

Examining Students' Skills in Differentiating the Meaning Relations of Homonyms, Homophones, and Homographs

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ABSTRACT

Students often struggle to distinguish words that look or sound similar but have different meanings. They also face challenges in using these words appropriately, leading to errors in comprehension and language use. This study aims to assess students' ability to differentiate the meanings of homonyms, homophones, and homographs, as well as to identify their level of accuracy and the difficulties they encounter in understanding and using these words in context. Using a qualitative approach, the research was conducted through comprehension tests, interviews, and observations of students. The findings indicate that while students have a basic understanding of these concepts, they still struggle to interpret meanings based on context, particularly with words that share similar pronunciation or identical spelling but have different meanings. Common errors were most frequently related to homophones, suggesting that students' listening and writing skills influence their ability to distinguish these words accurately. Additionally, confidence played a role in students' responses, as those with higher confidence tended to provide clearer and more accurate answers. Based on these findings, this study recommends strengthening teaching methods that emphasize contextual understanding, improving listening and writing skills, and fostering a more supportive learning environment to help students better differentiate word meanings.

Keywords: Homonyms; Homophones; Homographs

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental medium of communication, allowing individuals to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas effectively. In both spoken and written interactions, the accurate use of words is crucial for ensuring clarity and comprehension. However, certain words in English share similarities in spelling or pronunciation while carrying different meanings, often causing confusion among language learners. This challenge is particularly evident in homonyms, homophones, and homographs, which frequently pose difficulties for students learning English as a second language.

Homonyms are words that share both spelling and pronunciation but have distinct meanings, such as *bat*, which can refer to either a flying mammal or a piece of sports equipment. Homophones, in contrast, are words that sound identical but have different spellings and meanings, such as *flour* and *flower*. Homographs, on the other hand, have the same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings, such as *lead* (to guide) and *lead* (a type of metal). The complexity of these word relationships often leads to ambiguity, particularly in reading and listening activities.

Many students struggle to differentiate these linguistic categories, resulting in errors related to comprehension, pronunciation, and contextual word usage. Misinterpreting homonyms, homophones, and homographs can affect their ability to construct meaningful sentences, accurately understand reading materials, and convey messages effectively in spoken interactions. Furthermore, difficulties in distinguishing these words may lead to misunderstandings in communication, particularly in academic and professional settings where precision in language use is essential.

Given these challenges, this study aims to examine students' ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs, identify common errors, and analyze the factors contributing to these difficulties. Using a qualitative approach, the research will employ comprehension tests, interviews, and observations to gain deeper insights into students' lexical processing and their strategies for distinguishing these words in various contexts.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of teaching methods by identifying areas where students require additional support in vocabulary acquisition. Educators can utilize these insights to develop more effective instructional strategies that emphasize contextual learning, listening exercises, and writing accuracy. Additionally, this research may serve as a reference for curriculum designers in enhancing English language programs to address lexical ambiguity more effectively.

Beyond benefiting educators and curriculum developers, this study is also significant for students, as it can help improve their language proficiency by refining their ability to recognize and use words accurately in context. Mastery of

homonyms, homophones, and homographs will not only enhance their reading comprehension and writing skills but also boost their confidence in verbal communication. Developing strong lexical awareness will further aid students in avoiding misinterpretations and miscommunications in both academic and everyday language use.

This study focuses on students from the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. It specifically examines their ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs through various assessments while identifying patterns in their errors. However, this study does not extend to other linguistic aspects such as grammar, sentence structure, or overall English fluency. Instead, it concentrates on students' understanding of these lexical categories in both written and spoken contexts.

By investigating the challenges students face in distinguishing similar-sounding and similar-looking words, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into second-language acquisition and semantic learning. Ultimately, the study aims to offer recommendations for improving English language instruction, equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate lexical complexities and enhance their overall linguistic competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learners often struggle to understand words that look or sound alike but have different meanings. This challenge is particularly evident in homonyms, homophones, and homographs, which can cause confusion in both written and spoken communication. The ability to distinguish between these word categories is essential for effective language comprehension and expression. A strong vocabulary foundation enables learners to infer meanings based on context, making vocabulary mastery a crucial factor in overcoming these difficulties.

