

Semantic Aberrations in the Writings of EFL Students

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to trace possible patterns of meaning deficiency in the writings of Iranian EFL students and to compare the proportion of such deficiencies across two different writing tasks: descriptive and narrative. A comparison of students' ability to recognize such deficiencies and their actual performance on the writing tasks was also made. As a result, eleven groups of such deficiencies were recognized in the data. It was also found that learners had more difficulty writing the narrative tasks and that their recognition of such deficiencies was better than their writing performance.

Key Words: Semantic aberration, EFL writing, writing tasks, narrative writing, descriptive writing

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring a native-like or near native proficiency has always been considered ideal for a language learner and has been the stated goal of language courses. Considering the fact that most learners never achieve that level of proficiency in a foreign language, researchers and practitioners gradually became interested in investigating foreign language learners' problems in the production of the foreign language.

From the two productive skills, speaking and writing, the first has received much attention and has been the focus of many language studies since most learners are primarily interested in learning to speak. Writing – the second productive mode of the language – has often been slightly attended to because it has often been considered of secondary importance in language learning (Reichelt, 2001). Also, in the research studies conducted so far, most attention has been paid to the syntactic problems found in students' writings to provide suggestions for increasing the quality of their written production in

terms of its syntactic accuracy. (Reichelt, 2001)

However, when appropriacy is considered, other factors are at work. From a native speaker's point of view, the writing performance of a learner may seem unnatural though it may be syntactically well written. There may be grammatically correct sentences that still seem odd, strange, and even funny. The so-called sentences may be deviant regarding the other two aspects of language: semantic and pragmatic. Zughoul (1991) believes that these areas have not received as much attention as the other components of IL (phonology and syntax).

Considering the semantic deviations, it seems that learners at all levels of language proficiency suffer from such deficiency in writing but when it comes to recognizing such errors in context, they seem to have less problems. The number of errors that students make in production is higher than in recognition (Afifi & Alaha, 2000). Also, comparing the quality of learners' performance across different tasks has been of interest in IL studies based on the assumption that different language tasks place different cognitive demands on the learners. As Sajjadi and Tahririan (1992) report, second language learners vary in their production when elicited through different tasks. Robinson (2001) supports the idea in that such difference is because of demands of task structure and design.

Research hypotheses

This study was therefore an attempt to investigate and test the following hypotheses:

1. *Language transfer is not the major source of semantic errors.*
2. *The proportion of semantic errors is not different across different writing tasks.*
3. *There is no significant difference between learners' semantic awareness and their performance on the writing tasks.*

Literature review

Within the field of foreign language writing, most of the studies have looked for possible relationships between different instructional practices and the learner's written product. These practices include explicit grammar instruction, feedback, task type, computer use,

classroom activities, and process writing.

The most popular factor seems to have been the effect of explicit grammar instruction on students' writing. Cooper and Morain (1980), Cooper (1981), Manley and Calk (1997), and Frantzen (1995) have reported varying results regarding improvement in writing accuracy. Except Frantzen, the three other studies reported positive results in the syntactic complexity of students' writing.

A second group of studies have investigated feedback in terms of its type, explicitness, and authority. Regarding the type of feedback, there are cases for and against grammar correction. For example, while Truscott (1996) is against grammar correction in L2 writing classes, Ferris (1999) refers to his thesis as premature and overly strong. Also, a number of studies have considered feedback in terms of its focus on the content or form of writing. The results of such studies as Kepner (1991), Lalande (1982), Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2001), and Semke (1982, 1984) have reported the effectiveness of feedback on the content of writing performances and not as much on their linguistic accuracy. In general, the results have suggested that learners may benefit from receiving comments regarding the content of their essays and that marking of errors may have no positive effect on students' writing performance. Research on the degree of explicitness of feedback has pointed out that less explicit feedback helps students as well as more explicit feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001), and that more correction does not lead to more accuracy and overt correction, in fact, has a negative influence on writing fluency (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). The last issue regarding feedback is the comparison of teacher and peer feedback. Although teacher feedback has a crucial role, the results of studies such as Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992), Paulus (1999), Piasecki (1988), and Tsui (2000) showed that even for learners who are less mature writers, peer comments do play an important role.

