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Lexical errors in elementary level EFL learners' compositions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify and categorize the lexical errors that appear in a group of elementary level Turkish EFL learners' compositions. The participants of the study were 53 EFL students at Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages. The lexical errors in their 4-5 paragraph compositions were counted and classified into seven categories. It was hoped that the results could provide some guidance for both Turkish EFL students and their teachers in terms of reducing the number of lexical errors in their compositions.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the basic components of language when communication is regarded and it is also a central part of language learning. The development of lexical knowledge is considered by both researchers and teachers to be central to the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Read & Chapelle, 2001). Llach (2005: 46) states that "language learning starts up with vocabulary, words are the first linguistic items acquired by the learner (in first and second language acquisition) … and no language acquisition at all can take place without the acquisition of lexis". Relevant research literature suggests a strong relationship between vocabulary acquisition and lexical errors which are generally considered a vital aspect of the acquisition process (Llach, 2007a). Lexical errors not only play a relevant role in the second language vocabulary acquisition process, but they also are among the most numerous type of errors in learners' performance. Therefore, providing observable learner language data, lexical errors are an important source of information about L2 vocabulary acquisition (Llach, 2007b). Shin (2002: 1) states that "the study of learner errors has been a part of language pedagogy for a long time. Language instructors are constantly concerned about the errors made by their students and with the ways they can improve language teaching".

Thus, it is very important to identify and remedy lexical errors in foreign language learners' compositions because those errors appear to be one of the main causes of communication problems (Llach, 2005b). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and categorize the lexical errors that appear in a group of elementary level Turkish EFL learners' compositions. That is, this study was conducted in order to (1) identify the lexical features which cause difficulties to Turkish EFL students, (2) to classify those lexical errors according to their type and frequency, and (3)

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to provide possible explanations for the causes of those lexical errors. It was hoped that in general the results of this study would contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of lexical errors in EFL composition. In addition, as the study was conducted with Turkish EFL learners, it was hoped that the results could provide some guidance for Turkish EFL teachers in terms of reducing the number of lexical errors that appear in their students' compositions. The research question that guided the data collection and analyses processes of this study was as follows: What are the wrongly-used lexical items in elementary level Turkish EFL students' compositions?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 53 subjects participated in this study. Participants were enrolled at Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages. They were elementary level Turkish learners of English. Their proficiency level was determined by a test implemented at the beginning of the semester and the language instruction was given accordingly. The aim of this education can be enunciated to reach intermediate level in order to pass the test implemented at the end of the year and start studying at their departments. The lessons were divided according to language skills and areas. The data of the study were collected by their writing teacher as an assignment of writing lessons in May 2009.

2.2. Instruments and data collection

Fifty-three written compositions were used as the instrument of the study to obtain real language from the participants. Subjects were allotted 90 minutes to complete their essays. Although there were no minimum time constrains, they were instructed to write 4-5 paragraph essays. The students were not allowed to use any kind of dictionaries or other supplementary materials while writing their essays. The composition task was to write a problem solution essay. They were free to choose one of the 2 topics given below:

A. Imagine you have a web-blog where you share your experience on learning English with your school friends. Many Turkish students have difficulty in the Reading skill. Therefore, you want to write solutions for this problem to your friends. Write a 4-5 paragraph essay suggesting solutions for improving English reading skill.

B. Imagine you are a psychologist and every week you write an essay on how help students at university. This week you will write about making friends. When students first come to university they have difficulty in making friends and are unhappy. Therefore, write a 4-5 paragraph essay offering solutions for making friends at Anadolu University.

2.3. Data analysis

After the data were collected compositions were read at least twice by the two researchers, they were scrutinized for lexical errors. Lexical errors were identified, counted, interpreted and classified into pre-determined categories. Repeated lexical errors within the same compositions were not counted more than once. For example if a student talks about "winning the university exam" four times in the same composition, this lexical error was counted only once. In the present study the terms of error types were either directly taken or modified to fit the current study from the previous studies which focused on the investigation of lexical errors. Although the researchers started data analysis with several pre-determined lexical error categories in mind, some new categories emerged from the data during the data analysis process.

3. Results

3.1. Categories of Lexical Errors

The analysis of the data yielded to seven categories of lexical errors as explained below.

