Lexical and Structural Ambiguity in English: A Case Study of Comprehension Challenges Among First- and Fourth-Year Students at the Faculty of Education, Misurata University, Libya

1 Ismail Faraj Algumatti
Faculty of Education, Misurata University, Libya

2 Mustafa Abdusalam Hamuda
Higher Institute of Science and Technology, Misurata, Libya

i.a;gamati@edu.misuratau.edu.

lybazeenastreet@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: Learners of English must access word meanings and interpret them in context. However, ambiguity disrupts this process, causing confusion and inviting multiple interpretations. This study examines how Libyan EFL learners struggle to interpret ambiguous English statements—particularly lexical and structural ambiguity, which are major sources of misunderstanding. The research aims to identify the types of ambiguity that pose the greatest challenge and to explore the strategies instructors use to help students overcome these difficulties. Researchers employed a descriptive approach and gathered data through two tools: a multiple-choice test administered to 60 English majors (divided equally between first-year and fourth-year students), and one-on-one interviews with English teachers at the Faculty of Education, University of Misurata. Results showed that first-year students performed poorly on both types of ambiguity, while fourth-year students improved, especially in resolving structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity was more difficult due to limited vocabulary and contextual understanding. Teachers reported using a variety of strategies, such as placing words in real-life contexts, paraphrasing, and listening exercises, to enhance comprehension. The study emphasizes that students need more exposure to English, a stronger vocabulary, and explicit instruction, all of which are essential for improving learners' ability to interpret ambiguous English expressions. Keywords: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, types of structural ambiguity, ambiguity, disambiguation strategies.

Keywords: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, types of structural ambiguity, ambiguation, disambiguation strategies.

الغموض المعجمي والبنيوي في اللغة الإنجليزية: دراسة حالة لتحديات الفهم لدى طلاب السنة الأولى والرابعة في كلية التربية، جامعة مصراتة، ليبيا

2) مصطفى عبد السلام حمودة

1) إسماعيل فرج القماطي

المعهد العالي للعلوم والتقنية – مصراته – ليبيا

كلية التربية جامعة مصراتة – ليبيا

الْمُلَخَّصُ: يُعَدُّ الوُصولُ إلى مَعاني الكَلِماتِ وتَفسيرُها في سِياقِها الصحيح أُمورًا أَساسيَّةً لِمُتعلِّمي اللُّغةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ. إلّا أَنَّ الغُموضَ كَثيرًا ما يَعرقِلُ هذهِ العَمَليَّةَ، مِمّا يُؤَدّي إلى اضطِرابٍ في الفَهم ويُتيحُ المَجالَ لِعِدَّةِ تَفاسيرَ مُحْتَمَلةٍ. تَتَناوَلُ هذهِ الدِّراسةُ التَّحَدِّياتِ الَّتي يُواجِهُها المُتعلِّمونَ الليبيُّونَ دارِسُو اللُّغةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ بَوصفِها لُغةً أَجْنَبيَّةً عندَ تَفسيرِ العِباراتِ الغامِضَةِ، مع تَرْكيزٍ خاصٍّ على الغُموضِ المُعْجَميِّ وَالبِنائيِّ، وهُما مِن أبرَزِ مَصادِرِ سُوءِ الفَهْمِ. وَتَهْدِفُ الدِّراسةُ إلى تَحديدِ أَنواعِ الغُموضِ الأَكثرِ صُعوبةً بالنِّسبةِ لِلمُتعلِّمينَ، إِضافةً إلى اسْتِكْشافِ الاستراتيجيّاتِ التَّعْليميَّةِ الَّتي يَعتمِدُها المُعلِّمونَ لِمُساعَدةِ الطُّلّابِ على تَجاوُزِ هذهِ العَقَباتِ. اعْتَمَدَ الباحِثانِ المَنهَجَ الوَصْفيَّ، وَجُمِعَتِ البَياناتُ باستخدامِ أداتَيْن: اِخْتِبارِ اخْتِيارٍ مِن مُتَعَدِّدٍ طُبِّقَ على **60** طالِبًا مِن قِسْمِ اللُّغةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ (مُوَزعينَ بالتَّساوي بَيْنَ طُلّابِ السَّنَةِ الأُولى وَالسَّنَةِ الرّابِعَةِ)، وَمُقابَلاتٍ فَرْديَّةٍ مَعَ مُدَرِّسي اللُّغةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ بكُلِّيَّةِ التَّرْبِيَةِ في جامِعَةِ مِصرَ. وَقَد أَظْهَرَتِ النَّتائِجُ ضَعفَ أَداءِ طُلّابِ السَّنَةِ الأُولى في كِلا النَّوْعَيْنِ مِنَ الغُموضِ، في حينَ أَظْهَرَ طُلّابُ السَّنَةِ الرّابِعَةِ تَحَسُّنًا مَلْحُوظًا، خُصوصًا في مُعالجَةِ الغُموضِ البِنائيِّ. كما ثَبَتَ أَنَّ الغُموضَ المُعْجَميَّ أَكْثرُ صُعوبةً بَسَبَبِ مَحدوديَّةِ المُفرَداتِ وَضَعفِ القُدْرَةِ على تَوْظيفِ السِّياقِ. وَأَفادَ المُعَلِّمُونَ أَنَّهُم يَسْتخدِمُونَ مَجْموعَةً مُتَنَوِّعَةً مِنَ الاستراتيجيّاتِ، مِنها: وَضْعُ المُفرَداتِ في سِياقاتٍ واقِعيَّةٍ، وَإِعادَةُ صِياغَةِ العِباراتِ، وَاستخدامُ تَدريباتِ الاسْتِماعِ لِتَعْزيزِ الفَهْمِ. وَتُؤَكِّدُ الدِّراسةُ ضَرورَةَ تَوفيرِ تَعَرُّضٍ أَكْبَرَ لِلْلُغَةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ، وَتَنْمِيَةِ الثَّرْوَةِ اللُّغَويَّةِ، وَتَقْديمِ تَعْليمٍ صَريحٍ، باعْتِبارِها عَناصرَ أَساسيَّةً لِتَحسينِ قُدْرَةِ المُتَعلِّمينَ عَلَى تَفسيرِ العِباراتِ الغامِضَةِ في اللُّغَةِ الإِنْجليزيَّةِ.

