

Investigating Iraqi EFL Preparatory Students' Ability in Using Homonyms

التحقق من قدرة طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق على استخدام الكلمات المتجانسة

م. م. نور حازم حسون عبدالقادر العبيدي*

Noor Hazim Hassoun Abdulqader Al-Obaidy

Abstract

This paper highlights the concept of homonymy, which is a semantic phenomenon that is part of our everyday language. It aims at investigating EFL preparatory students' ability in using homonyms. It finds out the problems that students encounter in using homonymous words. A diagnostic test was distributed to (50) of sixth class preparatory students in two secondary schools in Nineveh Governorate. They were selected in a random way. The data of the research were collected from the test that consisted of two questions, each question includes (10) items, so the full number of the items were (20). The test's results show that students' ability is weak and they commit errors in using homonyms. The researcher discovers that the most committed errors are because of the students' low knowledge of acquiring vocabulary especially preparatory students who study English as a foreign language. At the end, the research is finished with recommendations for further studies.

Keywords: Homonyms, EFL students, errors.

الملخص:

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على مفهوم التجانس وهي ظاهرة دلالية وهي جزء من لغتنا اليومية. يهدف البحث إلى التحقق من قدره طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في استخدام المتجانسات ويكتشف المشكلات التي يواجهها الطلاب في استخدام الكلمات المتجانسة. تم توزيع الاختبار التشخيصي على (٥٠) من طلبة الصف السادس الإعدادي في مدرستين من المدارس الثانوية في محافظة نينوى تم اختيارهما عشوائياً. جمعت بيانات البحث من الاختبار المكون من سؤالين وكل سؤال يحتوي على (١٠) فقرات، وبذلك يكون العدد الإجمالي للفقرات (٢٠) فقره. تظهر نتائج الدراسة أن قدرة الطلاب ضعيفة وأنهم يرتكبون أخطاء في استخدام الألفاظ المتجانسة. يكتشف الباحث أن معظم الأخطاء التي حدثت ترجع إلى معرفتهم المحدودة باكتساب المفردات خاصة بالنسبة لطلاب المرحلة الإعدادية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وأخيراً يُختتم البحث ببعض التوصيات.

*المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة نينوى - العراق

Email: noorhazim63@gmail.com

General Directorate of Education in Nineveh Governorate - Iraq

الكلمات المفتاحية: المتجانسات، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الأخطاء.

1. Introduction:

Language is the main part of our lives because we use it in everyday situation. Ullman (1962:27) explains that meaning is an ambiguous term in the theory of English language. English language itself is ambiguous; the words usually have so many meanings. Yule (2006:107) defines homonymy as “a term used in semantics to refer to the lexical items that have the same sound or spelling but differ in meaning.”

For example:

1. a - right means opposite of “left ”.
b - right means correct .
2. a - know means to have knowledge .
b- no means opposite of “yes”.

The researcher in this research concentrates on EFL preparatory students' ability in using homonyms, which are important to master English at all levels of learning. Errors, which are committed by EFL students, have an important role in language learning. When students commit errors, they can improve their skills by getting the right rules from their teachers. In conclusion, errors and their analysis are beneficial for both learners and English teachers.

1.1. The problem of the study:

Learning Homonym is complicated, because EFL learners cannot use the words unless they know their meanings. Learners must know how to choose the right homonymous word as a word may carry meaning that it is not same as the learner meant. The researcher notices that EFL preparatory students face many difficulties in using homonyms. As a result, there will be confusion among students when they use the words. This has encouraged the researcher to shed light on this area.

1.2. The Hypothesis of the Study:

It is hypothesized that most of Iraqi EFL preparatory students' ability in using homonyms is weak which make them to commit errors in deciding the correct homonyms in context.

1.3. Aims of the Study:

- Investigating whether Iraqi EFL preparatory students are capable to use and comprehend homonyms.
- Identifying the difficulties that EFL preparatory students encounter in using homonymous words.
- Discovering the causes behind students' errors and giving appropriate solutions to handle the errors.

1.4 .The Significance of the Study:

Teaching homonyms is a very important topic for EFL learners. When the students learn the meaning of homonyms correctly, they will be capable to comprehend what they hear and read. Ellis (1985: 51-4) states that EFL students make errors in using homonyms in their correct meanings. The process of error analysis is such an excellent way of investigation. In this way, the students will be able to find out solutions to the problems that they face. The research will be beneficial for teachers of English.

