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Language Transfer in Writing: A Case Study at University

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Language Transfer in Writing: A Case Study at University

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Abstract. This article describes an investigation into the learning outcomes that transferred from a university content-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. This study sought to answer the following question: How do the learners transfer L1 to the acquisition of L2 (English) linguistic item, particularly in lexical choice? The study objective is to describe the types of lexical errors. Therefore, it was a cross-sectional qualitative case study. The result is five types of lexical errors cover misspellings, borrowings, calque, misselection and semantic confusion. According to their source, borrowing and calque are from mother tongue. Misspellings, misselection, and semantic confusion are from target language. Lexical errors imply a lack of lexical knowledge and an inadequate use of vocabulary. Besides, they contribute negatively to communicative quality. Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of L1 influence during foreign language acquisition. However, the study does provide insights regarding the nature of L1 influence in English writing, particularly the lexical choice. Most importantly, the study shows that in some cases, L1 influence continues to play a role throughout writing.

1. Introduction

At present English is widely accepted as the world language for information exchange and communication [1,2]. As a consequence, second language (L2) programs have essential role in academic studies and future professional success [3,4]. English is, therefore, regarded as a crucial language that students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have to master at the university level. However, as they have difficulties understanding and writing academic texts, mastering them turns to be a complicated task.

Writing as a productive skill materializes through the visual channel [5] Concerning about vocabulary, writing manifests a wider variety of words and words of lower frequency [6] Different from oral language is developed naturally and unconsciously, writing is developed in a conscious way that mostly takes place at academic settings.

In educational settings, learner needs as the "identifiable elements" of "students' target English situations", govern EAP [7]. As a matter of fact, the students' backgrounds are from pre-intermediate English level ranging from 300-400 for their paper-based TOEFL scores. Therefore, they need to be equipped with fundamental writing skill as later it is used to succeed in their courses and future careers [8].

The reason why compositions are used in this study is they will give relatively spontaneous language material produced by the learner [9]. Besides that, they reflect the real linguistic and lexical knowledge of the learners. It is not amazing, therefore, that compositions have been repeatedly used to

assess linguistic knowledge and lexical competence of EFL learners, including exploration of lexical errors.

Furthermore, lexical errors are an important window into the lexical acquisition process. By identifying, classifying and interpreting lexical errors, the main lexical acquisition stages and lexical acquisition processes are able to be established, and to find out what areas of lexis are more problematic to learners at certain stages. Lexical errors have a closely connected role in interaction, and they have long been recognized as the most likely cause of unintelligibility. Because of their negative impact on communication, lexical errors are judged to be the most serious and severe of all types of errors. In communication, as they have an affect on the meaning of the message, lexical errors are regarded to be very damaging to communication [10]

It is obvious that lexical errors may greatly irritate and disturb the interlocutor.[5] Misunderstandings coming from misleading utterances, communication impairment caused by unintelligible information and irritation on part of the hearer are the worst consequences of lexical errors [11]. Consequently, if language is considered primarily as a means of communication, and if these errors result in a breakdown in communication, the importance and necessity of their eradication follow. For this to happen, an understanding of the source of these lexical errors is significant for teachers and researchers, and the relevance of lexical error taxonomies [12].

For students and their lecturers, vocabulary is a crucial part of university life, especially in high-stakes writing and assessment [13]. Focusing on vocabulary will support the students in their academic studies at university. The students certainly will meet these words in their reading at university. Other reasons include assisting the students enrich their vocabulary size and raising their awareness of the importance of vocabulary at university.

In written language, since it is decontextualized, eventually it consists of richer vocabulary than oral language so comprehension to a great degree relies on word knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge, as a result, is equally significant to the writer as it is to the reader. It is proven by several studies that state rich vocabulary instruction and developing word consciousness can positively influence writing [14].

"Knowing a word' means knowing how to use it appropriately in context, in combination with other words (collocation) and in particular communicative situations and texts". Conveying the desired meaning and avoiding unwanted implications can be difficult for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. On that account, 'lexical errors' is a deviation in form and/or meaning of a target-language lexical word. For form deviations, orthographic or phonological deviations are involved. Meaning deviations will take place as lexical items are applied in contexts where they are attributed another meaning [5].

