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The Role of L2 Proficiency in the Word Association Behavior of Jordanian EFL Learners**Prof. Mahmoud Qudah***Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Jordan***Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of L2 proficiency in the learners' word association behavior in an attempt to get better understanding of how their mental lexicon is structured. To this end, 20 low-level, 20 mid-level, and 20 high-level Jordanian EFL students were presented with a twenty-item Word Association Test to see whether there are similarities or differences between the results of the students in these groups. The main principal of this test is to present the subjects with a number of stimulus words and then to ask them to provide the first word that comes to their mind either in writing or orally. The results of this study indicate that EFL learners tend to use syntagmatic word association techniques and that the proficiency level of the students has partial effect on their use of word associations. These results support Wolter's (2001) argument about the re-evaluation of the syntagmatic-paradigmatic shift in the case of nonnative speakers. The study also provides important implications for vocabulary teaching through enhancing learners' ability to build stronger semantic links between words.

Key Words: Word association, Lexicon, Syntagmatic chain, Paradigmatic choice**Introduction**

The word 'association' was first used in psycholinguistics to refer to connections between ideas, concepts, or words which exist in the human mind (Sinopalnikova, 2003). Accordingly, the appearance of one word entails the appearance of the other in what is called 'word association'.

One of the easiest ways to reveal the word association mechanism in the human mind is through the application of a Free Association Test (FAT). FAT mainly consists of a number of words (stimuli) which are presented to the subjects who are, in turn, asked to respond with the first word that comes into their minds (responses). Compared

to other more sophisticated psycholinguistic word association experiments, FAT is the easiest experiment that reveals the broadest information about how words are organized in the human mind.

The results of a FAT series consisting of hundreds of stimuli and thousands of subjects are usually called Word Association Norms (WAN). In addition, a more developed form of WAN consisting of thousands of stimuli is called Word Association Thesaurus (WAT).

Many researchers claim that there is a relationship between the learners' level of language proficiency and their responses on Word Association Tests.

They go further to claim that WATs could be used as means of assessing language proficiency.

Literature Review

The mental lexicon can be defined as “a person’s mental store of words, their meanings and associations” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: p.327). There are different attempts to explore and describe the human mental lexicon. For Brown (2006), the mental lexicon can best be compared with the World Wide Web or a computer, which should be always updated, new words are added, new connection to existing words are made and rarely used words are forgotten.

Aitchison (2003) proposed four main methods for researching the mental lexicon: 1) word searches (tip-of-the-tongue) and slips of the tongue, 2) linguistics and linguistic corpora, 3) speech disorders and brain scans and 4) psycholinguistic experiments. In the present study, the researcher will make use of the last one of these methods through the application of a free word association test which is considered as one measurement in psycholinguistic experiments.

The word association test (WAT) was “initially used as a psychological tool to study the subconscious mind, and more recently used by psycholinguists to explore the mental lexicon” (Peppard 2007, P. 4). Wolter (2001) identified three categories of word associations: paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and phonological or clang responses. As

Wolter (2001) stated, Paradigmatic responses have the same grammatical function as the stimulus word and can be of four types: co-ordinates, superordinates, subordinates, and synonyms. Syntagmatic responses have a collocational or sequential relationship with the stimulus word, and are not from the same word class. Phonological or clang associations are semantically unrelated but similar-sounding words. In the same vein, Read (1993, p.359) distinguished three types of associations: paradigmatic “The two words are synonyms or at least similar in meaning, perhaps with one being more general than the other”; syntagmatic “The two words are collocates that often occur together in a sentence”; “The associate represents one aspect, or component, of the meaning of the stimulus word and is likely to form part of its dictionary definition”.

One of the most important issues to consider here is the relationship between word-association and level of language proficiency. Research in this area has produced conflicting results with some studies pointing to the disconnection of the two and some pointing to the undeniable influence of word association and the level of language proficiency. As Wolter (2002) states devising a word association test (WAT) as a means of assessing proficiency in a foreign language has always had something of an inherent appeal to it. He claims that there may be a connection between psycholinguistic knowledge and more general proficiency in a second and

foreign language. He particularly argues that we would expect learners of higher proficiency to have more highly developed semantic networks in the L2 mental lexicon. However, his study with a group of language learners and native speakers did not support his views since he could not find any evidence that word associations in a foreign language are linked to proficiency.

