

Original Article

Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Gravity of Their Peer Written Lexical Errors: The Case of Intelligibility and Acceptability

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Abstract

Errors are an important feature of development in a second language as they indicate the state of learners' knowledge. This study investigates the gravity of the lexical errors made by Iranian advanced EFL learners from the perspective of their peer advanced EFL learners. Sixty advanced Iranian undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature at Shahid Beheshti University of Tehran, Iran, took part in this research. The participants, who were selected through a purposive sampling, were given a questionnaire containing eleven lexically erroneous sentences extracted from their fellow advanced students' writings. They were required to judge those sentences in terms of their acceptability and intelligibility. The results indicated that the students considered mis-ordering as least acceptable type of errors (mean: 1.78) and calque (i.e., translation from L1) the least intelligible type (mean: 2.46). The results further showed that there was a strong positive correlation between acceptability and intelligibility ratings of the errors by the advanced EFL learners, meaning that the more acceptable the errors, the more intelligible they were. The findings of this study can help improve teachers' understanding of EFL learners' problems; they can also inform EFL teachers' instructional planning and remedial practices, especially in the English as an international language paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Second language (L2) teachers face persistent challenges when dealing with students' linguistic errors (Hyland & Anan, 2006). However, errors are inevitable in the process of L2 learning and how to best address them has always been high on L2 teachers' agenda. For a long time, students' errors were not welcomed (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013) and they were to be avoided at all cost and immediately corrected by teachers if they occurred. With the advent of communicative language teaching approach; nevertheless, these negative perceptions towards errors began to change as scholars found that errors are unavoidably necessary to students' learning (Yang et al., 2016). This perspective brought about a shift in views towards errors and the way they should be dealt with; errors began to be seen as primary indications of the difficulties learners face in their L2 learning process and assisted language teachers devise subsequent strategies to help learners overcome those barriers (Mungungu, 2010). Consequently, specification, evaluation, and correction of students' errors have increasingly attracted L2 researchers and teachers' interest (Hughes & Lascara-tou, 1982; Maharjan, 2009). Error correction is also significant for L2 writing development and has been well received by L2 learners (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Tran, 2013). Recent studies indicate that teachers' correction of errors in learners' writing assignments works to their benefits and improves their writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Karim & Nassaji, 2018, 2020). The degree of usefulness of such a correction, nevertheless, is substantially dependent on consistency and uniformity of error judgment and evaluation made by teachers (Hyland & Anan, 2006).

Error correction, in practical terms, incorporates three processes of identification, correction, and evaluation, although most studies have mainly emphasized on identification and correction, leaving out error evaluation (Hyland & Anan, 2006). Sheorey (1986) referred to error judgment and evaluation as a complex and less appreciated

task, which has not sufficiently been addressed in error treatment studies. He states that research has mainly focused on error correction strategies that teachers use, and the effects these corrections have on students' learning and the critical issue of how teachers evaluate those errors has received low profile. The main problem teachers may face in error judgment is the lack of access to guidelines or criteria that specify the degree of seriousness or gravity of those errors (Grobe & Renkl, 2007). For this reason, the debate on error judgment has leaned towards criteria development in order to avoid ambiguous and inconsistent correction practice (Hyland & Anan, 2006). Since error judgment somehow depends on shared opinions, one rational way to develop error correction criteria is to consult the stakeholders who are involved in the writing process (Vann et al., 1984). As such, researchers have been obsessed with native speakers' reactions to students' errors as evaluation criteria and strived to measure which errors seems unacceptable or interfere with comprehension from the viewpoints of native speakers (Vann et al., 1984). Later, a few studies have addressed the differences in perceptions of error gravity between native and non-native teachers. These studies revealed difference of opinions between native and non-native teachers in judgment of students' errors in writing (e.g., Hyland & Anan, 2006; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; James, 1977; Lee, 2009; Shi's, 2001). As pointed, work on error analysis has focused on teachers' (either native or non-native) judgments of error acceptability (Burt & Kiparsky, 1975) and learners' views regarding seriousness of errors have been ignored. Learning about English as foreign language (EFL) learners' judgments as one of the main stakeholders in academic EFL programs can be a practical step in developing priorities for EFL writing instruction. This implication is perfectly in line with conclusions made by Sharifian (2009) and Marlina (2014) who state that the English as International Language (EIL) disregards reliance on a particular variety of English and attributes English a pluricentric position where all varieties are acknowledged for international communications and intercultural relationships. In other words,

from a pedagogical view of EIL, the aim of English instruction is to make EFL learners competent communicators with all kinds of world English users, and not merely with a selected group of native speakers of English or competent interlocutors like teachers, a view which holds a separate position from existing ELT trend that highlights the inner-circle varieties and disregards non-native speaker (NNS) English varieties (Sharifian, 2009). One of the probable outcomes of this movement is that teacher's focus mainly on the errors that are of greater gravity in the view of the learner and align their priorities with theirs.