Considering the amount of practice and modeling will become another implication that foreign language learners need to receive on their academic writing. Writing classes could give emphasis on using quoting and paraphrasing in order to incorporate vocabulary into writing in academically recognized ways. Providing this kind of support may stimulate the learners to engage with the meaning and form of words initially, which may in turn increase confidence in using words in writing rather than using avoidance techniques [5]. The concept of language learners or interlanguage has been highly influential in the study of second language acquisition since it was proposed by Selinker (1972) in his seminal research paper "Interlanguage" [15], which provided the theoretical framework for interpreting second language acquisition as a mentalistic process and for the empirical investigation of interlanguage. It is not wondering, since then, the study of interlanguage and various aspects of it has become significant until now, including lexical items. Lexical errors represent a hint into vocabulary acquisition in English given the fact that they may demonstrate a lack of lexical knowledge, possible communication strategies used by the learners, the organization of the mental lexicon, and/or the development of lexical competence [16]. In this sense, doing research on lexical errors will be useful in helping to delve into the issue of the lexical competence development.

This study sought to answer the following question: How do the learners transfer L1 to the acquisition of L2 (English) linguistic item, particularly in lexical choice? The goal of this study is to

describe the types of lexical errors. By doing so, interlanguage or cross-linguistic phenomenon is critical to a complete understanding of students' writing development in the process of acquiring English lexical items.

2. Methodology
In this study, our participants consist of a total of 42 undergraduate Indonesian learners of EFL at one of private universities in Jakarta in first semester. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20 years old. Therefore, the subjects were all Indonesian speakers and have been learning English as a foreign language attending two and half hours per week.

Here, the students were required to produce a descriptive paragraph. They were given time to choose their own topic. No maximum or minimum word or length constraints were imposed. Participants were allowed to use any support material such as dictionaries. They were allotted 30 minutes to complete the writing task.

For the research question presented above, qualitative analyses were conducted for the composition task by accumulating the samples in written texts that had been collected chronologically. A written composition was used for the study as the elicitation procedure to obtain real language from learners. The author thinks that in order to explore interlanguage phenomena in using lexical choice of English in their writing, the performance data was collected from individual language users at a single point in time. Hence, this is cross-sectional study.

The students wrote the essay in regular classes with extra help from dictionaries, as stated above. The subsequent phase in the study consisted in the identification of the lexical errors found. Taking into account the objective of this study, after that, the classification of the lexical errors was done.

3. Results
From the data, the results below are categorized into several parts. Firstly, misspellings are also known as 'spelling errors' or 'orthographic errors' [5]. Below are the examples.
a. He has a thin *musthace* and it look so funny.
b. Fourth, after the result came out you will *rechieve* a college payment receipt.
c. Winda is humble, alway friendly, *beatiful* and have a good person.
d. Bali is absolutely *averyone*'s favorite place not only from Indonesian.
e. Now, I'm studying at University of XXX and I just *intered* in the year 2017.
f. … being force to do something they didn't want to do or something that make they loss something more *importat*.
g. Conformity not only *couse* you loss something ….
h. Conformity is *bound* that *connet* peple ….
i. So it will make you have good *mod* when riding.
j. ... follow extracurricular activities or called UKM such as basketball, dance, *badmintoon*.
k. After a while, you are given an *enterance* exam schedule.
l. We have different *habbid* that is ….

Secondly, borrowings are covered. Borrowings can be called as 'complete language shift' or 'code-switching' [5]. The examples are:
a. First, you find the information about XXX at *brosur* or website.
b. After that, you must show your rapport to *staf* administration.
c. In XXX you can get grants from the result of your *rapot* score.
d. First, we came to campus and straight to *admisi* room.
e. Putri Island has three color of water, that are white, blue, and *tosca* green.
f. One of negative effect is when someone in the *grup* being force to do something they didn't want to do or something ….
g. Kota Tua also has *sepeda* rent.
h. There are two kinds of saus, the first is the spicy one and ….

