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Semantic Transfer and Lexical Errors in English Writing among Undergraduates' Saudi Male Students

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ABSTRACT

Arab students who learn English as a foreign language, especially Saudi students, face several challenges during the process of mastering writing skills. This research addresses the problem of persistent lexical errors in students' academic writing, which stem from semantic transfer between Arabic and English. The main purpose of this study is to identify and categorize the most common lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English in the academic writing of Saudi undergraduates' students and to examine the perceived causes of lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English. The main research question is: What are the most common lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English in the academic writing among Saudi male undergraduates' students? The research participants were 20 male students from the Languages and Translation Department at the University College of Haql, University of Tabuk. Using a mixed-methods approach to examine lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English. Quantitative data from 100 student essays were analyzed descriptively to identify common errors, while qualitative insights were gathered through a semi-structured group interview and analyzed thematically to explore students' perceptions of the causes. The findings reveal that the most common lexical errors through the semantic transfer are direct translations, word choice errors, false cognates, and incorrect collocations. The semi-structured interview revealed four main causes of these errors: negative transfer from Arabic, overgeneralization of English rules, limited exposure to authentic English, and insufficient awareness of collocations.

Keywords: Lexical Errors; Semantic Transfer; Arabic to English; Academic Writing; Saudi Students; Translation Errors; Collocations

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1. Introduction

Lexical errors have been researched comprehensively in applied linguistics, as they affect English language learning and communication^[1]. Researchers divide lexical errors into different categories, i.e., formal errors, semantic errors, and miscollocations^[2]. Semantic errors result because of negative transfer from L1, wherein learners make incorrect lexical meaning mappings of the L1 to the target language. Research shows that semantic transfer is experienced when there is partial meaning between words of L1 and L2, but with a difference in connotation, collocational constraints, or syntactic roles^[3].

When it comes to Arabic-speaking learners, the problem of lexical errors is further accentuated by structural and semantic differences between Arabic and English^[4]. Arabic is a Semitic language, while English is a Germanic language, and thus there are large differences in morphology, syntax, and lexis. For Arab learners, one of the key difficulties is that there is an assumed direct lexical equivalence between Arabic and English, which creates word choice and meaning errors. Errors assume different forms, including incorrect collocations, misused synonyms, and literal translations that misrepresent the intended meaning.

In the regard of Saudi learners' context, recent research highlights that semantic errors among Saudi English learners predominantly result from negative transfer from their first language (Arabic), which complicates the acquisition of accurate lexical items in English. Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) demonstrate that Saudi learners' reliance on Arabic syntactic and semantic structures leads to persistent semantic inaccuracies, especially in word order and prepositional use. Eltayeb Yousuf Ahmed et al. (2024) identify literal translation and collocational mismatches as major contributors to lexical and semantic errors, showing that such negative transfer hampers the development of native-like lexical competence. Aljuraifani and Alanazi (2025) report that more than half of the grammatical and semantic errors in Saudi learners' academic writing are due to interlingual interference, which directly affects lexical choice and semantic accuracy. Bakri (2024) focuses on the misuse of articles, a semantic category where Arabic's definiteness system ("al-") interferes heavily with English article usage, further intensifying lexical-semantic errors. Sanosi, Khan, and

Duddu (2023) argue that the pronounced differences in the article systems and collocational patterns between Arabic and English serve to accentuate lexical problems for Saudi learners beyond simple grammatical mistakes. Collectively, these studies illustrate that for Saudi learners, lexical errors are not isolated phenomena but are deeply intertwined with semantic errors caused by structural and semantic differences between Arabic and English, magnified by negative L1 transfer^[5-9].

While lexical errors have been well researched within SLA, there is still a lack of literature on semantic transfer for Saudi undergraduate learners (University level). Prior research has indicated lexical errors among Arab learners as a group, but few have critically explored the causes and types of semantic transfer errors specifically within the Saudi EFL community. The students have different linguistic difficulties because both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and colloquial dialects contribute to affecting their English writing^[10].

Despite the rising concern of English language skills at the higher education level in Saudi Arabia, there is limited research to identify and classify systematically the most frequent lexical errors that arise through semantic transfer. Furthermore, little is known about Saudi students' perceptions regarding the causes of these errors and the extent to which they recognize the impact of L1 interference on their writing. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing the lexical errors in academic writing among Saudi undergraduate students and investigating their perspectives on the causes of these errors.

To address the identified gap, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most common lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English in academic writing among Saudi undergraduate students?
2. What do Saudi undergraduate students believe are the causes of their lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English in academic writing?

The corresponding objectives of this study are:

1. To identify and categorize the most common lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English in the academic writing of Saudi undergraduate students.

2. To examine the perceived causes of lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English.

This study focuses on 20 male undergraduate students from the Department of Languages and Translation at the University College of Haql, University of Tabuk. The research is limited to analyzing lexical errors in academic writing produced by these students, specifically examining instances of semantic transfer. The results will be based on student interviews and samples of student writing. As the study offers a specific investigation of Saudi learners, its results can be extended to be applicable to other EFL learners who are Arabic speakers with comparable linguistic issues.

