

Lexical Interference in English Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT:

Background. This study examines intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference in English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners. Lexical interference occurs when semantic, structural, or contextual features of the native language are transferred into the target language, leading to errors in comprehension, translation, and usage at both microstructural and macrostructural levels. These challenges are particularly significant in multilingual environments such as Azerbaijan, where learners are exposed to several linguistic systems, increasing the likelihood of cross-linguistic influence and transfer-based misinterpretation.

Purpose. The research aims to describe and classify the main types of lexical interference affecting Azerbaijani learners of English. It focuses on how polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, collocations, and phraseological structures contribute to lexical error formation and discusses pedagogical implications for more effective vocabulary instruction.

Materials and Methods. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, drawing on theoretical and empirical literature in language transfer, bilingualism, and lexical semantics, together with illustrative examples from Azerbaijani and English. Lexical units showing signs of interference were analysed through comparative semantic analysis. Learner errors were categorised according to linguistic source, lexical relation, and the degree of intra-linguistic or inter-linguistic influence.

Results. The analysis shows that lexical interference most frequently results from the misinterpretation of polysemous lexemes, inaccurate synonym and antonym choices, and structural mismatches in collocations and idiomatic expressions. Azerbaijani

learners often transfer native-language semantic distinctions, verb–noun patterns, and pragmatic norms into English, producing recurrent errors such as incorrect prepositions, inappropriate verb selection, inaccurate evaluative vocabulary, and literal translation of phraseological units.

Conclusion. The findings confirm that intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference significantly shape English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners. Emphasising semantic nuance, collocational norms, and contrastive analysis in teaching can help reduce lexical errors. The study offers pedagogical implications for language teachers and curriculum designers and identifies directions for future research on lexical interference in bilingual and multilingual contexts.

Keywords: lexical interference, intra-linguistic interference, inter-linguistic interference, language transfer, microstructural interference, macrostructural interference, Azerbaijani learners, English vocabulary acquisition, lexical semantics

Introduction

Learning a second language requires learners to manage relationships both within the target language and between the target language and their first language. One major challenge in this process is lexical interference, which occurs when features of a learner's native language influence the acquisition, interpretation, or use of vocabulary in another language. Although cross-linguistic influence is a natural part of bilingual processing, it may lead to errors in lexical accuracy, semantic interpretation, and communicative clarity.

This issue is especially important in bilingual and multilingual contexts such as Azerbaijan, where learners may be exposed to Azerbaijani, Russian, Turkish, and English. The presence of several linguistic systems increases the likelihood of transfer and makes vocabulary learning more complex than simple word memorisation. Learners must understand not only word meanings but also contextual usage, semantic nuance, collocational patterns, and phraseological expressions.

Lexical interference may appear at both microstructural and macrostructural levels. At the microstructural level, learners may struggle with polysemous words, sememes, and context-

dependent meanings. At the macrostructural level, interference may occur through incorrect synonym or antonym selection, inappropriate collocations, and literal translation of phraseological units. For Azerbaijani learners of English, such errors often result from differences between the semantic and morphosyntactic systems of Azerbaijani and English.

Despite the general recognition of interference as an important factor in second-language acquisition, research specifically addressing Azerbaijani learners' lexical difficulties remains limited. This study therefore investigates intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference in English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners. It focuses on interference related to polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, collocations, and phraseological structures. Using illustrative Azerbaijani–English examples and comparative semantic analysis, the study aims to identify recurrent lexical error patterns and explain how they are shaped by the interaction of linguistic systems.

Literature Review

Intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference have been widely examined in second-language acquisition, particularly in relation to vocabulary development. Interference is generally

understood as the influence of one linguistic system on another, most often through the transfer of first-language features into second-language use. In vocabulary learning, this influence may affect semantic interpretation, word choice, collocational behaviour, and idiomatic usage.

Odlin (2012) distinguishes between positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer supports learning when the first and second languages share similar structures or meanings, whereas negative transfer produces errors when learners apply native-language patterns that are inappropriate in the target language. This distinction is central to the present study because Azerbaijani and English differ in semantic organisation, phraseological patterns, and collocational norms. Ringbom (2007) similarly argues that lexical transfer may occur across any language pair, especially when learners rely on familiar lexical or conceptual associations that do not fully match the target language.

