

The Acquisition of Blends by Iraqi EFL Students at the English Dept, College of Education, University of Babylon

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1. Introduction

A blend involves the telescoping of two or more separate word-forms into one, or – rarely – a superposition of one form upon another. It usually contains overlapping phonemes, and preserves some of the meaning of at least one of the source words (Algeo, 1977: 47). As a process of new word-formation, blending is found in both Arabic (e.g. بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ < بِسْمَلٌ ; حَضْرَمِوت < حَضْرَمِی) and English (e.g. **Brunch** = breakfast + lunch; **Smog** = smoke + fog) (SOED, 2003; Wright, 2005: I. 162; Gries, 2004:639).

This paper aims at examining the acquisition level of English blends by fourth-year Iraqi EFL students in The English Dept, at the College of Education, University of Babylon to see how well they perform in this area. It also conducts an error analysis to explain the probable sources of errors made by the subjects, and what measures (if any) are required to enhance the acquisition of this particular group of words. The research is conducted with the hypothesis that : “The collective acquisition rates of blends by Iraqi EFL students at the fourth-year level in The English Dept, College of Education, University of Babylon is poor.” Here, the term “poor” refers to that level of acquisition defined in terms of test-scores ranging from 40-49%, in accordance with the evaluation scale currently adopted by the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

The Validity of this hypothesis is to be verified by designing, administering, scoring, and analyzing a written test to a representative random-sample of Iraqi EFL students at the level above in the English Dept, College of Education, University of Babylon.

2. Test

2.1 Test Objectives and Format

The present test is of the diagnostic or progress type in that it checks on the subjects' acquisition of English blends. More specifically, it is designed to answer the question: "How well have the fourth-year EFL students learnt the particular word-formation process of blending?". To ensure its objectivity, the test format has been totally designed to elicit responses of the completion and multiple choice type with keys (See the Appendix). No more than one answer or choice can be correct for each test item. It is worth mentioning here that the two test techniques above are the most suitable for a diagnostic test of vocabulary items (Harrison, 1983: v, 12; Ingram, 1968: 93).

2.2 Test Reliability and Validity

Traditionally, the characteristics of a good test have been seen to be reliability and validity; i.e. feasibility and discrimination (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 187). Reliability is a quality of test scores, and it refers to the extent to which such scores measure the subjects' proficiency in an error-free manner (Bachman, 1990: 24; Ellis, 2003: 310). To ensure this quality in the present test, two procedures have been taken in advance. The first is to design an objective test wherein each item allows only one correct answer (Pit Corder, 1973: 370). The other procedure is second-rating of the test papers by an experienced colleague teacher. The scores of the second-rater have been totally the same as those of the first-rater. This procedure of second-rating has been adopted by Bachman et al. (1995: 243), and is endorsed by Ellis (2003: 311).

A valid test is one in which the testee's score gives a true reflection of that testee's ability on the trait measured (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 187). In other words, it is the degree to which a test measures what it is designed to measure (Ellis, 2003: 352). The most important type of validity is content validity; i.e. what goes into the test (Harrison: 1983: 11). This type of validity has been realized by testing only those items that are related to the recognition and production of English blends, neither more, nor less (See: the Appendix). In

addition, key answers have been provided in the test sheet to facilitate performance in this particular area of FL acquisition.

2.3 Subjects

Twenty undergraduate students have been randomly selected from the Fourth year students of The English Dept, at the College of Education, University of Babylon. The sample above is quite representative as it comprises 25% of all the legible subjects. The female/male ratio has been at 50%. All the subjects share the same mother-tongue, English learning years at school, and age.

2.4 Test-Item Description

Two types of skills have been targeted in the test: i) recognition, and ii) production of blends. The recognition part comprises six fill-in-the-blank items, wherein the subjects are required to select six out of seven choices to match the written clues given for each item. For example, item (a) of question (2) reads:

(1)

If the speech of a person is full of slang words, then this speech is called
.....

In the item above, the subject is required to correctly select the blend 'slanguage' from the list given at the top of the question (See Q2 of the test in the Appendix.). Blends tested include: telethon, Oxbridge, travelogue, motorcade, Chunnel, and electrocution.