1. Errors of wrong word choice: This category consists of lexical errors where a wrong lexical item is used instead of the correct one. By having that wrong item there, the whole sentence does not make any sense. This

generally happens particularly when the learner selects a wrong or inappropriate item from several L2 equivalents of the same word. Following are the examples of errors of wrong word choice from the data:

Example 1: *If students want good friends, they should follow the <u>upstairs</u> ways.* (above)

Example 2: *Some students are <u>embarrassed</u>. They cannot talk to other students easily.* (shy)

The student who wrote Example 1 above explains in his/her composition the ways of dealing with loneliness at university. This sentence is taken from the final paragraph of his/her essay where s/he wants to refer the points s/he mentioned 'above' but s/he uses the word 'upstairs' instead. Another student wrote Example 2 with the intention of using the word 'shy' in order to express a general characteristic of some students. However, s/he ends up using the word 'embarrassed' which means feeling nervous and uncomfortable about what people think of you.

2. Errors of literal translation: The lexical errors under this category are the items that are directly translated into L2 by sticking to the literal L1 meaning. In other words, the errors in this category are made when the learner literally transfers the individual meaning of an item without knowing the set expressions in the target language. Although it may make some sense to a native speaker of L1, it sounds awkward to a native speaker of the target language (L2). Examples 3 and 4 below illustrate lexical items in this category.

Example 3: *If necessary to summarize briefly, every student is lonely at university.*   (to sum up)

Example 4: *Many Turkish students <u>live</u> this problem*. (have)

In Example 3 the student starts his/her sentence by expressing the wish 'to sum up' the points s/he discussed previously. However, s/he literally translates a phrase (kısaca özetlemek gerekirse) in Turkish which means 'to sum up' but not expressed with the same words in English. Similarly, in Example 4 the student wants to state that Turkish students 'have' a particular problem but s/he uses the phrase 'to live problem' because in Turkish there is a literally equivalent expression (problem yaşamak) which means 'to have problem'.

3. Errors of omission or incompletion: Errors of this category are detected especially when a lexical item which should be present is omitted, or when a lexical item which should complete is incomplete. Since one of the key lexical elements of the sentence is missing, the sentence makes partial or no sense. This generally happens when the missing or incomplete item is insignificant in the student's mother tongue (Shin, 2002).

Example 5: *Another way to solve is that students should want help from the help centre for students.* (…the problem…)

Example 6: *Secondly, students should help from their teachers about English reading skills.* (…ask for/seek…)

As the foregoing examples illustrate, the students who wrote these sentences made an omission mistake which caused them to make partial or no sense. In Example 5 the student writes in his/ her composition about the ways of solving the problem of making friends. After talking about the first solution in his/her mind, he wants to start to write about the second solution but his/her sentence misses a key lexical element (the problem). Similarly, Example 6 lacks a key word (ask for/seek) which has to be used in order to convey the intended meaning.

4. Misspelling: This category is also known in the literature as spelling errors and it consists of lexical errors which violate the orthographic conventions of English (Llach, 2007b). The following are the misspelling examples from the data collected for the present study.

Example 7: *The most important solution for <u>improwing</u> English listening skills is <u>absoluetly</u> following…* (improving – absolutely)

Example 8: *I suggest to these university students that there are two solutions in order to avoid this rough <u>station</u>: <u>understending</u> and to be well-informed.* (situation – understanding)

5. Errors of redundancy: Lexical errors in this category are generally recognized when a lexical item is unnecessarily used, repeated or paraphrased. Shin (2002: 8) suggests that "this type of error is often found when students are unaware that the preceding word contains the semantic meaning of the subsequent word".

Example 9: *Listening skill is <u>more</u> difficult for Turkish students. They don't <u>have make</u> <u>a</u> practice*.

Example 10: *Every year thousands of students start university after the <u>UEE exam</u> in Turkey*.

Both of the sentences above exemplify unnecessary use of lexical items which cause redundancy in students' compositions. The first sentence in Example 9 is the opening sentence of the essay. Therefore, there is no need to use the word 'more' in the sentence as there is no previously mentioned issue to compare this skill with. In addition, the second sentence of Example 9 also has unnecessary lexical items (*have make a*) which make the sentence sound awkward. Also, in Example 10 the student uses the abbreviation 'UEE' to refer to University Entrance Exam but

s/he continues by writing the word 'exam' after the abbreviation, which causes the redundancy of using the same word twice consecutively.

6. Errors of collocation: All the words in a language keep companies which the speakers of the language use with. Lexical errors are categorized under this type of error when a lexical item used in a sentence does not suit or collocate with another part of the sentence, these items sound unnatural or inappropriate.

