Word Choice Errors in EFL Undergraduates' Written Language

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Abstract

The current study attempts to explore and analyze errors of word choice made in written language by Saudi undergraduates at King Khalid University. It additionally tries to determine the probable sources of errors and provide remedies to them. The study focuses on word choice errors in four areas, viz., literal translation, collocation, subject /verb agreement, and word formation. Guided by a qualitative research design, the data was collected through a structured interview with two Writing teachers. Writing samples from final exams of 15 EFL learners were also collected. Analysis shows that literal translation is the highest frequency of error type (38.29 %), followed by collocation (28%), subject /verb agreement (21.14%), and parts of speech (12.57%). The study relates the errors to several factors including the impact of the Arabic language (L1), inappropriate teaching methods and learning strategies, inadequate mastery of appropriate English word usage, lack of collocation competence, limited students' vocabulary knowledge, and other factors. To assist students overcome and reduce word choice errors, the study presents some recommendations and pedagogical implications.

Introduction

Lexical errors caused by incorrect choice of words are common in foreign language learning. In EFL situations, most learners choose words from a dictionary without attempting to understand the form and the context of the chosen word. These errors also occur because EFL learners lack adequate vocabulary and are unwilling to acquire new vocabularies (Andre, 2015). A major consequence of incorrect use of words is the impact on the clarity and effectiveness of communication. The use of inappropriate or incorrect words impacts the meaning, which results in ambiguity and confusion, and a breakdown in communication. A wrong word

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choice reduces the communicative purpose of a written text resulting in a failure to achieve the desired outcome of communication. Various word choice errors in EFL writing also occur due to the differences of linguistic and cultural backgrounds of learners. A learner who belongs to a homogenous community is likely to make fewer word choice errors as compared to a learner who comes from a community speaking a different language.

EFL writing skills are essential for learners because writing enhances communicative skills, aids academic success, and expands knowledge (Rae, 2020). In other words, writing is critical to students' learning success. Students must, of course, have a certain level of proficiency in writing a text, including organization, vocabulary, writing mechanics, grammar which often results in poor selection of words, confusion between parts of speech, and often inaccurate punctuation and spelling. Among these, vocabulary is the most essential element. Vocabulary competence has a significant impact on language learning. Since languages are based on words, vocabulary is essential for learning all language skills. According to Llach (2005), words are the first linguistic element a student learns, and learning any language necessitates vocabulary development. Chen (2002) sees that the proper use of words in second-language writing is critical but challenging for learners to acquire. Choosing acceptable terms can be challenging since choices often depend upon first-language knowledge which may be partially or entirely unrelated to the second language.

Al-Zahrani (2011) observes that EFL students have difficulty choosing the correct word when composing an essay or a paragraph. Similarly, Ra'uf (2020) maintains that the majority of EFL students struggle to communicate in English due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Muhammed (2019) claims that it can be challenging for EFL learners to select a suitable word since there are many words with different meanings. Andre (2015) classifies word choice errors into two types: lexical and semantic. Lexical errors are caused due to wrong selection, wrong formation, and distortion of words, while semantic errors are caused due to ambiguity in the meaning or collocation. This suggests that students need to know which words to use to convey their meaning, since improper choice of words might significantly impact the meaning of the sentence. Most EFL students find it difficult to express themselves in the target language.

In this study, therefore, the term *'word choice error'* relates to the diversions that are created by the second-language learners in identifying and analyzing correct words in both spoken and written English texts (Aygen & Eastlund, 2019). Llach (2005) emphasizes that EFL learners should acquire appropriate knowledge and learning of English vocabulary which includes literal translation, subject/verb agreement, collocation, and word formation errors. The current study, therefore, aims to investigate, identify, and analyze word choice errors in these four categories, viz., collocation, subject /verb agreement, literal translation, and word formation, in the written texts of Saudi EFL undergraduates at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. for this purpose, the following objectives were framed: (i) to identify and analyze word choice errors; (ii) to determine the most likely causes of these errors; (iii) to suggest appropriate remedies or solutions to help learners develop linguistic proficiency and reduce the occurrence of such errors. It is intended that the results of this research may lead to a more thorough comprehension of the phenomena of word choice errors in EFL writing. Studying EFL learners' word choice errors will provide data that allows teachers of English to recognize the source of the errors that characterize students' writing, as well as contribute to productive techniques to aid EFL students in acquiring appropriate and useful English vocabulary.

