LEXICAL SEMANTIC ERRORS IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

In language teaching and learning, the correct use of vocabulary in the target language is as important as the language's grammar. This study investigates lexical semantic errors in the academic writing of 4th-year undergraduate students at the National University of Lesotho. Using the random sampling method, ten Action Research reports were selected. Errors were identified and analyzed using Hemchua and Schmitt's (2006) classification. Findings in the study indicate that errors resulting from the confusion of sense relations were most frequent, followed by errors in collocation and translation errors. The study recommends that teaching communication skills courses offered at the year 1 level should include explicit vocabulary teaching to minimize semantic errors, which, as is argued, result in incomprehensible texts.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Lexical Semantic Errors, Text Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Success at university is, to a large extent, determined by students' mastery of writing skills. This is because it is through writing that students can demonstrate that they comprehend what they gathered from listening to lectures and other academic talks and reading different texts and can express the information logically. Therefore, a successful text submitted for assessment is expected to have relevant content and should not be marred by errors. However, students' written texts have been observed to contain different errors. To understand the causes of students' errors, Error Analysis, a theory proposed by Corder (1967), has been applied. Corder (1967) makes a distinction between errors and mistakes. Explains that mistakes are performance-related in that a learner knows the rules of the target language, but during the performance, he/she can deviate from those rules. This explanation suggests that he/she can easily recognize and correct mistakes. This is why Owu-Ewie and Williams (2017:464) refer to them as a "slip of a pe." On the contrary, errors reflect a learner's lack of competence in the target language as he/she makes systematic errors and cannot easily correct them. The Error Analysis approach demonstrates that errors in L2 are due to an array of complex factors, including L1 interference. It can therefore be used to analyze any type of error.

Many studies have analyzed and categorized student writing errors in different countries. These studies aimed to determine the cases and the frequency of these errors. For example, Ander and Yildirim (2010) analyzed lexical errors of EFL students at Anadolu

University School of Foreign Languages. e following categories of errors were observed in the students' compositions: errors of wrong word choice, literal translation, errors of omission or incompletion, errors of misspelling, errors of redundancy, errors of collocation, and errors of word formation. Muchemwa (2015) also studied students' errors at Solusi University in Zimbabwe and observed errors in word inflection, punctuation, incomplete sentence, subject-verb agreement, and word order. Orthographic errors are spelling errors stemming from students writing words as they sound, overgeneralizing the rules, and interference with the mother tongue. As regards semantic errors, they mostly used the wrong words. That is, they would write one thing while they meant another thing. Another study was conducted by Afrin (2016). It focused on language problems in the writing of Stamford University Bangladesh undergraduate students. The errors are mostly similar to those inMuchemwa's (2015) study. For example, there were fragments, subject verb agreement, punctuation, and spelling errors. Her errors concerned organizational problems such as ineffective paragraphing. As regards semantic errors, it was observed that students made errors in word choice.

From the foregoing review, it can be observed that students struggle with different aspects as they write in a second or foreign language. Although it is important to note that all errors impact negatively on the student's grades, it can be argued that lexical errors, particularly those involving word meanings, are the most serious, as inappropriate choices can result in texts that are difficult to comprehend, even if written in well-constructed sentences. Indeed, Khalil (1985:346) rightly points out that semantic errors affect text intelligibility, and even native speakers may find them difficult to interpret.