The production part comprises ten items wherein the subject is required to make a blend in the form of one word out of two words. One solved example of such an operation has been given beforehand as a guide to facilitate correct production (See Q1 of the test in the Appendix.):

(2)

Watergate + Iran = Irangate

Blends tested in this part include: Eurasia, e-mail, brunch, smog, motel, Amerindian, Petrodollar, Interpol, petrochemical, and stagflation.

Both the recognition and the production parts have been allocated equal marks: 60 for each. The reason why scoring has been made out of (60) is because this figure allows more exact statistical results than (50) since the former number

allows more rounded fractions than the latter, and because each of the two questions in the test has six items. To minimize time and effort, test format has been designed so that the subjects can write down their responses for each item on the same test sheet.

Test item selection has been based upon those blends that are more commonly used in the media and or test books, rather than those the are less common (See Q1 and Q2 of the test in the Appendix.).

2.5 Test Administration

The test was administered to all the subjects in one sitting during the last teaching month for the second semester of the academic year 2009/2010. The selection of such a time has been based on the assumption that the subjects should by then have acquired maximal skills at the English Dept, immediately before graduation. Subjects were briefed beforehand as to the type of task they are volunteering to perform, and all their questions and queries were attended to during the testing session. The time allocated for the test was forty-five minutes, within which all the subjects submitted their responses to the researcher.

2.6 Test Results

2.6.1 Recognition Level

Acquisition at this level shows that eighteen out of the twenty subjects (i.e. 90%) have obtained scores above the non-pass mark of (49%). The highest possible mark of (100%) has been obtained by four subjects only (i.e. 20%), immediately followed by (83.3%) (one subject, i.e. 5%), and (66.6%) (five subjects, at 25%). The score of the recognition performance of just one subject (i.e. 5%) was (00%).

Though the figures above reflect some high individual rates of performance, the mean of scores at this level stands at (62.47%) only, which is less than Good (70-80%), according to the test standards adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education. If one takes into consideration the fact that the items of the test presented to the subjects are fairly easy since blends – by virtue of their structure – are semantically transparent lexical items, then one can conclude that

the results at this level do not single out a high collective level of acquisition. The results above are outlined in Table (1) below.

Table (1) Acquisition Scores and Rates at the Recognition Level

Subject No	Recognition 60/120	%
1	60	100
2	60	100
3	60	100
4	40	66.6
5	50	83.3
6	30	50
7	60	100
8	40	66.6
9	40	66.6
10	40	66.5
11	30	50
12	20	33.3
13	30	50
14	40	66.6
15	30	50
16	30	50
17	30	50
18	30	50
19	30	50
20	00	00
Total	750 /1200	1249.5
Mean	37.5/60	62.47

2.6.2 Production Level

The picture is greatly less satisfactory at this level, simply because production is more difficult than recognition. Only one subject (i.e. 5%) has obtained the pass mark of just (50%), and no subject scored higher than that. The acquisition rate of eight subjects (i.e. 40%) has been at zero rate. The mean of scores at this level stands at (16.5%), which is quite low, given the advanced stage of study the subjects are engaged in. Table (2) below summarizes the results at this level.

Table (2) Acquisition Scores and Rates at the Production Level

Subject No	Production 60/120	%
1	24	40
2	12	20
3	6	10
4	24	40
5	12	20
6	30	50
7	00	00
8	12	20
9	12	20
10	12	20

11	18	30
12	24	40
13	12	20
14	00	00
15	00	00
16	00	00
17	00	00
18	00	00
19	00	00
20	00	00
Total	198/1200	330
Mean	9.9/60	16.5

2.6.3 Total Performance

Taking recognition and production all-together, test results show that only seven out of twenty subjects (i.e. 35 %) have obtained the pass-mark of 50% and above. Of these, the highest score was that of 70%, obtained by just one subject (i.e. 5%). In other words, only one subject has managed to get at the threshold of Good performance as far as the topic of blending is concerned. This is immediately followed by only one subject (i.e. 5%) scoring (60%). The scores of the five remaining pass-subjects (i.e. 25%) oscillate between (50-55%). As for the mean of total scores, it stands at (39.45%), which is very poor. The figures above are outlined in Table (3) and (4) Hereunder:

Table (3) Total Scores

Subject No	Total Score 120%	%
1	84	70
2	72	60
3	66	55
4	64	53
5	62	52
6	60	50
7	60	50
8	52	43
9	52	43
10	52	43