الكَلِماتُ المُفْتاحيَّة: الغُموضُ المُعْجَميُّ، الغُموضُ البِنائيُّ، أَنواعُ الغُموضِ البِنائيِّ، الغُموضُ، استراتيجيّاتُ إزالَةِ الغُموضِ

.

1. Introduction

Ambiguity is a complex and inherent feature of natural languages, often posing significant challenges for both native and non-native speakers. It refers to a sign having at least two distinct senses (Winkler, 2015). It is inherent to language and speech (Boyarskaya, 2019). It underscores the complexity of the relationship between how we say things and what we actually mean. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), ambiguity can be a real headache. It is especially tough when trying to understand messages in real-life conversations (Kadłub, 2017). Ambiguity arises when a word or phrase can be interpreted in more than one way. This often happens because of different meanings we can assign to a word or how a sentence is structured (Gillon, 1990). For EFL learners, who tend to rely on clear language cues rather than intuitively picking up on context, this can lead to confusion, misunderstandings, and sometimes even communication breakdowns (Awwad, 2017). There are two common types of ambiguity in English learning: lexical and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has multiple meanings. For example, in the sentence "He went to the bank," it could mean he visited a financial institution or went to the riverbank (Fromkin et al., 2011, p. 172). Structural ambiguity, sometimes called syntactic ambiguity, arises from how words are arranged in a sentence. This can lead to different interpretations, as in the example "The teacher saw the student with the telescope" (Gillon, 1990). These kinds of ambiguities are especially challenging for non-native speakers. Often, they lack sufficient exposure to real-life language situations, and their vocabulary may not be broad enough to infer meanings from context (Nwala, 2015). Therefore, addressing both lexical and structural ambiguity is crucial in teaching English as a foreign language. By helping learners understand how ambiguity functions, teachers can improve students' interpretive skills and deepen their grasp of

vocabulary and sentence structure. Additionally, when students receive explicit lessons on ambiguity, they become more independent in their reading and listening skills. They learn to navigate complex conversations more effectively (Barnard & Johnson, 2005). Ultimately, mastering ambiguity not only enhances linguistic accuracy but also fosters overall communicative competence, which is the primary goal of EFL education. The central research questions of this study are:

2. Research Questions

To examine the difficulties Libyan EFL learners face in interpreting ambiguous English expressions, this study focuses on both lexical and structural ambiguity. It also identifies the specific types of structural ambiguity that pose the greatest challenges for learners. Additionally, the study explores the strategies English teachers employ to help students interpret the intended meanings of ambiguous words and sentences. The central questions of the research are as follows:

- To what extent do lexical and structural ambiguities pose challenges for Libyan learners of English as a foreign language?
- Which type of structural ambiguity - analytical, attachment, referential, coordination, or elliptical- is the most difficult for second language learners to comprehend?
- What strategies do English teachers at the Faculty of Education employ to help students interpret the intended meaning of ambiguous words and sentences?

3. Significance of the Study

The study underscores the importance of robust grammatical and lexical knowledge for both language learners and instructors, as this knowledge is essential for accurately interpreting ambiguous sentences and for ultimately achieving higher levels of English language proficiency. The study also demonstrates heightened awareness of the types and underlying causes of linguistic ambiguity, offering valuable insights that support a more systematic and informed analysis of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it

proposes practical strategies to help both students and teachers identify and interpret the intended meanings of ambiguous words and sentences. Within the Faculty of Education, the English Department may particularly benefit from these findings through a deeper understanding of students' comprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity, thereby informing more effective instructional practices.

