

Jordanian EFL Learners' Comprehension and Production of Synonyms

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper reports on the findings of a study examining Jordanian EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of using synonyms in English.

Methods: Two main tasks were administered by the researcher to elicit data for the current study. The first task, which consisted of 10 multiple choice items followed by four synonymous words, was designed to assess the participants' ability to recognize the correct English synonym in contextualized sentences. The second task, which consisted of 10 words selected systematically from the glossary of *English for Adults: Course book*, was developed to evaluate the subjects' ability to provide synonyms for the given words.

Results: The study revealed that Jordanian EFL learners encounter a serious difficulty in using synonyms both on the receptive and productive levels because of their limited knowledge of English in general and of the semantic differences and the collocation restrictions of synonyms in particular. Besides, the main findings showed that the major sources of errors on the receptive level are transfer of training, negative transfer, and overgeneralization. On the other hand, the main sources of errors on the productive level are negative transfer, semantic approximation, and confusion of words on the ground of formal similarity.

Conclusions: The study concluded with some pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL teachers in the context of teaching English synonyms.

Keywords: collocation, negative transfer, overgeneralization, semantic approximation, synonyms, transfer of training

استيعاب وإنتاج المتعلمين الأردنيين للمترادفات في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخص

الأهداف: تتناول هذه الورقة نتائج دراسة تبحث مقدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الأردن على استيعاب وإنتاج المترادفات في اللغة الإنجليزية. **المنهجية:** تم الحصول على البيانات من خلال مهمتين رئيسيتين: تتكون المهمة الأولى من 10 جمل متعددة الخيارات متبوعة بأربع كلمات مترادفة لتقييم قدرة المشاركين على التعرف على المترادف الإنجليزي الصحيح في الجمل السياقية. بينما تألفت المهمة الثانية من 10 كلمات تم اختيارها بشكل منهجي من كتاب *English for Adults: Course book* لتقييم قدرة المشاركين على إنتاج مترادفات لهذه الكلمات.

النتائج: كشفت الدراسة أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الأردن يواجهون صعوبة كبيرة في استخدام المترادفات على كلا المستويين استيعاباً وإنتاجاً وذلك بسبب معرفتهم المحدودة باللغة الإنجليزية بشكل عام وبالاختلافات الدلالية و المتلازمات اللفظية للمترادفات بشكل خاص. إلى جانب ذلك، كشفت النتائج الرئيسية أن المصادر الرئيسية للأخطاء على مستوى استيعاب المترادفات هي نقل التدريب (transfer of training) والنقل السلبي (negative transfer) مستوى إنتاج المترادفات هي النقل السلبي (negative transfer) والتقريب الدلالي (semantic approximation) الذي يقع فيه المتعلمون فيما يتعلق بالكلمات المتشابهة لغوياً.

الخلاصة: اختتمت الدراسة ببعض النتائج والتوصيات لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أو كلغة ثانية في سياق تدريس مترادفات اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات الدالة: المترادفات اللفظية، النقل السلبي، التعميم المفرط، التقريب الدلالي، المترادفات، نقل التدريب



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1. Introduction

Semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, hyponymy, and meronymy, etc., have attracted the attention of philosopher, cognitive psychologists, linguists, language educators, computer scientists, literary theorists, and cognitive neuroscientists, etc. (Murphy, 2003). Several researchers were concerned with providing a definition for synonymy. For example, Quine (1961: 22) considered synonymy "the primary business of the theory of meaning". Synonymy was defined by Saeed (2003: 65) as a lexical relation that holds between "different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings", such as couch/sofa, boy/lad, lawyer/attorney, and large/big. Another definition of synonyms was provided by Cruse (1986: 267) who considered synonyms as "lexical items whose senses are identical in respect of 'central' semantic traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may provisionally describe as 'minor' or 'peripheral' traits". Farghal (1998: 81) defined synonyms as "words that sound different but have the same or nearly the same meaning". Hurford et al. (2007: 106) defined synonymy as "a relationship between two predicates that have the same sense". For instance, in most dialects of English, stubborn and obstinate are synonyms.

