English Through the Filter of the Mother Tongue in Economics Students' Formal Writing

Leonte Alina
Istratie-Macarov Alexandra-Lavinia
"Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters
alina_leonte2@yahoo.com
lavinia.istratie@gmail.com
Vlad Loredana Gabriela
"Mihail Kogalniceanu" Theoretical High School
lori_vl@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study presents an analysis of a series of errors made in English by Romanian economics students, which are due to associations with the mother tongue. The study specifically dwells on formal misselection, misformations and distortions. 125 papers were used in the study, which were collected in the academic year 2016/2017 from 59 first year finances and banking students, 26 third year marketing students and 40 first year management students. Finances and banking students wrote a report starting from a chart, marketing students wrote a cover letter, while management students wrote a business email. Different topics were provided in order not to limit the students' vocabulary to one topic only.

Key words: formal misselection, misformations, distortions, ESL, mental lexicon
J.E.L. classification: A22

1. Introduction

When it comes to the human ability of retaining information, we understand that, like a computer or a library, the mental lexicon is always being updated. This update implies the addition of new words, the creation of new connections between existing words and even the disuse of words no longer common. This phenomenon is present in all users of language, be they native speakers or second language learners (McCarthy, 1990, p. 42). Although there is extensive research on the mental lexicon of native speakers and bilinguals, that of second language learners needs further exploration. Opinions seem to be divided into two separate sides, with some studies claiming that second language learners have separate word stores and others finding evidence to support the presence of a single one. While earlier studies lack any significant indication that the mental lexicons of native speakers and second language learners bare similar constitution (Channel, 1988), more recent investigations claim that they are in fact organized in a similar manner (Wolter, 2001). With this research in view, we look at the most common mistakes made by second language learners in the field of economic sciences and attempt to identify their connection to the mental lexicon.

2. Object of the research

The aim of the paper is to analyze and identify the most common lexical mistakes made by Romanian economics students in English formal writing. Starting form the idea of the mental lexicon as "a person's mental store of words, their meaning and associations" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 327), we focused on the ways in which Romanian students made use of their personal mental library or computer (McCarthy, 1990, p. 34) in order to solve the task at hand.

According to McCarthy, "the total model for the place of any word in the lexicon will have to be three-dimensional, with phonological nets crossing orthographic ones and cross-crossing semantic and encyclopedic [personal knowledge] nets" (McCarthy, 1990, p. 41). Ronald Carter claims that "mistakes in lexical selection may be less generously tolerated outside classrooms than mistakes in syntax" (Carter, 1998, p. 185). The most likely cause of this effect is that lexical selection is mostly made of words which communicate the desired content. When a speaker makes unsuitable lexical connections (i.e. lexical errors), s/he makes the desired output message difficult, if not impossible, to be understood or interpreted by the intended receiver. We will focus in our paper on a taxonomy of the errors that Romanian university students made when producing academic English writing and on the analysis of these errors. We believe our findings have implications for vocabulary learning and teaching in a wide range of language contexts.

3. Procedures and methods of research

The research is based on the analysis of 125 papers of Romanian economics students: 59 first year finances and banking students, 26 third year marketing students and 40 first year management students (a similar study was carried out by Hemchua and Schmitt (2006)). Finances and banking students were given the task to write a report starting from a chart, marketing students had to write a cover letter, while management students had to write a business email. These papers were later analyzed and in this process, we identified a series of misconnections and word associations. We used Carl James' error classification of second language learners' output, introduced in his research *Errors in Language Learning and use: Exploring Error Analysis* (1998). Furthermore, considering the two types of errors he introduced, formal and semantic, we have concluded that his depiction of formal errors is the one to best suit our scope. Therefore, directing our attention towards formal errors we further introduce the three-type classification made by James in his study, namely, 1. formal misselection, 2. misformations and 3. distortions (James, 1998).

Drawing from Laufer's "synformic confusions" (1991), James introduces four sub-types of Formal misselection involving similar lexical forms (visual and sound similarity) and refers to them as the mala-propism type (James, 1998). The first sub-type introduced is the suffix type. As the name suggest this refers to words which hold the same root but support different suffixes, such as, considerable / considerate. The second sub-type under discussion is entitled the prefix type, and as the name suggests, refers to words which have the same root but different prefixes, such as, consumption / resumption / assumption. The third sub-type to be introduced is the vowel-based type, namely words which bare similarity in the number of vowels present and to some extent in their pronunciation, such as, manual / menial. And the final sub-type, the consonant-based type, referring to words with similar structure or pronunciation, such as, save/ safe.

