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Examining the Impact of Multi-Word Expressions on Writing Proficiency in AL-Yarmouk University ESL Students/ Jordan

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Abstract

Multiword Expressions (MWEs) including collocations, idioms, and lexical bundles are essential to language fluency. ESL learners frequently face difficulties in their proper usage, resulting in odd phrasing and reduced coherence; yet, their proper use poses considerable obstacles for ESL learners. This study explores the difficulties undergraduate ESL students encounter in Jordan when incorporating MWEs into their writing, and investigates the role of Multiword Expressions (MWEs) in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing, focusing on their patterns, common errors, and assessment methods. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected through writing samples, student questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, the correlational study was conducted with fifty (50) students from Al-Yarmouk University, a state university in Jordan. The findings indicate that students struggle with selecting contextually appropriate MWEs, differentiating between fixed

and flexible expressions, and avoiding direct translation from their native language. Additionally, proficiency level plays a crucial role in the accuracy and frequency of MWE usage. The study highlights the need for targeted pedagogical strategies to improve MWE acquisition, suggesting explicit instruction, corpus-based learning, and increased exposure to authentic language materials. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the linguistic challenges faced by ESL learners and offer recommendations for enhancing MWE competence in academic writing

Keywords: Multiword Expressions, ESL writing, language proficiency, second language acquisition, Jordanian students

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in multi-word expressions (MWEs) has increased in linguistics and language learning. Multiple definitions of MWEs exist, including "sequences of words that always go together and behave as a single unit" and "a word or phrase consisting of two or more words that together convey a meaning that is different from the meanings of the individual words." MWEs are composed of idioms, collocations, and phrasal verbs, all of which preserve the core idea of the sentence. An example of a MWE consisting of two fundamental English phrases is "kick the bucket," which has a meaning different from the two words that comprise the phrase. MWEs are common and familiar to native speakers, although they are usually challenging for second-language learners.

According to Baldwin, Timothy, and Soo Nam Kim (2010), multi-word expressions (MWEs) are "expressions consisting of at least two words that can be syntactically and/or semantically idiosyncratic and that have surprising properties that cannot be predicted from their constituent words. "Nunberg et al. (1994), defined "multi-word expressions as fixed combinations of words that have a specific meaning beyond the meanings of their constituent words and are highly resistant to modification or paraphrasing. "Multi-word expressions (MWEs), in which the overall meaning is not always deduced from the meanings of individual words, are collections of words that work as a single unit of meaning (Jackendoff, 1997). MWEs are contiguous word sequences that function as a single linguistic entity and display syntactic and/or semantic characteristics. Teaching MWEs and increasing learners' awareness of MWEs in a language may result in a more comprehensive grasp of that language. These expressions are seen to be very important in comprehension and

fluency in English language acquisition, particularly in the setting of second language learning. They can be categorized as collocations (e.g., "strong coffee"), idioms (e.g., "spill the beans"), phrasal verbs (e.g., "give up"), and formulaic sequences (e.g., "as a matter of fact"). Their use indicates language competency; they challenge students; and they are vital for language processing. Multi-word expressions (MWEs) Are Important Since they retain their meaning as a group rather than as individual words. Normal use of MWEs has been directly linked to proficiency in a foreign language. It would appear that recognizing and appropriately utilizing MWEs is crucial for language learners, as their failure to do so leads to unidiomatic and unnatural speech.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of Multiword Expressions (MWEs) on the writing proficiency of English as a Second Language (ESL) students at Yarmouk University, focusing on their frequency, accuracy and effectiveness in academic writing. By analysing students' written essays, this research seeks to determine the extent to which MWEs contribute to the quality of writing and to identify potential teaching strategies for integrating them into the learning process. Understanding the role of MWEs in ESL writing provides valuable insights for teachers and curriculum developers seeking to improve language teaching in Jordanian higher education.

In the context of Jordanian ESL learners at Al Yarmouk University, the acquisition and application of MWEs can pose challenges due to differences in linguistic structures between English and Arabic (Al- Qawasmeh, 2020). Research has demonstrated that ESL students who incorporate MWEs into their writing demonstrate improved lexical richness, cohesion, and overall fluency (Al-Qawasmeh, 2020). However, many learners struggle with their appropriate usage due to a lack of exposure, instruction, and contextual understanding (Al- Qawasmeh, 2020).