Synonymy refers to "sameness of meaning". Similarity of meaning is "the most important lexical relation" in WordNet model and philosophy (Miller and Fellbaum, 1991: 202). However, there are no real synonyms in language. In other words, you cannot find two words that have exactly the same meaning (Palmer, 1981: 59). Likewise, Saeed (2003: 65-66) maintained that true synonyms or exact synonyms are very rare. In particular, synonyms can at least differ in the following ways. First, some synonyms are related to different dialects. For instance, fall is used in American English, whereas autumn is used to British English. Secondly, synonymous words might be employed in different styles and registers, such as formal, colloquial, and literary, etc. Accordingly, wife or spouse is more formal than old lady or missus. Thirdly, synonyms also differ in relation to their connotative meaning. For example, naïve and gullible are more negative than ingenuous. Finally, some synonyms are restricted collocationally. For example, a police car or a cop car is used, but 'a guard car' or 'an old Bill car' is not very likely to be used.

Cruse (1986: 268- 270) classified synonymy into the following types: "absolute", "cognitive", and "contextual". Absolute synonyms mean that words have identical meanings if and only if all their contextual relations are identical. According to this definition, it is not possible to confirm that two words are absolute synonyms since it is impossible to check their relations in all contexts which are infinite. Therefore, many semanticists argued that natural languages abhor absolute synonymy. Lyons (2005: 61) posited that two or more expressions are considered absolutely synonymous if they fulfill the following three criteria: (1) all their meanings are identical, (2) they are synonymous in all contexts, and (3) they are semantically equivalent (their meanings are identical on all dimensions of meaning).

Cognitive synonyms are defined as follows: "X is a cognitive synonym of Y if (i) X and Y are syntactically identical, and (ii) any grammatical declarative sentence S containing X has equivalent truth-conditions to another sentence S1, which is identical to S except that X is replaced by Y". For instance, fiddle and violin are considered cognitive synonyms because they do not provide two sentences having different truth-conditions. For example, he plays the violin very well entails and is entailed by he plays the fiddle very well (Cruse, 1986: 88). Basically, near synonyms differ from cognitive synonyms in which near synonyms provide sentences with different propositional content. For example, foggy and misty are near synonyms since it is possible to affirm one and deny the other, e.g. 'it wasn't foggy yesterday'; 'it was just misty' (Farghal, 1998: 83).

On the other hand, contextual synonyms are defined as "two words that are freely interchangeable in a certain context although they are not cognitive synonyms". For instance, buy and get are considered as contextual synonyms as illustrated by the following sentence: I am going to buy/ get some sugar from the shop. These contextual synonyms, i.e. buy and get cannot be cognitive synonyms because they can present sentences with different propositional content. Beside, one can deny one and affirm the other. This can be clarified by the following example: John bought a university degree. John got a university degree. John didn't get a university degree; he bought it (ibid: 85).

Error analysis as a branch of applied linguistics is a very important area of the second and foreign language learning. Error analysis "is the study of errors made by the second and foreign language learners" (Richards et.al, 1985: 96). Error analysis deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they employ in recognizing the input they receive from

the target language. The importance of error analysis stems from the fact that it enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them (Erdoğan, 2005).

Errors are classified by Richard et al. (2002) into two main categories, viz., interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are caused by the interference of the native language L1, and they are also known as a negative transfer, linguistic interference, and cross-linguistic influence. Intralingual errors take place due to a particular misuse of a particular rule of the target language. In other words, the target language in this perspective is considered as an error cause. Intralingual errors are classified by Richard et al. (2002: 185) into the following types: (1) Overgeneralizations errors caused “by extension of target language rules to inappropriate context”. (2) Simplifications errors result from learners’ production of simpler linguistic forms than those found in the target language. (3) Developmental errors indicate that the learner has started developing their linguistic knowledge but has failed to reproduce the rules they have recently been exposed to in target language learning. (4) Induced errors which are also known as transfer of training are caused by misleading teaching examples in which teachers sometimes explain a rule without highlighting the exceptions. (5) Errors of avoidance occur when the learner fails to apply certain target language rules just because they are thought of to be too difficult. (6) Errors of overproduction in which beginners overproduce and frequently repeat a particular structure.

Learning synonyms is so crucial to second/foreign language learners since it enables them to communicate successfully (Martin, 1984; Benware, 1986; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Yeh et al., 2007; Liu & Zhong, 2014; among others). Apparently, mastering the use of synonyms on both the productive and receptive levels is a clear indicator of achieving communicative competence in English. Following this line of thought, the current study aims to investigate the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to produce and comprehend synonyms. The following section provides an overview of previous studies on the acquisition of English synonyms in the foreign/ second language context.