Homonyms are words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings. For example, the word *bat* can refer to a flying mammal or a piece of sports equipment. Homonyms often lead to lexical ambiguity, where the intended meaning depends entirely on context. Smirnitsky (1955) categorizes homonyms into full and partial homonyms based on their grammatical functions. To correctly interpret homonyms, students must pay close attention to sentence structure and context.

Homophones, in contrast, are words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings, such as *flour* (used for baking) and *flower* (a plant). Since homophones rely solely on pronunciation, they frequently cause spelling mistakes and listening comprehension errors. Van Orden (1987) found that learners sometimes substitute homophones for one another when reading or writing, suggesting that phonetic similarities influence word recognition. To address these

challenges, students must develop strong listening skills and increase their awareness of common homophones.

Homographs, on the other hand, are words that have identical spellings but different pronunciations and meanings. For instance, the word *lead* can be pronounced as /li:d/ (to guide) or /led/ (a type of metal). Unlike homophones, homographs require learners to determine the correct pronunciation based on sentence context. Studies by Schvaneveldt, Meyer, and Becker (1976) suggest that readers rely on surrounding words to determine the appropriate pronunciation of homographs. Exposure to reading materials and pronunciation exercises can help students recognize and correctly pronounce homographs more effectively.

Context plays a crucial role in resolving lexical ambiguity in homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Johnson-Laird (1981) explains that the meaning of an ambiguous word is determined either through stored knowledge or dynamic interpretation during comprehension. For example, when encountering the word *bank*, readers must use contextual clues to determine whether it refers to a financial institution or the edge of a river. Nagy (1988) supports the idea that vocabulary learning extends beyond memorization, emphasizing the importance of understanding how words function in different contexts.

Despite the significance of vocabulary mastery, students often struggle to differentiate between homonyms, homophones, and homographs due to several factors. Phonological confusion is a common issue, particularly with homophones, as words that sound alike but have different spellings can lead to misinterpretation. Additionally, the irregular nature of English spelling makes it difficult for learners to establish consistent spelling patterns. A lack of contextual understanding further contributes to these difficulties, as students who do not engage in extensive reading may struggle to infer word meanings accurately.

To address these challenges, educators can implement various teaching strategies to improve students' understanding of homonyms, homophones, and homographs. One effective approach is explicit instruction, where teachers provide clear explanations and examples of word distinctions. Visual aids such as diagrams and word maps can help learners visualize differences between words. Additionally, context-based learning, which involves extensive reading, listening exercises, and interactive activities, can enhance students' ability to identify word meanings in real-world situations. Homonyms, homophones, and homographs present difficulties for English learners due to their similarities in spelling or pronunciation. However, these challenges can be overcome through vocabulary expansion, contextual learning, and effective teaching strategies. By improving their ability to distinguish these word categories, students can enhance their reading comprehension, writing accuracy, and overall language proficiency.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate students' ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in understanding these linguistic elements. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning through participant interactions, observations, and open-ended responses. The study aims to analyze students' difficulties in distinguishing similar-sounding and similarly spelled words, identify common errors, and explore factors that influence their comprehension. The research was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, specifically involving fifth-semester students from the English Education Department. This group was chosen because they have already been introduced to fundamental linguistic concepts, including homonyms, homophones, and homographs, making them suitable participants for the study. The study uses purposive sampling, a method that selects participants based on specific criteria, ensuring that they have relevant knowledge and experience related to the research topic.

Instruments and Procedures

The research instruments used in this study include comprehension tests, interviews, and observations. The comprehension test is designed to assess students' ability to correctly identify and use homonyms, homophones, and homographs in context. It consists of multiple-choice questions, sentence completion exercises, and short writing tasks that require students to distinguish between similar words based on context. These tasks help measure students' understanding of lexical ambiguity and their ability to apply their knowledge in practical language use.

