

An Analysis of Semantic Errors in Iraqi EFL Learners' Writings

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Abstract

This study aims at presenting a comprehensive taxonomy capable of accounting for Iraqi EFL students' semantic errors. It examines the types of these errors produced by third-year Iraqi EFL students in English Dep. in Education college for Human Science at Thi-Qar University. The recent study aims to classify and quantify the types of semantic errors made by Iraqi EFL students .Also it attempts to indicate the possible causes of these errors. The first hypothesis of this study is the most Iraqi EFL students fall in

the errors of confusion of sense relations. The second hypothesis is that the minimal or incomplete knowledge of Iraqi EFL students for English diction is the main factor to fall in many types of semantic errors .

The results of the analysis of ninety-four essays collected from Ninety-four students in class are analyzed and statistically indicated .The findings indicate that confusion of sense relations errors were more common than stylistic ones; 65.89% compared with 14.05%. The researcher also discusses the pedagogical implications for the teaching of vocabulary for foreign language learners.

Keywords: Errors, Semantic errors, itsTypes ,direct translation

المقدمة

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تقديم نموذج شامل يمكن استخدامه في تحليل اخطاء المفردات اللغوية الانكليزية في كتابات الطلبة المرحلة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية بجامعة ذي قار. تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى تصنيف وتحليل أنواع الأخطاء الدلالية لطلاب اللغة الانكليزية كما انها تحاول ان تبين الأسباب لارتكاب تلك الأخطاء. الفرضية الاولى لدراسة هي ان معظم الطلاب العراقيين يرتكبون اخطاء الارتباك في العلاقات معنى . الفرضية الثانية هي ان المعرفة الضئيلة لقاموس اللغة الانكليزية هي السبب الرئيس لوقوع في الأخطاء الدلالية.

إن نتائج التحليل لاربع وتسعون مقالة كتبت من قبل أربعين طالب تبين إن الخلط بين أخطاء ارتباك العلاقات معنى كانت الأكثر من الأخطاء الأسلوبية شيوعاً. في نهاية البحث ناقش الباحث الآثار التربوية لتدريس المفردات لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية.

1.Introduction

Compared to phonological and syntactic errors, there are few studies which have concerned with semantic errors. This view, in fact, has been held by several researchers (e.g. Blum-Kulka and Levenston, 1979; Levenston, 1979; Channell, 1981; James 1998; Obeidat, 1986; Stieglitz, 1983; Al-Shormanil,2010; Zughoul&Abdul-Fattah, 2003; Zughoul, 1991; Laufer, 1997; Wray, 2000)Who ascertain that unlike syntactic, morphological and phonological errors, investigation into semantic errors has been neglected until recently (Al-Shormanil and Al- Sohbanil, 2012:1).

Semantic knowledge has the significance in learning and communication in a foreign language .As Vahallen and Schoonens' (1989) study indicate that semantic knowledge is one of the main factors in academic success. Many teachers note that their students' wrong choice of words can be funny. To researcher agrees. However, what is problematic, according to Zughoul (1991:22), is that while the

wrong lexical choice can be funny utterances, they are not easily recognizable.

2. Semantic Errors

Semantic errors are violation of the rules of the semantic system particular to English language.(Al-Sohbanil ,2012:121) .EFL learners must have semantic competence to avoid falling in semantic errors when writing in English (Tuaychareon,2003:50).

2.1. Categorization of Semantic Errors

James(1998) classifies semantic errors in lexis into two main types: Their sub-types and examples are as follows:

2.1.1 Confusion of sense relations. EFL students must have semantic competence when writing in English to enable them avoiding semantic errors (Tuaychareon,2003:31).The following four main types of errors are classified accordingly.

1. Using a superonym for a hyponym. A more general term is used where specific

one is needed. Therefore the meaning is under- specified(for example, we have modern equipment <appliances> in our house).

2 Using a hyponymy for a superonym. An overly specific term used(for example, The colonels"officers" live in the castle)*.

3. Using inappropriate co-hyponyms(for example, I think the city has good communication "transportation" "public transport" such as a lot of buses).