Assessing students' proficiency in Multi-Word Expressions (MWEs) requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments that test comprehension, production and appropriate use. The study participants were third—and fourth-year English language and literary studies students at Al-Yarmouk University in Jordan. The sample consisted of fifty students. They were first given a pretest to evaluate their level of understanding and accuracy in using Multiword Expressions and Choosing contextually suitable MWEs. The test had both multiple-choice and free-writing questions. This paper discuss only the free writing section which help to demonstrate

the level of understanding and prior knowledge of the Multiword Expressions, as well as its correct application in their writing. The students were asked to write an essay on a given topic using MWEs.

1.1 LITRETURE REVIEW

Writing is a complex art that calls for the capacity to organize, produce, and monitor words. "The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course" (Raimes, 1983, p. 3), and writing skill is seen as a critical component of teaching foreign languages (Weigle, 2002). Writing training is essential in academic environments. "As a problem- solving process in which writers employ a range of cognitive and linguistic skills to enable them to identify a purpose, to produce and shape ideas, and to refine expression" (White & Arndt, 1991, pages 3 and 4).

Academic achievement and academic writing are tightly linked (Grabowski, 1996), although even high-achieving non-native English speakers struggle with academic writing in English (Johns, 1997; Leki & Carson, 1997; Prior, 1998). According to Hinkel (2004) and Weigle (2002), learning to write in English differs structurally from learning to write in one's native tongue. First language influences word choices (Wang, 2012) and sentence structure (Hyland, 2007; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Noor, 2001). Also, adapting their writing skills to Academic Writing in English can be challenging for learners who have different writing conventions in their original language (Hyland, 2007).

1. The Importance of MWEs in ESL Writing Proficiency

MWEs make considerable contributions to linguistic proficiency, especially in academic and formal writing. According to Pawley and Syder (1983), native-like fluency is based on mastery of prefabricated phrases rather than single words. Ellis (2008) adds that MWEs improve coherence, lexical diversity, and writing fluency, helping students to create more complex and structured compositions. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) discovered that students who actively used MWEs in their writing had higher readability and syntactic accuracy.

2. Challenges in Acquiring MWEs for Arabic-Speaking Learners

MWEs provide serious learning challenges for Arabic-speaking ESL students, despite their significance. Negative transfer and fossilised errors are frequently caused by the

linguistic structures of Arabic and English differing from one another (Oshodi, 2019). For instance, Arabic lacks phrasal verbs, which makes phrases like "give up" and "put off" especially difficult to use. Similar to this, Arabic idioms frequently have disparate conceptual mappings, which can result in incorrect usage and interpretation (Mahmoud, 2015). Alhassan and Wood (2015) conducted research on ESL learners in Jordan and found that students have trouble telling the difference between collocations (make a decision) and free combinations (write a letter). Since traditional language training in Jordan tends to concentrate more on grammar and isolated vocabulary than phraseology, their findings imply that a lack of exposure to actual English texts is a contributing factor to this issue.

1.2 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

How do multi-word expressions (MWEs) influence the writing proficiency of ESL students in Al- yarmouk University?

2.DISCUSSIONS

Two main approaches were used in this study to investigate how Multi-Word Expressions (MWEs) affected the writing skills of Al Yarmouk University ESL students: Pretest and Interviews, this paper will discuss only the free writing in the pretest.

Pretest: To evaluate students' first use of MWEs in academic writing, a writing assignment was given. Students were required to write a 300-word argumentative essay on a specified topic, and the essays were evaluated for appropriateness, accuracy, and MWE usage.

Pretest Results and Analysis

1.1 Frequency of MWEs Used

MWE Type	Total Occurrences	Average per Essay	Accuracy Rate
Collocations	120	2.4	65%
Phrasal verbs	85	1.7	50%
Idioms	40	0.8	30%

1.2 Accuracy and Appropriateness

- **Collocations** were the most frequently used MWEs, with an accuracy rate of

65%. Common errors included incorrect word combinations, such as *"do a decision"* instead of *"make a decision."* **Phrasal verbs** had a 50% accuracy rate and were used less frequently. A lot of students had trouble selecting the right preposition, which resulted in mistakes such using "depend from" instead of "depend on.

- **Idioms** had the lowest accuracy rate (30%) and were the least used. A lot of students tried translating Arabic idioms directly, which led to unnatural expressions.

Multi-word Expressions Errors Analysis categorized as follow:

1. **Grammatical Errors:** due to errors in syntax, tense or agreement.

