



The Comprehension of Synonyms by Saudi EFL Learners: Acquisition and Pedagogical Implications

Majed Alanazi

Bangor University, England, UK

E-mail: majedlinguist@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates 40 Saudi EFL learners' receptive knowledge of synonyms in English. It also tests whether the participants' English proficiency level plays a role in their comprehension of English synonyms. To achieve this, the researcher designed a multiple-choice test to measure Saudi EFL learners' ability to recognise the correct English synonym in contextualised sentences. In order to test whether the English proficiency level of the participants plays a role in their comprehension of English synonyms, the participants were divided on the basis of their scores on the Oxford Placement Test into two groups: 20 Advanced Learners (ALs) and 20 Intermediate Learners (ILs). Twenty native speakers of English (NSs) acted as the control group. The native speakers' answers on the multiple-choice test were considered as the accurate answers. The answers provided by the ALs and ILs were compared to those provided by the NSs to determine whether the answers of the former approximate those of the latter. A Chi-square test was employed to determine whether the differences between the three groups, ALs, ILs and NSs on the multiple-choice test were statistically significant. The results reveal that the answers supplied by the ILs differed statistically from those of NSs on all items on the multiple-choice test, whereas those provided by the ALs differed significantly from those of the NSs on eight items. The results also show that participants' English proficiency level may not have played a role in their ability to recognise the correct synonym on all items on the test. The researcher argued that the main sources of error were interference habits from the participants' first language (L1), lack of awareness of the semantic differences between the synonyms in English and lack of familiarity with English collocations. The study concluded with some pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL teachers in the context of teaching English synonyms to L2 students.

Keywords: Semantics, second language acquisition, synonyms, Arabic-speaking EFL learners, collocations

1. Introduction

In the field of lexical semantics, synonymy is a type of sense relationship between words, whereby these words have similar basic senses (Saeed, 2003). These words usually differ in the sense that each one has an added implication or rather connotation which is distinct from other words. This is the reason why many argue that true synonyms are non-existent and impossible to find (Quine, 1951; Cruse, 1986). For instance, Cruse (1986, p.270) states that "natural languages abhor absolute synonyms just as nature abhors a vacuum". Nevertheless, several linguists have endeavoured to categorise synonyms into two main types, namely, complete and partial synonyms (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). The former refer to words that have identical meanings, that is, two words can be regarded as complete synonyms if they have all meaning components in common (Quine, 1951). However, such a type does not exist, since the meanings of words that can be found in monolingual or multilingual contexts are always changing (Quine, 1951). Thus, it is possible for words to share the majority of their meaning components with other words, but not all. In the case of partial synonymy, words share most of their meaning components, rather than all. For example, the words *empty* and *vacant* may share most of the components. That is, both of them denote 'not filled or occupied, not containing people or things'. However, we can say *a vacant job* but not *an empty job*. It has been observed that synonymy or partial-synonymy is a very common linguistic phenomenon found cross-linguistically (Liu, 2013). Even though synonyms can be quite confusing and potentially overlapping as far as their semantics is concerned, each synonym does have a distinct meaning, which is not completely interchangeable (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002, p. 107). Here, one may argue that mastering the use of synonyms is essential to language users in general and to second/foreign language learners in particular (Martin, 1984; Benware, 1986; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Yeh et al., 2007; Liu & Zhong, 2014; among others). Such mastery is crucial due to the fact that it can help ESL/EFL learners communicate effectively and avoid communication breakdowns. Therefore, several researchers (e.g. Martin, 1984; Edmonds & Hirst, 2002; Yeh et al., 2007; Liu, 2013) have studied the importance of acquiring synonyms by L2 learners.

On the basis of my experience as an English teacher, English classes in Saudi Arabia do not focus on synonymy and the importance of differentiating between various nuances of meaning, especially their use in their proper context. Thus, EFL learners may find this phenomenon very challenging. As far as Arabic is concerned, the acquisition of English synonyms by Arabic-speaking EFL learners, in general, and Saudi EFL learners in particular has not yet been explored.

Therefore, this study is a serious attempt to investigate the following issues:

- I. The type of errors Saudi EFL learners produce when they use synonyms in English.
- II. The extent to which the English proficiency of native Saudi Arabic speakers has an impact on their comprehension of English synonyms.

The next section reviews the relevant literature on the acquisition of synonyms in L2 contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 Studies on the Acquisition of Synonyms in L2 Contexts

In spite of the importance of acquiring synonyms, especially in L2 contexts, this area has not received much attention with the exception of some studies that concentrated on errors produced by L2 learners when using synonyms (e.g. Martin, 1984; Laufer, 1991) or focused on the advantages of using corpus data to help L2 learners acquire synonyms (Yeh et al., 2007). In a pioneer study, Martin examines the challenges advanced L2 learners encounter when they use synonyms in the L2. On the basis of instances of errors made by advanced L2 learners, the results show that four main types/sources of error in L2 learners' use of synonyms are detected: 'stylistic, syntactic, collocational, and semantic' (Martin 1984, p.130).