Literature Review

A word choice error is defined as the use of inappropriate vocabulary in a specific field and situation (Nila, 2017). A word choice error refers to a deviation to the meaning assigned to a word, which the EFL learner is not able to correctly correlate (Wu & Garza, 2014). The EFL learner makes incorrect or inappropriate lexical choices when he or she deviates from the intended purpose of a word in a given context. The learners may be having a broad English vocabulary, he or she may still fail to utilize a word correctly because words often vary in meanings in different subjects (Mubarok & Budiono, 2022).

There are several reasons for word choice errors occurring in the case of EFL learners. Word choice errors occur when EFL students are unable to choose the appropriate word to convey the meaning or when he or she uses an incorrect word during the writing process (Solarte Carolina Lemos, 2022); or when the learners have limited knowledge or understanding related to language system of target language (Sari, 2016); or when learners fail to understand the semantic complexities due to identical words (Naderi, 2010) or due to lack of language competence (Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017) or because the learner has a completely lack of knowledge of the target language and its language system (Gayo & Widodo, 2018). In addition, language errors can also be caused by interlingual interference and intralingual interference. Interlingual interference refers to a negative transfer of first language learners (L1) while intralingual interference involves errors caused by learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language (Kaweera, 2013). In all these multiple cases. errors cannot be corrected by the learner himself (Al-husban, 2018).

Dana Ferris & Roberts (2001) argue that vocabulary related errors are due to inability of non-native speakers to select the most appropriate word with the desired specific meaning. Zhou (2009) consider the fundamental problem of word choice errors lies in the disorganization and misinterpretation of words'

meaning and their usage in a sentence. Al-Khasawneh & Huwari (2014) recommend metacognitive strategies instruction on vocabulary learning among Jordanian University students. To explain this further, Ander & Yıldırım (2010) identify word choice errors in EFL students' writing in the categories like literal translation, errors of omission or incompletion, misspelling, errors of redundancy, errors of collocation, and errors of word formation. Kaweera (2013) endorses this categorization and calls lexical errors as first language interference. Andre (2015) divide word choice errors into two types, lexical and semantic. Lexical errors are caused by wrong selection and wrong formation of words, while semantic errors are due to the ambiguity caused by semantic similarity between two words and/or by the intermingling of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Rafoth (2015) asserts that lexical errors are caused due to the complexities between two languages and indecisiveness about the correct meaning by non-native speakers while translating from first language to second or foreign language. Badilla & Núñez (2020) warn against the use of wrong choice of content words, as the errors in either oral or written English can cause distortion of meaning and misunderstanding. Kao & Reynolds (2020) and Hyland & Anan (2006) have often blamed L2 writing teachers for being less attentive to the mistakes and not offering direct feedback to EFL students, and sometimes themselves unaware of the specific types of errors occurred.

In academic writings, for communication and professional purposes, non-native speakers fail to adhere achieve credibility owing to wrong choice of words (Hyland & Jiang, 2018). In order to make their writing formal or objective, non-native speakers often use unnecessary cliches and slang which deviate from the standard practices of academic discourse. Likewise, word choice errors are also related to grammatical errors, when a non-native speaker chooses a wrong word that violates the structure of a sentence; for instance, using word classes interchangeably, such as a noun instead of a verb, or a verb instead of an adjective. Such grammatically incorrect sentences cause ambiguity in the sentence (Almusharraf & Alotaibi, 2021). In addition, there are also two other types of errors: precision errors and out-of-context word errors. Precision errors are mostly found in academic writings when writers commit word choice errors by making use of unprecise words. This happens when a non-native writer, unaware of the collocation, finds it difficult to edit word choice errors in spite of written feedback (Bobrova, 2018). The second type of word choice errors are out of context word errors, which occur when writers use words or phrases that do not fit within the context or are irrelevant to the topic of writing. The non-native writer may not be aware of the correct source of words or be unfamiliar with the topic. Such errors cause not only ambiguity but also affect communication. Such situations are most undesirable in the case of EFL situations (Chen, 2002). When such problematic and incorrect word choices occur, they not only cause meaning distortion but also result in a lack of understanding and lower reader assessments.