Among the many existing categories of errors, lexical errors are a prevalent type of error received little attention (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006; Kroll, 1990; Llach, 2007). To date, few if any, research has been conducted on investigating the gravity of EFL learners' written lexical errors from the viewpoint of their peers. As such, the present study attempts to fill this gap and investigates the perceptions of gravity of advanced EFL learners' written lexical errors from their peer advanced learners' perspective. Error perceptions can lay a fruitful pedagogical ground for an effective error treatment in the future (Brown, 2014). Considering the global trend to acknowledge that English is nowadays used for communication amongst NNSs, investigating the gravity of the errors made by the EFL learners from the perspective of other EFL learners can be fruitful as it can tell us about which lexical errors are perceived grave by those learners in the production of their fellow EFL learners. Thus, the following research questions will be addressed in this study:

1. What type of lexical errors do Iranian advanced EFL learners find least acceptable in their peers' written language?
2. What type of lexical errors do Iranian advanced EFL learners find least intelligible in their peers' written language?
3. Is there a correlation between ratings of acceptability and intelligibility lexical errors?

2. Literature Review

L2 writing teachers are commonly confronted with the problem of dealing with learners' errors. Errors; however, are common aspect of the process of language acquisition and provide teachers and researchers with valuable information regarding students' learning (Corder, 1967; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Nemser, 1971; Richards, 1971; Selinker, 1972). A distinction is usually made between errors and mistakes. While mistakes are regarded as performance-related errors in spontaneous speech or writing, which happens in the native speakers' speech as well, errors are characterized as deviations from the standards of the target language produced by non-native speakers (Lee, 1990). Errors are considered a useful pedagogical tool in the context of L2 teaching too. Gass, Behney and Plonsky (2013) state that errors are like red flags as they give the L2 instructors hints about the learners' evolving internal system and where they need help, thus enabling them to develop materials and techniques to assist learners overcome those errors.

According to Corder (1987), language learners errors are worth analyzing for three distinct reasons. First and foremost, errors and their types can be a yardstick through which the level of learners' existing L2 knowledge can be measured. Hence, lapses in the learners' competence are indicator of what they have to acquire further in their L2 learning process. Second, there is a linear relationship between learners' L2 acquisition and the errors they commit. Third, error production on the side of learners' is accompanied by error treatment on the side of teachers. Through teachers' feedback, learners would be able to discover new rules or repair the current impaired rules in their L2 system. SLA researchers have examined L2 learners' errors from a number of perspectives. The concept of error has also been linked to irritability, defined by Ludwig (1982) as "the result of the form of the message intruding upon the interlocutor's perception of the communication" (p. 275). Besides, Ludwig (1982) described irritation as a continuum ranging from an unconcerned, undistracted

awareness of a communicative error to a conscious preoccupation with form. Other studies (e.g., Meyer & Lorenz, 1984; Santos, 1988; Vann et al., 1984) have regarded irritation or stigmatization as an entirely subjective criterion dependent on the outlook of the hearer or listener. Since correction of students' written errors are generally considered as fundamental for writing development (Ferris, 2002), teachers have to come to a decision as whether or not to correct learners' errors and if they decide to do so, which types of errors they think should be corrected. One strategy for developing error correction priorities is to consider the perceptions of some audiences mainly native speakers (Kalil, 1985) and teachers (Vann et al., 1984) regarding seriousness of errors and the effect those errors may have on them.

The term "error gravity" which has been used interchangeably with other terms such as 'error perception', 'error judgments', or 'error evaluation' (Endley, 2016), is characterized as an attempt to investigate the errors which are perceived to be the most serious or distracting to readers or listeners, along with factors that exert influence on such judgments (Endley, 2016). It appears, therefore, that error gravity generally depends on the attitude of the listener or reader and cannot be judged by a universal criterion (Lee, 1990). As a research topic, error gravity came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s but seemed to have fallen out of rigor in the 1990s. Only now, in the last few years, have researchers begun to show a renewed interest in this issue (Endley, 2016). Error gravity introduces a criterion for error correction, indicating the categories and instances of error, which need urgent pedagogical attention (Corder, 1975; Lee, 1990; Richards, 1971). Hence, by developing different taxonomies of errors, research in this area aims at identifying instructional priorities which would enable instructors working in different pedagogical settings to attend to problems arisen in this regard (Endley, 2016). Various researchers have strived to find correlations between perceptions of error gravity and one or more variables such as the raters' teaching experience (James, 1977; Oliaei & Sahragard,

