

Adult Learners' Lexical Confusions: An Analysis of Vocabulary Errors

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Abstract

This paper has attempted to make a preliminary study of lexical errors of adult learners of English with a view to finding out the following:

- i) the type of lexical errors learners make
- ii) how these errors can be explained
- iii) to what extent these errors affect effective communication.

With regard to the first aim different types of errors such as errors of retrieval, speech perception, sense relations, LI influence etc. were found in the data.

With regard to the second aim it was found that most of these lexical errors were due to learners' incomplete knowledge of a word and some were due to LI transfer, mainly as a result of using bilingual dictionaries.

It was found that though most of these errors did not affect communication, they need to be corrected before they become fossilised.

1. Introduction

The status of Vocabulary which suffered significant neglect during the 'Audio-Lingual' era has regained importance with the introduction of the Communicative Approach to English Language teaching. Now the general consensus of opinion seems to be that a good stock of words is crucial for understanding whatever one listens to or reads and for producing language which would facilitate communication. Consequently an important aim of many a language teaching programme is to help students gain a large vocabulary of useful words. However, despite language teachers taking great pains to enrich the vocabulary of their students we find them making numerous vocabulary errors which are often referred to as 'howlers'. However interesting and amusing these errors may be, I think it is the duty of every language teacher to help his or her students to overcome their problems with lexis before their errors become fossilised.

Though a large quantity of research has been done on grammatical errors of learners of English, not much attention has been paid to learners' lexical errors. This paper attempts to make an exploratory study of lexical errors of adult learn learners - students who followed the Diploma in English course at the University Colleges affiliated to the University of Sri Jayawardenapura and the first year students offering English as a degree subject in the university. It should be mentioned here that the latter group of students are those with little previous exposure to English but who have the potential to learn the language.

2. Data Analysis and interpretation

The data collected from the written performance of my subjects revealed different types of lexical errors. The classification of these errors has been based on the assumption that having both receptive as well as productive control of a word involves the ability to

- a) recognise it when it is spoken or written
- b) spell and pronounce it accurately
- c) recall it when needed
- d) relate it to an appropriate object or concept
- e) use it in a grammatically correct way
- f) be aware of collocational appropriacy
- g) use it in the appropriate context
- h) use it at the appropriate degree of formality
- i) be aware of different meanings of the word

Adapted from Wallace M. 1982 (page 27)

Research has revealed that, "if a lexical entry is fully represented in the mind, all the specifications mentioned above will be spelled out correctly. But if it is represented partially only some of its features will be recorded or recalled correctly." Lauffer 1991 (p318). An analysis of the lexical errors of my subjects revealed that most of them are the result of the learners having an incomplete knowledge of the lexical items they have learnt. For instance, they may know how to pronounce a word and how to spell it but not know how to use it in a sentence or which other words it would collocate with. Based on this, their errors have been classified into the following categories.

1. Errors due to inability to retrieve a word required
2. Errors in speech perception
3. Orthographic errors

4. Errors due to inadequate knowledge of semantic relationships between synonyms
5. Miscellaneous errors

2.1. Errors due to inability to retrieve a required word

Research has shown that learners make use of the phonetic features stored in their minds to reconstruct a lexical item that is needed. In attempting to do so, they often retrieve a word that is phonetically similar but semantically different from the intended word. Sometimes native speakers too are said to make such mistakes which are referred to as "tip of the tongue" TOT phenomenon by Brown and Mc Neil (1970). Batia Laufer (1991) refers to similar errors made by L2 learners as "Synforms" (Similar Lexical Forms) - errors made by L2 learners as a result of confusion of words which have certain features that are similar. The language units participating in this type of errors found in my data were phonemes, syllables and morphemes, as shown in table 1.

Language units participating in the error	Examples of Errors (erroneous word underlined)	Target word
a) Phonemes	i) Take a <u>sit</u> ii) <u>audible</u> jungle leaves iii) He <u>located</u> the land for chena cultivation	Seat edible allocated
b) Syllables (The erroneous word and the target word had the same number of syllables)	i) Swami doesn't like <u>attain</u> drill classes. ii) However the Mudalali <u>prospects</u> iii) The debate which followed gave Napoleom a chance to <u>export</u> Snowball.	attend prospers expel
c) Morphemes	i) Fruits are abunding in the villege ii) This is a <u>natural</u> poem. iii) The owner did not <u>note</u> the thief.	abundant nature notice

Table 1

In almost all the errors of this nature in the data it was found that

- i) The confusion was between words in which the initial or final segments were phonetically similar.
- ii) Both the erroneous word and the target word belonged to the same word class.

