

THE ROLE OF LEXICAL ERRORS IN L2 READING PROFICIENCY OF YOUNG EFL LEARNERS FROM A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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The present paper explores the relationship between reading and lexical errors in writing in young Spanish learners of EFL. Research acknowledges the relation reading-vocabulary knowledge, but we have no notice of studies dealing with L2 reading comprehension and lexical errors. Learners had to complete a reading comprehension test and write a timed composition. Data were collected in two times when learners attended 4th and 6th grade of primary school, respectively. Results revealed that there is no significant correlation between lexical errors and reading comprehension for our learners in either moment of data collection, although lexical errors decrease with time and reading proficiency increases. A possible interpretation of this finding may be that lexical errors are not reflecting lack of lexical knowledge accurately.

Key Words: L2 reading proficiency, L2 lexical errors in writing ability

Este artículo explora la relación entre la lectura y los errores léxicos en escritura en jóvenes aprendices españoles de inglés. En la literatura se reconoce la relación entre lectura y conocimiento léxico, pero no conocemos estudios que tratan de la relación entre errores léxicos y lectura. Los participantes completaron una prueba de comprensión lectora y redactaron una composición. Hubo dos momentos de recogida de datos que se corresponden con cuarto y sexto de primaria. Los resultados revelaron que no existe correlación significativa entre errores léxicos y comprensión lectora en ninguno de los momentos de recogida de datos, aunque con el tiempo

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disminuyen los errores léxicos y aumenta la capacidad lectora. Una posible interpretación de este hallazgo puede ser que los errores léxicos no estén reflejando una falta de conocimiento léxico.

Palabras clave: nivel de lectura en L2, errores léxicos en escritura en L2

INTRODUCTION

It is a fact difficult to deny that vocabulary is central and even preconditional to different areas of language proficiency. Performance in L2 reading and writing has been observed to be strongly influenced by vocabulary knowledge, so that a better vocabulary knowledge implies a better performance in these skills (Qian 2002). By this token, it seems safe to argue that the more the lexical errors in the written production of an L2 learner, the lower the L2 reading proficiency of that learner. The relationship between lexical errors and L2 reading proficiency will be briefly sketched in the following section, after account has been given of the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and lexical errors. The rest of the paper devotes to the description of a study carried out to examine the correlation between lexical errors and reading skills in the second language.

LITERATURE REVIEW: L2 READING AND LEXICAL KNOWLEDGE

Vocabulary knowledge is a relevant factor in reading assessment. Vocabulary size as well as the depth of lexical knowledge has been found to correlate significantly with measures of L2 proficiency. Research regarding the relationship between the number of words a learner knows and the L2 reading proficiency has put forward strong correlations between these constructs. For instance, Laufer (1992) used the VLT (Vocabulary Levels Test) to measure the receptive vocabulary size of Hebrew and Arabic students. She then correlated this measure with reading comprehension obtaining a significant correlation coefficient of $r = 0.5$ ($p < 0.0001$). She repeated the experiment some years later in 1996 searching for the relationship between receptive vocabulary size as measured by the VLT and reading comprehension of Israeli students. This time the correlation coefficient was still significant and somehow higher ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.0001$). Qian (2002) was also interested in examining the extent of the relationship between vocabulary size measured using the VLT and L2 reading proficiency of his Korean and Chinese students. He obtained high correlations between these two measures ($r =$

0.78, $p < 0.05$). Finally, Cameron (2002: 151) has also worked with this issue and has reported that vocabulary test results have long been found to correlate with reading comprehension test results. From the foregoing review of studies, which highlight the notable correlations between vocabulary size and reading comprehension, we can safely conclude that vocabulary is a facilitating factor in reading comprehension. So to put it shortly, the more words a learner knows, the higher is his/her reading comprehension skills.

In line with these studies and supporting the idea of the instrumental role of vocabulary in reading comprehension, different studies have addressed the question of the number of words which are necessary for the comprehension of written texts (Anderson and Freebody 1981; Hirsh and Nation 1992; Laufer 1989, 1992, 1996, 1997; Coady 1995, 1997; Meara and Jones 1987; Grabe and Stoller 1997; Qian 1999, 2002; Qian and Schedl 2004). The results of these studies point to a threshold vocabulary of 3000 word families, i.e. 5000 words necessary for general text comprehension. Learners with vocabularies below that size will have great problems in understanding original written texts, because reading comprehension will be hampered by lack of word knowledge. One of the most prominent representatives of this line of research is Laufer (1997), but see also Hirsch and Nation (1992), Coady *et al.* (1995), among many others.

