Semantic Pragmatic Errors in Written Discourse of Iraqi EFL Students

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Abstract
The semantic pragmatic errors which the Iraqi EFL Students produced in their writings are investigated in this study. A total of 120 students of the English Language Department in College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University from the four academic years participated in the study. The data was collected via a written discourse task with formal letter writing, argumentative essay and short narrative texts. The analysis concentrated on identifying semantic and pragmatic errors, especially those impairing meaning and context. The findings showed that students from the first year made the highest number of such errors in pragmatic aspects such as speech acts, politeness strategy, context, etc. Students in higher levels make mistakes too but improved pragmatic ability. The results show that teaching learners about pragmatic and semantic clarity on purpose should be present in the curriculum to improve their communicative competency in written English. This research aids understanding of language learning difficulties in areas like Iraq which are multilingual and socioculturally complex.

1. Introduction

Completing the process of learning a language does not entail that one knows a language's grammar and vocabulary, but includes a new aspect as well, namely, the ability to communicate in an appropriate manner in various social settings, (Hymes, 1992). However, mistakes are bound to happen in second language learning when learners apply the rules of their native language or misinterpret the rules in the target language. Semantic and pragmatic errors are especially important because they will affect what the speaker intends to mean and what they get across. Phrase or word wrongly used in a particular sense is called a semantic error. For instance, they may use "loan" instead of "lend" or "effect" rather than "affect". Such mistakes arise mostly due to deficient lexical knowledge. Moreover, the mother tongue interferes with such use. On the other hand, the misuse of language in the social sphere refers to a pragmatic error, for instance, misuse of requests,

apologies, and other speech acts, lack of observance of politeness conventions, misunderstanding or disobeying of implications or conversational implicatures. Pragmatic errors can often be more serious than grammatical or lexical errors because they can cause a breakdown in communication and/or negative social evaluation, (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). Iraqi EFL students have certain difficulties due to the low input from Arabic to English. Most EFL instruction in Iraqi universities pay most of the attention on grammar and vocabulary with less focus given on the semantic and pragmatic aspect. Students often write texts that are structurally correct but semantically unclear or pragmatically inappropriate. The purpose of the study is to examine and classify the semantic and pragmatic errors in the written discourse of a sample of Iraqi EFL learners at the Department of the English Language, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University. Through analysis of texts produced by different academic level students, the study aspires to find out the distribution of occurrence of errors as well as infer the role of proficiency level in the occurrence of errors. The findings will help curriculum developers and teachers to incorporate more semantic and pragmatic instruction into EFL courses so that students' communicative competence in written English could be enhanced.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

1.2.1 Objectives

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze the semantic and pragmatic errors of Iraqi EFL students in their writing, specifically to:

1. identify the types and frequency of semantic and pragmatic errors in written texts produced by Iraqi EFL students.

2. investigate whether or not there are significant differences in error types and frequencies based on the academic year (first to fourth year).

3. explore possible causes of these errors, including mother tongue interference, limited exposure, and lack of explicit pragmatic instruction.

1.2.2 Research Questions

1. What types of semantic and pragmatic errors do Iraqi EFL students make in their written discourse?

2. Do error patterns differ significantly across academic levels?

3. What factors contribute to the occurrence of these errors?

1.3 Related Studies

For a better understanding of the field, here are some recent studies published about the Semantic and Pragmatic Errors in EFL Learners' writings especially Arab students:

1.3.1 Semantic Errors in FL/L2 Writing

Mistakes involving words that result in a shift and/or loss in meaning are called semantic errors (Nation, 2013). Errors can arise from lexical confusion, interference from the mother tongue, or limited vocabulary knowledge. James (1998) and Ellis (1994) note that errors made on the semantic level indicate that learners have not yet fully mastered what words mean, how they collocate and what the relevant semantic fields are.

In the Arab world, many studies have analyzed semantic errors in EFL writing. One example is that Al-Khairy (2015) carried out a research on the semantic errors in the writing of Saudi EFL university students. He found that the most frequent errors were the wrong use of synonyms, false friend errors, and inappropriate collocation. The writer claimed that the inaccuracy occurred due to the negative transfer from Arabic and lack of authentic English text.