A number of other researchers (Cumming (1989), Chavez (1996), Chastain (1990), Koda (1993), McKee (1980), Martinez-lage (1992), and Paulson (1993)) have investigated the texts produced by students who were assigned different writing tasks and found differences in

their performances. In general, it was indicated that narrative writing might demand more difficult linguistic processing than descriptive writing (Koda, 1993). It was also generalized that different task types are likely to lead students to produce texts with differing characteristics (McKee, 1980).

In recent years, research also has been conducted on the effects of computer use on foreign language composition. Most of them found little effect on students' subsequent writing of compositions (Florez-Estrada, 1995; Herrmann, 1990; Ittzes, 1997; McGuire, 1997; and Trenchs, 1996).

Classroom reading/writing activities have also been noticed for the possibility of their relationship to gains in writing proficiency. The activities included sustained writing and extensive reading. The results suggest that writing practice, but not experience in reading, has a positive impact on at least some aspects of learner's writing including fluency (Baudrand-Aertker, 1992; Caruso, 1994; Nummikoski, 1991; and Uhler, 1995).

The last line of research includes studies on process approaches to writing instruction that has characterized much of the work in the 1980s and 1990s (Cambourne, 1986; Ferris, 1995; Flower and Hays, 1981; and Kelly, 1992). The results of such studies indicated that process instruction had a positive effect on at least some aspects of students' writing performance including composition length and quality of organization.

Reviewing the above-mentioned studies inspired an interest to consider learners' written productions from a semantic aspect. The study is elaborated in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

48 students took part in the study. They were both male and female students, aged between 20 to 32 years. All of them were third-year students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language at Najafabad Azad University, Iran. They had enrolled for the advanced writing course in two groups with different instructors. To ensure their

linguistic homogeneity, the students were tested on two versions of Nelson test (1976) at intermediate level.

Procedure

Since the study was text-based, a sample of writings was collected during an eight-week period. There were eight topics chosen based on the students' needs and interest and with the agreement of the course instructors. The topics included four descriptive and four narrative ones in order to fulfill the requirements for the second research question. The papers were weekly collected, corrected, and returned to the students. In the process of correction, feedback was provided for the structural errors; the correct forms were supplied for the incorrect ones. But no such feedback was provided for the so-called semantic errors because the learners were going to be tested later to see if they could recognize the appropriate form supplied on the test. So, in order to avoid any practice effect, such errors were only underlined to let students know that there was something wrong. After this period, the corpus of 802 semantically deviant sentences was analyzed to find different patterns of error. In the second phase of the study, students were tested on an error-recognition test to see if they could recognize the correct form of deviant sentences they had produced while writing. Each item on the test included two sentences; an erroneous sentence produced by the learners on the writing tasks, and a correct one supplied by the researcher. For example, the first test item read:

- 1) *He is experienced in different grounds.
He is experienced in different fields.

Students were supposed to read both sentences in each item and mark the one that was acceptable in English.

DISCUSSION

Types of semantic deviance

Based on Zughoul's (1991) model, a number of error categories were identified in a corpus of 802 semantically deviant sentences. Each category is elaborated in the following. However, it is important to

mention that the categories are by no means comprehensive and they may also overlap.

1. Assumed synonymy

It is a general principle in semantics that there are no real synonyms in a language since, as Palmer (1976) puts it; it is unlikely that two words with exactly the same meaning will survive in a language. Although English is said to be rich in synonyms (because of vast borrowings from other languages), there is no reason to expect that the synonymous words can always be used interchangeably. The minute differences between synonyms do not only involve their meaning. It may be in their style, formality, collocation, etc. Therefore, there are selectional restrictions on lexical choice that are not always obvious. One may conclude that it would be difficult and in some cases even impossible for a learner to distinguish two similar words. So, he uses them interchangeably. The problem may be that no such distinction exists in the learners' native language, or the difference is so fine that only a native or near-native speaker can perceive. Another possibility is that the learner doesn't feel it necessary to distinguish the words, so he uses them to mean the same.