In addition to the comprehension test, semi-structured interviews are conducted to provide deeper insights into students' thought processes, difficulties, and learning experiences. These interviews allow participants to reflect on their challenges in distinguishing homonyms, homophones, and homographs and offer qualitative data on their perceptions of these linguistic features. Furthermore, observations are carried out during the test and interview sessions to analyze students' behavior, including hesitation, uncertainty, and reliance on phonetic similarities rather than meaning. By integrating these different data collection methods, the study ensures a more comprehensive understanding of students' struggles and strategies when encountering ambiguous words. The data collection process follows a structured sequence. First, students take the comprehension test to assess their initial understanding of homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Next, selected participants are interviewed to explore their experiences and difficulties in more depth. Lastly, the researcher observes students' reactions and problem-solving approaches during the tests and interviews to identify key behavioral patterns. This multi-method approach strengthens the validity of the study by cross-referencing different sources of data.

Data Analysis

The study follows Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves summarizing and categorizing student responses to identify common errors and challenges. Data display presents findings through tables, charts, and thematic summaries for easier interpretation. Finally, conclusions are drawn by analyzing patterns in students' errors and linking them to specific linguistic challenges. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation is applied by cross-checking data from tests, interviews, and observations. Member-checking is also conducted, allowing participants to review interview transcripts for accuracy. Despite limitations in generalizability, this study provides valuable insights into students' struggles with lexical ambiguity, offering recommendations for improving vocabulary instruction in English language learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Comprehension Test Performance

The results of the comprehension test reveal that students faced the most difficulty in distinguishing homophones, followed by homographs and homonyms. Homophones such as *flour* and *flower*, *their* and *there*, and *write* and *right* were the most frequently confused. Many students relied solely on pronunciation without considering spelling differences, which led to incorrect answers. This suggests that students primarily process words phonetically, without fully integrating orthographic knowledge into their word recognition skills. The heavy reliance on phonetics indicates a gap in spelling awareness, which affects students' ability to differentiate between words that sound alike but have different meanings.

Further analysis of the test results showed that even when students could correctly identify a homophone's meaning in isolation, they struggled when required to use it in context. For instance, while some students could define *there* as a location and *their* as a possessive pronoun, they often misplaced these words in sentence-based exercises. This suggests that memorization of definitions alone is not sufficient; students need repeated exposure to these words in meaningful contexts to reinforce correct usage. Without contextual reinforcement, learners may continue to make errors despite recognizing the words individually.

For homonyms, students performed relatively better because they were able to use context to determine the correct meaning of a word. However, challenges still arose when words had drastically different meanings, such as *bat* (animal) and *bat* (sports equipment). Some students struggled with polysemy, where a single word has multiple unrelated meanings, making contextual understanding essential. The errors observed in homonyms suggest that while students can apply contextual clues to some extent, they may lack the ability to efficiently differentiate between meanings when faced with less familiar contexts. This points to the need for greater exposure to homonyms in diverse situations.

Homographs posed the biggest challenge for students, particularly in terms of pronunciation. Words like *lead* (/li:d/ - to guide) and *lead* (/led/ - metal), or *minute* (/ˈmɪnɪt/ - time unit) and *minute* (/maɪˈnju:t/ - very small), were frequently misread. Many students relied on spelling alone, ignoring pronunciation differences, which resulted in frequent misinterpretations. This suggests that students are not fully aware of the role phonetics plays in differentiating homographs. The fact that homographs require an understanding of pronunciation rules, in addition to spelling and meaning, adds to the complexity of learning these words.

Interview Findings

Interviews with students provided further insight into the challenges they faced in differentiating homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Many students reported that their primary difficulty stemmed from limited vocabulary knowledge and weak listening comprehension. Since homophones sound the same but have different spellings, students who primarily rely on auditory learning struggled to recognize the distinctions. This reliance on phonetics without a strong foundation in spelling contributed to persistent errors, as students often mistook one word for another purely based on sound.

Some students expressed that English's inconsistent spelling rules made it particularly challenging to recognize differences between similar-sounding words. Unlike languages with more phonetic consistency, English often has irregular spelling patterns, making homophones difficult to memorize and apply correctly. For example, words like *pair*, *pear*, and *pare* follow different spelling conventions despite being pronounced identically. Students reported that they often felt frustrated when encountering such words, as there seemed to be no clear rule governing their usage. This frustration sometimes led to reliance on guessing rather than logical application of vocabulary knowledge.