According to Martin (1984, p. 131), stylistic errors are common in L2 contexts; they usually result from a mismatch of styles. For example, learners may use a hyperformal expression where an informal one is needed. Alternatively, learners may employ a word that is too colloquial or too formal in a certain communicative context. An example of the latter could be *I wish to call on you, but I do not know where you reside* (Martin, 1984, p. 131). Such a sentence can be viewed as too formal if someone is talking to a friend. An alternative would be: *I want to visit you, but I don't know where you live*. Syntactic errors are also quite common among L2 learners. For example, if learners were given the word *worship* as a general expression for *pray*, they may fall into a syntactic trap. That is, they may attach the same preposition which usually appears with the familiar word to the new synonym, resulting in expressions such as *worshipping to God* (Martin, 1984, p. 132). Other common syntactic errors revolve around argument structure and transitivity. For instance, the verb *reduce* can only be used transitively, while verbs like *decrease* can be used transitively and intransitively. As far as collocational errors are concerned, Martin maintains that these types of errors are notoriously difficult due to their arbitrariness. For instance, one can say *a big eater* but *a heavy smoker, loud noise* but *a strong odour*. Such arbitrariness can present a challenge to L2 learners when dealing with synonyms. It can also be challenging to L2 teachers, in particular, they need to explain why one should say *I was a heavy smoker*, not *a large smoker* (Martin, *ibid*). Finally, the last type of error discussed by Martin (1984) is semantic errors. Martin posits that semantic errors are the most complex and the most difficult type. This difficulty can explain the substantial number of errors produced by L2 learners. The subtle difference between the meanings of words can put pressure on L2 learners to make distinctions between the different synonyms. Analysing words based on their semantic features brings to mind concepts like abstract/concrete, animate/inanimate, and state/event in addition to other properties that are not quite clear. An example of a semantic error is the confusion between *damage* and *injure*. While *damage* only takes inanimate objects, *injure* takes animate objects, e.g. *she was badly damaged in the car accident* (Martin, 1984, p.131). Martin explains that L2 teachers need to pay special attention to these errors, urging students to find an acceptable word that is suitable in a certain context. When the learners produce one of the errors discussed above, the teacher needs to identify the type, i.e. whether stylistic, syntactic, collocational or semantic and then explain the error to the learners. In this way, learners may be able to refrain from producing such errors as they will be aware of their types and how they can be avoided. One may notice that such errors discussed by Martin were produced by advanced L2 learners. This may suggest that synonymy is quite challenging even for those who have an advanced language proficiency level. In a similar vein, Laufer (1991) conducted a study to examine the degree of lexical richness exhibited by advanced L2 learners in writing. The results of the study demonstrate that even advanced learners encounter difficulties when dealing with synonyms in L2, since they employ the same word to convey the same concept over and over again. Asserting whether this observation is true as far as Saudi EFL learners are concerned is one of the main aims of the current study.

In addition to the studies discussed above, reviewing the literature suggests that the study of synonymy has started to gain momentum only recently when new methods have been advanced in corpus and cognitive studies. These advancements have made it possible for researchers from various fields of linguistics to get involved in research on synonymy (Arppe, 2002; Yeh et al., 2007; Liu, 2010; among others). For instance, few researchers have examined the effect of synonyms on the acquisition of vocabulary or the influence of the acquisition of known lexical items on unknown ones (Laufer, 1991). In this regard, it has been found that synonyms are one of the most influential factors in the acquisition of vocabulary. In fact, researchers (e.g. Waring, 1997; Finkbeiner & Nicol, 2003; Zhang & Sheng, 2009; among others) indicate that the learners found it more challenging to acquire new synonyms in comparison with new words that are semantically unrelated.

In recent years, in order to improve research validity and reliability, some synonym studies have used mixed methods, combining both corpus analysis and experimental studies. In these studies, the participants were requested to perform synonym similarity judgments or alternatively perform forced choices. The latter means that the participants were asked to choose a word from a set of synonyms which are provided for them and use the item they selected to fill in the missing word in a number of sentences (Liu, 2013). After administering the test, the participants were asked to account for the choices they have made on the test, providing the researcher with valuable information that has enabled him to understand how learners perceive of synonyms, especially the ways they are used. Such an experiment can provide

information that cannot be provided by a corpus. Thus, the idea of using both corpus and experimental methods can offer insight into the causes of errors made by L2 learners. Following the experiment, the researcher conducted a corpus analysis. Through data elicitation, Liu was able to determine two major factors that may offer an explanation for the participants' synonyms selection, namely: (1) salience, i.e. the main or salient usages of synonyms; and (2) the participants' interpretation of the communication context. The former refers to the collocations of those synonyms with the highest frequency in comparison with their alternative counterparts, which have a similar meaning. The frequency was calculated by computing the ratio of the number of times the word is used to refer to a certain concept to the total corpus frequency of all occurrences of all the items which are used to refer to the same concept. The analysis shows that salient usages are systematic, i.e. non-arbitrary; that is, they are the primary meaning of the synonym. For instance, according to Liu (2013), people say *right to vote*, rather than *authority* or *power to vote*, since voting is regarded as a birth right protected by the constitution. In other words, voting is not given by one's position like *authority* or *power*. The same applies to other examples such as *erroneously/mistakenly/incorrectly/wrongly* accused of murder. The correct answer is *wrongly*, because it is the only adverb that denotes the meaning 'unfairly' which is needed in the above context. Hence, according to Liu (2013), the comprehension of salient usages includes grasping the overlapping different semantic networks of a number of synonyms in a certain set. This entails the understanding of how the meanings of the synonyms overlap as well as the nuances of meaning in which the synonyms differ. Going back to the example of *right/power/authority to vote*, all the synonyms have primary meaning of 'prerogative' in common (Liu, 2013). Nevertheless, the degree of their sharing is different, especially when it comes to *right* whose 'prerogative' comes from birth right. At the same time, the three synonyms have meanings that are different from each other. For example, *power* denotes 'energy', a meaning not shared by the other two synonyms, i.e. we can say *wind power*, but it is ungrammatical to say *wind right/authority*. In this sense, *authority* and *right* are not actually synonyms of *power*.

