

LEXICAL AND STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY IN EFL STUDENTS' ESSAY WRITING: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon in which a word, phrase, or sentence conveys more than one possible meaning, potentially causing misunderstanding in written communication. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, students often experience difficulty producing clear and precise sentences. This study investigates lexical and structural ambiguity in EFL students' cause-and-effect essays from a semantic perspective. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 20 essays written by fourth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi. The data were analyzed by identifying ambiguous expressions, classifying them into lexical and structural ambiguity, and interpreting their possible meanings. The findings revealed 48 instances of ambiguity, consisting of 18 cases of lexical ambiguity (37.5%) and 30 cases of structural ambiguity (62.5%). Structural ambiguity occurred more frequently, indicating that students experienced greater difficulty constructing clear and grammatically appropriate sentence structures. The ambiguities were mainly associated with limited grammatical competence, insufficient vocabulary knowledge, and inadequate awareness of sentence clarity. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening grammar instruction and vocabulary development to improve clarity in EFL writing. Furthermore, it provides pedagogical insights into common ambiguity patterns that can inform writing instruction and feedback strategies to enhance students' academic writing skills.

Keywords: *Ambiguity, EFL Writing, Lexical Ambiguity, Semantic Analysis, Structural Ambiguity*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas, knowledge, and experiences through written texts. Effective writing requires the integration of various linguistic components, including vocabulary, grammar, organization, coherence, and contextual meaning (Harmer, 2004; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Unlike speaking, writing provides limited opportunities for immediate clarification;

therefore, writers are expected to express their ideas clearly and accurately. In academic contexts, writing serves not only as a means of communication but also as an indicator of learners' language proficiency and critical thinking ability. Consequently, producing clear and comprehensible written texts remains one of the major goals of EFL instruction. Writing proficiency is a key component in learning English, as it encompasses various linguistic elements such as spelling, grammatical structure, vocabulary selection, contextual meaning, and punctuation, particularly in written communication (Amin & Shofiyyudin, 2026).

Moreover, writing serves as a medium for expressing ideas and emotions originating from both the mind and the heart. Language functions as a system of symbols that enables this expression in the form of text. The ability to write well depends on how effectively individuals organize their words to produce meaningful and coherent messages (Chico & Zrary, 2022). In the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing is considered a vital skill that integrates multiple components, including orthography, grammatical rules, vocabulary, contextual meaning, and writing conventions. Therefore, since writing is not naturally acquired, it must be developed through a systematic and structured learning process to help learners organize their thoughts and create meaningful texts effectively. However, many EFL students experience difficulties in producing clear and unambiguous sentences. One of the common problems found in students' writing is ambiguity.

Despite its importance, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in writing effectively. Previous studies have shown that learners frequently struggle with grammatical accuracy, vocabulary selection, sentence construction, and idea organization, all of which may affect the clarity of their writing (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Li & Zhang, 2023). These linguistic limitations often lead to unclear expressions and multiple interpretations, creating ambiguity in written communication. Since readers cannot directly negotiate meaning with the writer, ambiguous expressions may hinder comprehension and reduce the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, ambiguity represents an important issue in EFL writing that deserves further investigation.

According to Demir (2020), communication typically involves two participants: the speaker, who produces linguistic expressions, and the listener, who interprets them. Ideally, this interaction leads to mutual understanding of the conveyed messages. However, in practice, communication does not always result in full comprehension. Misunderstanding may arise due to issues related to linguistic structures, limited expressive ability, insufficient contextual knowledge, or confusion caused by ambiguous language. Such ambiguity is a common phenomenon in everyday communication and often leads to partial understanding or even misinterpretation.

Ambiguity is generally defined as a linguistic phenomenon in which a word, phrase, or sentence can be interpreted in more than one way (Kreidler, 1998). In communication, ambiguity may arise when language users fail to provide sufficient linguistic or contextual information to convey a single intended meaning. Demir (2020) argues that communication ideally involves successful meaning transfer between the producer and the receiver of a message; however, this process is not

always achieved due to linguistic complexity, contextual limitations, and ambiguous language use. Although ambiguity is considered a natural characteristic of language, it can become problematic in written discourse where clarity and precision are highly valued.

