Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on second language (L2) learning and acquisition specifically the learning and acquisition of L2 lexis. Lexis is an important aspect of language. Katz's semantic markers and the Jackendoff theory, two important theories in L2 lexical development, will also be reviewed. The latter part of this chapter deals with errors in second language acquisition, Error Analysis and finally the various studies of lexical errors in L2 acquisition.

2.1 Second Language (L2) Learning and Acquisition

For Krashen, learning is a conscious effort which is planned. On the other hand, acquisition is unplanned and unconscious. For many other linguistists, these terminologies refer to "how one actually learns a language." Ellis (1985) in Lewis (1993) explains that:

> Acquisition can be broadly defined as the internalisation of rules and formulas which are then used to communicate in L2. In this sense the term acquisition is synonymous with the term learning.

He continues to add that Krashen expresses these terms quite differently:

> Acquisition for Krashen, consists of the spontaneous process of rule internalisation that results from natural language use, while learning consists of the development of conscious L2 knowledge through formal study.
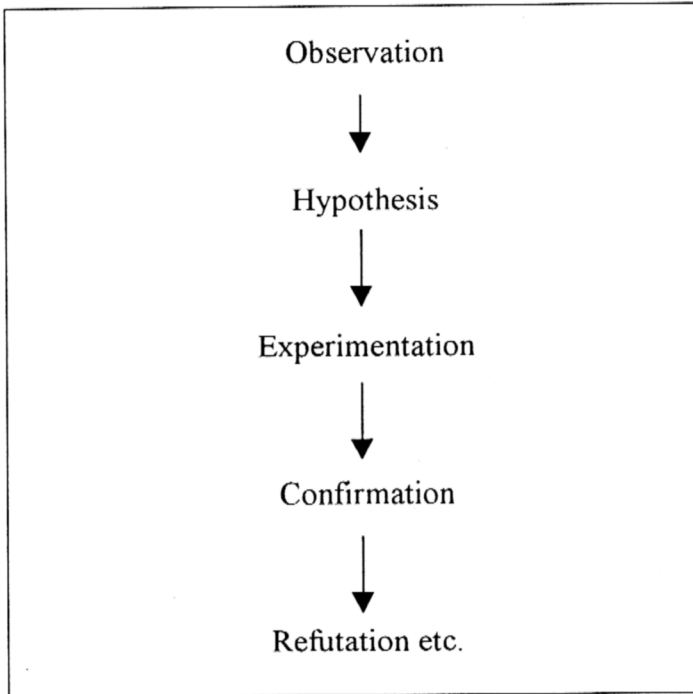>
> (1993: 20)

Krashen also claims that, "learning is valuable but subordinate to acquisition". In his Monitor Hypothesis, he states that conscious learning has a limited function. A language student's use of words comes from a supply of unconsciously acquired language. Conscious learning helps the student to examine, explain and correct his choice of words or lexical items used in the written or verbal form. Therefore, in the language classroom, the process of language acquisition is accelerated if the student is capable of comparing what he knows with what he has been taught as correct. A student's understanding of a language, according to Krashen then, is a process based on the following:

Table 7

Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis

(How Language is Acquired)

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              Observation                 │
│                  │                       │
│                  ▼                       │
│              Hypothesis                  │
│                  │                       │
│                  ▼                       │
│            Experimentation               │
│                  │                       │
│                  ▼                       │
│              Confirmation                │
│                  │                       │
│                  ▼                       │
│             Refutation etc.              │
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2.1.1   The Importance of Lexis in L2 Acquisition/Learning

According to Tan (1994), learners in many instances indicate that lexical problems represent one of the major obstacles in writing and that they are their greatest single source of difficulty in Second Language Acquisition.

In Krashen's and Terrel's Natural Approach, much emphasis is placed on vocabulary. They comment:

> Vocabulary is basic to communication. If acquirers do
>
> not recognize the meaning of the key words used by

those who address them, they will be unable to participate in the conversation.

<div align="right">(1983:155)</div>

Choice of words, therefore, is intrinsic to meaning rather than the morphological and syntactic elements of the L2:

> If they (students) wish to express some idea or ask for information, they must be able to produce lexical items to convey their meaning....if our students know the morphology and the syntax of an utterance addressed to them but do not know the meaning of key lexical items, they will not be able to participate in the communication.

<div align="right">(1983:155)</div>

As a result, in the Natural Approach, greater emphasis is placed on the ability to communicate message and not the linguistic form of an utterance.