The second factor discussed by Liu (2013) is the interpretation of the context of use, which has a great impact on language use (Croft & Cruse, 2004), in general, and the participants' synonym selection on the test in particular. This factor plays a major role in the acquisition of synonyms, since the learner usually has to make a decision about which synonym in a set is the most semantically suitable and prototypical to convey the concept in question (Liu, 2013). Liu maintains that even though the learner may choose the most salient synonym in the set, more often than not, the participant's interpretation of the other synonyms pertaining to what the participant him/herself wants to convey may affect his/her choice. That is, the participant may decide that the prototypical meaning of the most salient synonym may not be suitable for the concept in question and select another less salient synonym, whose prototypical meaning fits the concept better than the most salient one. One can argue that if teachers are aware of these factors and how they can affect learners' choices, it can help them think of the most effective ways to teach synonyms and the ways in which they are used in their correct contexts.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that synonyms are very significant for effective communication and rather challenging for language users, in particular, for L2 learners (Martin, 1984; Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). Mastering the use of synonyms can help L2 learners enhance their vocabulary repertoire and, in turn, improve their communicative skills in the target language. Several studies have been conducted on the acquisition of various lexical items by Arabic-speaking EFL learners (e.g. Altakhaineh & Zibin, 2014; Altakhaineh & Rahrouh, 2015; Alotaibi & Alotaibi, 2015). However, to the best of my knowledge, there have not yet been any studies that address the acquisition of English synonyms by Arabic-speaking EFL learners, in general, or Saudi EFL learners, in particular. Thus, this study aims to bridge this gap. Specifically, it seeks answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What types of errors do Saudi EFL learners produce when they use English synonyms?
- 2) To what extent does the English proficiency level of Saudi EFL learners affect their comprehension of English synonyms?
- 3) Does the participants' L1 influence their comprehension of synonyms in English?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The sample of the current study included forty university students, majoring in English, at University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. They were native speakers of SA and their mean age was 23. To increase the validity of the results, these participants were chosen randomly from the population of students majoring in English at Tabuk University. These participants were divided on the basis of their English proficiency level into two groups: 20 Intermediate Learners (ILs) and 20 Advanced Learners (ALs). The first half of participants was in their first and second year, while the other half was in their fourth year. However, the participants' university level may not be an accurate measure of their English proficiency level. Thus, in order to accurately measure the English proficiency level of the participants, they were asked to take an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The reason for taking such a test is to ensure that the participants' division into two groups is done on solid grounds, i.e. their scores on the placement test. The participants were divided into two groups based on their scores on the test. If the participants' scores ranged between 60-79, they were considered intermediate, whereas if their scores ranged between 80-100+, they were regarded as advanced. Following that, the participants were asked to take a multiple-choice test in order to examine their comprehension of English synonyms (see Appendix 1). In order to ascertain that the multiple-choice test is reliable, 20 native speakers of English functioned as a control group. Their answers on the test were taken to be the correct answers (see section 3.3). The 40 Saudi EFL learners functioned as the treatment group due to the fact that they took the two tests. The frequency of the selected

synonyms was checked in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to ascertain that these synonyms are employed in contemporary speech. With respect to the sentences used on the test, they were taken from COCA and Cambridge Online Dictionary, with a few modifications for clarity and to better suit the participants' proficiency level.

3.2 Instrument

A receptive, multiple-choice test of synonyms was used to check the participants' ability to comprehend synonyms properly. The multiple-choice test consists of 12 sentences and each sentence is followed by four options: (1) the correct synonym; (2) one synonym which is close in meaning to the correct one; (3) another synonym close in meaning to the correct one; and (4) one *I don't know* option (see Appendix 1). The final option was employed to reduce the probability of guessing and then choosing wrong answers, which in turn increases the reliability of the test (Charteris-Black, 2002; Zibin, 2016). Nicol (2007, p. 54) explains that the multiple-choice test is regarded as one of the most commonly used data elicitation tools to test the participants' ability to comprehend a certain structure or expression in the target language. This test has been used by several researchers to assess EFL learners' comprehension of a particular phenomenon in the target language (Charteris-black, 2002; Altakhaineh & Rahrouh, 2015; Zibin, 2016 among others). These researchers maintain that the multiple-choice test can elicit useful data that can help the researcher evaluate the participants' receptive knowledge and determine the cause of potential errors. Therefore, the researcher chose the multiple-choice test as one of the data elicitation tools based on his belief that it is the appropriate tool to use to test the participants' ability to choose the correct synonym in a certain sentence in English. The test design utilised in the current study was originally suggested by Charteris-Black (2002, p. 119). In addition, in order to provide accurate assessment of the ability of Saudi EFL learners to recognise synonyms in English, three cases of each syntactic category of the synonyms are used; three sets of nouns, three sets of verbs, three sets of adjectives and three sets of adverbs. The reason for choosing nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs is that some studies focus on synonymous adjectives and verbs more than on English synonymous nouns and adverbs. Hence, this study bridges this gap by means of studying all four syntactic categories of the synonymous words.

3.3 Procedure

After taking the OPT to determine the English proficiency level of the Saudi EFL learners, the researcher gave the multiple-choice test to the NSs who acted as the control group. Only the items that were answered unanimously by 80% or more of the native speakers were included in the final version of the multiple-choice test. Utilising a control group can ensure that the test used in the study is reliable and can indeed measure the participants' ability to choose the correct English synonym in a certain sentence (cf. Zaid, 2011). Then, the researcher gave the multiple-choice test to the two groups, i.e. the ALs and ILs to measure their ability to recognise the correct English synonym in contextualised sentences. Their answers were marked based on the answers provided by the NSs. After obtaining the answers from the three groups, the researcher analysed the data using Chi-square, as explained in the following section.