2013), their area of academic specialization (Meyer & Lorenz, 1984; Roberts & Cimasko, 2008; Santos, 1988; Vann et al., 1984;), and their age (Vann et al., 1984). However, one more variable that has received considerable attention in this respect is the notion of native speakers (NSs) versus NNSs' judgments on L2 learner errors (Rao & Li, 2017). The findings of a multitude of studies (e.g., Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Hyland & Anan, 2006; James, 1977; Porte, 1999; Rao & Li, 2017) in this respect demonstrate that generally NNSs are less tolerant of learner errors and tend to rely on rule infringement; on the other hand, NS teachers are more lenient and prioritized intelligibility in evaluating errors.

While most studies on error judgment have focused on measuring native speakers' reactions, Khalil (1085) recommends rather than relying on native speakers' judgment, researchers are required to look for "alternative means of judging communicative effect to establish pedagogically appropriate and useful hierarchies" (p. 384). Moreover, most studies so far have focused on judgment of teachers and error perceptions and judgment of EFL learners who are the main actors in language learning process have not been taken into consideration. A successful L2 writing class requires that both parties, the teacher and learners, be actively involved in the learning and teaching process (Tran, 2013). From the viewpoint of EIL (Alsagoff et al., 2012; Matsuda, 2107; Mckay, 2018; Mckay & Brown, 2016; Sharifian, 2009), which is a new approach to teaching English, it has been extensively discussed that English is not limited to native-speaking communities since the number of people who speaks English as a second or foreign language goes far beyond that of native English speakers (e.g., Lluraa, 2017; Marlina, 2018; Schuttz, 2019). The global expansion of English has thus eventuated in revisiting how this language should be taught and conceptualized (Mckay & Brown, 2016; Nushi, et al., 2016). Accordingly, "the unprecedented global demand, use, and appropriation of EIL necessitate a profession-wide response to English language learning, teaching, teacher education, assessment, and policy" (Selvi, 2013,

p. 42). EIL takes into account the fact that the use of language in interaction is heavily contingent on mutual intelligibility between the interlocutors, the speaker's current level of expertise, and the listener's English proficiency (Mckay, 2018). Elaborating the concept of mutual intelligibility, Seidlhofer (2011) contends that intelligibility in communication is influenced by not only language skills but also perceptions of those who are being addressed. She maintains that the perception of our addressees and whether they belong to the same social or ethnical group affect our expectations in linguistic exchanges and determine the degree to which speakers comprehend each other's messages. Mckay (2018) states that EIL has been characterized as both the many varieties of English spoken globally and the use of English by NNSs. As Stern (1983) puts it, EIL leaves no room for the concept of native-like competence since the majority of EIL learners use English along with other languages and follow some certain motives for learning English that are different from those of native speakers. As such, EIL has gained momentum in academic venues and is considered as a legitimate alternative to the traditional ESL/EFL dichotomy. In view of this, investigating EFL learners' perception and judgment of errors is essential.

Lexis is one of the significant elements of written language. Learners need to make use of words accurately in written communication to get their messages through. Ellis (1994) states that the most prevalent type of errors non-native language learners make is lexical in nature. According to Llach (2011, the term lexical error is used to refer mostly to "the deviations in the learner's production of the L2 norm with regard to the use in production and reception of lexical items" (p. 75). Lexical errors are worth attending to for a number of reasons. First and foremost, lexis is one of the important aspects of successful communication, especially in the written mode. Folse (2004) holds that "with poor vocabulary, communication is constraint considerably. You can get by without grammar; you cannot get by without vocabulary" (p. 2). Second, some studies (e.g., Lennon, 1991; Meara, 1984) suggest

that EFL learners are more susceptible to committing lexical errors than other types of linguistic errors and that these errors are of high frequency in L2 learners' writing (e. g., Ahn & Kang, 2015; Lee, 2017). Third, lexical errors can affect the quality of academic writing (Engber, 1995), bring about senses of intolerance and irritation in exchanges between native and non-native speakers, and are more likely to impede the flow of communication than their counterparts in syntax (Carter, 1998; Saud, 2018). Finally, possessing a good command of lexical knowledge plays a pivotal role in L2 learning as corroborated by Schmitt (2000) who asserts "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of the second language" (p. 55).

