

Analysis of Word Choice Errors in Saudi EFL Students' Spoken Language

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Abstract—The purpose of this research paper is to identify and analyze word choice errors committed in spoken English by Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University. It also seeks to identify the origins of the errors and to suggest relevant solutions to assist learners in developing lexical competence and reducing the occurrence of these errors. The research focuses on five different forms of word choice errors. These errors consist of errors of redundancy, literal translation, subject /verb agreement, collocation, and inappropriate usage of formal and informal words. To gather data, the study is based on conducting structured interviews with three EFL-speaking teachers. It also employs a speaking test as a data collection technique from fifteen EFL learners chosen at random, who are required to speak one by one in front of the class for 3-6 minutes. Their oral performance is recorded by mobile phones. According to data analysis, the most common error category is literal translation (33.97%), which is followed by collocation errors (24.88%) as well as subject/verb agreement (18.66%). Furthermore, there are redundancy errors with a percentage of (12.44%). The last type of error committed is inappropriate use of formal and informal language, which has a percentage of (10.04%). The study attributes these errors to a variety of causes, including the Arabic language's impact as well as ineffective teaching techniques and learning strategies. The study offers several recommendations and pedagogical implications to help EFL learners overcome and minimize word choice errors.

Index Terms—EFL students, errors, Saudi, spoken language, word choice

I. INTRODUCTION

The most crucial skill that helps students improve in the second language learning process of learning is the ability to speak English. Mastering speaking skills is crucial for understanding other English skills and improving overall proficiency. Speaking appears to be the most important aspect in learning a new language, out of the four major language abilities. According to Brown and Yuke (1983), as stated by Dang et al. (2023), speaking is the ability on which learners will be assessed the most in real-life settings. Furthermore, Rao (2018) believes that speaking plays an important part in learning a second language. According to Nga and Quynh (2021), word choice is an essential component of any interaction. The style of communication is determined by the word choice. In general, a competent speaker will use language that he or she is familiar with, confident in, and sufficiently straightforward for the listeners to comprehend. Word choice is crucial in speaking skills because it makes it easier for listeners to understand the topic. It explains, clarifies, and broadens concepts. Weak word choice produces ambiguity and dooms a speaker's work to fall short of expectations or fail to deliver its message entirely.

However, communicating fluently like a native speaker is challenging. Learners experience numerous challenges, most of which are caused by incorrect word usage. Choosing the appropriate vocabulary words is one of the challenges that EFL learners face when speaking. Handini et al. (2021), see that the learners have a low level of vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Ra'uf (2020) claims that the majority of EFL students struggle with English communication due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. According to Sahan et al. (2023), one of the reasons influencing the students' difficulty in speaking is the failure to produce words appropriately. Speaking is one of the most difficult abilities to learn in English. Learners must master English pronunciation, comprehend grammar, possess a large vocabulary, and maintain accuracy and fluency when practicing English speaking abilities. Learning a foreign language and developing communication abilities in general rely substantially on vocabulary. The main meaning of the sentences is represented by vocabulary. As a result, some students have difficulty selecting the appropriate words for a specific utterance.

For Yang et al. (2013), word choice errors are those that are semantically incorrect yet grammatically acceptable in the given linguistic context. They believe that the biggest challenge in selecting the proper word is the semantic transfer of the mother tongue. As reported by Agassy et al. (2020), vocabulary is the foundation of language, and without it, one will have difficulty comprehending people or expressing ideas. Some students struggle with vocabulary. They have difficulty selecting the appropriate words to employ in their sentences because not all words can be utilized in every sentence. They are additionally impeded by a lack of vocabulary. Furthermore, Mukminatien (1999) observes that language learners make numerous mistakes when speaking, such as poor word choice.

Based on the researcher's teaching experience, EFL learners have difficulty selecting acceptable words when speaking. Many learners are competent in spoken language, but they are rarely accurate; they frequently use inappropriate words. When speaking, learners frequently fail to recognize and comprehend the semantic differences between words. Identifying and evaluating word choice errors in spoken language by learners are crucial because such errors appear to be one of the key causes of interaction challenges. The study of EFL learners' word choice errors will provide data that will allow English teachers to identify the cause of the errors that characterize students' spoken language, as well as contribute to productive approaches to assist EFL students in acquiring suitable and correct word choice and useful English vocabulary. Addressing EFL learners' word choice errors when speaking English is critical. However, in the Saudi EFL setting, this topic has received less attention. Thus, the purpose of this research is to fill a gap by investigating the origins of these errors and to assist EFL learners in recognizing errors in English speaking. As a direct result of the research findings, learners can learn about their mistakes and find appropriate remedies to improve their English-speaking skills. As a result, the purpose of this research paper is to explore, identify, and analyze word choice errors made in spoken language by Saudi EFL undergraduates at King Khalid University. It is hoped that the results of this study will help to a better understanding of the nature of word choice errors in EFL speaking. As a result, the study aims to find and evaluate word choice errors in English speaking, to identify the causes of these errors, and to propose efficient remedies to assist learners in developing lexical competence and reducing the recurrence of these errors.