These results will be beneficial to applied linguistics and EFL pedagogy as follows. Firstly, through an identification of frequently made lexical mistakes by Saudi undergraduate learners, language instructors and course planners will be provided with practical advice for developing effective instruction. The specific semantic transfer issues identified will enable instructors to institute targeted corrective measures, including contrastive analysis and consciousness-raising exercises, to address these errors.

Second, this study will bring to light what causes lexical errors according to learners, providing a learner-centered agenda which can guide language teaching. Upon understanding that learners' lexical errors result from L1 interference, instructors can prepare materials that rectify misconceptions and encourage more precise vocabulary use. Lastly, this research contributes to research into Arabic-English linguistic transfer, especially in the Saudi education landscape. With an increasing focus by Saudi Arabia on English language competency at both education and professional levels, knowing specific issues affecting learners is key to enhancing education results for English. Future research and pedagogical innovations will be underpinned by empirical evidence provided by this research, to improve lexical word-use accuracy by EFL learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Lexical Errors and Semantic Transfer

Lexical errors because of semantic transfer are a documented phenomenon in foreign language acquisition (FLA), especially for learners whose native language (L1)

is quite different from the target language (L2). For Saudi learners of English, semantic transfer errors tend to manifest themselves because of the inappropriate transfer of Arabic meaning or concepts into English, subsequently resulting in inappropriate word usage as well as miscommunication. Due to differences in the structures and semantics of Arabic and English, semantic transfer, as a problem, is most apparent in academic writing.

Both Arabic and English diverge not only syntactically but also lexically. Numerous Arabic words lack equivalents during translation into English; thus, learners become dependent upon false friends or inappropriate word usage based upon perceived similarities. The process results in deploying words semantically inaccurately or unsuitably for use within the English language. It can have an impact upon formal writing, specifically academic, whereby exactness and clarity are critical. For example, Al-Otaibi^[11] determined that Saudi learners often misuse English words through semantic transfer from Arabic. An example error included the use of the Arabic word “مؤتمر” (mu'tamar), meaning “conference” in English. But learners used the term “seminar” (a narrower term for conference in English) because of the similarity of meaning in Arabic, which resulted in a lexical error. The above is an example of how learners incorrectly assume that “seminar” and “conference” can be used interchangeably because of Arabic cultural and conceptual similarity.

Another instance from Al-Rashidi^[12] is that of the word “حدث” (haddath), which typically translates into English as an “event.” Students, however, mistook this word for an English word meaning “incident” (in English, typically defined as an unfortunate or unexpected occurrence) since Arabic's wider meaning for “حدث” refers to both good and ill events. This resulted in sentences like “There was a bad incident at the seminar,” which in English would seem awkward or contextually incorrect.

Al-Seghayer^[13] highlighted another frequent error in his study, related to the Arabic word “شركة” (sharika), which translates to “company” in English. While “company” is the correct translation, Saudi students often mistakenly use the word “corporation” due to an overgeneralization of the meaning. The term “corporation” in English is typically used to refer to larger, more formal business entities, whereas “company” is more flexible and can refer

to a variety of business sizes. A student might write, “The corporation has agreed to fund the project,” when in fact the intended meaning would better align with the less formal “company.”

Another common semantic transfer error involves the Arabic word “فيلم” (*film*), which, transferred directly to English, causes problems because in Arabic, “فيلم” refers to any kind of movie or motion picture. In contrast, the word “film” in English more specifically refers to the medium of a movie or a movie made on photographic film. Saudi students sometimes use the term inappropriately in phrases like “I will watch the film tomorrow,” which sounds overly formal or incorrect when referring to movies in general.

Students often misuse the Arabic word “دراسة” (*diraasa*), which translates to ‘study’ in English, in contexts where ‘research’ would be more appropriate. For example, a student might write, ‘The study aims to explore...’ when ‘research’ would better reflect the academic process involved, as ‘study’ in English is often used in a more general sense or for undergraduate work rather than in the specific context of academic research. This reflects confusion between Arabic and English scholarly usage, particularly in terms of vocabulary and context.

Moreover, semantic transfer collocational errors are not uncommon. The Arabic term “قوي الشخصية” (*qawi al-shakhsiyya*), with its meaning of “strong character,” can result in incorrect usage of “strong character” in English, for example. The preferred English term, though, is “strong personality,” since “character” for English refers to something else, typically to moral qualities and not to personality. Such an error indicates the problem of translating Arabic expressions to English without giving thought to natural collocations found within the language being targeted. Kharma and Hajjaj^[14] have also investigated collocational mistakes, highlighting how learners tend to use expressions like “أخذ فكرة” (*akhadh fikra*), which is equivalent to “take an idea” in Arabic. In English, this should be phrased as “get an idea” or “have an idea.” Translating “take an idea” literally creates a semantically incorrect expression that will not be interpreted similarly within English. These instances highlight the nature of lexical flaws resulting from semantic transfer. As much as learners may use their L1 to make informed guesses at the vocabulary of English, differences between the two language systems typically lead to un-

noticed errors. Such differences—both at a word level and at collocational, connotative, and cultural levels—must be known to the Saudi learner if he is to deepen his writing skills at an academic level.

