

## Error analysis of students in learning vocabulary

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### Abstract

To err is human. To learn from errors is helpful. To analyse students' errors is important for teachers' plan for their teaching. In our study, attempt has been made to analyse some language students' errors in learning vocabulary, which is a building block of language. It is hoped that this will shed light on students' language acquisition and more emphasis can be placed on how these errors can be avoided, and how the students' difficulties can be identified with some suggestions to overcome them.

A group of **tertiary** language students were recruited to be the subjects of the present study. A test was given to them to test their prior knowledge in the related vocabulary. Then they were given a list of glossaries to study. The glossaries were taken from different fields, including literature, public relations, public affairs, as well as accounting and finance in bilingual versions with Chinese as L1 and English as L2. A test was conducted to check how much the participating students had learnt from the bilingual list of glossaries. They were given some items in English and they had to translate these into Chinese, and vice versa. Several levels of comparison have been taken into account for analysis: different genders and backgrounds of participating students, different categories of glossaries, and also varied degrees of competence in English and Chinese as reflected in the test performance.

### Keywords

error analysis, vocabulary learning, second language acquisition,

### Role of Vocabulary in Language Learning, especially in second language learning

Undeniably, vocabulary is an essential part in language learning. It provides the content and the meaning of communication. It is the very basic unit of language that helps to generate ideas. However, despite its importance, vocabulary has not received sufficient attention that it deserves.

As highlighted by Richards (in Read 2000, p. 25), the nature of vocabulary learning is very complex which "involves a great deal more than just memorizing the meaning of a word." "Vocabulary ability" draws on the various types of "pragmatic knowledge" in the sense that "the social and cultural situation in which lexical terms are used significantly influence their meaning" (Read 2000, p. 29).

### **Why “Error Analysis”?**

As pointed out by Corder (in Richards 1974, p. 25), the errors of a learner “provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using (i.e. has learned)” and “are significant in three different ways”: the teacher (to assess the effectiveness of teaching), the researcher (to have evidence of language learning or acquisition), and the learner himself (about how he learns the language).

### **Definitions**

According to Richards (1974, p. 173-178), errors may be divided into “interlanguage errors” (as caused by the interference of the learner’s mother tongue) and “intralingual and developmental errors” (persistent and systematic errors) in terms of over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized).

### **The Present Study**

A group of tertiary language students who are all Chinese (with Chinese as their first language or L1 and English as their second language or L2) and studying in their second year for Associate of Arts in English for Professional Communication, were recruited to participate in a study of a bilingual (Chinese and English) glossary covering various important areas in our society, including accounting and finance, public affairs, public relations, and literature. It was hoped that through this study, some of the students’ learning problems as reflected in their errors may be identified and also their effectiveness of learning the target vocabulary would be enhanced.

### **Design of the Study**

In the pre-test (Test 1), the subjects were asked about the corresponding terms from English into Chinese and vice-versa. Then, they studied a given glossary list of the related terms immediately after the pre-test. They were not given the list so that they could not study it at home, and the amount of time spent on studying the list could be controlled.

During the post-test (Test 2) conducted two weeks later, most students showed improvement in their performance. They also found this to be a rewarding learning experience and that they were more aware of the different terms used in the two languages.

### **Hypotheses of the Study**

1) The subjects would perform better in English to Chinese translation than vice versa.



2) Participants would have improvement from pre-test (Test 1) to post-test (Test 2).

For the actual content of the two tests, please refer to Appendix 1.

### **Findings and Discussions**

In Test 1, out of 10 questions asked, the number of correct answers is 3.41 (an average of the 12 participants) and the number of incorrect answers is 6.59. Five of the participants got 3 correct answers.

In Test 2, out of 10 questions asked, the average number of correct answers is 4.5 and the number of incorrect answers is 5.5. Five of the participants got 5 correct answers. The improvement percentage is 31.58%.

In Test 1, for 10 participants, the correct answers are all from English to Chinese. Most of them answered the first 3 questions (1. *Simile* 明喻 2. *Mission* 使命/任務 3. *Education Bureau* 教育局) correctly. For the other two participants answered one Chinese to English question correctly. 95.12% of the correct answers are from English to Chinese, while 4.88% of the Correct Answers are from Chinese to English

In Test 2, most of the correct answers all the 12 participants are from English to Chinese. Most of them answered the first 3 questions (1. *Metaphor* 隱喻/暗喻 2. *Press Release* 新聞稿 3. *Labour Department* 勞工處) correctly.