1.5. The Scope of the Study:

The current research is limited to Iraqi EFL preparatory students of the sixth class in two Secondary schools in Nineveh Governorate, which were randomly selected during the academic year (2025-2026). The students of the sixth class have been selected as they are considered in an advanced stage of learning English as a foreign language.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Preliminaries:

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Semanticists try to concentrate on the literal meaning of the words rather than on what a speaker might want them to mean in a specific situation (Yule, 2006:13). Lexical semantics is one of the main branches of semantics which deals with the meaning of lexical items and it is to be taken as a basis for the explanations of the nature of meaning. One way of defining meaning is by looking into the inter-relationship between words of a language, and this is the main goal of lexical semantics as Palmer (1981: 67) states .

Vocabulary is the main thing that EFL students need in learning a language (Hatch & Brown, 1995: 1). Possessing a huge vocabulary stock can

enhance EFL learners' ability in using English skills. Generally, most content words do not have just one meaning for each; rather they are connected with so many senses. Therefore, homonymy is the most confusing topic in English. They are two words which have the same spelling and pronunciation but with different meanings. So, learning homonyms will not only enhance EFL English vocabulary box and make them feel smarter but will also help them to make things more understandable and comprehensive (ibid).

2.2. Definition of Homonyms:

The term "homonym" comes from the Greek word "ὁμώνυμος" "homonymous meaning", "having the same name", it is the conjunction of ὁμός (homos), "same" and ὄνομα meaning "name". Thus, it refers to two or more distinct concepts sharing the "same name" (Wikipedia, 2021:1). Lyons (1981, 43) states that homonymy refers to items that carry two or more unrelated meanings. McArthur (1992:22) indicates that a homonym refers to words that have different meanings, depending on when they are used. A more restrictive definition sees homonyms as words that are homographs i.e. words that share the same spelling regardless to their pronunciation, and homophones i.e. words that share the same pronunciation, regardless to their spelling. The relationship between homonyms is called "homonymy" (ibid.)

Fromkin et al. (2003: 71) state that homonyms are different words with the same pronunciation that may or may not be same in spelling. In one hand, they define them as partially similar to that of homophones. On the other hand, Watkins et al. (2001:269) define homonyms in the same way of defining homophones i.e. words that seem exactly like other words but have different spellings in spite of the fact of not calling them "homophones" in addition to "homonyms" as Fromkin et al. (2003:71) do.

2.3 .Types of Homonyms:

Semanticists differ in their classification of the different types of homonyms, which makes terminology problematic area. Gramley and Pätzold (1992:13) define homonymy as "the existence of different lexemes that sound the same (homophones, e.g. days/daze) or are spelt the same (homographs, e.g. lead (guide) /lead (metal)) but have different meanings." They divide them into two types i.e. homophones and homographs. This model is adopted in this research.

2.3.1. Homophones:

Crystal (1998:185) indicates that homophony refers to the lexemes that have the same pronunciation, but different meaning. Yule (2006: 120-1) points out that homophones are words that seem the same but differ in their grammatical functions and meaning. Lyons (1981: 71) claims that “many-to-one” correspondence between written and spoken words is described as homophony.

Lester (1991:427) says that ambiguity arises in using homophones since a word is ambiguous when it can be interpreted differently. In order to solve such problem EFL students must learn the meaning of these words.

For example, I will meet you in the /ail/ may mean:

3-a- isle means a small island.

3-b- aisle means a passageway between rows and seats in a building .

In sum, a homophone is a group of words that are pronounced the same, but spelled in a different way to give different meanings.

For example, the words

4-a- “To” means to show motion.

4-b- “Too” means “also” or “extremely.”

4-c- “Two” means the number 2.