2.2. Common Lexical Errors Made by EFL Learners

Lexical errors are one of the most common issues for second language learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These errors happen because of incorrect word choices, inappropriate usage of forms, or an inability to comprehend differences in meaning between the two languages. These errors not only impede successful communication but also influence the writing and speaking abilities of EFL learners at academic levels. Amongst the most frequent types of lexical errors are errors of word choice, false friends, direct translations, and incorrect collocations. Here, these types of errors are discussed with examples and summaries of recent research to comprehend what causes them and how these lexical errors affect language production.

2.2.1. Choice Errors

Choice errors happen because learners select an inappropriate word, typically because of inadequate vocabulary knowledge or a misinterpretation of word meaning. There are several reasons why these types of errors can happen, including a lack of understanding of synonyms, misinterpretation of word connotations, or cross-linguistic influence. For instance, an example sentence by a Saudi learner could be, “I have to do research on this,” while it should be “conduct research.” In this case, the error is a result of an excess of usage of the verb “to do,” which appears to be an apt alternative for many different acts but never collocates with the term “research” in English. As Al-Rashidi^[12] noted, learners tend to resort to simple, common words without being fully aware of how to use them properly. Choice errors can be especially detrimental to academic writing, as language precision is at stake. Misuse of scholastic vocabulary can undermine an academic’s clarity and professionalism, as Al-Otaibi^[11] has observed, since most EFL learners have been found to adopt general words like “make” for more accurate academic verbs like “create,” “formulate,” or “develop.”

2.2.2. False Cognates

False cognates, or false friends, are words that are similar-sounding in two languages with different meanings. False friends are a common source of lexical mistakes for learners of EFL, if the learner's native language contains vocabulary shared with English. For example, the Arabic term "جمال" (jamal), which translates to "camel" into English, may be misinterpreted by learners to be indicated by "sentence," as an English term for "jamel" indicates a type of sentence in linguistics. The error here arises because both words resemble one another but have different meanings in both languages, leading to confusion. As Kharma and Hajjaj ^[14] point out, learners' use of visual similarity between words in a learner's first language and in an FL can be tantamount to serious miscommunications. Other traditional examples are the French-English false cognate "actuellement," which is French for "currently," and is frequently mistaken for "actually," and English's "eventually," meaning "in the end," which gets mixed up with Arabic's "في النهاية" (fi al-nihaya), as in, to say, "I will eventually go to the market," when what's meant to be conveyed is, indeed, "in the end." These kinds of errors are especially frequent with learners who have multilingual backgrounds, and avoidance of false cognates depends heavily upon paying close attention to meaning differences between similar-sounding vocabulary.

2.2.3. Direct Translations

Direct translations are instances where learners translate words or phrases from the native language (L1) to the target language (L2) without reference to context or cultural differences. It typically produces unnatural or incorrect phrases, which may be grammatically accurate but semantically incorrect or clumsy. A good example of Arabic-English translation is for the Arabic sentence "سوف أعمل على" (sawfa a'mal 'ala), meaning literally "I will work on" in English. However, the more appropriate English phrase would be "I will focus on" or "I will work towards." Another example could be the Arabic phrase "نظرة شاملة" (nathra shamilah), which could be directly translated as "comprehensive view," but the correct English equivalent would be "broad overview." Al-Otaibi ^[11] noted that such errors often occur because students are unfamiliar with the nuances of

the English expressions and simply translate them directly from their native tongue.

Direct translation errors often arise because learners have not yet internalized the idiomatic and contextual differences between their native language and the target language. These errors reflect a lack of fluency and a need for more exposure to natural language usage in English contexts.

2.2.4. Incorrect Collocations

Collocations are pairs of words which commonly exist together within a language. Students of EFL frequently make mistakes with incorrect collocations, which are situations where learners use words together that don't exist naturally for native speakers. For instance, a learner may say, "The decision was strong," rather than "The decision was firm" or "The decision was strongly made." Here, the learner is misusing the word "strong" because it does not collocate with "decision" as it does not in English. There is a high rate of collocational errors among Arabic learners, Al-Seghayer ^[13] points out. For example, Arabic learners will say, "I am waiting for the bus since one hour," whereas what should be uttered is, "I have been waiting for the bus for one hour." The variation of verb tenses and use of prepositions between Arabic and English hampers collocations, as well as the fact that there are not necessarily patterns to collocations. Learners are not aware of specific word combinations that are natural sounding for a certain language and hence generate awkward and incorrect sentences. Such a problem is especially true for academic writing, where accurate and natural usage of language is essential for good communication.

2.3. Causes of Lexical Errors Caused by Semantic Transfer from Arabic to English

Lexical errors based on semantic transfer arise when learners transfer meaning or word usage from their first language (L1) into the second language (L2) indiscriminately. For Arabic-speaking learners of English, these errors are especially frequent because Arabic and English have large linguistic and cultural differences. Scholars have identified various principal causes of lexical errors based on semantic transfer, including negative transfer of Arabic vocabulary

patterns, overapplication of L2 rules, restricted exposure to authentic English usage, and lack of consciousness of lexical collocations.