Although previous studies had found no clear cut evidence that language proficiency is a determinant in word association, newer research claims that it may still be possible to "develop a word association test as a means of assessing proficiency in a foreign language, despite the findings of past studies" (Wolter, 2002, p. 315). For instance, Dergisi's study (2010) revealed that proficiency in English might affect word associations and competent speakers can make generalizations about the occurrence of a word and can find associated words easily. Students in advanced level use superordinates and subordinates more than the students in elementary level because they connect the words in their minds more easily by establishing a network of associations than the students in elementary level (Dergisi, 2010). Similarly, in another study conducted by Khazaenezhad and Alibabae (2013) on 120 Iranian EFL learners revealed that the upper intermediate students' responses were significantly more frequent than beginners' responses in the categories of paradigmatic relations such as synonymy and hyponymy, the beginners'

responses, on contrary, were significantly more frequent in the category of "Grammatical collocation" which is a syntagmatic relation.

Considering all the above mentioned studies, it seems that there is still a need for more exploration to gain a better understanding of how FL learners' mental lexicon might be organized and how word association behavior may vary according to L2 proficiency level. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to expand our current understanding of the possible role L2 language proficiency may have in word association behaviors of Jordanian EFL learners.

Research Questions

In the light of the aforementioned reasons, this study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the responses of the low-, mid-, and high-level students to the free association test?
2. Are there any similarities and differences between the responses of the students in the three levels?

Methodology

The participants

This study aims to explore the lexical sense relation in the mind of Jordanian EFL learners and to what extent their word association behavior is affected by their level of language proficiency.

The participants of the present study consisted of 60 Jordanian EFL learners who were enrolled in the University of

Jordan, both male and female, aged between 19 to 42. The participants were then divided into three groups according to their level of foreign language proficiency. The first group consisted of 20 first-year students who failed in the English language proficiency test provided by their university and were taking an English elementary course (English 99). Therefore, they have low level of English language proficiency and the experience they have in English is limited to what they had been taught in their educational life at school.

The second group consisted of 20 second and third year students who were specializing in Applied English. The members of this group had already passed the English proficiency test provided by the Jordan University and passed the introductory courses of their field of study (Applied English). Thus, they have mid-level of English language proficiency.

The third group, on the other hand, consisted of 20 PhD students who were specializing in Linguistics at the Jordan University. Therefore, besides what they had already been exposed to during their educational life at school, they had also exposed to English during their higher education at university (during their Bachelor and Master degree). Moreover, to enter the PhD program of Linguistics at the Jordan University, students should get a total score of 75% in the National English Exam or 550 in the TOFEL (ITP). This prerequisite requirement aims to guarantee the students' high level of English language proficiency

and their development of the necessary skills for communicating in English.

Word Association Test

The word association test used in this study was adopted from Wolter (2002). It mainly consisted of 20 verbs which were taken from the Edinburgh Associative Thesaurus (available online at

<http://monkey.cis.rl.ac.uk/Eat/htdocs/eat.html>). The reason for the selection of this test is that Wolter (2002) had evaluated a number of Word Association tests and developed this one as an attempt to account for the shortcoming of the tests applied in previous studies. For him a WAT should; (1) be easy to administer and score, (2) be a nice complement to other methods of assessing learner performance (2) suggest a relationship between psycholinguistic knowledge and second or foreign language proficiency.

Results and Discussion

In total, 1200 responses (400 from students of high level, 400 from students of mid level, and 400 from students of low level of foreign language proficiency) were collected for the twenty stimulus words. All of the responses were first classified into paradigmatic, syntagmatic and phonological associations. The paradigmatic responses were further classified into co-ordination (antonymy), hyponymy/ hypernymy and synonymy. The syntagmatic associations were further classified into lexical, grammatical and restricted collocations.

The frequency of encyclopedic classification is shown in Table (1) responses was also recorded. This initial below.

Table (1): The Classification of the Jordanian EFL Learners' Responses Based on Peppard (2007) Model

As Table (1) shows, the most frequent type of association is Lexical with 17 instances (13 low level, 2 mid level, 2 high level). The least frequent

| | Paradigmatic Choice | | | Syntagmatic chain | | | Phonological or Orthographical relations | Encyclopedic Knowledge | Total |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------|------|-------------------|-------|------|--|------------------------|-------|
| | Co-ordination | Hypo. | Syn. | Lex. | Gram. | Res. | | | |
| Low level | 5 | 13 | 8 | 334 | 16 | 0 | 13 | 11 | 400 |
| Mid level | 7 | 12 | 13 | 322 | 28 | 0 | 2 | 16 | 400 |
| High level | 4 | 5 | 6 | 333 | 37 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 400 |
| Total | 16 | 30 | 27 | 989 | 81 | 0 | 17 | 40 | 1200 |
| Percentage | 6.08% | | | 89,16% | | | 1,41% | 3,33% | 100% |

collocations (989 instances; 334 low level, 322 mid level, 333 high level) being syntagmatic type in terms of the relations. The second most frequent association is Grammatical collocations (81 instances; 16 low level, 28 mid level, 37 high level) which is followed by Encyclopedic knowledge (40 instances; 11 low level, 16 mid level, 13 high level) and then Hypernyms and Hyponyms (30 instances; 13 low level, 12 mid level, 5 high level). Synonymy was the next most frequent associations (27 instances; 8 low level, 13 mid level, 6 high level). The sixth most frequent association is Phonological / orthographical relations

association is Co-ordinations with 16 instances, (5 low level, 7 mid level, 4 high level). The category of restricted collocations has no instances in the elicited responses.