39 percent of the errors found in the corpus were examples of using words supposed to be synonymous in a specific context. The problem was that learners were unaware of the selectional restrictions that normally distinguish similar words from each other. The following are a few examples of this error category.

1. *Educated people are always more respectful.
2. *There are some beautiful and tightly mosques there.
3. *They couldn't live lonely.
4. *Some of the students are not interested in their course.
5. *I missed my wallet.

In sentence 1, *respectful* is used instead of *respectable*. In 2, *tightly* is used instead of *firm*. In 3, the learner used *lonely* instead of *alone*, ignoring the difference between the two. In 4, the learner used *course* instead of *major*, and in 5, he confused the terms *lost* and *missed*.

As for the reason, one may think of bilingual dictionaries as a responsible factor. Usually, the words are listed indistinctively in a

native-target language dictionary. This gives the learners the illusion that the words are always synonymous. Another factor may be the teaching methods. Teachers usually think it suffices to give one-word synonyms in the course of vocabulary teaching. This hinders adequate learning of vocabulary at a time when learners are especially encouraged to learn more and more vocabulary.

2. Literal translation

Approximately 35 percent of the identified errors were cases in which the choice of a lexical item was an equivalent for the Persian word or expression on the literal level but did not convey the meaning intended in the target language. In order not to confuse this category for the next, it ought to be stressed that here translation occurs at word level and includes a single word in a sentence. A number of examples are presented in the following:

6. *Lack of possibilities and good teachers was obvious.
7. *We can face hard things.
8. *I didn't like the model of her hair.
9. *The class was very crowded.
10. *I was hardly against their idea.

In 6 *possibilities* is confused for *facilities*. In 7 the learner surely meant *difficulties* and in 8 *style* would be more appropriate. Number 9 is erroneous because the learner meant *noisy*, and in 10 he meant *strongly*.

Lack of lexical knowledge can be said to play an important role in the occurrence of this kind of error. When the learner does not know the word he needs and is also unaware of the fact that the meaning he intends to convey may be stated in a different way in the target language, he chooses the wrong item that is literally equivalent to what he has in mind. The dictionary is a proof of his choice which, at the end, results in an erroneous sentence.

3. Message translation

Whereas the above category deals with cases of error in which translation from mother tongue results in the choice of semantically

inappropriate words, this category includes the same errors at a wider range; that is, cases where translation goes beyond words to include phrases, clauses, and even sentences. Therefore, the only difference between the two categories is in the range of translation involved. Items that are placed in this category involve translation of the whole message and are obviously non-English. This category accounted for 11 percent of the errors. Here are a few examples:

11. *I jumped suddenly out of sleep.
12. *The food was cooked outside.
13. *We waited for the answer of the medical laboratory.
14. *I wish I had been swallowed by the earth.

4. Verbosity

There is a tendency on the part of students to incorporate long, big-sounding words into their compositions because "they are under the influence of the myth that the inclusion of such words makes a piece of writing more impressive and literary like" (Zughoul, 1991). When a learner is seeking a word in especially a bilingual dictionary, he is faced with a number of words listed in just one entry and under one heading. However, he is unaware that the words differ in many respects, including style, formality, etc. Usually, the words are listed from more informal to highly formal. Looking at the list of words, the learner tends to ignore the familiar words he has read or seen before, and chooses the one which is usually longer, less common, and listed at the end. There were 29 cases of such errors in the corpus which accounted for 3.6 percent of the total number of errors. The following are some illustrative examples.

15. *The students were abundantly ladies.
16. *I had two antithetical feelings.
17. *She cautioned me.

In 15, the learner meant *mostly*; in 16 he could have used a more familiar common word like *opposite*, and in 17, using *warned* is certainly more appropriate.