The second type of formal errors introduced, misformations, refers to words which do not exist in the second language. The obvious origin of these errors comes from the speaker's mother tongue. For this reason, they are also called "interlingual misformation errors" and James (1998) sub-divides them into three types, namely, borrowing, coinage and distortions. The first sub-type of this division, borrowing, refers to words directly introduced from the mother tongue into the second language without any sort of change, such as, "It is a great eveniment" (paper 88). where the Romanian word *eveniment* is supposed to replace the English word *event*. The second sub-type, coinage, refers to words which are invented from the mother tongue and given an English-like ending or appearance, such as, "I inregistetred for the course" (paper 103). Here, the Romanian word *inregistrat* is given a new from, in an attempt to express the English word *registered*. The third and final sub-type in this category, calque, is an attempt to translate a word or a sentence from the first language into English, regardless of the correct matching of prepositions or word order. For example, the sentence "I want to be the best in everything" (paper 13), while it might make sense in Romanian, in English the correct sentence would sound close to "I want to be the best at everything". To this category we would like to add capitalization, namely a lack of capital letters for some categories of words, which is resulted from the fact that in the mother tongue the words are not capitalized, while in the second language they are, for example, *indian* or *i*.

The third type of formal errors, distortions, refers to words which do not exist in the second language and are the result of an incorrect use of the target language, resulting in the misspelling of words. We have here as well a series of five sub-types defining the possible types of misspelling. The first sub-type, omission, refers to the neglect of a vowel or consonant, such as, *buiness* (paper 35), as opposed to *business*. The second sub-type of error, overinclusion, refers to the adding of a vowel or a consonant, such as *bussiness* (paper 39), as opposed to *business*. The third sub-type, misselection, refers to the wrong selection of vowels or consonants in a word with the result sounding or appearing similar, such as, *olso* (paper 14) instead of *also*. The forth sub-type, misordering, refers to the rearrangement of letters in a word, but maintaining the same number of letters and keeping with the pronunciation, such as *whit* (paper 35) instead of *with*. The final sub-type, blending, refers to the combination of two forms of a word which doubles its final letter in certain circumstances, for example, *gratefull* (paper 46), resulting from the combination of *grateful* and *gratefully*.

4. Results and discussions

Table 1 presents the frequency of the lexical errors made by the students (hierarchically).

Table no 1: Frequency of lexical errors

Error types	No of errors (Total=314)	%	No of papers containing the error (N=122)	%
1. Formal misselection				
1.1 Suffix type	8	2,54	7	5,73
1.2 Prefix type	7	2,22	7	5,73
1.3 Vowel-based type1	7	2,22	7	5,73
1.4 Consonant-based type	10	3,18	10	8,19
2. Misformations (interlingual)				
2.1 Borrowing (L1 words)	29	9,23	26	21,31
2.2 Coinage (inventing)	43	13,69	37	30,32
2.3 Calque (translation)	46	14,64	40	32,78
2.4 Capitalization	10	3,18	8	6,55
3. Distortions (intralingual)				
3.1 Omission	80	25,47	48	39,34
3.2 Overinclusion	30	9,55	22	18,03
3.3 Misselection	34	10,82	27	22,13
3.4 Misordering	8	2,54	7	5,73
3.5 Blending	2	0,36	2	1,63

Source: Corpus analysis

The research revealed that, as far as the formal misselection errors are concerned, the consonant-based type error is the most frequent. Examples like *trough* instead of *through*, *whit* instead of *with*, *where* instead of *were* show that Romanian students are still tributary to the Romanian language spelling which is very phonetic. The next most frequent error is the suffix type, which means that the students have difficulties in deciding on the written representation of the final syllable of certain words: *agence* instead of *agency*, *to applie* instead of *to apply*, *respons* instead of *response*, *advice* instead of *advise*. In other cases, the errors are cause because of the lack of knowledge of grammatical rules: *studyed* instead of *studied*. The prefix type and the vowel-based type errors are the least frequent in this category. The vowel-based type errors prove the students' difficulty in adapting to a less phonetic language (*by* instead of *be*, *for in* instead of *four*, *feel in* instead of *fill in*), while the prefix type errors seem to be caused by an interference with the students' mental lexicon, which determines them to form new words in English by applying a prefix that is used in Romanian for a word with a similar meaning in the target language (e.g *inregistered* instead of *registered*, because of the influence of the Romanian word *inregistrat*).