However, all of them got one answer in the direction of Chinese to English question correct. 70.37% of the Correct Answers: from English to Chinese 29.63% of the Correct Answers: from Chinese to English.

### **Analysis of Results**

From the results of Test 2, we can see that the participants, who are Chinese, are more familiar with the terms in Chinese i.e. they have more prior knowledge in the Chinese terms than the English ones. The questions that they answered correctly are general terms or terms used in literature or name of department which has close relationship with them (i.e. Education Bureau).

From the results of Test 2, we can see that the percentage of correct answers from Chinese to English has increased sharply from 4.88% to 29.63%. This shows that Chinese to English translation has to be learnt and that English (L2 of the participants) vocabulary has to be learnt by rote memory or some other methods.

In pointing out the percentage of correct answers, we wish to imply the related percentage of errors as they are two sides of the same coin. For more details about the errors, please refer to Appendix 3.

From the results of the 2 tests, we can see that they could answer the terms in literature/public relations/public affairs correctly but not the accounting/financial terms. This may be due to the fact they are language students, NOT business students. The proportion of their courses are related to language rather than business.

The students came on voluntary basis and this indicates that they were motivated. The use of traditional word lists with intentional focus (Arabski, 2006, p.175) is helpful as it highlights the practical nature of the vocabulary categories. Moreover, these are relevant to their studies, future career and daily life.

The hypotheses of the study have been clearly supported by the study. The 12 participants, who are all Chinese and Year 2 students of AA in English for Professional Communication, performed better in English to Chinese translation than vice versa. They had improvement from pre-test (Test 1) to post-test (Test 2).

Basically the errors made by the students are more related to the **deficit of knowledge** in either Language 1 (Chinese) or Language 2 (English), or both. In such cases, they were unable to find the right mapping of the two terms in both languages. For the ones that they could **partly recognize**, they might have been misled by making the wrong guesses. This might have ended up in the mismatch of these terms although sometimes they might be partially correct, but straightly speaking, there would be no such terms in either language. When some terms involve several words, the order of these words could be a challenge for some students, and they recalled the wrong order of these words. In some cases, the errors are more related to **wrong recognition or association of words** in terms of spelling the English word or writing of the Chinese characters. On top of these, there are some errors which could not be ascribed to a particular source of problem, such as possibly related to the internal condition of the subjects of being tired, forgetful or careless, or external factors like the test situation and exposure duration of the word lists and so on.

### Conclusion and recommendations

It can be seen from the study that the interplay of external stimulus (in the form of useful added-value learning exercises in the form of specialized categories of word lists) and internal driving force (intrinsic motivation of learning more and excelling others if possible) is crucial. The participating students are well-motivated and have responded readily to the teacher's invitation to take part in the learning workshop.

While Test 1 may serve as the baseline (or learning threshold) of the subjects, Test 2 may serve as a measurement of students' performance after being given time and help with the word lists for more exposure and rehearsal. The majority

of the students were able to show clear improvement in Test 2 as compared to their results in Test 1. In general, the students performed better in English to Chinese translation than in Chinese to English. Hence, the two hypotheses have been supported.

The feedback from the participating students is also very positive and encouraging. In general, they find the activity educational and helpful, and most of them would be willing to take part in similar studies in the future. When asked what categories they would be interested, some suggested terms in new categories like legal, medical and psychological fields. Some expressed to add more terms to the existing categories, especially in literature, public relations, as well as accounting and finance. Some of them indicated that the word lists have helped to broaden their views and would like to have this more often if possible.

Since students are at the tertiary level, they have achieved quite advanced learning skills. Some expressed that mere more exposure of the related word lists would be sufficient to help them learn the related vocabulary. Moreover, some of them indicated that arranging the terms under different categories would be helpful for them to encode the new terms, as it might help them to associate the terms with the related field and help them to recall the terms more easily.

As for the types of errors, they are mainly related to the lack of exposure to certain terms, implying a deficit of the related knowledge or concept; inability to perceive challenging word order for terms with several words; partial recognition of some terms resulting in mismatches; wrong recognition or association of words as reflected in spelling (English) and writing (Chinese characters) errors. There are also other unspecified errors which may not be ascribed to particular causes such as subjects' internal conditions or the external test situations.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As suggested by Corder (1981, p. 45), "remedial action becomes necessary when we detect a mismatch or disparity between the knowledge, skill, or ability of someone and the demands that are made on him by the situation he finds himself in." From the analysis of the subjects' errors, it reveals that there may be some possible ways to overcome the errors or to reduce them. More exposure of students to the social or cultural contexts of the related terms in both languages would be helpful. Watching television programmes, especially in news and social affairs, would prepare the students to be more ready for learning the related terms. Reading newspapers and listening more to the related reports are also possible.