2.3.1. Negative Transfer from Arabic Vocabulary Structures

One of the most common reasons for lexical errors is negative transfer, whereby learners draw upon Arabic word meaning and syntax in forming English sentences. This tends to create direct translation errors, with Arabic words transposed into English in a fashion that does not activate native usage. As an example, Arabic learners would be likely to say, “I will drink medicine” as opposed to “I will take medicine,” as the Arabic sentence “سأشرب الدواء” (sa’ashrab al-dawaa) literally means “I will drink the medicine” [11]. Another instance is with the word قوي (qawi), which is Arabic for “strong,” but commonly misused for saying “strong rain” rather than “heavy rain.” It is because Arabic provides greater usage for certain adjectives, thus causing inappropriate lexical usage in English [15].

2.3.2. Overgeneralization of L2 Rules

Overgeneralization happens when learners apply a rule, they have learned in one context to all similar situations, without considering exceptions. For instance, many Arabic-speaking students learn that “big” is a general adjective for size, leading them to say, “a big problem” instead of “a serious problem.” While “big” is correct in some cases (e.g., “a big house”), it does not always translate accurately when describing abstract concepts. Overgeneralization of basic vocabulary prevents learners from developing a more precise and nuanced lexical repertoire.

2.3.3. Limited Exposure to Authentic English Usage

Many Saudi EFL learners have limited exposure to authentic English contexts, relying primarily on textbooks and classroom instruction. Unlike native speakers who acquire vocabulary naturally through immersion, EFL learners often lack direct interaction with idiomatic and context-dependent English expressions. According to Al-Rashidi [12], Saudi students frequently make lexical errors because they have not internalized idiomatic expressions or collocations

commonly used by native speakers. For example, learners may write “do a mistake” instead of “make a mistake” because they are unfamiliar with the correct verb-noun pairing in English.

2.3.4. Insufficient Awareness of Lexical Collocations

Collocational errors, which occur when learners incorrectly combine words that do not naturally go together, are another significant cause of semantic transfer errors. Arabic learners often translate word combinations directly from their L1, resulting in unnatural phrases. For example, the Arabic phrase “معلومات غنية” (ma’lumat ghaniya) translates literally as “rich information,” but in English, the correct phrase is “valuable information”. It is an issue because Arabic and English use differing conventions for pairing words. Whereas native speakers learn collocations through immersion into the language, EFL learners need to be specifically instructed to learn frequent English collocations to prevent these mistakes. Semantic transfer is a major cause of lexical errors for Arabic-speaking EFL learners owing to negative L1 transfer, overgeneralization, poor exposure to natural English usage, and lack of collocational competence. It is understood that addressing these causes will enable instructors to intervene with specific measures to diminish errors, for example, by enhancing learners’ exposure to natural English, explicit teaching of collocations, and creating awareness of frequent semantic transfer errors. Alleviation of these issues is necessary to improve lexical accuracy for Saudi EFL learners’ academic writing.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

There have been several linguistic theories explaining how learners learn a second or a foreign language and what kind of errors they make. Within these theories, Error Analysis Theory (EA), Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), and Interlanguage Theory (IL) are most applicable to research into lexical errors made by Arabic-speaking learners of English. All three theories provide important observations regarding how errors arise, how they could be generated, and how these contribute to language acquisition. In the following, these three theories are described, and Error Analysis Theory is identified as being most appropriate for the study at hand.

2.4.1. Error Analysis Theory

Error Analysis Theory (EA) was first proposed by Corder ^[16] and is an organized methodology for examining language learners' errors. It transforms the role of error correction to an understanding of why and how errors happen and how these affect learning. EA classifies errors as interlingual (due to first-language interference) and intralingual (due to developmental reasons inherent to the second language). While previous methodologies treated errors as something negative, EA perceives them as an inherent part of second language learning and as an insight into learners' thinking. EA has been used frequently in second language acquisition research. It was found through research that lexical errors usually arise because of semantic transfer, overgeneralization, and insufficient mastery of target-language rules ^[17]. Examination of errors will help educators learn about learners' difficulties and adapt pedagogical measures to address them. EA is most applicable to research into written language since it is based upon meticulous error classification and investigation into the causes underlying them.

2.4.2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) postulated by Lado ^[18] states that differences in a learner's first language (L1) and second language (L2) are responsible for most of the learner's errors. CAH postulates that learners transfer elements of their native language to a second language, which results in predictable errors. CAH believes that the larger the difference between L1 and L2, the larger the number of errors will be. Although CAH has made important contributions to language transfer studies, it has drawn criticism for its shortcomings. It exaggerates the significance of L1 interference and does not consider universal linguistic rules and developmental mistakes. Second language acquisition research has, for instance, identified that not all errors result from direct transfer, as learners sometimes make errors as a process of creating novel linguistic rules^[3]. CAH, nonetheless, still proves to be worth examining for transfer-based errors, mainly lexical errors, as direct translation for words at L1 can lead to inappropriate word selection.