Among the misformation errors, the calque and the coinage errors are the most frequent and they represent about 28% of the total number of errors. Students tend to transfer words or expressions from the first language to the target language by using a word-for-word translation. As a result, incorrect structures in the target language are obtained: *in time of ten years* instead of *in ten years' time*, *participating at* instead of *participating in*, *to keep the meeting* instead of *to hold the meeting*. Also, learners invent words from the mother tongue and give them an English-like ending or appearance: *inregistered* instead of *registered*, influenced by the Romanian *inregistrat*, *modificated* instead of *modified*, influenced by the Romanian *modificat*, *procentage* instead of *percentage,* influenced by the Romanian *procentaj.* Rarer, but still present are borrowing errors, where students introduce words from the mother tongue into the target language without any change: *voluntar* for *volunteer*, *financiar* for *financial*, *partener* for *partner*, *egal* for *equal.* These errors are proof of insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners, who resort to words borrowed from their mother tongue in order to maintain the flow of their speech. The least frequent of the interlingual errors of misformation are the capitalization errors. In Romanian, words denoting nationalities, months of the year or days of the week as well as adjectives denoting nationalities are not capitalized, so, learners are prone to writing *indian* instead of *Indian*, *monday* instead of *Monday*, *april* instead of *April.*

As far as distortion errors are concerned, omission has the highest frequency and it also ranks at the top of all the formal errors included in the research. Thus, students neglect vowels or consonants such as in *tomorow* instead of *tomorrow*, *complains* instead of *complaints*, *necesary* instead of *necessary*, *impresed* instead of *impressed*, *sumer* instead of *summer.* This can be due to the lack of double consonants in Romanian. There are also omission errors due to the fact that Romanian is a very phonetic language: *respons* instead of *response*, *sincerly* instead of *sincerely*, *belive* instead of *believe.* In this case, the students fail to write the correct spelling of certain words because they overlook the mute vowels, or they are unaware of certain sounds. Next, misselection errors are closely followed by overinclusion errors. Students select the wrong vowels in words such as *responsability* instead of *responsibility*, *olso* instead of *also*, *latter* instead of *letter*, *excellance* instead of *excellence*, because of the difference between the pronunciation and the written word. Overinclusion errors are in a way opposed to the omission errors, but they share the same cause, that is the lack of double consonants in the students' mother tongue. Once the students are aware of the general spelling rules in the English language, they struggle so much to fit these rules that they start adding vowels or consonants ever where they are not needed: *metting* instead of *meeting*, *tommorow* instead of *tomorrow*, *bussiness* instead of *business*, *verry* instead of *very, haelp* instead of *help*, *aboute* instead of *about.* The fact that Romanian is a phonetic language lays at the basis of the next type of errors, the misordering errors, where students write *buisness* instead of *business*, *togheter* instead of *together*, *whit* instead of *with* and *aswering* instead of *answering.* The least frequent error in this category is blending. This comes from a logical association that students make between the base word and *full* or *full of*, resulting in such misspelled words as *gratefull* instead of *grateful* or *thnakfull* instead of *thankful.*

5. Conclusions

All in all, omission errors (25.47%) rank at the top of all the types of errors included in the research, followed by calque (14.64%) and coinage (13.69%), which can lead to the conclusion that even if omission, an intralingual error, is at the top of the rank, the next two interlingual errors are even more frequent, as they add up to 28.33 % of the total errors registered in the research. The least frequent errors are those derived from formal misselection and blending.

The table below shows the error types in order of their frequency.

Table no. 2: Rank order of frequency of formal errors

	Error types	No of errors (Total=314)	%	No of papers containing the error (N=122)	%
1	Omission	80	25,47	48	39,34
2	Calque (translation)	46	14,64	40	32,78
3	Coinage (inventing)	43	13,69	37	30,32
4	Misselection	34	10,82	27	22,13
5	Overinclusion	30	9,55	22	18,03
6	Borrowing (L1 words)	29	9,23	26	21,31
7	Consonant-based type	10	3,18	10	8,19
8	Capitalization	10	3,18	8	6,55
9	Misordering	8	2,54	7	5,73
10	Suffix type	8	2,54	7	5,73
11	Prefix type	7	2,22	7	5,73
12	Vowel-based type	7	2,22	7	5,73
13	Blending	2	0,36	2	1,63