2. Literature review

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the acquisition of synonymy by EFL/ESL learners on both the production and recognition levels (Ying 2006; Shen 2010; Zhuang 2011; Mohammed 2014; Alanazi 2017a; Alanazi 2017b; Krebt 2017; Saud 2018; Khazaal 2019; Fadlallah 2021; Nasser 2021, among others). Ying (2006) examined the use of two synonymous words, i.e. “almost” and “nearly” in Chinese EFL learners’ writing based on a corpus. The researcher stated that learners misused and underused both words. In addition, the participants committed errors in the collocational patterns of these two synonymous words. The findings revealed that “the learners’ mothers tongue interference” affected their performance greatly (ibid: 7). Similarly, Shen (2010: 7) explored Chinese EFL learners’ synonymous errors when they were using two adjectives, i.e. glad and happy based on a corpus. The study indicated that there were an overuse and a misuse of these two synonymous words along with their collocational pattern. This can be attributed to the mother tongue negative transfer. Furthermore, the overuse of glad and happy is justified since these two words belong to the basic vocabulary in English. The competence of Chinese EFL learners in using synonyms was also investigated by Li and Xia (2018:573). The researchers evaluated the ability of Chinese EFL learners to provide the appropriate collocations of the following synonyms, namely begin, start and commence based on a Chinese non-native speakers of English corpus CLEC. The results revealed that Chinese students faced a great difficulty in providing the appropriate collocations of these synonymous words. The researcher concluded that “learners tend to adopt avoidance strategy due to the lack of contextual awareness and the knowledge of collocational behavior”. In the same vein, Zhuang (2011) examined the writing errors committed by Chinese college students in Taiwan. The results demonstrated that about 60%-70% of the students made serious errors in using near-synonyms, such as rise/raise.

On the other hand, the proficiency of Sudanese EFL learners in using synonyms was examined by a number of researchers. Mohammed (2014), for example, analyzed the errors committed by Sudanese EFL learners in using synonyms through a diagnostic test. The results of the test demonstrated that 59% of the participants made errors in using English synonyms. The study concluded that the participants encountered a serious difficulty in selecting the correct synonyms. The main reason behind the subjects’ bad performance in the test was their limited knowledge of English synonyms. In a recent study, Fadlallah (2021) investigated the lexical errors made by 50 Sudanese EFL students at Kassala University through a free composition writing task. The major findings revealed that the major types of lexical errors were synonymous errors, collocational errors, transfer errors,

phrasal verbs errors, spelling errors and inflectional errors. The researcher maintained that the main sources of errors were overgeneralization, L1 interference, and the partial application of rules.

On the other hand, the competence of Saudi EFL learners in using synonyms was assessed by Alanazi (2017a) who explored the ability of 40 Saudi EFL learners to use synonyms on the production level. To achieve the goal of the study, a translation test was administered in which the participants were asked to provide the correct synonym in a contextualized English sentence. The main findings revealed that errors arose from the limited knowledge of English collocations and some English lexical words, L1 interference, and lack of awareness of the slight differences in meaning between synonymous words. In exploring the ability of Saudi EFL learners to use synonyms on the recognition level, Alanazi (2017b) asked 40 Saudi EFL learners to do a multiple-choice test to assess Saudi EFL learners' competence in recognizing the correct English synonym in contextualized sentences. The study concluded that errors occurred as a result of L1 interference, and the insufficient knowledge of the semantic differences between synonymous words and English collocations. Saudi EFL learners' knowledge at the lexical level was also examined by Saud (2018) who analyzed the lexical errors committed by 30 female EFL students at King Khalid University in writing essays in English. The researcher maintained that the vast majority of lexical errors occurred in near synonyms.

The proficiency of Iraqi EFL learners in using synonyms was examined by a number of researchers. Khazaal (2019), for example, explored the English competence of 50 Iraqi college students in using synonyms through a writing test. The study showed that the participants faced a serious difficulty in using synonyms since they committed many errors. The researcher concluded that the two main reasons for the difficulty in using the correct synonyms were the limited knowledge of English vocabulary in general and the obvious lack of knowledge of synonymous words in terms of their types and usages in particular. Krebt (2017) went further and assessed the performance of Iraqi Advanced EFL learners in using synonyms on both the production and recognition levels. The results indicated that the subjects were incompetent in producing and recognizing synonyms despite being at the advanced level. Besides, the participants tended to use general lexical items instead of using the appropriate synonymous word which refers to a narrower sense of meaning and fits the context properly. Similarly, Nasser (2021: 144) studied the proficiency of 50 Female Iraqi students at Baghdad in interacting with English synonyms through a pre-test and a post-test. The researcher proposed that "most Iraqi students are not familiar with using synonyms and find difficulties in recognizing the meaning of the English lexical items". The study recommended that focusing on sense relations while teaching synonyms is an effective way for EFL students to improve their vocabulary. Wongkhan and Thienthong (2021: 523) examined 120 Thai (EFL) students' knowledge of academic collocation and synonymy. To this end, the researchers developed ten collocation questions with a set of three synonyms given as collocates choices. The results revealed that "the more experienced (ME) students significantly outperformed their less experienced (LE) counterparts in most collocation questions".

