The Role of Interlingual and Intralingual Transfer in Learner-centered EFL Vocabulary Instruction

Dr Abdulmoneim Mahmoud
Department of English, College of Arts
Sultan Qaboos University

Abstract
This study seeks to present empirical data bearing out the claim that EA can bridge the gap between language learning and teaching through what has been revealed so far about learning and communication strategies. The study focuses on vocabulary errors and their direct bearing on vocabulary instruction. We intend to analyze the vocabulary errors made by the learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and propose a strategy-based teaching technique that is in line with the learners’ psycho-cognitive association strategy reflected in interlingual and intralingual transfer. At the linguistic level, meaning can be explained by presenting students with related words such as [1] true stylistic, regional and/or emotive synonyms, [2] distinguishable near-synonyms, [3] derivatives, [4] synforms, [5] superordinates/hyponyms, and [5] antonyms.

Key words: Learner-centered EFL vocabulary Instruction
The Role of Error Analysis in Learner-centered EFL Teaching

Error analysis (EA) started as an offshoot of contrastive analysis (CA) in the 1950s when language learning was believed to a matter of habit formation. In case of foreign language (FL) learning, the first language (L1) was deemed to be a source of interference and error in case of differences between the two languages, (see e.g. Lado, 1957). Hence, CA gained grounds as a means of predicting areas of similarity and difference between L1 and FL. The fact that not all the differences between L1 and FL lead to error and that not all errors made by FL earners are due to the influence of L1 led to the well-deserved liberation of EA from CA and, hence, to the death of predictive CA, (Whitman and Jackson, 1972).

Talking about the heyday of EA, James (1998, p.11) writes, “By the late 1960s EA had become the acceptable alternative to the Behaviorist CA of the 1950s.” Thus, the tables were turned; EA became a corporate body subsuming CA under it to play an explanatory role in case of interlingual transfer. EA continued to flourish with the advent of the markedness theory which attributed the degree of difficulty in language learning to the degree of markedness. The more marked a language form is, the more difficult it is to learn, (see Eckman, 1981). EA also benefited from the notion of universal grammar (UG). According to the UG theory, many of the rules we internalize when learning L1 are believed to be universal and this leads to a better understanding of the distance between L1 and FL and the difficulties that FL learners face, (Comrie, 1990; Major and Faudree, 1996).

As Dessouky (1990, p. 146) says, EA is “a non-stop area of research”. This means when Dessouky published his study in 1990, EA had not lost momentum since the 1960s. Language teaching specialists are still doing their error analyses. Numerous EA studies were conducted in the first decade of the 2000s. The following are only a few examples: Bacha (2000), Moretimer (2001), Olasehinde (2002), Abi-Samra (2003), Mubarak (2003), Erdogan (2005), El-Tayeb (2006), Xie and Jiang (2007) Abu-Jarad (2008), Al-Nawas (2009) and Darus (2009). EA will remain ‘a non-stop area of research’ for a simple reason: as long as people continue to learn language (L1 or FL), they will commit errors. Nobody goes from zero competence to full competence in the language in one leap. And as long as people commit errors – as opposed to performance slips and mistakes (see Brown 2000) - there will be a need for EA not only for the traditional purposes of error correction and remedial teaching, but also for what EA can reveal about the process of learning and using language. At this juncture, research in language learning and communication strategies (e.g. Bialystok, 1990; Chamot et al., 1999; Cohen, 1998; Dornyei, 1995; McDonough, 1999; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; O’Malley et al., 1989; Rost and Ross, 1991) boosted EA and shifted it from a purely linguistic perspective to a psycho-cognitive domain. Thus, EA has come to play a more sophisticated role in language acquisition research and in language teaching. As researchers continue their investigation into the cognitive strategies of learning and communication, EA will gain
ground as the key to the understanding of these strategies. The instances of the learners’ correct production of language forms may fall short of informing us about the cognitive processes since such correct pieces could be due to memorization or sub-conscious acquisition. Needless to say, a learner may produce an incorrect form as a result of exposure to faulty language input.

Decades ago, Corder (1967, p. 167) wrote, “A learner’s errors … are significant in that they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language.” Corder showed the importance of EA to the researcher. In this study, however, we focus on its importance to the classroom teacher. Apart from its role in correcting learners’ errors and in re-teaching problematic forms and structures, EA constitutes a link between language learning and teaching that can be exploited in initial as well as remedial teaching. Since EA gives us an insight into the strategies of language learning as Corder (ibid) said, these strategies can inform our teaching methods and bring them closer to the learning process, thus making for a learner-centered technique of language instruction, (Mahmoud, 2010).