From a semantic perspective, ambiguity is commonly classified into lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity (Leech, 1981). Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single lexical item possesses more than one meaning, often due to polysemy or homonymy. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, occurs when a sentence allows multiple interpretations because of its grammatical structure or syntactic arrangement (Fromkin et al., 2013). While both types of ambiguity may occur naturally in everyday language use, they become particularly significant in academic writing because they may obscure the intended message and affect readers' interpretation of the text.

Lexical ambiguity has long been recognized as one of the most common sources of misunderstanding in language use. According to Kreidler (1998), lexical ambiguity emerges when a word carries multiple semantic interpretations within the same linguistic context. Similarly, Lyons (1995) notes that many English words possess several related or unrelated meanings, making interpretation highly dependent on context. Words that exhibit polysemy, homonymy, homophony, or homography frequently contribute to ambiguity, especially when contextual information is insufficient. As Laporte (2001) and Rodd et al. (2002) suggest, lexical ambiguity is inherent in natural language because a substantial number of commonly used words have multiple meanings. Consequently, language users must rely on contextual cues to determine the intended interpretation. For instance, the sentence "*I have visited my aunt*" may lead to ambiguity due to the word "*aunt*." This term can refer to either the sister of one's father or mother, making it difficult for the listener to determine the intended meaning without additional context. While homophonous words tend to create confusion in spoken communication, homographic words are more likely to cause misunderstanding in written texts. In educational settings, such as classrooms, this type of lexical ambiguity is frequently encountered by students, particularly when they are unfamiliar with all possible meanings of a word or are unaware of the ambiguity it may create.

Structural ambiguity, meanwhile, originates from the organization of linguistic elements within a sentence. According to Fromkin et al. (2013), structural ambiguity occurs when a sentence can be assigned more than one syntactic interpretation. Likewise, Radford (2004) explains that different structural representations may produce different meanings even when the same lexical items are used. Structural ambiguity may result from unclear phrase attachment, coordination, modification, ellipsis, or other syntactic arrangements that permit multiple interpretations. Previous linguistic studies have also demonstrated that ambiguity may arise at both surface and deep structural levels, leading readers to derive alternative meanings from the same sentence (Sennet, 2016). Therefore, both lexical and structural ambiguities constitute important aspects of semantic analysis, particularly in written communication where interpretation depends heavily on linguistic form.

In the context of EFL writing, ambiguity is often associated with learners' limited vocabulary knowledge and insufficient mastery of grammatical structures. Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in language production, while inadequate lexical competence may lead to inappropriate word selection and unclear meaning. Similarly, insufficient grammatical awareness may affect learners' ability to construct precise and coherent sentences, resulting in structural ambiguity. As a consequence, students' written texts may contain expressions that allow multiple interpretations, thereby reducing writing quality and communicative effectiveness.

A considerable body of research has examined ambiguity from various linguistic perspectives. Chaicharoen (2015), for example, investigated lexical ambiguity resolution and highlighted the important role of contextual information in determining intended meanings. Similarly, Khawalda et al. (2011) explored lexical ambiguity in English and emphasized the contribution of semantic relations such as homonymy, homophony, and polysemy to meaning interpretation. Other studies have focused on identifying lexical and structural ambiguity in different discourse contexts. Rahman & Nurjannah (2017) analyze both lexical and structural ambiguity in texts containing local wisdom. Their primary focus is to identify how syntactic categories contribute to meaning disambiguation. The results indicate that ambiguity most frequently occurs in nouns (46.6%), followed by adjectives (33.33%), verbs (6.66%), and adverbs (6.66%). Charina (2017) explores how lexical and structural ambiguity contribute to humor creation. The study shows that humor may arise when a word carries multiple meanings or when sentence structure and context allow for varied interpretations. Based on 25 sentences analyzed, 12 reflect lexical ambiguity and 13 structural ambiguity. The findings demonstrate that both types of ambiguity are employed in producing humor patterns such as puns, where one interpretation is neutral while another conveys exaggerated or humorous meaning.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into the nature of ambiguity, several limitations remain. First, many studies focus on literary works, humorous discourse, translation, or isolated linguistic examples rather than authentic academic writing produced by EFL learners. Second, most studies primarily classify ambiguity types without examining how ambiguous expressions generate multiple interpretations within students' written texts. Third, relatively few studies integrate semantic analysis with pedagogical implications that may help improve students' writing clarity. Furthermore, previous findings regarding the dominance of lexical or structural ambiguity remain inconsistent. While Tambunan (2009) reports that structural ambiguity occurs more frequently in learners' writing, Kristianty (2006) finds lexical ambiguity to be more dominant. These inconsistencies indicate the need for further investigation in different educational contexts.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining lexical and structural ambiguity in EFL students' essay writing through a semantic analysis framework. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated sentences or non-academic texts, this research analyses authentic essays produced by EFL learners. Furthermore, it does not merely identify ambiguity types but also investigates how