3.4 Data analysis

A Chi-square test was used to obtain the *P*-value, which then determines whether the difference between the participants' results, i.e. ALs vs. ILs, is statistically significant. The Chi-square test is used to compare actual or observed frequencies with expected frequencies in a sample data in order to determine whether the two frequencies differ statistically (Tavakoli, 2013, p. 59). This test is used to investigate the relationship between the variables, giving the researcher insight into how the variables may affect each other (Tavakoli, 2013; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015). Chi-square determines whether there is a relationship between data in rows and in columns. This may suggest that Chi-square is an appropriate data analysis tool in the current study, since it aims to determine whether the English proficiency level of the participants influences their comprehension of English synonyms. Four Chi-square tests were conducted on each item on the multiple-choice test, one to compare the results of the native speakers with both the advanced and intermediate, then three other Chi-square tests were done to compare (see Appendix 2):

1. ALs and NSs
2. ILs and NSs
3. ALs and ILs

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

As mentioned previously, the multiple-choice test consisted of 12 items designed to test the ability of 40 Saudi EFL learners to recognise the correct synonym in contextualised sentences in English. Prior to administering the multiple-choice test, the researcher gave the test to 20 NSs, who acted as the control group. The results of the control group demonstrate that approximately 19.6 (98%) of the participants in total were in agreement on the synonyms on the test. This may indicate that the degree of saliency of the synonyms on the test is high, based on the answers of the NSs (see Liu & Zhong, 2014). That is, in each case, there is a dominant synonym that cannot be interchanged or substituted with another without affecting the meaning. A Chi-square test was used to determine whether the differences between the ALs and the NSs and then between the ILs and the NSs were statistically significant. This test can help the researcher decide whether the answers of ALs and ILs approximated those of the control group, i.e. NSs. The results of the Chi-square are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the Chi-square on each item by ALs vs. NSs and ILs vs. NSs

No.	Item	ALs vs. NSs		ILs vs. NSs	
		Chi- score	P value	Chi- score	P value
1.	<i>Right</i>	3.243	0.197	17.143	0.000
2.	<i>Swarm</i>	8.485	0.014	21.538	0.000
3.	<i>Temper</i>	3.421	0.180	10	0.006
4.	<i>Mistakenly</i>	10.293	0.005	14.053	0.000
5.	<i>Fully</i>	8.98	0.011	17.143	0.000
6.	<i>Vaguely</i>	8.485	0.014	19.487	0.000
7.	<i>Deep</i>	3.982	0.136	8.657	0.013
8.	<i>Strong</i>	7.059	0.029	10.594	0.005
9.	<i>Heavy</i>	7.684	0.021	9.274	0.009
10.	<i>Keep</i>	4.444	0.108	7.059	0.029
11.	<i>Catch</i>	8.98	0.011	20.526	0.000
12.	<i>Pay</i>	11.259	0.003	20.526	0.000

P value < 0.05

Table 1 reveals that the answers provided by the ILs differed significantly from those of NSs on all items on the test, suggesting that the answers provided by the ILs did not approximate those provided by the NSs on any item on the test. On the other hand, the Chi-square test shows that the results provided by the ALs differed significantly from those of the NSs on eight items (i.e. items 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12), which may suggest that only four answers provided by the ALs were more similar to those provided by the NSs.

In order to answer the second research question: the extent to which the English proficiency level of Saudi EFL learners affects their acquisition of English synonyms, the researcher conducted a 2(group) * number of choices on the Chi-square test between the ALs and ILs. The results of the Chi-square are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results of the Chi-square on each item by ALs vs. ILs

No.	Item	ALs vs. ILs	
		Chi-square score	P value
1.	<i>Right</i>	8.64	0.013
2.	<i>Swarm</i>	7.156	0.027
3.	<i>Temper</i>	2.833	0.242
4.	<i>Mistakenly</i>	1.299	0.522
5.	<i>Fully</i>	2.862	0.239
6.	<i>Vaguely</i>	7.376	0.025
7.	<i>Deep</i>	7.561	0.022
8.	<i>Strong</i>	2.336	0.310
9.	<i>Heavy</i>	0.125	0.939
10.	<i>Keep</i>	2.133	0.344
11.	<i>Catch</i>	3.804	0.149
12.	<i>Pay</i>	3.025	0.220

P value < 0.05

Table 2 reveals that despite the subtle differences between the answers provided by the ALs and those provided by their ILs counterpart, these differences were not enough to differ statistically except on items 1, 2, 6, and 7. This indicates that the participants' English proficiency level may not have played a role in their ability to recognise the correct synonym on all items on the test.

Now that the results of the Chi-square test were discussed, the researcher presents the number of correct answers provided by ALs and ILs on the multiple-choice test. Table 3 below presents the number of correct answers on the multiple-choice test by the three groups.

Table 3. The number of accurate answers provided by the three groups on the multiple-choice test

No.	Correct answers	NSs	ALs	ILs
1.	<i>Right</i>	20	17	8
2.	<i>Swarm</i>	20	13	6
3.	<i>Temper</i>	20	16	12
4.	<i>Mistakenly</i>	19	10	8
5.	<i>Fully</i>	20	12	8
6.	<i>Vaguely</i>	20	13	6
7.	<i>Deep</i>	17	12	7
8.	<i>Strong</i>	20	14	11
9.	<i>Heavy</i>	19	11	10
10.	<i>Keep</i>	20	16	14
11.	<i>Catch</i>	20	12	6
12.	<i>Pay</i>	20	10	6