Having shed some light on the endurance of EA as an area of research, this study seeks to present empirical data bearing out the claim that EA can bridge the gap between language learning and teaching through what has been revealed so far about learning and communication strategies. The study focuses on the vocabulary errors and their direct bearing on vocabulary instruction. We intend to analyze the vocabulary errors made by the learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and propose a strategy-based teaching technique that is in line with the learners’ psycho-cognitive association strategy reflected in interlingual and intralingual transfer.

Focus on vocabulary has a twofold purpose. First, the analyses that are devoted solely to vocabulary errors are sporadic, peripheral and overshadowed not only by the analyses of errors in other areas such as grammar but also by the heavy emphasis on vocabulary learning strategies based on data collected by means of questionnaires and verbal reports, (see e.g. Bernardo, 2009; Cohen, 1990; Gu and Hu, 2003; Nation, 2001; Zhang, 2001, 2009; Wang, 1998). We reviewed a random sample of 278 error analyses; only 11 of them were dealing exclusively with single-word vocabulary errors. Most of the analyses (149) were general, touching on all types of errors. The analyses of grammar errors amounted to 69 and those devoted to pronunciation errors were 14. Of the 12 analyses of vocabulary errors, six were unpublished theses and papers written in the 1970s, (Clackson, 1977; Kantor. 1978; Myint, 1971) and the 1980s (Balhouq, 1982; Hamdan, 1984; Mustafa, 1987). The unpublished materials may not be accessible to the readers around the world. Hence, we are left with only five articles: Abberton (1963), Bickerton (1971), Khatib (1984), Laufer (1992) and Scolfield (1981). As we can see from the list, the most recent one (Laufer, 1992) was published about 20 years ago. With regard to the subjects of the 11 vocabulary studies, only four of them investigated the errors of Arab
learners of EFL (3 unpublished theses and one ERIC document). Thus, the reason for our focus on single-word vocabulary errors is the scarcity of such studies, especially in the Arab world, (for some multi-word studies see Heliel, 2000; Hussein, 1990; Mahmoud, 2003, 2005).

The other equally important purpose of this study is related to the teaching of single-word units of meaning. The fact that vocabulary needs to be explicitly taught has been emphasized by many researchers, (e.g. Laufer, 2001; Nation and Meara, 2002; Stahl, 1999; Webb, 2008). Incidental vocabulary learning through exposure is a slow process and takes a long period of time, especially in FL learning contexts where exposure to the language is confined to a few hours per week of formal classroom instruction. As Widdowson (1990, p. 162) said, “the whole point of language pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of natural discovery.” Explicit vocabulary teaching is, then, intended to accelerate the learning process and help the learners “learn more words in a shorter period of time”, (Stahl, 1999, p. 14). This need for explicit vocabulary instruction is corroborated by the teaching techniques proposed by second and FL teachers, teacher trainers and researchers (see e.g. Hubbard et al., 1983; Mehta, 2009; Nation, 1990; Ur, 1996). These techniques are usually presented as a list of ten or more items for the teachers to choose from: using realia, acting, showing pictures, using L1, giving synonyms and antonyms, breaking words into roots and affixes, guessing from the context, defining, giving examples, pronouncing, showing parts of speech, and describing.

This study aims to help teachers choose the appropriate technique when presenting an EFL word based on the findings of EA. Nation (1990, p. 1) says, “When a teacher chooses or rejects a way to deal with vocabulary, this choice or rejection should be based on a good understanding of the way of dealing with vocabulary, the principles behind it, and its theoretical and experimental justification.” In other words, the teachers’ choice of a teaching technique should not be random, inconsistent and on the spur of the moment. Since EA can inform us about the learning and communication strategies employed by EFL learners, these strategies can be the basis of our choice. This is one way of achieving learner-centeredness where the learners are involved in the teaching-learning process. Thus, in addition to its traditional role in language pedagogy (i.e. error correction and remedial teaching), EA assumes the new role of bridging the gap between learning and teaching through strategy-based vocabulary instruction, (for more information about the role of errors in understanding learners’ strategies see e.g. Ali, 2000; Erdogan, 2005; Field, 2003; Salem, 2007; Xie and Jiang, 2007).

