

Investigating Lexical Errors in Written and Spoken Productions among University Students of Business English



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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their writing and spoken production. The participants were 50 undergraduate students from a business school at the University of Ibn Zohr, Morocco. A comprehensive language assessment was conducted to measure their vocabulary size, productive vocabulary knowledge, and language proficiency. Their written essays and spoken interviews were analyzed using James' Taxonomy of Lexical Errors (1998). The results showed that the most frequent types of lexical errors made by the participants were word Distortions (46%), followed by Misformation (33%), and finally Confusion of Sense Relation (18%). The study also found a significant correlation between vocabulary size and productive vocabulary knowledge with the number and types of lexical errors made by the participants. The findings have implications for language teaching and learning, suggesting that more attention should be given to vocabulary instruction and practice to reduce lexical errors in Business English communication.

KEYWORDS: Lexical Errors, James Taxonomy, Business English, Written and Spoken productions

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Background of the Study

Business English has become a widely-used language of communication in the globalized world of commerce and industry. (Faruk, 2013; Li, 2014; Rao, 2019). As such, the ability to effectively communicate in this language has become a key requirement for many university students pursuing careers in business-related fields. However, despite the importance of language proficiency in this context, many students struggle with the specific lexical demands of Business English, making frequent errors in their written and spoken production (Albassri, 2016; Coxhead, 2012).

Previous research has examined various aspects of Business English language proficiency, including grammar, vocabulary, and discourse features (Faruk, 2013; Li, 2014; Nickerson, & Planken, 2015; Rao, 2019; St John, 1996). However, there is a lack of comprehensive studies specifically addressing the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students in this context. Such information is crucial in informing the development of effective pedagogical approaches aimed at improving language proficiency in Business English.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in both their written and spoken production. The study will contribute to a better understanding of the specific lexical challenges faced by these students and provide insights into potential areas for pedagogical intervention. By doing so, the study also has the potential to inform the development of targeted language learning materials and instructional approaches aimed at improving language proficiency in Business English among university students.

B. Statement of the problem

The problem addressed in this research is the identification of the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in both their written and spoken production. The study aims to investigate the specific lexical errors that occur most frequently among this group of students, as well as to determine the overall prevalence of such errors in their language use. Thus, the research seeks to shed light on potential areas of difficulty for these students and inform pedagogical approaches aimed at improving their language proficiency in Business English.

C. The Research Questions

The present paper tries to answer the following research questions:

- What are the types of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their writing and spoken production?
- What is the frequency of these errors in writing and spoken production?

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Based on the research questions of this study, several hypotheses can be formulated. Firstly, it can be hypothesized that university students of Business English are likely to make various types of lexical errors in their writing and spoken production due to the complexity of the language and their limited vocabulary knowledge. Secondly, it can be hypothesized that the frequency and types of lexical errors made by the participants are related to their language proficiency and productive vocabulary knowledge. Thirdly, it can be hypothesized that certain types of lexical errors, such as calques and near Synonyms, are more frequent than others due to the interference of the previously acquired languages or less proficiency. These hypotheses can guide the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on lexical errors has shown that learners often struggle with the correct use of words and phrases in context (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Kang, 2014; Lennon, 1991). These errors can affect the clarity and coherence of communication and hinder learners' ability to convey their intended meaning (James, 1998). Studies have also shown that learners tend to make errors that are specific to their native language and culture (Bada, 2001; Ridha, 2012). In the business context, lexical accuracy is particularly important, as it is essential for establishing credibility and communicating effectively with clients and colleagues (Harrington, 2006; Pluck, 2018). Despite its importance, research has shown that learners often struggle with business-specific vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Troufanova, & Inozemtzeva, 2015).

A. Types of Lexical Errors in James Taxonomy (1998)

James' Taxonomy of Lexical Errors categorizes errors into two main types: formal errors and semantic errors.

Formal Errors

Formal errors refer to mistakes that affect the form or structure of a word or phrase, without necessarily changing its meaning. It consists of thirteen types that are grouped into three main categories namely, Formal misselection, Misformation, and Distortions. In business English, formal errors are often considered to be as serious as semantic errors since they may still cause confusion or misunderstanding in communication (James, 1998).