5. Similar forms

This error category accounted for 3 percent (24 cases) of errors

In the course of analyzing the corpus, five sentences were identified which included new terms. This process is referred to as analog; the learner coins new verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or other parts of speech to satisfy his needs. Of course, this coinage is not haphazard and follows the existing paradigms of the target language. For example, the learner actively uses rules of affixation to produce other parts of speech from the word he knows. Although this can be an evidence of the creative use of language for communication, the result is erroneous since no such items exist in English. The following are some examples.

29. *I gradually habited to that city.

30. *There are responsibles in the society.

In 29, the learner has coined a new verb from the noun he knows (habit). In 30, a noun is taken from an adjective (responsible).

11. Redundancy

By examining the corpus of written essays, a number of sentences were recognized to be non-English simply because they included some redundant information. That is, some items were needlessly inserted. Examples of this redundancy are:

31. *The rustle of gold leaves in the fall of leaves is very romantic

32. *I like to learn English language.

In 31, fall of leaves is obviously the English equivalent for the Persian expression. Also, in 32, language is redundant and the result of Persian-to-English translation.

Semantic deviation and mother tongue Influence

As was previously discussed, there is a general consensus among researchers that language transfer is a central phenomenon in second language acquisition (Schacter, 1992; Gass and Selinker, 1992; Ellis, 1989). Mother tongue is now believed to be "a resource of knowledge that learners use to help them sift the second language data and to perform as well as they can in the second language" (Ellis, 1987).

As the present study is concerned with semantically deviant sentences, the role that mother tongue plays in their occurrence can be investigated by analyzing the available classification of such errors presented above so as to provide an answer to the first research question.

Errors of assumed synonymy are mostly due to fine distinctions between two or more words. These distinctions will be problematic for a language learner whose mother tongue does not include the same distinction. So, one can conclude that in such cases mother tongue influence causes the learner to use such words indistinctively.

Obviously all errors of literal translation and message translation, as the names imply, result from first language transfer since they are Persian equivalents for the meanings which are conveyed differently in English.

Errors of similar forms and verbosity, however, can't be traced back to first language transfer. Language transfer can be called responsible for some cases of circumlocution in which the description is affected by the style or word choice in the mother tongue as in the examples 21 and 22 above.

Errors of collocation, on the other hand, are directly related to first language influence. When there is a gap in learner's competence, he can't use the lexicon appropriately and the dictionary only gives him one-word equivalents without any examples or explanations. In such a situation, the learner has to resort to L1 to fill the gap in his IL knowledge.

Another error category that is directly the result of transfer from L1 is idiomaticity. As was stated previously, when the learner does not know an idiomatic expression in the target language, he usually translates the native language equivalent into the target language.

Errors involving the confusion of binary terms are also sometimes due to effects of mother tongue as in sentences 27 and 28 above. In 27, using *learn* instead of *teach* is because of translation from L1, and in 28 it is because Farsi includes only one verb but English distinguishes between giving advice and asking for it.

Contrary to errors of analogy, errors of redundancy are directly the result of the influence of mother tongue style in writing as can be clearly recognized in the examples 56-58 above.

In conclusion, transfer can be claimed to account for most of the errors observed in the data (more than 70%). So, transfer is not an influential factor only in the acquisition of syntax of a language. It also plays an important role in the acquisition of semantics of that language.

Semantic deviance across writing tasks

The study of variation over different language tasks is not a new idea. Based on such studies as Tarone and Parrish (1988), and Sajjadi and Tahririan (1992), most researchers now believe that second language learners vary in their production when elicited through different tasks. This variation is believed to relate to the communicative demands and discourse characteristics of the task. It is believed that more cognitively demanding tasks produce different behaviors from those of the less demanding ones (Cumming, 1989). Robinson's (2001) study supports the idea in that such difference is because of the demands of task structure and design. In other words, "for any learner, a simple task will always be less demanding than a complex one since the difference in the extent of attentional focus, working memory, reasoning, and other demands imposed by the task structure is invariant and fixed" (Robinson, 2001). Therefore, one can conclude that task complexity helps explain within-learner variety in performing any two tasks.