Of course, there are other non-observational methods of collecting data about the learners’ strategies such as interviews and questionnaires, (Oxford, 1994; Burns, 1999). However, these tools suffer from some drawbacks that render them unreliable. The learners may not be conscious of the mental processes involved in learning and communication. This could be the reason why the students who responded to the
questionnaire administered by Intaraprasert (2010) did not report strategies that involved cognitive processes in learning vocabulary. Needless to say, students’ responses could be influenced by their understanding of what the researcher wants them to do or say, (Afflerback, 2002; Burns, 1999; Davies, 1995). In case of interviews and introspection, the learners may not be able to verbalize their thoughts due to the lack of proficiency in the language. According to Nunan (1992, p. 115), “there might be a discontinuity between what the subjects believed they were doing and what they were actually doing”. The respondents may misunderstand or not understand the questionnaire items. To avoid such pitfalls, EA can be used provided that errors are analyzed as objectively and meticulously as possible. When EA is conducted for pedagogical purposes, the main problem is the classification of errors. It might be difficult to differentiate performance deviations (i.e. mistakes) from those that are due to the lack of competence in the language (i.e. errors), a grammar error may turn out to be a vocabulary error and vice versa, and an error could be interlingual or intralingual or both. The performance-competence (mistake-error) problem can, hopefully, be solved by criteria such as frequency, systematicity and self-correction.

Ambiguity at the other two levels – (i.e. the linguistic level: grammar vs vocabulary and the strategy level: interlingual vs intralingual) – can be taken care of at the teaching stage where individual differences between the learners need to be taken into account. One learner’s grammar error could be another learner’s vocabulary error. One and the same error could be committed by two or more learners for different reasons (i.e. interlingual transfer or intralingual transfer). Our teaching technique should cater for both types of errors at both levels. For instance, an error such as *He went to the home, necessitates reference to the use of the preposition ‘to’ and the article ‘the’ with the noun ‘house’ and their non-use with the noun ‘home’. At the level of the underlying strategy, the teacher can refer to the possibility of interlingual transfer from Arabic since ‘home’ and ‘house’ are both ‘bayt’ in Arabic. The error could also be intralingual; the preposition and the article might have been transferred from the phrase ‘to the house’. Thus, ambiguity at both linguistic and strategic level is useful in that it can help teachers take care of the individual differences between the learners. It could be argued that EA fails to account for avoidance, a strategy whereby learners do not use the forms and structures they find problematic. This is undoubtedly true. However, a learner may avoid a particular form and use another correct one instead. After all, language teachers do not assume a fault finding attitude towards learners. Another possibility is that the learner may commit one or more errors when using an alternative form or structure. In this case, his interlanguage exhibits an error (or errors) that might not have been committed if he had resorted to avoidance.

In the above sections we intended to echo the need for further classroom-oriented research in EFL vocabulary learning and the need for the explicit teaching of the meanings of the unfamiliar words as part of the meaning-focused activities or as a separate activity. We proposed a learner-centered technique of vocabulary instruction
based on the findings of EA. In the following sections, we will present empirical data in support of the proposed EA-based vocabulary teaching. We will analyze EFL learners’ errors in using single-word units of meaning with the aim of revealing their underlying cognitive learning and communication strategies which can be used as a basis for the above-mentioned learner-centered technique of teaching.

**Vocabulary Errors of EFL Learners:**

As we stated earlier, the role of EA is no longer confined to the traditional classroom practices of error correction and remedial teaching. In the field of language acquisition, EA informs us about the processes and strategies learners employ to develop competence in the target language. In the field of language teaching, it can inform our methods and techniques through what it reveals about the learning and communication strategies employed by the learners. With the role it plays in language learning and language teaching, EA contributes to learner-centered language pedagogy by bringing the teaching techniques closer to the learning strategies. To that end, we conducted the EA reported below.

