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“Synformic” Interference and its Relevance to Learners' Language Proficiency

Lexical items have been regarded as the most salient components of meaning in any meaningful utterance. From among millions of English words, those sharing some formal, functional, or semantic characteristics (e.g., historic/historical, economic/economical, etc.) seem to be more challenging for EFL/ESL learners to learn than other words. Such similar lexical items have come to be known as "synforms" – a coinage by Laufer (1983) – in the literature. Faced with such words, learners generally experience difficulty to distinguish between the delicate shades of meaning conveyed by each member of such pairs. Evidence indicates that there is some relationship between language proficiency level and the amount of confusion experienced by learners. In this study, the researcher did two experiments on "synforms", having two groups of junior undergraduate EFL learners of non-English majors as participants (N=60). The participants had already been arbitrarily categorized as 'the higher proficiency' and 'the lower proficiency' groups on the basis of a proficiency test. The purpose was to investigate the relationship between the two variables in question – namely, the proficiency level and the amount of lexical interference. The results indicate that there is a strong negative correlation ($r_{obs.} = -0.84$) between language proficiency level and the number of errors EFL learners make due to "synformic interference". In other words, more proficient learners seem to be less prone to lexical confusions than less proficient ones, who made a significantly greater number of errors on the same post-test.

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