4. Using a wrong near synonym: It is unlikely to find two words with exactly the same meaning. Words that are considered synonyms

especially those used in dictionaries are in fact different in meaning in some respect. (Palmer, 1976: 60) .A difference in meaning among synonyms may be, according to Nilsen (1975:155) a difference in geographical distribution, in styles or register,in collocation, in connotation, and possibly some other ways. This can be indicate with an example:

she is excellent(brilliant) student).* (Schmitt, 2006:10-11)

5. Confusion of binary terms : According to Palmer (1976) as cited by Erdmenger, 1985:93):

there are lexical items which are usually categorized as "relational opposites". These words generally exhibit the reversal of a relationship between items rather than "oppositeness in meaning".

These items under binary opposites such relations as antonyms as in big and small, complementary relations as male- female and directional relations as in come and go. Such words tend to be confused and used as substitutes for each other by Arab students.(ibid:97)

This type of error is committed by the learners when they are confused about lexical item .It is known as "relational opposite" (Laufer,1997:301-312). (for example ,using of look and feel in* I look (feel)happy and *He feels (looks)happy(Al-Shormanil and Al-Sohbanil,2012:1).

6. Translation from L1: This type of errors occurs as result of direct translation of word, phrase andor sentence from the learners' native language in to English. All the errors mentioned above ,except distortion of meaning, due to L1 translation.

The first four categories were suggested by Hemchua and Schmitt's(2006) study. The confusion of binary terms category was adopted from Zughoul's (1991) classification and two other categories which are inappropriate meaning and distortion of meaning, were borrowed from Al-Shormani and Al-Sohbani (2012) .

2.2. Collocation Errors : Collocation is a frequent use of a word or phrase that is used together with another word or phrase .This seems natural and correct for native speakers. The wrong choice of collocation can occur as result of translation from Arabic to English and to the dependence on monolingual dictionaries that offer one word synonym without explanations or examples. (Channell, 1981:115-121)

James (1998) mentions the following three degrees of the inappropriate collocation:

1. Semantically determined word selection(for example, The city is grown(developed)).
2. Statistically weighted preferences(for example, An army has suffered big losses< heavy losses is preferred>)." *
3. Arbitrary combinations and irreversible binomials (for example, hike- hitch(hitch-hikes)).

EFL learners are incompetence in collocation knowledge as many studies have improved that (for example, Bahns and Eldaw 1993; Farghal and Obiedat 1995; Granger 1998; Howarth and Schmitt1998).

2. 3. Stylistic Error

The stylistic errors have three subcategories which are verbosity, misuse of compounds and circumlocution. According to

Leech's(1981) study, 'verbosity' is a type of stylistic error which occurs when the learners do not convey a sufficient meaning in their English writing (for example ,**I informed my girlfriend of the party through the medium of telephone*).Such sentence is too brief and un clear.

Circumlocution means “talking around” or “talking in circles.” It is when you want to discuss something, but don’t want to make any direct reference to it, so you create a way to get around the subject(for example ,*Our father who art in Heaven*. Here , the writer uses "father " as one name of God.¹

Verbosity is used in Hemchua and Schmitt's taxonomy and circumlocution is used in Zughoul's. Unlike the taxonomies of these two researchers which only included either one or the other of these two subcategories, the current study included both, thus making a distinction between verbosity and circumlocution.

Most EFL students' semantic errors due to L1 transfer . This supports the results of other researchers who saw LI transfer operating in many types of semantic errors(see for example Zughoul(1990), Jabri(2005).

1- available on <http://literaryterms.net/circumlocution/>

5 .Design of the study

The design of the study is based on the combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach is used in describing and analyzing data to find the frequency of semantic errors in the subjects' writings. On the contrary, the quantitative approach is used for determining the percentages of using these errors in the students' writings