Various empirical studies show that errors in word choice have the most apparent high ranking among all errors (Isma & Ode Rasmin, 2023; Khan, 2022; Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017; Şen & Şimşek, 2020; Zawahreh, 2012). Anggreni & Bochari (2021), for example, examine word choice errors of English students at Tadulako University in their written work. The research addresses three categories of errors: word choice, word formation, and literal translation errors. The objective of this study was to investigate the factors that contribute to errors committed by the learners. The findings show that word choice was the most common error followed by literal translation and word formation. The study relates these errors to the students' weakness in considering the context of the subjects in writing. In another study, Mohammed & Abdulla (2015) investigate lexical errors made by Sudanese EFL universities. To collect data, a questionnaire for EFL instructors and an essay test for the students were conducted. The data shows that learners produce word choice errors because of a variety of variables, the most important of which is the influence of the first language.

Kirmizi & Karci (2017) examine linguistic and lexical errors of Turkish EFL students and their causes at Karabuk University in Turkey. As a regular English language exercise in class, students are required to write about "*The Qualities of a Good Language Teacher*." The essays are then collected and analyzed using Wakkad (1980) and Tan (2007) taxonomies. Data analysis shows that word choice, articles, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and word order are the five most common errors. According to the study, these errors are created by the impact of the first language, lack of vocabulary, and insufficient grammatical skills. Ahmed et al. (2024), in a recent study, find out that word choice errors in spoken English by Saudi EFL learners were caused by Arabic language interference, inefficient instructional and learning techniques, a lack of collocation proficiency, and learners' ignorance of rule limits.

Ahamed & Othman (2019) investigate errors of word choice and their effects on EFL Saudi learners' writing performance at King Khalid University. The study's participants included both EFL university teachers and students. Unstructured interviews and tests were used as data collection tools. Results of the research revealed that learners produce word choice errors because of mother tongue interference and lack of lexical knowledge. It was also suggested that EFL teachers should motivate learners to expand their lexical knowledge by offering them resources for reading on a variety of issues. Kao & Reynolds (2020) conducted an empirical study at Taiwan Learner Corpus with the Taiwanese high school students. The corrective feedback provided by L2 writing teachers made evident instances of word choice error tags (n = 1,439) mostly grammar errors, assuming that teachers were also not aware of the multiplicity of word choice errors. It was also found that teachers provided indirect feedback requiring students to self-correct without guidance.

Methodology

Research Design

The present research used a mixed-method research design, indicating that it employs qualitative as well as quantitative methods (Hennik, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). The qualitative method was used in structured interviews with EFL teachers investigating the sources of learners' word choice errors in their writing performance. The quantitative method, on the other hand, was used to calculate the percentage and frequency of word choice errors made by students.

Sampling

Fifteen Saudi EFL undergraduates studying the course of Writing 4 were randomly chosen as the subjects for the study. Two teachers who taught this course for two different groups were also chosen as subjects for this study. The students included in this study were enrolled in King Khalid University, College of Science and Arts in Tanumah, Saudi Arabia, in the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024.

Instruments of Data Collection

Writing samples were collected from final exams from fifteen students because students worked extremely hard in exams to achieve high grades. As a result, the exam papers reflected their true writing abilities and knowledge. The students were requested to write a paragraph of at least 120 words on one of the following topics: a. Your first day at the university; b. An embarrassing incident; Differences between school life and university life. The data was collected from structured interviews conducted with two teachers who taught Writing 4. The interview determined the causes of errors and proposed remedies.

Data Analysis

After the data was gathered through structured interviews and English writing exams, the test scripts were checked to determine errors of word choice in the paragraphs. The errors were determined, analyzed, and categorized by experienced teachers into four major categories: literal translation errors, subject/verb agreement errors, collocation errors, and word formation errors. Errors were then counted to determine their percentage. Finally, the structured interviews transcripts were analyzed and examined to locate the causes of errors and propose improvements.