Traditionally, four modes of writing have been identified: descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative (Raimes, 1983). The order shows their increasing difficulty. Theoretically, students progress from the simplest mode (descriptive) to the most difficult one (argumentative). From among these modes, the first two were chosen to see if there would be any variation observed in learners' productions. The number of errors across writing tasks was calculated and based on the Chi-square test (Table 1), the difference proved to be

significant. This supports the traditionally held belief that the narrative mode of writing is more demanding than the descriptive mode.

Table 1. Chi-Square Test Results

?	Df	X ²	Critical X ²
.05	2	7.2	5.99

Error production versus error recognition

The results of the error-recognition test revealed the following:

- a. The learners could recognize the appropriate form on most of the items of assumed synonymy.
- b. Learners had more difficulty in recognizing the appropriate choice on the items of literal translation.
- c. As for errors of message translation, most learners could recognize the correct choice.
- d. In the case of errors of verbosity, learners had few problem when they saw the more familiar word supplied.
- e. Supplying the similar form helped learners distinguish the two.
- f. Most learners could recognize the correct usage for cases of circumlocution.
- g. Learners were not good at recognizing errors of collocation.
- h. Some idiomatic expressions were easier for learners to identify depending on their frequency of use.
- i. When both forms of binary terms were available, most learners could recognize the correct form.
- j. Most learners didn't recognize the right word on the item which tested analogy.
- k. Just more than half of the learners could recognize the right choice on the item that included redundant information.

It can be generalized that wherever the erroneous utterance sounded too un-English because of the mother tongue influence or any other factor, almost all learners could recognize it. It was only when learners didn't know the exact word or didn't have any idea of how to express the meaning that such distracting factors as L1 influence came to play a role in the production of the erroneous sentence.

However, keeping in mind that the test was designed to make learners aware of the incorrect usage, and that it was almost successful

in doing so (on most items most learners could recognize the correct form), one can conclude that awareness raising is of great help in making learners consider the potential of the words they intend to use, as Liu and Shaw (2001) suggest. Since successful performance in a foreign language highly depends on mastery of lexical relations, one should fully realize the properties of a word before using it.

On the other hand, depending on how much of the word's potential is exploited by the learner, there is always a gap between receptive and productive knowledge (Laufer, 1991). Learners are usually not aware of this gap and it gives them the illusion (in the case of vocabulary learning) that knowing the meaning of any word is equal to knowing that word. So, another function of awareness-raising (through tests, teacher/peer feedback, etc) is to let students be aware of this gap.

The last point to mention is that, despite the popular belief, a learner's vocabulary knowledge should not be measured by its size, but by its depth. The lowest percentage of recognition on the test belonged to collocations, the company a word keeps. And there is no need to emphasize the importance of knowing collocational relations in correct usage of lexical items. So, 'how many new items a learner learns' is not as important as 'how well he learns them'.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the study, the following can be concluded:

It was hypothesized at the beginning of the study that mother tongue does not play a major role in appropriate production of a foreign language. By this study, however, language transfer was identified to be a major factor underlying the occurrence of the so-called semantic errors. It was responsible for more than 70% of the errors. The first hypothesis of the study was, therefore, rejected. This supports the idea of transfer being the central phenomenon in second language acquisition as Selinker (1992) claims. The finding is also in line with the idea that first language is a resource of knowledge that learners use. In comprehension, they use it to help them sift the second language data in the input. They also use this resource to fill the gap in

their knowledge of the second language in production.

As for the second hypothesis, it was predicted that the number of errors on the descriptive tasks would be the same as that on the narrative tasks. However, the learners performed differently on the two writing tasks. They made more mistakes on the narrative tasks (439 cases) than on the descriptive ones (363 cases). Using a Chi-square test, the difference was proved to be significant (see Table 1). Therefore, the second research hypothesis was also rejected. The present study supports the fact that learners may perform differently on different language tasks because they impose different demands on the learner (Robinson, 2001; Sajjadi & Tahririan, 1992).

