Evaluating EFL Learners' Recognition of Near-Synonyms

تقييم قدرة تمييز متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية للمرادفات شبه المتماثلة

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مكان العمل: الكلية التربوية المفتوحة

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كيفية اقتباس البحث

Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2024 Volume: 14 Issue :2
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2024, Volume: 14, Issue: 2

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How To Cite This Article

Yaqoob, Hiba Mohammed, Evaluating EFL Learners' Recognition of Near-Synonyms, Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, April 2024,Volume:14,Issue 2.

الملخص

تدور الدراسة الحالية حول شبه المرادفات وكيف يمكن ان تكون مصدرا للإرباك لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة ثانية ؛كما ان عدم ادراك المعنى الدقيق لها يؤدي الى سوء الفهم او ازالة ماء وجه الاخرين او عدم الالمام بها قد يسبب مشاكلا في صياغة اسئلة الاختبارات المدرسية لمعلمي اللغة الانجليزية.

اختار الباحث طلبة الكلية التربوية المفتوحة–مركز نينوى الدراسي ،قسم اللغة الانجليزية ذوي تخصصات ومخرجات مختلفة :معلمي اللغة الانجليزية ،معلمي التخصصات الاخرى ومن غير المعلمين .بلغ عدد العينة (45) فردا من اصل (70).اعد الباحث اختبارا تضمن (17) فقرة مقسما الى مرادفات ذات المعنى الدلالي ومرادفات ذات المعنى التلميحي .بعد عرض الاختبار الى مجموعة من الخبراء في جامعة الموصل ،كلية الآداب ،قسم اللغة الانجليزية .تم تطبيق الاختبار بعد اجراء بعض من التعديلات المقترحة من قبل الخبراء .تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة الى ان متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية قد اظهروا قدرة على تمييز المرادفات الهدف بشكل عام

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Evaluating EFL Learners' Recognition of Near-Synonyms

كما اظهروا قدرة على تمييز مرادفات المعنى الدلالي اكثر من المرادفات ذات المعنى التلميحي بالنسبة لمتغير المرحلة، اظهر طلبة الصف الرابع قدرة على تمييز المرادفات الهدف اعلى مقارنة ببقية المراحل الدراسية. اما بالنسبة لمتغير التخصص، فقد اظهر متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية الذين يعملون كمعلمين للغة الانجليزية القدرة على تمييز المرادفات الهدف اعلى من المعلمين ذوي التخصصات الاخرى وكذلك غير المعلمين.

Abstract

The current study revolves around evaluating the problematic degree of near-synonyms for EFL learners as a second language, which consequently results in misunderstandings or threats to others' faces or can cause problems in the formulation of exam questions for English teachers.

The researcher selected students from the **"Open Educational Collage-Nineveh Study Center,"** Department of English who are originally certified by different outputs: English teachers who have no university certificates, teachers of other disciplines, and non-teachers. The sample number was 45 out of 70. The researcher prepared a test that included 17 items divided into synonyms of denotational meaning and synonyms of connotative meaning (See Appendix).

After the test was presented to a group of experts at the University of Mosul, Collage of Arts, Department of English, it was applied, after some of the modifications proposed by the experts. The results indicate that EFL learners showed an ability to distinguish the target synonyms, and there was a remarkable ability to distinguish synonyms of denotational meaning more than those of connotative meaning. For the variable of grade, students in the fourth grade showed the ability to distinguish the target synonyms compared to other grades. As for the specialty variable, EFL learners who work as EFL teachers, who have no university certificates, showed an ability to distinguish the target synonyms compared to other teachers of other specializations and non-teachers.

1.Introduction

Kroeger (2018:108) shows that synonyms are words that "mean the same thing," hence each two words can be substituted by each other without changing their meaning.

The concept of **"near-synonyms"** has appeared, depending on the idea that perfect synonyms are extremely rare because different implicatures can be produced from identical and similar utterances that share the same truth conditions but vary in logical forms (Levinson, 1983:125). Learning synonyms requires learners to be accurate because they can be a source of confusion.

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1.1 The Problem of the Study:

Most EFL learners think that synonyms are similar words in meaning and can be easily used interchangeably, neglecting the presence of different referents of a word itself. Although synonyms share semantic similarities, they differ in their contextual usage. Thus, EFL learners misuse synonyms by substituting synonyms in inappropriate contexts (Laufer,1990). A test is applied to teachers who are EFL learners in the "**Open Educational Collage.**" In brief, EFL learners may confuse these words, especially when constructing test questions.