When we look at the results, it is quite obvious that the low, mid, and high level students used a variety of responses which are more or less similar. 89.16% of all the L2 learners' responses are syntagmatic, 6.08% are paradigmatic, 1.41% are phonological and 3.33% are encyclopedic. Therefore, the most frequent type of association used by the three groups is syntagmatic. This supports the findings of Wolter's (2001,

p. 61), which indicates a syntagmatically dominant mental lexicon in the case of non-native speakers. Wolter argues for a “syntagmatically dominated” L2 mental lexicon and calls for a re-evaluation of the syntagmatic-paradigmatic shift in the case of nonnative speakers.

However, it is observed that the students in the low level preferred using simple words such as kill-sheep/ man/ snake; keep-meat/clean/ food, whereas the students in the mid level used more complicated words such as kill-death, crime, thief; keep-secret/ silent/ money. High level students also used more complex, derived and multi word items such as kill-the time/ criminals/ protesters; keep-in touch/ calm/going. This difference might be due to their levels since the students of the mid and high level of proficiency were exposed to more complex vocabulary and they may have kept it in their memory.

Furthermore, the results reveal that the low level students responses are the highest frequent in the category of Phonological or Orthographic relation such as move-more; care-car; apply-apple; kill-bill. This finding can be explained by the storage of words in the memory. As Henning (1973, cited in White, 1988) states, low-proficiency language learners encode words in their memory according to acoustic similarities rather than by association of meaning whereas learners at a high level encode vocabulary according to meanings.

Henning (1973, cited in White, 1988) finds that high level students remember words that are stored in semantic clusters, while low-proficiency learners tend to recall words on the basis of their sounds. Abdullah (1993) states that good readers “store” their knowledge of vocabulary in semantically related networks; the activation of a word in a network will automatically “activate” other related words, which will then aid comprehension.

Conclusion

The results of this study show minimal effect of the level of foreign language proficiency on the word association behavior of Jordanian EFL learners except the phonological or orthographic category. In addition, most of the learners responses are syntagmatic in relation which supports Wolter’s (2001, p. 61) view that non-native speakers have a syntagmatically dominant mental lexicon. He, therefore, called for a re-evaluation of the syntagmatic-paradigmatic shift in the case of nonnative speakers.

On the other hand, the results contradict McCarthy (1990) and Meara (1983) view that as FL learners acquire more vocabulary knowledge during the language learning process and become more proficient, their responses in word association tests incline to paradigmatic relations.

This in turn leaves the door wide open for further research to gain a better insight into the mental lexicon of learners as related to the other mentioned

categories. All in all, the conclusion is that there is a great deal of work yet to be done and we have a long way to go in order to understand the complexity of the mental lexicon.

Implications for Foreign Language Learning/Teaching

On general, the associations that learners make on word association tests reflect the important role these associations might play in the teaching and learning of new vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000). Thus, it seems logical to assist FL learners organize their mental lexicon through promoting stronger links between words, which can facilitate vocabulary learning.

Meara (2009, p. 19) promotes the idea of developing “learning methods that, as a side effect, produced learners with native-like association patterns” in an effort to produce more proficient L2 communicators. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to use some vocabulary building activities using association, such as free association, brainstorming or mind mapping of

words and topics, which might be more effective for developing L2 learners’ mental lexicon as compared with direct vocabulary instruction. It is recommended to teachers to make use of such meaningful communicative activities which can help learners make meaningful connections between new and formerly learned vocabulary.

Abdullah (1993) also advises the teachers to adopt activities that will help reinforce and recycle vocabulary to facilitate automatic lexical access; to help students organize information or words according to concepts or topics. He suggests that activities in the classroom should help learners build up new networks or maintain, refine, and expand existing networks. Suggested activities are:

1. Narrow reading activities
2. Word prediction (predicting vocabulary from a given topic).
3. Word prediction (predicting topic from given vocabulary).
4. The odd man out.
5. Vocabulary map.

