Improving EFL Students Thesaurus-Using Skills: an Action Research at a University

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Abstract
It stands undisputed that thesauri are a crucial resource for learning English. Apart from high-quality thesauri, efficient thesaurus use requires adequate thesaurus skills from the English learner's part. While research has shown that most learners of English need guidance on how to make full use of thesauri, there has been scant evidence for gallant endeavours to train these thesaurus users because such formal instructions would demand, among other aspects, a thorough understanding of the learner and their unique context in the first place. This paper briefly reports partial findings of an action research project which crystallizes a specific case of EFL students' thesaurus use. The paper thus specifically aims to (i) explore students' perceptions of thesaurus use and (ii) investigate their thesaurus practices in an EFL writing class. As part of a qualitative study, the paper highlights major findings from questionnaires, interviews and thesaurus-using tests with fifty-one university students. It is anticipated that these insights will raise teachers' awareness of the complexity of thesaurus use among EFL students and can point the way to more designing and implementing programs with a view to sharpening their students' thesaurus skills. Further investigation is indubitably warranted.

Keywords: thesaurus-using skills, EFL students, university

1.   Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in learning English. To produce an academic text, learners of English need to master a vocabulary size of some 10,000 word families. Unsurprisingly, EFL students who want to excel in English usually desire to have a fluent command of English lexical items. However, gaining mastery of English vocabulary is amongst greatest difficulties that English language learners normally encounter. When coming across a new English word in an academic text, learners can use several strategies, such as looking up the word in a dictionary, turning to the teacher or peers, divining the meaning of the word from its context (Gu, 2003). Among these strategies, dictionary use and guessing strategies are popularly used.

Like reading, while writing a text in English, EFL learners need to consult a dictionary in order to pick out the words they want. Also, EFL learners refer to a dictionary to replace the words they have used previously in their text. In other words, EFL learners look for English synonyms in a dictionary and/or thesaurus so as to polish their written text. In course of consultation, obviously, EFL learners may face several difficulties (Huang & Eslami, 2013). Therefore, the present study aimed at providing insight into EFL students' thesaurus-using skills by investigating (i) their perceptions of thesaurus use and (ii) their practices of thesaurus use in English writing.

We posed two primary research questions in this study:
(1)   What are students' practices of using a thesaurus when producing an English text?
(2)   What are students' perceptions of thesaurus use in their English writing?

2.   Review of related literature

2.1.   English synonyms

Synonymy can be viewed as a very basic concept in English lexicology. The concept formulated from a Greek word '*sunonumon*' is used to refer to a relationship of two or more words or expressions having the same meaning (Phoocharoensil, 2010). In the space of recent years, the study of synonyms has received increasing attention. Then it has come to linguists' attention that there are two major types of synonyms: *strict synonyms* and *loose synonyms*.

The history of research into synonymy divides synonyms into two main types: *strict (absolute) synonyms* and *loose synonyms*. Specifically, two items are considered strict synonyms when they can be used interchangeably in all of their possible contexts of use. Moreover, the substitution of one lexical item for the other must not result in a change in meaning, connotation and formality of what is being said or written. However, the point is strict synonyms are very rare and not actually existent. In regard to *loose synonymy*, it occurs more frequently in a language. When linguists mention synonyms, they refer to varying degrees of loose synonymy, "where we identify not only a significant overlap in meaning between two words, but also some contexts at least where they cannot substitute for each other" (Jackson & Amvela, 2007, p. 94).

2.2. Thesaurus-skills

2.2.1. Definition of thesauri

Thesauri occupy an irreplaceable position in English teaching and learning. A thesaurus which is a useful resource that "words with similar meanings are grouped together" (Kilgarriff & Yallop, 1999, p. 1). Thesauri can come in many forms such as paper-based and electronic-based (a mobile application or an Internet site). Thesauri can be used to search for appropriate words needed in a writing task in order to avoid repetition and make a text more appealing.

Teachers and learners of English can enjoy the benefits of thesauri in many ways. Thesauri lend students a hand when the teacher is not available. Like dictionaries, thesauri can be "a friend in need" of English language learners. In fact, it has come to our knowledge that human memory is associative and that we retrieve information better by connecting similar concepts. In a theoretical perspective, the learner's vocabulary size can increase when known synonyms are learnt together. The vocabulary acquisition process would occur more easily for learners with wider vocabularies than for those with limited vocabularies as extended vocabulary knowledge would help accelerate the process (Webb, 2007). Moreover, access to a thesaurus helps learners develop autonomy and take more responsibility for their learning (Huang & Eslami, 2013). In an age of rapid technological advance, lexicography has made big strides the thesaurus-making profession, thereby improving the quality and new kinds of thesauri.