Below we highlight some recent studies that focussed on lexical errors (formal and semantic), but for our research purposes, we present only findings related to semantic mistakes (i.e., those that involve meaning). Shalaby et al. (2009) examined lexical (formal and semantic) errors in 96 writing samples of female Saudi students enrolled in a prep-year program at a university in Saudi Arabia. Findings indicate that there are 434 semantic errors (60.45% of the total errors). The most frequent error category was a confusion of sense relations, followed by collocation and stylistic errors, respectively. Another study was conducted by Mutlu (2016), who conducted a study analyzing 16 Turkish-speaking university students' essays. Findings on semantic errors reveal that confusion of sense relations, mainly involving the use of near-synonyms, was the most frequent category, accounting for 50% of all errors. These were followed by errors in preposition partners and semantic word selection at 24 and 22%, respectively. The other errors were quite infrequent, making a combined count of 6%. Jassim (2016) analyzed 94 paragraphs written by their year students in the Department of English at an Iraqi university. The researcher observed a total of 434 semantic errors made of 286 sense relation errors, 87 collocation errors, and 61 stylistic errors. The most frequent errors concerned sense relations, accounting for 65.89 % of total errors. These were followed by collocation and stylistic errors at 20 and 14%, respectively. Another study relevant to this research was conducted by Owu-Ewie and Williams (2017). The analysis of 150 senior high school students' essays revealed that grammatical errors such as articles, tense, prepositions, and number constituted 61%, while lexical (semantic) errors constituted 39%. They observed that most errors at the lexical level

were due to homophone problems. A recent study was carried out by Saud (2018). The researcher investigated errors made by 30 third-year English students at King Khalid University. The study found that semantic errors constituted 14.6% of all errors. Most semantic errors concern confusion about sense relations, particularly near-synonyms. The remaining errors were collocation errors.

This brief literature review shows that the emerging pattern in most studies relates to rankings of the categories of errors where the confusion of sense relations (in particular, near-synonyms) dominates in frequency count. The current study is based in Lesotho, a former British protectorate. Lesotho recognizes Sesotho (dominant L1) and English (L2) as official languages, with English being used as a medium of instruction from Standard 4 up to the university level. All other subjects, except Sesotho, are offered and examined in English. This means that on entering tertiary schooling, students would have received instruction in English for nine years. in the researchers'' experience of teaching at the National University of Lesotho [NUL] for over 20 years, there has always been a concern about the poor writings skills of the university students. This concern emerges despite the university admitting students who have passed the English Language at high school. In addition, all first-year students must take courses in scholarly communication and study skills, as well as remedial grammar. Although the names and codes for these courses have changed over the years, the aim is to enhance students'' language skills appropriate for the university level. It could be expected that students, having received instruction in these courses, would produce error-free texts. However, complaints about students'' weaknesses in writing, even at senior levels, continue to be raised. There is not much research on NUL students' writing errors. Available literature includes Letsoela (2014) on the inappropriate use of transition markers, Letsoela and Ntsane (2015) on spelling errors, and Ekanjume-Ilongo and Morato-Maleke (2020) on different types of errors in students'' essays. Therefore, further research on errors in NUL students' academic writing is needed. The current study fills that gap in the existing literature.

This study thus examines the lexical semantic errors in writing NUL final-year undergraduate studies. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:
1. Identify and categorize the lexical semantic errors
2. Explain the likely causes of the errors
3. Examine the extent to which they affect intelligibility

Hopefully, this study's findings will contribute to the existing knowledge of the semantic errors students commit when writing in English as a second language. Furthermore, upon noticing the types of errors in the students' writing, it is envisaged that lecturers will devise ways of assisting students in avoiding or minimizing them.

METHODS

Design

The current study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Since the overall aim of this research was to examine errors in students' academic writing, the quantitative approach, or more precisely, descriptive statistics, was used to calculate

frequencies and percentages of the errors and their types. After identifying and counting the errors in the student's texts, the possible causes of the errors and how they affect comprehension were considered. This is a qualitative analysis. Combining these two approaches helped to bring about a fuller understanding of the errors committed by the students.

Data

The data for the study were fourth year Bachelor of Education [B.Ed]students' Action Research reports. The reports were submitted as part of the student-teachers' teaching practice assessment. The projects were written by Basotho ESL students who majored in the English Language and would, therefore, be qualified to teach at senior levels in high schools upon completion of their degrees. Ten projects, labeled S1 to S10 to protect the identities of the student writers, were randomly selected. As the research design is partly qualitative and therefore concerned with information richness and not necessarily sample size, the researchers felt that this limited number allowed for an in-depth analysis. In addition, the choice for final year students writing was influenced by the fact that the writers were senior students who had been exposed to different writing tasks in their four years at university. Their writing was expected to be advanced and, to a large extent, free from language errors. The reports were personal accounts and reflections on the student's teaching practice sessions. They would include aspects such as background about the schools they were based at, the topics they taught, challenges they faced, and how those challenges were addressed. Each report was, therefore, unique.