Findings and Discussions

Analysis of Learners' Written Texts

In this section, word choice errors were identified and classified into four categories involving errors in collocation, subject /verb agreement, literal translation, and word formation. These errors are represented in Table 1:

Table 1: *Wrong Choice Errors: Types, Frequencies and Percentages.*

Types of wrong choice errors	Frequency	Percentage
1. Literal translation	67	38.29 %
2. Collocation	49	28%
3. Subject /verb agreement	37	21.14%
4. Word formation	22	12.57%
Total	175	100%

The overall number of word choice errors was (175), as shown in the table. The percentage of errors show that errors of literal translation with a percentage of (38.29 %) were the most frequent error made by the students. Errors of collocation were the second type of error with a percentage of (28%), followed by subject /verb agreement word choice errors representing (21.14%), and finally errors of word formation with a percentage of (12.57%). When students use inappropriate or incorrect words in their writing, they commit such type of word choice errors. This includes using words with incorrect meanings or using words that are inappropriate for the context. The following are excerpts from students' writing exams for each category of word choice errors.

Errors of Literal Translation

Literal translation errors refer to items that are translated directly into a second language while adhering to the literal meaning of the first language. Consider the following examples:

Example (1) My Colleagues did an Accident on their Way Home.

Correct form: My Colleagues Had / Made an Accident on Their Way Home.

Explanation: The learner uses the verb (did) instead of the verb (had or made). This error can also be related to the impact of the first language and to the big differences between Arabic and English.

Example (2) The Teacher Divides Us into Groups.

Correct form: The Teacher Divides Us into Groups.

Explanation: The participant intends to express that the teacher divides them into groups, however, he applies the preposition 'to' which is appropriate in the structure of the Arabic language. This type of inaccuracy can also be attributed to the impact of Arabic.

These types of word-choice errors often result from mother tongue interference. Students have most likely learned these English words and their meanings in isolation, but they do not know how to use them appropriately in context.

Errors of Collocation

Collocation constitutes one of the most problematic components of language. The syntagmatic association of words is referred to as collocation. A collocation error occurs when a word is chosen that should not typically follow or precede another word. In EFL writing learners usually start with Arabic phrases and words and then try to find their English equivalents without considering the semantic differences in each linguistic setting. The following examples show word collocation errors from collected samples of students' written exams.

Example (3) In the University We Learn Knowledge.

Correct form: In the University We Acquire Knowledge.

Explanation: The participant here uses the verb (learn) instead of using the verb (acquire, gain, or obtain). This collocation error can be related to the impact of the Arabic language in which the learner thinks in Arabic.

Example (4) We Study Deeply to Get Good Academic Results.

Correct form: We Study Hard to Get Good Academic Results.

Explanation: The adverb (deeply) does not suit or collocate with the adverb (study). This collocation error can be attributed to the type of learning strategies used by the learners and to the lack of collocation competence.

Subject/Verb Agreement

When the subject and verb do not agree in number, the sentence lacks subject-verb agreement.

Example (5) Everybody Attend the Lecture on Time.

Correct form: Everybody Attends the Lecture on Time.

Explanation: Since "everybody" refers to a group carrying out a single activity as a single entity, the indefinite pronoun takes a singular verb form.

Example (6) The Lecturer Always Give Us Valuable Advice.

Correct form: The Lecturer Always Gives Us Valuable Advice.

Explanation: This sentence lacks subject-verb agreement because the subject (lecturer) does not agree in number with the verb (give). Errors in examples 5 and 6 above can be attributed to ignorance of rule restrictions.

Errors of Word Formation

A word formation error consists of an item where the learner uses an inappropriate form of a word in writing. The participants also have difficulty selecting the correct part of speech as demonstrated by the following instances:

Example (7) There Is a Different Between School Life and University Life.

Correct form: There Is a Difference Between School Life and University Life.

Explanation: This sentence shows a word choice error in which the student should use the noun form (difference) instead of the adjective form (different).

Example (8) University Live is More Interesting Than School Life.

Correct form: University Life is More Interesting Than School Life.

Explanation: This sentence also shows a word choice error in which the learner inappropriately employs the verb form (live) instead of the noun (life)

Errors in examples 7 and 8 above can be attributed to carelessness and ignorance of rule restrictions. Finally, these four types of errors in word choice require more attention and they should be emphasized in remedial teaching.