The review of the relevant literature indicates that EFL learners encounter a serious difficulty in using synonyms on both the production and recognition levels. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, none of the previous literature has explored the proficiency of Jordanian EFL learners in using synonyms on both the productive and receptive levels. The significance of the present study also stems from the importance of mastering synonyms in achieving communicative competence in English. The current study aims to fill this research gap and contribute to the existing literature on synonyms through providing answers to the following research questions:

- (1) Do Jordanian EFL Learners face a difficulty in using synonyms on both the recognition and production levels?
- (2) What are the main sources of committing errors in using synonyms on the recognition level?
- (2) What are the main sources of committing errors in using synonyms on the production level?

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

The subjects of the study were 20 second-year students majoring in Applied English at the University of Jordan. They were registered for the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The subjects were chosen randomly from Essentials of Public Speaking class. Their age range was between 19 and 20. The subjects had covered between 29-38 credit hours and studied courses like English Linguistics, Pronunciation and Speech, English Grammar, Writing, Word Formation and Collocations and Essentials of Public Speaking, etc. Prior to this, they had twelve years of formal instructions in EFL at school.

All the subjects were native speakers of Jordanian spoken Arabic, who also had a working knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic. None of the subjects stayed in an English-speaking country for more than three months or had a parent who is a native speaker of English.

3.2. Data elicitation tasks and their validity

The data were elicited through two tasks designed to measure the subjects' ability to recognize and produce English synonymous words. The subjects were given 15 minutes to complete the tasks. The first task consisted of 10 items, which were followed by four synonymous words in which the subjects were asked to select the correct synonym in contextualized sentences (see Appendix 1). Items 6 and 10 were developed by Hussein (1988), whereas items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9) were selected from the following website www.english-test.net.

The second task consisted of 10 English words in which the subjects were asked to write synonyms for each target word as much as possible. The target words were selected systematically from the glossary of English for Adults: Course book which was written by Bliemel (1979). The seventh word from letter M to V was chosen. In both tasks, the following lexical categories were used, viz. verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs.

To ensure the validity of this task, five native speakers of British English, who hold a bachelor's degree, were asked to complete the tasks and provide the researcher with their feedback about these tasks and their suitability and validity to assess the subjects' ability to understand and produce synonyms. The jury's comments and suggestions were taken into consideration in revising and writing the final version of the tasks. The taxonomy of errors proposed by Richard, et al. (2002) is adopted in the current study in order to identify the main sources of errors in using synonyms on the receptive and productive levels.

4. Results and discussion

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in three sub-sections, viz. (1) Performance on the recognition level, (2) Sources of errors underlying faulty responses on the recognition level, (3) Performance on the Production level, and (4) Sources of errors underlying faulty responses on the production level.

4.1. Performance on the recognition level

Table 1 provides the complete list of percentages of correct responses for the subjects (n=20) on each sentence. A glance at the mean of correct responses suggests that recognizing the correct English synonym in contextualized sentences constitutes a serious problem. Generally speaking, the subjects' level of performance was not very satisfactory concerning the fact that the subjects (sophomore) were majoring in Applied English and they took Word Formation and Collocations course. Only 96 out of 200 (48%) answered correctly. This consolidates the findings of the previous research studies (Zhuang 2011; Alanazi 2017a; Alanazi 2017b; Krebt 2017; Saud 2018; Khazaal 2019; Nasser 2021) which revealed that EFL learners encounter a serious difficulty in using synonyms. However, the relatively high achievement in some items might be ascribed to how common the synonymous word and the context are.