Data Analysis

The researchers made two copies of each report. Each researcher read through each set of reports and identified the errors. The researchers also read each other to ensure that no errors went unnoticed. Thus, each report was independently analyzed by the two researchers. These researchers have experience teaching writing skills at universities. In addition, they offered courses in Introductory Semantics. They, therefore, have equal competence in the analysis of semantic errors. After identification, the errors were categorized using Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) semantic classification, which is itself a modification of James (1998) classification. Although Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) 's complete classification of lexical errors has two major categories, formal lexical errors and semantic lexical errors (p12), the former is outside the scope of this study. Below we reproduce the classification of the semantic error, including explanations and examples as provided by the authors:

Figure 1. Lexical semantic error taxonomy

1 **Confusion of sense relations**
1.1 Using a superonym for a hyponym. A more general term is used where a specific one is needed. Therefore the meaning is underspecified (for example, We have modern equipment in our house).

1.2 Using a hyponym for a superonym. An overly specific term is used (for example, The colonels live in the castle).*

1.3 Using inappropriate co-hyponyms (for example, I think the city has good communication such as a lot of buses).

1.4 Using a wrong near synonym (for example, a regretful criminal or sinner).*

2 **Collocation errors** (word combinations that do not sound natural and correct. Inappropriate collocation may not be absolutely wrong, but rather infelicitous.

2.1 Semantically determined word selection (for example, The city is grown).

2.2 Statistically weighted preferences (for example, An army has suffered big losses).*

2.3 Arbitrary combinations and irreversible binomials (for example, hike-hitch).

2.4 Preposition partners (verb or noun + particular preposition, preposition + noun) (for example, some channels in television, surrounded with nature).

3 **Connotation errors** (for example, There are too other advantages of living in the city)

4 **Stylistic errors**

4.1Verbosity (for example, I informed my girlfriend of the party through the medium of telephone).*

4.2 Underspecification (meaning is not clear, for example, Although cars in the country are lower

Our analysis retained all subcategories relating to sense relations, collocation, and stylistic errors. The fifth subcategory, under sense relations, was drawn from our data and thus added to the classification. The category included cases where students used antonyms of words in place of the words they intended to use. We also introduced two new categories, namely, Translation Errors, for those errors that seemed to be caused by literally translating L1 (Sesotho) expressions to English and 'Othe' to cater to cases where there was no semantic relation between the word used and the one intended or cases where students would just make up words.

Lastly, during the analysis and classification of errors, it was observed that some sentences contained only one error while others contained two or more errors. Therefore, in cases where there were multiple errors in a sentence, these were counted separately. Furthermore, regarding cases where the same student repeatedly made the same error, such an error was measured once. This was done to avoid exaggerating the frequency of the errors. The following figure can summarise the analysis:

Figure 2: Semantic Errors Classification **(**Adapted from Hemchua and Schmitt (2006:12)

Semantic errors
1 Confusion of sense relations
1.1 General term for specific one
1.2 Overly specific term
1.3 Inappropriate co-hyponyms
1.4 Near synonyms
1.5 Antonyms
2 Collocation errors
2.1 Semantic word selection
2.2 Statistically weighted preferences
2.3 Arbitrary combinations
2.4 Preposition partners
3 Stylistic errors
3.1 Verbosity
3.2 Underspecification
4. Translation errors
5.Other
5.1 No relation between the word used and the one intended
5.2 Nonsensical

RESULTS

As indicated earlier, the paper aims to examine the lexical semantic errors NUL students commit. Findings suggest that there were 172 semantic errors distributed among the ten students' research reports. This distribution is presented in table 1 below:

Table 1. Distribution of semantic errors

Errors type	Frequency	Percentage
1. Confusion of sense relations		
General term for specific term	14	8
Hyponym instead of a superordinate term	4	2
Near synonyms	28	16
Homonyms	16	9
Antonym of intended word	1	1
Total	64	37
2. Collocation errors		
Semantic word selection	32	19
Statistically weighted preference	9	5
Arbitrary combinations	4	2
Preposition partners	11	6

Total	56	33
3. Stylistic errors		
Verbosity	11	6
Underspecification	4	2
Total	15	9
4. Translation errors	21	12
Total	21	12
5. Other		
No relation between the word used and the word intended	9	5
Nonsensical	8	5
Total	17	10
Grand total	172	100

As seen from table 1 above, most errors concerning sense relations with more than a third of all occurrences can be seen. This category was followed by collocation with a count of a third of all occurrences. Errors for other types were fairly few as they together constituted slightly over 20 per cent of the occurrences.

DISCUSSION

Categorization of Errors

It has been observed that confusion of sense relations was the most frequent error type. Sense, broadly defined, concerns relationships inside language (Hurford and Heasley 1983:1) in that it is through the knowledge of the correct meaning of a word that speakers establish the relationships that hold the words themselves (Palmer 1981: 29). It therefore, follows that as Reimer (2010:136) rightly explains," knowing an expression's meaning does not simply involve knowing its definition or inherent semantic content. As well as knowing a word's definitional meaning, a competent speaker knows how it relates to other words of the language".

Most errors in sense relations concern near-synonyms. Students thus made errors such as the following:

1. The student-teacher **resumed <assumed>** teaching on the 17th February-2009, in Form D1. **[S10]**
2. ...they responded spontaneously without too **much < many >** grammar and spelling mistakes. **[S5]**

The student used the word resumed instead of assumed in the first example. While the two are similar in that they refer to the taking on of responsibility (in this case, teaching). The student seems not to be aware that *resumed* means *assume* again. For example, a teacher who is reporting on his/her teaching practice experience started the practice on 17th February. Therefore, the word *assumed* should have been used.

In the same way, student 5 seemed not to have internalized the rule that English uses different determiners for countable and uncountable nouns to express abundance. *Much* is

used to express a great quantity, while many are used to express a great number (countable). Since the student was referring to mistakes, *many* were the correct word.

Another frequent error in sense relations concerned the relation of hyponymy. Students seemed to have problems concerning when to use a superordinate term or a hyponym. The following examples illustrate:

3. During the post-observation **conference<meeting >**, the student teacher and the cooperating teacher decided that all new words should be explained. **[S1]**
4. English is a very **ambiguous course<subject >**. [**S5**]

In example 3, the general term *meeting* was appropriate. This is because, while conference and meeting share the meaning of gathering people, a conference is used for a large official gathering, not an encounter between the student-teacher and the cooperating teacher, for instance. In example 4, the student used *course* in reference to English, which was his/her major subject. From a single subject, several courses can be derived.

Another error in sense relations involved homonymy, particularly homophones (words that sound identical but are written differently). Examples in the students' texts include:

5. All these made students **loose<lose >** all hope they had of passing…**[S7]**
6. Students **turned<tend >** not to care. **[S9]**
7. She came **ones< once >** or twice when she had a little time to spare. **[S5]**

The error with the least frequency, and one which was not identified in previous studies, involved a case where one student used an antonym of the word he/she intended to use. The student wrote:

8. *It is also seen that **leniency** of teachers can harm the operation of the teaching and learning activities and so it is important to loosen up but be done with caution. **[S2]**

A close reading of the sentence suggests that the student's intended message was that teachers need to be a little lenient when they deal with students, as their strictness can negatively affect the process of teaching and learning. It could therefore be concluded that the student did not know the meaning of *leniency.* Although this was an isolated case, it is worrying that an aspiring English teacher might not know the meanings of such a common word.