5.1.Research Procedures

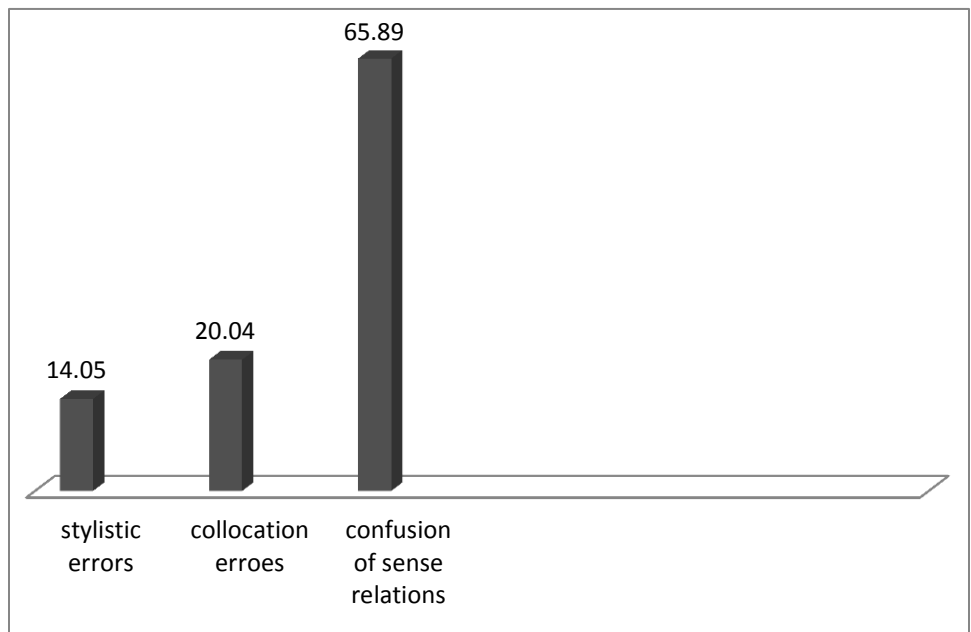
The research materials are gathered from 100 students at third-year from Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences , University of Thi-Qar , of the academic year 2015-2016 are chosen randomly to gather the data of this study. Ninety-four samples are selected and given a quantitative analysis to compute the overall frequency of occurrence of semantic

errors. The subjects were asked to write well-organized paragraph on each of the topics included advantages and disadvantages of living in a big city and a small city, advantages of learning English ,the students' challenges while studying at university, reasons for the choice of an ideal job , and your favorite hobby.

5.2. Results and Discussion

The 94 writing samples analyzed for this study yielded a total of 434 semantic errors . The findings indicated that the confusion of sense relations

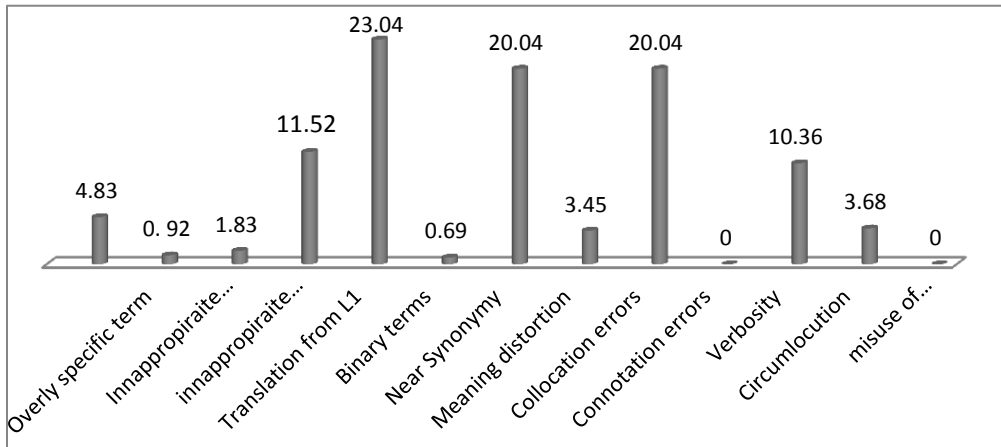
errors occurred much higher frequency than the collocation and stylistic errors ,that is, 286 errors (65.89%)compared with 87 (20.04%) and 61 (14.05%). (See figure 1 below)



Major categories of Semantic errors Figure (1)

The subcategories of semantic errors varied in their frequency of occurrence as show in figure 2,with two categories, connotation and misuse of compounds , not occurring at all . The subcategories within major category of semantic errors showed even greater variation, with some types of errors occurred quite frequently such as direct translation from L1 which occurred 100 times (23.04). These errors due to direct translation from L1 were classified under a subcategory of semantic errors, the confusion of sense relations . It

was followed in frequently by two other types of semantic errors which are near synonymy and collocation errors, both of which occurred 87 times (20.04) . Table1 shows the frequency of occurrence of the semantic errors .