A total of 1015 errors in the use of single-word vocabulary items were detected in 60 essays written by third-semester Arabic-speaking university students majoring in EFL. The essays were argumentative and they were two and half to three pages in length written as homework assignment for a post-intermediate writing course. A list of more than 15 topics were suggested by the students themselves (e.g. globalization, polygamy, co-education, mobile phones, car-entrance permits, intermarriage, a useful/useless course, living on campus, etc.). Since the students had the opportunity to revise their essays, the incorrectly produced words were deemed as ‘errors’ as opposed to ‘mistakes’. Two university EFL teachers, one of whom was a native speaker of the language, helped in detecting errors in the use of single-word vocabulary items. Three Arabic-speaking EFL teachers helped in classifying the errors into L1-based (interlingual) and L2-based (intralingual). Repeated errors in an essay were counted as one. Because data collection continued throughout the semester, the students were available for consultation in case of ambiguity. Six errors were ambiguous at the linguistic level (e.g. grammar/vocabulary or spelling/vocabulary). A few errors were ambiguous at the strategic level; they could be classified as both L1-based and L2-based. Consultation with the learners helped in resolving ambiguity. As we stated earlier, ambiguity at the level of the underlying strategy can be taken care of when teaching. Most of the 1015 vocabulary errors found were cases of substitution (i.e. mis-selection) where an incorrect word was used instead of the required word. Such an error is usually referred to as ‘wrong word’ (WW) or ‘word choice’ (WC). Substitution errors amounted to 985 (97%) of the total number of vocabulary errors detected. Cases of insertion of words that were required amounted to 28 (2.8%). Only two errors (0.2%) were cases of omission of a required word, (see Table 1 below).
Table (1)
Types of Vocabulary Errors Detected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>N0.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1015</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following are examples of errors of addition:
*Many people misuse the usage of the mobile phone camera.
*Its disadvantages stand to remind us that it is a source of problem.
*It is a question that every academic student must answer.
*Students spend their time finishing their activities work.
*Studying overseas is better because it has better advantages.
*In the past years, the increase in mobile phones increased dramatically.

The substitution errors were further analyzed and classified into formal errors (i.e. errors related to word formation) and semantic errors (i.e. errors related to meaning). The former amounted to 144 (14.62%) of the total number (985) and the latter amounted to 841 (85.38%). The following are examples of word formation errors:
*Dating is the best way to get marriage.
*After you get marriage, you discover your partner.
*What is the different between these types?
*In addition, friendship is differ from love.
*The mobile makes the distant between us shorter.
*It helps us if we are in very distance areas.
*Some people, especially the unemployment youth, believe that …
*They learn how to deal with different people, students or employments.

The most frequent word formation errors were the use of ‘economical’ instead of ‘economic’, ‘healthy’ instead of ‘health’, ‘emergent’ instead of ‘emergency’, and ‘Arabic’ instead of ‘Arab’ or ‘Arabian’.

The semantic errors (841) were classified as:

- wrong word-choice: (e.g. using ‘tease’ instead of ‘harass’, ‘reduce’ instead of ‘slow’, ‘produce’ instead of ‘create’ or ‘cause’)
- synforms: (i.e. using a word similar in form but different in meaning, e.g. expect-except, store-restore, buttons-bottoms, tempt-attempt)
The Role of Interlingual and Intralingual

- coined words: (i.e. creating a word that does not exist in English, e.g. acception, disobeymeny, moretheless, traitorous)

- informal words: (e.g. stuff, kids, guys, wow)

Table (2)
Types of Semantic Errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong words</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synforms</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coined words</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal words</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the vocabulary errors found were then classified according to the strategies underlying their production: L1-based (interlingual) errors versus L2-based (intralingual) errors. A total of 630 errors (62%) were judged as intralingual and 385 (38%) were believed to be interlingual, (see Table 3 below).

Table (3)
Interlingual vs Intralingual Errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interlingual</th>
<th>Intralingual</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>98.70</td>
<td>605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insertion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>38*</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A function of the number of interlingual/intralingual errors respectively

The table above shows that 62% of the errors were intralingual and most of these (96.03%) were cases of substitution (i.e. word choice). Likewise, most of the interlingual errors (98.7%) were cases of substitution. The interlingual errors have been discussed elsewhere together with their pedagogical implications, (Mahmoud, 2011). The two types (interlingual and intralingual) were then linguistically classified, (see Table 4).

