

LEXICAL ERRORS IN ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EAP) STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the lexical errors in the essays produced by diploma-level students from an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom at a private tertiary institution. The lexical errors were identified and categorised. This paper will discuss the findings and possible implications of the study to EAP instructors.

Keywords: Lexical Errors, Error Analysis, English for Academic Purposes

INTRODUCTION

English has been taught from the age of seven to seventeen years old in the Malaysian education system. Despite of years of exposure to English instruction, the acquisition of the English language among learners in Malaysia is still relatively low (Hiew, 2012). One of the factors which has contributed to the low English language proficiency among the English language learners is limited vocabulary (Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012), which would lead to lexical errors in their speech and writing.

Lexical errors refer to mistakes at word level (Hernández, 2011). Such errors are an evidence of vocabulary acquisition process (Llach, 2007), which implies that an analysis of lexical errors is a way to assess whether learners have acquired adequate vocabulary as required in the curriculum. The analysis is helpful to English language instructors in ensuring students' success in the learning of English, as vocabulary is the most important factor for English language learners' academic success (Saville-Troike, 1984).

Lexical error analysis in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context could help EAP instructors understand the nature of lexical errors committed by EAP learners. Such understanding could help the instructors devise strategies to help EAP learners in the acquisition of relevant English lexis. Furthermore, lexical errors have been under-researched (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006). Therefore, this study was aimed at identifying and categorising the lexical errors made by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners. With this objective in mind, this study set out to investigate the following research question:

1. What are the categories of lexical errors that diploma-level English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students commit most frequently in academic essay writing?

Past Research on Lexical Errors

A number of studies have been carried out on lexical errors committed by English learners. Lexical errors are determined by English learners' competency (Llach, 2007). Naba'h (2011) Llach (2013) and Shalaby, Yahya, & El-Komi (2009) found that the category of lexical errors

committed by English language learners included direct translation from L1, which is an evidence of interlingual interference. However, Hemchua & Schmitt (2006) found that L1 transfer was not the major source of errors. The types of lexical errors could also be factored by students' academic specialisations (Akande, Adedeji, & Okanlawon, 2006). It is worth noting that identifying *the underlying cause of errors is inexact and problematic* (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006). Thus, error categorisation could vary among researchers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research utilised qualitative data analysis method. Nineteen (19) guided academic essays on the analysis of non-linear stimuli were examined for lexical errors. The essays were written by nineteen (19) diploma-level students, who were from a Malaysian University English Test (MUET) preparatory class at International Islamic University College Selangor (KUIS), for their final examination. The class was a mixed-gender group of adolescents who were pursuing business-related diplomas.

MUET is a test which measures candidates' English language proficiency. It is mandatory for admission to an undergraduate programme at a Malaysian public university. The test, administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council, consists of four components, namely reading, listening, speaking and writing. Since many diploma holders intend to pursue their studies at the bachelor-level, KUIS has included an English language subject that prepares students for MUET in the curricula of its diploma programmes.

English for academic purposes (EAP) courses focus on *the language and associated practices that people need in order to undertake study or work in English-medium higher education* (Gillett, n.d.). Meanwhile, *MUET syllabus seeks to consolidate and enhance the English language ability of the students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level* (Rethinasamy & Chuah, 2011). As the MUET preparatory course at KUIS equipped the students with English proficiency and related skills in academic settings, the MUET preparatory course fits into the EAP category.

There were several steps undertaken by the researchers in the data collection process. First, the researchers went through each essay to identify the errors. Next, the researchers went through the identified errors to discriminate the lexical errors from other categories of errors such as grammatical and stylistic errors. After that, the lexical errors were categorised with reference to Ander & Yıldırım (2010) as in Table 1. The frequency of each category of lexical errors in an essay was recorded in a spreadsheet developed by the researchers, which helped to calculate the total number of lexical errors in all essays. Finally, the frequency of each category of lexical errors was tabulated for analysis.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Research question 1 asked the categories of lexical errors that diploma-level EAP students commit most frequently in essay writing. To answer this question, the researchers tabulated the frequency of each lexical errors' category. The findings of the study are summarised in Table 2.

Table 1: Categories of lexical errors

No.	Category	Definition
1.	Wrong word choice	A wrong word was used to express student's idea, thus rendering the sentence as illogical.
2.	Literal translation	A word from L1 was translated directly, without knowing the right meaning in the target language.
3.	Omission or incompleteness	The lexical element of the sentence was missing or omitted, making the sentence seems partially logic or does not make sense at all.
4.	Misspelling	A spelling mistake.
5.	Redundancy	The lexical item in the sentence is repeated, used or paraphrased unnecessarily.
6.	Collocation	The word used does not collocate well with another part of the sentence.
7.	Word formation error	The wrong form of word is used in the sentence.

(Ander & Yildirim, 2010)

Table 2: Analysis of Lexical Errors

Category of Lexical Errors	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Wrong Word Choice	32	41.56
Omission/Incompletion	16	20.78
Misspelling	12	15.58
Literal Translation	6	7.79
Redundancy	5	6.49
Word Formation	4	5.20
Collocation	2	2.60
TOTAL	77	100.00

A total of seventy-seven (77) lexical errors were detected in all essays. The three (3) categories of lexical errors that recorded the highest percentage are wrong word choice with 41.56 percent, omission/incompletion with 20.78 percent and misspelling with 15.58 percent. On the other hand, redundancy, word formation and collocation recorded the lowest percentage with 6.49 percent, 5.19 percent and 2.60 percent respectively.

It was found that the most common lexical errors committed by the students when writing their essays were the errors of wrong word choice, errors of omission/incompletion and misspelling. These findings agree with Ander & Yildirim (2010) who also identified errors of wrong word choice, misspelling and errors of omission/incompletion as the most common types of lexical errors found in the student essays that they analysed.

This finding, to the researchers, imply that the students were weak in English vocabulary, as they did not have adequate vocabulary to express themselves accurately in academic settings. As a result, their essays were difficult to comprehend. However, the researchers also feel that the lexical errors committed by the EAP learners demonstrate that they had used their problem-solving ability to address their inadequate vocabulary issue (Hang, 2005) in answering the guided essay writing question. This suggests that the students, despite of their

weak English proficiency, still possess some creative thinking skills which could be developed to help them improve their learning skills.

CONCLUSION

This study suggested that the three most frequent lexical errors committed by the EAP students in the sampled guided academic essays are wrong word choice, omission/incompletion and misspelling. The researchers are aware that as errors are not a monolithic process (Hang, 2005), it is difficult to determine the real cause of the lexical errors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study imply that EAP instructors are recommended to give more emphasis on students' vocabulary acquisition and to administer spelling practices for the students in class. Such activities could help the students in vocabulary mastery, hence increasing their vocabulary size. Due to the small sample size involved in this study, more studies on lexical errors in the EAP context should be carried out involving larger EAP students' population.

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