| No. | Semantic Error | No. of Er | Perce | No. of containing Errors(The total =94) | Percentage |
|-----------|---|------------|--------------|--|--------------|
| 1 | The total No. of confusion sense relations | 286 | 65.89 | 70 | 74.46 |
| 1.1 | General Term for synonymy | 21 | 4.38 | 18 | 19.14 |
| 1.2 | Overly specific term | 4 | 0.92 | 1 | 1.06 |
| 1.3 | Inappropriate co-hypothesis | 6 | 1.38 | 3 | 3.19 |
| 1.4 | Near synonymy | 87 | 20.04 | 65 | 74.14 |
| 1.5 | Direct Translation from L1 | 100 | 23.04 | 66 | 70.21 |
| 1.6 | Binary terms | 3 | 0.69 | 2 | 2.12 |
| 1.7 | Inappropriate meaning | 50 | 11.52 | 35 | 37.23 |
| 1.8 | Distortion of meaning | 15 | 3.45 | 9 | 9.57 |
| 2. | Collocation errors | 87 | 20.04 | 33 | 35.01 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------|--|------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| 3. | Connotation errors | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. | The total No. of stylistic errors | 61 | 14.05 | 19 | 20.21 |
| 4.1 | Verbosity | 45 | 10.36 | 17 | 18.08 |
| 4.2 | Misuse of compounds | 1 | 0.2 | 1 | 1.06 |
| 4.3 | Circumlocution | 15 | 3.45 | 11 | 11.70 |
| | The total No. of semantic errors | 434 | 100 | 76 | 80.85 |

Figure (2) Subcategories of semantic errors

Table (1) Frequency and Percentages of in Iraqi EFL Students Writings the Semantic Errors

Of the semantic errors, the major category with the highest frequency of occurrence was the confusion of sense relations. The total number of errors in this category was 286, with a percentage of 65.89% of the total number of errors . This proves that the first hypothesis which indicates". The most Iraqi EFL students fall in the errors of confusion of sense relations" is true. This types of errors included in the category listed in their order frequency of occurrence were direct translation of lexemes from LI using words with inappropriate

meaning, near synonyms a general term for a specific one, words that distorted meaning inappropriate co-hyponyms, wrong binary terms, and finally overly specific terms 'Collocation errors' as a major category, were next in frequency after confusion of sense relations' and occurred with the same frequency as the subcategory

of the use of inappropriate words.' Stylistic errors were the least frequent, with 'verbosity' the highest subcategory followed by 'circumlocution'. These types of semantic errors are discussed below.

5.2.1. Direct translation from LI

Direct translation from LI was the most frequent errors in the subjects' writings. That is, it occurs 100 times (23.04) from the total rate of confusion sense errors.

Examples of semantic errors due to LI transfer that the researcher found in the writing samples occurred on the word level, phrase level even sentence level as can be seen in the following examples:

- 1-The *doctors* help us to overcome many difficulties us this year.(professors)
- 2- He has number of *adjectives* which make me like it.(qualities).
3. The students *took* a bad idea about English. (**had/ formed**)
4. the student can *reach the success*? (**achieve**)
- 5.When the students *become* in third year, he face more difficulties . (reached).
- 6.The students should give aware to instruction. .(be aware of)

In example 1, the subject fails to recognize that the word **doctor** is used for refer to those who work in hospital. In (2), the Arabic translated word *adjectives* has been used instead of **qualities**. The choice of subject seems equal for Arabic word on the literal level ,but doesn't convey the intended meaning in English language .These sentence produce with this kind of error seems odd and funny for English native speakers . In sentences 3, the subject assumes that the Arabic word /axatha/ (took) will

convey the intended English meaning "formed/had". In (4), the subject attempts to associate the one meaning of the lexical item in

English with all meanings which the corresponding item in Arabic supplies. In (5), the subject used "reach" /wasala/ instead of the intended meanings "achieve/realize". In sentence 6, the subject translated the Arabic word /asbaha/ and conveyed it into English instead of reach/is". Sentence 6 is a good example of translating from Arabic into English. Therefore, they used "give aware" instead of "be aware of".