Research on semantic errors is little but growing in Iraq. An examination of essays written by Iraqi EFL students showed some semantic problems related to the use of a preposition, verb pattern, and idiomatic expression (Jassim, 2019). The study suggested including additional semantic awareness activities in the curriculum to improve students' accuracy in vocabulary use.

1.3.2 Pragmatic Errors in FL/L2 Writing

Pragmatic errors happen when learners produce utterances that are inappropriate for the social context or speaker's intention, or that violate cultural norms (Thomas, 1983). Some errors are inappropriate speech acts, misuse of politeness markers, and failure to observe implicatures.

Rose and Kasper (2001) state that explicit instruction rather than implicit assumption through grammar instruction is necessary to develop pragmatic competence. Many EFL programs don't teach the pragmatic part, and this creates a lot of problems.

Mahdi (2010) compared the pragmatic performance of German and Iraqi speakers. He conducted an extensive cross-linguistic study of German and Iraqi-Arabic routine formulae. It was found Most German routine formulae have functional Iraqi-Arabic equivalents; however, the actions that trigger— and the responses to—some speech acts differ across the two cultures (e.g., wishes, compliments), so pragmatic norms are not fully interchangeable and need explicit teaching.

Alsulayyi (2016) looked into the strategies of apology of EFL learners from Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that the students exhibited non-native-like patterns, often tending towards fixed expressions with various mitigators. The authors stressed the importance of explicitly teaching variations in speech

acts. In a different study, Love & Powers (2002) studied Examines communication between female university students in the United Arab Emirates and first year faculty from five western countries. It was found that different classroom norms in the UAE (e.g., more negotiation over deadlines/attendance, less immediate feedback, group visits to instructors, and gender-based proxemic rules) created high uncertainty for Western instructors, that is, reducing miscommunication required explicit expectation-setting and sensitivity to local interaction norms.

Sattar and Lah (2009) also compared Iraqi EFL learners' and native speakers' compliment responses and found a significant difference in their frequency and level of formality. Iraqi students tended to reply that made fun of themselves or ones which deflected the conversation. This contrasted with acceptance strategies used by native speakers.

1.3.3 Semantic and Pragmatic Errors in Academic Writing

The difficulty non-native English speakers encounter when tackling academic English suffers due to its complex nature. According to Hyland (2004), academic writing should not only be grammatically correct but also semantically and pragmatically appropriate (in argument, hedging, and citing).

Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2012) study on the Iranian EFL students' academic writing showed errors in the hedging devices and stance marking that were reported to cause a high rate of problem in the argument clarity and persuasive force. Include genre-based instruction to help students write better, recommend researchers.

1.3.4 Learner Proficiency and Error Types

Multiple research**es** have connected error types with learner proficiency levels. According to Ellis (1994), early learners were more likely to make errors that were global in nature, which affected meaning. In contrast, more advanced learners made more local errors which did not affect meaning. - Nevertheless, some researchers (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001) argue that pragmatic errors do not vanish even in advanced learners due to lack of exposure and insufficient instruction. As part of a longitudinal study, Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan (2012) asked Spanish EFL learners at different levels to write emails. The findings demonstrated that although advanced learners used more complex pragmatic strategies, they still erred in adjusting tone and formality to the recipient.

Table 1: Summary of Related Studies

Study	*Country*	*Participants*	*Focus*	*Key Findings*
Al-Khairy (2015)	Saudi Arabia	University EFL students	Semantic errors	Misuse of synonyms due to L1 transfer
Jassim (2019)	Iraq	Iraqi EFL students	Semantic errors	translation from L1 scores the highest number of errors
Alsulayyi, M. N. (2016)	Saudi Arabia	University students	Apology strategies	Overuse of formulaic expressions lacking mitigation
Mahdi (2010)	German	EFL learners	Directness and lack of cultural sensitivity	pragmatic norms are not fully interchangeable and need explicit teaching
Dabbagh (2017)	Iraq	Iraqi EFL students	Request strategies	Blunt and unmitigated expressions
Love& Powers, (2002)	UAE	EFL learners	Communicating under uncertainty	reducing miscommunication required explicit expectation-setting
Farrokhi & Sattarpour (2012)	Iran	EFL students	Academic writing	Hedging and stance marker errors
Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan (2012)	Spain	EFL learners	Email writing	Advanced learners still made tone/formality errors

