Analysis of Lexical Choices of VERB by Arabic Speakers in ESL Academic Writing

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Abstract

Academic writing for ESL students involves various linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical challenges. An effective way to assist ESL students in overcoming their struggles is to analyze their writing, identify problems, and apply feasible solutions for those problems. This study examined the lexical choices of the verb in ESL students' writing. Findings revealed that because of the syntactic power of the verb, students pay more attention to the grammatical than to the lexical aspects of the verb. Accordingly, they would have poor lexical repertoire of the verbs and overuse certain verbs that do not mirror the academic genre. Moreover, their poor repertoire and overuse of certain verbs, in turn, resulted in syntactic limitation and rhetorical problems. This study supports the need for teachers and students to focus more attention on the development of lexical repertoire.

1. Literature Review

Writing in one's own language could be a challenge for many as it involves cognitive abilities, logical thinking, language skills, and talent. Writing in a second language, however, amplifies these challenges. ESL writers need to adapt to the new language rules and rhetoric, to consider genre differences, and to understand the writer-reader relationships (Cumming, 2001, p. 7). Because of its conventions and peculiarities, writing for L2 learners seems to be the least developed skill, among the other skills of speaking, listening, and reading. While interaction and communicative strategies compensate for any misunderstanding in speaking and listening, these contextual clues are missing in writing, where readers are left alone with the text (Weigle, p. 222). Therefore, L2 learners need to consider making their ideas clear for the readers. They need to master the lexical, syntactic, rhetorical,

and stylistic domains in order to successfully accomplish their tasks and assist the reader to track and receive their messages.

Amidst all the domains on which English academic writing is founded, the lexical choices stand out as a prominent feature. This aspect reflects the writer's richness and flexibility of employing variety of language. Through words, writers depict their thoughts, beliefs, vision, status, intention, and voice. Readers, on the other hand, perceive these thoughts and visions through the same words. In academia, due to the necessity of communicating thoughts and messages precisely and elegantly, lexical choices are of a high importance. Writers should carefully select their words to reflect the exact meaning and maintain harmony with the academic register; otherwise, dissonance surfaces clearly. Even extremely slight differences in the meaning or connotation of words float up as a lack of accuracy or appropriateness.

The verb, being one of the main four content words (noun, verb, adjective, and adverb), attains a superior rank in discourse. Its syntactic and semantic functions steer not only the sentences, but also the discourse in general. On the stylistic level, "energetic" and "vivid" verbs can create elegant and stylish texts with which readers may interact and enjoy (Sword, 2012, pp. 8 & 49). On the syntactic level, verbs bear the responsibility of reflecting the most important features, such as tense, aspect, and voice. Crystal (2012) points out "in grammatical theories, accordingly, the verb is considered the most important element in sentence structure" (p.510).

In L2 learners' writing, the lexical characteristics of the verb are seemingly not given the same consideration in comparison with that paid to the syntactic features. One reason might be attributed to the influence of grammar textbooks that concentrate mainly on the syntactic aspects such as tense, aspect, voice, transitivity, regularity, and modality. Moreover, grammar textbooks are not the only source to blame; other course textbooks such as those of reading and vocabulary share the responsibility of having limitations in covering the lexical features or, as stated by Zimmerman (2014), "the vocabulary breadth" (p. 289). In his analysis of nine aspects of the word knowledge, Brown (2011) discerns that textbooks

give high priority to the form and meaning and grammatical functions while other lexical features such as register, collocation, and connotation receive the minimal attention (p. 94).

Due to its idiosyncrasies and powerful functions, especially syntactically, the verb has been a controversial part of speech. One of the controversies surrounding its analysis was whether verbs should be classified according to their semantic or syntactic aspects (Levin 1993, pp. 11-16). In his book *English verb classes and alternations*, Levin provides an informative analysis showing the correlation between the semantic and syntactic aspects and behaviors (pp 5-10). His argument about the lexical semantic representation of the verb is based on the hypothesis that meaning of the word determines its syntactic properties (12). Thus, he provided a notable meaning-based taxonomy of verbs. Still, in comparison with syntactic classes overwhelming the ESL/EFL textbooks, these meaning-based classes have not yet found their ways to the ESL/EFL textbooks.