5.2.2. Near Synonyms

It occurred (87) times at a rate of 20.04% of the total number of errors. The following are examples of this type of error, with presumably intended the word in

brackets following the sentence.

7- *We communicate with each others to *get* (again\ acquire) knowledge.

8- *For me, I can live(stay) in village only for relaxing because the life style is boring in city.

9. * So my relationship with this city is very *deep*. (strong)

10. * The city is the place where the people lived after *travelling* from tribes. (migrating).

11- *We will have a good chance to get a *work*. (**job**)

12. They do not *improve* the idea in student's *brain* that English is difficult. (**change**) (**mind**)

13. We must *treat* our weakness in English constructions. (**remedy/ tackle/deal with**).

Example 7, the subjects uses informal instead of formal ones. The subject uses the word *get* which seems inappropriate for formal writing. This example indicates that EFL student is unaware of the register restriction in formal situation. In (8), the subject seems unaware of the difference between "stay" (be in the village only for a short time as visitor) and "live" (have her home there). Here, the student does not realize the difference in underlying meanings. In (9), besides being an example of a near synonym, is also an example of L1 transfer, where a relationship may be described as deep (*?amiqa*). Interestingly, though, the Arabic word (*qawiyya*) is also frequently used to describe relationships. Moreover the word is "strong" a word that the student probably knows, but wrongly assumes to be synonymous with "deep". However, there is misusing of the word *traveling* for migrating in example number 10. In (11), the subject uses a word from Arabic language then translates it into English synonymous but the use and meaning are not the same. It might have been assumed by the writer of this sentence that they are synonyms and can be used interchangeably, as examples (12), (13). In bilingual dictionary, the item "brain" has the equivalent of /*aqel*/, "treat" and "remedy" have the equivalent of /*yualej*/.

From examples above, it is possible to suggest that L1 transfer has a role in these errors, mainly due to *divergent polysemy* (means a single word in L1 corresponds to two or more words in a target language).

5.2.2.Lexical Choices with Inappropriate Meaning

Next in frequency after near synonymy errors was the use of a word that gave an inappropriate meaning. This type of error occurred 50 times and represented almost a third (17.48%) of the confusion of sense relations category, and 11.52% of the total number of errors. Examples of this error:

14. * I can link my hobby with my job. The word "link" here is used with

the sense of combine.

15.* I found the prep year is very hard and *the work* is very long.

16. * But they are quite different in other points for example *timing and uniform*.

As stated above, some of the erroneous lexical choices classified under the subcategory of giving an inappropriate meaning could, at the same time, be traced back to L1 transfer. An example of this is the use of the word join in sentence number 14:

* I can *link* my hobby of drawing with my job.

The word join here is used with the sense of combine . This is a direct translation of the word ajma3u used in both classical and colloquial Arabic with the sense of either put together or combine, as in the Arabic phrase "ajma3u"[ma bain] hiwayati wa zamali.

5.2.4.Confusion of Binary Terms

This category occurs (3) times (i.e. 0,69%) .For example:

17. *I like to *walk* to college on my foot every day.(go)

18.*We are *learnt* English language by the best teacher.(teach)

19.* the students may face many difficulties because of incompetence of their teachers in *education*.(teaching)

In the example 17 , the subject uses the word *walk* instead of *go*. It should be noted here that this binary term reflects a relationship of oppositeness between terms in a complementary distribution sense .This type of errors may be occurred because of lacking of distinction occurring in the learner's dialect. The subjects of this study could not distinguish the difference between some words. As shown in examples18 and19 , " learn" is used as substitute for " teach", and study / bidrus/, education /ta9leem/ teaching /tadrees/.

5.3.Collocation Errors

We found that 87 collocation errors, i.e. 20.04% , of the total number of semantic errors in the subjects' writings. Some of the examples are mentioned below with the correct collocation each sentence .

