Lexico-Semantic Relations Errors in Senior Secondary School Students' Writing

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the lexico-semantic relation errors in ESL writing. The data was taken from 200 SSS students' letter texts in 10 secondary schools randomly selected from two states in the South-Western Nigeria, the lexico-semantic errors were traced to four linguistic sources: collocation, generalisation, similarity, and duplication. From these seven sub-categories of errors were identified. The findings reveal that collocation errors are predominant, accounting for 56.5% of the total lexico-semantic errors. The reason for this may be traced to improper mastery of lexical sense relations. This aspect of lexical studies is often neglected in ESL classroom. As a result, the writers cannot define boundaries that separate lexical items. The study concludes that teachers should teach lexical sense relations and should emphasize collocations, especially the types that learners have difficulties in learning as observed in the writing. Pupils should also be encouraged to read a lot of literature written in English, since collocations are better acquired through reading.

Keywords: English, writing errors, lexical studies

INTRODUCTION

Language use is a social activity and the study of actual instances of language that have been used, or being used by speakers and writers is the concern of modern linguists. Bringing together linguistic, sociological, and psychological insights over the years, socio-linguists, pragmatists, discourse analysts and text linguists have been able to show how language relates to the social context of its use and how meanings are made in everyday linguistic interactions. (Fishman, 1971; Austin, 1962; Halliday and Hasan, 1985; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

Writing, like any other form of discourse is a social activity. The spatial distance between a writer and his reader places on the former certain demands, one of which is explicitness, which may be achieved through appropriate choice of words and their relations. I writing, there is no visual or aural contact, and thus, no possibility of immediate feedback (Eggins, 1994: 53ff). Writers make distinct and conscious choices of lexico-grammatical items that best express the meaning they are trying to convey from the system of networks that constitute language. These are put together to form a single integrated structure that is regarded as a text (Halliday and Hasan, 1985; Bloor and Bloor, 1995).

Sequencing words and structure in texts in such a way that they are semantically and syntactically appropriate has been a potential source of problem for English as Second Language (ESL) pupils. The purpose of this paper is to determine cohesion in ESL student's writing and how this is achieved through lexico-semantic relations. By lexico-semantic relation, we mean how meanings are realised in texts through the lexical choices. In writing, we do not interact to exchange words or sentences, but to make meanings, to make sense of the world to each other. (Eggins, 1994:11).

1. THE PROCEDURE

The data for this study consisted of letter texts of 200 Senior Secondary School students, randomly selected using simple randomisation sampling process. 10 Senior Secondary Schools in Osun and Ondo States in South Western Nigeria were selected for the purpose.

The subjects (SSS III) students were chosen because of their exposure to English Language in terms of continuous writing. They also have exposure to the language as the medium of instruction and a school subject. Their ages range between 15 and 20 years. The subjects were asked to attempt the following question: Write a letter to your friend in another school telling him or her about your new school.

The content of this letter is the type the students are familiar with, being an informal letter, which they write from time to time to friends even outside the classroom setting. The experience the pupils were asked to share is one common to all of them.

The letters were written by the subjects in their classrooms under the supervision of their teachers and this researcher. They were limited to four hundred words and give 40 minutes to complete the exercise.

2. DATA ANALYSIS

The letter texts were read through with the aim of identifying the lexico-semantic deviants in them. The basis for establishing the deviants was by simple contrast with the Standard English of educated speakers.

In order that meaningful comments could be made on the data, the devised categories for the deviants on the basis of the linguistic factor leading to them. All the deviations were traced to four linguistic sources: collocation, generalisation, similarity, and duplication. These are further subdivided into seven lexico-semantic relation deviants. Below is a diagram representing the categories.

LEXICO-SEMANTIC RELATION PROBLEMS

COLLOCATION		GENERALISATION	SIMILARITY		DUPLICATION	
Error of Collocation of Prepositions	Error of Probable Collocations	Error of Generalization	Meaning Similarity Error	Sound Similarity Error	Meaning Duplication Error	Word Duplication Error
ECP	EPC	EOG	MSE	SSE	MDE	WDE

3. RESULTS

A total of 85 lexico-semantic errors were identified in the data. The tabulations below highlight the number of occurrences of each of the error category and their overall percentages.