Different taxonomies have been developed to categorize and further analyze lexical errors (e.g., Djokic, 1999; Engber, 1995; James 1998; Lennon, 1996; Warren, 1982). Drawing on the form versus content-oriented distinction, James (1998) developed a lexical error taxonomy that is comprised of two major categories namely, formal and semantic. The formal errors are divided into three major classes: (formal mis-selection, mis-formation, distortion) which in turn are accompanied by twelve subclasses. On the other hand, the semantic errors are divided into two major categories (confusion of sense relations, collocation errors), which are in turn subdivided into five classes (1 Figure 1. James' (1998) lexical error taxonomy).

1 Figure 1. James' (1998) lexical error taxonomy

I. Formal Errors

1. Formal mis-selections
 - 1.1. Suffix type
 - 1.2. Prefix type
 - 1.3. Vowel-based type
 - 1.4. Consonant-based type
2. Mis-formation
 - 2.1. Borrowing (L1 words)
 - 2.2. Coinage (inventing based on L1)
 - 2.3. Calque (Translation from L1)
3. Distortions
 - 3.1. Omissions

- 3.2. Over-inclusion
- 3.3. Mis-selection
- 3.4. Mis-ordering
- 3.5. Blending

II. Semantic Errors

1. Confusion of sense relations
 - 1.1. General term for specific ones
 - 1.2. Overtly specific term
 - 1.3. Inappropriate co-hyponyms
 - 1.4. Near synonyms
2. Collection Errors

So far, a multitude of studies have been conducted on gauging the frequency or problematizing the nature of lexical errors (e.g., Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006; Shalaby, Yahya & El-Komi, 2009; Hamadi, 2016; Saud, 2018). Relying on James' (1998) taxonomy of errors, Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) analyzed lexical errors of Thai university EFL students extracted from their compositions. The results indicated that semantics, more than the forms of words, cause communication problems for the students. For formal errors, formal mis-selection followed by distortions and for semantic errors, collocations followed by confusion of sense relations were found to be the most frequent. In a similar vein, Shalaby et al. (2009) scrutinized the types of lexical errors in the writing of Saudi college students. The results revealed that lexical semantic errors were more frequent than lexical formal errors. Besides, mis-selection of suffix type was found as the most problematic error category and lexical errors of L1 direct translation was next in frequency. The most frequent error types in the lexical semantic category were confusion of sense relations and collocation errors respectively. Hamdi (2016) also analyzed the lexical errors by Tunisian EFL learners via James' taxonomy. The findings indicated that lexical formal errors were higher in frequency in comparison with lexical semantic ones. Additionally, distortion followed by mis-formation was the most problematic and formal mis-selection were the least problematic errors. Saud (2018) also examined Saudi EFL learners' lexical errors through employing an

achievement test. Employing James' comprehensive taxonomy of errors, he concluded that formal mis-selection error type was the most frequent category of formal errors and confusion of sense relations was the most frequent among the lexical semantic errors. Vowel-based error was found to be the most problematic formal error and use of near synonym was the most problematic semantic error.

As the literature indicates, there has been a wealth of studies done on investigating the lexical errors; however, few, if any, studies have examined EFL learners' perceptions towards these errors. This is of particular importance given the fact that in the current EIL paradigm what matters in NNS-NNS communication may be different from that in native speaker-native speaker (NS-NS) or NS-NNS communication. To fill this void, the present study has taken a new step forward and aims to determine the gravity of lexical errors made by Iranian EFL learners, in terms of their acceptability and intelligibility, as perceived by their peer learners.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 60 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature at Shahid Beheshti University of Tehran, Iran. These participants, both male and female, were within the 18-22-age bracket and were selected through a purposive sampling to meet the inclusion criterion of this study, that is, they had to be advanced EFL learners. They were given a questionnaire containing eleven lexically erroneous sentences and asked to judge those sentences in terms of acceptability and intelligibility. The sentences were extracted from their peers' (fellow advanced students) IELTS writing task 2 essays and classified based on James' (1998) taxonomy of error (explained later in the article).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. IELTS Writing Task 2

The students were given an IELTS Writing Task 2 topic to write on and their essays were examined and scored according to the standard IELTS writing exam rubric. These writing scores were then matched to the set of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels. Those whose scores fell between 7.5-8.5 (C1) were considered advanced learners (writers). To analyze and classify the lexical errors in the students' essays, James' (1998) taxonomy of lexical errors was adopted. The taxonomy is one of the most comprehensive classification systems and is based on the distinction between form-oriented and content-oriented lexical errors. The justification behind this distinction is that mental lexicon is organized in a way that it follows both formal and semantic principles. Hence, in this sense, it is either formal or semantic associations that activate the storage or access of words (Llach, 2011). James (1998) categorizes lexical errors into two major types: formal and semantic features as defined below in some detail:

I. Formal Errors

Formal errors are categorized into three types: (1) Formal mis-selection, (2) mis-formations, and (3) distortions. The subcategories and examples for each type are stated below:

1. **Formal mis-selection** or the incorrect word choice involve similar lexical forms and is of four major types:
 - 1.1. The suffix type: These are lexical errors in which the roots are the same but suffixes are different (for example, **competition/competitiveness**)
 - 1.2. The prefix type: These are lexical errors in which the roots are the same but prefixes are different (for example, **reserve/preserve**)
 - 1.3. The vowel-based type. These are lexical errors, which contain wrong choice of vowels (for example, **seat/set**)

- 1.4. The consonant based type: These are lexical errors, which contain wrong choice of vowels (for example, **save/safe**).
2. **Mis-formations** are words that do not exist in the L2. The source of these errors is from the learner's L1. These errors are classified into three types:
 - 2.1. Borrowing involves using L1 words in L2 without any change
 - 2.2. Coinage involves learner formulating a new word from L1
 - 2.3. Calque involves translating one word or phrase from learners' L1
3. **Distortions** refer to words that do not exist in L2. There is no transfer from L1 and the words are produced as the result of misapplication of L2. James (1998) classifies distortions into five types:
 - 3.1. Omission (**intresting** instead of interesting)
 - 3.2. Over inclusion (**dinning** room instead of dining room)
 - 3.3. Mis-selection (**delitous** instead of delicious)
 - 3.4. Mis-ordering (**littel** instead of little)
 - 3.5. Blending (**travell** instead of travel).

II. Semantic errors

In addition to formal errors, James highlights two types of semantic errors:

- a) Confusion of sense relations, and
 - b) Collocation errors.
1. **Confusion of sense errors:** These are errors in which a word is used in contexts where a similar word should be used and encompasses four types of errors:
 - 1.1. Using a superonym for a hyponym refers to using a more general term instead of a specific one.
 - 1.2. Using a hyponym for a supersonic involves using a specific term instead of a general term
 - 1.3. Using inappropriate co-hyponyms
 - 1.4. Using a wrong near synonym.

2. **Collocation errors:** The second type of semantic errors is referred to as collocation errors are those types error in which a wrong and inappropriate word is selected to accompany another word.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Eleven lexically deviant sentences were randomly chosen from amongst the erroneous sentences in the students' essays. These sentences were selected in such a way that they represent different categories of lexical errors. Caution was applied to make sure that each sentence included only one error. The errors were written in bold in each sentence for easy spotting. The respondents were then asked to judge the gravity of the errors in those sentences in terms of acceptability and intelligibility on a five-point Likert scale attitude questionnaire (see the Appendix). The Likert scale ranged in an ascending order from 1 (Not acceptable/intelligible) to 5 (perfectly acceptable/intelligible). The reliability of the questionnaire calculated via Cronbach's Alpha turned out to be .82, indicating that the questionnaire enjoyed a good level of reliability. Additionally, five EFL experts who held PhD degrees in TEFL and had 10 years of teaching experience examined the content validity of the questionnaire. Five advanced EFL learners also reviewed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was revised based on the comments received and then administered to the participants to complete the questionnaire. The two elements of acceptability and intelligibility were defined in operational terms. Acceptability was defined

as the degree to which the errors were assessed in language use as acceptable or unacceptable in different contexts with particular purposes and intelligibility was defined as the degree to which the error in language use could be considered as ambiguous or understandable in different contexts.

4. Results

Table 1 displays the mean of students' acceptability ratings of 11 categories of errors on the 5-point scale as well as the standard deviations of their ratings. The answer to research question one can be revealed by examining the Table, that is, the learners tended to consider 'mis-ordering' as the least acceptable error type (error 7), with a mean value of 1.78. Mis-ordering belongs to the category of formal errors and refers to words that do not exist in the L2; the source of these errors often goes back to the learners' L1. The questionnaire item that contained the 'mis-ordering' error was: *I **had myself** this terrible stress, which was caused by *konkor* (exam to enter Iranian university). The analysis also showed that the most acceptable error type was 'confusion of sense relations' (error 9) (M= 3.53) in the semantic-type category that included choosing a specific term (hyponym) where a more general one (superonym) was needed. The questionnaire item that contained the 'confusion of sense relations' was:

Migrating from one country to other countries isn't a new phenomenon. More skilled people leave their home **towns in order to have better employment choices.*

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for the Acceptability of the Eleven Lexical Errors

Errors		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.03	2.50	3.06	3.35	2.18	2.40	1.78	2.41	3.53	3.13	2.73
Std. Deviation		1.23	1.32	1.28	1.44	1.29	1.18	1.05	1.40	1.12	1.47	1.21

Note (for Table 1.)

