

# *Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners Mastery And Use Of The Appropriate Lexical Relations*

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## **Abstract**

This study is concerned with investigating and examining the levels of mastery and production of third year Iraqi EFL students/University of Tikrit, with focus on lexical/semantic difficulty occurring when using appropriate lexical relations as synonyms and collocations. The study presents an analysis of difficulties in using lexical units from a semantic (lexical relation) perspective, which results in the production of erroneous sentences and which affect the collaborative process of communication. The results of the study indicate that Iraqi EFL students make both combinatorial (collocation) and substitutional(synonyms) lexical errors; but the latter being more frequent. The results also show that lexical errors are mostly due to intralingual reasons. And they are not likely to decrease or diminish with the increasing exposure to the target language unless a vital change occurs in the method of teaching of lexical relations. It is verified in the study that lexis is not a random list of words; it is a rule governed area and must be taught in a systematic way.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.2. The Problem**

Appropriateness in this study refers to the positive contribution of a lexical unit to its context. The researcher, through personal experience, has observed that one main problem in Iraqi EFL students is often the inappropriate selection of an item in the context in which it is used, thus creating an obvious inaccuracy in their written and spoken communication and the level of inaccuracy varies in intensity. This study focuses on lexical relations, by which we mean how meanings are realized in texts through the lexical choices. The lexical relations discussed in the study are synonymy and collocation.

This study sees lexical errors as equally significant as grammatical errors and in fact, more disturbing in communication. According to Sonaiya(1988:87), Corder(1971:71)and Allan and Corder(1975: 8), native speakers perceive lexical errors as more serious than all other types of errors because "it is in the choice of words that effective communication is hindered most". It attempts to emphasize the fact that the neglect of lexical relations in EFL classroom should be a

concern for teachers. Learners' lack of knowledge of appropriate lexical patterns makes them prone to all sorts of lexical errors, which can be, at times, more disruptive in communication than grammatical errors.

### **1.3 Hypotheses**

1. University of Tikrit students in their third year(College of Education) face difficulties in using lexical units from a semantic (lexical relation) perspective, which results in the production of erroneous utterances.
2. Iraqi EFL students make both combinatorial and substitutional lexical errors; the latter being more frequent.
3. The lexical errors are mainly intralingual errors, induced either by the incorrect application of rules or by students attempting to create an assumption concerning the target language.

### **1.4 The significance of the study**

- 1) The area discussed has been neglected by researchers who have concentrated only on grammatical errors. Dixson (2004:78) states that the “grammatical and phonologic aspects are emphasized; and as a result, the lexical aspect is neglected.”
- 2) The results may draw the attention of EFL teachers to the importance of the lexical aspect in the EFL class and it may also contribute to developing their level of communication.
- 3) The importance of this study also lies in its identification of the difficulties in the use of vocabulary by Iraqi EFL learners and the extent to what these difficulties affect the collaborative process of communication.

### **1.5 Aims of the study**

The study aims at:

1. Investigating and identifying the difficulties facing Iraqi EFL students in using lexical relations, this results in the production of erroneous utterances and which affect the collaborative process of communication.
2. Analysing and comparing the errors that Iraqi EFL learners manifested in using lexical items (as synonyms and collocations) in their written tasks.
3. Specifying the sources of errors of lexical appropriateness.

## **LITRETURE REVIEW**

### **2. Substitutional Relations**

#### **2.1 Synonyms**

Synonyms are words that hold similar meaning. Saeed (2003:65) defines synonyms as ‘different phonological words which have the same or very similar meaning’. Though words in English may seem to mean the same, there are parameters that differentiate them. Rodale (1981:87) presents three characteristics that never make words ‘coincide’ totally. These are frequency, distribution and connotation. He highlights the difference between ‘home’ and ‘house’, saying that not all houses can be counted as homes, referring the

differences between them to distribution. ‘motherly’ and ‘maternal’ are different in connotation, while the difference between ‘Leo’ and ‘Lion’ is that of frequency.

Stubbs (2002:36) introduces two parameters, denotation and connotation. By denotation Stubbs includes words that mean the same but cannot be collocated with the same words e.g. ‘coach’ and ‘sofa’. The word couch collocates with the word ‘casting’ (casting couch) and ‘psychiatrist’ (psychiatrist couch) but it does not collocate with the word ‘bed’. On the other hand, the word ‘sofa’, which is a synonym of the word ‘couch’, collocates with the word ‘bed’ (sofa bed) but does not collocate with either ‘casting’ or ‘psychiatrist’. Learners usually tend to use synonyms in order to avoid repeating the same word.