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Appendix 1: The Word Association Test

Please write the first word that immediately comes to your mind for the following words:

Note: There is no right or wrong answer.

| | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1. | draw | |
| 2. | jump | |
| 3. | care | |
| 4. | bring | |
| 5. | move | |
| 6. | keep | |
| 7. | visit | |
| 8. | fall | |
| 9. | break | |

| | | |
|-----|---------|--|
| 10. | travel | |
| 11. | cut | |
| 12. | enjoy | |
| 13. | kill | |
| 14. | argue | |
| 15. | write | |
| 16. | send | |
| 17. | replace | |
| 18. | apply | |
| 19. | make | |
| 20. | show | |

Appendix 2: The Most Frequent Responses

1. Syntagmatic Responses

A. Lexical collocations

| Word | High Level | | Mid Level | | Low Level | |
|-------|--------------|-------|-----------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. |
| draw | Picture | 11 | picture | 5 | picture | 2 |
| | | | | | tree | 2 |
| | | | | | flower | 2 |
| jump | - | - | rope | 3 | - | - |
| | | | rabbit | 2 | | |
| Care | Mother | 4 | | | | |
| | children | 4 | children | 2 | cat | 4 |
| | Baby | 4 | baby | 2 | baby | 4 |
| | Take | 3 | | | | |
| bring | Food | 3 | book | 4 | food | 2 |
| | Water | 2 | bag | 3 | water | 5 |
| move | House | 2 | | | car | 5 |
| | Chair | 2 | slowly | 2 | chair | 3 |
| | Quickly | 3 | quickly | 2 | | |
| keep | Calm | 4 | calm | 3 | book | 2 |
| | Money | 2 | | | clean | 2 |
| | Going | 2 | | | food | 2 |
| | Silent | 2 | silent | 2 | | |
| visit | Parents | 5 | family | 3 | grandfather | 2 |
| | grandparents | 2 | | | grandparents | 2 |
| | grandmother | 2 | | | grandmother | 2 |
| Fall | Love | 2 | love | 2 | pen | 3 |
| | | | mountain | 2 | baby | 2 |

| | | | | | | |
|---------|--------------|---|--------------|---|----------|---|
| break | Leg | 4 | window | 5 | window | 2 |
| | Glass | 4 | heart | 3 | glass | 5 |
| | Ice | 2 | | | table | 2 |
| travel | Abroad | 5 | - | - | | |
| | Paris | 2 | | | Paris | 3 |
| Cut | Hair | 3 | | | meat | 2 |
| | Paper | 3 | | | paper | 5 |
| | Finger | 3 | finger | 5 | finger | 2 |
| | Tree | 3 | tree | 2 | tree | 3 |
| | | | | | knife | 3 |
| enjoy | Life | 4 | life | 2 | life | 2 |
| | Time | 4 | | | time | 2 |
| | Holiday | 2 | | | trip | 2 |
| | | | | | party | 2 |
| Kill | - | - | crime | 2 | sheep | 2 |
| | | | time | 2 | dog | 2 |
| | | | enemy | 2 | | |
| argue | - | - | friend | 5 | friend | 3 |
| | | | teacher | 2 | doctor | 2 |
| write | Letter | 5 | letter | 4 | message | 8 |
| | message | 8 | story | 3 | story | 3 |
| | Email | 5 | | | book | 3 |
| | | | | | homework | 2 |
| send | Letter | 4 | letter | 3 | letter | 3 |
| | message | 8 | message | 9 | message | 8 |
| | Email | 5 | email | 4 | email | 3 |
| replace | A word | 3 | table | 2 | table | 2 |
| | | | seat | 3 | | |
| | | | book | 2 | | |
| apply | Rules | 5 | application | 2 | rules | 3 |
| | Method | 3 | job | 2 | program | 2 |
| | | | work | 2 | | |
| make | Cake | 7 | cake | 8 | cake | 8 |
| | mistakes | 4 | mistake | 3 | coffee | 2 |
| | | | | | juice | 2 |
| Show | Love | 2 | picture | 2 | - | - |
| | presentation | 3 | presentation | 4 | | |
| | | | film | 2 | | |

*freq.: frequency

B. Grammatical collocations(the most frequent responses)

| Word | High Level | | Mid Level | | Low Level | |
|---------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. |
| Jump | Up | 3 | - | - | up | 3 |
| move | Away | 2 | forward | 2 | - | - |
| keep | - | - | up | 2 | - | - |
| Fall | Down | 8 | down | 5 | - | - |
| | Back | 2 | | | | |
| break | - | - | up | 2 | - | - |
| | | | down | 2 | | |
| travel | - | - | by | 2 | - | - |
| argue | against | 3 | - | - | - | - |
| | with | 2 | | | | |
| replace | with | 2 | - | - | - | - |
| apply | for | 2 | - | - | - | - |

2. Paradigmatic Responses

Synonym

| Word | High Level | | Mid Level | | Low Level | |
|-------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. |
| argue | debate | 2 | - | - | - | - |

Hyponym

| Word | High Level | | Mid Level | | Low Level | |
|------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. |
| jump | - | - | - | - | sport | 2 |

Antonym

| Word | High Level | | Mid Level | | Low Level | |
|------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. | Response | Freq. |
| jump | - | - | run | 2 | run | 2 |

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