II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

A. Method

Both quantitative and qualitative are used to find out the word choice errors committed by Saudi EFL students in the spoken English language.

B. Participants

The study targets EFL students who enroll in the Speaking 4 course. 10 students are randomly chosen as a sample for this study. They all study the textbook "Open Forum 3" by Duncan and Parker (2008) in the first semester of 2023/2024 at King Khalid University, College of Science and Arts in Tanumah, Saudi Arabia. The study targets also three EFL teachers who teach this course.

C. Instruments of Data Collection

The current study uses two instruments to collect data as follows:

(a). Testing

This study applies to an oral test. In this test, each student is asked to talk freely for about 4 to 6 minutes about his first day at the college.

(b). Interview

The interview is intended to elicit specific information from the EFL teachers who teach the Speaking 4 course. It contains two questions. The first question concerns the causes of word choice errors in the spoken language of EFL Saudi students. The second interview question focuses on the teachers' recommendations for enhancing students' lexical competency and assisting them in lowering the occurrence of these errors.

D. Data Analysis Techniques

1. Each student is asked to speak individually in the classroom.
2. The students' oral performances are audiotape recorded and then examined to find errors.
3. The errors are classified into five types involving errors of redundancy, literal translation, subject /verb agreement, collocation, and incorrect use of formal and informal words.
4. Following the classification of all errors, each error is counted to determine its percentage.
5. Structured interviews with EFL instructors are analyzed and evaluated to identify error sources and provide solutions.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Analysis of Learners' Spoken Language

This section identifies and categorizes word choice errors into five types: redundancy, literal translation, subject/verb agreement, collocation, and inappropriate usage of formal and informal words. The table below shows these errors:

TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF WORD CHOICE ERRORS

| NO | Types of wrong choice errors | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------|--|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Literal translation | 71 | 33.97 % |
| 2 | Collocation | 52 | 24.88% |
| 3 | Subject /verb agreement | 39 | 18.66 % |
| 4 | Redundancy | 26 | 12.44 % |
| 5 | inappropriate usage of formal and informal words | 21 | 10.04 % |
| Total | | 209 | 100% |

As stated in the table, the total number of word choice errors is (209). The percentage of errors ranges from (33.97 %) to 10.04 % involving errors of literal translation with a percentage of (33.97 %) as the most frequent error made by the students. Collocation errors are the second most common form of error, representing 24.88% of all errors. The third category of word choice error is subject/verb agreement, which has a rate of (18.66%). Then there are redundancy errors with a percentage of (12.44%). With a percentage of (10.04%), the last type of error committed is inappropriate usage of formal and informal words.

Categories of word choice errors:

Word choice errors occur when learners employ wrong or inappropriate words in their spoken language. This could include employing words with inappropriate meanings or using words that are incorrect for the context. Here are some instances from the students' speaking tests:

(a) Errors of literal translation:

Literal translation errors occur when items are translated straight into a second language while maintaining the literal meaning of the original. Consider the following examples:

Example (1) My plan in college is to work hard to bring a good grade.

Correct form: My plan in college is to work hard to get/obtain a good grade.

Explanation: The learner uses the verb (bring) instead of the verb (get or obtain). This error can also be attributed to the impact of the mother tongue.

Example (2) This will make problems.

Correct form: This will cause or create problems.

Explanation: The learner uses the verb (make) instead of the verb (cause or create). This kind of error can also be related to the influence of the Arabic language in the English language learning process.

(b) Errors of collocation

Collocations are defined by McCarthy (2005) as a couple or group of words that are frequently used together. A collocation error occurs when a word is chosen that should not typically follow or precede another word.

Example (3) We ate breakfast in the college canteen at 9. a.m.

Correct form: We had breakfast in the college canteen at 9. a.m.

Explanation: The verb (ate) doesn't collocate with (breakfast). The correct collocation for this word is (had).

Example (4) I left the college in noon.

Correct form: I left the college at noon.

Explanation: The learner here uses the preposition (in) instead of using (at). Since the preposition (in) doesn't collocate with (noon), this is a collocation error. The collocation errors in the above examples can be related to the impact of the Arabic language in which the learner thinks in Arabic. These errors can also be attributed to the type of learning strategies used by the learners and to the lack of collocation competence.

(c) Subject /verb agreement

To have a subject-verb agreement in a sentence, the verb must match the number, person, and gender of the subject. Look at these examples:

Example (5) One of my colleagues invite us for snacks and tea in the college canteen.

Correct form: One of my colleagues invites us for snacks and tea in the college canteen.

Explanation: This sentence lacks subject-verb agreement because the subject (One) does not agree in number with the verb (invite). The learner fails to recognize that the word (One) in the expression (One of...) is a singular word, despite the fact it is subsequently followed by plural nouns.

Example (6) Everything (look) great.

Correct form: Everything (looks) great.