### **3. Combinatorial Relationship**

#### **3.1 Collocation**

Collocation is a term that refers to the way in which some words are always used together, or to a particular combination of words. Palmer (1968:6-7) states that Firth’s statement (the father of collocation) that ‘you know a word by the company it keeps’ summarises the content of the Firthian view of collocation. Wouden (1997:5) considers collocation as ‘the mechanism, or fact, that certain words are regularly found in the company of other words’.

English language is full of collocations, that is why collocation plays an essential part in English vocabulary. McCarthy (1994:12) states that ‘the relationship of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary’ and that there is not enough effort on teaching collocation, though it is ‘more disruptive in communication than grammatical errors’. He (ibid.) argues that collocation ‘deserves to be a central part of vocabulary learning’. Halliday and Sinclair (1966) believe that collocation can finish the unfinished work of grammar, which may be a view based on McIntosh’s notion that lexical patterns are just as important as grammatical ones (Carter, 1988:32). To illustrate this notion, Halliday and Sinclair (Ibid:34) give the example of the words ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’; if we want to distinguish these two words grammatically, it is not possible and their meaning is almost the same. The only differentiation between these two words is that of collocation, e.g. the words ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’ can be distinguished by the words they co-occur with. This co-occurrence is referred to by Halliday and Sinclair as ‘set’, which ‘is a way of linking conceptually words which may not necessarily occur in the same text’.

Collocation has been a focus point to research on ESL classroom. Taiwo(2004:44) finds that an ESL learner’s lack of knowledge of collocation may lead to some inaccuracy in his/her discourse such as using a longer sentence instead of using the correct collocation form:

- People have the ability to say what they need (freedom of expression).
- The situation whereby people vote for their rulers to rule them (democratic rule).

#### **4. Appropriateness And Lexical Errors**

An appropriate utterance is one whose form conveys a certain context. Any word used in a context must fit that context or at least not violate the rules of the situations. *Lexical Appropriateness* concerns the suitability of a lexical unit in expressing a meaning (Stubbs, 2002:92). If a lexical unit fails to express the intended meaning then the whole utterance is not adequate, thus the lexical unit used is considered inappropriate. Linguists say that words should be used in relation to specific contexts of usage and that words carry with them unconscious information relating to their register, collocation and frequency, (Singleton, 2000: 97) . Certain words used have lexical relations within a text like that of collocations and synonyms.

There is no doubt that lexical units play a great role in shaping the quality of second language acquisition but this importance is not well reflected in the size or type of research conducted on lexical errors. Richards (1980 p. 425) claims that less attention has been paid to vocabulary than that to other fields of language 'such as grammatical competence, contrastive analysis, reading and writing'. Xiao Ming (2001: 28) relates this neglect to Zughoul's (1991) factors. The first is the influence of the *audio-lingual methods* which are based on the belief that phonology and syntax are more important than lexis in second language acquisition. A Second factor is connected with the result of 'teachers' and theorists' reactions against learners' over-exaggeration of vocabulary learning and the teachers' over-emphasis on structure construction'. The third factor, according to Zughoul(ibid.:29), is that vocabulary has only been used as a tool to facilitate the study of syntactic and phonological structural topics.

#### **5. Methodology Of The Study**

##### **5.1 Test objective**

The main objectives of the test:

1. Investigating the difficulties facing Iraqi EFL learners in using lexical relations, this result in the production of erroneous utterances and which affect the collaborative process of communication.
2. Identifying and comparing the variability of errors that Iraqi EFL learners manifested in using lexical items (as synonyms and collocations).
3. Specifying the sources of errors of lexical appropriateness.

##### **5.2 The Sample Selecting Process**

The sample of the study consists of a group of students who were responded to a test at the University of Tikrit. The students constitute a sample of 52 out of 160 EFL undergraduate third year students all majoring in English Department during the second semester of the academic year(2009-2010).They were chosen randomly from both sexes from about 19-20 age. To be in line with the condition of homogeneity of sample, students who failed at any stage and non-Iraqi students were excluded from the population.