The importance of syntactic aspects of the verbs is unquestionable, yet the lexical choices certainly attain equal, if not superior, rank to the syntactic features in the academic writing. Importance of lexical choices comes from the requirements of academic writing that necessitate the proper register, variety of lexical and syntactic constructions, and stylistic taste that make the academic writing elegant and stylish. Paying equal attention to the lexical and syntactic aspects can result in remarkable outcomes. Interestingly, the consequences of separating syntactic and lexical aspects, especially those pertaining to the verb, have been recognized in recent works. The term "*lexicogrammar*" appeared in *The Grammar Book,* where Celce- Murcia and Larsen-Freeman identify significant correlations of combining the two dimensions and emphasize the importance of the lexical item in the syntactic construction and vice- versa (1999, pp. 29-30). This correlation is emphasized by Levin (1993), who reports that "certain meaning components identified via the study of semantic/syntactic correlations show considerable overlap with the set of elements posited as being central to the meanings of English verbs" (p.16).

Within its powerful grammatical functions, however, the verb has also been viewed as belonging to a variety of lexical classes. Biber, Johanson, Leech, Conard, and Finegan (1999) examine the verb from

many perspectives. They efficiently analyze it in terms of its functions and classes. Most importantly in their work, verbs are classified semantically into "activity verbs, communication verbs, mental verbs, verbs of facilitation or causation, verbs of simple occurrence, verbs of existence or relationships, and aspectual verbs" (pp. 360-64). Frequency and distribution of these classes were examined in the corpus of four registers: conversation, fiction, academic, and news. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) categorize verbs in terms of their meaning and semantic functions into four classes: factual, persuasive, emotive, and hypothesis.

In academia, students write for different purposes, mainly including but not restricted to conveying information, showing relations, attributing causes, arguing in favor of or against, reporting works or events, etc. All these purposes require certain categories of verbs to precisely convey the messages. For example, Biber et al. report that due to the peculiarities of academic discourse, certain categories are used frequently by native speakers such as existential, causative, activity, and occurrence verbs (p. 372). Non-native speakers, on the other hand, employ different categories such as public and private verbs that reflect the spoken register (Hinkel, p. 275). To write fluently and precisely, L2 learners need to use a variety of verbs to reflect and communicate these purposes and functions; thus, they need not restrict their attention to the syntactic but should include the lexical aspects as well.

L2 learners' lexical choices in academic writing have been investigated by numerous studies, though those examining verbs in the lexical scope are rare. Besides, concentration of these studies focus on L2 learners' lexical use of verbs at a given time, i.e., their progress has not been investigated. The question of whether or not L2 students incorporate new verbs with more academic register throughout their language study in the ESL environment has not yet been investigated. Furthermore, research has not yet examined whether L2 learners make more progress with the syntactic or the lexical aspects of verbs. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to enhance the previous scholarship in this field and to fill the gap of further investigating the lexical features of the verb and the improvement that L2 learners make.

2.1 Research questions

The present study, by concentrating on the progress of lexical choices of verbs in the writing of Arab-speaking students across four levels, seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent lexical classes of verbs used in each level?
2. What do their choices reflect: Over/under use; appropriate register, i.e., academic vs, common; and rich or limited repertoire?
3. Is there any incorporation of new lexical verbs? If so, do the incorporated verbs reflect academic or common register?
4. Is there advancement in incorporating more verb varieties from one level to another?

Additionally, the present paper hypothesizes that an additional factor that may cause the poor lexical choices of the verb is that learners pay more attention to other verbal aspects such as tense, aspect, and voice. To test this hypothesis, the learners' acquisition of lexical categories of verbs will be compared with their increasing proficiency in correct use of verbal tense, aspect, and voice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpus of the study

The corpus of this study consists of twenty final exam essays that received passing grades. These essays were written by Arab ESL students who were attending the language program at the English Language Institute (ELI) in order to become linguistically qualified to join graduate and undergraduate programs at Missouri State University (MSU). The researcher chose five essays from each of the four advanced levels: 401, 402, 501, and 502 where students in each level engaged in seven weeks of an intensive language program to pass to the next level. The types of texts are different from one level to another; in 401 the essays were expository, while in 402 (the exit level for the undergraduates) the essays were persuasive. In 501, the essays were analytical, and in 502 (the exit level for the graduates) they were argumentative.

3.2 Procedures

To answer the questions raised earlier in this paper, the researcher followed the following procedures. First, to find out which type of verbs are frequently used or underused, verbs should be categorized lexically. Hence, the lexical taxonomy proposed by Biber et al. (1999) and Quirk et al. (1985) was adopted as a model against which verbs found in the students' essays were categorized. Second, the verbs were classified into eight categories: "*to be,"* and the seven categories of Biber et al.'s taxonomy, (pp. 361-64), namely

- "Activity verbs**,** which denote actions" (bring, carry, come, etc.);
- "Mental verbs that denote activities and states experienced by humans, but do not involve physical action" (think, know, examine, study);
- "Verbs of existence or relationship, which report state that exists between entities" (seem. exist, has, include, involve);
- "Communication verbs involving communication activities" (announce, discuss, ask, explain, say);
- "Verbs of simple occurrence which report events" (change, become, develop);
- "Verbs of facilitation or causation that brings about a new state or affairs" (cause, require, enable);
- "Aspectual verbs that characterize the stage of progress of some other event or activity" (begin, finish, and start).