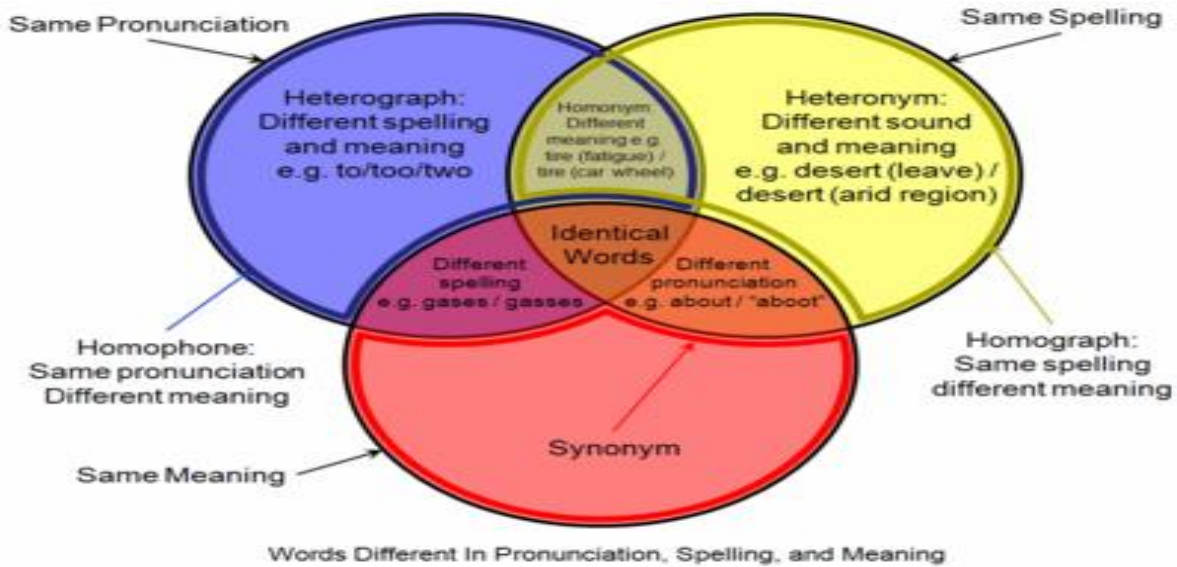
2.3.2. Homographs:

Homograph is a term that refers to lexemes that are written alike but may or may not be pronounced similarly and have different meanings (Wikipedia 2021: 2). Crystal (1998:190) states that homographs are words that are pronounced differently and they are different in meanings and origins but they are same in spelling.

In order to work out which pronunciation and which meaning is appropriate. Here are some common homographs:

5-a- “does” means a helping verb.

5-b- “does” means a female deer .



Venn Diagram shows the relationship between homograph and the related linguistic concepts.

2.4. Homonymy and Polysemy :

In semantic analysis there is a distinction that is made between homonymy and polysemy which creates a problem that has affected many linguists in general and semanticists in particular. Polysemy “polly-seamus in Latin” is defined as the existence of a lexeme with many meanings. Polysemy is a property of single words that differentiates it from homonymy in principle (Lyons, 1981: 146).

Yule (2006: 120) points out that dictionaries are very important in putting boundaries between “homonymy” and “polysemy”. He indicates that if we aren’t sure whether the words are examples of homonymy or polysemy so we can check the dictionary. He adds that semanticists treat homonymy and polysemy differently (Ibid.)

For example:

6-a- face means front part of head and face .

6-b- face means front part of clock.

2.5 .Reasons behind Homonyms :

Ullman (1962 :122) proposes number of ways in which homonyms can arise:

1. The phonetic convergence :

It happens when two or more words with different forms in spoken language as well as in writing which is most common in both English and French .

2 . The semantic divergence :

It arises when two or more meanings of a word drift apart and consequently the unity of the word being lost.

3. The foreign influence

It occurs when the words are introduced from another language .

4. Semantic borrowing

It occurs through the effect of a foreign language .

2.6. Lists of the most confusing homonyms :

The lists below show the most confusing homonyms that are taken from the student's English text book of the sixth class. The researcher gives the common meaning of these homonyms according to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013).

2.6.1 . List of homophones:

1 . Were: past simple of "be."

Wear: to have clothing on our body.

2. Sell: to give something to someone else in return for money.

Cell: the smallest basic unit of a plant or animal.

3. Road: a long, hard surface built for vehicles to travel along.

Rode: past simple of "ride."

4. Band: a group of musicians who play modern music together.

Banned: past simple and past participle of the verb "ban."

5 . Break: a short rest from work .

Brake: a device that makes a vehicle go slower or stop.

6. For: a preposition.

Four: a number.

7. Cent: a unit of money.

Sent: past simple and past participle of "send."

8. Knows: to have information in your mind.

Nose: the part of the face that sticks out above the mouth.

9. Waste: an unnecessary or wrong use of money.

Waist: the part of the body above and slightly narrower than the hips.

10 . Too: also.

Two: number 2.