For most language teachers, there has always been a strong belief that the formal teaching of grammar and form would facilitate understanding of meaning. Krashen, stresses the importance of vocabulary quite explicitly:

> Vocabulary is also very important for the acquisition process. The popular belief is that one uses form and grammar to understand meaning.

The truth is probably closer to the opposite: we acquire morphology and syntax because we understand the meaning of utterances.

As a result,

communicative ability is usually acquired quite rapidly; grammatical accuracy...increases only slowly, and after much experience using the language.

(1989:16)

2.2 Semantic Theory and L2 Lexical Development

Learning a second language involves the acquisition of vocabulary for communicative purposes. For a language student, the acquisition of a word involves phonological and graphic memorization, grasping the meaning associated with the word, understanding the syntactic category that the word belongs to and its co-occurrence limitations. How meanings of lexical items are acquired is dependent on a formal theory of lexicon.

2.2.1 Theories of Lexical Semantics

Wesley Hudson (1982) in Gass and Schacter (1989) comments that different treatments of word meaning fall into one of the two camps listed below:

theories of meaning and

theories of reference.

The meaning–based theory (intentional theory) "takes the semantic relations of synonymy, entailment, contradiction...as having to do with the inherent properties of words themselves."

The reference-based theory (extensional theory), on the other hand, "treats semantic relations as determined by relations between the objects to which the words refer." Hence, the meaning of a word is determined "by mapping a sentence onto a set of truth values (true or false) as determined by the state of things in the world (or possible worlds)" – in short the basic facts of a word within a context or situation.

Ferge (1982), in Gass and Schacter (1989), instead uses the terms 'sense' and 'reference'. A word, he explains, is said to convey its sense (what distinguishes between two terms referring to the same thing) and to stand for its referent. For instance, 'an angry bear' and 'a docile bear' connote different senses but the reference would be similar (bear).

2.2.2 Katz's Semantic Markers

Katz (1964, 1975) developed a semantic theory which is closely linked to the objectives of transformational grammar. According to him, the meaning of a word is made up of a number of "semantic primitives or basic units of meanings" ; "word meaning as represented in a word's internal structure."

The word 'CAT' can be analysed based on the following semantic primitives:
[ANIMAL], [FOUR-LEGGED], [FURRY], [DOMESTICATED] etc. These
"semantic primitives' or semantic markers are concepts drawn from within a
language learner's mental lexicon. Therefore, the process of obtaining word
meaning comprises of

> ...a direct mapping between semantic primitives , drawn
>
> from a universal store, and a particular word in a given
>
> language.
>
> (Gass and Schacter 1989:224)

Katz's theory stresses that words are linguistic entities based on logical
inferences. Putnam (1975) contests this theory that much of one's knowledge of
what a word actually means is "revisable by future scientific discovery" and that
"meaning should not be considered as inherent property of words." He goes on
to argue that, "determining words' extensions is not a matter of linguistic
competence; it does not reside in any one person's mind but is, in a sense, the
property of the society." It is how society stereotypes certain concepts or ideas
on a lexical item.

2.2.3   The Jackendoff Theory

Jackendoff's (1993) theory stresses that the semantic relations between words
involve:

a)   a relation between their internal structure

b)   an approach in which learning word meaning is a rule–governed process, and

c)   the fuzziness and revisability of meaning.

A language learner's perception of things results from certain information the mind provides - that is, what is a nameable thing. Not on all occasions is there a clear–cut distinction of what is or is not a thing. As a result, a "series of graded judgements that fall along a yes/ not sure/ no continuum", allow for learning word-meaning in a rule-governed process.

Jackendoff argues that "the meanings of words are organized along principles similar to those operating in the perceptual domain in the determination of thinghood." Our logical inferences to a lexical item is based on the internal structure of the word which is obtained via experience or what we are told about it. A word can be divided into the superordinate or subordinate categories, according to a set of principles. This process of categorization allows for distinguishing lexical entries.

The lexical entry for the word 'BEAR' would then include the following semantic markers:

[ANIMAL], [MAMMAL], [FOUR LEGS], [HAS FUR] etc. In addition, the superordinate entry for 'bear' will be related to other subordinate (hyponym)

categories, for example, 'koala bear', 'polar bear', 'honey bear' etc. Therefore, through a set of semantic markers that serve to reduce redundancy of information, inferences can be drawn between lexical entries.

The lexical entry for the word KOALA BEAR will then impart information that distinguishes it from other types of the superordinate BEAR.