- Error 1: Formal mis-selection/suffix type
- Error 2: Formal mis-selection/prefix type
- Error 3: Mis-formation/borrowing
- Error 4: Mis-formation/coinage
- Error 5: Mis-formation/calque
- Error 6: Distortion/mis-selection
- Error 7: Distortion/mis-ordering
- Error 8: Confusion of sense relations/use of a superonym for a hyponym
- Error 9: Confusion of sense relations/use of a hyponym for a superonym
- Error 10: Confusion of sense relations/use of inappropriate co-hyponyms
- Error 11: Collocation errors

In terms of intelligibility (the second research question), like the case in acceptability, learners found the use of specific term (hyponym) instead of a general (superonym) term as the most intelligible error (M = 4.13) that is included in the semantic, 'confusion of sense relations' category. Subsequently, the least intelligible error turned out to be of formal error category, that is, mis-formation, 'calque' (i.e., error 5, translation from L1) (M = 2.46) (see Table 2). The questionnaire item that contained the 'calque' error was:

**If we care, celebrities are not very different from us.*

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for the Intelligibility of the Eleven Lexical Errors

Errors		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.80	3.88	3.83	3.88	2.46	2.85	2.48	3.68	4.13	3.73	3.41
Std. Deviation		.97	1.02	1.22	1.19	1.33	1.14	1.37	1.15	1.19	1.26	1.19

To answer the third research question, Pearson's correlation was used to probe the correlation between acceptability and intelligibility ratings of the students. The results indicated that there was a strong positive correlation between acceptability and intelligibility ratings of the errors by the advanced EFL learners, meaning that the more acceptable the errors, the more intelligible they were (see Table 3).

Table 3 Table 3. Correlations between Acceptability and Intelligibility of the Errors

		Acceptability	Intelligibility
Acceptability	Pearson Correlation	1	.408**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	60	60
Intelligibility	Pearson Correlation	.408**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	60	60

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Discussion

Previous studies suggest that lexical errors are the most prevalent category of errors in written English (e.g., Llach, 2011). Studies on error gravity have also revealed that lexical errors are judged to be more serious than their structural counterparts as they cause the greatest interference to successful communication. One prevalent strategy to develop error correction criteria is to consult the stakeholders who are involved in the writing process (Kalil, 1985; Vann et al., 1984). While earlier work on error gravity has mostly emphasized native speakers' judgments of error acceptability (Burt & Kiparsky, 1974), EFL learners' views regarding seriousness of errors have been ignored. Learning about EFL learners' judgments of typical EFL writing errors as the main stakeholders in EFL programs can improve teachers' understanding of the of errors and help them align their error correction priorities with students' and focus principally on the errors that are of greater gravity in the view of the learners. As a result, the primary purpose of this study was to gauge the gravity of written lexical errors made by Iranian EFL learners from their peer perspective; the gravity of errors was measured in terms of acceptability and intelligibility.

The results of this study revealed that the learners marked the semantic lexical errors as more acceptable and more intelligible in comparison with the formal lexical errors, implying that EFL learners face more difficulty when confronting the formal errors. This finding is in line with previous studies, which demonstrated that the participants committed more formal errors than semantic errors (Amin, 2014; Hamdi, 2016; Rezai & Davarpanah, 2019; Saud, 2018). The results also indicated that the least acceptable type of errors was mis-ordering (at the lexical level). Mis-ordering error alters the surface structure of the sentence and may emanate from incomplete application of rules, that is, failure to fully develop a structure. According to Ridha (2012), mis-ordering is a common error amongst L2 learners. Nushi (2016) has also found out that word order errors are the likely candidates of

fossilization in the Iranian EFL learners' interlanguage and EFL practitioners need to give serious pedagogical attention to teaching of this feature to help learners avoid fossilization. Furthermore, Vann et al. (1984) stated that errors such as inappropriate preposition or lack of pronoun agreement have been described in the literature as less grievous, while those errors that impede comprehension, such as word order and word choice have been considered as more grievous. It appears that to EFL learners in this study, mis-ordering error or incorrect placement of an item in a sentence is the type of error that makes the meaning of the sentence more ambiguous and incomprehensible and globally impact the communication (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). This perception of gravity of mis-ordering errors supports findings of Burt and Kiparsky (1974) regarding the undesirable communicative effect of errors in areas like word order, which tends to have an effect on whole sentence organization.