1.2 The Aim of the Study:

Words of similar meaning are considered a problematic issue for EFL learners because of the idea that" **denotative meaning**" may have more than one referent and the role of context in varying the" **connotative meaning**" of similar words. Thus, the current study aims at:
1. Testing if EFL learners and teachers who have no university certificate are able to recognize the target near-synonyms.
2. Testing which kind of synonym is best recognized: denotative or connotative.
3. Determining if the variables "Grade" and "specialization" affect EFL learners' ability to recognize target synonyms.

1.3 The Value of the Study:

This study sheds light on the idea that not all words necessarily have the exact similar meaning and can be substituted in all contexts. Also, it emphasizes that meaning of synonyms is either "denotative " or connotative. It raises EFL learners' attention to the necessity of using words, especially those used in constructing questions like **"answer"** or **"reply"** and **"statements"** and **"sentences."**

2.Literature Review

2.1. Near-Synonyms

Lyon (1968:448) defines synonyms as "two or more lexical items which have the same meaning if they can replace each other without any change in the meaning of context." Synonyms are treated as a problematic issue for EFL learners. Although each synonym has its own distinct meaning, it is not completely interchangeable (Edmond &Hirst,2002:107).One of the reasons that make synonyms cannot be used interchangeably is that their interpretation depends on context (Liu,2013)Accordingly, synonyms are classified into two types: "perfect" and "near-synonyms.".
1. Perfect synonyms: they are technical terms and nearly concrete words from separate linguistic sources (Hasan,2009:2).

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2. Near-synonyms: they can be clearly defined as words similar in meaning but not identical and cannot be replaced in every context (Edmond&Hirst,2000).

2.2. Denotative Meaning

Udofot (1999:22) explains "denotative meaning" as "the ordinary dictionary every day meaning of a word or expression." Crystal (1987:418) defines denotative meaning as the object in a (dictionary) relationship between a word and the reality to which it refers. Denotative meaning is limited to only one literal meaning (Zuhdah and Alfarn ,2020:105).The restriction of denotative meaning can be extended to not only real referents but imaginary ones as well (Lobner,2000:25).

The following "near-synonyms" are with various denotative meanings:

2.2.1. "Tool" / "Instrument"

By replacing the word **"instrument"** with **"tool,"** They need some basic "**tools**" like a "**hammer**" and a **"screwdriver."** The sentence will not be quite correct because **"instrument"** means **"devices for precise scientific and technical processes,"** unlike the tools "hammer" and "screwdrivers.".

(1) **"Do you need tools like a screw and a hammer?"**

(2) **"Do you need instruments like a screw and a hammer?"**

2.2.2 "Ray" / "Beam"

Both words "Ray" and "Beam" are used as **"lights",** but they are of various sources. Using the word **'beam'** in:

(3) **"A ray of sunshine entered into the room"**

(4) **"A beam of sunshine entered into the room"**

It is not correct, as **"beam"** refers to "a strong stream of light, often from an artificial source," while **"ray"** means "a thin bar of light, especially sunlight."

2.2.3 "Feeling" / "Sentiment"

Despite having similar meanings, these two terms are used differently. **"Feeling"** means "the capacity to feel love, hate, or anger," while **"sentiment"** means "the attitude of mind," as in:

(5) **"People often have strong sentiments about capital punishment"**

(6) **"People often have strong feelings about capital punishment."**

The aforementioned statement is inappropriate semantically since people frequently "feel hateful or angry toward such punishment." Consequently, individuals rely on their emotions rather than "sentiments" that originate from their thoughts.

2.2.4 "Ripe"/"Mature"

Although the terms "ripe" and "mature" in this context refer to similar concepts, they indicate different stages of development. "Ripe" refers to "a state in which food is ready to eat, while "mature" refers to a state in

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which food has reached its peak, particularly in the case of cheese and wine.

(7) "These apples are not quite mature, but they will soften in a few days."

(8)"These apples are not quite ripe, but they will soften in a few days".

The aforementioned statement is false because the word "ripe" must "be used for fruits in specific.".

2.2.5 "Marriage" / "Wedding"

These two synonyms appear to have the same meaning. **"Wedding"** refers to "the ceremony making the event," but the first term **"marriage"** indicates "the state of being married.".

(9) "We had a quite interesting wedding in a famous hall."

(10) "We had a quite interesting marriage in a famous hall."