4. Literature Review

This review provides an overview of ambiguity for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Ambiguity among students primarily stems from limited linguistic competence and insufficient contextual awareness, which hinder their ability to map linguistic forms onto a single intended meaning. When students lack adequate lexical knowledge, they may struggle to distinguish among multiple meanings of a word, leading to lexical ambiguity. Similarly, weak grammatical and syntactic knowledge can make parsing sentence structure difficult, resulting in structural ambiguity (Cutting, 2002). Ambiguity is a normal linguistic phenomenon that often poses challenges for second- or foreign-language learners, particularly when a single word has multiple meanings to disambiguate or when sentence structure is covert and difficult to interpret (Fromkin et al., 2011). Lexical ambiguity occurs when one word has more than one sense (e.g., "bank"), and structural or syntactic ambiguity arises from the phrase structuring of sentences (e.g., covert phrase attachment). Fromkin and Rodman (1983) and Leech (1981) emphasize that vague words make comprehension troublesome, as learners must use contextual or grammatical information to arrive at the intended meaning. Ullmann (1977) further categorizes ambiguity into phonetic, lexical, and grammatical types. Previous studies confirm that both lexical and structural ambiguities significantly hinder comprehension for non-native learners.

Research on Arab learners has shown that structural ambiguity, particularly prepositional phrase attachment and coordination, frequently leads to misinterpretation, while lexical ambiguity often stems from limited vocabulary knowledge (Khawalda & Al-Saidat, 2012). Khawalda and Al-Saidat (2012) investigated structural ambiguity among Arab students by presenting sixty English majors with sentences containing prepositional phrases, coordinate clauses, ellipsis, and relative clauses. The participants

tended to interpret only the surface meaning, without engaging with deeper meaning. Awwad (2017) also conducted a study on the perception of ambiguity at the Lebanese University and found that students performed poorest on syntactic ambiguity (87% incorrect), followed by semantic (84%), pragmatic (78%), and lexical ambiguity (71%). Some research has examined ambiguity among English foreign language learners to understand how ambiguous sentences are processed and interpreted. Felser et al. (2003) investigated the processing of relative clause attachment ambiguities among adult L2 learners of English and found that they differed from native speakers in their resolution strategies. Similarly, Roberts and Liszka (2019) examined the influence of grammatical aspect on the comprehension of temporarily ambiguous sentences through a self-paced reading task, revealing cross-linguistic effects in ambiguity processing. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that ambiguity in language presents persistent difficulties for L2/EFL learners and remains a key area of investigation in understanding second language processing and comprehension.

Although previous studies have established that linguistic ambiguity poses significant challenges for EFL learners, the literature remains limited in providing a comprehensive, context-specific account of how different types of ambiguity are processed (Semiz, 2014; Almahameed, 2020). Specifically, there is a notable lack of research that simultaneously examines lexical ambiguity alongside multiple forms of structural ambiguity within the EFL context and links learners' performance to teachers' classroom strategies. Furthermore, few studies have investigated developmental differences by comparing early- and advanced-level university learners' comprehension of ambiguity, highlighting a gap in understanding how ambiguity processing evolves (Almahameed, 2020). To address these gaps, the present study focuses on first- and fourth-year Libyan EFL students, exploring both lexical and structural ambiguity and examining the pedagogical strategies teachers employ to facilitate effective disambiguation.

4.1. Definitions of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in language, occurring at all levels of linguistic analysis. It is defined as an expression that has more

than one meaning, as noted by Gillion (1990) and Fortuny and Payrato (2024). Similarly, scholars such as Rusche (1980), Clare (1993), Hoefler (2003), and Nwala (2015) state that ambiguity arises when a word, phrase, or sentence can be interpreted in multiple ways, requiring readers to negotiate meaning on an individual level. Ambiguity has long been a concern for academics and remains a key issue in human communication. It can be described as words with more than one meaning (lexical ambiguity) or sentence structures that lead to multiple interpretations (structural ambiguity). Akmajian et al. (2010) and Fromkin et al. (2011) explain that lexical ambiguity occurs because words are polysemous, while structural ambiguity results from the syntactic organization of phrases.

4.2. Types of Ambiguity

Because ambiguity affects communication, translation, and understanding, it is a significant issue in linguistics and language learning. Due to limited vocabulary or grammatical awareness, learners often struggle with ambiguous statements in EFL contexts. Bach (1982) explained that there are two types of ambiguity—lexical and structural—as follows:

4.2.1. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word carries more than one meaning. Fromkin et al. (2011) clarify that a sentence is ambiguous if it contains one or more ambiguous words. Thus, different meanings of a single word give rise to lexical ambiguity. For instance, in: She could not bear children, 'bear' is ambiguous and can mean either 'to tolerate' or 'to give birth.' The sentence thus refers to either an individual who is unable to tolerate children or one who cannot bear them. Dayal (2004) also categorizes lexical ambiguity into homonymy and polysemy.

a. Homonymy

Homonymy is the relationship between two words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings and origins.