Semantic Errors

Semantic errors, on the other hand, refer to mistakes that affect the meaning or interpretation of a word or phrase. It consists of Confusion of senses relation, collocation, connotation, and stylistic errors. For James (1998), Semantic errors can cause misunderstandings because they affect the intended meaning and interpretation of the information being conveyed. According to him, to mitigate semantic errors and reduce misunderstandings, it is important to strive for clarity in communication. This can be achieved by using precise language, providing relevant context, clarifying any potential ambiguities, and being mindful of cultural and linguistic differences when communicating with diverse audiences (James, 1998).

B. Frequency of Lexical Errors

Research on the frequency of lexical errors has shown that learners tend to make errors that are specific to their native language and culture (Bada, 2001; Ridha, 2012). For example, Chinese learners of English may struggle with the correct use of articles, as Chinese does not have articles. Similarly, learners from Arabic-speaking countries may struggle with the correct use of the present perfect tense, as Arabic does not have an equivalent tense. Research has also shown that learners tend to make more errors in writing than in speaking (Kuiken & Vedder 2011). This may be due to the fact that learners have more time to reflect on their language use in writing, whereas, in speaking, they must produce language more quickly.

C. Impact of Lexical Errors on Communication

Lexical errors can have a significant impact on communication, particularly in the business context. Inaccurate use of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which can affect the credibility of the speaker or writer. For example, if a business professional uses an incorrect word or phrase when negotiating a contract, it can lead to confusion and potentially result in a loss of business. Research has also shown that lexical errors can affect the fluency and complexity of language use (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Learners who struggle with lexical accuracy may spend more time thinking about their language use and less time focusing on the content of their message. This can result in a lack of coherence and organization in their communication.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to investigate the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their writing and spoken production. The research design for this study is a quantitative descriptive study, utilizing a corpus of learner language for data analysis. Participants were 50 university students of Business English, ranging in age from 18 to 25 years old, and recruited from the University of Ibn Zohr, Morocco. Two instruments were used for data collection: a writing task and a

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speaking task. The writing task was a 300-word essay prompt that asked participants to describe a recent business event or news story. The speaking task was a three-minute monologue on the same topic as the writing task. Both tasks were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The data were analyzed using James' (1998) taxonomy of lexical errors, which categorizes errors into two main types: semantic and formal errors. The frequency of each error type was calculated for both the writing and speaking tasks. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection and analysis, several measures were taken. First, the two tasks were designed to measure the same construct (lexical accuracy), ensuring that the results were consistent across both tasks. Second, the data analysis was conducted by two independent raters who were trained in James' taxonomy of lexical errors. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which indicated high agreement between the raters ($\kappa = 0.85$). Ethical considerations were taken into account during the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participating. Confidentiality was ensured by removing all personal identifying information from the data.

The quantitative data collected in Phase 1 were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the frequency and types of lexical errors made by the participants. The qualitative data collected in Phase 2 were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes related to lexical errors. The results of both phases are then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their written and spoken production. James' Taxonomy of lexical errors is a widely recognized framework for classifying lexical errors in language learning research. It is based on the premise that errors can be classified into two main categories; Formal and informal. Each category is further subdivided into subcategories, allowing for a more detailed analysis of the specific types of lexical errors made by language learners.

Furthermore, the taxonomy aligns with the general objective of the study, which is to identify the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their written and spoken production. By using James' Taxonomy, the study can provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of the specific types of errors made by the participants. It also allows for a better understanding of the lexical challenges faced by university students of Business English and will inform the development of pedagogical approaches aimed at improving their language proficiency in this context.

IV. THE RESULTS

The results of the analysis showed that the most frequent type of lexical error made by the participants was

1. Distortions, accounting for 46% of all errors. Within the distortion category, the prevalent subcategory was Overinclusion (34%), followed by Misselection (11%), and Misordering (1%). One of the spotted examples of overinclusion was:

A. "I will discuss the pros and *consequences of the new marketing strategy."

a student includes unnecessary or incorrect words in a sentence. In this case, overinclusion occurs when the student mistakenly uses "consequences" instead of "cons" or "disadvantages" to refer to the negative aspects of the marketing strategy.