Kellerman (1987) adds that interference may also arise from variation within the first language itself, including dialectal, regional, or sociolectal forms. This point is relevant to Azerbaijan, where learners may encounter standard Azerbaijani, regional varieties, Russian loanwords, and Turkish influence. Laufer (2014) further shows that the relationship between L1 and L2 lexical systems can be bidirectional, meaning that second-language acquisition may influence both L2 performance and aspects of L1 lexical behaviour.

Research on lexical relations further explains why vocabulary interference is persistent. Studies on polysemy show that learners often rely on the most familiar or prototypical meaning of a word, which may cause misinterpretation when another meaning is required by context (Mezentseva, 2014). Similarly, research on synonymy indicates that learners may treat near-synonyms as interchangeable, despite differences in connotation, register, grammatical behaviour, and pragmatic appropriateness (Shcherbakova, 2003). For Azerbaijani learners, this may affect the use of English verbs such as *see*, *look*, and

watch, or adjectives such as *little*, *small*, *tiny*, and *short*.

Collocations and phraseological units are also central to lexical interference. Collocational competence often develops more slowly than general vocabulary knowledge, and learners may rely on literal translation from the first language when forming English word combinations (Lightbown, 1994). In Azerbaijani, verb–noun combinations may be more flexible than in English, which can lead to errors such as *make sports*, *make a conclusion*, or *take an information*. Such errors show that learners need knowledge of how words naturally combine, not only knowledge of individual word meanings.

Theoretical models of bilingual lexical processing also support this view. The Revised Hierarchical Model of Kroll and Stewart suggests that L1 conceptual links may remain dominant during L2 development, making learners more vulnerable to transfer. Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis similarly suggests that learners must consciously notice semantic and collocational distinctions before they can acquire them. From this perspective, persistent lexical errors may result from unnoticed differences between Azerbaijani and English.

Recent studies further support the relevance of lexical interference, collocational competence, and bilingual lexical processing in second-language vocabulary development. Research on semantic complexity, lexical activation, learner corpora, and vocabulary instruction shows that lexical acquisition is influenced by cognitive processing, usage patterns, lexical similarity, and exposure to authentic language input (Bordag et al., 2017; Bordag et al., 2021; Bulté & Lowie, 2020; Chen, 2022; Crossley & Skalicky, 2019; Li & Zhang, 2016; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2020; Yamashita, 2018). Other studies on collocations, formulaic language, priming, and task-based vocabulary learning also demonstrate that learners often struggle with word combinations and cross-linguistic influence even beyond basic word meaning (Carroll & Conklin, 2017; Khezlrou & Ellis, 2023; Laufer & Waldman, 2018; Macis & Schmitt, 2017; Montero Perez,

2019; Siyanova-Chanturia & Spina, 2020; Styles et al., 2008). These findings support the need for contrastive and usage-based vocabulary instruction, particularly in multilingual learning contexts (Baliashvili, 1988; Barakhta, 2015; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2019).

Overall, previous research shows that lexical interference is shaped by semantic ambiguity, structural mismatch, cognitive processing strategies, and linguistic variation. The present study builds on this foundation by examining how these forms of interference appear in English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners and by identifying lexical areas that require more explicit pedagogical attention.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design to examine intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference in English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners. This design was selected because lexical interference is closely connected to semantic interpretation, contextual meaning, collocational behaviour, and cross-linguistic comparison. Therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate for identifying and explaining recurring lexical error patterns rather than measuring them statistically.

The study draws on two main sources of material. The first consists of theoretical and empirical studies in bilingualism, lexical semantics, and second-language acquisition, including works on language transfer, semantic processing, polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, collocations, and phraseological units. The second consists of illustrative Azerbaijani–English examples representing recurrent lexical errors observed in pedagogical and learner-language contexts. Although these examples were not collected through a formal learner corpus or experimental procedure, they provide empirical clarification of how theoretical categories of interference appear in actual language use.

The analysis was conducted through comparative semantic examination. Azerbaijani and English lexical items were compared in terms of meaning, structure, usage, and contextual function. The

examples were then classified into two levels: microstructural interference, involving polysemy, sememes, and context-dependent meanings; and macrostructural interference, involving collocations, synonymy, antonymy, phraseological units, and syntagmatic relations. Each example was analysed according to the linguistic source of the error, the semantic or structural mismatch between Azerbaijani and English, and the likely mechanism of transfer or misinterpretation.

This framework makes it possible to connect individual lexical errors to broader patterns of cross-linguistic influence. While the study does not provide quantitative results, it offers systematic qualitative evidence for identifying areas where Azerbaijani learners require explicit pedagogical support, especially in relation to semantic nuance, collocational norms, and phraseological usage.