For example, the word bank meaning "a financial institution" is entirely unrelated in meaning and etymology to bank meaning "the land alongside a river, lake, or sea" (Merriam-Webster, 2003, p. 117).

b. polysemy

Polysemy, on the other hand, happens when a single term has numerous connected senses based on a common etymology. Green, for instance, has several connected senses like '*having green color*,' '*pleasantly attractive*,' '*young*,' or '*not yet mature*' which share a common etymological origin (Merriam-Webster, 2003, p.202). Cruse (2011) further points out systematic polysemy, distinguishing between '*unit*' and '*type*'; as in the sentence: 'I like this jacket', where jacket may be employed to refer either to a particular jacket or to jackets in general.

4.2.2. Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity is also known as syntactical ambiguity or grammatical ambiguity. Structural ambiguity is the situation where a clause, sentence, or phrase can be assigned to two or more rival meanings through the order of words or lexical units. According to Fromkin et al. (2011), structural ambiguity refers to the structure of a sentence that allows for more than one meaning in place of words in the sentence. In addition, Hurford et al. (2007, p.120) define that 'A sentence which is ambiguous because its words are related to each other in more than one way, though none of the words separately are ambiguous, is structurally (or grammatically) ambiguous.' From the above quotations, it is clear that structural ambiguity is a form of ambiguity that arises because the given phrase or sentence has two or more underlying structures. Here, the individual words constituting the sentence are not ambiguous, but their formation can be translated into two or more ways.

4.2.2.1. Types of Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity occurs when a set of words can have more than one possible grammatical structure, and each produces a distinct meaning (Simatupang, 2007). According to Simatupang (2007)., Okanlawon and Oluga (2008)., Khawalda (2012)., and Elasfar (2021), ambiguity is categorized into the following types:

a. Analytical Ambiguity

Analytical ambiguity is the situation where the grammatical function of constituents in a sentence or a phrase is indeterminate (Hirst, 1987, p.34). For instance, the phrase '*American history teacher*' may be understood as either [*American*][history teacher] or [*American history*] [teacher]. The mentioned expression can be interpreted as an American teacher who teaches history, or A teacher who teaches American history.

b. Attachment Ambiguity

Ambiguity of attachment occurs when a syntactic element, like a prepositional phrase or a relative clause, may be attached to more than one element of a sentence In the sentence: The police shot the man with a gun, the phrase '*with a gun*' can modify the verb 'shot' (i.e., *the police shot with a gun*) or the noun 'man' (i.e., the *man was armed*).

c. Referential Ambiguity

Referential vagueness occurs when a pronoun does not clearly refer to its antecedent. For example: Nora phoned her mother the day before yesterday. They chatted for two hours. She promised to visit next month, but it is unclear whether 'she' refers to Nora or her mother. Levinson (1983, p. 204) provides another example: Ali told Khaled that someone was waiting to see him, where 'him' could refer to either 'Ali' or 'Khaled'.

d. Coordination Ambiguity

Coordination ambiguity arises in sentences containing multiple conjunctions, as coordination structures can link elements in more than one way (Cruse, 1986, p.54). For example, young men and women may be interpreted as young [*men* and *women*] or [[*young men*] and *women*].

e. Elliptical Ambiguity

Elliptical ambiguity occurs when it is unclear whether an ellipsis is *present* in a sentence. Ellipsis involves the omission of words whose meaning is understood from context. For instance, in '*John knows a richer man than Kim*', two interpretations arise: *John knows a man richer than Kim is*, or *John knows a man richer than any other man known by Kim*.

4.3. Causes of Ambiguity

According to Reed (2005)., Mohunen and Portunen (2012)., and Lamb (2008), ambiguity in language may arise for several reasons, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

1. Lack of Context

Lack of context refers to the absence of surrounding information necessary to clarify the meaning or facilitate accurate interpretation of a statement, idea, or written text. Reed (2005) explains that context-free statements may be interpreted differently, as the meaning largely depends on context. For instance, the following sentence: 'She cannot bear a baby' is equivocal through the utilization of the term *'bear'*. Absent the provision of extra context, it may be interpreted as "she cannot *stand* a baby" or "she cannot *have* a baby."

1. Word-Order Ambiguity

Mohunen and Portunen (2012, p.3) observe that word-order tends to result in lexical and structural vagueness. Indra does not want to go as he needs to write an economics course paper (Prideaux, 1976, p.59) is vague due to the word 'paper'. It may be either "an essay" or a sheet of paper. Thus, the sentence can either be interpreted to mean Indra declined because he needed to write an essay or because he needed to prepare a sheet of paper.

