Chapter 5
Pedagogical Suggestions and Conclusion

5.0 Summary

As indicated by the findings of the research, many of the errors made by the respondents comprised the use of the wrong homophonic word in a given context, thus, displaying a lack of understanding of the semantic and syntactic relationship of each homophone in a sentence. This shows that the students in this research possess inadequate ‘vocabulary’ of the homophones tested.

Many language errors produced by learners of the English language, as mentioned earlier, result from students trying to say or write something for which they do not have the linguistic resources. In short, the real problem is a defect in the student’s vocabulary. The errors recorded in this study were mostly intralingual errors. The homophone errors were local or global errors which rendered the sentences awkward and distorted in meaning. Hence, language teachers should recognize that lexical items have a central role to play in English language acquisition. Language in the classroom is not merely words and grammar, and lexis is not another word for vocabulary. Language is a concept that involves

i) identifying different lexical items and exploiting them in various contexts (understanding their meanings in a variety of sentences),

ii) mastering their collocational range and restrictions on that range (to see what lexical items properly belong with other language items) and as Nattinger (1992) points out,
iii) chunking unfamiliar material in meaningful ways and creating more and other effective lexical phrases.

Based on the above, pertinent issues on pedagogical implications arise and this will be dealt with in the next section.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

Below are a few suggestions on how to improve the students’ mastery of homophones and how to increase their lexical density:

i) English language classes need to emphasize meaning, form and function. In teaching homophones, the teacher should not merely point out the difference in meaning and spelling of the word but also emphasize the use of the lexical item in context. For example, in the sentence, "She was/ chasxx/", either the verb "chased" or the adjective "chaste" is possible. With extended context, the intended concept could eventually be identified. The teacher, thus, has to stress how ambiguity can lead to disruptions in comprehension. Language teachers, therefore, have the important task of sensitizing the language learner towards understanding the meaning of a lexical item in the presence of other language items. By helping the students develop this skill, language learning becomes more effective as students are exposed to identifying constituent bits within the whole.

ii) The language teacher should try to stimulate and sustain interest in the English language. Crossword puzzles, board games and quizzes can be
mentally challenging instead of the teacher drilling grammatically and lexically correct structures or setting exercises that need minimal thinking. Students learn effectively in language-rich classrooms and with language-rich materials. Teachers should not be afraid of exposing their students to English, to all stages of difficulty. Homophonic words could be taught effectively through ‘problem-solving’ exercises (refer to Enrichment Exercises in Appendix E) thus, enhancing the students’ ability to think analytically and critically. This increases and encourages learner autonomy, not teacher dependence.

iii) An effective way of improving language proficiency is through reading. Students do not do much of this outside the classroom. The Language Panel in each school usually requires students to do a book-report, that is to read English language books (preferably story-books) and to provide synopsis or reviews of the books read.

This is a good idea because:

a) it exposes students to materials in English
b) it inculcates the reading habit in them, and
c) it helps students to increase their word power.

However, in many schools, this is merely an inherited tradition, seldom practised. If practised, it is a mere mechanical exercise. Teachers should encourage this activity, because only through extensive reading is a student able to possess a better command of vocabulary and language items. The students too become sensitive towards the existence of
homophones and other confusing lexical items, like polysemous words and homographs.

iv) The language-teacher should also bear in mind that learning vocabulary is not merely memorisation of words. Vocabulary must be ultimately acquired – integrated into the learner’s linguistic resources, thus, readily available when required. Lewis (1993:117) suggests that vocabulary learning and acquisition can be aided through following classroom procedures that,

a) assist students in identifying lexical items correctly,

b) encourage transfer from short-term to long-term memory, and

c) encourage recording of lexical items in helpful, non linear formats.