As shown in Table 3, on item 1, the number of correct answers provided by the ALs was very close (17) to that of the NSs (20), suggesting that the ALs did not face problems with this item. Comparing those answers to the ones provided by the ILs, one may notice that only 8 of the ILs chose right on the test. On item 2, ILs encountered more difficulty than ALs; the number of correct answers provided by the former group was 6, while that provided by the latter was 13. Regarding item 3, temper, the answers provided by the ALs and NSs were very close, i.e. 16 and 20, respectively. In addition, 12 of the ILs were able to guess the correct item to be used, which may suggest that they may not have found this item as difficult as the other items. With respect to item 4, mistakenly, 19 of the NSs chose mistakenly, while only 10 and 8 of the ALs and ILs, respectively, chose it, which suggests that both the ALs and ILs encountered problems with this item. With regard to item 5, fully, all of the NSs chose fully on the test, whilst 12 and 8 of the ALs and ILs chose it, respectively. Concerning item 6, vaguely, Table 3 shows that all of the NSs chose vaguely, whereas 13 and 6 of the ALs and ILs, respectively chose it. Regarding item 7, deep, the answers provided by the ALs (12) approximated those provided by the NSs (17). However, only 7 of the ILs were able to choose the correct answer. On item 8, strong, Table 3 demonstrates that all of the NSs chose strong on the test, whereas 14 and 11 of the ALs and ILs chose it. With regard to item 9, heavy, 19 of the NSs chose heavy, while only 11 and 10 of the ALs and ILs respectively chose it. On item 10, keep, 20, 16 and 14 of the NSs, ALs and ILs chose keep on the test, suggesting that they have not found this item problematic. With respect to item 11, catch, all of the NSs chose catch, whereas 12 and 6 of the ALs and ILs chose it. This may suggest that the English proficiency level of both groups had no impact on their answers on this item. Finally, on item 12, pay, all of the NSs selected pay, whereas 10 and 6 of the ALs and ILs respectively selected it. In the next section, the researcher provides a qualitative analysis which examines the types of errors the participants produced and whether the participants' L1 influenced their use of synonyms in English, respectively.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

One interpretation for the results on item 1 could be that the synonym *right* is used quite frequently with voting in English; thus, the ALs could have recalled the correct use of the synonym *right*. Comparing the answers of ALs and NSs answers to the ones provided by the ILs, one may notice that ILs encountered more problems with this item. The ILs may not have been familiar with the most salient use of the synonym in the context provided, or they could have interpreted the context in another way, that is, everyone in this city has *the power*, in the sense 'ability', to vote in the next election for mayor (see Appendix 2). This possibility has been suggested by Liu (2013), in which he explains that the EFL learners may sometimes provide an answer which they believe is the one suitable in a certain context. Thus, they provided an inaccurate answer. The results of the Chi-square (see Table 2) show that the differences between the ALs and ILs on this item were statistically significant, suggesting that the English proficiency level could have influenced their answers.

On item 2, i.e. *swarm*, the difficulty which the participants, especially the ILs, encountered with this item could be due to the fact they were not familiar with the collocation *swarm of insects*. In fact, 6 and 7 of the ALs and ILs respectively chose *flock* rather than *swarm* on the test. One interpretation for this result could be the fact that the word *swarm* and *flock* in Arabic have the same translation, i.e. سرب. Thus, the first language of the participants could have affected their answers on the test. This result can provide an answer to the third research question: whether the participants' L1 influenced their use of synonyms in English. Beardsmore (1982) explains that many challenges encountered by L2 learners when they learn the vocabulary of L2 are caused by interference habits from their first language (L1). In particular, the formal elements of L1 can be used in L2, which results in errors in L2, especially when the structure of L1 and L2 are different.

Regarding item 3, the answers of the groups suggest that the ALs were familiar with the correct synonym to be used in that context. In spite of the fact that there were differences between the results of the ALs and ILs, they were not enough to be statistically significant, suggesting that this item did not present a challenge to both groups. Many ILs were able to guess the correct item to be used due to the fact that none of the other two synonyms, i.e. *spirit* and *disposition* were deemed suitable in the context provided or that the collocation was familiar to both groups.

With respect to item 4, *mistakenly*, both the ALs and ILs encountered problems with this item. The two other synonyms provided on this item are very close to the correct answer, i.e. *erroneously* and *incorrectly*. In fact, 7 and 6 of the ALs and ILs chose the synonym *incorrectly* rather than *mistakenly*. In addition, the other 6 of the ILs chose *erroneously*. This may indicate that both the ALs and ILs were not aware of the subtle semantic differences between the synonyms provided. All the synonyms, i.e. *mistakenly*, *incorrectly* and *erroneously* have the primary meaning 'wrongly'. Nevertheless, only the synonym *mistakenly* co-occurs with the word *identity* (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2016). This is a case of collocational error as described by Martin (1984), where the EFL learner is not aware of the words that usually accompany another word.

Thus, this provides an answer to the first research question: the type of errors produced by Saudi EFL learners. Specifically, Martin suggests that these types of errors are notoriously difficult due to their arbitrariness. For instance, one can say *a big eater* but *a heavy smoker*, *loud noise* but *a strong odour*. This arbitrariness can be problematic to L2 learners when they encounter synonyms in L2. This can also be problematic to L2 teachers. Specifically, they need to explain why one should say *mistaken identity*, not *an incorrect identity* or *erroneous identity*.

With regard to item 5, *fully*, the results of the data analysis also shows that 6 and 8 of the ALs and ILs chose the synonym *utterly* on the test, rather than *fully*. This may suggest that the participants in both groups were not aware of the semantic differences between the two synonyms. In this regard, Martin (1984) discusses a type of error referred to as a semantic error, i.e. one that is caused by lack of knowledge of the subtle nuances of meaning between the synonyms (Marin, 1984). Martin explains that semantic errors are the most complex and the most difficult type. This difficulty can explain the huge number of errors produced by L2 learners on the experiment he conducted. In particular, the subtle semantic difference between the meanings of words can put pressure on L2 learners to make distinctions between the different synonyms. Semantic errors represent another type of error produced by Saudi EFL learners in addition to collocational errors. Even advanced L2 learners produce errors on this type (see Laufer, 1991). The deal with *utterly* is that it is usually followed by bad adjectives, such as *stupid*, according to Louw (1993). However, the participants were not aware of this fact; hence, their incorrect answers.