ambiguous expressions create multiple interpretations and explores the linguistic factors contributing to their occurrence. By combining ambiguity classification with semantic interpretation, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of meaning construction in EFL writing and offer pedagogical insights for improving writing clarity and effectiveness.

Based on these objectives, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What types of lexical and structural ambiguity are found in EFL students' essay writing? and (2) What linguistic factors contribute to the occurrence of ambiguity in the students' essays?

RESEARCH METHOD

This section describes the research methodology used in this study, including the research design, participants, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures. The purpose of this section is to provide a clear explanation of how the study was conducted in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. By applying an appropriate methodological framework, the study aims to systematically analyze lexical and structural ambiguity in EFL students' essay writing using a semantic approach.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative research is appropriate for analysing language phenomena in depth, particularly in understanding meaning and interpretation. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding social or linguistic phenomena through detailed data analysis. This design was chosen because the study aims to describe and interpret ambiguity in students' writing rather than to measure it statistically.

Participant, Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all fourth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi during the 2024/2025 academic year. From this population, 20 students were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria were established to ensure that participants were relevant to the research objectives. The selected students had (1) completed academic writing courses, (2) demonstrated sufficient English writing proficiency to produce essay texts, and (3) submitted complete essays of at least 250–300 words on the assigned topic. Essays that were incomplete, plagiarized, or did not meet the minimum length requirement were excluded from the analysis. Purposive sampling was employed because it enables researchers to select participants who possess characteristics relevant to the research focus (Sugiyono, 2017). Since the study aimed to investigate ambiguity in

EFL students' written production, students who met the predetermined criteria were considered the most suitable sources of data.

Instrument

The primary data source consisted of students' essays. Participants were assigned to write argumentative or descriptive essays on topics related to their academic and personal experiences. The essays were collected through documentation techniques and served as the main corpus for semantic analysis. Documentation was selected as the data collection technique because it provides authentic written records that can be examined repeatedly during the analysis process. According to Moleong (2018), documentation is a reliable qualitative data collection technique for obtaining written materials relevant to the research objectives.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using semantic analysis. Semantic analysis focuses on examining how meaning is represented and interpreted in linguistic expressions, including instances of ambiguity. According to Kreidler (1998), semantic analysis investigates the relationship between linguistic forms and their possible meanings. The analysis procedures consisted of the following steps:

1. Reading and reviewing all collected essays thoroughly.
2. Identifying words, phrases, and sentences containing potential ambiguity.
3. Coding and classifying the ambiguous expressions into lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity categories.
4. Validating the classifications through inter-rater checking and peer review.
5. Interpreting the possible meanings of each ambiguous expression based on its linguistic and contextual usage.
6. Identifying patterns and determining the dominant types of ambiguity found in the essays.
7. Drawing conclusions regarding the occurrence and causes of lexical and structural ambiguity in EFL students' essay writing.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation procedures were implemented. First, investigator triangulation was employed through peer checking. Two lecturers with expertise in linguistics and semantics independently reviewed the identified ambiguous expressions and their classifications. Second, inter-rater checking was conducted to ensure consistency in the coding process. The researcher and the independent reviewers analysed the essays separately and classified ambiguous expressions into lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity categories. Any discrepancies in classification were discussed until consensus was reached. Third, coding validation was carried out by comparing the identified ambiguities with established semantic theories proposed by Kreidler (1998) and other relevant linguistic references. Ambiguous expressions were only included in the final analysis when they met the theoretical criteria of lexical or structural ambiguity and were confirmed by the reviewers.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Distribution of Ambiguity

