * Iran is my homeland.
- * I am learned Koran by my father.
- * Our lives are influenced by economic challenges.
- * I am working 24 hours in every week.
- * I do various exercises in the evening.
- * Today we are making significant progress.
- * The teacher mentioned that we should study hard.
- * Last week the bank where my cousin is employed was robbed.
- * I always ask my teacher to assist me with my English.
- * English is a vibrant language through which all people can express their ideas.
- * I believe my tolerance for learning English is greater than for learning anything else.

4. Transfer of Lexico-Semantic Elements in Iran

As noted by Keshavarz (2012), mistakes in this category can be classified into two subcategories: (a) Cross-Association and (b) False Cognates. Each of these will be addressed separately below.

4.1. Cross-Association

Cross-association happens when two words in the target language are represented by one word in the learner's native language. Consequently, the learner might use that single term to convey two distinct meanings in the target language.

- * I can't study in this lobby because some students open their radio very loud.

The cause of this error is that in Persian, the word for *open* can also mean to turn on electronic devices, along with its more typical meanings like opening a door.

- *We will arrive back to Tehran after about 13 o'clock (instead of 13 hours).

This kind of error arises because the term /saʔāt/ in Persian refers to both hour and o'clock.

* He had an argument with his wife.

The cause of this mistake is that in Persian, the word /zān/ can mean both woman and wife.

4.2. False Cognates

It can be declared that a false cognate is a word that looks alike in two different languages but has a different meaning in each one. This resemblance can lead language learners to mistakenly use the word. Newmark (1988) identifies this type of misleading cognate as a false friend.

Example:

* My father bought a new machine last week.

Note that the word *machine* in this sentence is used because of the influence of its cognate /ma j[n/ (car) in Persian.

Similarly, the word *cigar* in the following sentence has been used because of its superficial similarity with the word /sigar/ in Persian.

* He smokes a lot of cigars.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the author investigated the lexical errors made by Iranian EFL learners in L2 classes. Vocabulary is considered a crucial element in the language development of EFL learners. Analyzing lexical errors is important because they offer insights into learners' language competence. English speakers often perceive lexical mistakes as more obstructive and significant than grammatical errors, as they impede readers' comprehension (Munira, 2013).

In order to help EFL students grasp word usage, Willis (1996) suggests that language teachers incorporate language awareness exercises that focus learners' attention on particular elements of word usage and meaning within the context of the L2. Additionally, any corrective classroom tasks designed should motivate learners to select suitable words when expressing

their intended messages, assist them in recognizing compatible word collocations, and engage them in comprehending the differences in the applications and meanings of words across different languages.

The findings of this research indicated that EFL teachers should place greater emphasis on their students' vocabulary development and incorporate a diverse range of strategies in the classroom. These activities may improve students' vocabulary proficiency, thereby broadening their overall vocabulary.

Tutors can acquire an important understanding from the findings of lexical error analysis in multiple ways. Even before the theoretical foundations of error analysis were established, educators routinely identified and categorized learners' lexical mistakes to meet practical needs and develop appropriate materials and teaching methods. By examining these errors, teachers can identify the specific lexical challenges that students encounter at different stages of their education. This process enables them to assess learners' proficiency levels in the target language at specific points in their learning journey and to recognize the additional knowledge they need to acquire. A curriculum designed around the prevalence of lexical errors allows educators to teach directly at the point of error and focus on areas where mistakes are more frequent. Errors serve as feedback, informing teachers about the effectiveness of their instructional materials and methods, and highlighting which sections of the syllabus have not been adequately learned or taught, thus requiring additional attention. This information helps educators determine whether they can progress to the next topic in the syllabus or if they need to allocate more time to the current material being covered.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper

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