In comparison, research concerning the role of depth of vocabulary knowledge is not as abundant. Few are the studies that have been devoted to examining the relationship between vocabulary depth and reading proficiency. We highlight in this sense the work of Qian (1999, 2002). In these studies depth of vocabulary knowledge, which is measured through three vocabulary elements or components: synonymy, polysemy, and collocation, correlates strongly with reading comprehension. These findings help understanding the role of vocabulary depth in L2 reading proficiency.

We agree with Qian (2002:517-518) that the difficulties in operationalizing vocabulary depth may have contributed to the lack of studies using depth measures. One way of measuring depth of vocabulary or rather lack thereof is by exploring lexical errors. The different categories of lexical errors tap lack of knowledge in the different areas of lexical competence.

Measuring the production of lexical errors is a possible way of looking into depth of word knowledge. The different types of lexical errors illustrate lack of knowledge of different word aspects, e.g. spelling, meaning, word class, and so on. Moreover, we can assume lexical errors to be indicators of lack of general language ability, since they are evidence of lack of vocabulary and vocabulary is widely recognized as an important predictor of linguistic competence (Cobb 2000). Several studies have also accounted for the relationship between lexical errors and foreign language proficiency and lexical knowledge.

Considering the importance of vocabulary knowledge in performance and development of the different language areas, and in general school success (Verhallen and Schoonen 1993, 1998; Morris and Cobb 2004), it is reasonable to think that lexical errors may have a negative impact in general educational and academic achievement, in general foreign language development and performance, both in written (writing and reading) (Jarvis *et al.* 2003; Grant and Ginther 2000; Engber 1995; Laufer and Nation 1995), and in oral skills (speaking and listening) (McCarthy 2006).

Lexical errors are considered to be severe errors (see Santos 1988; Dordick 1996) and in this sense they serve to evaluate the proficiency, lexical and general, of the learners in the different language skills, and to measure the quality of their written and oral production, e.g. scores of written compositions are based on the percentage of lexical errors (vs. effectively and well-used vocabulary) contained in that writing, among other lexical measures (frequency, originality, variation) (see e.g. Engber 1995; Laufer and Nation 1995).

Regarding the role of lexical errors in assessing writing, research has put forward that the presence of lexical errors will influence to some negative extent the score obtained by the written text (Engber 1995; Agustín Llach 2007). One brandished explanation for this is the fact that message communicability lies on the basis of the assessment of the quality of the written interlanguage (Fernández 1997:30-32; Hughes and Lascaratou 1982). A message that communicates well, will obtain higher scores than a message, which communicates poorly. The presence of lexical errors might be determinant in the communicability of the message, since they clearly obscure meaning (James 1998:212; Haastруп and Phillipson 1983:145).

Density of errors, especially of lexical errors, has been proved to be closely linked to the assessment of oral texts. In their experiment, Albrechtsen, Henriksen, and Faerch (1980) determined that ESL conversation extracts with a high density of lexical errors, i.e. with many lexical errors (objective measure), obtained negative evaluations (subjective measure given by native speaker judges) as regards their linguistic deployment. This statement provides further evidence of the correlational relationship between lexical errors and discourse quality (see also Valero Garcés *et al.* 2003:14).

Furthermore, different studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between reading comprehension and writing ability (Cassany 1989; Carson 1990; Weigle 2002). Learners whose written work is assessed positively also show high scores on reading comprehension tests. In this sense, it seems reasonable to assume that a learner who displays a weak writing skill will also show a weak reading comprehension skill. Research has showed that L2 proficiency affects not only transfer of L1 literacy skills to L2 literacy skills (Carson 1990; Hyland 2003;

Grabe 2003), but it also affects the transfer from L2 reading skills to L2 writing skills (Flahive and Bailey 1993; Shanahan 1987). However this issue is still in need of further research. From the foregoing research, we can think that vocabulary knowledge is a crucial factor in both literacy skills: reading and writing. Consequently, the presence of lexical errors in writing might go parallel with a poor reading comprehension. Nevertheless, we have no notice of research articles that have tried to examine the role of lexical errors in reading comprehension.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The foregoing review of the literature has put forward the lack of studies examining the role of lexical errors in L2 reading. The present study intends to cover that gap in research and investigate how lexical errors affect L2 reading proficiency and which types of lexical errors exert a stronger influence on the L2 reading ability of young EFL learners. Consequently the following research questions guided the present study:

1. Is there any correlation between the different types of lexical errors and reading comprehension?
2. And if so, what is the direction of this relationship?
3. How does the relationship between lexical errors and reading comprehension evolve with time?