Furthermore, in the language classroom, students ask for words as a result of unexpected difficulties in various texts. In most occasions, the appropriate word is supplied and the teacher continues with the main topic of the lesson. However, if homophonic, polysemous and homographic words appear, this opportunity can be exploited to supply, explore and record these words systematically in the students ‘vocabulary book’. This book, ideally with an alphabetical thumb index, where the words are listed under certain topics or semantic fields allows the student to retrieve selective lexis efficiently. It is of little value if a lexis is recorded with the LI translation in the ‘vocabulary book’. This vocabulary list has no pedagogic value.
v) Language teachers are frequently encouraged to produce authentic materials, write exercises, make flash cards etc. There is an enormous selection of teaching materials readily available on a wide range of topics to maintain interest among the students. For example, comics, fairy tales or poems that exploit homophonic words can be used for language teaching (refer to Appendix E). Language teachers should learn to adopt and adapt these materials which are stimulating, challenging and motivating. These can help to develop better reading and writing skills among students. Teachers will also have to develop themselves continuously and professionally.

vi) In language classrooms, the English dictionary is perhaps the most under-exploited resource. As Lewis points out:

The tendency is to see the dictionary as useful only for looking up the meaning of unknown words. A good dictionary ...the Cobuild range – helps with meaning, stress, collocational range and archetypical examples...it conveniently and helpfully blurs the distinction between dictionary and grammar book.

(1993:180)

By learning to exploit the dictionary, language students are exposed to the various meanings of a given word in different contexts. The referential meanings of words allow for semantic webbing. Thus, the student does
not learn vocabulary in isolation. Teachers feel very honoured when they are referred to as "walking-dictionaries". They need to change this mind-set and learn to empower the students because this dependency on the teacher cripples the students in terms of learning.

vii) Too much emphasis has always been placed on getting the students to communicate verbally. Hence, the Present–Practice–Produce paradigm pre–dominates in language teaching. However, to increase word-power among language students, students should be encouraged to listen apart from reading extensively. The language teacher is the best source of listening for students. Therefore, Teacher-Talk-Time should be increased. By listening, the student absorbs. The language which is produced is initially based on receptive skills rather than productive skills. Prabhu's (1987) work and Asher's Total Physical Response have proven that general language abilities develop quickly in the early stages if teaching is based on controlled listening. Teachers should not consider this approach as being teacher-centered. The researcher personally finds that the most under-exploited skill in English language teaching is the Listening Skill. When Test 3 was conducted, many students were unable to listen, think and comprehend at the same time. Listening is an equally important skill to enhance competency in the English language.

viii) The researcher also proposes the existence of an English language conducive environment. Students should have easy access to language
learning. Interesting articles in English should be pinned on general notice boards for students to read. These include comic strips, film-reviews, synopses of the latest blockbuster movies, confusing grammar or lexical items like homophones, common idioms etc. All these promote the use of the language. In most schools, many notice boards are quite bare. The printing of an English newsletter comprising articles contributed by the students is encouraged. The language teacher has to monitor this. The newsletter is definitely more student-centered.

ix) Teachers should also consider the following aspects in language teaching.

a) **From Speaking to Listening**

Over-emphasizing speech in the acquisition of a target language is inhibiting. Listening is a good source of linguistic input.

b) **From Structure to Lexis**

English language teachers have always emphasized grammatical structure. Emphasis on lexis, on the other hand, increases knowledge of meaning in context.

c) **From Teacher-Centered to Learner-Centered**

The role of an English language teacher is to make his or her students autonomous learners. Teachers should be “by the stage and not on the stage”. They should play the role of facilitators to produce self-directed, creative and critical thinkers.
d) From Product to Process

What the student produces should not be the primary criteria of learning. It is the process that sheds light on whether positive learning and teaching takes place.

e) From Sentence to Text

Teachers should not focus on the sentence as the basic unit of language. Instead, sentences must be taught as part of a text.

5.2 Conclusion

Based on some of the suggestions above, English language teachers can perhaps increase the proficiency of language students especially in the finer elements of the language like homophones, homographs and polysemous words. Hopefully by the time we approach the next millennium, English will no longer be a foreign language to most of our students.