3. Missing or Incorrect Punctuation

Missing or incorrect punctuation in a statement refers to the absence, misuse, or inappropriate placement of punctuation marks (such as commas, periods, question marks, or quotation marks), which can impede clear understanding, alter the intended message, or lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation in written communication. According to Lamb (2008, p.1), punctuation helps to disambiguate meaning in written English, and without it, vagueness ensues. Consider the following instance: Where is the small animal hospital? Without it, ambiguity: it could be a *hospital for small animals* or a *small hospital for animals*. The disambiguation is achieved by placing a hyphen: Where is the *small-animal* hospital? or where is the small *animal hospital*?

4. Faulty Pronoun Reference

Ambiguity results from unclear pronoun reference. In the sentence: John and Max are brothers, but he has always been taller. The pronoun '***he'*** could refer either to ***John*** or ***Max***. Therefore, the sentence can be interpreted as '***John has always been taller***' or '***Max has always been taller'***.

4.4. Ways of Disambiguating Ambiguity

In constructing unambiguous sentences, linguists have proposed several strategies to resolve ambiguity. Davis (2004)., Reed (2005)., Schlenker (2006)., Hurford et al. (2007)., Barnard (2005)., and Bhaskara (2009) have provided the following strategies.

1. Paraphrasing

According to Hurford et al. (2007), paraphrasing a sentence means to clarify its meaning. If we consider the example: 'She loves me more than *you',* one can notice that this expression may have two possible interpretations: (a) *She loves me more than you love me*, and (b) *She loves me more than she loves you*. The ambiguity here may be due, in fact, to the relationship between the verb '*loves' and the function of 'you'.* In *a*, '*you'* acts as the 'subject of loves'; whereas in *b*, it serves as the object. Paraphrasing, therefore, tends to clarify the relationship among the words of an expression.

2. Adding the Preposition of

Bhaskara (2009, p.9) notes that the addition of the preposition ***of*** can eliminates ambiguity by clarifying relationships between words. Consider the example: My brother just bought two two-story houses on Jalan Sudirman. This construction may mean either 'a ***house with two stores***' or '***two stores of a house***'. As one inserts the preposition '***of***', the interpretation of the meaning would be either: My brother just bought a house ***of*** two stores on Jalan Sudirman; or My brother just bought two stores ***of*** a house on Jalan Sudirman.

3. Moving Sentence Constructions

Schlenker (2006, p. 8) argues that restructuring sentence elements can disambiguate meaning. Take the sentence 'Mary will hit the student with the book'. This can be interpreted as (a) Mary using a ***book to hit the***

student, or (b) Mary hitting a student *who is holding the book*. To make the first meaning explicit, the sentence may be rephrased as: *By using the book*, Mary will hit the student, or Mary will hit the student *by using the book*. Restructuring thus eliminates uncertainty.

4. Adding Additional Context

According to Reed (2005, p. 189), ambiguity may, in fact, arise from a lack of context, and providing additional details would specify the meaning. For instance, the sentence '*He has lost the match*' is vague, since '*match'* could mean either a '*sporting contest'* or a '*matchstick*'. Adding context would disambiguate the interpretation of the sentence: (a) He has lost the *football match* against the Liverpool team, or (b) He has lost the *matchstick* needed to light a cigarette.

5. Using a Hyphen

Davis (2004, p.6) explains that hyphens serve to combine two or more words functioning as a single adjective before a noun; thereby, preventing misinterpretation. For example: (a) *brown-eyed* girl (where *brown-eyed* forms a single descriptive unit), (b) *fur-lined* coat, and (c) *tone-deaf* violinist. In each case, the hyphen clarifies the intended meaning.

6. Using Pictures

Barnard (2005, p. 1) claims that visual aids may disambiguate words that have the same spelling but differ in meaning. For instance, the sentence: Mother goes to the *bank*; the word '*bank'* may be interpreted as either a '*riverbank'* or a '*financial institution'*. Having a picture alongside the sentence will lead the reader to the implied meaning and eliminate uncertainty.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part is organized into four main sub-sections: research design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

5.1. Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive research design, which is a form of non-experimental inquiry, to examine the comprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity among 60 students in the English Department at the

Faculty of Education in Misurata University, Libya. The design combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches, since, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 12) declared, there is no single method that can give the subtle variations in ongoing human experience.' The qualitative aspect will focus on exploring participants' understanding, attitudes, and motivations, while the quantitative dimension will draw one's attention to the results numerically through tables and graphs.

5.2. Participants

To carry out this research, students and teachers from the Faculty of Education at Misurata University were selected to participate. The participants included 60 Libyan students from the English Department, with 30 first-year students and 30 fourth-year students, all majoring in English as a foreign language. In addition, teachers also participated. Three teachers from the English Department of the Faculty of Education were interviewed, one male and two females. First-year students were chosen to evaluate their basic knowledge of the English language, most importantly, their understanding of ambiguity, before further language instruction. Fourth-year students were selected intentionally because they are more experienced, having studied for over three years. Their participation would help the researcher determine how their understanding of ambiguity has developed over the course of their studies. The distribution of students by level, first and second semesters for first level, and seventh and eighth semesters for fourth level, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Distribution of Study Participants

First–year Total number of 30 students		Fourth–year Total number of 30 students		Teachers	
1st semester	2nd semester	7th semester	8th semester	3 Teachers	
12	18	22	8	1 male	2 females

5.3. Data Collecting Methods

For this research, two instruments were employed to gather data: a student questionnaire and teacher interviews. The data were collected during the first semester of the academic year 2023–2024.