"The state of this action" is what the word **"wedding"** refers to. It covers every need for organizing a wedding, including the location, protocol, attire, and attendees. The word **"marriage"** is used to describe "persons, whether they are married or not." As a result, using the word **"wedding"** rather than **"marriage"** would not confuse the listener or reader because the speaker discusses the event itself and how it was an engaging party.

2.2.6 "Jealousy"/"Envy"

Also, these near-synonyms seem similar from the outside, but they are different in their exact meaning, where **"jealousy"** means "the desire to have absolute possession of someone or something," while **"envy"** means "the desire to have the same good fortune as someone else," as in:

(11) "Students must be envious of education."

(12) "Students must be jealous of education."

Replacing **"jealousy"** with **"envy"** could cause unethical misunderstandings. The listener will comprehend that, despite education being a source of morality and respect, the speaker promotes immoral behavior in the classroom.

2.2.7 "**Answer**"/ "**Reply**"

This item is used when there is a question or on a math test. It can be written or spoken, while reply means responding to someone and having a conversation with them.

(13) "John says: The weather is so nice.".

"Layla replies/* Answer: Let's go hiking.".

2.2.8 "Sentence"/"Statement"

The sentence is more general than a statement. The former is a group of words that usually have a subject and a verb. It can be a statement, a

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question, or a command. Statements are basic facts or opinions and are a kind of sentence.

(14) "Identify if the following statements are questions, imperatives, or exclamatory."

2.2.9 "Save" /"Rescue"

These two near-synonyms refer the same meaning, but the difference is "rescue" is used for only a person and people unlike "save" it can be used for the both.

(15)"Using seat belts saved us from danger"

(16)"Using seat belts rescued us from danger"

2.2.10 "Student"/ "Pupil"

The word pupil is used to refer to a learner in primary schools, while "**student**" is used to refer to a learner at universities.

(17)"This book is for students at university."

(18)"This book is for pupils at university."

2.2.11 "Mend" /"Repair"

These two words are used interchangeably, but **"mend"** is more specified in contexts of clothes, as in:

(19)"She will repair my broken machine."

(20) "She will mend my broken machine."

2.2.12 "Below" /"Under"

Both words are used interchangeably, but **"below"** is used in measuring temperature, while **"under"** is used when the object is only under something else.

(21)"What are you hiding under your hat?"

(22)"What are you hiding below your hat?"

Choose is used to describe both the act of choosing from a range of options and the act of saying yes/ no.

2.3 Connotative meaning

The notion that significant phrases must always be "denotations" is untrue. It is evident from connotative words- words with similar denotations having different connotations- that some expressions and words that are thought of as synonyms actually have different meanings, which is a source of "confusion" for many EFL learners. A word's ability to communicate is determined by its referents (Leech, 1974:5).

Jeffies (1998:109) defines **"connotative meaning"** as "a word we use lightly and often in everyday language to refer to obvious but indirectly expressed emotions." Yule (2006:57) clarifies the way of analyzing "connotative meaning" as it depends on the beliefs and the speaker's knowledge and can be exchanged by any objective imaginary references. Connotation can take on several meanings. Thus, a word's meaning

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doesn't change while its connotations do (Lobner, 2000:35) says that a word has a constant meaning but different connotations, which can lead EFL learners to be confused.

A significant and special kind of connotation that represents the core of our research is **"negative connotation."**. Ignorance of **"negative connotation"** leads to breaking the politeness principle and consequently "face-threatening" others. Examples of **"near-synonyms"** with connotative meaning are the following pairs:

2.3.1. "Childish" / "childlike"

Though on the surface, these two phrases seem to relate to a tiny boy or girl, they actually signify quite different things. For example, the word **"childish"** has a negative connotation that suggests "behaving immaturely," while the word **"youthful"** means "lively" and "energetic.".

(23) "In spite of your age, you have great energy. You are childish."
(24) "It was childish, and she should get over it."

In the aforementioned example, the speaker aims to compare and convey his appreciation for the listener's tremendous energy, which is similar to that of youth, but he misuses the appropriate word by substituting the negative term **"childish"** for the positive one **"Youthful.".**

2.3.2 "Skinny"/"Slim"

While another synonym expressly has a similar connotation, its meaning is different, which could confuse and have a negative effect on the reader or listener. "Too thin to the extent that his or her body appears like a "skeleton" is the definition of skinny. If anything, the term "slim" refers to "someone who is not fat and has a positive or neutral connotation."

(25) "You have lost your weight horribly"; "You look skinny."