Source: Corpus analysis

When analyzing the corpus, we were faced with the following problems: the three authors sometimes judged errors differently, sometimes we could not agree what an error is and sometimes it was hard to determine if the source of the error was interlingual or intralingual in nature. Error analysis is a useful tool, but it has its limitations. Simensen pointed out that error analysis only partially reflects interlanguage, whereas performance analysis studies the learner's overall performance (Siemensen, 1998, p. 94). As a paranthesis, who is to say that an error will not become norm in the future? English, as an international language, has influenced Romanian specialized vocabulary in the context of globalization see Nadrag's and Galbeaza's studies on the influence of English economics terminology on the Romanian language (Nadrag & Galbeaza (Buzarna-Tihenea), 2013; Nadrag, et al., 2012). The same can happen in reverse, if an error which is very common among non-native speakers begins to replace the norm.

Nevertheless, the results of this research emphasize the necessity of vocabulary learning strategies in the classroom, so that the students can find the ways to understand and solve their language problems. According to Nadrag et al., students "can better acquire specialty terms in less time when the teaching/ learning process is focused on: 1) similarities and differences between the two languages (Romanian and English); 2) communicative activities; 3) working conditions" (Nadrag, et al., 2012, p. 231).

To lower the level of interlingual errors, students should be encouraged to use monolingual dictionaries and taught how to correctly read the phonetic transcription of words. They should divide certain problem words into syllables to become aware of certain groups of sounds and the way they are represented in writing. Students should do phonetic exercises to practice simple vowel sounds or groups of sounds. One example of such exercise would be the minimal pairs (sit-seat, desk-disk, wet-wait, bat-but, had-head etc.). Other types of difficulties could be overcome through thorough practice of the English prepositions, expressions and word order structures as well as through the development of the students' vocabulary knowledge. Students could improve their ability to choose among different suffixes and prefixes if they became aware of certain patterns in the creation of different parts of speech. Through extensive practice, they should create a classification of their own, a corpus to which they can relate whenever they encounter a similar situation. Explaining the etymology of some words can also give the students an insight into why those words are written in a particular way. As far as preposition and fixed word order are concerned, students should learn chunks of language and try to integrate them in new and different contexts. This way, they will assimilate the structures and use them automatically.

6. References

- Carter, R., 1998. *Vocabulary: Applied linguistics perspectives.* s.l.:Psychology Press.
- Channel, J., 1988. Psycholinguistic considerations in the study of L2 vocabulary acquisition. In: R. Carter & M. McCarthy, eds. *Vocabulary and language teaching.* London: Longman, pp. 83-96.
- Hemchua, S. & Schmitt, N., 2006. An analysis of lexical errors in the English compositions of Thai learners. *Prospect,* 21(3), pp. 3-25.
- James, C., 1998. *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis.* New York: Longman.
- Laufer, B., 1991. *Similar Lexical Forms in Interlanguage.* Tübingen: Narr.
- McCarthy, M., 1990. *Vocabulary.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nadrag, L., Galbeaza (Buarna-Tihenea), A. & Stan, A. C., 2012. Mathods for improving the teaching/ learning of the Maritime Code in the English language: an experimental study case. *Constanta Maritime University Annals,* Volume 6, pp. 229-234.
- Nadrag, L. & Galbeaza (Buzarna-Tihenea), A., 2013. The Internationalization of the English Language and Its Influence on the Romanian Economic Language. *Ovidius University Annals Economic Sciences Series,* 13(2), pp. 134-139.
- Nadrag, L., Galbeaza (Buzarna-Tihenea), A. & Stan, A. C., 2012. Limba engleza si impactul acesteia asupra limbajului economic romanesc. In: *Predarea limbajelor de specialitate in secolul al XXI-lea: Realizari si perspective, conferinţa internaţională.* Chisinau: ASEM, pp. 317-326.
- Richards, J. C. & Schmidt, R., 2002. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.* 3rd edition ed. London: Longman.
- Siemensen, A. M., 1998. *Teaching a Foreign Language: Principles and Procedures.* Bergen: Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjorke AS.
- Wolter, B., 2001. Comparing the L1 and L2 mental lexicon. *tudies in Second Language Acquisition,* Issue 23, pp. 41-69.