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the Semantic Theory (Lyons, 1977) and the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) theory (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993) is also part of the framework as the authors state that second language learners acquire this competence over time.

2.1 Semantic Theory

The meaning of words, phrase and sentences is what semantics is all about (Lyons 1977). When learners misunderstand the meanings of words, it leads to semantic error in communication. In EFL writing, students are Arabic speakers who employ a lot of synonyms, collocations and idiomatic expressions that go astray via transfer from Arabic (Al-Khairy, 2015).

More than often, when Iraqi EFL students write, interference due to the Arabic system happens because of the structural and lexical systems. Basically semantic interference (Al-Momani, 2016). To illustrate, the Arabic language relies heavily on root-based morphology, whereas the English language is primarily based on the affixation and syntactic structures.

2.2 Speech Act Theory

According to Austin (1962), language is not just used to describe reality but performs actions. This concept gives rise to the term speech acts. The acts of locutionary (saying something), illocutionary (meaning what is said), and perlocutionary (doing something). (13 words) Searle (1969) classified speech acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

The language used in writings is called speech acts. For example, requests, apologies, compliments, refusals, etc. When miscommunication and impoliteness occur, Thomas (1983) calls it pragmatic failure due to errors in these areas.

The Arabic and English communicative norms of Iraqi EFL students differ greatly, leading them to use illocutionary acts inappropriately in their writing. To illustrate, the Arabic cultural preference of being direct may be considered as rude in English in instances like a formal letter or academic essay.

2.3 Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)

Understood as the study of how learners develop their ability to use a second language, Interlanguage Pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). According to ILP researchers, pragmatic development is gradual and influenced by exposure, instruction, and sociocognitive factors. For this aim, the current study adopts an ILP perspective to study the development of semantic and pragmatic competence across levels.

3. Methodology

The research is descriptive qualitative which involves the quantitative one in identifying and classifying semantic and pragmatic errors in writing discourse. The layout enables detailed examination of particular errors and comparison of numerous student groups.

3.1 Participants

The study involved 120 students from the English Language Department at College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University. They were chosen through purposive sampling to represent all four (4) academic years.

Table 2: Summary of Participants

Academic Year	Number of Participants
First Year	30
Second Year	30
Third Year	30
Fourth Year	30

The students were most exposed to the English language through classroom instructions and university materials.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

Using a written discourse task consisting of three types of writing, data were collected.

1. Formal Letter Writing – e.g., job application letter

2. Argumentative Essay – e.g., "Should English be the official language of Iraq?"

3. Short Narrative Text – e.g., recounting a personal experience

The selected tasks have sentences of different types and pragmatics to conduct an elaborate error analysis on them.

All the participants were asked to do the composing tasks under observed conditions over the period of one week to decrease outside help.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The data is analyzed with error analysis (Corder, 1981). The steps are as follow.

1. The meaning and practical application of all texts written is looked through.

2. Error Classification: Errors are grouped into:

   - Semantic Errors: Misuse of vocabulary, false friends, collocations, prepositions.

   - Pragmatic Errors: Inappropriate speech acts, incorrect use of politeness markers, contextual insensitivity.

3. Each error type is counted and recorded for each level of education.

4. Mistake patterns of first, second, third and fourth-year students are compared.

To assess the reliability, each rater independently coded a random 20% samples of our data. Cohen's Kappa is used to determine the inter-rater agreement yielding a score of 0.82.