Table 1. The complete list of percentages of Jordanian EFL learners' correct responses on each sentence (N=20)

Item No.	correct responses	Percentage	Frequency
1	mistake	55%	11
2	robbers	20%	4
3	rapidly	65%	13
4	deserted	40%	8
5	alone	60%	12
6	heavy	50%	10
7	risks	65%	13
8	suits	45%	9
9	massacred	20%	4
10	senior	60%	12
Mean		48%	96/200

The pattern of responses in individual items revealed a very important phenomenon. For example, in item (1) 55% of the subjects chose the correct synonymous word which was “mistake” in the following sentence: *“It is a **mistake** to argue with your friends”*. The word ‘mistake’ was the correct choice between error, fault and slip, whereas in item (9) only 20% of the subjects selected the correct synonymous word which was “massacred” in the following sentence, *“A lot of Indian villages were **massacred** after white men settled in the new continent”*, in which ‘massacred’ was the correct choice between “executed”, “killed” and “dispatched”. The justification for this big difference is that the former item, i.e. mistake is commonly used, and thus the subjects are quite familiar with it, whereas the subjects are rarely familiar with the latter item, i.e. massacred. This can interpret why item (9) presented a challenge for the participants.

Table 1 shows that the subjects did relatively well on choosing the synonymous words which are frequently used in certain contexts. These synonymous words which are used in these contexts are read and heard frequently in the participants’ academic materials and their communication such as:

(1) 65% of the subjects answered item (3) correctly: *“The company’s revenues are increasing **rapidly**”*.

(2) 60% of the subjects answered item (10) correctly: *“An elderly person, especially one who is retired is called a **senior** citizen”*.

(3) 60% of the subjects answered item (5) correctly: *“Joan’s husband abandoned her unexpectedly, leaving her **alone** and uncertain about the future”*.

(4) 65% of the subjects answered item (7): *“Since you have bought a brand new house I think you should insure it for all **risks**”*.

(5) 55% of the subjects answered item (1): *“It is a(n) **mistake** to argue with your friends”*.

The relatively high frequency of correct responses in these items can be attributed to the fact that these words, i.e. rapidly, senior, alone and risks, are commonly used, and thus the subjects are more familiar with these words than other words, such promptly, superior, unaccompanied, and perils, respectively which are not commonly used, and thus these words are not familiar to the participants.

4.2. Sources of errors underlying faulty responses on the recognition level

4.2.1. Incorrect responses due to transfer of training

Keshvarz suggested that “errors that result from pedagogical procedures contained in a text or employed by the teacher” (cited in Al-Kaisy 2005:142). The student can be misguided when the teacher tends to define a certain word by providing its synonyms without explaining the slight differences between these synonymous words, e.g. “error” and “mistake”. As a result, the students tend to use these synonymous words interchangeably in all contexts without being aware of their semantic differences and their collocational restrictions as well. Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses due to transfer of training.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses made by Jordanian EFL learners due to transfer of training

#	Incorrect response	Percentage	Frequency
6a	tough	15%	3
6b	strong	15%	3
6c	hard	20%	4
7a	hazards	10%	2
7b	crises	25%	5
Mean		17 %	17/ 100

Regarding item (6), 50% of the subjects selected the correct answer “heavy” in the following sentence: *“George drinks a lot. He is a heavy drinker”*, and this might be attributed to the fact that the participants are quite familiar with this collocation in which the word “heavy” collocates with drinker. However, 20% of the subjects selected “hard”, 15% of the subjects chose “strong” and 15% of the subjects selected “tough”. Hence, it seems quite clear that the other 50% of the subjects who used the

wrong options were not aware of this collocation in which the word “heavy” collocates with “drinker”.

In item (7), 65% of the subjects chose the correct answer “risks” in the following sentence: *“Since you have bought a brand new house I think you should insure it for all risks”*. The word “risk” is the most common word to the participants compared with all other choices. However, 25% of the subjects selected “crises”, whereas 10% selected “hazards”. This means that 35% did not recognize the semantic differences between these synonymous words.

Selecting the wrong choices in items (6) and (7) might be ascribed to the fact that synonymous words are taught without directing the students’ attention to the semantic differences between these words in terms of the appropriate contexts in which they can be used along with their collocational restriction. In other words, there is a lack of knowledge of the subtle nuances of meaning between synonyms. This lack of knowledge causes a semantic error since learners are not aware of the subtle semantic differences between synonymous words (Martin, 1984).