When the speaker criticizes the listener for his drastic weight loss, he uses the term **"ugly"** or "shocking." Therefore, **"skinny"** is the appropriate word to use to describe him as an ugly person, similar to a skeleton.

2.3.3. "Jabbering"/"Chatty"

Although they all allude to someone who speaks a lot, these terms have distinct meanings. Unlike the word "chatty", which has a positive connotation of "friendly to me", the phrase "jabbering" has a negative connotation of "annoyance".

(26) "He was so friendly because he was jabbering all the time."

The speaker misapplied the term **"jabbering,"** calling the listener outgoing and gregarious rather than using the more appropriate equivalent, **"chatty,"** because he was unaware of its connotation.

2.3.4 "Club"/"Group"/"Clique"

When we examine the precise meanings of **"club"** and **"group,"** we discover that although they have similar literal meanings, they actually

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have different connotations. For example, **"club"** refers to "a group of people that comes voluntarily together for a shared passion or purpose with a positive connotation," whereas "group" has a neutral connotation because it describes a variety of people. In contrast to the previous pair, the word **"clique"** has a negative meaning because it refers to a group of people who are known for excluding others.

(27)"I don't like his reaction; therefore put him in a clique"

2.3.5 "Steal"/"Rob"

The verb **"steal"** implies "the theft of small things without force or violence", while **"rob"** denotes "to bigger and more valuable objects."

This connotative meaning of the verb **"rob"** is related to and associated with a pejorative, negative connotation. It is used with institutions or people. On the contrary, the verb **"steal"** has a positive meaning.

(28) "The gang robbed the tourists on the plane"

 (29) "The gang stole the tourists on the plane"

3. Methodology and Data Analysis:

3.1 The Sample of the Study

Students of the four grades in the "**Open Educational Collage,"** Department of English have been chosen as a sample for this study. They also vary in specialization: EFL teachers, teachers of other specialties and non-teachers.

3.2 Instruments

A test   was created by the researcher to gauge how well EFL students could identify the target synonyms. It has seventeen items total, with two alternatives for each item. Five of them have connotative meaning, and the remaining twelve are about denotative meaning. The researcher used near-synonyms from the book **"Advanced English Course (2009).**

3.3 The Validity of the Tests:

Six specialists from the University of Mosul, the Collage of Arts, and the Department of English evaluated the test and made some adjustments and suggestions. Both the face validity and content validity of the test were determined to be valid. (0.82) was the test's validity. The experts' arithmetic mean of all the scores revealed it.

3.4 The Reliability of the Test

Cronbach's alphas were employed in the study to gauge the test's dependability. The reliability of the test was 0.83 when the researcher queried twelve EFL students who were not in the same chosen sample.

3.5 Scoring

The test is scored using the following scheme: one point is awarded for a correct response and zero for an erroneous response.

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3.6 Data Analysis

After gathering several pairs of related synonyms and dissecting each pair's meaning, it is discovered that while synonyms are defined for English language learners as two terms with the same meaning, they are interchangeable due to differences in semantic features and the potential for pragmatic meaning for some of them. Because not all words that seem similar have exactly the same meaning, this kind of difference is thought to be confusing for English language learners. As previously discussed, synonyms can cause confusion since they might have both denotative and connotative meanings. In terms of the denotative meaning, a list of twelve pairs of "near-synonyms" is shown, which appear to have identical meanings, but actually have different meanings and five pairs of synonyms are shown, which don't share a connotative meaning. This presents a problem for EFL learners, particularly those with "negative connotation.".

Table 1: Overall Differences According to Test Value

N	Mean	Test Value	Std. Deviation	t-cal.	t- tab.	Sig.
45	10.4667	8.5	2.65090	4.977	2.017 (0.05) (44)	0.000*

Table(1) above illustrates how the research sample, which consists of EFL learners, has a higher degree of near-synonym recognition because their mean is higher than the test's hypothetical mean. Additionally, the T-test's calculated result is higher than its tabulated value. This suggests that EFL students did a decent job of recognizing the nearly synonyms that were utilized.

