Lexical Errors and Accuracy in Foreign Language Writing

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María Pilar Agustín Llach

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List of Abbreviations

CPH	Critical period hypothesis
EA	Error analysis
EAP	*English for Academic Purposes*
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language
FL	Foreign language
IL	Interlanguage
L1	Mother tongue
L2	Second/foreign/target language
NL	Native language
SLA	Second language acquisition
T1	Testing time 1 in fourth grade
T2	Testing time 2 in sixth grade
TL	Target language

Introduction: An Outline

The past decades have seen a noteworthy increase in research about vocabulary and vocabulary-related issues.* The observation that vocabulary is central to language development has promoted this increase in research studies in the lexical field. Several reasons account for this (James, 1998: 143–144). Firstly, the boundaries between grammar and lexis are now seen as more blurred than assumed. Lexis is inextricably intertwined with the other linguistic systems. The study of language from various perspectives, phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics, has the word as its central and definitional element (cf. Singleton, 2000: Chap. 1). Secondly, learners consider vocabulary as the most important aspect of language, thus equating language learning with vocabulary learning. We agree in this sense with Singleton (2000: 12) that 'language is popularly conceived in terms of words'. In addition, lexical errors have been found to be the most numerous in many different research studies. Furthermore, they have been judged as the most serious category of errors. Finally, we have to highlight the functional role of vocabulary as a crucial aspect in communication and language assessment, especially in writing assessment. If knowledge of vocabulary is at hand, then communication is possible even though no grammar knowledge exists. It then becomes significant for language teaching and learning.

Lexical errors have also occupied researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) and teaching in recent years. In all, research on lexical errors as the central issue is not very abundant as compared with research on general vocabulary matters. Especially scarce are studies with primary school graders. Longitudinal studies on the development of the lexicon examined through the light of lexical errors are also almost non-existent. Moreover, most studies that deal with lexical errors have mainly addressed the description and classification of these lexical errors

* This study is part of the research projects: FFI2010-19334, BFF2003-04009-C02-02 and HUM2006-09775-C02-02.

and the field is in need of studies that explore the role of lexical errors in writing assessment, lexical knowledge and L2 vocabulary acquisition.

In most teaching situations a frequent appearance of errors is considered as a failure either in the process of learning or in the process of teaching. However, focusing on errors can provide very telling and informative insights regarding the process of SLA. Finding out the what, why and when of lexical errors can be very valuable and useful in determining how to remedy them and get a successful performance (Ellis, 1997b: 15). More specifically, lexical errors can serve to indicate L2 writing ability and vocabulary knowledge. The need to establish objective and reliable measures and criteria to evaluate the writing competence of learners in the L2 calls for the examination of the role of lexical errors in this issue.

Ignorance or imperfect knowledge of lexical items leads to errors. The notion of error has changed from a negative view to a positive one as an inevitable phenomenon in the process of SLA. It helps us to understand how language acquisition proceeds and where it does not proceed smoothly, what stages it goes through, what processes are at stake, and in particular, at which moment of acquisition the learner is. Errors put forward any possible methodological shortcoming and any problematic learning area, so that EA should precede any pedagogical design. Furthermore, lexical errors shed light on the structure of the L2 lexicon, just as L1 errors are indicative of the properties of the L1 lexical store (Laufer, 1991a: 321). Finally, learners can learn from their errors by spotting problematic L2 areas where they need more practice.

There is enough evidence to assume lexical errors to be important predictors of writing quality, relevant measures of lexical knowledge and crucial insights into the vocabulary acquisition process. Writing is a very difficult skill for any language user, particularly for non-native learners; so lexical errors are numerous. Evaluation of the writing process and written products of learners is an arduous task, and objective measures of writing quality are needed that facilitate and quicken this writing evaluation. Vocabulary has proven to be crucial in establishing writing quality. Likewise, lexical errors have been shown to be important composition assessment criteria and quality predictors. The quality of interlanguage performance is generally assessed in terms of communicability, so that if an utterance communicates well, its quality will be assessed positively. Considering this, the more lexical errors a text displays, the less is its communicability and, therefore, the lower is its quality (Engber, 1995).

Hence, this book focuses primarily on lexical error production of young Spanish learners over two years from fourth to sixth grade. It aims at exploring the development of the participants' written production and vocabulary knowledge through the observation of lexical errors. By examining the mechanisms that explain lexical errors we can start discovering the processes that are activated in lexical acquisition.

Considering the methodology of analysis and the types of objectives pursued by the investigation, the study presented in this book is framed into EA and the field of lexical SLA. The main merit of our research concerns the correlation between lexical error and essay score, which, if finally found, will provide with objective criteria for evaluation and clues about what to concentrate teaching on. For learners the findings are important since they could be shown what they have to pay more attention to when writing.

This investigation claims novelty for its approach to the study of lexical acquisition from lexical errors. Moreover, this study is original and novel, because although it is framed within the traditional EA methodology, its perspective is new. This study uses EA and lexical errors as an instrument to assess, valuate and measure other language constructs such as writing ability and receptive vocabulary knowledge.

This book is divided into two main parts. The first part provides the theoretical background to the second, which is an original empirical study. Chapter 1 looks at the process of L2 vocabulary acquisition, and Chapter 2 examines some of the variables which affect lexical (error) production, concentrating basically on proficiency level and vocabulary size. In Chapter 3, the relationship between writing assessment and vocabulary is examined. Chapter 4 gives a critical review of previous research on lexical errors. The second part of the book reports on an original study, which relates lexical errors, writing assessment and receptive word knowledge. Individual chapters are devoted to explaining the method, the changes in lexical error production over time, the role of lexical errors in writing quality and their relationship with receptive vocabulary size. Finally, implications for practice, limitations and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Part 1

Lexical Competence and Lexical Errors