Collocation was the second most frequent category of semantic errors, with counts of 33%. Collocation is largely determined by meaning because it is based on the understanding that part of the knowledge of the meaning of a word involves knowledge of words with which it co-occurs. Collocation errors concerned word selection and statistically weighted preferences, as illustrated below:

9. The study has been **done <conducted>** by one student teacher **autonomously <independently >** at Holy Cross High School…**[S5]**
10. It improves the listening and **asking<questioning >** skills of learners. **[S9]**

11. The **procedures< steps >** in constructing a paragraph should be followed. **[S10]**

Another type of error in collocation concerned preposition partners. In this category, it was observed that students used inappropriate prepositions, omitted prepositions where they were not required; or used two prepositions because they could not decide which one was more appropriate. The following examples illustrate these types of errors:

12. The teacher was also familiar **to<with >** employing the method when teaching. **[S4]**

13. Also it has been observed that the students are fully reliant **< on >** the teacher. **[S1]**

14. In the revision session, the student-teacher **put up <** omit ***up >*** emphasis on the error of subject-verb agreement.... **[S3]**

15. An action research also equips me as the practising teacher with an understanding **of about<**omit ***about >*** events and things...**[S9]**

The next category of errors involved stylistic errors which concerned redundancy, underspecification and translation. With regards to redundancy, it was observed that students would use two words with the same meaning while only one would have been sufficient. These words were joined with *and,* suggesting that the students considered them not to mean the same thing. The following examples illustrate:

16. This study has shown that the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching aids relies much on the **commitment and dedication** of the teacher. **[S2]**

17. The main **reason and purpose** for using these groups of people was finding views, relationships, and concerns with regard to...**[S9]**

It is not clear what the students hoped to achieve by using two words that mean the same thing, but if we consider the use of the conjunction, this might suggest that the students were not aware that they had chosen words that meant the same thing and this had no effect on the meaning of the text. Another stylistic error was underspecification; students simply used vague terms instead of precise ones to communicate their intended meaning. They would, for instance, write:

18. The purpose of a paragraph is to separate ideas, and a new paragraph means a new idea is **being talked about<introduced >**. **[S8]**

19. This research will help other student teachers on how to teach paragraphs so that learners write very **wonderful<effective >** paragraphs. **[S3]**

There were also translation errors where students would translate from their L1 (Sesotho) into English. Some of the translations did not render the sentences incomprehensible, as illustrated in the following sentence:

20. When they got to class, the cooperating teacher introduced the student teacher to the students and told them that the student teacher would take over as their teacher starting **from the week to come <following week >**. **[S1]**

The reader could easily guess that the student meant *the following week* when he/she used the phrase *from* the *week to come*. Although errors such as this"may not significantly confuse readers in relation to communicative meaning, they do create a bad impressio" (Hemchua and Schmitt 2006:16). Translations could, however, be interpreted only by the reader who understands the writers' native language. The following examples illustrate:

21. Learners can be passive because they hate the teacher or they are bored with subject/topic or they are depressed or even **taken off <very impressed >** by the previous teacher or a lesson. **[S2]**

22. Most of the slow learners are less attentive in class, being more concerned with the social problems **surrounding< affecting >** them. **[S4]**

In the first example, the writer translates the Sesotho slang expression nkeh' which means to be impressed/captivated. The second example is a Sesotho translation of a metaphor of problems as enemies which can surround a person.

The last category, which we labelled'Othe', included cases where it was impossible to categorize the errors because the sentences were simply incomprehensible. As seen in the following examples, the sentences do not make sense:

23. Teaching methods are essential to encourage the mastery of bodies of knowledge, and motivation for learning is **supplied** by inspiration from the teacher …..**[S7]**

24. After employing several teaching techniques to teach English in form B3, the student teacher **employed** several problems in which students could not retain what they have been taught. **[S10]**

Other examples involved cases where there was no relation between the words used and what seemed to be the intended meaning, as determined by the context of use. Examples include:

25. I feel that I **view< prefer >** planning and assessment instead of a traditional lecturing style of teaching. **[S9]**

26. Basing myself on self-evaluation andlearners' responses of the questions which were asked to them, I **became<came up >** with the following ideas. **[S3]**

In summary, it has been observed that NUL students made errors mostly with sense relations and collocation. These findings are consistent with other studies where these categories were the most frequent (see, for instance, Shalaby et al 2009, Mutlu 2016, Jassim 2016 and Saud 2018).