2.4.3. Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage Theory (IL), proposed by Selinker ^[19], refers to the dynamic, changing linguistic system that learners develop as they learn a second language. Interlanguage is neither a state of being fully L1 nor fully L2 but a state halfway between, being influenced by both. IL provides an explanation for errors resulting from the influence of L1, simplification, overgeneralization, and fossilization (when incorrect forms become fixed as a part of learners' language use). It is especially helpful for capturing how learners evolve with time and why some errors continue to be made with greater exposure to the target language ^[20]. But its emphasis upon language development through time diminishes its utility for research analyzing errors within static written samples as contrasted with language acquisition patterns through time.

Error Analysis Theory (EA) is most suitable for this study as a framework. In contrast to CAH's assignment of errors to transfer only at the L1 stage and IL's examination of language development through time, EA offers an integrated and systematic methodology for detecting, classifying, and analyzing lexical errors found in pieces of writing. EA, being most capable of delving into learners' understanding of their errors, is best suited to utilizing both writing samples and questionnaires for this study. Through EA, this study can reveal the most frequent lexical errors resulting from semantic transfer between Arabic and English and investigate their causes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research employs a qualitative and quantitative research framework to investigate lexical errors resulting from semantic transfer between Arabic and English for academic writing purposes, specifically for Saudi male learners. Mixed method is appropriate as it allows for a deep exploration of both the types of lexical errors and the perceptions of students regarding the causes of these errors. By combining writing tasks and semi-structured group interviews, the study aims to identify the most common lexical errors and understand the underlying factors contributing to them.

3.2. Participants

The participants are 20 male students from the Department of Languages and Translation at Haql College, University of Tabuk, enrolled in Level 4 of their English language program. These students were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they were directly relevant to the study. All participants are native Arabic speakers with an intermediate proficiency in English, which makes them suitable for examining the impact of semantic transfer from Arabic to English in their writing. All participants in this study were enrolled in a writing course as part of their English program requirements. The decision to select male students was based on the researcher's current teaching assignment; he is instructing Level 4 male students, which facilitated more convenient and efficient data collection.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

This study utilizes two primary data collection methods: writing tasks and semi-structured group interviews.

3.3.1. Writing Tasks

The students will complete a short writing task (approximately 100–150 words) on the five following topics:

- o The Importance of Learning English for Saudi Students
- o My Future Career and How English Can Help Me
- o The Role of Technology in Language Learning
- o Challenges I Face When Writing in English
- o A Memorable Experience in My Life

Every student will be requested to write about these topics above, so the total writing sample from all the participants will be 100 writing samples. These topics are designed to prompt the use of common academic vocabulary, which may reveal lexical errors resulting from semantic transfer. Writing samples will be examined to spot instances of lexical error types including false friends, direct translations, and non-native collocations. These types of errors will be classified to comprehend the semantic transfer character of mistakes through writing based on student performance.

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Group Interview

Following the writing exercises, students will engage in semi-structured group interviews, with a total of five students in each group. These interviews will focus on the students' perceptions of the causes of their lexical errors in English writing, particularly regarding semantic transfer.

Key questions will include:

- o Do you translate words directly from Arabic to English when writing? How does this affect your writing?
- o What difficulties do you encounter when choosing the correct vocabulary in English, and do you think these challenges are related to your native language?

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis will combine error analysis and thematic analysis. The writing samples will be analyzed using error analysis to identify and categorize lexical errors caused by semantic transfer, such as false cognates and direct translations. The interview data will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key themes related to the students' perceptions of the causes of lexical errors. This comprehensive approach will provide insights into both the types of lexical errors and the students' understanding of their causes.

4. Findings

The aim of the writing task was to address and answer Research Question 1, which aimed to explore the types of lexical errors most often made by Saudi university students. To answer this question, a writing task was given to 20 students on five different topics, resulting in a total of 100 writing samples (each student submitted five pieces of writing). The writing task included open-ended questions, and all respondents completed the task.

After collecting the writing sheets from the students, two colleagues from the English Department at the University of Tabuk carefully checked the students' writing to identify lexical errors, marking them with a red pen. Afterward, the researcher double-checked the students' writing for accuracy. The most common errors found in the

writing test were four different types: Direct Translation Errors, Word Choice Errors, False Cognates, and Incorrect Collocations. These four types of lexical errors were repeated across all five topics, indicating systematic challenges in vocabulary use. The following tables provide a breakdown of these errors with examples from students' writing, followed by a descriptive analysis that highlights the most frequent lexical errors.

4.1. Lexical Errors in Topic 1: The Importance of Learning English for Saudi Students

This topic exhibited a high frequency of direct translation errors, with 15 out of 20 students committing such mistakes. The tendency to translate Arabic phrases directly into English resulted in unnatural expressions. Word choice errors were also significant, as seen in "gain a new character" instead of "develop a new personality." False cognates and incorrect collocations, though less frequent, indicate lexical confusion and insufficient awareness of English phrase structures (Table 1).

4.2. Lexical Errors in Topic 2: My Future Career and How English Can Help Me

Direct translation errors were again the most frequent, followed by word choice errors. The misinterpretation of false cognates, such as "sensible" instead of "sensitive," suggests that students rely on words that appear similar in

both languages. Incorrect collocations, while less common, indicate challenges in natural phrase formation (Table 2).