Since most of the learners could recognize the correct forms of semantically deviant sentences on the test (more than 50% of them could recognize the correct form on 31 test items), one can conclude that enhancing learners' awareness of the properties of words in context is an effective factor on their production. It had been hypothesized that there was no significant difference between learners' awareness and their performances on the writing tasks. Therefore, the third research hypothesis was rejected too. This finding is in line with Afifi and Altaha's (2000) study in that learners make more errors in production than in recognition (as is generally agreed upon). It also agrees with Liu and Shaw (2001) in that raising learners' awareness of the word potential is an influential factor in their appropriate use of L2 lexical items.

The results of the study imply more attention to teaching word properties in vocabulary courses to raise learners' awareness of word potential. The study also implies some time devoted to teaching where and how to use a word in writing courses. The interested reader may duplicate the study to trace possible error categories not included in the present classification, or across other writing tasks.

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APPENDIX

The Error-Recognition Test

In the following items, choose the sentence which is more acceptable in English.

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| <p>1) He is experienced in different grounds.
He is experienced in different fields.</p> <p>2) I like teaching.
I like teaching profession.</p> <p>3) I educated from high school.
I graduated from high school.</p> <p>4) I didn't accept in the test.
I didn't pass the test.</p> <p>5) While my parents were away, I had to do all the housework.
While my parents were away, I had to do all the works of the house.</p> <p>6) I became familiar with some students.
I got acquainted with some students.</p> <p>7) None of them had an affirmative answer.
No one agreed.</p> <p>8) A good place for family vacation should be silent.
A good place for family vacation should be quiet.</p> <p>9) Dr. Akbari is a member of the scientific board.
Dr. Akbari is a member of faculty.</p> <p>10) He promised to purchase a book for me.
He promised to buy a book for me.</p> <p>11) The air is really polluted in Tehran.
The air is really dirty in Tehran.</p> <p>12) I felt jealous of her.
I was jealous of her.</p> <p>13) A good teacher teaches us how to live.
A good teacher learns us how to live.</p> <p>14) After break was rung and school finished, I went to see her.</p> | <p>After school, I went to see her.</p> <p>15) We should try to increase the surface of our knowledge.
We should try to increase our knowledge.</p> <p>16) Everybody wore black in the funeral.
Everybody wore black in the burial ceremony.</p> <p>17) I answered loyally.
I answered honestly.</p> <p>18) I usually go to bed at midnight.
I usually sleep at midnight.</p> <p>19) All night, my aunt defined from her past.
All night, my aunt talked about her past.</p> <p>20) I didn't have a good sense.
I didn't have a good feeling.</p> <p>21) I told his characteristics to the police.
I described him for the police.</p> <p>22) They are samples of God's power.
They are symbols of God's power.</p> <p>23) A good writing can absorb the readers.
A good writing can attract the readers.</p> <p>24) Most people go to university to get a degree.
Most people go to university to take a degree.</p> <p>25) When I finished my lecture, all the students encouraged me.
When I finished my lecture, all the students clapped for me.</p> <p>26) We should think of a solution to our problems.
We should think of a solution to our difficulties.</p> |
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- 27) I had lost my ring and after two days, my brother's baby found it.
I had lost my ring and after two days, my niece found it.
- 28) The teacher asked me to read my composition.
The master asked me to read my composition.
- 29) I didn't like the model of her hair.
I didn't like her hair-style.
- 30) I like the sea because of its wideness.
I like the sea because of its extent.
- 31) I remember it obviously.
I remember it clearly.
- 32) After I attended the exam, I wasn't anxious anymore.
After I sat the exam, I wasn't anxious anymore.
- 33) I departed from my seat.
I left my seat.
- 34) We live in a crowded country.
We live in a populated country.
- 35) The class was very crowded.
The class was very noisy.
- 36) She cautioned me to be careful.
She warned me to be careful.
- 37) The test wasn't hard.
The test wasn't difficult.
- 38) I jumped suddenly out of sleep.
I woke up at once.
- 39) Trust in God.
Rely in God.
- 40) My brother doesn't like his university major.
My brother doesn't like his university course.