2.6.2. List of homographs:

1. Lying: telling a lie.

Lying: being in horizontal position.

2. Play: participate in a sport.

Play: theatre piece.

3. Close: near.

Close: shut.

4. Bit: tiny amount.

Bit: past tense of bite.

5 . Present: a gift.

Present: here.

6 . Live: to have life.

Live: in real time performance.

7. Can: an aluminum container.

Can: be able.

8. Cool: slightly cold.

Cool: fresh.

9. Ruler: a governor.

Ruler: a flat tool used in geometry.

3. Research Design and Method of the Study:

3.1. The Population of the Study :

The sample of this research was the sixth-class preparatory students in two secondary schools in Nineveh Governorate. The total number of the students enrolled in the two schools was (60). The samples of the test were (50) Iraqi EFL preparatory students who were randomly selected during the academic year (2025-2026). The students who took the test consisted of nearly 90% of the total number of the students in the two schools. The sample of the first school consisted of (22) students while the second school consisted of (28) students. The students of sixth class have been selected as they are considered in an advanced stage of learning English as a foreign language. All the participants have the same background knowledge, age and the years of EFL learning .

3.2. The instrument:

The instrument used in this research involves a diagnostic test of homonymous words. The test has been constructed from homonyms that are taken from the student's English text book of the sixth class .

3.2.1. Description of the Test:

The diagnostic test of homonyms is constructed of (20) sentences. (10) items contain homophones and the rest of the items contain homographs. The EFL students must choose the correct homonyms, which are closed ended, i.e. multiple-choice items and restricted to one answer. The scoring of the test is objective.

3.2.2. Validity of the Test

The test was judged by five English experts to ensure its validity. Depending on the evaluation of the test, the researcher finds that the test was valid in both face and content validity. The validity of the test was 0.86.

3.2.3. Reliability of the Test

The researcher used the split half method to measure the reliability of the test. Then the items of the test were divided into two halves to calculate the correlation between the two sets of scores of the two halves. The reliability of the test was 0.80. This revealed that the test was reliable.

3.2.4. Scoring:

The tests' results were analyzed by calculating the frequency and percentage of the correct and incorrect answers. The scoring of the test was as

correct or incorrect because all the items allowed for only one answer. The unanswered items were counted as incorrect ones. The total score of the test was (40) marks. Table (1) below shows the distribution of the test's scores.

Table (1): Distribution of the Test's Scores

Questions	Items' No.	Score	Total marks for each question
1	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10	2 for each item	20
2	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10	2 for each item	20
Total			40

4. Results and Discussions:

4.1. Data Analysis:

The current research analyzes the data that were collected from the students' test in order to check their ability and analyze their errors in using homonyms. This test investigates whether the students can use the appropriate word. The researcher discusses the data analyses in the form of tables to carry out the whole percentages and total explanations according to testees' decision in this test which contains two objective questions and each question includes (10) sentences. Data analyses of the first question of the test, which is designed to examine EFL ability in using homonyms, are shown in the table below.

4.2. The Production Level:

Table (2): The Students' Performance at the Production Level

Items	No. of correct responses	Percentage %	No. of incorrect responses	Percentage %
1	27	54%	23	46%
2	44	88%	6	12%
3	28	56%	22	44%
4	43	86%	7	14%
5	45	90%	5	10%
6	41	82%	9	18%
7	42	84%	8	16%
8	42	84%	8	16%
9	23	46%	27	54%
10	30	60%	20	40%

Item No. 1: The full number of the correct answers and their percentages are (27, 54%) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (46.23 %).

Item No. 2: The total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (44, 88%) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (6, 12%) because they may guess the answer.

Item No. 3: The total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (28, 56%) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (22, 44%) because they do not have enough information about their meanings.

Item No. 4: The total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (7, 14%) while the total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (43,86%) because it is so clear.

Item No. 5: The total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (5, 10%) while the total number of the correct responses and their percentage are (45, 90%) because the point is very clear .

Item No. 6: The total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (9,18%) while the total number of the correct responses and their percentage are (41,82%) because they have enough information about them.

Item No. 7: The total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (42,84%) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (8.16 %).

Item No. 8: The total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (42, 84 %) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (16.8 %).

Item No. 9: The total number of the correct responses and their percentages are (23, 46%) while the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentages are (54.27%).

Item No. 10: The total number of the incorrect answers and their percentages are (30, 60%) while the total number of the correct responses and their percentage are (20, 40%).