4.3. Lexical Errors in Topic 3: The Role of Technology in Language Learning

Errors in this topic revealed a strong reliance on Arabic structures, as seen in direct translations like "Technology gives a new knowledge." Word choice and false cognate errors indicate a limited grasp of nuanced vocabulary differences, and incorrect collocations demonstrate difficulty in combining words correctly (Table 3).

4.4. Lexical Errors in Topic 4: Challenges I Face When Writing in English

This subject generated most of the direct translation errors, which indicates that learners tend to fall back upon Arabic syntax while constructing sentences. A high frequency of word choice mistakes indicates that they lack mastery over English verb usage (Table 4).

4.5. Lexical Errors in Topic 5: A Memorable Experience in My Life

This topic had the highest number of direct translation errors, highlighting students' difficulty in expressing emotions in English. The frequency of word choice errors indicates misuse of common English expressions (Table 5).

Table 1. Lexical Errors from Topic 1—The Importance of Learning English for Saudi Students.

Type of Lexical Error	Example of Lexical Error	Number of Participants Committing the Error	Total Number of Errors
Direct Translation	"English opens the world for me» (from Arabic: يفتح العالم)	15	24
Word Choice Error	"I will gain a new character from English" (instead of 'develop')	13	21
False Cognate	"English is an actual language" (instead of 'practical')	10	17
Incorrect Collocation	"I want to have a strong skill in speaking" (instead of 'good skill')	9	15

Table 2. Lexical Errors from Topic 2—My Future Career and How English Can Help Me.

Type of Lexical Error	Example of Lexical Error	Number of Participants Committing the Error	Total Number of Errors
Direct Translation	"I want to make a successful job» (from Arabic: صنع عمل ناجح)	16	26
Word Choice Error	"English will improve my future" (instead of 'enhance')	14	23
False Cognate	"Speaking English will make me more sensible" (instead of 'sensitive')	12	18
Incorrect Collocation	"My dream job is to be a high teacher" (instead of 'senior teacher')	10	16

Table 3. Lexical Errors from Topic 3—The Role of Technology in Language Learning.

Type of Lexical Error	Example of Lexical Error	Number of Participants Committing the Error	Total Number of Errors
Direct Translation	“Technology gives a new knowledge» (from Arabic: يمنح معرفة جديدة)	17	28
Word Choice Error	“Apps support students to study” (instead of ‘help’)	13	22
False Cognate	“Teachers should be careful when using AI” (instead of ‘cautious’)	11	19
Incorrect Collocation	“Technology helps in fast learning” (instead of ‘rapid learning’)	9	14

Table 4. Lexical Errors from Topic 4—Challenges I Face When Writing in English.

Type of Lexical Error	Example of Lexical Error	Number of Participants Committing the Error	Total Number of Errors
Direct Translation	“I have big problems in grammar» (from Arabic: مشاكل كبيرة)	18	30
Word Choice Error	“Writing in English makes my stress” (instead of ‘causes’)	15	25
False Cognate	“Grammar rules are actual difficult” (instead of ‘really’)	13	21
Incorrect Collocation	“My writing needs hard practice” (instead of ‘intensive practice’)	11	18

Table 5. Lexical Errors from Topic 5—A Memorable Experience in My Life.

Type of Lexical Error	Example of Lexical Error	Number of Participants Committing the Error	Total Number of Errors
Direct Translation	“The trip changed my soul” (from Arabic: غيرت روعي)	19	32
Word Choice Error	“The event created a strong memory” (instead of ‘left’)	16	27
False Cognate	“The hotel was actual good” (instead of ‘really’)	14	23
Incorrect Collocation	“I had a big happiness that day” (instead of ‘great happiness’)	12	20

4.6. Descriptive Analysis of Lexical Errors

From the statistical analysis, direct translation errors were the most frequent, with a mean of 28 per topic, indicating a heavy reliance on Arabic syntactic struc-

tures. Word choice errors were the second most common, showing difficulty in selecting appropriate English vocabulary. The standard deviation values suggest some variation in the occurrence of errors across topics (Table 6).

Table 6. Descriptive Analysis of Lexical Errors.

Type of Lexical Error	Total Occurrences	Mean	Standard Deviation
Direct Translation	140	28.0	3.0
Word Choice Error	118	23.6	2.5
False Cognate	98	19.6	2.2
Incorrect Collocation	83	16.6	2.0

4.7. Findings for Research Question 2

To examine the perceived causes of lexical errors caused by semantic transfer from Arabic to English, a semi-structured group interview was conducted with four groups of five male students each. The responses were categorized into four main themes, with relevant subthemes highlighting specific areas where semantic transfer influenced lexical errors. The participants’ responses are presented with their respective group and student codes (e.g.,

S1/G1), with direct quotations italicized.

4.7.1. Theme 1: Negative Transfer from Arabic Vocabulary Structures

Sub-theme 1: Literal Translations from Arabic

Many students relied on direct translations from Arabic, resulting in incorrect lexical choices. S1/G1 admitted, “*I often translate words directly from Arabic, but sometimes the meaning is not the same in English.*” In a similar

vein, S3/G2 said, *"When I want to say something like 'make a party,' I write it like that because we say it like this in Arabic."* It shows how students are having difficulties with understanding the differences between Arabic and English phrase structures.