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11	48	40
12	44	37
13	42	35
14	40	33
15	30	25
16	30	25
17	30	25
18	30	25
19	30	25
20	00	00
Total	948/1200	789
Mean	47.4/120	39.45

Table (4) Details of Scores at All Levels of Acquisition

Subject No	Recognitio n 60/120	%	Productio n 60/120	%	Total Score 120%	%
1	60	100	24	40	84	70
2	60	100	12	20	72	60
3	60	100	6	10	66	55
4	40	66.6	24	40	64	53
5	50	83.3	12	20	62	52
6	30	50	30	50	60	50
7	60	100	00	00	60	50
8	40	66.6	12	20	52	43
9	40	66.6	12	20	52	43
10	40	66.5	12	20	52	43
11	30	50	18	30	48	40
12	20	33.3	24	40	44	37
13	30	50	12	20	42	35
14	40	66.6	00	00	40	33
15	30	50	00	00	30	25
16	30	50	00	00	30	25
17	30	50	00	00	30	25
18	30	50	00	00	30	25
19	30	50	00	00	30	25
20	00	00	00	00	00	00
Total	750 /1200	1249. 5	198/1200	330	948/1200	789
Mean	37.5/60	62.47	9.9/60	16.5	47.4/120	39.45

2.6.4 Test Results: Conclusion

The analysis and Tables above provide statistical evidence validating the hypothesis presented in section (1) that the acquisition rates of blends by Iraqi EFL students at the fourth-year level in The English Dept, College of Education, University of Babylon is poor.

3 . Error Analysis

Error explanation is a difficult task since it requires hypothesizing about the processes going on in the learner's mind, which have caused error occurrence. In this area, the analyst can only suggest plausible answers as being explanations of the facts since there may well be more than one plausible explanation or source (Bell, 1981: 175). Error sources in foreign language acquisition can be broadly classified into four main categories (Brown, 1987: 177-184):

1. Interlingual Transfer;
2. Intralingual Transfer;
3. Context of Learning;
4. Communication Strategies.

Each of the categories above is discussed separately in the next four subsections.

3.1 Interlingual Transfer

Many errors of foreign language learners can be traced back to the negative interference of the rules of the native language (Arabic in this case) on L2 acquisition (i.e. English). This negative influence occurs when the already learned patterns or elements within the native language system interfere with the acquisition of new patterns or elements in the target language system where the two systems are different (Lado, 1961: 211). The cause of such interlingual transfer lies in the fact that before a learner becomes familiar with the system of the second language, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which she/he can draw (Brown, 1987: 177).

In this test, (16%) of all subjects' errors can be ascribed to resorting to translation into Arabic in the formation of English blends:

(3)

<u>Correct response</u>	<u>Erroneous Test Response</u>
Interpol	Policenational : الشرطة الوطنية
brunch	fastlunch; lunchfast : غداء سريع
Eurasia	Europia : بية الأور
email	elemail : الإيميل
Amerindian	IndoAmerican : الهندوأمريكية
motel	hotmotor : محرك حار
petrochemical	petroll : بترول

3.2 Intralingual Transfer

Intralingual transfer refers to the negative transfer that occurs through overgeneralization when FL learners make use of their prior knowledge of the system of the target language in the process of learning that target language. Here, the deviant structures in the target language (e.g. *goed, *flied) are related to the learners' incorrect application of their previously learned material to a present foreign language context (Brown, 1987: 82-3). These structures reflect faulty or partial learning of the target language (Richards et al. 1992: 187).

One recurrent manifestation of intralingual transfer in the responses of subjects in this test is resorting to compounding instead of blending, often very unsystematically:

(4)

<u>Correct response</u>	<u>Erroneous Test Response</u>
Eurasia	Europasia, Asiaeurope
Amerindian	IndianAmerican, AmericanIndian,
E-mail	Electronicmail, electromail

brunch	Breakfastlunch
smog	smokefog
motel	motorhotel
petrodollar	petroldollar
Interpol	Internationalpolice, policenational
petrochemical	petrolchemical, chemicalpetrol
stagflation	stagnationinflation,

Another type of intralingual transfer is overgeneralization through the misapplication of various unrelated target-language morphological rules:

(5)

<u>Correct response</u>	<u>Erroneous Test Response</u>
Eurasia	Asiarop; EuAsia; europasia
email	electronicmail; mailonic; electonicial; electronail
brunch	breach; lunchbreak; luneak, blunch,
petrodollar	petrollar; petrolicals; petdollar
motel	motorel; motortel
Amerindian	Amindian; Americanian
stagflation	infastagnation; stagninflation

Statistic analysis has shown that intralingual transfer is behind (35%) of all subjects' errors due to overgeneralization.