Concerning item 6, *vaguely*, all the synonyms provided on the test, i.e. *vaguely*, *nearly* and *approximately* have the same primary meaning 'almost, not completely'. However, only *vaguely* has the element 'unclearly' and usually collocates with *remember*. These characteristics made the choice between the items difficult, particularly, for the ILs. The results show that 12 of the ILs chose *nearly* rather than *vaguely* on the test. This may indicate that the ILs were not aware of the subtle semantic difference between *nearly* and the *vaguely*, on the one hand, and they were unfamiliar with the collocation *vaguely remember*, on the other. Thus, they produced erroneous answers on the test. On the basis of my experience as an English teacher in Saudi Arabia, I noticed that English classes do not pay attention to synonymy and the importance of differentiating between various nuances of meaning, especially their use in their proper context and their accompanying words, i.e. collocations. Thus, Saudi EFL learners may find this phenomenon very challenging.

Regarding item 7, looking at the results provided in Appendix 2, one may notice that 11 of the ILs chose *intense* rather than *deep* on the test. This is probably because feelings in Arabic usually collocate with an adjective that has a similar meaning to *intense* rather than *deep*, i.e. مشاعر قوية. Thus, the ILs may have translated the meaning of *intense* literally from Arabic and thus choose it on the test rather than *deep*. This answer suggests that the participants' L1 may have influenced their use of synonyms in English. In addition, the context provided may have played a role in the ILs choice, i.e. *I didn't know that John has such _____ feelings for Mary; he loves her very much*. Once again, one may notice that L1 may have affected the answers of Saudi EFL learners when dealing with synonyms in English.

On item 8, *strong*, one may observe that 6 and 6 of the ALs and ILs chose *powerful* rather than *strong* (see Appendix 2). One reason for such a choice could be accounted for by referring to L1 interference (see Erdoğan, 2005; Saville-Troike, 2012). In particular, the two synonyms in Arabic have one translation, i.e. قوي. The participants may not have been aware of the differences between *strong* and *powerful* in English, especially when they collocate with *coffee*.

With regard to item 9, *heavy*, examining the results on this item demonstrates that 6 and 7 of the ALs and ILs, respectively, chose *massive* rather than *heavy* on the test (see Appendix 2). One interpretation could be that the synonym *massive* was regarded as suitable by the participants, especially in the context provided on the test, namely, *When John saw that the woman was struggling with a _____ bag, he ran to help her*. Translating *massive* literally from Arabic yields ضخم 'huge' which could be suitable in the context provided above. However, the answers provided by the NSs (19) may suggest that *heavy* is the salient usage in this context (see Liu, 2013).

With respect to item 10, *keep*, one may suggest that ALs and ILs were familiar with the meaning of the synonym and the fact that it collocates with *secret*; hence, the accurate answers by both ALs and ILs. In contrast, one may also argue that the EFL learners were not familiar with either of the other two synonyms provided, i.e. *preserve* and *retain*. Therefore, they opted for the one synonym they are familiar with.

With respect to item 11, *catch*, a look at the answers provided by ALs and ILs on this item (see Appendix 2) shows that 6 and 11 respectively chose *take*. It can be argued that some participants opted for this choice, since the word *cold*

collocates with *take* in Arabic rather than *catch*, i.e. أخذ برد. Hence, the participants' L1 may have had an impact on the participants' answers on this item. Some participants may not have been aware of the fact that collocational patterns in Arabic and English are not similar. This lack of awareness caused some participants to translate the collocation literally from Arabic; thus, producing a wrong answer on the test.

Finally, with regard to item 12, *pay*, the equivalent of *paying respect* in Arabic is *giving respect*. This may explain why 7 and 9 of the ALs and ILs respectively chose *grant*. That is, *grant* has a meaning which is close to *give*, yielding the Arabic collocation, rather than the English one.

In sum, this section provided a qualitative analysis of the results, demonstrating that the main factors that played a role in the participants' erroneous responses were: L1 interference, lack of familiarity with the collocations in English and the interpretation of the context. The next section discusses these results and compares them to those conducted by other researchers.

4.3 Discussion

The results of the Chi-square on the multiple-choice test reveal that despite the subtle differences between the answers provided by the ALs and those provided by their ILs counterpart, these differences were not enough to differ statistically except on four items. This indicates that the participants' English proficiency level may not have played a role in their ability to recognise the correct synonym on all items on the test. With regard to the first research question related to the errors produced by Saudi EFL learners, the results show that the main causes of errors on the multiple-choice test were attributed to: (1) the fact that Saudi EFL learners may sometimes provide an answer which they believe is the one suitable in a certain context other than the salient synonym; (2) lack of familiarity with English collocations; (3) lack of awareness of the semantic differences between the synonyms in English; and (4) interference habits from the participants' first language (L1). These sources of error were discussed by other researchers. For instance, Liu (2013) explains that the interpretation of the context plays a major role in the acquisition of synonyms, since the learner usually has to make a decision about which synonym in a set is the most semantically suitable and prototypical to convey the concept in question (Liu, 2013). Liu maintains that even though the learner may choose the most salient synonym in the set, usually the participant's interpretation of the other synonyms pertaining to what the participant him/herself wants to convey may influence his/her choice, motivating the participant to choose another less salient synonym, whose prototypical meaning fits the concept better than the most salient one. The results of this study confirm Liu's (2013) observation, suggesting that interpretation of the context could be a cross-linguistic factor affecting the acquisition of synonyms by EFL learners in general. Thus, the results of this study and those of other studies such as Liu (2013) suggest that special attention needs to be given to the context and how some synonyms are used in certain contexts, but not in others (see section 4.4).