Practical exercise can be designed with a view to identify the word order and writing or spelling of the target terms. Furthermore, students may be encouraged



to keep learning useful terms for their own benefits, as motivation plays a very important role in language learning.

### **Future research**

For future directions of research, it is recommended that more categories of word lists can be developed to fit the changing needs and social demands. While word lists have been used as a common practice in learning vocabulary, they may be seen as having the advantage of clear-cut competence of knowing a term separately, but also the disadvantage of lacking a context which may be helpful for students' understanding of the term and how it is applied in real-life or meaningful situations.

It is suggested that in the future, the use of word lists with separate terms and also the same terms provided with a contextual can be compared, and see if it makes any difference with or without context for learning vocabulary.

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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1 Test 1 and Test 2 Content**

#### Test 1

*(terms asked are in italics and answers are underlined)*

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>Simile</i>           | <u>明喻</u>                                 |
| 2. <i>Mission</i>          | <u>使命/任務</u>                              |
| 3. <i>Education Bureau</i> | <u>教育局</u>                                |
| 4. <i>turnover</i>         | <u>營業額</u>                                |
| 5. <i>profit after tax</i> | <u>稅後溢利/利潤</u>                            |
| 6. <i>頭韻</i>               | <u>Alliteration</u>                       |
| 7. <i>企業慈善活動</i>           | <u>Corporate Philanthropy</u>             |
| 8. <i>政務司司長</i>            | <u>Chief Secretary for Administration</u> |
| 9. <i>中期股息</i>             | <u>interim dividend</u>                   |
| 10. <i>市盈率</i>             | <u>Price/Earnings Ratio</u>               |

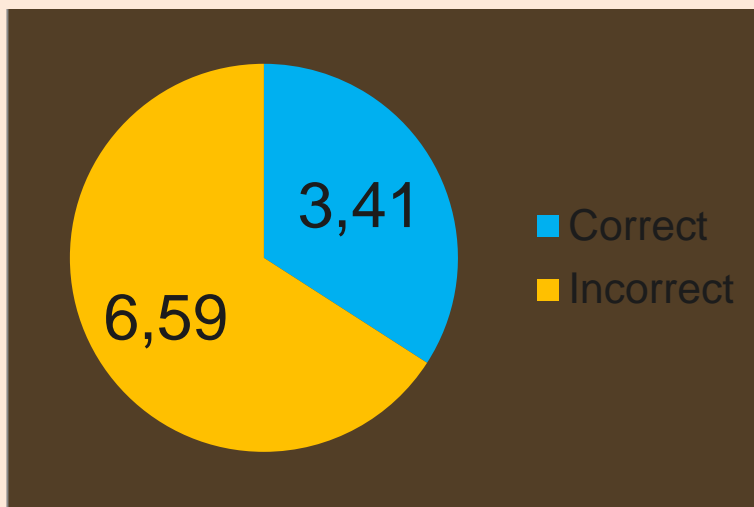
#### Test 2

- |                                  |                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Metaphor</i>               | <u>隱喻/暗喻</u>                         |
| 2. <i>Press Release</i>          | <u>新聞稿</u>                           |
| 3. <i>Labour Department</i>      | <u>勞工處</u>                           |
| 4. <i>divided per share</i>      | <u>每股派息</u>                          |
| 5. <i>cash and bank balances</i> | <u>現金及銀行存款</u>                       |
| 6. <i>似非而是的說法</i>                | <u>Paradox</u>                       |
| 7. <i>傳媒關係</i>                   | <u>Media Relations</u>               |
| 8. <i>行政長官</i>                   | <u>Chief Executive</u>               |
| 9. <i>每股盈利</i>                   | <u>earnings per share</u>            |
| 10. <i>附屬公司</i>                  | <u>subsidiary company/subsidiary</u> |