2.2 Errors in speech perception

These errors which are also called 'Slips of the ear' (Brownman 1980) are the result of misperception of words uttered by the interlocuter. Brownman contends that with regard to adult native speakers these errors are accidental but in the case of L2 learners they could be attributed to a deficiency in lexical competence.

Many errors of this type were found in my data. The learners had produced these erroneous words as they had perceived them and more often than not it had resulted in their producing a word that does not exist. As in errors discussed in Section 1 here too the learners had substituted a word for a phonetically similar word but in this case the substituted words did not exist in the target language. This may be due to the learner having perceived only a part of the word, either the initial or final segment correctly.

Interestingly in these errors too the language units participating were found to be phonemes, syllables or morphemes as seen in the following example.

- a) The bride and bride-broom (bride-groom) came to the village.
- b) There were boose-pimples (goose-pimples) on his body.
- c) She tries to surviue (survey) the place.
- d) He gave him a testimonior (testimonial).
- e) I am an orpent (orphan) and my parents sleep in graveyard.

2.3 Orthographic Errors

2.3.1 Spelling errors caused by faulty pronunciation

Many of the orthographic errors were phonological errors as well. That is, the learners' inability to pronounce a word correctly had resulted in their spelling it incorrectly. One of the problems many Sri Lankan learners have is confusion between the phonemes /p/ and /f/ which results in the production of the following

Error	Intended word
impormation	information
infortant	important
pinger	finger
surfrice	surprise
fast away	passed away
fresher	pressure

Interestingly most of the errors were the result of the learners substituting the phoneme /f/ for /p/ though it should have been the reverse for the phoneme /f/ is absent in Tamil and is a recent addition to the Sinhala alphabet. This may be due to over-correction of that sound by the teacher which had resulted in the learners becoming hypersensitive about it.

The absence of the phonemes /ɔ/ and /ɔ:/ in their mother tongue also posed a problem for many learners and their tendency is to substitute it with the diphthong /əʊ/ which again is a lengthened /o/ for Sri Lankan speakers of English. Their faulty pronunciation had had resulted in the production of the following orthographic errors.

Error	Intended word
row	raw
sow	saw
colled	called
becose	because
solt	salt

2.3.2 Errors caused by overgeneralisation of spelling rules

Another common spelling error that was observed was the result of overgeneralisation of certain rules of spelling such as doubling a consonant preceded by a vowel when adding certain suffixes like '-ed', '-ing' etc. It was interesting to note that the consonant following a vowel was doubled even when no suffix was added.

fillm	circuss	saturday
reffer	writter	misunderstanding
hottel	affraid	preffer
traggic	allways	agree

2.3.3 Spelling errors due to LI influence

Sinhala and Tamil are phonetic languages; that is, each phoneme is represented by a grapheme and consequently there is not much difference between the spoken and written forms of the word. But in the case of English there is no one to one correspondence between the phonemes and the graphemes.

The learners will have to be aware that in English there are several graphemic representations for one sound. For instance the phoneme /i:/ is represented by the following graphemes.

'e' in be
 'ie' in believe
 'ee' in seen
 'ei' in deceive
 'ea' in bean etc

Further silent graphemes in words like bomb, foreign, depot etc. have to be taken into account.

The analysis of the data collected revealed that the unpredictability of the English phoneme/grapheme relationship had caused many orthographic problems to learners, especially to those who did not read much. It was observed that many words were misspelt as a result of the learners writing a word exactly the way it is pronounced as they do in their mother tongue. Here are some errors of this type:

misspelt word	target word
jujed	judged
wership	worship
esyly	easily
stayshan	station
inuf	enough

2.3.4. Errors caused by misperception of the spoken word

Another common spelling error found in the data could be considered to be the result of misperception of the spoken word by the learner which may be due to inattentive listening. In most cases the error was the result of omitting the consonants /d/ and /t/ of the stem, especially in final position, affixed with a plural morpheme.

Error	Target word
husban	husband
parens	parents
aduls	adults
frienly	friendly
incidens	incidents

From the above discussion it should be clear that in general orthographic errors are the result of inattentive listening, faulty pronunciation and inadequate reading on the part of the learners.

2.4 Errors due to lack of knowledge of semantic relationships between words with similar meaning

It was quite evident that these errors were the result of the learners not being aware of the contextual constraints upon certain words. The following are clearly examples of wrong register.