Concerning the second source of error, i.e. collocational errors, it seems that they are very frequent not only in the Saudi EFL context, but in other contexts as proposed by Martin (1984). This may suggest that this type of error is encountered by EFL learners in general and needs to be addressed in EFL classrooms. Regarding the third source of error, i.e. semantic errors, Martin (1984) explains that semantic errors are the most difficult type of errors as far as the acquisition of synonyms is concerned. This difficulty can explain the big number of errors produced by L2 learners. The subtle difference between the meanings of words can make it difficult on L2 learners to make distinctions between different synonyms. The data analysis shows that Saudi EFL learners also produced semantic errors, which confirms the results provided by previous research (e.g. Marin, 1984). The results of this study and that of Martin (1984) suggest that semantic errors are regarded as a stumbling block to EFL/ESL learners in the comprehension of synonyms in L2 contexts. Thus, teaching methods that focus on these types of errors need to be developed and integrated in L2 teaching (see section 4.4).

With respect to the fourth source of error, i.e. L1 interference, again it seems that this type of error can be found in other EFL contexts (Albert & Obler, 1978; Beardmore, 1982; Liu & Zhong, 2014; Zibin & Altakhaineh, 2016). This suggests that as far as L1 influence is concerned, the results reported in this study confirm previous studies conducted on the acquisition of synonyms by ESL/EFL learners.

Based on the results of the multiple-choice test, the researcher would argue that as far as the acquisition of synonyms by Saudi EFL learners is concerned, direct instruction could be more effective than incidental learning, especially with students of low or intermediate English proficiency levels (see Sadoski, 2005; Lyster, 2007). This suggestion may contradict that of Krashen (2004), who suggests that vocabulary ought to be acquired indirectly or incidentally via extensive reading. Krashen's (2004) argument is based on the input-oriented language acquisition theory, which suggests that if the input is meaningful and contextualised, the learner can connect the meaning with the form (Min, 2008). However, the answers provided by Saudi EFL learners on the test may suggest that: the differences between nuances of meaning, how each synonym should be used in certain contexts and the fact that L1 and L2 exhibit differences as far as lexical items are concerned should be explained directly to the learners. Incidental learning (accompanied by direct instruction) could be more effective with advanced and motivated EFL learners, but not with those learners who have low or intermediate English proficiency level (see Schmitt, 2008). The latter group may not pay attention to the difference in synonyms unless it is pointed out to them. In addition, as suggested by Coady (1993), repetition is necessary for EFL learners to acquire synonyms, exposure is not enough. This takes us to the following section which proposes some pedagogical implications to ESL/EFL teachers.

4.4 Pedagogical Implications

Taking into account the previous discussion, some pedagogical implications can be proposed. Since most of the material Saudi EFL learners are exposed to at school and University are made-up sentences, which may not be used by native speakers of English on a daily basis, Saudi EFL learners are not aware of the contemporary real-life English language used by native speakers. In addition, the focus in Saudi curricula as far as English teaching is concerned is on sentence structure. Little attention is given to areas such as synonymy and collocations. Hence, it is proposed that curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia need to take into account the importance of phenomena like synonymy and collocations and start including activities and tasks that may help Saudi EFL learners acquire the correct lexical items (this was also proposed by Santos, 1988). Once EFL learners comprehend the notions of synonymy and collocations, they may not find the production of these items as difficult as before.

Additionally, ESL/EFL teachers need to acquaint students with the fact that one-to-one equivalence between English and Arabic as far as lexical items is concerned may not be possible all the time. The two languages have different lexical items that could be expressed using one word or many words. This type of knowledge may help EFL learners produce unmarked sentences in English, because they will not think that what applies to L1 applies to L2 in all cases. EFL learners can be encouraged to use note taking strategies, where they write the English lexical item with its synonym and definition, so that they can become more used to thinking in English, rather than Arabic (see Alharthi, 2014). Furthermore, ESL/EFL teachers may give students real sentences (collected from a corpus) and show them how each synonym is used in certain contexts, not all contexts. This type of tasks can help EFL learners understand the concept of partial synonymy and endeavour to learn how each synonym is used in its context.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the ability of 40 Saudi EFL learners to comprehend synonyms in English. In particular, it tests their receptive knowledge of synonyms in English. It also tests whether the participants' English proficiency level plays a role in their acquisition of synonyms in English. To this end, the researcher designed a multiple-choice test to measure Saudi EFL learners' ability to recognise the correct synonym in English in contextualised English sentences. In order to test whether the English proficiency level of the participants contributed to their results on the test, the participants were divided on the basis of their scores on the Oxford Placement Test into two groups: 20 Intermediate Learners (ILs) and 20 Advanced Learners (ALs). Twenty native speakers of English (NSs) functioned as the control group. The native speakers' answers on the multiple-choice test were regarded as the correct answers. The answers provided by the ALs and ILs were compared to the ones provided by the NSs. In order to determine whether the differences between the three groups, ALs, ILs and NSs on the multiple-choice test, a Chi-square test was employed. The results of the multiple-choice test reveal that the answers provided by the ILs differed significantly from those of NSs on all items on the test. In addition, the Chi-square test shows that the results provided by the ALs differed significantly from those of the NSs on eight items (i.e. items 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12), which may suggest that only four answers provided by the ALs were more similar to those provided by the NSs. The answer to the first research question is that Saudi EFL learners produce collocational and semantic errors when they are asked to recognise the correct English synonym in contextualised sentences. The answer to the second research question is that despite the differences between the answers of ALs and ILs on the test, these differences were not enough to differ statistically except on items 1, 2, 6, and 7. This indicates that the participants' English proficiency level may not have played a role in their ability to recognise the correct synonym on all items on the test. The answer to the third research question is that L1 interference affects the comprehension of English synonyms by Saudi EFL learners. Based on these results, the researcher concluded with some pedagogical implications to ESL/EFL teachers to help them acquaint students with synonyms and collocations in English. Finally, it is recommended that studies which examine the acquisition of lexical phenomena by Arabic-speaking EFL learners, e.g. compounds (see Altakhaineh, 2016 for more information on Arabic compounds) are required to provide more insight into the acquisition process of such items which has not received due attention.