Sub-theme 2: Misuse of Synonyms Due to Arabic Equivalents

Students also struggled to select proper English synonyms where there were several different Arabic equivalents. S2/G3 explained, *"In Arabic, a word may have different meanings, and therefore, if I select an English word, I do not necessarily get the right word."* reinforcing this, S4/G4 said, *"I thought 'big problem' and 'huge problem' meant the same, but my teacher told me that 'huge' is stronger in English."* This indicates the challenge of subtle word selection where learners depend upon literal translation.

4.7.2. Theme 2: Overgeneralization of L2 Rules

Sub-theme 1: Applying Arabic Grammar Rules to English

Some lexical mistakes arose through the imposition of Arabic grammatical patterns into English. S3/G1 explained, *"In Arabic, adjectives follow the noun, and occasionally I write 'car red' and not 'red car.'"* S5/G2 explained similarly, *"I keep forgetting that verbs aren't necessarily formed as they are in Arabic."* This indicates that learners have difficulties with English syntax internalization.

Sub-theme 2: Overgeneralizing English Rules

A few students misused English rules based on limited exposure. S2/G4 stated, *"I knew -ed forms verbs past tense, and therefore I used 'good' for 'went.'"* S1/G2 stated similarly, *"I knew that 'happy' becomes 'happily,' therefore 'fast' becomes 'fastly.'"* Such mistakes reveal how learners assume regularity in word formation in English without realizing exceptions.

4.7.3. Theme 3: Limited Exposure to Authentic English Usage

Sub-theme 1: Dependence on Arabic-English Dictionaries

Students most depended upon straight dictionary translations, hence inappropriate lexical decisions. S3/G3

described, *"I use an Arabic-English dictionary, but sometimes it provides me with an odd word that native speakers do not use."* S5/G1 stated, similarly, *"I used 'enormous' in my sentence because the dictionary provided it as a synonym for 'big,' but it did not sound right to me in my essay."* It indicates that learners fail to decide on word usage within an appropriate context.

Sub-theme 2: Lack of Exposure to Native English Contexts

Most of these students identified insufficient exposure to native English speakers as an obstacle to enhancing lexical accuracy. S4/G2 said, *"I don't get to hear English often enough in everyday life, and therefore I don't necessarily know which words are natural."* S2/G1 reinforced this view by saying, *"We learn mostly English at school, but outside school, we use Arabic, and therefore not enough."* Insufficient exposure to English limits their word use refinement.

4.7.4. Theme 4: Insufficient Awareness of Lexical Collocations

Sub-theme 1: Difficulty in Learning Fixed Expressions

Students complained of difficulties with collocations, with word combinations which were not natural to say. S1/G4 explained, *"I used to write 'do a mistake' for 'make a mistake' because we say it like that in Arabic."* S5/G3 acknowledged, *"I used to write 'strong rain' for 'heavy rain' because I did not know what to use as a correct collocation."* These instances point to difficulties that students have with learning inherent English word pairings.

Sub-theme 2: Challenges in Using Prepositions Correctly

Another frequent problem was incorrect usage of prepositions because of discrepancies between Arabic and English. S3/G2 explained, *"I used 'angry on' because in Arabic, it's said that way."* Supporting this, S2/G3 stated, *"Prepositions confuse me because sometimes they do not fit Arabic ones."*

It shows that learners have difficulties in mastering the English usage of prepositions.

From the writing exercises and group interviews, it was found that semantic transfer between Arabic and English is one of the key reasons for lexical errors during En-

glish writing. The most frequent of these errors are direct translations, word selection mistakes, false cognates, and incorrect collocations, of which direct translation happens most often. Interviews disclosed that there were four major causes: negative transfer of Arabic, overgeneralization of English rules, restricted exposure to authentic English, and lack of sufficient awareness of lexical collocations. The learners depend greatly upon Arabic structures, misapply English rules, and receive insufficient input from authentic sources. Overall, these results highlight the importance of focused instruction and greater exposure to natural English use to minimize lexical errors.

5. Discussion

The results of both the students' writing exercises and the semi-structured group interviews offer important indications of the characteristics of semantic transfer-induced lexical errors between Arabic and English. The discussion critically considers these results by situating them within connections with prior research and interpreting them based on upon Error Analysis Theory (EA) ^[21]. The theory indicates that errors constitute an integral component of language learning, as these mirror underlying learning strategies as well as developmental phases. In this research, EA supports both the kinds of lexical errors observed within students' writing as well as the perceived causes given during the interviews.

It noted as one of its main findings that there was an abundance of direct translation by students with Arabic word patterns being carried straight into English, hence the kinds of errors to be noted as e.g., "*He did a big sin*" (as opposed to, e.g., "*He committed a big sin*"). It lends support to EA's interlingual transfer concept, whereby learners depend upon structures within their native language as a fallback when there is not adequate L2 knowledge available to draw upon. Abu-Rabia ^[22] found, in similar studies, that Arab EFL learners have great trouble with verb-noun collocations because there are differences between Arabic and English lexical combinations. While, however, these studies were based upon spoken errors, this study shows how these errors persist through to formal writing, and hence to a greater cognitive dependence upon structures contained within L1 during formal writing.