METHOD

This study has a longitudinal design over three years with two moments of data collection.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 218 learners of EFL participated in this study. They were between 9 and 10 years old and were in 4th grade of primary education at the first data collection moment, henceforth T1. At the second data collection moment, henceforth T2, two years later, participants were between 11 and 12 years old and attended the 6th grade of primary school in four schools in Spain. Intact classes were taken for the study. We highlight the homogeneity of the groups with respect to their L1, Spanish, educational background, culture and EFL training. By the time of data collection learners had received approximately 419 and 629 hours of instruction in English, their first foreign language for the first and second data collection moments, respectively.

INSTRUMENTS

In order to carry out the present study we used the following instruments of data collection: a written composition in English and a reading comprehension test. Additionally, participants had to complete a questionnaire to inform about demographical data.

The written composition. Learners were required to write a letter to an imaginary host family in England. In the letter they had to introduce themselves and talk about their home, their school, their hobbies, their town and any other thing they thought the host family would like to know about them. Participants had 30 minutes to complete this writing task. Apart from time, no other constraints were imposed on the learners regarding the linguistic structures or vocabulary to use. This composition topic was selected because it allowed learners a wide range of linguistic devices and subject topics, so that either a limited linguistic knowledge or world knowledge would not interfere with the completion of the task.

The reading comprehension test. Learners had ten minutes to read a text and answer seven multiple choice comprehension questions where subjects had to choose from three options which was the correct one, i.e. the one that fitted with the information provided in the text. The reading passage had a total of 190 words and told the story of a zoo worker. The seven comprehension questions consisted in circling the appropriate end for the sentence provided, or in circling the correct answer to the question posed. The answers for the questions were easily deduced from the information in the text, where these appeared implicitly stated. This reading comprehension test was drawn from the Cambridge KET course book, Key English Test 1 (see Appendix for a sample).

PROCEDURES AND ANALYSIS

The reading comprehension test was corrected and one point was assigned to each correct answer up to seven points. Compositions were typed into computer-readable files and scrutinized for lexical errors. Following Celaya and Torras (2001) a word is considered erroneous, and therefore unacceptable “if it contains a malformation, if it is not an English word or if it violates native-like use in the context where it appears” (p. 6). A total of 6 individual categories of lexical errors were identified: misspellings, borrowings from the mother tongue, coinages or lexical creations, calques or literal translations, misselections, where two words are mixed up due to formal similarity, and semantic confusions, in which the semantic similarity of two words leads to erroneous selection of the target lexical item. These six categories were grouped to make up two further dichotomies. First, we distinguished among formal (misspelling, borrowing, coinage, misselection) and semantic lexical errors (calque and semantic confusion), and second between L1-oriented (borrowing, coinage, calque) and L2-oriented lexical errors (misspelling, misselection, semantic confusion). When lexical errors were identified and classified into these categories, then we went on to the analysis of the data.

Data were submitted to descriptive and inferential statistics. Correlation analyses were performed to examine the relationship between the different types of lexical errors and L2 reading proficiency. The sample did not meet the normality assumption, so non-parametric correlations were performed, in particular we carried out Spearman test. We use the statistical package SPSS 15.0 to implement these statistical tests.

RESULTS

Lexical errors were computed and classified for learners at each testing time. Table 1 offers the mean number of the different categories of lexical errors for each grade, and Table 2 presents the descriptive results for lexical errors grouped into the further dichotomies. At both testing times, misspellings are the most numerous category of lexical errors and misselection the least frequent. Misspellings decrease in number from 4th to 6th grade and so do borrowings, the rest of the categories increase their presence in the compositions of 6th graders with respect to the previous testing time.

When lexical errors are grouped into dichotomies, we can observe that formal errors, which are always the most frequent, decrease whereas semantic

lexical error increase from T1 to T2. In the case of lexical errors produced by the influence of the mother tongue of the learners very little variation can be observed so that we can conclude that they remain stable. Nevertheless, lexical errors derived from target language influence decrease at T2 showing that learners have acquired a higher mastery of the L2.