4.2.2. Incorrect responses due to negative transfer

Richards (1971: 214) posited that “interference from the mother tongue is clearly a major source of difficulty in second language learning”. These are errors which are attributed to the mother tongue interference. One of these errors can be committed when there is only one word in the learners’ mother tongue language which is commonly used in a number of contexts, whereas there are two or more possible equivalents for this word in the target language. Accordingly, the students might use this word which is found in their mental lexicon without paying attention to the other words which are found in the target language and used differently according to the context. This can be illustrated through the following items (1), (2), (3), (4), and (8). Table 3 shows the frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses made by Jordanian EFL learners due to negative transfer.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses made by Jordanian EFL learners due to negative transfer

Item No.	Incorrect responses	Percentage	Frequency
1	slip	25%	5
2	thieves	70%	14
3a	Quickly	10%	2
3c	Promptly	25%	5
4a	quitted	25%	5
4c	departed	15%	3
4d	resigned	20%	4
8a	fit	20%	4
8c	match	20%	4
Mean		25.5%	46/180

Regarding item (1), 55% of the subjects selected the correct answer “mistake” in the following sentence: *“It is a(n)..... to argue with your friends”* which is commonly used in this context and the participants are quite familiar with it. However, 20% of the participants selected the following wrong answers, namely fault and error. This can attributed to the negative transfer of the mother tongue language since in Arabic both words are translated as *xaṭaʾ*. Therefore, the subjects see no semantic differences or collocation restrictions in the use of these two words. On the other hand, 25% of the subjects chose “slip”. Using the wrong answer, i.e. slip can be attributed to the influence of the participants’ mother tongue language since they made an association between the slip of the tongue and the act of arguing which is quite common in their native language. You might make *zalat lisan* ‘a slip of the tongue’ when you are arguing with somebody.

In item (2), 70% of the subjects selected the incorrect answer “thieves” in the following sentence: *“The attacked the owner of the house and disappeared with the expensive painting”* since in the subjects’ mother tongue language, i.e. Arabic there are two main equivalent words, i.e. *sa:riq* and *liṣ* for all the following synonymous words, viz., thief, robber, and stealer. In addition, these two Arabic words are used interchangeably to mean somebody who steals things regardless of using violence

or not, whereas in English the following synonymous words, namely thief and robber are not used interchangeably since robber means someone who steals from banks, offices, houses, etc. especially using threats or violence, whereas thief means someone who steals things from a person or place without using threats or violence. Accordingly, the subjects see no semantic differences or collocation restrictions between these English synonymous words because of L1 interference, and thus the majority used the most common word, i.e. thieves with which they were quite familiar.

In Item (3), 65% of the subjects selected the correct answer "rapidly" in the following sentence: "*The company's revenues are increasing.....*" which is commonly used in this context, whereas 25% of the subjects chose "promptly", 10% of the subjects selected "quickly". The influence of the mother tongue language might make 35% of the subjects choose the incorrect answers since in the subjects' mother tongue language the Arabic equivalent for all these synonymous words, namely promptly, quickly, and fast is *bisurfa*. Accordingly, they see no collocation restrictions or semantic differences between these synonymous words because of L1 interference.

In Item (4), 40% of the subjects selected the correct answer "deserted" in the following sentence: "*My best friend me in a time of need*" which is commonly used in this context, whereas 20% of the subjects chose "resigned", 15% of the subjects selected "departed" and 25% of the subjects selected "quitted". 60% of the subjects selected the incorrect answers since in the subjects' mother tongue language the word *taraka* 'leave' is used to refer to the act of leaving somebody, a job, a country, a house or anything regardless of the thing that is left. Hence, the subjects see no collocation restrictions or semantic differences between these English synonymous words. However, in English there are semantic differences between these words. For instance, "quit" means to leave a job, school, etc. especially without finishing it completely, "desert" means to leave someone or something and no longer help or support them, "resign" means to officially announce that you have decided to leave your job or an organization, and "depart" means to leave, especially when you are starting a journey.

In item (8), 45% of the subjects used the correct answer "suit" in the following sentence: "*This music really my mood*". In the subjects' mother tongue language, the following synonymous words, namely suit, and fit are literally translated as *juna:sib* and they are used to refer to anything which is suitable or convenient whether the thing which suits you is related to colour, shape, size or abstract things. However, in English there are collocation restrictions and semantic differences between these English synonymous words. For example, "suit" is associated with clothes and colours, etc. which makes you look attractive, whereas "fit" is used when a piece of clothing fits, it means it is the right size for your body. Since the participants can use one Arabic equivalent, i.e. *juna:sib* to stand for these two synonymous words "suit" and "fit" in their mother tongue language, they see no semantic differences or collocation restrictions on the use of these synonymous words. Accordingly, they use these two English synonymous words interchangeably.