The analysis was conducted on 20 cause and effect essays written by EFL students of fourth semester of Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi. From these essays, a total of 48 ambiguous expressions were identified. These ambiguities were classified into two types: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. The detail data can be seen in the following table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Ambiguity

No	Type of Ambiguity	Frequency	Percentage
1	Lexical ambiguity	18	37.5%
2	Structural ambiguity	30	62.5%
	Total	48	100%

Ambiguity Distribution per Essay

To provide a more detailed understanding of how ambiguity appears in each student's writing, the distribution of lexical and structural ambiguity across the 20 essays is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Ambiguity Distribution per Essay

Essay No	Lexical	Structural	Total
1	1	2	3
2	0	2	2
3	1	1	2
4	2	2	4
5	1	1	2
6	0	2	2
7	1	2	3
8	2	1	3
9	1	2	3
10	0	1	1
11	1	2	3
12	2	1	3
13	1	2	3
14	0	2	2
15	1	1	2
16	1	2	3
17	1	1	2
18	0	1	1
19	1	1	2
20	1	1	2
Total	18	30	48

Lexical Ambiguity and Semantic Interpretation

To illustrate how lexical ambiguity appears in students' writing, several examples of ambiguous words identified in the essays are presented in the following table. The table provides sentence examples, the ambiguous lexical items, and their possible interpretations. This aims to show how a single word can carry multiple

meanings and potentially lead to misunderstanding when the context is not clearly defined.

Table 3. Lexical Ambiguity and Semantic Interpretation

No	Essay	Sentence	Ambiguous Element	Possible Interpretations
1	1	Students need more paper for assignments	paper	writing material / academic article
2	3	The class discussed environmental issues	class	group of students / lesson session
3	4	Education opens many fields of opportunity	field	area of study / open land
4	4	Students need a higher degree for employment	degree	academic qualification / measurement unit
5	5	The bank supports educational programs	bank	financial institution / river bank
6	7	Students joined a special class	class	lesson session / group of students
7	8	Students go to the bank for study	bank	financial place / metaphor
8	8	Technology influences every field.	field	discipline / physical area
9	9	Education has many issues	issues	problems / topics
10	11	Students face problems in study	problems	difficulties / tasks
11	12	The issue is serious	issue	problem / topic
12	12	The class was successful.	class	group of learners / lesson
13	13	Education affects every field	field	discipline / land area
14	15	The principal left a note for the students	note	a short written message / a musical sound
15	16	Students should observe the current trends in education	current	present or existing now / flow of electricity or water
16	17	The school organized a fair for students	fair	an exhibition or event / just and impartial
17	19	Students need the right material for research	material	information or content / physical substance
18	20	The teacher asked students to draw a conclusion.	draw	to infer or reach a conclusion / to create a picture

The findings indicate that lexical ambiguity mainly results from the use of polysemous and homonymous words, such as *paper*, *class*, *field*, *degree*, and *bank*, which have multiple meanings and may lead to different interpretations when contextual information is insufficient. For instance, *paper* may refer to writing material or an academic article, while *degree* may denote an academic qualification or a unit of measurement. These findings support Ullmann's (1962) view that lexical ambiguity occurs because a single lexical item can represent more than one meaning in the mental lexicon. Although context generally helps readers identify the intended meaning, limited contextual cues may create interpretive uncertainty. The results also suggest that students tend to use familiar vocabulary without fully considering contextual appropriateness, reflecting limited vocabulary depth and semantic awareness. Therefore, improving students' understanding of word meanings in context is essential to reduce lexical ambiguity and enhance clarity and precision in academic writing.

Structural Ambiguity and Semantic Interpretation

To further illustrate the occurrence of structural ambiguity in students' essays, the following table presents several examples identified in the data. The table includes sentence examples, the ambiguous structural elements, and their possible interpretations. This presentation aims to show how unclear sentence construction, such as relative clause, adverb, participial phrase and prepositional attachment, can lead to multiple interpretations.