The least intelligible type of error, on the other hand, was calque. Calque is a word-for-word translation from one language to another. It is an interlingual error (i.e., negative transfer), which falls within lexical errors (inappropriate creation) and its occurrence indicates that students make frequent use of existing terms incorrectly by amplifying their meaning content. Errors of this type lead learners to directly translate from their mother tongue because of their literal meaning. In other words, L2 learners generally commit transfer errors, as they cannot use the full cluster of semantic features of the target language lexical item.

The study further revealed that the use of hyponyms instead of superonyms in the category of 'confusion of sense relation' was the most acceptable and most intelligible error type to the respondents. Semantic confusion refers to the error made by the learners in using two words of the target language, which share semantic similarity. It is speculated that this type of error is due to underdeveloped knowledge of vocabulary, which means that learners have already had enough English vocabulary but cannot discern the exact usage of the words in the sentences. Some studies

(e.g., Saud, 2018; Wells, 2013) suggest that this kind of error, which is categorized as a conceptual-type error, is a highly frequent one among EFL learners. Wells (2013) believes that confusion over meaning of words is not reminiscent of L1 transfer but the outcome of learners' association of the word with the literal meaning, that is, the learners prefer one word over another because of their similar properties. This indicates that non-native speakers of English, even those who enjoy high proficiency in English, face difficulties in finding the conceptual equivalence between terms and objects despite their sufficient grammatical proficiency to start and continue communication. The underlying justification for the acceptability and intelligibility of using hyponym instead of superonym in writing may be pertinent to the notion that in today's pedagogical and educational milieus, communicative language teaching is the dominant approach and, in that approach, concepts but not terms are emphasized. Mackay (2018) asserts that the use of language in interaction is heavily contingent on mutual intelligibility between the interlocutors, the speaker's current level of expertise, and the listener's English proficiency.

The results further verified a positive correlation between intelligibility and acceptability of errors, which implies that these two factors are interdependent, that is, an acceptable error is less likely to interfere with comprehension. This finding is in agreement with previous studies on error gravity that emphasized the significance of comprehensibility as judgment criterion and highlighted the potential of lexical errors to act as communication distracters. Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) who studied error gravity judgment by native teachers found out that the vocabulary and spelling errors were the most grievous errors to native speakers because they hinder comprehension. Likewise, Khalil (1985) and Olsson (1973) found that semantically deviant utterances are less intelligible than grammatically deviant ones. In their error gravity studies, Santos (1988) and Dordick (1996) observed that lexical errors were judged by faculties as the most grievous errors since

they make the meaning of the message ambiguous and unintelligible, leading to comprehension difficulties and accordingly disrupting communication. In other words, judgment of acceptability of errors is so dependent on the degree of unambiguousness or intelligibility of the message conveyed and when lexical errors interfered most with communication, they were marked as the most serious ones.

6. Conclusion

The present study was designed to determine which sentence-level errors are judged to be most serious by Iranian EFL students to help develop an error correction priority for EFL writing teachers. A survey was conducted to measure how Iranian EFL students at Shahid Beheshti University reacted to written lexical errors their classmates had made in an IELTS writing task 2. Sixty respondents judged the relative gravity of the written errors that occurred in 11 sentences. The results of the study showed that the participating students did not consider all errors as equally serious; rather, their judgments generated a hierarchy of errors. In this regard, participants marked the semantic lexical errors as more acceptable and more intelligible in comparison with the formal lexical errors. They also marked calque as the least intelligible type of error and the use of hyponyms instead of superonyms as the most acceptable and most intelligible error type. The analysis of the data also verified a positive correlation between intelligibility and acceptability of errors.