Example 11: *When students <u>attend</u> the activities, they will meet a lot of friends and the problem will be solved.* (participate in/be involved in)

Example 12: *During their school lives students can <u>be in</u> certain difficulties.* (face/experience/encounter)

The examples above illustrate collocation errors in some students' compositions. In both examples the students use several lexical items which do not suit or collocate with one another.

7. Errors of word formation: Lexical errors in this category consist of the items where the students use the wrong form of a word in their compositions. For instance, when a student intends to use a noun in a sentence (e.g. difference) but ends up using the adjective form of that noun (e.g. different) this error is categorized as an error of word formation.

Example 13: *They should watch a movie everyday because watching movies is very <u>benefit</u> for improving listening skills.* (beneficial)

Example 14: *Students have different <u>thinks</u>, ideas and ideals.* (thoughts)

Examples 13 and 14 illustrate the lexical errors of word formation as in the former one the student wrongly uses the noun form (benefit) of an adjective (beneficial) and in the latter one the student wrongly uses the verb form (thinks) of a noun (thoughts).

3.2. Frequencies and Percentages of Lexical Errors

Total number of the lexical errors made by the participants was found to be 743. As for the categories, Category 1 (Errors of wrong words choice), which consists of 32% of all the errors, was found to be the category with the most deviant items. Category 4 (Misspelling) and Category 3 (Errors of omission or incompletion) together follow Category 1 in terms of the frequency of erroneous lexical items, 20% and 19%, respectively. On the other hand, Category 6 (Errors of collocation) consists of the least frequency of errors, 3%. Category 6 is followed by Category 2 (Errors of literal translation) and Category 7 (Errors of word formation) in terms of having the least frequency of deviant lexical items, 6% and 7%, respectively.

4. Discussion, conclusion and implications

The purpose of this study was to identify and categorize the lexical errors that occur in Turkish Elementary level EFL learners' compositions. The findings of the study suggested that, first of all, the participants of the study make errors of word choice the most. Apart from making errors of wrong word choice, the participants of the study seem to make many errors of misspelling and errors of omission or incompletion. High frequency of the errors in these three categories can stem from the students' English proficiency level. Since the participants of this study were all Elementary level English learners, it can be said that their lexical development does not allow them to make the right lexical choices all the time, to write complete phrases or sentences, or to remember the correct spelling of some words.

Secondly, the results of the study revealed that errors of collocation, errors of literal translation and errors of word formation do not appear on students' compositions as frequently as the errors of wrong word choice, misspelling and omission or incompletion. Making relatively few errors of collocation and word formation might be related to students' avoidance of using complex words, phrases or sentences in their compositions, which could also be linked to their language proficiency. On the other hand, the finding that the participants of this study make relatively few errors of literal translation conflicts with the findings of similar studies in the literature (Zughoul, 1991; Shin, 2002). In both of these studies the researchers found that the category of errors of literal translation was among the high-frequency categories. The reason why the participants of the present study made less literal translation errors when compared to other studies might be related to the characteristics of Turkish language. The native languages of the participants in Zughoul's and Shin's studies were Arabic and Korean respectively. These two languages might yield

to more errors of literal translation in EFL composition when compared to Turkish. Further studies are needed to explore this issue better.

One of the implications of this study for the instruction of EFL composition in Turkey might be designing and implementing activities which focus on right word choice. The instructor of the course can give a lecture considering these problematic areas of the students' compositions. The same strategy can be followed for the errors of misspelling and errors of omission or incompletion.

Although the present study was an attempt to identify and categorize the lexical errors in Turkish EFL learners' compositions, it had its own limitations. First of all, the whole data were collected from the students who have the same language proficiency. Further studies should aim at investigating the relationship between the learners' language proficiencies and the frequency of lexical errors in their compositions. Second, in the present study the effects of the frequency of lexical errors on the grades that students get for their compositions were not investigated. Further studies are needed in order to examine the relationship between the frequency of lexical errors and composition grades. Third, the data of the study were analyzed by two native speakers of Turkish. As mentioned in the methodology section of this paper, identifying and categorizing lexical errors in students' compositions have its own risks and difficulties. This situation becomes worse when the data analysis is done without a native speaker of the target language. Therefore, involving a native speaker of English in the data analysis procedures of further studies would lead to better results.

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