	N	misspelling	borrowing	coinage	calque	misselection	sem. confusion
4th grade	218	7.12	1.71	0.59	0.51	0.39	0.59
6th grade	218	4.63	0.86	0.78	1.27	0.5	0.77

Table 1. Mean lexical errors for each category

	N	Formal	semantic	L1-oriented	L2-oriented
4th grade	218	9.97	1.1	2.93	8.2
6th grade	218	6.76	2.01	2.92	5.8

Table 2. Mean lexical errors grouped in dichotomies

As it can be seen in Table 3 the range of correct responses in the reading comprehension test goes from a minimum of zero correct answers to five or seven right responses in 4th and 6th grade, respectively. In the same vein, the mean of correct responses increases from the first to the second data collection moment, suggesting that learners are better L2 readers as they pass grade.

	N	Max.	Min.	Mean
4th grade	218	5	0	1.6
6th grade	218	7	0	2.41

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for reading comprehension

The results of inferential statistics are offered in the following tables (Tables 4 to 7). The correlation coefficients obtained, which turned out to be far from significant indicate that in 4th grade lexical errors do not have any impact on the reading skill of young EFL learners. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that lack of depth of lexical knowledge measured with lexical errors does not interfere or impede reading skills in the first stages of foreign language acquisition.

	Reading comprehension
Misspelling	-.058, p = .398
Borrowing	-.041, p = .55
Coinage	.61, p = .373
Calque	.027, p = .693
Misselection	-.029, p = .667
Sem. Confusion	-.005, p = .942

Table 4. Correlation coefficients for lexical error categories in 4th grade

	Reading
Formal	-.074, p = .276
Semantic	.025, p = .717
L1-oriented	.013, p = .852
L2-oriented	-.047, p = .489

Table 5. Correlation coefficients for lexical errors in dichotomies in 4th grade

Results of correlation analyses for lexical errors and reading comprehension in 6th grade reveal very similar results to 4th grade findings with non-significant correlations between the variables, except for calques. A significant relationship is showed between presence of calques and reading comprehension pointing to some kind of positive influence of calques on the reading skills of beginner, though more advanced, EFL learners. In sum, learners who display presence of calques in their compositions can be thought to be better readers than those who do not calque from the L1, especially in 6th grade. However, correlations are very weak to draw a conclusive relationship of causality between both variables. For the rest of lexical error categories, we can safely assume that their presence does not affect reading comprehension in either way.

	Reading comprehension
Misspelling	-.016, p = .811
Borrowing	-.093, p = .171
Coinage	.010, p = .888
Calque	.155*, p = .022
Misselection	.064, p = .345
Sem. Confusion	-.101, p = .137

Table 6. Correlation coefficients for lexical error categories in 6th grade

* significant p < .05

	Reading
Formal	-.051, p = .453
Semantic	.065, p = .340
L1-oriented	.038, p = .578
L2-oriented	-.024, p = .719

Table 7. Correlation coefficients for lexical errors in dichotomies in 6th grade

In light of the results presented above we can answer our first research question negatively, since for all categories of lexical errors in 6th grade, except calques, there is no significant relationship with reading comprehension. In the case of calques, where a significant though weak correlation was found in the data of 6th graders, the relationship is positive indicating that presence of calques in learners' compositions will point to better results in reading comprehension tests. This answers our second research question.

Regarding the third and last research question, the analysis of the data revealed that the relationship between lexical errors and reading comprehension does not change with time and remains stable, except for calques. The considerable increase in the presence of calques from 4th grade writings to 6th grade compositions may account for this difference in the nature of the relationship. In 4th grade presence of calques was nearly anecdotic being the one but least frequent error category, whereas in 6th grade their presence becomes noteworthy being the second most frequent lexical error type.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Interpretation of our results points to a lack of relationship between lexical errors and reading comprehension. This result somehow goes against findings of previous research that highlight the important influence of depth of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension (Qian 1999, 2002). However, there are clear differences between these investigations in the way in which depth of knowledge is operationalized. We can think that lexical errors are not a proper and accurate measure of depth of knowledge.

Moreover, depth of knowledge is a complex construct that is made up of many different componential elements such as knowledge of word polysemy, collocation, synonymy, word frequency and so on. The lexical errors here

identified may not have tackled all these aspects. In this sense, they are not accurate reflections of the quality of lexical knowledge, and therefore the lack of correlations.

The stability in the lack of relationship between lexical errors and reading proficiency over three years time serves to strengthen the idea that there is something in reading comprehension beyond lexical errors. So there may be other aspects of lexical knowledge that exert a strong influence in reading comprehension other than lexical errors or that lexical errors are not tapping.