2.2.2. Thesaurus-skills

Nevertheless, unabridged thesauri are not enough. EFL learners need to have the necessary skills to make full use of their thesauri. When looking up synonyms in a thesaurus, learners are confused because some of them can often be substituted effectively one another in some contexts but not always (Webb, 2007). Therefore, the skills EFL learners need to develop involves the ability to distinguish loose synonyms. In Huang & Eslami's (2013) words, learners "often have difficulty developing an appropriate context for an unfamiliar word" based on a thesaurus (p. 3). According to Phoocharoensil (2010), thesaurus skills are the skills that EFL learners need to possess, or is expected to acquire in handling a thesaurus and tell apart the words it provides. More specifically, in the final stage of the dictionary consultation process, which is understanding lexicographical issues, EFL learners should distinguish English synonyms basing on four criteria (Nesi, 1999).

Connotations are the first criteria. As Finegan (2007) explained, synonyms carry the same referential meaning in referring to a specific concept, their emotive or expressive meanings may differ from each other. Thus, EFL learners need to have the ability to differentiate slight differences in the emotive or expressive meanings of synonyms.

Grammatical patterns are the second factor EFL learners should consider when choosing from a list of synonyms. It is obvious that words that convey a similar meaning do not share the same grammatical patterns (Davies, 2007). Thesaurus user are expected to tell the difference in grammatical patterns of synonyms in order to use them accurately.

Collocations are the next element for EFL learners to take into account before picking out the right words. As English language is arbitrary, it is hard for EFL learners to decide which words are good or strong collocates that tend to go with the headword (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003). To improve EFL learners' thesaurus-using skills, they need to observe and take notice of collocational patterns as possible while reading or writing.

Style of formality of context is the last thing to contemplate. Undoubtedly, among synonyms, some have a tendency to occur in a more formal context than the rest. It is awkward to use an informal word to replace for another one in a very formal situation and vice versa. Thornbury (2002) emphasized that regarding register language learners should develop the essential skills to use synonyms accurately in a given context.

2.2.3. Benefits of thesaurus-using skills
In the context of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), thesaurus skills cannot be underestimated because the learner typically sit international English examinations such as IELTS or TOEFL, which the learner may have to use a wide range of vocabulary and expressions effectively to get high scores. In the long run, EFL learners are likely to experience benefits from thesauri as they work or research in English. Indeed, thesaurus-using skills are an important part of professional reference skills and life-long learning skills.

3.   Statement of the problem

Unfortunately, studies have shown that language learners lack these skills and are, thus, struggling with or simply giving up on their thesaurus use. It is true that the thesaurus consultation process is far more complicated, and "no matter how simple and clear it may seem to us, there are people who do not know even the very simplest dictionary conventions" (Tono, 2011, p. 109).

Given the benefits of thesauri and the widespread lack of thesaurus-using skills among language learners, researchers have appealed for integrating thesaurus training into the language learning curriculum. Actual efforts to improve language learners' thesaurus-using skills, nonetheless, have been scant, partly because such formal interventions would require a brave endeavor from language teachers to investigate their content and to design, implement and evaluate their interventions.

From my personal observation over years of teaching at my university, EFL students lack the skills to use thesauri effectively. That is what motivated me to start an action research to improve students' thesaurus-using skills. As part of the project, I investigated my students' perceptions and practices of thesaurus use. The findings of this enquiry have refined my understanding of my situation and informed the subsequent interventions, which, I believe, other teachers would relate to in their efforts to sharpen students' thesaurus-using skills.

4.   Methodology

4.1.   Research questions
This study can be conceptualized as a qualitative case study, in which I explored my EFL students' thesaurus use in terms of their perceptions and practices. To achieve the stated goals, I formulated two research questions as follows:
(1)   What are students' practices of using a thesaurus when producing an English text?
(2)   What are students' perceptions of thesaurus use in their English writing?
Particularly, the first question dealt with students' thesaurus ownership and using habits, prior instruction and current level of thesaurus-using skills. The second question focused on students' perceptions of the roles of thesaurus use in their learning, difficulties in using thesauri, and the thesaurus-using skills that they needed to develop.