Table 1. Collocation Errors

ERROR TYPE	OCCURRENCE	PERCENTAGE
ECP	30	35.3
EPC	18	21.2
TOTAL	48	56.6

Table 2. Generalization Errors

ERROR TYPE	OCCURRENCE	PERCENTAGE
EOG	3	3.5
TOTAL	3	3.5

Table 3. Similarity Errors

ERROR TYPE	OCCURRENCE	PERCENTAGE
MSE	16	18.8
SSE	7	8.2
TOTAL	23	27.0

Table 4. Duplication Errors

ERROR TYPE	OCCURRENCE	PERCENTAGE
MDE	6	7.0
WDE	5	5.9
TOTAL	11	12.9

The tables above reveal that Collocation Errors are predominant in the data, they account for 56.5% of the total Lexico-semantic Relation Errors. Next to Collocation Errors are Similarity Errors that account for 27.0% of the errors. The other categories of errors: Duplication and Generalization Errors account for 12.9% and 3.5% of the total deviations respectively.

4. DISCUSSION

(a) COLLOCATION OF PREPOSITIONS

Nouns and verbs in English usually collocate with some particular prepositions and the knowledge of such nouns and verbs is incomplete without knowing which prepositions usually accompany them. Violations of such collocations, even where intelligibility is not interfered with marks the usage as non-standard (Weinrich, 1982:63). Some texts with this kind of deviation are below: (The deviant usage is underlined.)

> ECP 1: We end our school <u>in</u> 2.50 p.m.
> ECP 2: The school was founded <u>in</u> January, 1994.

The extracts above show improper mastery of prepositions that collocate with the expression of time in English. The preposition *at* is used for precise timing, for example, *at 2.50 p.m.* The use of *in* and *on* in relation to time and date is the source of the error in ECP 2. *On* is used when the day of the week or month is specified, e.g., *on January 1994*. When the year alone is specified, *in* is appropriate, e.g. *in 1994*.

(b) PROBABLE COLLOCATIONS

This error has to do with the breaking of mutual expectancies that hold between words. It is not enough to know that certain words collocate, the context of the use of such words is equally important. Some examples of violation of such expectancies are:

> EPC 1: If possible <u>post</u> me a <u>mail</u>
> EPC 2: Immediately we hear the <u>rang</u> of the <u>bell</u>…

It is evident from the extracts above that the writers know that *post* and *mail* and *rang* and *bell* collocate, their usage here however is wrong. *Mail* means "the postal system directed and worked by the government" according to *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English*. The word is uncountable but sometimes plural with singular meaning. In the latter sense, it means letters and anything sent or received by post, e.g. "the mails arrived early today". In English, *mail* and *post* do not collocate in the sense the writer used the word in the extract. *Rang*, the past form of the verb ring refers to the act of causing a bell to sound

and not the sound itself as the writer used it above. The use of word *hear* indicates that the writer intends to refer to the sound and not the act.

(c) MEANING SIMILARITY
The data reveals that the writers are not always aware that it is not in all contexts that words that are similar in meaning can be interchanged. Partial synonymy is sometimes responsible for the inappropriate choice of lexical items, for example,

MSE 1: My spoken English is gradually <u>increasing</u>
MSE 2: My school was <u>created</u> in 1994

The word increasing is used in relation to quantity as opposed to quantity. One's English cannot increase because evaluation of a phenomenon such as Spoken English in the sense the writer is doing it cannot be done in terms of number but rather in terms of the quality. However, one's vocabulary stock can be measured in terms of the number.

Verbs like create begin, found, and start, have the same connotation: the idea of "setting out". The contexts in which they are used, however, will determine their specific meanings. Schools can only be founded (start building) and not created as the writer of MSE 2 puts it.

(d) SOUND SIMILARITY
Errors in this category are very easily identified since they deal with spelling. There are two different manifestations of SSE in the data. The first one shows that the writers were confused on the use of certain homophonous words, e.g.

SSE 1: I saw the <u>principle</u> of the school
SSE 2: They will give them <u>prices</u> for good performance

The other case is one in which the words used are not necessarily the homophones of the intended ones, but they still sound similar to the writers, perhaps owing to their inaccurate pronunciation or lack of familiarity with the words, e.g.

SSE 3: The teacher will <u>polish</u> the students
SSE 4: So many people in my <u>formal</u> school were there

A conclusion one may draw from this is that sometimes the writers write what they think they hear (which are wrong in these cases) even when they know the meaning they are trying to convey.

(e) MEANING DUPLICATION
There are sometimes two or more acceptable lexical items available to convey a meaning. The data reveals that the writers sometimes play it safe by inserting the

two alternatives. They may be said to be exhibiting "lexical indecision", i.e. inability to decide on the appropriate word from some alternatives. They therefore insert both, leaving the burden of choice to the reader. The resultant redundancy of meaning duplication renders a text ineffective. Below are some examples of MDE

> WDE 1: <u>Now</u> that I am <u>now</u> a master of these three calculations.
> WDE 2: The teachers are <u>more</u> interested in some students <u>more</u> than others.