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Appendix 1

Multiple-choice test:

Choose the answer that best completes the following sentences.

1. Everyone in this city has the _____ to vote in the next election for mayor.
 - a. authority
 - b. right
 - c. power
 - d. I don't know
2. While I was walking in the park yesterday, I saw a _____ of insects gathered around a swamp.
 - a. Herd
 - b. Flock
 - c. Swarm
 - d. I don't know
3. I try to avoid speaking to Lucy in the morning, she has a very bad _____.
 - a. Temper
 - b. Spirit
 - c. Disposition
 - d. I don't know
4. A photograph of the killer the police was looking for was _____ identified as John Smith.
 - a. Mistakenly
 - b. Erroneously
 - c. Incorrectly
 - d. I don't know
5. I am _____ aware of the consequences of my actions. I will not blame anyone for my mistakes.
 - a. Thoroughly
 - b. Utterly
 - c. Fully
 - d. I don't know
6. She _____ remembers that Bob was working with her sister at that time.
 - a. Nearly
 - b. Vaguely
 - c. Approximately
 - d. I don't know
7. I didn't know that John has such _____ feelings for Mary; he loves her very much.
 - a. Intense
 - b. Extensive
 - c. Deep
 - d. I don't know
8. Nothing can really wake me up in the morning except for a cup of _____ coffee.
 - a. Strong
 - b. Powerful
 - c. Substantial
 - d. I don't know
9. When John saw that the woman was struggling with a _____ bag, he ran to help her.
 - a. Massive
 - b. Heavy
 - c. Weighty
 - d. I don't know

10. I will never trust Jack again, he can never _____ a secret!
- Preserve
 - Keep
 - Retain
 - I don't know
11. If you don't put your jacket on, you're going to _____ a cold.
- Take
 - Develop
 - Catch
 - I don't know
12. Yesterday, friends and relatives came to _____ their respects to Mrs Smith who passed away two day ago.
- Pay
 - Bestow
 - Grant
 - I don't know

Appendix 2

Results of the Chi-square on each item on the multiple-choice test:

Item 1

	Authority	Right	power
Advanced	1	17	2
Intermediate	4	8	8
Native speakers	0	20	0
	Chi-square: 20.8		<i>P</i> value: 0.000
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		3.243	0.197
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		17.143	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		8.64	0.013

Item 2

	Herd	flock	Swarm
Advanced	1	6	13
Intermediate	7	7	6
Native speakers	0	0	20
	Chi-square: 24.904		<i>P</i> value: 0.000
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		8.485	0.014
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		21.538	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		7.156	0.027

Item 3

	Temper	spirit	disposition
Advanced	16	2	1
Intermediate	12	5	3
Native speakers	20	0	0
	Chi-square: 10.719		<i>P</i> value: 0.029
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		3.421	0.180
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		0.006	0.006
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		2.833	0.242

Item 4

	Mistakenly	Erroneously	Incorrectly
Advanced	10	3	7
Intermediate	8	6	6
Native speakers	19	0	1
	Chi-square: 15.996		<i>P</i> value: 0.003
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		10.293	0.005
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		14.053	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		1.299	0.522

Item 5

	Thoroughly	Utterly	Fully
Advanced	1	6	12
Intermediate	4	8	8
Native speakers	0	0	20
	Chi-square: 17.931		<i>P</i> value: 0.001
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		8.98	0.011
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		17.143	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		2.862	0.239

Item 6

	Nearly	Vaguely	Approximately
Advanced	5	13	2
Intermediate	12	6	0
Native speakers	0	20	0
	Chi-square:	24.643	<i>P</i> value: 0.000
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		8.485	0.014
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		19.487	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		7.376	0.025

Item 7

	Intense	Extensive	Deep
Advanced	4	3	12
Intermediate	11	0	7
Native speakers	3	0	17
	Chi-square:	16.568	<i>P</i> value: 0.002
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		3.982	0.136
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		8.657	0.013
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		7.561	0.022

Item 8

	Strong	Powerful	Substantial
Advanced	14	6	0
Intermediate	11	6	2
Native speakers	20	0	0
	Chi-square:	12.797	<i>P</i> value: 0.012
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		7.059	0.029
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		10.594	0.005
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		2.336	0.310

Item 9

	Massive	Heavy	Weighty
Advanced	6	11	2
Intermediate	7	10	2
Native speakers	1	19	0
	Chi-square:	9.885	<i>P</i> value: 0.042
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		7.684	0.021
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		9.274	0.009
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		0.125	0.939

Item 10

	Preserve	keep	Retain
Advanced	4	16	0
Intermediate	4	14	2
Native speakers	0	20	0
	Chi-square:	9.12	<i>P</i> value: 0.058
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		4.444	0.108
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		7.059	0.029
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		2.133	0.344

Item 11

	Take	Develop	Catch
Advanced	6	1	12
Intermediate	11	2	6
Native speakers	0	0	20
	Chi-square:	20.266	<i>P</i> value: 0.000
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		8.98	0.011
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		20.526	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		3.804	0.149

Item 12

	Pay	Bestow	Grant
Advanced	10	1	7
Intermediate	6	4	9
Native speakers	20	0	0
	Chi-square:	21.582	<i>P</i> value: 0.000
Advanced vs. Native speakers:		11.259	0.003
Intermediate vs. Native speakers:		20.526	0.000
Advanced vs. Intermediate:		3.025	0.220