Moreover, the existence of false cognates also supports EA's interlingual influence. Students regularly misuse words that are similar in both languages but have different connotations, like "actual" for "current" under the influence of Arabic 'aktuāli (أكتوالي). This is consistent with Alqarni ^[23], who found comparable errors in Saudi learners due to loanword misinterpretation. While different from Alqarni's study that found false cognates to be most frequent as far as reading comprehension was concerned, this study indicates their occurrence with regular frequency as far as writing is concerned, and hence, it is likely that learners internalise these lexical mistakes as opposed to misinterpreting them as a reading affair.

Errors with word choice and incorrect collocations were also quite prevalent, with violations of word usage in inappropriate situations, for example, "strong rain" where "heavy rain" is required. EA attributes this to intralingual errors, which are committed because of incomplete L2 pedagogical coverage and not as an artifact of L1 interference. The overgeneralization of English lexical rules by learners, leading to the misapplication of past patterns, has been documented in various studies. This issue is particularly evident among learners with diverse first language (L1) backgrounds, including Arabic speakers. Arabic-speaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often face challenges in word choice, especially in academic writing. These difficulties are exacerbated by limited exposure to authentic English input, prompting students to rely on translation methods rather than internalizing native English collocations.

The semi-structured interviews shed additional light upon perceived causes of lexical error, supporting the EA framework's interlingual and intralingual error division. A repeated pattern was the negative transfer of Arabic word structures, with learners confessing to thinking first in Arabic and then converting to English, which results in unnatural phrasing. One learner (S3/G2) commented, "*In Arabic, we say 'big' with lots of things, and I believe it's alright for English as well.*" This resonates with research identifying that Arab learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tend to transfer Arabic patterns of collocations to English, thus creating ungrammatical usage.

The research also proposed that explicit instruction for collocations could significantly minimize these errors,

and several learners similarly believed that exposure to authentic materials and teaching could rectify lexical errors. Another key discovery was that overextension of L2 rules was responsible for most lexical mistakes. Participants explained that because of restricted vocabulary knowledge, they tried to guess word meaning based on prior learned patterns. For example, student S4/G3 said, *"If I know the word 'success,' I believe 'successment' would be right for achievement."* This resonates with Lightbown and Spada [24], who contended that learners try to apply well-established morphological rules to new words, and hence produce errors. In contrast to Lightbown and Spada's research, which investigated young learners of EFL, this study emphasizes how hypercorrection occurs at university levels as well, which indicates that explicit vocabulary teaching is still required beyond elementary levels.

Furthermore, minimal exposure to authentic use of English by learners was found to be a major lexical errors cause. Several test-takers acknowledged that most of their exposure to English was via textbooks and lessons and not through actual usage. As one student (S2/G1) explained, *"We learn English, but do not hear how vocabulary is used naturally by native speakers."* It has been pointed out that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) do not enjoy immersive opportunities and thus select vocabulary unsystematically [6]. This investigation extends the claim to academic writing, where minimal exposure to authentic materials degrades lexical accuracy. A last contributing factor to lexical errors was a lack of awareness of lexical collocations, which influenced students' word usage directly. Students complained of collocations, as English words did not pair like Arabic words did, and sometimes did not make sense to them. During an interview, one student (S1/G4) said, *"In Arabic, what do you say for 'big responsibility'? We say it, and I did the same in English, but the teacher told me to put 'great responsibility.'"* This echoes Nation [25], who noted that collocation mistakes are especially difficult for learners of an L2 because word pairing is arbitrary for English.

While Nation proposed that explicit training for collocations could be helpful, several learners within this study suggested that what was needed was more contextualized practice, for example, being exposed to native English materials and actual usage situations. Overall, the results of

this study coincide with Error Analysis Theory, illustrating how both interlingual (influence of Arabic) and intralingual (developmental issues of L2) elements produce Saudi learners' lexical errors. The study validates much prior research and identifies distinctive Arabic-specific lexical issues that still affect academic writing. Critically analyzing these errors through the EA framework, the study emphasizes the need for specific instructional intervention, focusing on explicit collocation training, enhancing exposure to authentic English, and employing measures to identify and counteract L1 influence. These results have promising implications for EFL curriculum design, specifically for Saudi higher education, where lexical accuracy is still an utmost challenge for academic writing.

6. Conclusion

Synonym Lexical errors resulting from semantic transfer between Arabic and English were investigated through this study, based on the writing of Saudi male undergraduates. Results indicated that direct translation was most common, followed by word choice errors, false friends, and incorrect collocations. Interviews suggested that there were four intervening causes for these errors: negative transfer from Arabic, overapplication of rules for English, insufficient exposure to authentic English, and lack of collocational awareness. These results concur with existing research into lexical transfer and language learning. Instruction specifically addressing differences between Arabic and English, and enhanced exposure to authentic English, is suggested as a solution for these issues. The study underlines awareness of lexical issues and exposure to language in real use. Future research may extend this to examine specific teaching methods for the minimization of lexical errors.

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Informed Consent Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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