4.2.   Subjects
The subjects of this study were 42 students of an EFL writing class that I taught in the second semester of the school year 2018-2019 at my university. They ranged from 20 to 22 years of age and were either in their second or third year, all majoring in economics-related discipline such as general accounting, construction economics, and business administration. To be eligible to enroll in this writing course, the students were required to pass level B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Hence, their general English were some pre-intermediate at the time I carried out this project.

4.3.   Data collection
Three data collection instruments were employed: thesaurus-using test, questionnaire and interview. In the first week of the course, I gave the students a test in paragraph writing. The writing topic was a short film review. This topic was adapted from a level B1 test practice book. Students were required to write from 120 to 150 words. In the second week, I asked the students to underline the repeated in their paper, and to try to replace them using their thesauri. These two steps were chosen because they involved and benefit most from thesaurus use. While doing the test, the students were allowed to use any kinds of thesauri they liked but they had to make notes of the similar words or phrases they found by explaining why they chose them in their revised paper. They were also required to jot down the sources of these replaced words. There were no time limits on the test in order that the students would do it at their own pace.

Data on students' perceptions and habits of thesaurus use were collected via a questionnaire delivered to the students after they completed the writing test. In the first section, I asked students about their thesaurus-using habits and ownership. Part 2 discovered whether or not students had ever been taught how to use a thesaurus before. In the last part, students expressed their opinions on the roles of thesauri in their English learning as well as the difficulties they had when consulting thesauri. The students answered the questionnaire in Vietnamese at home and handed it in on the following session of the course. I explained to the students how to answer the questionnaire in a slide in class and answered all the questions arose.

The interview question was based on the analysis of the test and questionnaire data so that I could concentrate on the areas that were not satisfactorily investigated in these two instruments. The interviewees were selected by purposeful sampling. I chose two students performing best and two doing worst on the thesaurus-using test to delve into the difference between good and poor thesaurus users. The last interviewee was a student whose answers in the questionnaire were particularly informative. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and were audio-recorded with the permission of the subjects.

4.4. Data analysis

Students notes on the thesaurus-using test were stored in a Microsoft Office Excel file where I counted, classified the look-up items and examined the results. As for the questionnaire data, I deployed SPSS to process Likert-scale answers. Answers from open-ended questions were first entered into an Excel file, and then I printed the sheets out to analyze the data using my pencils and color markers. All the interviews were transcribed in a Microsoft Office Word table and later printed out so that I could analyze the data based on the research questions. Excerpts from the questionnaires and interviews that illustrated the themes were then translated into English.

5. Major findings

5.1. Students' practices of using thesauri

Analysis of the questionnaire data pointed out that more than half of the students used more than one thesaurus (56.5%). Online thesauri were the most popular, being used by 77.3% of the subjects. Mobile thesaurus applications and paper ranked second and third at 36.8% and 16.2% respectively.

The most popular names were "Thesaurus.com", "Synonymy.com" and "Thesaurus" (a smartphone application). In the interviews, most students said that they were aware of the limitation of a mobile application like Thesaurus, but still used it because it was "free", "quick", "easy" to use and, as it was in their apps store, "quite handy". As for paper thesauri, some students said that they were "more informative and reliable", but did not use them very often because they were "thick", "time-consuming", "heavy", and "difficult to use".

Concerning frequency of use, online thesauri scored highest, with 78.5% of the subjects reported that they used "every time they needed", closely followed by mobile thesaurus applications, with 61.7% at the same frequency. Despite being owned by nearly half of the students, paper thesauri were actually used much less often, with a modest 21.6% being touched.

Most students reported that they had known about thesauri for 1 to 2 years thanks to their previous teachers. However, more than half of the subjects (58.6%) had never heard about how to use a thesaurus. The others (41.4%) stated that they had been taught about using thesauri. Answers to the open-ended questions, which asked them to describe what they had learned, revealed that they had a very limited understanding of thesaurus-using skills. Some even wrote that "learning vocabulary" and "conjugating tenses" were the 'skills' they had been taught, which were not only too general but also irrelevant.

Means analysis of the students' self-assessment of their thesaurus-using skills showed that they thought they could use a thesaurus quite well (M=5.93 on a 10-point scale). However, data from the thesaurus-using test painted a less positive picture. Many students appeared to have picked up the wrong words more often. More specifically, there were 189 pairs of synonyms that were identified by the students, but only 76 of them (40.2%) were correct. For examples, it was very strange when one student wrote "He flushed the letter down the lavatory." to avoid repeating the word "toilet". One more interesting example is the case of the phrase "be able", one student used "be capable" in order to mean "having the ability to do something". He wrote "*Ross is capable to fly Concorde". Obviously, these two words differ in grammatical patterns. Students had problems in distinguishing synonyms, especially when the segments they wanted to look up were an idiomatic phrase or had multiple parts of speech. Other problems included choosing the wrong collocations, failing to find more about connotations and apply meanings into context. In addition to the above issues, students also failed to replace personal pronouns, which was typically necessary and demanded more advanced skills in using thesauri.