The test comprises **30** items that are categorized into two parts: synonyms and collocations. The students were given one hour and a half to answer all the questions. They were asked not to leave any question unanswered. The aim of the test is to measure third year Iraqi ESL students' ability to produce correct utterances using appropriate lexical forms. The whole test is scored out of thirty which represents the total number of test items. Each category (question) is given scores with the score of 1 given to each item.

### **5.3 Nature of research procedures**

The methodology adopted in this research can be described as a 'quantative' one. The goal of quantitative research is to provide statistical information about research questions so that accurate conclusions concerning the matter discussed can be drawn from the data. To maintain this and achieve the desired results, the researcher has opted to use multiple choice questions. McDonalds (2001: 83) states that 'multiple choice items are adaptable to all types of subject matters; their scoring is accurate and efficient'.

The test is designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Are third year students whose major study is English able to use appropriate lexical items in relation to specific semantic relations within a given context?
- 2) How variable is the students' performance when compared across the two tests items?
- 3) What are the sources of the errors? Are they attributed to negative transfer of L1 (interference) or are they L2 specific?

### **5.4 Test Tasks and Description:**

As mentioned above, the multiple choice test was designed by the researcher. It consists of a number of tasks each in a separate test, i.e., the test items fall into two types. The first type includes synonyms, whereas the second includes collocation:

#### **1) Test of synonym choice:**

It consists of 15 synonymy questions in the form of multiple choice questions. The students were asked to choose out of four options the one that gives the nearest meaning to the expression as it occurs in the item. The distracters selected by the researcher are all plausible in the sense that they all shared some semantic property related to the correct answer but only one shared the notion of contextual relevance along with the identicalness or close similarity of meaning. For example in the item:

The stem of the bean plant was too thick to cut.

- a) column    b) stalk    c) bark    d) trunk

#### **2) Test of collocation choice:**

This part also consists of 15 multiple choice items testing students' knowledge of collocation. The students were asked to choose out of four options the one word that co-occurs with other words within a given context. The distracters were mostly closely related to the correct answer: they are either

synonyms, near synonyms or words that connote with the correct answer yet they do not form an appropriate collocation. For example:

Many \_\_\_\_\_ were raised in the meeting.

- a) difficulties b) ideas c) Suggestions d) thoughts

### **5.5 Validity of the test:**

Validity is the most essential characteristic of any test. According to Wainer(1988: xvii) validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inference made by test scores'. For a test to be valid it must measure the aims of the study, in this case the ability to use appropriate lexical forms. There are four strategies in which a researcher can corroborate the validity of his test: Establishing face validity, predictive validity, concurrent validity and content validity. In this study the researcher has focused on establishing content validity to determine the validity of her tests. Content validity refers to the actual content of the test. It answers the question whether the test is representative of the concepts that are to be measured. Gliner (2000:320) introduces steps of how content validity is established. The first step is to define the concept an investigator is trying to measure, secondly is a literature search to see how the concept has been dealt with in the literature. Then items that form the measurement of the test are generated. These items are gradually reduced to form an appropriate test. The decision and subsequent refinement of the test as an instrument of measurements are usually made by a panel of experts who review the items for representatives of the concept and aims.

### **5.6 Reliability of the test**

Test reliability refers to the evenness of scores students would receive on alternate forms of the same test. This implies that the exact students will never score the exact results on variant periods, but if the test is reliable there should be some kind of consistency in the results. The importance of reliability lies in that it measures the extent an examinee's scores reflect random measurement errors which are caused by **a)** factors related to the examinee, e.g. motivation, fatigue , boredom ...etc, **b)** factors related to the test, e.g. ambiguity , trickiness , weak directions and **c)** factors related to scoring, e.g. carelessness, counting errors ...etc.( Wells,2003:2). All these factors create unreliable tests that measure errors in test design rather than the learners' level of competence. Another important aspect of reliability is that it supports validity. For a test to be valid it has to be reliable first. There are several ways to test reliability of a test: test\ re-tests, split-half reliability and alternate form reliability. The researcher in this study has focused on test -retest to determine the reliability of her tests. Test-retest is a method of giving 'the same individuals the same test on two different occasions (ibid.: 27). If the results of the scores are similar, then the test is considered reliable. According to Kumar(1996:141) the advantage of test-retest method is that it 'permits the instrument to be compared with itself.'