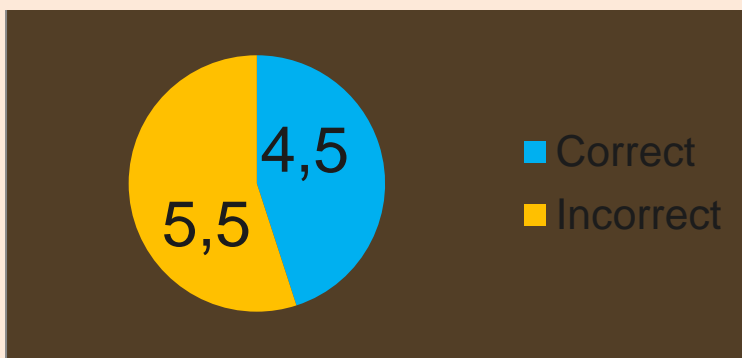


## Appendix 2 Test 1 and test 2 Results

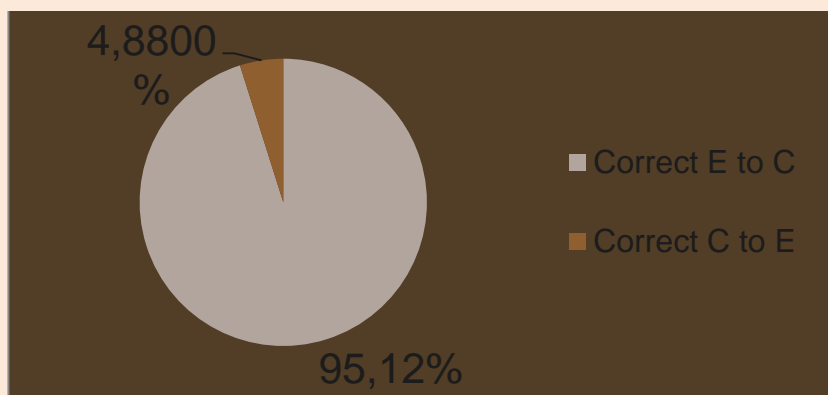
### Test 1



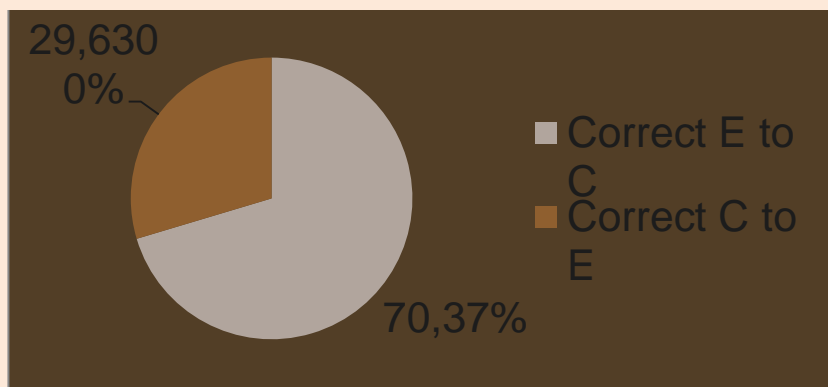
### Test 2



### Test 1



Test 2





### **Appendix 3 More detailed information on students' errors**

#### Test 1 (10 terms)

Literature	2 terms
Public Relations	2 terms
Public Affairs	2 terms
Accounting and Finance	4 terms

#### Literature

12 participants got 17 answers (out of 24 answers: 12 participants x 2 terms) wrong – the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Literature terms is 70.83%

Example of error: 6. 頭韻 Alliteration → “head rhyme”

#### Public Relations

12 participants got 13 answers (out of 24 answers) wrong – the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Public Relations terms is 54.17%

Example of error: 7. 傳媒關係 Media Relations → “press relationship”

#### Public Affairs

12 participants got 13 answers (out of 24 answers) wrong – the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Public Affairs terms is 54.17%

Example of error: 3. Labour Department 勞工處 → “勞工署”

#### Accounting and Finance

12 participants got 44 answers (out of 48 answers) wrong – the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Accounting and Financial terms is 91.67%

Example of error: 9. 中期股息 interim dividend → “mid-term share profit”

#### Test 2 (10 terms)

Literature	2 terms
Public Relations	2 terms
Public Affairs	2 terms
Accounting and Finance	4 terms



### Literature

12 participants got 13 answers (out of 24 answers) wrong

- the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Literature terms is 54.17%

### Public Relations

12 participants got 10 answers (out of 24 answers) wrong –

- the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Public Relations terms is 41.67%

### Public Affairs

12 participants got 4 answers (out of 24 answers) wrong –

- the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Public Affairs terms is 16.67%

### Accounting and Finance

12 participants got 39 answers (out of 48 answers) wrong

- the percentage of participants getting wrong answers in Accounting and Financial terms is 81.25%