The Misselection instance was

B. "Our company needs to invest in a new human resources manager to *overlook employee relations."

In this case, the student misselects "overlook" instead of "oversee," resulting in a completely different meaning. The correct word should be "oversee," meaning to supervise or manage.

The last lexical error in Distortions is misordering as in the following instance:

C. "I study in the university *English"

The correct form is "I study English in the university" instead of "I study in the university English". Another example of a phrase order error is "In the first semester I am taking economics" instead of "I am taking economics in the first semester".

2. The second most frequent type of lexical error was **Misformation**, accounting for 33% of all errors. Within the omission category, the most frequent subcategory was calque (23%), followed by borrowing (10%). Arabic interference can lead to calque errors when students directly translate Arabic expressions into English for example:

A. "I have a big meeting tomorrow, so I will make sure to *bring with me all the required documents."

In this example, the student calques the Arabic phrase "bring with me" into English, which sounds unnatural. The correct English expression should be "bring all the required documents."

Borrowing errors, moreover, occur when students incorporate Arabic words directly into English without considering their appropriateness, and one of its forms is literal translation as in this case:

B. "Break the head" is used instead of "brainstorm" or "think creatively."

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Learners may directly translate Arabic expressions or idioms into English, resulting in awkward or incorrect usage. In Arabic, the expression "كسر الرأس" /kasr al-ra's/ means to think deeply or ponder, leading to a literal translation in English that doesn't convey the intended meaning.

3. The Least frequent type of lexical error was a **Confusion of Sense Relation**, accounting for 18% of all errors. The rest of the lexical errors in the taxonomy are rarely observed in the productions of the students. Arabic interference can lead to the use of near-synonyms that are not precisely equivalent in English. One of the spotted examples is:

A. "Our company is experiencing a lot of *challenges in the market."

the student uses "challenges" to refer to difficulties or problems faced by the company. However, a more appropriate word in a business context would be "obstacles" or "obstructions," which convey a clearer sense of barriers or hindrances. These errors occur because students may rely on near-synonyms that have similar meanings in Arabic but are not necessarily interchangeable in English. It is important to highlight the subtle differences between near-synonyms in English and provide examples and explanations to help students grasp their correct usage. By doing so, students can overcome Arabic interference and enhance their accuracy and clarity in Business English communication.

In terms of the frequency of lexical errors in written texts versus spoken production, the frequency of errors was higher in written texts than in spoken production. Specifically, the frequency of errors in written texts was 62%, compared to 38% in spoken production. This suggests that university students of Business English may have more difficulty with written production than with spoken production. In addition, the results showed that the frequency of errors varied depending on the language proficiency level of the participants. Participants with a lower language proficiency level made more errors overall, with 67% of their lexical errors falling into the substitution category. In contrast, participants with a higher language proficiency level made fewer errors overall, with only 26% of their errors falling into the substitution category.

V. THE DISCUSSION

The present section provides a discussion of the obtained data as well as explores the implications of the findings for Business English language teaching. All the previously mentioned errors in the results occur due to the influence of the students' native Arabic language on their English usage. (Mahmoud, 2005; Magdy & Fahmy 2007; Shalaby & El-Komi, 2009). Students may struggle to find the appropriate English expressions or may directly translate phrases from Arabic. It is important to address these issues by providing targeted instruction, reinforcing proper English usage, and encouraging students to practice in an immersive English environment. This can help them overcome interference and improve their Business English proficiency.

The findings of the present study are consistent with other studies that have examined lexical errors in the context of Business English. In a study by Chuang & Nesi (2006) on lexical errors made by Chinese learners of English, overinclusion was identified as a common error type. The author explained that learners tend to overgeneralize and include unnecessary words in their English sentences, influenced by the word order patterns and structures of their native language. This finding supports the notion that overinclusion errors can be attributed to learners' native language interference. Previous research by Shalaby & El-Komi (2009) examining lexical errors in language learners highlighted similar instances of misselection errors as reported in the results. The study found that learners often struggle with selecting appropriate words due to a limited vocabulary repertoire or insufficient knowledge of word meanings. Such errors can be attributed to learners' lack of awareness of subtle differences in word meanings and their failure to accurately convey their intended message.