5.2.   Students' perceptions of thesaurus use

Most students viewed thesaurus use a vital strategy, with 78.8% wanting to use a thesaurus when they needed to avoid repetition and make their paper more attractive. Understandably, they reported highly positive opinions about the role of thesauri in learning English. On a five-point Likert scale, Items 3.2. (i.e. "Thesauri are useful in learning English") and 3.4 (i.e. "I want to learn how to use thesauri effectively"), for examples, scored a mean of 4.45 and 4.27 respectively (with 5.00 being "Absolutely true").

However, in the questionnaires, they shared a number of difficulties in using thesauri, particularly when they had to choose the word with the correct emotive meaning (Item 3.9, M = 3.55). On his experience in using thesauri in general and when doing the thesaurus-using test in particular, one interview later confirmed that:

"The hardest thing is choosing a suitable word with the same emotive meaning [that I wanted to convey]. I have to make further consultation [in another dictionary] and read through all the meanings and examples to decide. And that's tiring." (S19)

He added that if he could find a good result, he would sometimes feel "mad", "exhausted" and want to "give it up for good".

Another student talked about her difficulty in identifying collocations of similar words. She found the consultation process "challenging and exhausting".

"I found that synonyms co-occur with different words, especially in an idiom. For instance, it is very good to write "many happy returns of the day". But I cannot use the word "glad" in this case, even though "happy" and "glad" are synonyms. [It seems to me that] I need to develop advanced skills to deal with this problem." (S33)

6.   Discussion

Findings of students' thesaurus-using practices show that technology-based thesauri such as Internet site and mobile applications have taken an increasingly significant share of the dictionary market previously dominated by their paper counterparts. This is an understandable development, given the fact that technological advances have made thesauri cheaper, faster, and more accessible than ever. This shift clearly has

impacts on the specification of thesaurus-using skills students need to master, with some new skills added to the repertoire while others now becoming obsolete (Lew, 2013). Nonetheless, many of the new skills are either too trivial or too advanced for the lay user, which means the core thesauri skills are likely to remain the same. Thus, formal instructions on thesaurus-using skills should keep the concentration on the fundamental skills, particularly criteria 2 and 4 in Nesi's (1999) classification, while introducing new skills to students.

In another angle, the study found that the majority of EFL learners had never had any training on how to use thesauri accurately and effectively, which may explain the mistakes they made in the thesaurus-using test and the difficulties they shared in the questionnaires and interviews. In fact, the urgent need for formal instructions on thesaurus-using skills is evident, as it has been widely recommended in the growing body of literature.

Knowledge of students' perceptions and practices of thesaurus use is part of the broader understanding of the "thesaurus culture" of an educational context (Hartmann & James, 1998). This concept is powerful on both theoretical and practical implications because it pieces together the findings of thesaurus use research, including those of this study, to offer a multifaceted understanding of the immediate context, which enables tailored interventions to hone thesaurus-using skills. As the concept embraces a variety of issues, it follows that efforts to teach EFL learners thesaurus-using skills should be accompanied and reinforced by improvements in other aspects of the thesaurus culture, particularly teachers' and students' awareness of the roles of thesauri in English teaching and learning. In this way, these interventions will benefit from and, simultaneously, foster a thesaurus-friendly learning environment.

7. Conclusion

Thesauri have always been and will even still be an important learning resource. This study has extended a case-specific, richly descriptive understanding of how these reference works were being employed and perceived by a group of EFL learners in a higher education setting. Among the main themes of the findings were the prevalence of mobile and online thesauri over their traditional print counterparts, the true need for formal, evidence-based interventions to boost students' thesaurus-using skills, and, from a broader dimension, the prospects of nurturing a thesaurus-friendly learning environment.

The insights and discussions presented so far are undoubtedly limited to the peculiarities of my research context. Hence, more comprehensive studies should look at other settings to gain a more general knowledge of EFL learners' thesaurus-using skills. In a different vein, teachers might find the ideas in this paper useful for their efforts to understand students' thesaurus use in their educational contexts, and accordingly, to boost their students' thesaurus-using skills.

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