Analysis of Teachers' Interview

This part describes and analyses the structured interview. The participants' responses can be summarized as follows:

Causes of Word Choice Errors

According to the participants, many students commit word choice errors in writing, due to a variety of factors. These elements are summarized as follows:

a. The student's vocabulary knowledge.
b. The impact of mother tongue.
c. Ineffective teaching methods.
d. Inappropriate learning strategies, such as synonyms, repetition, and overgeneralization, have a negative impact on English collocation acquisition.
e. Inadequate command of proper English word usage
f. When composing a written work, learners rely largely on their vocabulary knowledge of Arabic.
g. Inadequate second-language knowledge, word formation, and subject-verb agreement.
h. Inadequate collocation competence.
i. Most EFL students have insufficient vocabulary knowledge because of their lack of awareness of expanding new vocabulary, low reading frequency, and insufficient use of English dictionaries.
j. Ignorance of the semantic differences in English vocabulary.
k. Ignorance of rule constraints.
l. Students' carelessness

Suggestions For Overcoming These Errors

When asked in the interviews what they would suggest for overcoming these errors, the participants proposed the following points as remedies:

a. Teachers should assist students in improving their abilities to correctly employ vocabulary and combinations of words, develop accurate phrases, and understand language patterns.
b. To help students develop their lexical knowledge, teachers should create handouts and exercises that focus on specific linguistic aspects such as subject/verb agreement, collocation, word formation, and so on.
c. Teachers should provide individual feedback to students on their specific linguistic issues.
d. Teachers should provide appropriate and accurate in-class group feedback, with a particular emphasis on common word choice errors or a subset of word choice error types.
e. Teachers should encourage students to read magazines, articles, and books to expand their vocabulary.
f. Teachers should adapt their teaching methods and techniques to meet the needs of their students.
g. More successful strategies of teaching are required to improve vocabulary acquisition.
h. Because most word choice errors were discovered to be the result of L1 and literal translation errors, teachers should provide teaching tools that emphasize the conceptual distinction between words in English and their literal Arabic equivalent.
i. Teachers should look for ways to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge by encouraging extracurricular tasks both outside and inside of the classroom. This will help learners remember the terms and enable them to utilize them more successfully in context.
j. EFL learners should be motivated to utilize English dictionaries effectively.

Conclusion

The current study investigated word choice errors in the written work of Saudi undergraduates at King Khalid University. The study targeted four categories of word choice errors: literal translation, subject /verb agreement, collocation, and word formation. The study made evident several factors which caused these errors including the influence of the first language, inappropriate teaching methods, and learning strategies, inadequate mastery of appropriate English word usage, students' limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of collocation competence, and other factors. Based on these findings, the study concludes with a few pedagogical implications and recommendations to assist students in overcoming and minimizing errors of word choice and to assist teachers in teaching word choice in writing. First and foremost, students need to increase their capacity to select the correct vocabulary relevant to their writing topic as their major challenge in writing English is related to use of correct vocabulary. For this purpose, writing should be taught through reading, which means that learners should be exposed to a variety of texts. Before assigning students to write, teachers should go over these texts with them and focus on word choice. While reading, students should pay close attention to the tense, vocabulary, and punctuation. They should be encouraged to use a learner's dictionary to ensure that words chosen by them are acceptable in the target language. Second, teachers should vary their techniques and methods of teaching in accordance with students' levels of competence and try to develop students' interest in vocabulary. They can work out such teaching strategies that would increase their

knowledge of vocabulary and also their capacity to select the right words relevant to their writing. Since most of the word choice errors were discovered to be the result of first language and literal translation errors, teachers should create teaching resources that clearly emphasize the semantic distinction between words in English and their Arabic literal equivalent.

A few suggestions for future research may also be made considering the study limitations. First, this study was limited to a small number of samples and focused solely on the perspectives of EFL teachers. A larger sample study, with a focus on students' perspectives to learn more about the causes of word choice errors and to obtain a more thorough understanding of this challenge, is required. Second, this study focuses on word choice errors in university learners' written texts. Future research focusing on errors of word choice in the spoken language of EFL undergraduates is required.

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