- the eye by the eye (= an eye for an eye) preposition and determiner misuse.
- in his face (= to his face) preposition error.
- crocodiles' tears (= crocodile tears) possessive 's' error, it is a fixed idiom.
- a drop in an ocean (= a drop in the ocean) determiner error.

These errors include incorrect usage of prepositions, determiners, and possessive forms, particularly in fixed idioms. The preposition **"by"** is wrong in **"the eye by the eye"** rather than **"an eye for an eye,"** and **"the"** should be **"an"** to fit the idiom structure. Similarly, using **"in his face"** rather than **"to his face"** is a prepositional error, as **"to"** appropriately emphasizes direct confrontation, whereas **"in"** implies physical proximity. The term

"crocodiles' tears" wrongly uses a possessive form, when **"crocodile tears"** is a fixed idiom expressing false sadness. Finally, using **"a drop in an ocean"** instead of **"a drop in the ocean"** misuses the determiner **"an,"** whereas **"the ocean"** refers to the huge sea in general, making the phrase more understandable. These errors demonstrate how minor changes in prepositions, determiners, and possessives can disrupt the natural flow and meaning of idiomatic expressions in English.

2. **Lexical Errors:** due to incorrect word choice or form.

- Far from sight, far from the heart (=Out of sight, out of mind). literal translation of Arabic.
- Did a mistake(= made a mistake) incorrect word choice, it is a fixed collocation.
- Heavy coffee(= strong coffee)
- Fast shower(= quick shower)

Direct translation, poor word choice, and improper collocations are the causes of these lexical problems. The Arabic phrase "**Far from sight, far from the heart**" is translated literally into the English phrase "**Out of sight, out of mind**," demonstrating how idioms frequently do not transfer word for word between languages. Since "**make**" is typically used with "**mistake**," using "**did a mistake**" rather than "**made a mistake**" is a collocational error. Similarly, since "**strong**" and "**quick**" are the normal adjectives for similar noun combinations in English, using "**heavy coffee**" instead of "**strong coffee**" and "**fast shower**" instead of "**quick shower**" are examples of poor adjective choices. These mistakes highlight the value of mastering idioms and collocations as opposed to depending solely on literal translation or sensible word combinations.

3. Grammatical and Lexical Errors:

The language and structure of the matching Arabic idioms were reflected in some of the wrong idioms, which included grammatical and lexical problems, as in:

- took his right by his hand (= took the law into his hands)
- the luck smiled to him (= fortune smiled on him)
- they added the fire wood (= added fuel to the fire)
- the chance of the age (= the chance of a lifetime)

4. contextually incorrect idioms:

<i>Idiom</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>	<i>Incorrect Arabic Meaning</i>
Day after day	Every day/happening repeatedly	Every other day
Red-face	Embarrassed/ ashamed	furious
Arm and Leg	Very expensive/ costly	She is her mother arm and leg(= dependable person)

There are mismatches between Arabic and English terms in the idioms that are being offered. For instance, the English phrase "**day after day**" denotes anything that happens constantly or regularly, whereas the inaccurate Arabic phrase "**every other day**"

denotes something that happens every other day. In English, "**red-faced**" refers to embarrassment rather than rage, which is best described by phrases like "**seeing red**" or "**boiling with anger**." The phrase "**arm and a leg**" describes something costly rather than a trustworthy individual; "**right-hand person**," "**backbone**," or "**rock**" would be more appropriate terms. Last but not least, the expression "she is her mother's arm and leg" is incorrect in English; "**she is her mother's rock**" or "**always there for her mother**" instead expresses a strong, reliable support. these illustrations show how crucial it is to communicate clearly by using precise idiomatic terms in both languages.

3.CONCLUSION

The effect of Multi-Word phrases (MWEs) on Yarmouk University ESL students' writing skills emphasizes how crucial it is to become proficient in idiomatic phrases, collocations, and lexical structures. Direct translation from Arabic is the source of many student mistakes, including poor word choice, improper use of prepositions, and improper collocations. These mistakes can impair understanding and give the impression that conversation is awkward or unnatural. Errors like "did a mistake" instead of "made a mistake" reveal a lack of knowledge with set collocations, while substitutions like "far from sight, far from the heart" for "out of sight, out of mind" illustrate how direct translation can change meaning. With the help of teaching strategies like explicit instruction in common collocations, exposure to authentic materials, and practice through writing and speaking exercises, students can internalize these expressions. Additionally, contrastive analysis between Arabic and English idioms can prevent negative language transfer and improve overall language proficiency. By focusing on MWEs, students can improve their ability to communicate effectively, express ideas more naturally.

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