In addition to homophones, students also found homonyms difficult, particularly when encountering words with unrelated meanings. Some students explained that they had previously learned certain words in one specific context but struggled to identify them in another. For instance, while students recognized *bank* as a financial institution, they had difficulty associating it with the meaning of *riverbank*. This suggests that students' exposure to vocabulary is often limited to specific uses, which may hinder their ability to recognize multiple meanings of the same word. Without broader exposure, students may continue to struggle with homonyms that do not have closely related meanings.

Furthermore, a few students noted that they relied heavily on rote memorization in their vocabulary learning rather than understanding words in meaningful contexts. As a result, when faced with homographs that require both spelling recognition and pronunciation adjustment, they found it difficult to apply the correct pronunciation.

This highlights the importance of integrating phonetic training into vocabulary instruction to help students recognize pronunciation variations. The interview findings reinforce the idea that vocabulary acquisition should focus not only on memorization but also on contextual learning, pronunciation practice, and application in diverse linguistic settings.

Observational Findings

Observations conducted during the test and interview sessions revealed that confidence levels significantly influenced students' ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Students who appeared more hesitant and uncertain often second-guessed their answers, leading to increased errors. This was particularly evident in the case of homophones, where students were unsure of which spelling to use, even when they understood the difference in meaning. Their uncertainty often led to guesswork rather than an application of prior knowledge, which in turn resulted in inconsistent performance.

On the other hand, students who demonstrated greater confidence in their pronunciation and spelling abilities performed better in distinguishing these word categories. They were able to make more informed decisions when selecting the correct spelling of homophones or choosing the correct pronunciation of homographs. These students also exhibited greater willingness to engage in discussions and clarify their doubts, suggesting that confidence plays a key role in vocabulary mastery. This observation indicates that increasing students' exposure to word distinctions and providing opportunities for practice can help build their confidence and improve their accuracy.

Another notable observation was that students who actively engaged in the learning process, such as by asking questions and discussing their reasoning, tended to have a better grasp of the differences between homonyms, homophones, and homographs. These students were more likely to attempt self-correction when they realized inconsistencies in their answers. This suggests that an interactive learning environment, where students are encouraged to discuss and analyze word meanings, may help enhance their comprehension.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the challenges students face in differentiating homonyms, homophones, and homographs. The results indicate that homophones were the most problematic for students, followed by homographs and homonyms. This aligns with previous research suggesting that phonological similarities often lead to confusion in word recognition (Van Orden, 1987). The difficulty students had with homophones highlights the need for greater emphasis on orthographic awareness in vocabulary instruction. Many students relied solely on pronunciation, neglecting spelling differences, which led to errors. This suggests that traditional memorization methods may be insufficient in helping students internalize the distinctions between homophones. Instead, a more

integrative approach, combining phonetic drills, spelling exercises, and contextual application, may be necessary to reinforce learning.

For homonyms, the students performed relatively better, as they could use context to determine the appropriate meaning of words. However, errors still occurred when words had drastically different meanings, such as "bat" (animal) and "bat" (sports equipment). This finding supports Pinker's (1994) theory that homonymy creates lexical ambiguity, requiring learners to develop strong contextual awareness. Students' difficulties in recognizing multiple meanings of homonyms indicate that exposure to diverse contexts is essential for vocabulary development. To address this issue, educators should provide students with varied reading materials and structured practice exercises that encourage them to interpret words in multiple contexts. Activities such as sentence completion tasks, storytelling, and discussions can help reinforce their understanding of homonyms and their meanings in different scenarios.

Homographs posed a distinct challenge for students, particularly in pronunciation. Words like "lead" (/li:d/ - to guide) and "lead" (/lɛd/ - metal) or "minute" (/ˈmɪnɪt/ - time unit) and "minute" (/maɪˈnju:t/ - very small) were frequently misread. Many students relied on spelling alone, disregarding pronunciation differences. This finding aligns with Schvaneveldt et al. (1976), who emphasized that contextual clues play a critical role in selecting the correct pronunciation of homographs. The results suggest that students require additional training in phonetic variations and pronunciation rules to distinguish homographs effectively. Phonetic awareness exercises and pronunciation drills should be incorporated into language instruction to enhance students' ability to recognize and correctly pronounce homographs. Interactive activities, such as minimal pair drills and listening comprehension tasks, can also be beneficial in improving pronunciation accuracy.