Results

Microstructural and Macrostructural Dynamics of Lexical Interference

Lexical interference is examined in this study at two main levels. The microstructural level concerns the internal semantic organisation of individual lexical items, especially cases of polysemy. The macrostructural level concerns relationships between lexical units, including synonymy, antonymy, collocations, phraseological units, and other patterns of word combination (Mezentseva, 2014).

For Azerbaijani learners of English, interference occurs when the two languages organise meaning or word combinations differently. Some Azerbaijani lexical items cover wider semantic fields than their English equivalents, while some English words require more specific contextual or collocational choices. As a result, learners may overgeneralise meanings, transfer Azerbaijani structures into English, or choose English words that are semantically close but pragmatically inappropriate.

Microstructural Interference

Microstructural interference is mainly associated with polysemy, where one lexical item has several

related meanings. Errors occur when learners fail to distinguish between different sememes or transfer an inappropriate meaning into English.

A clear example is the Azerbaijani word *adam* ("person"). In everyday speech, the expression *Ay, adam!* functions as a form of address similar to "Hey, you!" in English. A literal translation such as *Hey, human!* sounds unnatural because it transfers the general dictionary meaning of *adam* without considering its communicative function. This shows that learners must interpret both lexical meaning and social context (Jafarova, 2020).

Another example is *Mən dostumu gözləyirəm*, meaning "I am waiting for my friend." In Azerbaijani, the verb *gözləmək* does not require a preposition equivalent to English *for*. Learners may therefore produce *I am waiting my friend*, while the correct English form is *I am waiting for my friend*. This demonstrates how Azerbaijani verb structure may be transferred into English.

A further example is *onun işi ağırdır*. A literal translation such as "his work is heavy" misapplies the physical meaning of *ağır*. In this context, English requires "his work is difficult" or "his job is tough." These examples show that microstructural interference results from difficulties with polysemy, metaphorical extension, and context-dependent meaning.

Macrostructural Interference

Macrostructural interference occurs when learners transfer collocations, phraseological units, idiomatic expressions, or structural relations between words from Azerbaijani into English. These errors involve not only individual word meanings but also the way words are expected to combine in the target language (Vishnevskaya, 1997).

For example, *yaxşı iş görmək* may be literally translated as *to make a good thing*, although the natural English equivalent is *to do a good job*. Similarly, *idmanla məşğul olmaq* may produce the incorrect form *I am making sports*, while English normally uses *do sports* or *play sports*, depending on context. These examples show that learners need to acquire English collocational patterns rather

than translate Azerbaijani word combinations directly.

Idiomatic expressions create similar difficulties. The Azerbaijani expression *başım qarışıqdır* may be rendered literally as *my head is mixed*, although the correct English equivalent is *I am busy*. Such errors indicate that macrostructural interference results from direct mapping of Azerbaijani phraseological structures onto English.

Interference Related to Lexical Synonyms

Lexical synonymy is another major area of interference. Words that appear similar in meaning may differ in nuance, register, grammatical behaviour, or pragmatic appropriateness (Kazimirova, 2006). Azerbaijani learners may therefore treat English near-synonyms as interchangeable.

This is visible in the use of verbs such as *see*, *look*, and *watch*. In Azerbaijani, verbs such as *görmək* and *baxmaq* may cover overlapping areas of meaning. However, English distinguishes between perception, directed attention, and continuous observation. Thus, *I see TV* is incorrect because television requires intentional and continuous attention; the correct form is *I watch TV*. Similarly, *I look the film* is incorrect because English requires *watch* for films or *look at* when directing one's eyes toward something (Jafarova, 2022).

Synonym interference also appears in adjectives. Learners may use *beautiful*, *handsome*, or *pretty* in inappropriate contexts because these words are semantically related but differ in conventional usage and social appropriateness. This demonstrates that synonymy-related interference is not only semantic but also pragmatic.

Interference Related to Lexical Antonyms

Lexical antonyms also create difficulty because Azerbaijani and English do not always organise contrasts in the same way. Antonyms may express contrasts related to size, weight, distance, height, and other semantic categories (Lightbown, 1994).

For example, *ağır çamadan* is correctly translated as *a heavy suitcase*, but *yiüngül çamadan* may be

incorrectly translated as *an easy suitcase*. The correct English phrase is *a light suitcase*, because *light* is the antonym of *heavy* in relation to physical weight. Similarly, *balaca məsafə* may lead to *small distance*, while English normally requires *short distance*. The expression *uzun adam* may be translated literally as *long man*, although English uses *tall man* for human height.