This process of judging an object to be an example of a word permits further levels of abstraction. Hence, we have tokens, (a thing that is "projectable into awareness" where there are names to describe it) and types (a category).

2.2.4 The Fuzziness of Word-meaning

The fuzziness of word-meaning led Jackendoff to come up with "the preference rule system." As Gass and Schacter point out , it accounts for

> the intractable nature of word meaning. Preference rules are the mechanisms that drive the choices involved in structuring the information internal to a lexical entry....the preference rule account makes very different (and apparently correct) predictions concerning the flexibility of word meaning.
>
> (1989:229-230)

This system can only be applied with the interaction of the three conditions below :

      . *necessity* (the basic feature of the lexical item

               i.e. thing, animal etc.)

      . *centrality* (the variable attribute), and
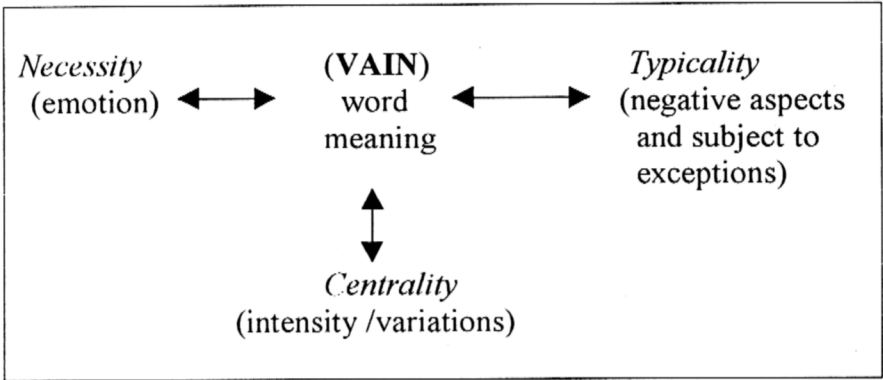
      . *typicality* (conditions that are typical but

               subject to exceptions)

Here, let us use the homophonic word "vain" to illustrate this system. Using Jackendoff's concept of word meaning, let us discuss the minimum set of conditions that influence rules to specify word-meaning. The necessary condition would be to identify 'vain' as a form of emotion or feeling. If it is a feeling, the intensity and variations of these feelings are the conditions that would affect its centrality. Typicality would necessitate a negative feeling as response - egotistic, dogmatic, ego-centric and arrogant. The exception to this typicality would be "proud" as used in the context of positive emotions. For example, the word 'patriotic' would mean proud of one's country.

Table 8

Jackendoff's Preference Rule Framework

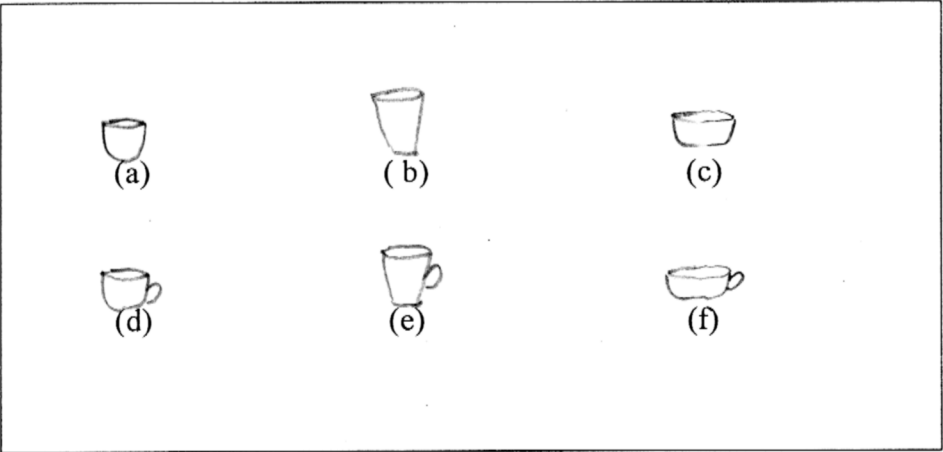| *Necessity* (emotion) | ←→ | **(VAIN)** word meaning | ←→ | *Typicality* (negative aspects and subject to exceptions) |

Centrality
(intensity /variations)

Labov (1978) illustrates the Preference Rule Framework even better in the cup/bowl example :

Table 9

Labov's Cup and Bowl Concept

Extracted and adapted from Gass & Schacter (1989) based on

R. Jackendoff (1983)

The necessary condition of a cup would be to contain liquid. What differentiates a cup from a bowl is a handle (typicality condition). Their height and width ratio are their centrality conditions. Figure (c) would raise doubts as to whether it is a bowl or a cup. However, the handle in figure (f) would override this vagueness.