Interviews revealed that students' difficulties stemmed from limited vocabulary knowledge and weaknesses in listening comprehension. Many students reported that they memorized words based on sound rather than meaning, leading to frequent homophone-related errors. Additionally, English's inconsistent spelling rules contributed to their struggles, making it difficult to differentiate similar words. These findings align with Nagy's (1988) argument that vocabulary learning should go beyond memorization and focus on understanding words in different contexts. To improve students' vocabulary acquisition, instructional approaches should incorporate multimodal learning strategies, such as combining reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. This will allow students to engage with vocabulary in a more meaningful and comprehensive way, improving retention and application.

Observational data further highlighted the role of confidence in students' performance. Those who were hesitant often second-guessed their answers, making more errors, particularly in distinguishing homophones. Conversely, students who were more confident in their pronunciation and spelling abilities performed better.

This observation supports Bosman and Van Orden's (1997) findings that uncertainty in phonological processing can lead to frequent errors. To build student confidence, educators should create a supportive learning environment where students feel encouraged to participate without fear of making mistakes. Gamified learning activities, peer collaboration, and positive reinforcement can help reduce anxiety and enhance students' ability to differentiate words more accurately.

The implications of these findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should focus on context-based learning rather than rote memorization. Teaching strategies should incorporate extensive reading and listening exercises to help students internalize vocabulary within meaningful contexts. Interactive learning methods, such as word association games, phonetic drills, and real-world sentence applications, can improve students' ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs. According to Schmitt (2000), multimodal learning, where students engage with words through reading, listening, and writing, is crucial for strengthening word recognition and recall. By integrating various instructional techniques, educators can enhance students' ability to recognize and correctly use similar words, ultimately improving their overall language proficiency.

In conclusion, the study highlights that students face significant difficulties in distinguishing homonyms, homophones, and homographs, with homophones being the most challenging. The main challenges arise from phonetic confusion, spelling inconsistencies, and lack of contextual understanding. However, targeted instructional strategies, such as enhanced listening training, phonetic awareness exercises, and contextual vocabulary teaching, can help students overcome these difficulties. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on lexical ambiguity in language learning and provide valuable insights for educators seeking to enhance vocabulary instruction in English language courses.

CONCLUSION

This study examined students' ability to differentiate homonyms, homophones, and homographs, identifying common challenges and factors influencing their comprehension. The findings indicate that homophones posed the greatest difficulty due to phonetic similarities and inconsistent spelling patterns. Homographs also presented challenges, particularly in pronunciation, while homonyms were easier to recognize when contextual clues were available. Errors were primarily linked to limited vocabulary knowledge, reliance on memorization, and difficulties in listening comprehension, highlighting the need for more effective vocabulary instruction.

The results suggest that students require greater exposure to words in meaningful contexts rather than through isolated memorization. Effective teaching strategies should incorporate pronunciation drills for homophones, reading comprehension exercises for homonyms, and phonetic awareness training for homographs. Additionally, interactive learning methods such as role-playing, word association

games, and sentence-building exercises can help reinforce students' understanding and application of these words. These approaches align with linguistic theories on lexical ambiguity, which emphasize that word meanings are best understood when learned through context rather than rote learning.

While students demonstrated some awareness of homonyms, homophones, and homographs, gaps in phonological and contextual understanding hindered their ability to use these words accurately. To enhance vocabulary retention and application, educators should adopt a multimodal approach that integrates listening, reading, and pronunciation exercises. Future research could explore the role of technology-assisted learning, such as speech recognition tools and interactive vocabulary apps, in improving students' ability to distinguish similar-sounding and similarly spelled words. These advancements could offer more engaging and effective methods for vocabulary development, further addressing the challenges students face in differentiating homonyms, homophones, and homographs.

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