These findings show that antonym-related interference arises from both misunderstanding English lexical distinctions and transferring Azerbaijani semantic categories into English. To reduce such errors, learners need awareness of how English selects adjectives according to context, object type, and intended meaning.

Discussion

The findings show that lexical interference among Azerbaijani learners of English is shaped by both intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic factors. Errors appear at the microstructural level, especially in polysemy, metaphorical meaning, and context-dependent interpretation, and at the macrostructural level, particularly in collocations, phraseological units, synonym selection, and antonymic distinctions. These patterns confirm that vocabulary acquisition involves more than memorising individual words; learners must also understand how meanings, structures, and word combinations function across languages.

The examples involving *adam*, *gözləmək*, and *ağır* show that learners may transfer the most familiar or literal Azerbaijani meaning into English even when the context requires a different interpretation. Similarly, examples such as *make sports*, *my head is mixed*, *I see TV*, *easy suitcase*, and *long man* demonstrate that learners may transfer Azerbaijani collocational, phraseological, and conceptual patterns into English. These errors support previous research showing that the internal organisation of the lexicon and the structural features of the first language strongly influence second-language performance (Odlin, 2012; Ringbom, 2007).

The findings also suggest that lexical interference is systematic rather than accidental. Learners rely

on transfer-based strategies as a natural part of bilingual processing; however, when Azerbaijani and English differ in semantic organisation or word-combination patterns, transfer may produce inaccurate or unnatural English usage. This confirms the need for explicit contrastive analysis, particularly in areas where Azerbaijani and English differ in polysemy, collocation, phraseology, synonymy, and antonymy.

Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests that vocabulary instruction for Azerbaijani learners should be contextual, contrastive, and usage-based. Teachers should move beyond isolated word memorisation and help learners understand how lexical items function in real communicative contexts. This includes teaching semantic nuance, collocational norms, phraseological usage, and pragmatic appropriateness.

Polysemous words should be taught through contextual comparison so that learners can distinguish between literal meaning, metaphorical meaning, and communicative function. Collocations and phraseological units should also receive systematic attention, since many errors result from direct translation of Azerbaijani word combinations into English. Activities using guided translation, error correction, semantic mapping, short authentic texts, and collocation-focused practice can help learners identify acceptable English usage.

Synonyms and antonyms should be taught through context rather than simple dictionary equivalence. Learners need to understand why English distinguishes between *see*, *look*, and *watch*, or why it uses *light suitcase*, *short distance*, and *tall man* instead of literal translations based on Azerbaijani patterns. Such instruction can develop learners' metalinguistic awareness and reduce recurring transfer-based errors.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design and relies on illustrative examples rather than data collected from a controlled learner corpus or experimental

procedure. Therefore, it does not provide statistical measurement of error frequency, severity, or distribution. Future research should incorporate corpus-based data, classroom-based learner production, experimental tasks, or longitudinal designs to provide stronger empirical evidence.

Second, the study focuses specifically on Azerbaijani learners of English, so the findings may not be fully generalisable to learners from other linguistic backgrounds. Comparative studies involving Turkish, Russian, Persian, or other L1 groups could help determine which interference patterns are specific to Azerbaijani and which reflect broader tendencies in second-language vocabulary acquisition. Future studies could also examine whether contrastive semantic instruction, collocation-focused activities, or guided translation tasks effectively reduce lexical interference.

Conclusion

This study examined intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic interference in English vocabulary acquisition among Azerbaijani learners. The analysis showed that lexical errors occur at both microstructural and macrostructural levels. At the microstructural level, learners experience

difficulty with polysemy, metaphorical meaning, and context-dependent interpretation. At the macrostructural level, errors appear in collocations, phraseological units, synonym selection, and antonymic distinctions.

The findings indicate that many interference-based errors result from differences between Azerbaijani and English in semantic organisation, verb–noun combinations, idiomatic expression, and lexical categorisation. These patterns confirm that lexical interference is systematic rather than random. From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights the importance of contrastive, contextual, and usage-based vocabulary instruction. By helping learners understand not only what words mean but also how they function in real communication, teachers can reduce transfer-based errors and support more accurate English vocabulary development.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it did not involve human participants, personal data collection, experimental procedures, or identifiable learner information. The illustrative examples used in the analysis are presented for linguistic and pedagogical purposes only.

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