Table 2 :Differences According to the Two types of Synonyms

Test type	Mean	%
Synonyms (denotational)	7.6889	69.90%
Synonyms (Connotatives)	2.7778	55.56%

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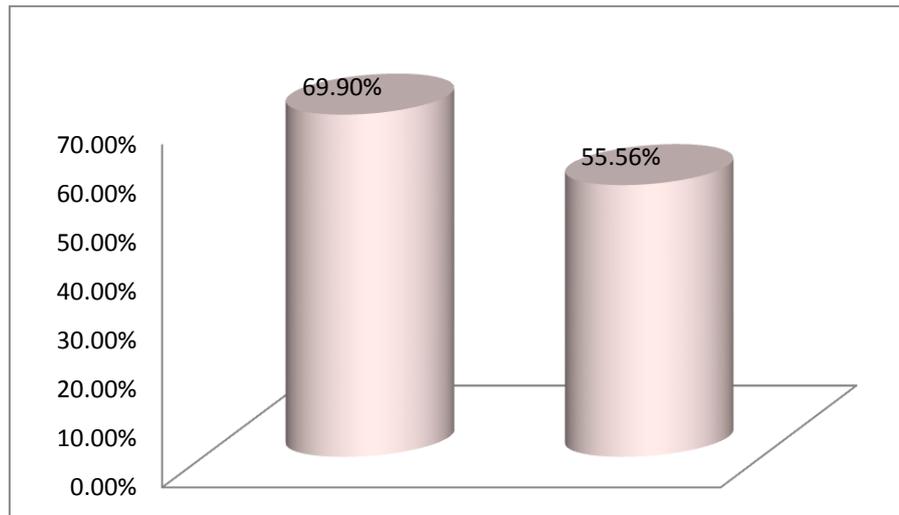
As shown in Table (2) above, the percentage of the near-synonyms that have no connotative meaning is higher than that of the connotative ones. This may mean that EFL learners have less ability to identify those of implied or connotative meaning.

Table 3: Differences According to the Variable of Grade

Stage	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
First	9	10.3333	3.16228
Second	12	10.3333	2.60536
Third	21	10.0476	2.24669
Fourth	3	14.3333	1.52753

Sources of variation	d.f.	Sum of squares	Mean sum of squares	F-cal.	F- tab.	Sig.
Between groups	3	58.914	19.638	3.217	2.836 (0.05) (3 , 41)	0.042*
Within groups	41	250.286	6.105			
Total	44	309.200				

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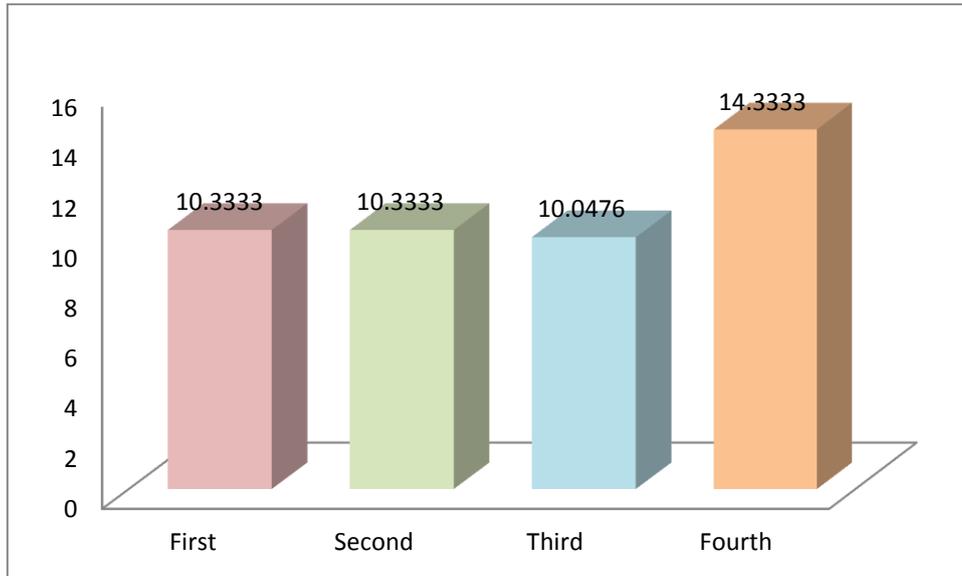
According to the variable of grade, it is clearly shown in table (3) that the fourth grade of EFL learners achieved a high level of recognition to recognize target near-synonyms compared to other grades.