5.3.1. Students' Test: A multiple-choice test was developed as the primary quantitative instrument. This tool was selected because it is widely used, cost-effective, and enables researchers to collect accurate information from a large number of respondents in a relatively short time. To address the research questions, a multiple-choice questionnaire was developed with three options for each item. It was divided into two sections:

Section One focused on lexical ambiguity. Students were given 10 sentences, each containing one ambiguous word or a word with multiple meanings, and asked to select the most suitable interpretation.

Section Two focused on structural ambiguity. Students were provided with 10 sentences and asked to select the correct interpretation. The items were organized as follows:

- Two sentences with analytical ambiguity
- Two sentences with attachment ambiguity
- Two sentences with coordination ambiguity
- Two sentences with referential ambiguity
- Two sentences with elliptical ambiguity

5.3.2. Teacher Interviews: Interviews were conducted with instructors to obtain deeper insights. As McNamara (1999, p. 2) explains, interviews are particularly effective for uncovering the personal experiences of participants and can provide rich, detailed information about the issues being studied. Open-ended interviews were conducted with three English language teachers to explore their strategies for helping students understand ambiguous words and sentences.

6. Data Analysis

The data collected from students were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings were primarily presented in the form of frequencies, percentages, and graphical representations. While inferential statistics (e.g., chi-square tests would strengthen claims about differences between groups,

the scope of this study and sample size favored a descriptive approach. Teacher interview responses, on the other hand, were examined through qualitative thematic analysis, identifying common strategies and perceptions.

6.1. Responses to Question One.

This question addresses the extent to which lexical and structural ambiguity pose challenges for Libyan EFL learners. The results related to this research question are depicted in two sections.:

(i) First-Year Students' Performance

The results in this section showed the comprehension of first-year students of lexical and structural ambiguity. The accurate

and inaccurate responses of the first-year students related to *lexical ambiguity* are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: First-Year Students' Responses to Lexical Ambiguity

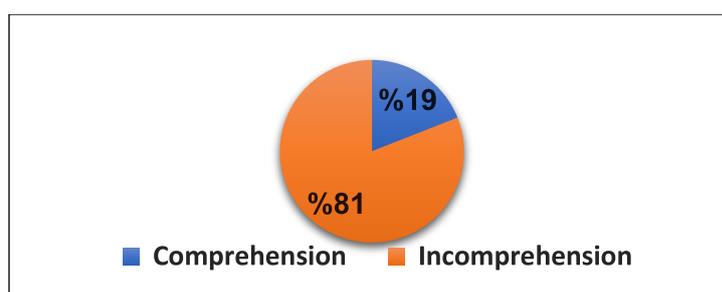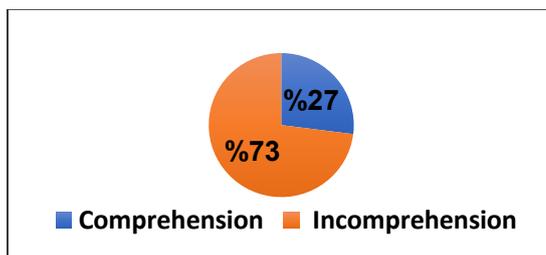| Comprehension of lexical ambiguity		Incomprehension of lexical ambiguity	
Accur acy rate of responses	Number of accurate responses	Inaccurate rate of responses	Number of inaccurate responses
19%	57	81%	243

Fig 1. First-year students' Lexical ambiguity comprehension

According to data presented in Table 2, the percentage of the correct answer in lexical ambiguity is 19% with a frequency of 57 responses. In contrast, the table indicates that the percentage of incorrect responses is

81%, with a frequency of 243. These findings suggest that first-year students demonstrate only 19% understanding of lexical ambiguity, whereas 81% of them showed a lack of comprehension of this phenomenon. The distribution of accurate and inaccurate responses of first-year students concerning structural ambiguity is displayed in Table 3 below:

Table 3. First-year students' percentage and frequency of responses relevant to structural ambiguity

Comprehension of structural ambiguity		Incomprehension of structural ambiguity	
Accuracy rate of responses	Number of accurate responses	Inaccurate rate of responses	Number of inaccurate responses
27 %	81	73%	219

Fig. 2. First-year students' comprehension of structural ambiguity.