Therefore, the interaction of the above-mentioned 3 conditions would result in the understanding of word meaning.

2.3   Cross-Linguistic Differences in Word–Meaning Perception

Cross–linguistic differences or cultural differences can affect perception of word-meaning. Among L2 learners, it is quite a common approach to use the translation method to learn words. Language teachers, thus, have to be sensitive to the cross-linguistic or cultural differences. English has the words 'blue' and 'green' in its colour lexicon (example as cited by Hudson in Gass and Schacter, 1989). In Chinese, the word *qinq* (blue/green) overlaps these two colours. Similarly, the word 'uncle' in English would refer to the brother of either one's parents. In Chinese, however, *bo* would refer to the father's older brother, and *shu* the father's younger brother or a male of one's parents' generation – via blood relation or otherwise.

Hence, word meaning in L2 can be better understood through:

> i)   extensive exposure to the TL (sufficient comprehensible input),
> and

ii)   an understanding of the meaning of a word through its types/token

distinction or through the use of semantic markers. Also, as it is

used in context or how society labels concepts or ideas to that

particular word, i.e. drawing logical inferences which are based

upon a pre-existing set of principles as to how a word is to be

used.

Jackendoff's theory propagates all of the above in the acquisition of word-meaning in L2.   To the teacher in a classroom, the only yardstick he or she has as to whether the above factors are met is through the analysis of the students' work – inclusive of both correct and wrong answers. If the student's response is correct, the lexical item tested is not a problem in language learning. It is the errors, however, that hold a wealth of information for the researcher.

The upper secondary Malay students in this research found many of the homophones tested to be challenging lexical items. Many could neither draw logical inferences nor understand their meanings in various contexts using a semantic approach. The researcher has chosen to analyse the errors that these students produced using the Error Analysis framework.

2.4   Theoretical Framework

2.4.1   Introduction

In second language teaching, many teachers are pre-occupied with employing a teaching technique which helps to prevent errors in the language production of learners. Language students feel 'silly' making language errors and often try to avoid the use of the TL. Hence, silence seems a better alternative than verbal communication. Lack of proficiency drives the students to communicate in their native language or mother tongue. A language teacher's attitude towards error and correction is therefore central in English language learning in the classroom.

2.4.2 Errors

The word 'error' is often associated with other negative words like 'wrong', 'failure', 'mistake', 'misunderstanding' and 'carelessness'. The word error according to Klassen (1981) as cited by Richards (1985) refers to a form or structure that a native speaker considers unacceptable due to unsuitable use of a language item or faulty or incomplete learning strategies. A distinction is sometimes made between an 'error' which is the result of incomplete knowledge and a 'mistake' which is caused by fatigue or carelessness.

Errors are intrinsic in SLA. Therefore, teachers and students must view them in a positive light. Often in the language classroom, errors are associated with blame and it is essential to avoid this as it merely increases feelings of guilt and inadequacy both in the student and the teacher.

2.4.3 Errors in Second Language Acquisition

In the 1950s and 1960s, the behaviourist approach to language teaching emphasized the fundamental Present-Produce paradigm. Language learners had to repeat pattern drills and set grammatical structures in a mechanistic manner. There was almost total agreement that errors should be avoided.

Memorization of "correct-models" ensured fewer or no errors in the production of learner language. Within this traditional paradigm, errors were equated with failure. The behaviourist approach as Lewis mentions was based on the assumption that,

> ...what was taught would be learned, retained and could be accurately produced in free situations. If not, the assumption was either that it had been badly presented (teacher failure) or inadequately practised (teacher or student failure).

> (1993:167)

Hence, behaviourism valued only successful performance. The theory which supports a methodology that avoids errors is today discredited. It is now generally believed that language-learning is not mere habit formation but is based on active mental development and the Observation-Hypothesis Experiment paradigm where students 'try out' a new language (Lewis 1993). Under this

paradigm, errors are viewed positively. The student then can tear himself away from the mind-set that errors are a terrible sign of failure. Language errors are creative experiments. Based on this belief, a language learner's confidence in using the English language is not inhibited.