There is now little doubt that English has established itself firmly as a world language through which millions of speakers with different first languages communicate. In fact, the number of those who speak English as an L2 now far exceeds that of those who speak it as their native tongue (Clyne & Sharifian, 2008; Crystal, 2003; McKay, 2002; Nault, 2006; Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006). In our field, TEFL or TESOL, the recognition of internationality of English is evidenced in the popular use of terms such as English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2000, 2007, 2009; Mauranen & Ranta, 2009), English as an

international language (EIL) (Baxter, 1980; Smith, 1983) and English as a Global Language (Crystal 2003; Gnutzmann, 1999), World Englishes (Kachru, 1985). There are now even journals (e.g., *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* and *Journal of English as an International Language*) that exclusively focus on issues related to the rapidly-growing use of the English language worldwide. This widespread use of English for communication amongst non-native speakers with different L1 backgrounds requires us “to revisit how we define and assess language proficiency” in English (Nushi, Abulhassani, & Mojerloo, 2016); the aim of English instruction should be to make learners competent EIL communicators. Holding such a view entails moving away from the current ELT practices that highlight the inner-circle varieties at the expense of NNS English varieties. In a similar vein, Sharifian (2009) considers EIL as the language of international and intercultural relations, which “rejects the idea of any particular variety being selected as a lingua franca for international communication” (p. 2). Such a shift in attitude towards proficiency in English also means a fresh look at EFL learners’ lexical use and particularly the errors they make when using the lexical items in the target language. Of the viable implications of this study can be providing the grounds for EFL teachers to address these issues and become cognizant of the principles of EIL approach through using supplementary materials and encouraging learners to be sensible of other varieties of English. Learners’ exposure to and familiarity with different varieties of English can equip them better reinforcements for international communication and greater tolerance of non-native local varieties (Rahimi & Pakzadian, 2019).

L2 learners’ writings may contain lexical formal and semantic errors, which mean they have not developed adequate vocabulary to accurately express themselves, either due to language transfer or inadequacy of instruction or insufficient practices. Instructors therefore could assist them by developing activities for those areas that they need improvement. Based on judgments of L2 learners about the

seriousness of lexical errors, an error-gravity scale can be developed from the most serious or grievous errors to the least serious ones to inform teachers’ instructional error-evaluation practices (Chan, 2010). This hierarchy of error gravity can assist writing teachers with planning and administering writing instruction in order to fill the existing gaps and make more informed decisions regarding their priorities in treating errors. Based on the findings of present study, it can be suggested that EFL teachers should be more tolerant of semantic confusion errors and give higher priority to mis-ordering and calque errors and provide students with appropriate feedback and explicit instructions. We end this discussion by suggesting that future researchers review the pertinent literature within the realm and scope of this study and observe to what extent the priorities of the EFL teachers match those of the EFL learners in terms of error correction and determine the measures that can be taken to narrow down the prospective mismatch.

The study has some limitations. First, the study focused on errors at sentence-level, detached from context and this would have influenced on audiences’ judgments. Second, the number of lexically erroneous sentences to be judged by students was small and as a result not all categories of lexical errors illustrated in James’ taxonomy were incorporated. A great deal more research needs to be conducted on the EFL students’ judgment, with greater number of students and greater number of error types to develop a set of reliable lexical error correction criteria. As such, future studies may be conducted to address other types of lexical errors and to include EFL students from different contexts such as school or language institutes. Third, the effect of students’ background characteristics including age, academic discipline, or gender on their judgment were not taken into account so future researchers may attempt to focus on how different background features affect the participants’ judgment.

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Appendix

Dear respondent,

The questionnaire below aims to investigate the gravity of the different lexical errors from your perspective in two respects, namely **acceptability** (how (un)acceptable the error is in the sample sentence) and **intelligibility** (how (un)intelligible the error is in the sample sentence). The errors need to be rated on the five-point Likert scale, with:

- 1 being (Not acceptable/ intelligible),
- 2 (May be acceptable/intelligible),
- 3 (Acceptable/intelligible),
- 4 (Highly acceptable/ intelligible), and
- 5 (Perfectly acceptable/intelligible).

Please do not leave any of the sentences unanswered. Please highlight the circle or the number of your choice. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

#	Errors	Acceptability					Intelligibility				
1.	Some resources are not available online or in E-books forms .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
2.	It may lead to the unsatisfaction of both parents and language institutions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
3.	They are wasting an extensive amount of time behind their computers , laptops, tablets, and cell phones.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Maybe the reasons for their success is more effort, motivation, providence, and self-belief .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
5.	If we care , celebrities are not very different from us.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6.	There is an argument which says that libraries should be locked because better alternatives are available.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I had myself this terrible stress which was caused by Konkor (university entrance exam in Iran).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I can have this chance to expand my vision about the Britain's language, society and people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Migrating from one country to other countries isn't a new phenomenon. More skilled people leave their home towns in order to have better employment choices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
10.	We should provide our students with language labs and electrical (instead of electronic) devices that ease the process of teaching and learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
11.	It could be avoided by arranging restrictions on the use of technology, both at home and at work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5