Table 4. Structural Ambiguity and Semantic Interpretation

No	Essay	Sentence	Ambiguous Element	Possible Interpretations
1	1	Students who use phones in class cause distraction	Relative clause attachment	Only phone users cause distraction / all students cause distraction
2	1	Teachers explain lessons to students clearly	Adverb attachment	Teachers explain clearly / students understand clearly
3	2	Students who are lazy fail exams.	Relative clause attachment	Only lazy students fail / all students fail and are lazy
4	2	Teachers give assignments to students quickly.	Adverb attachment	Teachers act quickly / assignments are completed quickly
5	3	Students improve skills using technology.	Participial phrase attachment	Technology is the method / technology modifies skills
6	4	Teachers help students with problems.	Prepositional phrase attachment	Students have problems / teachers use problems when helping
7	4	Students who study in groups improve results.	Relative clause attachment	Group-study students improve / all students improve

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8	5	Students use phones in class frequently.	Adverb scope	Frequent phone use / frequent class occurrence
9	6	Students who use internet excessively get low scores.	Relative clause attachment	Only students who use the internet excessively get low scores / all students get low scores and happen to use the internet excessively
10	6	Teachers explain lessons clearly to students.	Adverb attachment	Teachers explain in a clear manner / students understand the lessons clearly
11	7	Students using phones disturb class.	Participial phrase attachment	Only students using phones disturb the class / all students disturb the class while using phones
12	7	Teachers give tasks to students quickly.	Adverb attachment	Teachers distribute tasks quickly / students are expected to complete tasks quickly
13	8	Students improve skills using technology fast.	Adverb attachment	Students improve skills rapidly / technology is used rapidly in the learning process
14	9	Students who use phones in class get low scores.	Relative clause attachment	Only students using phones get low scores / all students get low scores and are phone users
15	9	Teachers help students with assignments.	Prepositional phrase attachment	Teachers help students who have assignments / teachers use assignments as a means of helping
16	10	Students improve learning using technology.	Participial phrase attachment	Technology is the method used to improve learning / learning itself uses technology
17	11	Teachers explain lessons to students clearly.	Adverb attachment	Teachers explain lessons clearly / students receive the explanation clearly
18	11	Students who study hard get success.	Relative clause attachment	Only hardworking students achieve success / all students achieve success and are hardworking
19	12	Students improve results using technology.	Participial phrase attachment	Technology helps improve results / results themselves involve technological use
20	13	Students using phones disturb class.	Participial phrase attachment	Only phone-using students disturb class / all students disturb class while using phones
21	13	Teachers give assignments to students quickly.	Adverb attachment	Teachers assign work quickly / students are expected to respond or finish quickly
22	14	Students who use social media get distracted.	Relative clause attachment	Only social-media users become distracted / all

				students are distracted and use social media
23	14	Teachers explain lessons to students clearly.	Adverb attachment	Teachers deliver explanations clearly / students understand the explanations clearly
24	15	Students use phones in class often.	Adverb scope	Phone use happens frequently / classes in which phones are used occur frequently
25	16	Students who use phones in class fail exams.	Relative clause attachment	Only students who use phones fail exams / all students fail exams and happen to use phones
26	16	Lecturers explain concepts clearly to participants.	Adverb attachment	Lecturers explain concepts clearly / participants understand the concepts clearly
27	17	Researchers improve data analysis using software.	Participial phrase attachment	Software is the tool used for data analysis improvement / data analysis itself involves software use
28	18	Employees who use smartphones get distracted.	Relative clause attachment	Only smartphone users become distracted / all employees become distracted and happen to use smartphones
29	19	Trainers explain procedures clearly to trainees.	Adverb attachment	Trainers explain procedures clearly / trainees understand the procedures clearly
30	20	Students improve skills using technology	using technology	unclear modifier

The findings show that structural ambiguity mainly resulted from relative clause, adverb, participial phrase, and prepositional phrase attachment, with adverb attachment occurring most frequently. These results highlight the importance of grammatical structure in reducing ambiguity and improving clarity in academic writing.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that ambiguity is a significant issue in EFL students' cause-and-effect essay writing. From the analysis of 20 essays, a total of 48 ambiguous expressions were identified, consisting of 18 cases of lexical ambiguity (37.5%) and 30 cases of structural ambiguity (62.5%). This result clearly indicates that structural ambiguity is more dominant than lexical ambiguity in students' writing. The predominance of structural ambiguity suggests that students encounter greater challenges in constructing grammatically clear and well-organized sentences than in selecting appropriate vocabulary. The dominance of structural ambiguity highlights the crucial role of grammatical competence in determining clarity in writing. Many students produced sentences with unclear

syntactic structures, particularly in the use of relative clauses, adverbial modifiers, participial phrases, and prepositional phrases. For instance, the sentence "Students who use phones in class get low scores" illustrates how ambiguity arises when it is unclear whether the relative clause refers only to a specific group of students or whether the statement can be interpreted more broadly. This supports the argument that structural ambiguity emerges when sentence structure allows multiple interpretations due to the arrangement of linguistic elements. In this context, students' limited understanding of syntax contributes significantly to unclear meaning construction.