2.5 Error Analysis (EA)

Error Analysis (EA) is a method often exploited to analyse SLA data. In this study – The Use of Homophones Among Upper Secondary Malay Students - the EA framework is used to investigate the errors made by Malay learners of English. Error Analysis is the study and analysis of errors made by second and foreign language learners. Errors made by L2 learners prove to be beneficial in three ways. Firstly, they assist the teacher in obtaining information as to how far the learner has progressed. Secondly, these errors help in the preparation of instructional materials for language learning. Thirdly, the researcher is able to identify how a TL is learnt. By understanding the learning strategies employed by the learner , the researcher is able to gauge to what extent a learner's application of these learning strategies account for quality learning.

Therefore, errors tell us about the psycholinguistic processes of language-learning (Corder 1987). Errors allow the language learner to test the hypotheses he has formed about the TL and to revise his hypotheses based on the feedback he receives.

In conclusion, many studies have shown that the EA framework is a viable method in identifying and understanding the errors made by SL learners.

2.6   Types of Language Errors

The language errors made by SL learners may fall into any of the categories below.

2.6.1   Intralingual errors

These errors are committed not as a result of the influence of the learner's LI/MT. They reflect the learner's incompetence in understanding the rules and intricacies of the TL. Richards (1971,1974) says that these errors can also be due to the following factors:

i)   over-generalization

For example, the learner may produce the following sentence , "We are come", based on a combination of the English patterns "We are coming".

This over-generalization can result in developmental errors which are natural in the developmental stage in language learning. They disappear as the learner's language ability increases (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982).

ii)   ignorance of rule-restrictions

For example, since the plural form of most nouns are followed by 's': 'dog' becomes 'dogs', 'cat' becomes 'cats' and 'cow' becomes 'cows'. The word 'sheep' is automatically given the same treatment. Thus , the learner produces this : 'sheep' – 'sheeps'.

iii)   incomplete application of rules

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For example, the form of the progressive tense is, "be + ing". However, instead of saying "I am eating", the learner produces this sentence: "I be eating" , not realising that the 'be' form of the verb may include, 'is', 'are', 'am', 'was' or 'were'.

iv)   the building of false systems or concepts

This may include some of the examples stated above.

Lewis (1993), however, says that the three possible linguistic sources of error

include

  a) interference – influence of MT/NL

  b) lexical deficiency – lack of vocabulary, and

  c) partial mastery – this includes some of Richard's factors above.

In the use of homophones, most of the errors made are a result of lexical deficiency among students. They just do not know most of the homophones or their meanings in context. The real problem is a defect in the student's vocabulary. Hence, in the teaching of homophones, the language teacher's response to the student's errors may need to be lexically rather than grammatically oriented.

2.6.2   Interlingual errors

These are errors due to language transfer. These are also known as interference errors due to the learner's MT/LI (Richards 1971).

2.6.3   Global and Local errors

A global error occurs when a message is misunderstood by the listener or reader. Local errors are errors that do not totally distort the message in a sentence that is being conveyed .

Burt and Kiparsky (1972), however, define global errors as misconstrued spoken or written messages and local errors as linguistic errors that make a sentence awkward. Misuse of homophones can be categorised as both global and local errors.

2.7   Studies of Lexical Errors in L2 Acquisition

Many researchers have revealed that one source of error in SLA is the lack of vocabulary among language students.

Ho (1972), as cited in Tan (1994), comments that lexical errors have presented the greatest difficulty for descriptive analysis while Duskova (1969) states that certain lexical errors are difficult to differentiate. In his study Duskova, discovered that Czechoslovakian post-graduate students committed both lexical and grammatical errors in the two assignments given. One, to correct an English letter, and two, to write a brief account of the student's journey abroad. Out of

the 1007 total number of errors studied, 223 were lexical errors and the rest grammatical errors. The main sources of lexical errors were misuse of words and distortions.

In a study by Politzer and Ramirez (1973), 126 Mexican children in a bilingual (English – Spanish) school and a monolingual school (Spanish) were asked to retell an eight-minute cartoon and to answer some questions. The lexical errors made revealed that the students not only selected wrong words but also coined new words to complete their tasks. There was also lexical borrowing from their mother tongue.

Ringbom (1978), as cited in Meara (1984), studied how Swedish and Finnish learners learnt English vocabulary. His findings revealed that all lexical errors made by these students fall into one of the following categories:

i)   ortographical

ii)   grammatical

iii)   semantic, and

iv)   others

In 1983, in his study using both Finnish and Spanish students learning English, Ringbom noticed that the semantic features of target language words were changed and modified to a model which was equivalent to the native language word for ease of learning.