After that, third type is calque. Calque or 'literal translation' takes place as the learner translates the word from the L1 literally [5]. The examples are:

a. I'm *school* at SMA XXX.
b. It's a pleasure to be with her and I really *enjoy* her personality.

Next, it covers misselection. Misselection is a confusion of formally similar items, that is pairs or triples of words that sound (phonetic similarity) or look (orthographic similarity) similar are confused and interchanged [5]. Below are the examples.

a. Afterwards, you have to show up your high school *report*.
b. Finally, we became an XXX *collage* student.

Besides that, semantic confusion can mean the confusion of semantically related words. In other words, two words are confused because they are semantically similar. Below are the examples [5].

a. There should be no red *values*.
b. Thirdly, send transfer *evidence* to admission email.
c. …, and I was well *received* in the university.
d. Choky is a cute animal because of its habit like licking his *feathers*.
e. Mobile phone is a very basic *requirement* for today, which has been widely used in
   the community, ….

It is obvious that there are five categories of lexical errors in the study. First category is misspellings. Most of the students in their writing have problems with English orthography. These are violations of the orthographic conventions of English which are generated as a result of the difficulties that learners have in coping with the 'English encoding system' [17] for example *musthace* for 'mustache', *rechieve* for 'receive' or *beatiful* for 'beautiful'.

Next category, borrowings, come up when the learner inserts any mother tongue into the English syntax without any attempt to tailor them to the target language [17] and this covers phonological or morphological adaptations, such as *brosur* for 'brochure', *staf* for 'staff' or *rapot* for 'raport'. After that, calque takes place even though learners are aware of the existence of the word and its form, but they lack knowledge of the semantic and/or collocational restrictions of the word [18]. like I'm *school* at SMA XXX (literal translation from *saya bersekolah di SMA XXX*) and it's a pleasure to be with her and I really *enjoy* her personality (literal translation from *menyenangkan bersama dengannya dan saya sangat senang dengan kepribadiannya*). Afterwards, misselection implies that the learners do the wrong selection of an already existing word in the target language. The examples are *report* for rapport and *collage* for college. Lastly, in semantic confusion the learners are confused with two words because they are semantically similar in meanings but are functionally different, for example *values* for 'score', *evidence* for 'proof', *accepted* for 'received', *feathers* for 'fur', and *requirement* for 'need'.

4. Conclusion

At present, studying and acquiring knowledge in English is a basic academic and social requirement. English, as we know, is the lingua franca of international communication. In communication, vocabulary is consequently essential. Lexical errors are important factors that may lead to communication breakdown. By indicating and analyzing the lexical errors, the process of lexical acquisition and the strategies used by undergraduate learners can be identified.

This study focuses on the categories of lexical items used by the foreign language learners in pre-intermediate English level. One of the key implications of this study, therefore, is the complex nature of the lexical decisions these participants make while writing. From the selection of words, we can see that writing takes the learners' great effort.

There was notable variability when acquiring different vocabularies in English, as evident in the error patterns in the learners' texts. In this study, there are five types of lexical errors. They are misspellings, borrowings, calque, misselection and semantic confusion. Lexical errors can be categorized according to their source. Here, borrowing and calque are from mother tongue. Misspellings, misselection, and semantic confusion are from target language [5].

First language (Indonesian language) is considered as the main source of transfer for the acquisition of foreign language (English). Positive transfer takes place if it facilitates, and usually occurs when

structure is identical or similar for both languages. Conversely, transfer that obstructs acquisition is referred to as negative, and has been found to occur when the languages are dissimilar [19].

Next, since the differentiation of the lexical errors category (misspellings, borrowings, calque, misselection, and semantic confusion) displays material for a better, richer and more complete explanation of the phenomenon, and more sufficient correction and evaluation criteria, it is regarded positive. Besides that, the differentiation brings order and clarity to the field, for the benefit of researchers, practitioners (teachers of ESL), learners and students of applied linguistics.

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