Only main verbs, which "can stand alone as the entire verb phrase" (Biber et al., p. 358), were targeted and analyzed, i.e., auxiliaries and modal verbs (functional words, like "is" and "will") were excluded. Moreover, verbs found in quotations were also eliminated since they were not the writers' choice of words. *Be* copular, as a main verb that "link[s] the subject noun phrase with a subject predicative or obligatory adverbial" (Biber et al., p 428), is sometimes considered an "existential" verb

(p.364) and sometimes a "stative" verb (Quirk et al., 1174). However, for the purpose of this study, the *Be* copular verb was classified in a separate category.

To answer the second question regarding the overuse and/or underuse of certain categories, rich or limited repertoire, and academic vs. common register, the researcher chose to add Quirk et al.'s sub-categorizations of verbs (1985) to Biber et al.'s taxonomy (1999). These sub-categories of verbs include "stative verbs, which refer to unbroken state, or eternal truths" (pp. 178-79); "public verbs, that consist of speech act verbs" (pp. 1180-81); "private verbs, which can only be subjectively verified"; "reporting,"; and "mental," verbs (Quirk et al., 1985). Furthermore, two reading and vocabulary textbooks that students had covered, namely *Essential academic vocabulary* (2006) and *Making connections* (2nd ed., 2004), were added to check the third question about comparing the focused input they received with their incorporation of new verbs from one level to another.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the total number of different verbs used in writing by leaners in each level and the total number of verbs used in each category for each level. In terms of lexical categories, students used activity verbs most frequently (33.9%). They also demonstrated high usage of mental verbs (21.7%) and the verb to *be* (17.3%). On the other hand, aspectual, causation, and simple occurrence verbs are the least used with frequency rates of 2.8%, 3.2%, and 4.2% respectively. Biber et al. refer to the distinctive functions of the academic prose that report connections among items and usually utilize "statements and verbs that report relationships, existence and/or occurrence" (1999, p. 372). However, the use of verbs by Arab ESL students, found in the corpus and shown in the Table (1), does not reflect what the academic prose favors, i.e., the existential, relational, and occurrence verbs.

Table (1)

Number of verbs used in each category

Level	No. of verbs	Activity verbs	Mental verbs	Verb to *Be*	Verbs of existence/ relationship	Communication verbs	Simple occurrence verbs	Verbs of Causation/ facilitation	Aspectual verbs
401	275	111	35	35	28	13	23	14	16
402	339	118	70	64	41	18	12	11	5
501	424	113	136	73	51	14	10	15	12
502	327	118	56	65	26	38	13	5	6
Total	1365	460	297	237	146	83	58	45	39

In order to obtain more insight into the features of verb use in the corpus, the researcher chose several of the most commonly utilized verbs for further analysis. Therefore, the researcher analyzed the verbs in each category separately to better address the study questions. That analysis reveals many facts relating not only to the linguistic deficiencies but also to the rhetorical shortcomings of the learners. When analyzing the corpus, a number of traits and behaviors regarding the lexical choices of the verb have been observed, such as the overuse of certain verbs, the rare use of multi-word lexical verbs, the absence of reporting verbs, and the repetition of certain verbs in the same paragraphs.

Examining Table 2, we can see that those writers favor certain verbs and use them too frequently. The overused verbs serve functions other than academic, such as public, stative, and private functions. Forms of the verb to *be* and the verb to *have*, which serve stative and public actions, characterize the writing of the students at all levels; the verb *to have* especially dominates level 501 students' writing. It

could be seen that the overuse of *be* copular affects not only the register but also the syntactic constructions. Out of 1365 verbs in the twenty essays, *be* copular was used 237 (17.3%) times to report stative action and followed by the subject predicate or predicative adjective.

Table (2)

Verbs Most Frequently Used in the Corpus.

Levels	verb to be	verb to have	learn	make	use	need	know	want	verb to do
401	35	13	1	12	12	1	6	8	12
402	64	17	8	6	2	2	11	9	1
501	73	32	51	21	10	11	12	5	6
502	65	14	0	19	21	28	3	7	9
Total	**237**	**76**	**60**	**58**	**45**	**42**	**32**	**29**	**28**

Reporting verbs are important in academic prose to refer to, evaluate, and show attitude towards other scholars' works. However, these verbs are almost absent in the twenty essays examined where only very few occurrences of *argue, write, illustrate, realize,* and *say* were noticed. Similarly, multi-word verbs were sporadic and very limited in the four levels. Scant multi-word verbs such as *rely on, look for, take into account, sum up,* and *associated with* appeared in the students' writing.