4.2.3. Incorrect responses due to overgeneralization

Hussein (1988: 124) maintained that EFL learners try to minimize the grammatical and the lexical properties of the target language, so they tend to use the general terms instead of using the specialized ones and this is called overgeneralization. Table 4 shows the frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses due to overgeneralization.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of the incorrect responses made by Jordanian EFL learners due to overgeneralization (N=20)

Item No.	Incorrect responses	Percentage	Frequency
9b	killed	30 %	6
Mean		30%	6/20

In item (9), 30% of the subjects selected the incorrect choice "killed" which is more common for the participants and they are more familiar with it than the other synonymous words, namely executed, massacred and dispatched. Those participants used the general term, i.e. killed without paying attention to other specific terms which refer to the same state of being dead, but with different shades of meanings which are associated with executed, massacred and dispatched. Hence, they overgeneralized the use of this word to other contexts in which it does not fit. Besides, it is quite clear that the participants were not aware of the

collocation restrictions and the semantic differences between these synonymous words.

4.3. Performance on the production level

In the second task, the participants were asked to provide synonyms as much as possible for ten key words. Table 5 provides a complete list of the number of acceptable responses, the number of unacceptable responses and the number of no responses regarding providing synonyms.

Table 5. The number of acceptable responses, the number of unacceptable responses and the number of no responses for each stimulus word regarding providing synonyms.

#	Stimulus word	No. of acceptable responses	No. of unacceptable responses	No. of no responses
1	Map	9	2	12
2	Negro	13	5	6
3	Old	21	4	0
4	Part	14	3	7
5	Quite	2	15	7
6	Reason	12	5	4
7	Save	19	2	2
8	Teacher	20	5	5
9	Unhappy	30	9	0
10	Visit	6	7	8
Mean		14.6	5.7	5.1

A glance at the frequencies and the mean of the number of provided synonyms suggests that providing synonyms constitutes a serious problem for Jordanian EFL learners since the mean of correct provided synonyms was only 14.6 which is too low. Furthermore, the mean of no provided synonyms was 5.1 and the mean of incorrect provided synonyms was 5.7. The subjects' ability to provide synonyms was also not satisfactory because of the fact that the subjects are majoring in Applied English, and they are sophomore and all stimulus words are common and frequently used words. This task depends on how many words that the subjects have in their mental lexicon in order to provide synonyms for each stimulus word.

The target item that got the highest number of no responses was the word “map” and this might be ascribed to the fact that the word map is more common and frequently used than its synonyms. Table (8) shows the number of provided synonyms which were classified into five categories depending on the number of the synonymous words which were provided by the subjects. In particular, it shows the sum of the cases in which one word, two words, three words, four words or no responses were provided. The maximum number of the correct provided synonyms was four words. Table 6 shows the sum of each category regarding the number of provided synonyms.

Table 6. Frequency of provided synonyms classified into five groups

The number of provided synonyms	one synonym	Two synonyms	Three synonyms	Four synonyms	No Synonyms
The Sum	91	42	9	4	51

The subjects' performance was not satisfactory concerning the fact that 51 cases provided no responses at all. Furthermore, only 4 cases provided four synonymous words which were the maximum number of the correct responses. Only 9 cases provided three synonyms, 42 cases provided two synonyms, whereas 91 cases provided only one word. It seems that the participants had a limited repertoire of English synonyms since the majority of the participants provided only one synonym for each target word.

4.4. Sources of errors underlying faulty responses on the production level

A close examination of the data suggested that the subjects used a number of strategies when they failed to provide the correct synonyms, e.g. literal translation and the semantic approximation. Furthermore, some incorrect answers were attributed to the fact that some target words were misread or misinterpreted (confusion of the words due to formal similarity), e.g. (quite elicited calm, silent, not hyper, shy and steady). Some target words elicited answers which are different from the lexical category of the stimulus word, e.g. unhappy (adj.) elicited sadness (n.). Table 7 shows the sources of errors underlying faulty responses on the production level along with the number of incorrect elicited answers due to each strategy.

Table 7. Sources of error underlying faulty responses on the production level

Source of error	The number of elicited incorrect responses
1. Semantic approximation	31
2. Confusion of the words due to formal similarity	12
3. Negative transfer	11

The study has shown that the most frequent source of errors on the production level was semantic approximation in which the number of elicited incorrect responses was 31, followed by the confusion of the words due to formal similarity (12 incorrect elicited responses), and then negative transfer (11 incorrect elicited responses). Semantic approximation is associated with the semantic similarity and the sense relationships that hold between words. Confusion of the words due to formal similarity is related to the similarity between two or more words in terms of their form. Negative Transfer is associated with the influence of the speakers' mother tongue language.