Still another interpretation of the absence of negative influence of lexical errors in reading comprehension may be due to the distance between reception and production in lexical knowledge. Lexical errors reflect a lack of vocabulary control in productive terms, whereas reading refers to comprehension and involves receptive word knowledge. We can positively think that learners who commit certain types of lexical errors, especially misspellings, may know those words receptively. So, reading comprehension would not be hampered by lack of productive lexical knowledge leading to lexical errors. L2 reading comprehension involves word recognition, whereas lexical error production belongs to the realm of vocabulary use. Having productive knowledge of a word comes after receptive mastery has been achieved (cf. Melka 1997), so that a gap arises between the words and word aspects learners know receptively and those they have productive knowledge of. The gap between these two types of lexical knowledge (cf. Laufer and Paribakht 1998) may account for the relative independent measures the two constructs reveal in our research study. These two types of “knowledges”: receptive and productive may be wider apart than it was thought before.

We have observed that in 6th grade calques correlate positively, though to a slight extent, with reading comprehension. From this result, we can argue that presence of calques points to higher levels of vocabulary knowledge, since learners are using L2 words to literally translate L1 words or expressions. Our results point to calques as a facilitating factor in L2 reading comprehension. Results for 4th grade may not be significant, because calques in the first time of data collection are very few, nearly inappreciable. It is especially remarkable that the correlations between L2 reading comprehension and lexical errors hardly change as learners move up grade and become more proficient. We can argue that the improvement of L2 reading comprehension and the decrease of lexical errors which parallel proficiency increase account for this lack of change. It would be interesting to observe whether at more advanced levels of proficiency with high proficient learners this relationship changes.

Future research should address the nature of the relationship between receptive lexical knowledge and reading comprehension.

In conclusion, we can argue that the production of lexical errors in written composition does not exert any negative influence in the reading proficiency of young Spanish EFL learners and consequently, we can conclude that these measures are reflecting different constructs. Furthermore, the situation does not change with an increasing exposure to the target language and as proficiency in the foreign language increases from 4th to 6th grade, with a reduction of lexical errors in writing and an improvement in reading comprehension scores. Possible explanations of this finding may be 1) that lexical errors are not reflecting lack of lexical knowledge accurately, or 2) that the two constructs measured (receptive and productive knowledge) are so wide apart that no relationship can be established.

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APPENDIX

COLEGIO _____ CURSO _____ FECHA _____ *Tiempo*
 APELLIDOS _____ NOMBRE _____ *10 minutos*

1) Lee el artículo sobre Ingrid McFarlane y contesta a las preguntas marcando con un círculo la respuesta correcta.

Ingrid McFarlane Zoo Keeper



When I left school at eighteen, I got a job at a zoo as a student keeper. Now, five years later, things have changed – I have passed my exams and I am a full animal keeper.

The money is not good. I only get £9,000 a year. You have to be outside in rain and snow, which is hard work, and you get very dirty. But this doesn't matter to me because animals are the most important thing in my life!

There are a hundred monkeys and fifty deer in my part of the zoo and I give them their food and clean their houses. I also need to watch them carefully to be sure that they are all well. In fact, rhinos are my favourite animals and so last year I went to Africa with a colleague for a month to study them.

The zoo is open every day and I work five different days each week. I live in a small flat twenty minutes away and I get up at ten to seven and start work at eight. The first thing I do when I get home at quarter past five is have a shower!

EJEMPLO

0 Ingrid left school

- A five years ago.
- B nine years ago.
- C eighteen years ago.

RESPUESTA

(A)

RESPUESTAS

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| 21 | Ingrid would like to | A | take some exams. |
| | | B | earn more money. |
| | | C | change her job. |
| 22 | How does Ingrid feel about working in bad weather? | A | She hates getting dirty. |
| | | B | She doesn't mind it. |
| | | C | She likes the snow. |
| 23 | If Ingrid doesn't check the monkeys, | A | they may become ill. |
| | | B | they may get hungry. |
| | | C | they may run away. |
| 24 | The animals Ingrid likes best are the | A | monkeys. |
| | | B | deer. |
| | | C | rhinos. |
| 25 | Ingrid travelled to Africa | A | to have a month's holiday. |
| | | B | to visit a colleague there. |
| | | C | to learn more about some animals. |
| 26 | The zoo is open | A | only five days a week. |
| | | B | seven days a week. |
| | | C | on different days every week. |
| 27 | Ingrid arrives at her flat in the evening at | A | five fifteen. |
| | | B | twenty past five. |
| | | C | ten to seven. |