- a) The verdict (decision) was to meet at Nallappa's grove.
- b) "See you" - leave taking at the end of a formal interview.
- c) From the inception (beginning) I was aware that teachers were poorly paid.
- d) Mudaliyar's wife certified (assured) that there was nobody in the room.

In addition, lack of knowledge of restrictions imposed by semantic features such as 'animacy' and 'inanimacy' on word usage led to constructions like

- a) The jungle attacked (destroyed) the village.
- b) His leg was damaged (injured) in the accident.
- c) I have re-formed (changed) my musical practice time.

Other errors due to lack of knowledge of the semantic value of words were:

- a) I was unable to go to job (work) for few weeks.

In the above sentence the learner had substituted 'job' for 'work' because he was not aware that the word 'work' is more appropriate in this context in which the reference is the place of work and not his set of duties.

- b) Some of them are finding (looking for) the scorpion with candles and lanterns in their hands.

The above error is the consequence of not knowing that 'find' is the result of a search and that it cannot be used in the progressive tense.

Other errors of this nature were.

- c) I think you will hear (listen to) my song.
 d) The head master becomes (sets) a bad advice (example)
 e) Sportsmeet time table (programme)

2.4.2. Collocational Errors

Another type of error which is the result of the learner not having a clear understanding of semantic relationship is collocational error.

"Knowledge of collocational appropriacy is part of the native speaker's competence, and can be problematic for learners in cases where collocability is language specific and does not seem solely determined by universal semantic constraints'.

McCarthy (1990)

A second language learner may know the correct grammatical form, spelling, pronunciation, meaning etc. of a particular word and yet may not know that there are certain restrictions with regard to combination of words. That is, they do not know that two words may have almost same meaning and yet not collocate with the same items. For instance in the construction "Anuradhapura is an antique (ancient) city", though both antique and ancient are synonymous, the learner does not know that antique collocates with an object not place.

Other errors of this type found in the data are

- a) You must observe (follow) my advice.
 b) I like to submit (express) my opinions.
 c) Andare was awarded (given) many gifts.
 d) He talks (tells) interesting stories.

2.5 Miscellaneous Errors

2.5.1 Errors in word formation

One of the causes of vocabulary errors among second language learners is their inadequate knowledge of word formation rules.

They fail to take into account the exception to rules when they try to derive one class of word from another and they tend to overgeneralize rules known to them. This very often results in their producing a word that does not exist as shown in the following examples.

- a) He is a kindful man.
- b) We should try to overcome jealousyness.
- c) This shows his mischiefness.
- d) He tried to earn money to save his family from poorness.
- e) The writer explains the differences between richers and poorers in society.

2.5.2 Lexical errors caused by mother tongue influence

These errors could be broadly classified as errors caused by

- i) Polysemic words in Sinhala which do not correspond with polysemic words in the target language.
- ii) Direct translation of the word from mother tongue.
- iii) The absence of the verb 'be' in certain constructions in Sinhala
 - i) It was interesting to note that in several instances polysemic words in Sinhala misled the learners into using an inappropriate word. For example ඔස් (his) in Sinhala means empty or blank and this resulted in the learner producing constructions like.

He wanted an empty (blank) paper.

Other errors caused by this confusion were

- a) When the Mudaliyar went near the cupboard she tried to wait (stop) him. (In Sinhala the polysemic word නවතීම is used for these two words.)

- b) Napoleon threatens (warns) other animals not to give a grain to them.

(The polysemic word for these two words in Sinhala is තර්ජනය කරනවා)

- c) You hope (expect) how much salary? (බලාපොරොත්තු වෙනවා)

I think this type of errors could be avoided if the learners do not rely too much on bilingual dictionaries, which generally do not provide adequate information to meet the needs of language learners.

- ii) Some of the errors which could be considered to be due to direct translation from mother tongue into target language were

- a) He takes work from the students
 b) He is a fish catcher
 c) They are deep friends
 d) The profession or career of this talking person is a hangman
 e) They looked after old-aged parents

- iii) The constructions 'subject +be+ complement (adjective)' which is not found in Sinhala posed a problem for many learners. As a result they tended to use adjectives which should be used as complement as predicators. The following are some examples of this sort of error.

- a) He afraids of Vedarala
 b) So Silindu did not afraid to any animal.
 c) He must responsible for that family.
 d) I think you will ready by six o'clock.

Another category of error similar to the one discussed above is the result of the learners using a noun instead of a verb especially with an auxilliary verb or the infinitive form.