4.4.1. Incorrect responses due to semantic approximation

Semantic approximation is considered as a source of errors when participants failed to produce the correct synonymous word. Hence, they depended on some sense relationships or some kind of semantic similarities between the target word and the words that they have in their mental lexicon and could be near in meaning to the target word (cf. Hamdan 2005:147). Below are some examples of the incorrect elicited answers due to semantic approximation.

(4a) Stimulus word: Teacher (n.).

(4b) Incorrect elicited answers: Doctor.

(6a) Stimulus word: Part (n.)

(6b) Incorrect elicited answers: period, kind.

(7a) Stimulus word: Map.

(7b) Incorrect elicited answers: Navigator, GPS, paper, description.

(8a) Stimulus word: Unhappy.

(8b) Incorrect elicited answers: bad, horrible, terrible, mad.

(9a) Stimulus word: Reason(n.)

(9b) Incorrect elicited answers: Because, due , answer , condition , circumstances.

(10a) Stimulus word: Visit (v.)

(10b) Incorrect elicited answers: journey, go over

4.4.2 Incorrect responses due to confusion of words on the ground of formal similarity

Duskova (1983:227) maintained that "errors in lexis presented much less homogeneous material for study than errors in grammar". Confusion of words on the ground of formal similarity "appears to be interference from another English form". Some incorrect answers were due to the misreading or the misinterpretation of the stimulus word. For instance, this can be illustrated through the word quite (adv.) which was misinterpreted as quiet (adj.) because of the similarities between the letters of the two words. The stimulus word which had the highest number of incorrect answers was quite (15 incorrect responses). Below are some examples of the incorrect elicited answers due to misreading or misinterpretation.

(5a) Stimulus word: Quite (adv.)

(5b) Incorrect elicited answers: Calm, silent or silence, not hyper, shy, and steady.

4.4.3. Incorrect responses due to negative transfer

Some subjects were translating words literally from their mother tongue language to provide synonyms. Literal translation is related to the negative transfer or what it is also called mother tongue interference. Corder (1981:1) posited that "errors were therefore predicated to be the result of persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language". Below are some examples of the incorrect elicited answers due to negative transfer.

(1a) Stimulus word: Negro (n.).

(1b) Incorrect elicited answers: Curly

(2a) Stimulus word: Save (v.).

(2b) Incorrect elicited answers: Memorize, mean.

(3a) Stimulus word: Old (adj.)

(3b) Incorrect elicited answers: Big.

5. Implications and recommendations

The current study has revealed that synonyms form a serious problem for Jordanian EFL learners on both the production and the recognition levels. This finding is in line with previous research studies (Ying 2006; Shen 2010; Zhuang 2011; Mohammed 2014; Alanazi 2017a; Alanazi 2017b; Krebt 2017; Saud 2018; Khazaal 2019; Abumahfouz and Al-Shboul 2020; Al-Taher 2021; Fadlallah 2021; Nasser 2021, among others) which revealed that EFL learners encounter a difficulty in using synonyms on both the recognition and production levels. Accordingly, teachers should focus on synonyms as an integral part of teaching vocabularies. More specifically, it seems quite clear that incidental teaching of synonymous words out of context does not enable students to use synonyms properly. Hence, teachers should raise EFL learners' awareness of the semantic differences and the collocation restrictions of these synonymous words in order to help learners use the correct synonym in the appropriate context, and thus their proficiency in using vocabulary in general and synonyms in particular will improve greatly. Furthermore, teachers should set synonyms exercises, such as multiple choice, translation, fill in the blank tasks in order to let students interact with synonyms and increase their awareness of their importance and the errors which they may commit if they do not recognize the collocation restrictions and the semantic differences between synonyms. Teachers should recommend to their EFL students a number of thesaurus dictionaries and collocations dictionaries, such as Ozdic dictionary of collocations and Oxford dictionary of collocations. These dictionaries not only develop EFL students' competence in using synonyms but also enrich their lexicon.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to use synonyms on both the recognition and the production levels. The overall subjects' performance was not satisfactory on both levels in light of the low mean of the correct responses. The main sources of errors made by Jordanian EFL learners on the recognition level are transfer of training, negative transfer, and overgeneralization. On the other hand, the main sources of errors made by Jordanian EFL learners on the production level are semantic approximation, confusion of words on the ground of formal similarity, and negative transfer. The findings have also revealed that there is a lack of knowledge of the collocation restrictions and the semantic differences between synonyms. There is also a lack of knowledge of some English lexical items. It is highly recommended that future research studies should focus more on the acquisition of vocabulary by EFL learners in order to identify the semantic, syntactic, and morphological difficulties these learners encounter while interacting with vocabulary.

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