3.4 Data Presentation Tools

Error types, frequency counts and trends across academic levels were presented using tables and graphs. Tools like these made comparisons easier and interpretations clearer. **4. Findings and Discussion**

The results of the study, which focus on the types and occurrence of semantic and pragmatic errors in written discourse made by Iraqi EFL students will be analyzed in this section. Analysis of the data is done as per first-year, second-year, third-year and fourth year.

Table 3: Total Number of Errors by Type and Academic Year

Academic Year	Semantic Errors (Total)	Pragmatic Errors (Total)	Combined Errors
First Year	215	287	502
Second Year	164	231	395
Third Year	112	184	296
Fourth Year	78	132	210

Data from Table 1 shows that first-year students made a substantial number of semantic and pragmatic errors. Fourth-year students made the least number of errors indicating that students have been exposed to the knowledge of these errors which helped them improve. Despite the learners being quite proficient, many errors persisted at a higher degree, namely, infractions on politeness strategies and speech acts.

Table 4: Distribution of Semantic Error Types by Academic Year

Semantic Error Type	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Total
False Friends	34	27	18	12	91
Preposition Misuse	56	43	31	22	152
Collocation Errors	45	38	27	18	128
Word Choice Confusion	80	56	36	26	198
Total	215	164	112	78	569

False friends were confused most often, then preposition misuse and collocation errors. The assertions of the above are in line with those of Al-Momani (2016), who argued that Iraqi EFL learners have problems with vocabulary depth and use in context.

Lower-level students faced more instances of false friends (words resembling or sounding similar in Arabic and English but having different meanings) due to limited lexical knowledge and, subsequently, L1 transfer.

Table 5: Distribution of Pragmatic Error Types by Academic Year

Pragmatic Error Type	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Total
Inappropriate Speech Acts	62	54	40	28	184
Lack of Politeness Markers	98	76	58	38	270
Contextual Insensitivity	65	51	42	28	186
Overgeneralization of Forms	62	50	44	38	194
Total	287	231	184	132	834

Pragmatic errors were generally higher than semantic ones across all levels. The most prevalent type was lack of politeness markers, especially in formal writing tasks like job application letters. Students frequently omitted expressions such as "please," "would you mind," or "I would appreciate it if…"

Inappropriate speech acts were also common — for example, using direct commands instead of polite requests. This supports earlier findings by Dabbagh (2017), who reported similar issues among Iraqi EFL students in letter writing.

Contextual insensitivity included inappropriate tone shifts and failure to adjust register according to the audience. For instance, students sometimes used informal language in academic essays or overly complex structures in personal narratives.

Table 6: Average Number of Errors per Student by Type and Year

Academic Year	Avg. Semantic Errors per Student	Avg. Pragmatic Errors per Student	Total Avg. Errors
First Year	7.2	9.6	16.8
Second Year	5.5	7.7	13.2
Third Year	3.7	6.1	9.8
Fourth Year	2.6	4.4	7

The average error rate is declining as students advance through their academic journey. This shows progress in their semantic and pragmatic

competence; however, they are still making errors in the fourth year. This confirms that current teaching practices on these aspects are not enough.

4.1 Qualitative Examples of Errors

Here are some examples of actual errors from student writings, along with corrections.

4.1.1 Semantic Errors

- Paraphrase: My book will be lent out to you.
- Please borrow my book (correct).
- New: Her negative influence had a bad impact on the group.
- My bad took away the determination of the team

4.1.2 Pragmatic Errors

- Please obtain me this position. I need it.
- I would be thankful for the chance to work with your firm.
- English is a dull language. We should not use it.
- Though English has its disadvantages, it is considered a global medium of communication.

Through the examples, we see that both semantic and pragmatic mistakes are detrimental to the text.

4.2 Interpretation of Findings

According to the findings, errors in meaning and usage tend to occur more frequent in the students' writing. Several factors contribute to these errors:

1. A lot of errors happen due to mother tongue interference where the students will do direct translation from Arabic.

2. A limited exposure to English. Most of the students learn English in class. They do not get to interact with foreign people.

3. A common shortcoming in EFL instruction in Iraqi universities is the neglect of pragmatic awareness. Instead, focus is heavily placed on grammar and vocabulary.