Table (4)
Types of Interlingual and Intralingual Errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interlingual</th>
<th>Intralingual</th>
<th>Total*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Arab World English Journal
ISSN: 2229-9327
www.awej.org
From the table above, it is evident that most of the interlingual and intralingual errors were due to the use of a wrong word, (369 and 364 respectively). A relatively large number of the intralingual errors (137) were due to the use of an incorrect derivative of the word, (see the examples listed earlier). Some of the word choice errors might have been committed due to the use of dictionaries in the process of writing. When students attempt to express concepts for which they do not have the requisite target language words, they may consult a bilingual (Arabic-English) dictionary when they know the word in Arabic. When two or more English equivalents are listed, there is a possibility of mis-selection. Most of the word choice errors (both interlingual and intralingual - 733) were instances of confusion of relations such as using a near-synonym (or an assumed-synonym) or using a super-ordinate instead of a hyponym or vice versa. In a few cases (1.5%), there was no relationship between the word used and the required one, (see Table 5).

### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Word Choice Errors</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Near-synonym</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super-ordinate/Hyponym</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Relationship</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>733</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A function of the grand total (1015 errors)

Examples:

[1] Near-synonyms (assumed-synonyms)

*We can also make and **delete** our appointments. (cancel)*

*I wish everyone can use the mobile phone **accurately**. (correctly – properly)*

*People can carry it everywhere **since** of its light weight. (because)*

*The mobile phone may **hurt** us. (harm)*

*Bearing all these **results** in mind, car permits should be applied. (consequences)*

*The teachers give one gender more **grades** than the other. (marks)*

*By studying at home we **ignore** culture shock. (avoid)*

*Culture shock is not a chronic illness; it can be **defeated**. (overcome)*
[2] Super-ordinate vs Hyponym

*A clarification of this is that there are many new English words. (example)
*A … if he wants to write a scientific journal. (article)
*These rules are from the university department. (administration)
*A car permit is a ticket for the students and academic doctors. (staff)
*Buses take the students from the campus to the classes. (hostels)
* … the words that have words like ‘unhappiness’. (affixes)
*The exams depend on things from outside the course. (information)

[3] No Relationship

*Technology brings a lot of devices that trigger our style of life.
*The mobile phone is an extreme phenomenon that has entered every house.
*The mobile phone is a very useful commodity when we travel.
*We should know how to impose the mobile phone in a good way.
*The mobile phone has become an obvious technology used by many people.

Thus, most of the 1015 vocabulary errors detected (74.42%) were cases of choice of an incorrect word due to both interlingual and intralingual association. And most of the word-choice errors (68.3%) were cases of using an assumed-synonymy. Ranking second after word-choice errors were word-formation errors (144 – 14.62%), most of which were due to intralingual transfer. Another important category was the use of synforms (i.e. formally similar but semantically different, 59 errors, 5.99%).

Examples of synforms:

*The fire might go to the adjust shops. (adjacent)
*The device connects between far distinctions in the world. (destinations)
*Scientists do their best to invite new equipment. (invent)
*The latest virgin of mobile phones enable us to … (version)
*Mobile phones cause the derivation of the youth. (deviation)
*Mobiles are helpful especially if you are in an empty distinct. (district)
*Defiantly, this invention shows human’s genius. (Definitely)
*On occasion, you can send SMS and congratulate anyone. (congratulate)
*On campus, recommendation is already paid. (accommodation)
*The cell phone causes diseases such as cancer and futility. (infertility)

The errors committed by using assumed-synonyms, super-ordinates/hyponyms, and synforms are all due to the strategy known as message adjustment. When the student attempts to convey a message but lacks the requisite word or expression, he tends to tailor the message according to the words available to him. The above analysis of vocabulary errors show that students use the super-ordinate strategy of association in learning and
using EFL words. They rely on interlingual as well as intralingual association. The errors detected in the students’ free written essays reveal two commonly used strategies: translation from Arabic and message adjustment. There were relatively few cases of word coinage. The rare or non-use of strategies such as paraphrasing, defining, code mixing, transliteration and foreignization could be attributed to the fact that the students were free to use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and to ask for help.