- a) We can victory this game.
- b) Representatives have to courage their retailers
- c) The writer uses various techniques to success his novel.
- d) He didn't fun others.
- e) They should obedience their parents.

5.3 Basic verbs used for all purposes

A common problem many learners had was finding a precise and appropriate verb to convey a particular context. As a result they substituted these verbs with basic verbs. Though such substitutions do not always make the construction erroneous, it does attest their limited stock of vocabulary. The following are some of the constructions made by my subjects using these basic verbs.

- a) The people in the village did her funeral.
- b) They try to be happy doing a game.
- c) To say his idea the poet.....
- d) The poet tries to say superstitions ideas of the people.
- e) It will make bad name for our parents.
- f) Orwell makes an important character who is napoleon.

2.5.4. Syntactic errors which affect the construction semantically

It was found that in some instances the learner was able to use an appropriate word but the construction did not convey the intended meaning as a result of a covert syntactic error as shown in the following examples.

- a) Therefore please be a patient for a week. (error of addition 'a')
- b) We should not be allowed to smoke **into** the bus. (substitution for 'in')
- c) Sri Lanka **was ruling** the British Government in 1815. (Error of substitution-Active verb for passive)
- d) She started to **hard work** herself. (Error of transposition)
- e) His parents are **lost**. (He lost his parents / His parents are dead - confusion between these two constructions)

2.5.5 Coining of non-existent words - A communicative strategy

It was interesting to find these learners making up words that do not exist in order to communicate. There were more than a hundred errors of this nature some of which are given below.

- a) He is inbornly timid kind of child.
- b) The headmaster is a ruleful man.
- c) He is an unstudious boy.
- d) He is an honersent man.
- e) I am like violin music till my childage
- f) He will help to difficulted people.
- g) He is normally uncarerd for his lessons.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study of learners' lexical errors showed that most of the errors found in the data were due to their possessing an incomplete knowledge of the lexical items they had attempted to learn, though some errors were caused by mother tongue influence. An attempt to classify these errors revealed that of the 792 errors collected, 376 (about 50%) were the result of lack of knowledge about how two or more semantically related items are differentiated. This may be because of the difference in the way in which a particular concept is lexicalised in their mother tongue and the target language.

The importance of learners having a knowledge of the semantic relations among words if they are to gain lexical competence, has been underscored by several applied linguists. For instance, Balmer and Brennenstuhl (1981) say "to know the meaning of single words is to know their semantic relations: their similarity, their dissimilarity, their implications, their presuppositions. In order to learn, use and teach a language, the ability to judge such relations is basic". (p 419)

This point is reiterated by Gairns and Redman (1986) when they state that "a clear understanding of sense relations can provide a greater precision in guiding students towards meaning and in helping them to define the boundaries that separate lexical items" (p.32)

The second largest number of errors in the data were orthographic errors - almost 200 - most of which were closely related to the phonological problems of these learners. This shows that pronunciation too needs to be paid attention to in vocabulary teaching.

While in school, all my subjects had used the English Every Day series, their course books from year seven to year eleven to learn English. But regrettably the attempt made in these course books to promote vocabulary acquisition in these learners does not seem to have helped them much. In these texts a section called "Word Study" comprising a set of lexical items related to a particular setting is presented in each unit with a view to enriching their vocabulary. However, in these sections selecting vocabulary items that would be useful to the students- those that would help them to communicate effectively - have not been taken into account. Rather, lexical sets that relate in some way to a preceding section has been the criterion of selection. A case in point is the 'Word Study' lesson in Unit Five of the English Every Day book one, page 54, where different parts of a bicycle are presented. This, presumably is a follow-up lesson of the 'Finding Out' lesson of the preceding section of the same unit, titled 'The Cycle Race' (p. 51). Students who have gone through this lesson may know all the parts of a bicycle and yet may construct sentences like:

"The bicycle was injured in the accident".

In addition, the vocabulary list given at the end of each book in the series (books one to five) indicates that the students should be familiar with around 4765 vocabulary items. But surprisingly most of the erroneously used words by my subjects were words that they would have come across in their course books. This stresses the need for more systematic vocabulary teaching in the schools if the students are to acquire a good stock of vocabulary.

The questions that need to be asked here are - what went wrong in the vocabulary teaching in schools? Why do these learners who have been exposed to nearly 5000 vocabulary items for about five years or more possess only a partial knowledge of the words they have learnt? How could teachers help students in vocabulary acquisition? Perhaps further research on the lexical errors of learners may throw light on the issues raised here.

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