4. The Arabic directness that is often seen as impolite in English seems to cause many pragmatic failures in writing.

This supports Sattar, H. & Lah (2009) who found that explicit instruction in pragmatics and the meaning hypothesis were recommended.

5. Conclusion.

This study investigated semantic and pragmatic errors made by Iraqi EFL students in their written discourse, including the differences in those errors used by students of different levels. A total of 120 participants from the English Language Department of Mustansiriyah University were asked to do writing tasks which elicited formal and informal varieties of language. The

study found that Iraqi EFL learners frequently make both semantic and pragmatic errors at the early stages of their language learning.

Semantic errors are caused due to the confusion of word meaning or incorrect choice of words, inappropriate use of preposition, collocations errors. Such errors are mainly influenced by the mother tongue interference. These errors also occur due to lack of depth of vocabulary. Students made even more pragmatic errors including a lack of politeness markers; inappropriate speech acts; and insensitivity to contexts among others. Thus, the current curriculum does not teach them how to be pragmatic.

The students' performance in the use of English in appropriate contexts was poor even in the fourth-year students though the error rate reduced through the years. Seems like teachers aren't adequately helping students with meaning and context beyond what they know.

Similar to the previous studies Sattar, H. & Lah (2009)), results indicate that participants should be taught explicitly the pragmatics and semantic awareness throughout the undergraduate program.

6. Recommendations

In light of the study's results, the researchers put forth the following recommendations for teachers, curriculum developers and policymakers:

1. Include Pragmatic Instruction in Writing Classes

It is vital for EFL curricula to be taught explicitly Speech acts, politeness strategies and appropriateness to context. Through role-plays, letter writing, or real-life situations, students can use the appropriate language.

2. Improve Semantic Recognition with Vocabulary Activities:

Teachers can use more activities to encourage deeper knowledge of words, such as matching synonyms and collocations, and reading real ones.

3. Boost your exposure to real speakers and actual materials.

Ask your students to read English newspapers, watch English movies and interact with native speakers on the internet. It helps them understand the natural use of language.

4. Utilize Error Analysis for Teaching Purposes.

Teachers must provide feedback on students' writing highlighting the semantic and pragmatic errors within it and suggest more appropriate alternatives.

5. Create Assessments for the Ability to Pragmatic

Students' language ability to produce contextually appropriate language could become a key assessment criterion in universities.

6. Undertake more investigation on longitudinal evolution.

In the future, research can monitor the same group over time to gain a stronger view on how semantic and pragmatic competence.

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الأخطاء الدلالية التداولية في الخطاب الكتابي للطلبة العراقيين متعلمي الانجليزية لغة اجنبية

مستخلص البحث:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الأخطاء الدلالية والتداولية التي ينتجها الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي الانجليزية لغة اجنبية في كتاباتهم. شارك في الدراسة 120 طالباً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية الآداب – جامعة المستنصرية من المراحل الدراسية الأربع. تم جمع البيانات عن طريق مهمة خطابية كتابية تضمنت كتابة رسائل رسمية ومقالات جدلية ونصوص سردية قصيرة. ركز التحليل على تحديد الأخطاء الدلالية والتداولية، لا سيما تلك التي تخل بالمعنى والسياق. أظهرت النتائج أن طلبة المرحلة الأولى ارتكبوا أكبر عدد من هذه الأخطاء في الجوانب التداولية مثل أفعال الكلام، استراتيجيات المجاملة، والسياق، في حين أن الطلبة في المراحل الأعلى ما زالوا يقعون في أخطاء لكن مع تحسن في الكفاءة التداولية. وتشير النتائج إلى وجوب تضمين تعليم الوضوح الدلالي والتداولي عن قصد في المناهج لتحسين الكفاءة التواصلية في الكتابة الإنجليزية. وتساعد هذه الدراسة على فهم صعوبات تعلم اللغة في بيئات مثل العراق متعددة اللغات ومعقدة اجتماعياً وثقافياً.