**Pedagogical Implications:**

Needless to say, strategic competence is as important as linguistic and socio-linguistic competence in developing communicative competence. Therefore, some researchers (e.g. Bernardo and Gonzales, 2009; Ghazal, 2007) believe that students should be trained in vocabulary learning strategies. This is a sound proposal. Students can be taught how to use the dictionary efficiently, how to use mnemonics and how to infer meaning from context. However, to the best of my knowledge, no one has operationally shown how the other cognitive strategies such as interlingual and intralingual transfer can be taught. After all, most of the learning and communication strategies listed in books and journal articles are collected from the learners themselves. It is the learners who inform researchers and teachers about these strategies. If we agree that strategies can be and should be taught, the teachers are trained to do so and some teachers may not even know about these strategies. In his article rightly titled ‘Talking Sense about Learning Strategies’, Swan (2008, p. 265) lists some criteria for selection of strategies for teaching. He believes that strategies should “involve procedures that not all learners would automatically engage in without teaching.” As far as the cognitive strategies are concerned, all adult FL learners resort to interlingual and intralingual transfer. This transfer strategy leads to error as well as correct usage; it leads to translation errors, code-mixing, transliteration, foreignization, over-generalization and word coinage. Thus, the criterion of ‘effectiveness’ is also not applicable. In light of Swan’s criteria of ‘learner involvement’ and ‘effectiveness of the strategy’, cognitive strategies (inter-and-intralingual transfer) should not be taught, if they can be taught at all. As we said earlier, it is the teachers who need to be taught about these strategies so that they make use of them in their teaching techniques.

In a more reasonable vein, some researchers (e.g. Rababah, 2003) believe that we should ‘encourage’ students to use the strategies that can result in successful communication. Encouraging students to use learning and communication strategies entails making them aware of these strategies. Strategy awareness necessitates showing students the possible benefits and dangers of their strategies with actual examples from their own production. In this regard, error analysis (EA) may help not only as a method of elicitation of strategies but also as a technique of teaching as we will see in the remaining sections of this study. Researchers (e.g. Corder, 1983; James, 1998; Tarone, 1983) agree that it is difficult to judge whether an error is due to a learning strategy or a communication strategy. They believe that communication strategies can lead to learning. According to
Tarone (1983, p. 67), it may be that one’s motivation is both to learn and to communicate.” She goes on to say “one may unconsciously acquire language even if one is using a strategy solely to communicate a meaning.” Corder (1983, p. 17) believes that only ‘successful’ communication strategies lead to learning. However, what Corder means by ‘successful’ is not clear. Does he mean error-free production or successful communication in spite of errors? It is our contention that learning can take place regardless of the success or failure of the communication strategy employed. The crucial issue here is the availability of feedback and the learner’s attention and intention to learn.

The association strategy is a mental process used for both learning and using vocabulary. Foreign language (FL) learners, like first language learners (L1), tend to link the words they need to know to the ones they already know. Unlike L1 learners, FL learners have the linguistic and conceptual system of their L1 to rely on, (see also Jiang, 2004). As Field (2003) says, learners’ errors indicate how words are learned. Hence, instruction can be based on this common association strategy. In this respect, Ur (1996, p. 67) says, “people commonly attempt to link items together in sense units or find some reason to associate them …. these can be harnessed in teaching.” In a similar vein, Carter and McCarthy (1998, p.90) refer to the “quite widely propounded idea that vocabulary teaching should make overt associations between semantically related words.” (see also Suberviola and Mendez, 2002). It is worth mentioning here that we need to focus not only on semantically related words but also on words that are formally similar but semantically different (i.e. synforms). In light of the findings of EA, FL learners need to be made aware of both interlingual and intralingual associations. Strategy-based vocabulary instruction should also warn the learners of the dangers of such associations by means of contrastive comparisons and by presenting them with actual errors resulting from formal and semantic associations. Having been familiar with the learners’ errors and their underlying strategies, the teacher can use contrastive comparisons not only in correcting the errors and in remedial teaching but also in initial teaching. Reflection upon strategy-based vocabulary teaching techniques when preparing lessons is, no doubt, better than random and inconsistent choice of teaching techniques.

Laufer (1990) believes that vocabulary selection and presentation can be based on the ‘learnability’ criterion (i.e. ease/difficulty in learning). She lists some factors leading to difficulty in learning: formal similarity, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic differences, differences between L1 and FL, rulelessness of collocations, and deceptive morphological structure. However, not all words are easy/difficult for all students to learn. Therefore, in this study, we advocate the use of EA so that vocabulary instruction could be based on actual learning problems, not on hypothetical difficulties based on purely linguistic analysis of words. In light of the findings of EA, we go even further to suggest how a word can be presented making use of the underlying learning and communication strategy (e.g. translation). As we stated earlier, one of the problems of EA is that of classification of errors. However, based on the underlying learning and communication strategy, almost all of the FL learners’ errors are either interlingual (L1-
based) or intralingual (L2-based) or ambiguous. Accordingly, a word can be taught by means of interlingual or intralingual association or both.