Table 4: Differences According to the Variable of Specialization

Specialization	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
English language teacher	28	10.6667	2.80848
Another specialty teacher	12	10.4643	2.70801
Non-teachers	5	10.0000	1.87083

Sources of variation	d.f.	Sum of squares	Mean sum of squares	F-cal.	F- tab.	Sig.
Between groups	2	1.569	0.785	0.107	3.222 (0.05) (2 , 42)	0.899
Within groups	42	307.631	7.325			
Total	44	309.200				

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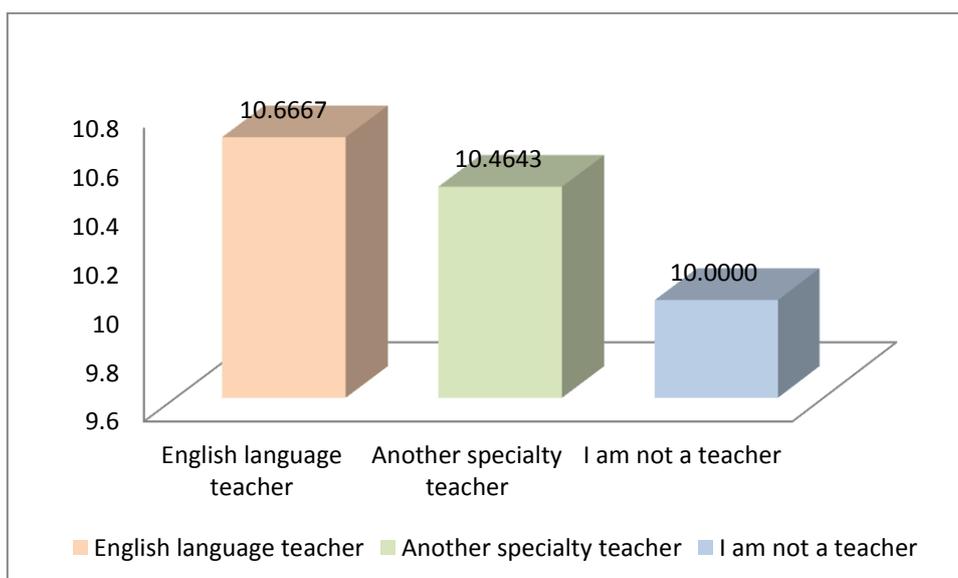
Comparing the three groups of EFL learners, who vary in their specialization, it is clear from table (4) that the category of EFL learners, who are originally EFL teachers, has ranked first in identifying suitable target synonyms because the mean of the former is higher than the second one. This can be attributed to the EFL learners' experience in schools, followed by teachers of other specializations and non-teachers in sequence.

4. Conclusion:

Depending on the research results, it can be concluded that:

1. EFL learners in the "**Open Educational Collage**" have a high level of ability to recognize near-synonyms.

2. EFL learners achieved a high level of recognition of denotational synonyms compared to the connotative ones.

3. According to the variable of "grade,", fourth-grade students have achieved a high level of synonym differentiation compared to the rest of the grades. This may be attributed to being more experienced and mostly EFL teachers by origin.

4. For the variable of "specialization," EFL learners, who are EFL teachers, achieved the first position in synonym differentiation, followed by teachers of other disciplines and non-teachers.

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 http://doi.org/10.24843/e-j1.2020.v14.i01.p011.

Appendix

Q. Choose the correct option:

1. She was shocked by the --------------- of the truck's headlights.

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a. beam   b. ray

2. Do you need ----------------- like a screw and a hammer?

a. instruments   b. tools

3. I think they are enough ---------------- to get married.

a. ripe   b. matured

4. Studies have shown that -------------- actually gets better in old age.

a. wedding   b. marriage

5. It was -------------- and she should get over it.

a. childish   b. child like

6. What the hell! She has lost her weight horribly! She seems ------------

a. slim   b. skinny

7. It was so nervous because the meeting was full of people --------------
into their mobile phones.

a. jabbering   b. chattering

8. My heart was ------------ .

a. robbed   b. stolen

9. Tom discussed a matter and I ------------------.

a. replied   b. answered

10.This book is for -------------- at university.

a. students.   b. pupils.

11. She will ------------- my broken machine.

a. repair   b. mend

12. Identify if the following ----------------- are questions, imperatives or
exclamatory.

a. statements   b. sentences

13. What are you hiding --------------- your hat?

a. under   b. below

14. The aim is to impose by force a puppet ------------- against the will of
our people.

a. club   b. clique

15. Do you think that ---------------- can lead people to be selfish?

a. envy   b. jealousy

16. We had a quite interesting ---------------- in a famous hall.

Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2024 Volume: 14 Issue :2
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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a. marriage   b. wedding

17. People often have strong --------------- about capital punishment.

a. sentiments   b. feelings.

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Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2024 Volume: 14 Issue :2
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)