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which avoids all the other problems that may arouse if the instrument was changed. To achieve reliability, the test was given to 15 students who repeated the test after fourteen days. The scores of the student were compared and were found to be similar. Therefore the reliability of the tests used in this study was maintained.

**6. Statistical Tools**

The researcher employs SAS (2001) program in order to calculate the correlation coefficient and to test the significant differences between the results obtained from the two items of the test (Synonyms & Collocations).

**7. Analysis And Discussion Of Results**

The tabulation below highlights the number of occurrences of each of the correct and incorrect responses in the two items of the test and their overall percentages.

**Table 1. Analysis of the number of errors of each test.**

Categories	Questions (Sample No. * Q's per test)	Sum of wrong responses	Sum of Correct responses	Perc.% of wrong responses	Perc.% of correct responses
Synonym	780	545	235	69,8%	30%
Collocation	780	316	464	40,5%	59%

**Table 2. Mean ± SD , Variance of score of test.**

Test	No. of student	Mean	Variance	S.D.
Synonyms (first)	52	4.519	2.84	1.68
Collocations (second)	52	8.942	3.19	

**Table 3. ANOVP table (Analysis of Variance Procedure)**

Source of variation	d.f	Mean square	Level of sig.	t-Value (calculated)	t-Value (tabulated)	Con.
Test	1	508.653	**	168.56	23.556	(P<0.01)
Exp. Error	102	3.01772				
Total	103	----				

**\*\* (P<0.01)**

The figures in the above tables show that at the **df** indicated , the computed t-test value is much higher than the tabulated t- value when the level of significance is (0.1) which means that the differences are statistically significant . This support the hypothesis that learner's responses in the second item are better than that in the first item (i.e., their errors in the first item being more frequent).

### 6.1 Source of Substitutional errors:

Results show that there was no trace of interlingual errors among the synonym errors, all errors were intralingual, which is displayed in the Figure below.

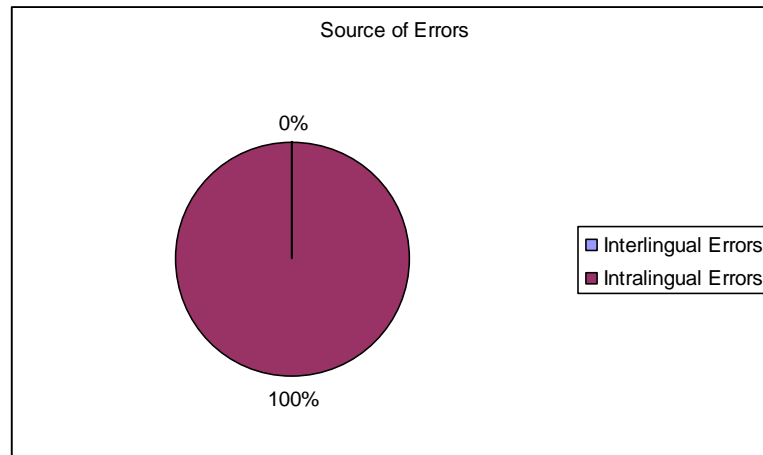


Fig. 1 Sources of Synonym Errors

The first task that was performed was to check whether there is any influence of L1 in the choices made by the students. The researcher finds no trace of interference when it comes to synonym errors. The first question in the synonym task was answered erroneously by 50 students. 31 of students chose the word “sew” instead of “intertwine” as a synonym for the word “weave”. Going back to L1, Arabic, there is a big difference between the word *yukhiet* and the word *intertwine* or *weave yahuk*.

The data reflects that the synonym errors made by the students were all found by the researcher as intralingual. Intralingual errors are those errors ‘which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete applications of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply’ (Richards, 1974:98). Another source of errors may be that of development in which students attempt to develop a hypothesis about the L2 that maybe incorrect or lead to incorrect performance in L2. According to Richards(ibid:6) the learner, in this case, tries to “derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language”.

The students have built their own hypothesis and derived their answers accordingly. The hypothesis rule becomes clear when the students said that they interrelated between words which are familiar to them in the stems of the test items that they were given and the option they chose. This method caused most of the erroneous answers but, as we will see, it sometimes led to the choice of the correct answer. Looking back at the sentence ‘*The loom is set to weave check pattern into the cloth*’ (Q1) the word ‘cloth’ is the only word that indicates sewing but the words ‘loom’ and ‘pattern’ strongly excludes ‘sew’.