As shown in Table 3, Fig. 2, and Fig. 3, the rate of correct answers corresponding to structural ambiguity stands at 27%, with a frequency of 81 responses. The table also shows, on the contrary, that 73% of the responses are wrong, with a frequency of 219. It means that the students in their first year have 27% understanding of structural ambiguity, and the rest of the 73% have no understanding of this aspect.
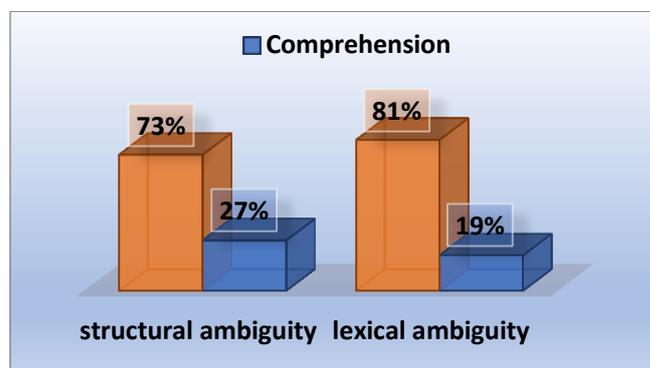
Fig. 3. First-year students' comprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity.

The analysis of findings on lexical ambiguity shows that only 19% of the participants' answers were correct, corresponding to a frequency of 57 responses, whereas 81% were incorrect, with an error frequency of 243. These outcomes suggested that the respondents largely struggled to interpret lexical ambiguity accurately. Furthermore, the data from Tables 2 and 3 clearly demonstrate that first-year English students face considerable challenges in understanding both lexical and structural ambiguous sentences. However, lexical ambiguity is more challenging for first-year students. The results are also shown in Fig.3 to clarify the percentage of students' comprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity.

(ii) Section Relates to the *Fourth-year Responses:*

The results in this section show the comprehension of fourth-year students of lexical and structural ambiguity.

1. The accurate and inaccurate responses of fourth-year students related to *lexical ambiguity* are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 4. Fourth-year Students' responses relevant to lexical ambiguity.

Comprehension of lexical ambiguity		Incomprehension of lexical ambiguity	
Accuracy	Number of	Inaccur	Numbe

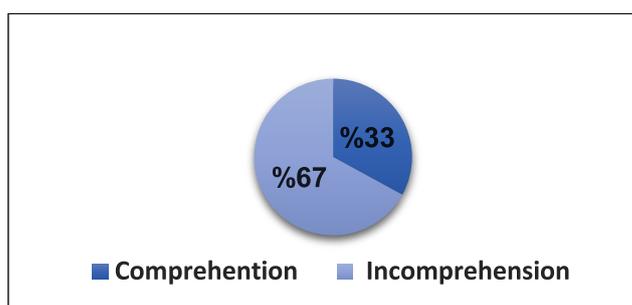| rate of responses	accurate responses	acy rate of responses	r of inaccurate responses
33 %	98	67%	202

Fig. 4. Fourth-year students' Lexical ambiguity comprehension.

From the data as illustrated in Table 4, the correct response in terms of lexical ambiguity is 33% and has a frequency of 98 responses. On the other hand, the percentage illustrates that 67% was incorrect, with a frequency of 202. From here, one can see that the fourth-year students showed 33% understanding of lexical ambiguity, and 67% of their responses indicate no understanding. Table 5 below shows the percentage of fourth-year students' correct and incorrect responses to structural ambiguity. The results are also illustrated in Fig. 4 to clarify the percentage Lexical ambiguity comprehension of fourth-year students.

Table 5. Fourth-year students' responses to structural ambiguity.

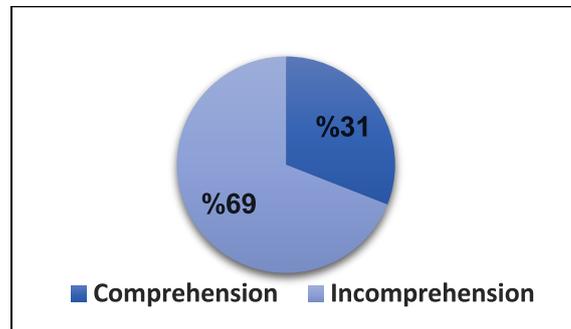| Comprehension of structural ambiguity		Incomprehension of structural ambiguity	
Accurac y rate of responses	Number of accurate responses	Inaccurat e rate of responses	Number of inaccurate responses
31%	94	69%	206

197

Fig. 5. Fourth-year students' comprehension of structural ambiguity.