Examples:

One of the frequent errors made by Arab students of EFL is the use of ‘healthy’ as a modifier instead of ‘health’ as in *healthy problems. Such an error requires both interlingual and intralingual comparisons. The confusion here could be due to Arabic where the adjective (صحي) is equivalent to ‘healthy’ in English. It could also be intralingual based on phrases such as a healthy baby and a healthy diet.

The verb ‘interrupt’ can be intralingually compared with ‘disturb’ and the L1 equivalents can be given to clear possible confusion since there are two different words in Arabic.

At the linguistic level, some errors are either grammatical or lexical as in:
*With this new technology, we are capable to use the internet.
*The student will lose self-discipline which causes to laziness.

In such cases, intralingual comparisons are necessary. Students should be made aware of the differences between ‘capable of’ and ‘able to’ and between ‘causes’ and ‘leads to’. Reference to L1 (Arabic) may help not only in clearing possible confusion but also in catering to the individual differences between the students.

Thus, vocabulary instruction can be guided by the types of associations students make as reflected in their errors. According to the findings of EA in this study, we can present a word in relation to a word (or words) that is:

[1] semantically related: near-synonyms (e.g. hurt – harm), a hyponym (e.g. journal – article), a derivative (e.g. distant – distance), an L1 equivalent.
[2] similar in form but not in meaning i.e. a synform (e.g. store – restore)
[3] semantically related but syntactically different (e.g. capable of – able to)
[4] semantically related but informal (e.g. kids, guys, stuff)

In this study, EA revealed 59 synform errors where the students used formally similar but semantically different words (e.g. using ‘separate’ instead of ‘spread’, ‘congregate’ instead of ‘congratulate’). The vocabulary teaching techniques listed by researchers and specialists (discussed earlier) do not include reference to formal similarity. This is most probably because such a technique is believed to be confusing for the learners, especially those whose proficiency level in the target language is low, (Nation, 1990). Post-intermediate and advanced students, however, can benefit from formal associations. In fact, my third and fourth semester university EFL students usually ask for clarifications of meanings of synforms such as ‘adopt-adapt-adept’, ‘insure-ensure-assure’, ‘alter-altar’ and ‘restore-resort’. They encouraged me to develop the habit of referring to
formally similar words whenever possible when teaching vocabulary, (for more information on synforms and their types see Laufer, 1997).

**Conclusion:**

The need for explicit vocabulary instruction is evident from the wealth of teaching techniques published in language teaching books and articles. In this study, we proposed a learner-centered teaching technique based on the learning and communication strategies employed by the students as revealed by the analysis of vocabulary errors. Apart from the role it plays in error correction and remedial teaching, error analysis (EA) can bring teaching techniques closer to the learning process through the strategies used in learning and using the target language. Almost all of the vocabulary errors in FL learning are due to the superordinate strategy of association including interlingual and intralingual association. Most of the errors detected in this study were due to incorrect word choice: the use of an assumed-synonym, an incorrect derivative, or a synform. Hence, vocabulary instruction can be guided by such strategic and linguistic associations. At the level of strategy, the meanings of words can be taught by means of interlingual and intralingual contrastive comparisons. At the linguistic level, meaning can be explained by presenting students with related words such as [1] true stylistic, regional and/or emotive synonyms, [2] distinguishable near-synonyms, [3] derivatives, [4] synforms, [5] superordinates/hyponyms, and [5] antonyms.

No doubt, the vocabulary words that students produce depend on the topic they speak or write about. In this study, the students attempted to use the words they needed in order to write about the topics they had chosen, (see examples listed earlier). If they had written on topics other than those, they would have used different words and, hence, might have committed different errors in terms of number and types. Therefore, this study is only an example of the role of EA in revealing students’ learning and communication strategies which can, in turn, help language teachers adopt learner-centered teaching techniques. Teachers can conduct their own EA and compile a data bank of errors which they can use in their initial and remedial teaching. Teachers of similar groups of learners can also make use of each others’ data banks and teach vocabulary in light of the underlying strategic and linguistic associations.
References