Furthermore, the frequent occurrence of ambiguous modifiers suggests that students lack awareness of how sentence structure influences meaning. In academic writing, especially in cause-and-effect essays, clarity is essential because students are expected to explain logical relationships between ideas. When modifiers are attached to different sentence elements, the intended relationship between cause and effect becomes unclear. For example, in the sentence "Teachers explain lessons clearly to students," the adverb clearly may refer either to the manner in which teachers explain the lessons or to the extent to which students understand them. Similarly, in the sentence "Teachers give assignments to students quickly," the adverb quickly may describe the teachers' action of assigning tasks or imply that students complete the assignments quickly. Such ambiguity not only creates confusion but also weakens the logical flow of the essay. Therefore, students' difficulties are not only related to grammatical knowledge but also to their ability to apply grammatical structures effectively in meaningful contexts.

In addition, structural ambiguity may also stem from students' reliance on simple sentence patterns without fully understanding more complex grammatical constructions. Many students tend to produce sentences by directly translating ideas from their first language into English without considering syntactic differences. This transfer effect often leads to unnatural or ambiguous sentence structures. For example, sentences such as "Students improve learning using technology" and "Researchers improve data analysis using software" contain participial phrase ambiguity because it is unclear whether the phrases using technology and using software function as methods of improvement or modify another element in the sentence. As a result, even though the intended meaning may be clear to the writer, it becomes unclear to the reader. This phenomenon reflects a gap between linguistic knowledge and practical language use, where students may understand grammar theoretically but struggle to apply it in real writing situations.

Meanwhile, lexical ambiguity, although less frequent, still plays an important role in causing misunderstanding. The analysis showed that several words used by students carried more than one possible meaning depending on the context in which they appeared. This finding indicates that students often rely on familiar vocabulary without fully considering its semantic complexity. As a result, readers may interpret the same word differently when contextual clues are insufficient. The occurrence of lexical ambiguity suggests that students' vocabulary knowledge is still limited not only in terms of the number of words they know but also in their understanding of multiple meanings and contextual usage.

Consequently, lexical ambiguity remains a challenge that can affect the precision and effectiveness of academic writing.

This finding aligns with the idea that vocabulary mastery is not only about knowing the meaning of words but also understanding their appropriate usage in different contexts. Students who lack this depth of vocabulary knowledge are more likely to produce ambiguous expressions. Moreover, the tendency to use familiar or frequently used words suggests that students may avoid more precise vocabulary due to uncertainty or lack of confidence. As a result, their writing becomes less specific and more open to multiple interpretations. Another important aspect revealed in this study is that ambiguity in students' writing is not caused by a single factor but by the interaction between grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge. The presence of both lexical and structural ambiguity indicates that students face challenges in integrating different components of language. Writing requires the ability to combine vocabulary, grammar, and meaning into a coherent and unified expression. However, when one or more of these components are weak, ambiguity is likely to occur. This supports the view that language learning is a complex process that involves multiple interrelated skills rather than isolated elements.

In addition, the findings suggest that students' lack of awareness of ambiguity contributes significantly to the problem. Many students may not realize that their sentences contain multiple meanings because they focus more on completing the task than on ensuring clarity. This indicates that ambiguity is not only a linguistic issue but also a cognitive one, where students fail to evaluate their writing from the reader's perspective. In academic writing, this awareness is essential because the primary goal is to communicate ideas clearly and effectively.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings have several important implications. First, there is a need to strengthen students' grammatical competence, particularly in sentence structure. Teachers should provide explicit instruction on how to construct clear sentences, including the correct placement of modifiers, the use of relative clauses, and the organization of sentence elements. Instead of focusing solely on grammatical rules, instruction should emphasize how these rules function in real communication. Practice activities that involve analysing and revising ambiguous sentences can help students develop a better understanding of how meaning is constructed.