4.3. The Recognition Level:

Data analyses of the second question of the test, which is designed to examine EFL ability in using homophones, are shown in the table below.

Table (3): The Performance of the Students at the Recognition level

Items		No. of correct responses	Percentage %	No. of incorrect responses	Percentage %
1	Live 1	14	28%	36	72%
	Live 2	27	54%	23	46%
2	Present 1	24	48%	26	72%
	Present 2	19	38%	31	62%
3	Cool 1	18	36%	32	64%
	Cool 2	26	52%	24	48%
4	Saw 1	25	50%	25	50%
	Saw 2	18	36%	32	64%
5	Play 1	21	42%	29	58%
	Play 2	17	34%	33	66%
6	Ruler 1	17	34%	33	66%
	Ruler 2	28	56%	22	44%
7	Can1	18	36%	32	64%
	Can 2	25	50%	25	50%
8	Close 1	12	24%	38	76%
	Close 2	30	60%	20	40%
9	Bit 1	23	46%	27	54%
	Bit 2	26	52%	24	48%
10	Lying 1	33	66%	17	34%
	Lying 2	21	42%	29	58%

Item No. 1: shows that 72% of the participants failed to use the word (live 1) correctly, in the first question, while 54% of them used the word (live 2) correctly in the second sentence.

Item No. 2: shows that less than half 48% of the testees used the word (present 1) correctly in the first statement. Whereas 62% of them failed to use the word (present 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 3: shows that 64% of the participant's failed to use the word (Cool 1) correctly in the first statement. While 52% of them used the word (cool 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 4: shows that 50% of the respondents used the word (saw 1) correctly in the first statement, while 64% of them failed to use the word (saw 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 5: shows that half 58% of the respondents used the word (play 1) correctly in the first statement. While 66% failed to use the word (play 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 6: shows the majority 66% of the respondents failed to use the word (ruler 1) correctly in the first statement. While 56% of them used the word (ruler 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 7: show that 64% of the respondents failed to use the word (can1) correctly in the first statement. Whereas half 50% of them used the word (can2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 8: shows that 76% of the participants failed to use the word (close 1) correctly in the first statement, while 60% of them used the word (close 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 9: shows that 54% of the participants failed to use the word (bit 1) correctly in the first statement, while half 52% of them used the word (bit 2) correctly in the second statement.

Item No. 10: shows that more than half 66% of the respondents used the word (lying 1) correctly in the first statement. Whereas 58% of them failed to use the word (lying 2) correctly in the second statement.

5. Conclusions:

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to check EFL preparatory students' ability in using homonyms. The researcher used and designed production and recognition tests to investigate the subjects. Depending on the

results of the test that are shown through the tables, which are mentioned previously in the research, we can conclude the following:

1. Almost all of Iraqi EFL preparatory students got difficulties and they are unable to use and comprehend homophones and homographs in context through the written text, as there is a difference between students' answers. Thus, the hypothesis of this study is validated.
2. Some of students' errors are caused by the syllabuses that are taught at secondary level. In other words, the textbook designers focus on many points of the target language and neglect the other things depending on their own point of view .
3. Other errors may be due to students' lack of knowledge of vocabulary items in general and homonyms in particular which means students have insufficient knowledge of the contextual meaning of the homonymous words.
4. Teaching of homonyms i.e. homophones and homographs is not covered by English language teachers. They have not concentrated on teaching the meaning of the most commonly used homonyms that are mentioned in students' English textbook.

6. Recommendations:

Based on the research finding, the students' ability is weak, the researcher would like to give suggestions to English teachers as this following: English teachers should give more exercises in identifying the meaning of homonyms because it will improve their ability in comprehending texts in general and sentences in particular. By knowing that their ability is weak, they should learn more about homonyms. As we know, homonymy is one of important language features when we want to comprehend any sentence or reading text. Moreover, it can affect the meaning of the sentence. It may look easy, but in fact it is not, if we do not know the correct meaning. Therefore, the students should review the study and learn more about homonymous words to improve their background knowledge. They have to know the meaning of the commonly used homonyms by using a special dictionary of homonyms as it is an integrated part in English language and we can use them in daily communication as well as in learning process.

Finally, English teachers should keep students on learning meaning intensively because most of EFL students have difficulties in answering the questions because of they do not have sufficient ability in understanding meaning.

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