Examining the incorporated verbs in light of the two textbooks used in all four levels, students did not show progress in incorporating new lexical verbs from one level to another. In 402, they incorporated verbs such as *communicate, provide, attract, improve,* and *illustrate*. Their writing also included single occurrences of *connect, establish, classify, involve,* and *guarantee*. Students in level 501 did not develop a use of new verbs beyond those used in their previous level. Only few new verbs appeared such as, *rely on, motivate, contribute, prove, contradict, realize,* and *improve.* In the final level, 502, the exit level for the graduates, learners incorporated new vocabulary with the academic register such as *warrant, argue, determine, survey, persuade, sum up, indicate, demonstrate, diminish, specify,*

and *recognize*. These usages occurred very rarely and sporadically in the writing of the level 502 learners, although students were advised to incorporate new vocabulary to enhance their writing.

In order to determine if Arab-speaking learners' lack of success in producing progressive lexical categories of verbs across the ELI levels is connected at all to their acquisition of syntactic aspects of verbs mentioned above (tense, aspect, and voice), this study examined learner essays by level to determine the number of errors learners made in their essays.

Table (3)

Number of Grammatical Mistakes			
Level	Tense	Aspect	Voice
401	14	8	5
402	1	7	1
501	1	4	0
502	1	1	0

When investigating the points of focus in this study, specific features of advanced leaner verb use have emerged and are worthy of being mentioned. The first prominent feature was that students in this study repeated certain verbs constantly. When they developed their arguments and attempted to add new information and points, they often used the same lexical items to present these new thoughts, as shown in the following example:

> 2. They can **learn** through internet or read some books about this language. Culture is the center of any language that they can **learn** about it to **improve** their sociolinguistic. The second way to **improve** the sociolinguistic competence is **making** friends from this a new language. The fast way to **improve** the sociolinguistic is **making** friends (402/ art 2).

Examination of this frequent repetition in terms of rhetoric shows that these advanced learners struggle with what is called “Circular Argument” or “Circular Reasoning,” when they restate what they have already argued rather than proving it (Weida, S. & Stolley, K. 2013). In terms of the cause-effect relationship, the phenomenon of using the same verbs repeatedly may be attributed to the lack of critical

thinking skill development that limits the students perceived vocabulary needs. Or it could be caused by the lack of lexical repertoire that limits critical thinking skills in developing ideas and supporting claims.

Another observation that arose from this study is the relationship between students' choices of verbs and their use of rhetorical *Voice.* This relation could be effectively explained in terms of syntactic constructions, yet lexical choices have a great role in identifying the writer's voice. For example, the use of stative verbs such as *be* copular and the verb *to have* indicates "indisputable facts" (Roz Ivanic and David Camps, 2001, p 18). Thus, the high percentage of these verbs in the essays, as examined in this paper, could be a negative indicator of their writers' voice. Modal verbs, such as *might, may,* and *would* that reflect tentativeness or hedging to modify and moderate propositions (Hinkel, 2005, p. 29), occur only 25 times in the corpus. The writers' overuse of stative verbs and underuse of modal verbs can reveal their lack of awareness of the academic voice that favors hedge phrases and avoids conclusive claims.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study confirm the hypothesis about the syntactic power of the verb on which ESL students pay more attention at the expense of its lexical aspects. Results also show that because of less attention to the lexical choices of the verb and the influence of spoken register presented by public and stative verbs, Arab ESL students tend to overuse certain verbs that do not reflect the academic register. These consequences, in turn, result in other syntactic limitations and rhetorical deficiencies in their writing. Syntactically, the overuse of certain verbs, particularly the verb to *be*, would lead to overuse of certain syntactic structures, such as it-clefts and the existential *there*.

Rhetorically, the poor repertoire of the verb caused circular reasoning when students restated their claims instead of supporting them. In addition, that overuse of stative verbs may leave a negative connotation of the writer's voice on the reader and result in predicative rather than attributive structures. Moreover, results reveal that ESL students rarely used multi-word verbs and reporting verbs. Incorporation of new verbs was limited to a single appearance in their writing.

Academic writing involves the mastery of the syntactic, lexical, rhetorical, and stylistic domains. Absence of any of these skills affects the whole product. Therefore, both ESL teachers and students need to take into consideration that achieving success in teaching and learning a second language in general, and writing in particular, is an integrative process that requires an adequate attention to all of its components.

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