The words now and more are appropriate in either of the positions they are put in the texts. The most probable reason for word duplication is absent-mindedness.

(f) GENERALISATION
Owing to improper learning, some of the writers studied are more comfortable using general terms than specific. This may be due to their limited knowledge of the specific forms required for explicitness. Examples of texts exhibiting EOG are below:

> EOG 1: They use *<u>manchine</u> to cut the grass
EOG 2: I promised that as a <u>member</u> of the school, I too will participate in them

The word machine, which the writer above intended to use is a general term used to cover "any mechanical device with parts working together to apply power" LDCE. Likewise, member simply means a person or thing that belongs to or part of a group. Words that subsume a wide variety of items like these should be avoided where the specific items are more appropriate.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings in this study show that the writers have the problem of defining the semantic boundaries that separate lexical items. As a result of this, they failed to observe the rule of restrictions on the co-occurrence of lexical items.

The implication of this is that ESL learners will find it difficult to produce coherent and meaningful texts as long as their learning of these lexical relations is imperfect. A clearer understanding of sense relations can provide greater precision in guiding students toward meaning and in helping them to define boundaries that separate lexical items.

Teachers should also sensitize their pupils to the difficulties involved in collocation by teaching types of collocations with which learners have the greatest difficulties. The areas of difficulties can be observed in their writing. Teachers should also encourage their pupils to read a lot of literature written in English, since collocations are better acquired through reading, and chances that

ESL learners cannot combine words correctly without having previously read them are very high.

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APPENDIX

SOME LEXICO-SEMANTIC ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN TEXTS OF ESL LEARNERS

I.   COLLOCATION ERRORS
(a)   Error of Collocation of Prepositions (ECP)
ECP 1: We end our school in 2.50 p.m.
ECP 2: The school was founded in January,1994
ECP 3: We came second for the reading competition
ECP 4: I will be looking forward in seeing you
ECP 5: I took my chair to the classroom to learning
ECP 5: I was also surprised of the behaviour of the people in the school

(b)   Error of Probable Collocation (EPC)
EPC 1: If possible post me a mail
EPC 2: Immediately we hear the rang of the bell…
EPC 3: The rate they are using to teach us is very high
EPC 4: I think you are sitting tight for your exam

II.   GENERALISATION
EOG 1: They use *<u>manchine</u> to cut the grass
EOG 2: I promised that as a <u>member</u> of the school, I too will participate in them
EOG 3: Our students also have some <u>area</u> which are still bad

III.   SIMILARITY
(a)   Meaning Similarity Errors
MSE 1: My spoken English is gradually <u>increasing</u>
MSE 2: After 8.00 a.m. we <u>resume</u> our classes
MSE 3: My school was <u>created</u> in 1994
MSE 4: The school <u>possess</u> many students
MSE 5: SS 1 to 3 were <u>shared</u> into classes
MSE 6: We also have shops where food and snacks are <u>present</u>
MSE 7: We <u>collected</u> the Ondo Local Government cup twice
MSE 8: I went to the bank to pay my <u>money</u>, which is 40 Naira

(b)   Sound Similarity Errors
SSE 1: I saw the <u>principle</u> of the school
SSE 2: They will give them <u>prices</u> for good performance
SSE 3: I will like to remind you of my <u>bathday</u>
SSE 4: We also have security officers <u>guiding</u> us.
SSE 5: Hope the teachers <u>their</u> are not lazy and wicked
SSE 6: At <u>list</u> we have more than 39 teachers

IV.   DUPLICATION
(a)   Meaning Duplication Errors
LDE 1: <u>Now</u> I am <u>now</u> a master in these calculations
LDE 2: Teachers are <u>more</u> interested in some students <u>more</u> than others
LDE 3: <u>After</u> the assembly <u>after</u> 8.00 a.m.
LDE 4: The <u>result</u> of last year <u>result</u>, I mean WAEC, everybody pass
LDE 5: She <u>also</u> asked us about my own <u>also</u>

(b)   Meaning Duplication Error
MDE 1: My school is a <u>mixed school of boys and girls</u>
MDE 2: My school have <u>up to</u> a population of <u>about</u> 1000
MDE 3: I was <u>very so</u> happy when I arrived there
MDE 4: My school has a <u>big large</u> football field