3.3 Context of Learning

This error source refers to the negative influence of elements of the learning situation, such as the classroom, the teacher, and the curriculum. Another term used in this respect is "induced error", which refers to an error caused by the way

in which a language item has been taught. This source of error accounts for (13%) of total erroneous responses in the data.

(6)

<u>Correct response</u>	<u>Erroneous Test Response</u>
email	electrmail
smog	smfog; smofog; fogok
petrodollar	petllar; predollar; pollar; polotional
petrochemical	chamitrical; peticals,
stagflation	station; stagnationinfan; stagnation; stragnation; staginflation
motel	mothotel

3.4 Communication Strategies

By a communicative strategy is meant that strategy used by learners to overcome a communication problem caused by a lack of or inability to access L2 knowledge (Ellis, 2003: 340). One such strategy is paraphrase; another is avoidance (Brown, 1987: 183).

Data error analysis shows numerous examples of erroneous responses, which reflect the learner's attempt to somehow cope with the testing situation by producing deviant answers. The types of deviations involved resist any attempt to reasonably attribute them to any of the three sources of error above since they clearly indicate that the learner's insufficient EFL learning induces her/him to give any response whatsoever just for the sake of responding. It has been found that the use of communicative strategies constitutes the highest single cause of error in the data is, at (36%). Here are some examples of such errors:

(7)

<u>Correct response</u>	<u>Erroneous Test Response</u>
email	electronimail

brunch	breaklunch; branch,
Amerindian	American; Amerian
Interpol	Interpolice
petrochemical	chemipetrol; petrochemic
stagflation	stagnation

4. Error Source: Summary

The discussion of error source above can be summarized in the following points:

1. The highest single cause of error in the data is the use of communication strategies, at (36%), because of the subjects' unfamiliarity with blends.
2. The second-highest rate of error is due to intralingual transfer, which is behind (35%) of all subjects' errors due to overgeneralization. In many cases, these errors are related to the use of compounding instead of blending as a word-formation process.
3. Interlingual transfer is the third frequent source of error, accounting for (16%) of all subjects' errors. In the majority of cases it has been due to mistranslations from Arabic into English.
4. The least frequent rate of error cause is the context of learning (i.e. 13%) wherein subjects produce "induced errors" caused by the way in which blending has been taught.
5. Table (5) below outlines the results above.

Table (5) Error Source

Error Source	%
Interlingual Transfer	16
Intralingual Transfer	35
Context of Learning	13

Communicative Strategies	36
Total Rates	100

5. Conclusion

The poor results above show that Iraqi EFL students at the fourth-year level have not been sufficiently exposed to the word-formation process of blending. In addition, they are not familiar with many useful and frequently used blends such as email and motel. This state of affairs requires serious syllabus feedback in this area of EFL acquisition to ensure sufficient exposition to this semantically transparent group of words.

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The Test

Note: Answer all the questions; and write down your answers on the same test sheet, please .

Q1.

Make blends (one new word) from the fusion of two of the following pairs of words as illustrated in the example hereunder:

e.g. Watergate + Iran = Irangate

- a. Europe + Asia =
- b. electronic + mail =
- c. breakfast + lunch =
- d. smoke + fog =
- e. motor + hotel =
- f. American + Indian =
- g. petrol + dollar =
- h. international + police =
- i. petrol + chemicals =
- j. stagnation + inflate

(Mark: 60/120)

Q2.

Fill in the blanks with the most suitable blend: (electrocution, slanguage, telethon, Oxbridge, travelogue, motorcade, chunnel).

- a. If the speech of a person is full of slang words, then this speech is called
- b. A book that describes the interesting places in a country and how to travel across them is called a
- c. When the electric chair is used to put an end to the life of a criminal person, then this is called
- d. The under-sea railway that connects England with France is called the
- e. A is a very long televised show.
- f. The names of two sister-universities can be blended into one word such as

(Mark: 60/120)