Second, vocabulary instruction should go beyond introducing new words and focus on developing depth of word knowledge. Students need to understand not only the meaning of a word but also its different possible interpretations and appropriate contexts of use. Teaching strategies such as contextual learning, collocation practice, and semantic mapping can help students use vocabulary more precisely. By increasing their awareness of polysemy and word usage, students can reduce the likelihood of lexical ambiguity in their writing.

Third, raising students' awareness of ambiguity is essential. Teachers can incorporate activities that encourage students to identify and correct ambiguous expressions in their own writing. Peer review and collaborative editing can also be effective in helping students recognize ambiguity from different perspectives.

When students learn to evaluate their writing critically, they become more capable of producing clear and effective texts.

Moreover, the findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of EFL writing challenges. While previous studies have shown that both lexical and structural ambiguity occur in students' writing, this study provides more specific evidence that structural ambiguity is more dominant in cause-and-effect essays. This suggests that different types of writing may present different challenges for students. In argumentative or narrative writing, for example, the distribution of ambiguity types may differ. Therefore, future research can explore ambiguity in various genres of academic writing to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize that ambiguity remains a major challenge in EFL students' writing. The predominance of structural ambiguity indicates that improving grammatical competence should be a primary focus in writing instruction. At the same time, lexical ambiguity highlights the need for deeper vocabulary knowledge and contextual awareness. By addressing both aspects simultaneously and increasing students' awareness of clarity in writing, educators can help learners produce more precise, coherent, and effective academic texts. A deeper interpretation of the findings suggests that the dominance of structural ambiguity is closely related to the cognitive and linguistic demands of second-language writing. According to Corder (1967), learner errors are not merely signs of failure but indicators of an evolving interlanguage system. In the present study, students appeared to possess sufficient vocabulary to express basic ideas; however, they experienced greater difficulty organizing those ideas into grammatically accurate structures. This may explain why structural ambiguity occurred more frequently than lexical ambiguity. While lexical choices can often be compensated for through context, syntactic ambiguity directly affects the relationships among sentence elements, making the intended meaning more difficult to recover.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study aimed to analyse lexical and structural ambiguity in EFL students' cause-and-effect essay writing using a semantic approach. Based on the analysis of 20 student essays, a total of 48 ambiguous expressions were identified, consisting of 18 cases of lexical ambiguity and 30 cases of structural ambiguity. These findings indicate that both types of ambiguity are present in students' writing, with structural ambiguity occurring more frequently. The dominance of structural ambiguity suggests that students experience greater difficulty in constructing clear and well-organized sentences. Problems such as misplaced modifiers, unclear clause relationships, and improper sentence structure contribute significantly to ambiguity. Meanwhile, lexical ambiguity arises from limited vocabulary knowledge and inappropriate word choice, particularly when students use words with multiple meanings without sufficient contextual support. Overall, the study reveals that ambiguity in students' writing is mainly caused by limited grammatical competence, insufficient vocabulary mastery, and lack of awareness of sentence clarity. These

issues affect the quality of writing, especially in cause-and-effect essays where logical relationships must be expressed clearly and precisely.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that EFL teaching should place greater emphasis on both grammatical accuracy and contextual vocabulary use. Teachers should provide explicit instruction on sentence structure, encourage revision and proofreading practices, and raise students' awareness of ambiguity in writing. In addition, incorporating semantic analysis activities in the classroom can help students better understand how meaning is constructed and interpreted. Finally, this study is limited to a small number of participants and focuses only on cause-and-effect essays. Future research is suggested to involve a larger sample size and explore ambiguity in different types of academic writing to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue. Drawing on Contrastive Analysis Theory (Lado, 1957), learners often transfer linguistic structures from their first language when composing texts in a foreign language. While such transfer may facilitate idea generation, it can also create ambiguity when the syntactic conventions of the two languages differ. In this study, the frequent occurrence of ambiguities involving relative clauses, modifier attachment, and participial phrases suggests that students experienced difficulty adapting Indonesian sentence patterns to the more explicit syntactic requirements of English. Therefore, structural ambiguity appears to reflect not only limited grammatical competence but also the influence of L1-based processing strategies in EFL writing.

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