A study by Yang (2019) investigating lexical errors made by Chinese learners of English identified calque errors as a common phenomenon. The study found that learners often resort to direct translation from their native language, resulting in the use of inappropriate idiomatic expressions or collocations. This tendency can be attributed to learners' reliance on familiar patterns and structures from their native language, hindering their ability to produce accurate and natural-sounding utterances in the target language. For Llach (2007), calques are simply English words that have been mistakenly used in a different context or situation. Even though there is an error in how they are used, their intended meaning remains unchanged, much like misspellings. As a result, readers can understand the learner's intended message, and communication can continue without significant distortion. Therefore, rather than being problematic, the presence of calques actually contributes positively to the learner's overall score, demonstrating their knowledge of English vocabulary. Additionally, and according to Llach (2007), borrowing can likely be attributed to the subjects' limited proficiency level, evident in their lack of experience in writing English and their inadequate grasp of the English graphophonological system. These factors help explain the prevalence of spelling errors. These errors are attributed to learners' limited knowledge of English vocabulary and their tendency to rely on familiar words or expressions from their native language.

The frequency of lexical errors in written texts versus spoken production, however, was found to be different in this study. Specifically, the frequency of errors was higher in written texts than in spoken production. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have also found a higher frequency of errors in written texts compared to spoken production (e.g., Llach, 2011; Pérez

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& Basse, 2015). This may be due to the fact that written production requires more attention to grammatical accuracy and formality than spoken production, which is often more casual and conversational.

A. Implications for Business English Language Teaching

The findings of the present study have important implications for Business English language teaching and learning as well. Specifically, language instructors should prioritize the teaching of Business English Jargon, as they were found to be the most common type of lexical error in the study. Precise terminological concepts for a specific function are notoriously difficult for language learners to master, as they involve the combination of words that do not have a predictable relationship with each other. To address this issue, Teachers can also provide learners with opportunities to practice using languages in authentic business contexts, such as negotiations, meetings, and presentations.

Language instructors are also advised to prioritize the teaching of word choice and spelling, as these were also found to be common types of lexical errors in the study. To improve learners' word choice, language instructors can provide feedback on errors or feedback from their peers and encourage them to use dictionaries and thesauruses to expand their vocabulary. To improve learners' spelling, learners are urged to practice spelling in context through dictation exercises and written assignments. The importance of lexical accuracy in the business context highlights the need for effective language teaching strategies that address learners' specific needs. Additionally, technology can also play a role in improving learners' lexical accuracy. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs can provide learners with opportunities to practice using language in context and receive feedback on their errors (Chapelle, 2009). These programs can be particularly effective in addressing learners' specific needs, as they can be tailored to learners' proficiency levels and learning styles.

B. Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 50 participants. Second, the study focused solely on lexical errors and did not examine other aspects of language proficiency. Third, the study was limited to university students of Business English at Ibn Zohr University. Finally, the study only used James' (1998) taxonomy of lexical errors to classify errors. Future research could consider using other taxonomies or developing a new taxonomy to classify lexical errors in a more comprehensive and nuanced way like that of Ringbom.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to investigate the types and frequency of lexical errors made by university students of Business English in their writing and spoken production. The study utilized James' (1998) taxonomy of lexical errors and collected data from a sample of 50 Business English learners through a combination of written and spoken tasks. The results showed that the most common types of errors were Distortion, misformation, and confusion of Sense relation. The findings of the present study have important implications for Business English language teaching, specifically the need for explicit instruction on the jargon of Business, word choice, and spelling. The literature on Business English language teaching supports the importance of explicit instruction on lexical items, feedback on errors, and the use of technology as effective strategies for improving learners' lexical accuracy. Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that more attention should be paid to written production in Business English language teaching, as learners appear to struggle more with written production than with spoken production.

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