- 21. *my hoppy is making use ***my rest to get fun time***. (to have fun)
- 22.* Do anything to ***get*** success.(have)
- 23. * The students ***take*** low marks in poetry. (***get***)
- 24.* We must ***produce*** our success .(make)
- 25.* 5. I ***hold*** every opportunity to speak English with others. (***seize***)
- 26. We do not travel ***abroad*** Iraq to use English. (***outside***) 27. Recently, English language is ***counted*** as the best means to communicate with the world. (***considered***)

The examples above show that the wrong choice of words are clear examples of translating from Arabic into English assuming that a collocation

in Arabic is similar to a counterpart in English. The subjects were thinking of the Arabic /yaakhuth\,in (23) . The lexical errors in sentences 24-27 might be due to the fact that one lexical item in

Arabic corresponds to more than one lexical item in English. Because of the extensive reliance of Arab learners on dictionaries, they pick up the first lexical item that comes to their mind ignoring some constructions may be

semantically incompatible and that resulted in producing uncommon, possibly unacceptable collocations. This can be attributed to the lack of

extensive reading of contemporary English prose where the learners may acquire and build up the competence to use appropriately the lexicon of the target language.

The results indicate that there needs to be more direct teaching of collocations in English. Furthermore, it points to the importance of teaching vocabulary items in context rather than in isolated lists. Thus. The findings prove that the second hypothesis ,which emphasizes on incomplete knowledge of Iraqi EFL students for English diction is the main factor to fall in many types of semantic errors, is true.

5.4. Stylistic Errors

Stylistic errors in general occurred 61 times (14.05%). This category included subcategories such as verbosity , circumlocution and miss use of compounds which occurred 45 times, 15 times and once respectively. Examples of these errors found in the students ' writings are:

28. * I don't know more about studying in university but I think it will be *good and nice*.

29. * The travel between the cities is *very easy and simple*.

30. *This cities have a lot of *garden and park*.

31. * It gives the person *power and strong*.

32. * He was very *intelligent and smart*.

33. * We can visit our family and friends by *easy way*

34-I like a style of life on there. (life style)

35-Also, both of them are existed in many kinds and choices. But in

university not say that take out from my marks. (deduct)

In examples 28-32 above, the verbosity in the students writing is a transfer from their L1, where the use of couplets such as easy and simple, big and large, is a favorable rhetorical style, referred to as lexical couplets. A lexical couplet a phrase or sentence coordinating two or more words with shared semantic components and a single referent, like the idiomatic English bits and pieces (Rieschild, 2006:6). In Arabic discourse, this is considered a stylistic embellishment. Synonymous parallelism may extend to adjacent clauses as coordinated phrases with a cognate verb and noun, lexical couplets may include rhyme (phonetic repetition) further intensifying the utterance (ibid:18). However, not all verbosity errors were examples of couplets; example 33 above is an example of using too many words to express a concept. Example 34 is related to misuse of compounds. However, example 35 is circumlocution error.

6. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The study attempts to indicate what types of semantic errors in the writings of Iraqi EFL students. In general, they are classified in to three main categories and subcategories. There were 434 semantic errors identified in this study. It has been found that translation from L1 scores the highest number of errors (.i.e., 26.06 of the total number of semantic errors) than other types of semantic errors. These errors may due to many factors as an inadequate of learning and interference of learners' first language .To remedy these

learning difficulties, the teachers' role is important to ensure an effective correction of errors. The

teacher should pay attention to make their student able to differentiate between Arabic language and the target language (i.e. English) being taught. In doing this, the teacher will reduce their students' roles in falling these errors. Furthermore, all new word should be taught in context. Students could also practice the use of superordinates in vocabulary learning as confusion of binary terms and near synonyms point to the significance of this particular training. English teachers

should also be trained to apply linguistic knowledge a classroom. For instance, more direct teaching is needed of the and morphological structure of word associations and collocations.

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Appendix

Samples of the students' writing

"Reasons for the Choice of Ideal Job"

To produce success in a life, we must select a good and ideal job. From my opinion the ideal job is where we sit in our own office and produce our own rules. It is important to have high technologies and experience at work. This gives you power and strength to continue. And it would make your job much comfortable and easier. I can link my happy with my job. In this way, the work will be successful. However, some people long time to increase their salary. It is suitable for their healthy

Advantages of learning English
English is an international language which
is spoken by many people in different
countries. Therefore, it is delivered as
a means of communication with people
from different countries. So we can visit
any country and communicate with its
people by easy way. Other advantages
of learning English is availability of
getting knowledge in different pages on
the internet which are written in English.
Really, learning English is advantageous.
Because English makes your travel
between countries very easy and simple.
It leads me to think that learning of English
will be good, nice and useful.