Levenston (1979), in Tan (1994), comments on how the language students in his study resorted to lexical simplification. This was done to avoid using certain lexical items which were beyond their capacity. Here, more frequently used words were used to express meanings of ideas. In lexical simplification, Blum and Levenston (1978) stress that avoidance, superordinate terms, approximation, transfer and circumlocution are methods often employed by target language learners to express meanings of lexical items that are not in the learner's mental lexicon.

2.7.1 Studies of Lexical Errors in L2 Acquisition in Malaysia and South East Asia

In many of the studies cited below, the EA framework was used to examine and explain the types and sources of lexical errors made by SL learners.

Teh (1989) who conducted an EA study of the sentences constructed by Malay students from the International Islamic University (UIA) found that the following were the main sources of lexical errors in the students' work:

i)   poor choice of word

ii)   wrong use of form

iii)   use of wrong word

iv)   use of slang or colloquialism, and

v)   use of non-English words.

In short, vocabulary limitations resulted in erroneous sentences.

Wee's (1990) data consisted of 32 scripts of essays written by both Chinese and Malay students in Singapore. She conducted a study to analyse the common language errors made by the General Paper students. The errors in lexis revealed "abnormal usage" of language that rendered a sentence acceptable but the words exploited, unsuitable. There was also insufficient understanding of the lexical items' connotative import.

In Tan's study (1994), the lexical errors produced by the Malay learners of English were of three types.

i)   interlingual errors (11%)

ii)   intralingual errors (88%) and

iii)   miscellaneous errors (1%)

The total number of lexical errors identified was 596. These errors were largely due to wrong selection of words, overuse of the superordinate terms (rather than appropriate hyponyms for imparting information), wrong use of colloquial or slang words ('got' instead of 'had', 'tummy' instead of 'stomach', 'spend', instead of 'treat' etc) and semantic confusion (instead of 'asked', the lexical item 'hold' is used ; 'ripe' is replaced by 'matured' etc).

Chow's (1996) case study on "The English language needs of Science Matriculation Students', in UKM, indicates that these students find it difficult to do the following:

i)   finding the right words to express themselves because of a severe lexical deficiency in their L2

ii)   understanding the meaning of many words

iii)   understanding technical and scientific terms and description, and

iv)   choosing suitable words when performing language tasks.

These shortcomings are due to the language students' minimal interaction in the target language outside the English language classroom.

The above lends support to Seow's (1984) argument on how there should be a conscious effort to teach vocabulary in the English language classroom especially with regard to the listening and speaking skills.

John (1996), in her analysis of the written errors in the English of the Law Students of Mara Institute of Technology (ITM), explains that a great source of errors among the 30 first semester students is a limited vocabulary in the L2. In many instances, illogical words render sentences extremely awkward and uninterpretable. Lack of fluency in the L2 led to subjects choosing circuitous routes to explain themselves.

Raja Zarina (1997) conducted a study on the written English compositions of 80 first year Malay students in the University of Malaya (UM). They were between 20 and 21 years of age. These students were given 1½ hours to write two compositions of about 350 words each. Nine topics were given to choose from. The students' lexical errors constitute 36.3% of the total language errors. Incorrect selection of words due to inherent difficulties and inadequate exposure to the target language contributed to distortion of contextual meaning in the sentences generated (55.2%). There was also evidence that confusing lexical items (effect–affect, weather–whether) contributed to 29.8% of the lexical errors analyzed. Word-formation errors were minimal at 1.8% (clouded instead of cloudy, unforgotten for unforgettable etc). Lexical errors which were a result of over-generalization (uncapable, unhuman etc) resulted in 13.2% of the errors made.

In conclusion, the EA framework has proven to be an effective method to analyse, understand and label the different types of lexical errors in the English language student's work. All the above studies have proven that there is a need for greater emphasis on vocabulary teaching in the language classroom. Language is constructed by the exploitation of a variety of lexical items. A severe deficiency in this component of language would affect a language student's ability to communicate both in the verbal or written form.

2.8   The Study of Homophones Using the EA Framework

To date, there has been no detailed study on the use of homophones among English language learners locally.   This is a exploratory study done by the researcher to depict how confusing lexical items like homophones can distort meaning in context if incorrectly used.   Most of the upper secondary Malay students in this research display an inability to understand the nature of the syntactic and semantic relationships signaled by the homophones tested within a given context.   A general lack of proficiency in the English language contributes to a major percentage of the errors made. Hence, 'confusibles' like homophones, polysemous words and homographs should be taught to the language learner. These finer elements of language are often neglected in the English language classroom as greater preference is given to other grammatical components.