According to the responses of the informal interview, the students tended to choose their answers by adopting the strategy of choosing more familiar words, which in this case is ‘cloth’, than risk choosing less familiar words, such as ‘loom’. Most of them chose the word ‘sew’ instead of ‘intertwine’.

Some of the answers presented by the students reveal that they seem to know the rule but they do not know its restrictions, or they are familiar with a rule but are unaware of its correct use. In the case of synonymy, students know the word which chose but they fail to use them properly because they have lack of knowledge in the restrictions of using the word. There is a tendency towards overgeneralizing some of the features of the chosen option and fit them to a context, causing the production of erroneous utterances. In second language acquisition it has been common to refer to overgeneralization as a process that occurs as the second/foreign language learner acts within the target language, generalizing a particular rule or item in the second language beyond legitimate bounds (see <http://vionet.hit.bg/toesyl.htm>). According to Brown (2000:96) overgeneralization occurs when second language learners create deviant structures based on prior experiences of other structures in the target language. Richards (1974: 174) thinks that it may reflect an attempt by the learner to reduce his linguistic burden.

Overgeneralization is clear in Q2 where most of the students chose ‘dirty’ as a synonym to the word ‘rusty’. According to the Cambridge dictionary the word ‘dirt’ is ‘dust, earth or any substance that makes a surface not clean’ while ‘rust’ is ‘a reddish brown substance that forms on the surface of iron and steel as a result of decay caused by reacting with air and water’. From the previous two definitions it is quite clear that rust does have a substance that may be considered dirty but definitely to be dirty does not mean ‘to be rusty’. The students have overgeneralised the lexical features of rustiness (dirty and old) and considered it an appropriate synonym for the word ‘rusty’.

## 6.2 Sources of Collocation Errors:

The results of the analysis show that only 27% of the collocational errors made by the sample were interlingual, and 73% of errors were intralingual, which is displayed in the figure below.

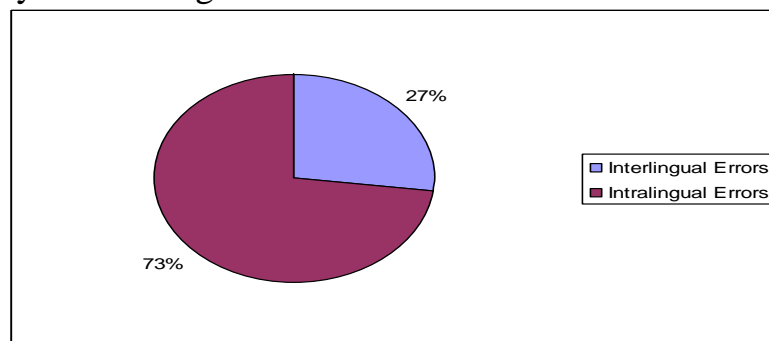


Fig. 2 Sources of Collocation Errors

The results of this study reveal that 69.8% (table 1) of the collocation answers were erroneous. This percentage strongly indicates that collocation is also a major difficulty students' face when using lexical items in English(Hill,1999:5). The essentially simple idea that word choice is seriously limited by what comes before and after "is perhaps the single most elusive aspect of the lexical system and the hardest, therefore, for learners to acquire" (Thornbury, 2002:7) .

This study finds little affect of negative transfer from L1 in the use of Iraqi EFL students of collocation ,contradicting other studies that have claimed that all collocational errors are a result of L1 interference. Mahmoud (2006:78) claims that most incorrect lexical collocations found are due to interlingual transfer from Arabic. The researcher in this study limits the possibility of first language interference. Third year Iraqi EFL learners should have a relatively large stock of target language vocabulary in this level. They may think it would be easy for them to find equivalents to their mother tongue words, either from their modern standard Arabic (MSA) and non-standard Arabic (NSA). But because collocation in Arabic is not mentioned as a study in itself and there is no systematic study that the testees could refer to in their L1. There can by no means be a great influence of L1 on the answers made by the sample. The findings of this study may support Mahmoud's (2006:96) findings that learners may have some negative interference in their answer but totally disagrees with the same researcher on the claim that errors are due to using equivalent collocations from their mother tongue. In a small attempt to find collocations in Arabic Kinga Dévényi, Tamás Iványi & Ariel Shvitiel (2004:90) published a paper discussing collocation in Arabic. They claim there is no systematic study that involves collocation. And that the learners have very little material to consult in order to find collocations in Arabic. Even Arabic as a second language dictionary does not contain a sufficient number of collocations.