Likely Causes of the Errors

Having identified the types of errors students make, it is also important to consider why such errors occur. Firstly, as has been observed that most errors concerned confusion of sense relations where students would confuse words that are somehow similar in meaning, it can be assumed that the students, being English L2 speakers, might not have reached the optimal vocabulary competence to recognize that words may be related in

meaning without necessarily being synonymous or interchangeable in all contexts of use (see Palmer (1981). Looking at the data, it can be concluded that the fact that the majority of sense relation errors concerned near-synonyms suggests that students might not be aware that synonyms differ in several ways. The same argument about students' insufficient competence with regard to word associations can be maintained about errors involving collocation and stylistic choices. His deficiency inhibits students from using precise terms or correct prepositions, as has been seen in the previous section.

Another cause of the errors is the students' L1 (Sesotho) interference. Studies that have dealt with L2 writing have noted that many errors are a result of L1 interference. With grammar, for example, learners apply the rules of their L1 to construct sentences in the target language. Ekanjume-Ilongo and Morato-Maleke (2020), for instance, observed that NULstudent' texts had English phrases/sentences which were translated from their mother tongue Sesotho.

Lastly, it has been noted that the students' carelessness caused some errors. Looking at examples 5-7, it is difficult to conclude that fourth-year English majors do not know the difference between those homonyms. Looking at these errors, especially when final-year English Language majors make them, they may be a result of students' carelessness and failure to proofread their work. It could be argued that they seem to be mistakes and not errors, but if these are errors where students do not know the difference between *loose* and *loss, tend* and *turned*, *once* and *ones*, for example, then there is even more reason for worry as these are the people who are being trained to teach at high schools. It should be noted that in a study of error analysis of second-year English language and linguistics students' essays, there were no errors in the use of homophones. It is quite surprising to find them in the writing of senior students majoring in English language and linguistics. One would have expected to find errors in the use of homonyms in the writing of second-year students and none, if not less, in final-year students writing.

Effect on Text Comprehension

Concerning the effect of these errors on text comprehension, it is realized that most of the errors do not affect text comprehension. This can be seen in confusion of sense relations and collocation errors; the reader can easily and correctly interpret the intended meaning (see examples 2, 3, and 5, for instance). With stylistic errors, however, particularly the errors of underspecification, the lecturer, who is the primary reader and is also testing the students understanding of content, may be left with doubts on whether the student's understanding is adequate. For example, in example 19, it can be argued that while the lecturer would know that ' wonderfu' paragraph is an effective paragraph in terms of structure and content, it will not be clear to him/her if this is what the student means by using the word 'wonderfu' as the term is just too vague.

It can also be argued that the errors most likely to affect text comprehension are L1 interference errors, especially to readers who do not share an L1 with the student writers. Without knowing the students' L1, expressions such as those in examples 21 and 22 simply render the sentences incomprehensible or nonsensical in the same way as those in examples 25, and 26 hamper communication.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is evident that while fourth-year students, particularly English majors, are expected to produce error-free texts, this is not the case with NUL students. The results indicate that rigorous teaching must be employed in delivering compulsory first-year academic communication and study skills and remedial grammar courses to set a solid foundation for these students. Teaching materials should be designed to address these kinds of cases; students should not only be taught basic grammar, but lexical and semantic knowledge should be included in the curriculum. As pointed out earlier, these errors can lead to text misunderstanding.

It is hoped that the results obtained in this study will inform the Communication and Study Skills Unit, which is tasked to equip students with effective study, academic reading, and writing skills. It is also hoped to provide appropriate input for university learning that deals with the problems that students face so that these problems may be addressed more rigorously. Verhallen and Schoonen (1993) rightly point out that analyzing errors in students' writing could be an invaluable source of information for lecturers. It can reveal problem areas and thus help the lecturers design appropriate remedial courses for students. In this regard, it is recommended that the syllabus should include explicit teaching of vocabulary to minimize errors such as the ones observed in this study. Furthermore, as the findings suggest

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