Explanation: Since the subject (everything) does not agree in number with the verb (look), this sentence lacks subject-verb agreement. The learner does not realize here that the indefinite pronoun "Everything" is usually singular and takes a verb form that ends in "s". Errors in examples 3 and 4 above can be related to learners' ignorance of rule restrictions.

(d) Errors of Redundancy

Gross (2020) defines redundancy as the unnecessary repeating of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or ideas. Redundancy is defined by Ghazala (2008) as "*the use of unnecessary extra words to express something*" (p. 253). Redundant words are those which add no meaningful content to a sentence. They can be words that repeat the same concept, indicate what is obvious, contradict one another, or are indicated by the context.

Example (7) I usually have my breakfast in the canteen with my (fellow) colleagues.

Correct form: I usually have my breakfast in the canteen with my colleagues.

Explanation: The word (fellow) in the example (7) above is redundant because it repeats the same meaning of the word (colleagues).

Example (8) The majority of (undergraduate) students live in Tanumah. -

Correct form: The majority of students live in Tanumah.

Explanation: The word (undergraduate) in the example (8) above is also redundant since it implies the same meaning as the word (students). These errors of redundancy can be attributed to the influence of the mother tongue and to students' low competence in English vocabulary.

(e) Inappropriate usage of formal and informal words

Formal English is used in "serious" publications and situations such as official papers, books, news reports, essays, business correspondence, or official speeches. Informal English is used in casual conversations and private correspondence.

Example (9) The idea is okay.

Correct form: The idea is acceptable or satisfactory.

Explanation: In this example, the learner uses informal language by employing the word (okay). Since this a formal context, the learner must use the words (acceptable or satisfactory)

Example (10) I live in Tanumah but my colleague lives in Abha.

Correct form: I live in Tanumah however my colleague lives in Abha.

Explanation: In this example, the learner uses informal language by employing the connector (but) to show contrast. The learner must use the connector (however) instead since the context is formal.

B. Analysis of Teachers' Interviews

This section sheds light on the analysis and description of the structured interview. The participants' responses can be summarized as follows:

(a). Causes of Word Choice Errors

The participants see that many students commit word choice errors in speaking skills due to many factors. These factors can be summed up and summarized as follows:

- i. The students seemed to have less knowledge about the differences between written and spoken English.
- ii. Lack of vocabulary.
- iii. Lack of collocation competence.
- iv. Teacher's style in teaching and developing vocabulary.
- v. Interference of EFL university learners' first language.
- vi. Inappropriate vocabulary teaching techniques and approaches.
- vii. EFL learners have a limited vocabulary.
- viii. Students' inadequate mastery of appropriate English word usage.
- ix. Students' incomplete knowledge of the second language subject-verb agreement and word collocation.
- x. EFL learners' misunderstanding of the semantic differences between English language words.
- xi. EFL learners' Ignorance of the semantic differences between formal language and informal language.

(b). Suggestions for Improving EFL Learners' Lexical Competence

To overcome these errors, the participants propose the following points as suggestions.

- i. Teachers should encourage students to enlarge their vocabulary by reading magazines, articles, and books.
- ii. Teachers should vary their techniques and ways of teaching and developing students' vocabulary to suit the students' different proficiency levels.
- iii. Students should be encouraged to think in English to avoid lexical negative transfer of Arabic in writing.
- iv. There is a need for more effective teaching strategies to enhance vocabulary learning.
- v. Teachers should develop instructional materials that explicitly highlight the semantic difference between an English word and its Arabic literal translation.
- vi. Teachers should provide individual feedback on the students' specific linguistic problems.
- vii. Teachers should provide appropriate and accurate in-class group feedback with a special focus on common word choice errors.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study aims to investigate word choice errors in the spoken performance of Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University. The study focuses on five types of word choice errors: redundancy errors, literal translation errors, subject/verb agreement errors, collocation errors, and inappropriate usage of formal and informal words. The study relates these errors to a variety of variables, including the impact of the first language, ineffective teaching techniques and learning strategies, insufficient command of proper English word usage, students' restricted vocabulary knowledge, and lack of collocation competency.

Based on these findings, the study concludes with the following pedagogical implications and recommendations to help students overcome and minimize word choice errors, as well as to help teachers teach word choice in speaking skills:

- (a) More effective teaching practices are required to improve vocabulary learning.
- (b) Teachers should provide instructional resources that emphasize the semantic distinction between an English word and its literal Arabic counterpart.
- (c) Teachers should adapt their strategies and methods of teaching and developing students' vocabulary according to students' varied levels of proficiency.
- (d) EFL students should be encouraged to utilize dictionaries efficiently.

Suggestions for Further Study

Based on the study's findings, a few recommendations for further research are offered considering the study's limitations. First, this study has a small sample size and focuses primarily on the viewpoints of EFL teachers. To learn more about the reasons for word choice errors and obtain a full grasp of the problem, a larger sample study with an emphasis on students' views is required. Second, this study focuses on word choice errors in the spoken language of EFL university students. A further study concentrating on word choice errors in EFL university undergraduates' written language is necessary.

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