To exemplify the interference of L1 to L2, in Q6 (Appendix1) students wrongly selected 'understood' and 'learn' as a collocation of 'the answer'. In NSA , *irafat aljawab* ( learned / understood the answer) is an appropriate expression, the students transferred this expression from L1 to L2 producing erroneous utterances.

The data reveals the students' unawareness of the fact that it is not in all contexts that words similar in meaning can be interchanged. The testees know the meaning of the word but they are unaware of the restrictions concerning the habitual co-occurrence of it. A certain word may be found appropriate in meaning but it does not co-occur with other words within a context. In Q4 they chose the words 'gained' and 'took' as a collocation of the word 'attention' which of course is inappropriate for though 'received' and 'took' and 'gained' may have same meaning 'to take or acquire' (see *dictionary.com*) each has its own restrictions in relation to the words it co-occurs with. In the context of the

test item, a person may 'receive' attention but he cannot 'take' or 'gain' it.

## 7. Conclusions

In the study, the researcher stressed that the lexical element of language is as important as the grammatical aspect and also emphasized the significance of synonymy, and collocations in EFL language learning. The study investigated two types of lexical relations (synonymy and collocation) produced by the testees. The data shows that most of the errors were either syntactic which are caused by the lack of information on the distinction of use of synonyms of a certain word. The learner uses a synonym of a word but he uses it in the same context of the original word which creates inappropriate utterances. The other types of errors were collocational where a learner tends to overgeneralize the partnership of one word with its synonym. In fact, The students faced slightly more difficulties dealing with substitutional relations (synonyms) than they did with combinational (collocation) relations. Most of the errors found by the researcher were not caused by the negative transfer from the lexical features of the native language (Arabic). They were exclusively intralingual errors, which mostly resulted from ignorance of the restrictions of rules within the target language (English) concerning lexical relations, developing an incorrect hypothesis and building their answers upon it and finally overgeneralizing rules. There was only trace of negative first language interference in some collocation errors but they were a very small minority. Due to the fact that intralingual errors tend to be reduced as learners have more exposure to the target language (English), the findings of this study strongly suggest that EFL learners need more practice in vocabulary and lexical components of language in order to overcome their difficulties. That is, in order to overcome these errors, vocabulary has to be a focal point in ESL/EFL classroom. The methodology of teaching vocabulary should be rule governed and not done randomly.

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(الاستقصاء عن مستوى براعة متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية في استخدام ترابط  
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كلية العلوم الإسلامية/الفلوجة/جامعة الأنبار

## أخلاصة

تضمنت الدراسة الحالية استقصاء واختبار مستوى وقابلية طلاب أطرله الثالثة/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية (جامعه تكريت) في الاستخدام الصحيح والأمثل للالفاظ و المعاني بالأضافة إلى الصعوبات التي سترافق استخدامهم للمرادفات و تنظيم المعاني بالشكل المناسب. تعنى هذه الدراسة أيضا بتحليل الأخطاء التي بدورها ستعيق عملية التواصل لأنها ستؤثر على صحة الألفاظ التي سيستعملها الطلاب . أظهرت نتائج البحث بان الطلاب يقعون بأخطاء في كلا الجانبين التركيبي و الاستبدالي لكن الأخطاء في الجانب الأخير أكثر شيوعا. أظهرت الدراسة أيضا أن الأخطاء في ألفاظ المتعلم تعود إلى تأثيرات اللغة البيئية التي لن تتناقص أو تقل بكثرة أجوء لاستخدام اللغة الاجنبية مالم يكون هنالك تغيير واضح في منهاج التدريس الذي يعتمد على المدرس في تدريس طبيعة الألفاظ وترابطها. أثبتت الدراسة بان الالفاظ هي ليست ترتيب عشوائي لاستنتاج الكلمات وإنما هي مجموعة من القوانين المنتظمة التي يجب أن تدرس بطريقه منتظمة .

**Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners Mastery And Use Of The  
Appropriate Lexical Relations .....**

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Ass. Lec. Wasan Khalid