Based on the data presented in Table 5, the percentage of correct responses related to structural ambiguity is 31%, corresponding to a frequency of 94. In contrast, the table indicates that 69% of the responses were incorrect, with a frequency of 206. These results suggest that fourth-year students demonstrated 31% comprehension of structural ambiguity, while the remaining 69% of responses reflect a lack of understanding.
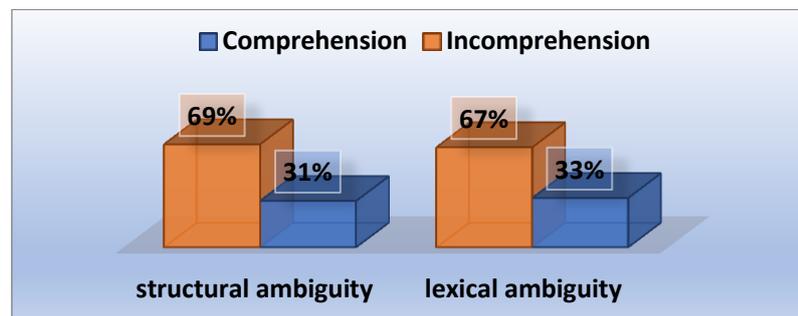

Fig. 6. Fourth-year students' comprehension of ambiguity.

Fig.6 clarifies the analysis of the findings related to structural ambiguity, indicating that 31% of the solutions provided by the participants were correct, with a frequency of 94%, and 69% incorrect, resulting in a frequency of 206. The findings indicate that a majority of the respondents were unable to resolve structural ambiguity. Additionally, the findings in Tables 4 and 5 evidently demonstrate that fourth-year English students struggle significantly with understanding lexical and structural ambiguous sentences. But structural ambiguity is more difficult for fourth-year students than lexical ambiguity, the study concludes.

The analysis revealed that lexical ambiguity is the most problematic for first-year students, as 81% of them struggle to comprehend it. This is significantly larger than the 67% fourth-year students who did not comprehend lexical ambiguity. The result for structural ambiguity is that it is quite difficult for fourth-year students, since they had 69% incorrect answers, which is only marginally larger than the 67% incorrect answers experienced by the first-year students. Fig.7 below clarifies the percentage of the first-year students' comprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity.
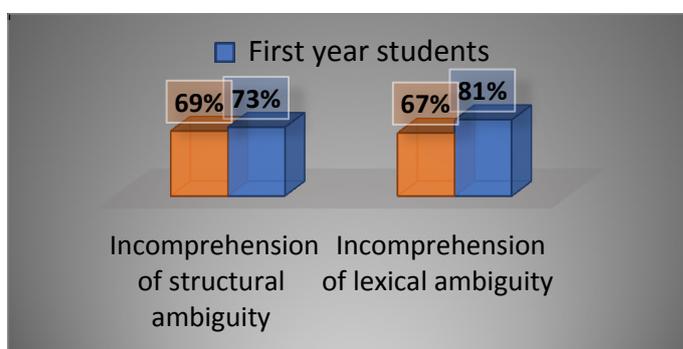

Fig. 7. First-year students' incomprehension of lexical and structural ambiguity.

6.2. Responses to Question Two

This section relates to the first-year students' responses to the question concerning the extent to which lexical and structural ambiguity pose challenges for Libyan EFL learners. The results of the second research question appear in Tables 6 and 7 below.

1. First-year students' responses*:*

Table 6. First-year students' accurate and inaccurate responses to each type of structural ambiguity.

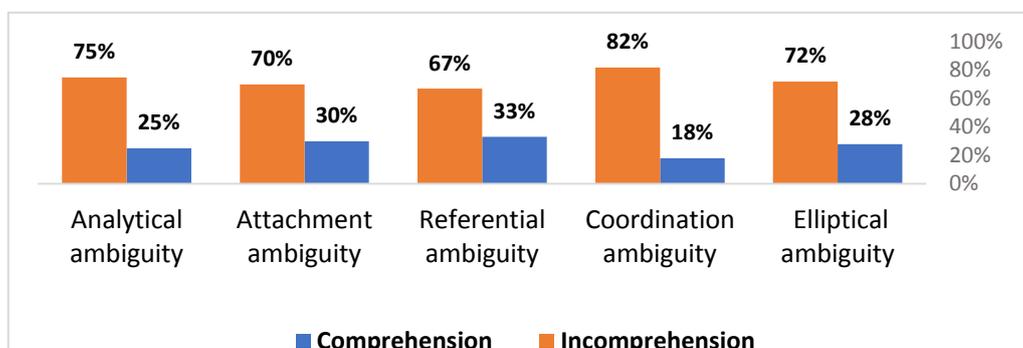| No	Category of structural ambiguity	Accuracy rate of responses	Number of accurate responses	Inaccurate rate of responses	Number of inaccurate responses
1.	Analytical	25%	15	75%	45

	ambiguity				
2.	Attachment ambiguity	30%	18	70%	42
3.	Referential ambiguity	33%	20	67%	40
4.	Coordination ambiguity	18%	11	82%	49
5.	Elliptical ambiguity	28%	17	72%	43

Based on the figures in Table 6, the percentages of correct responses for analytical ambiguity and attachment ambiguity are 25% and 30%, respectively. For referential ambiguity, the percentage of correct responses is 33%, while the percentage of correct responses for coordination ambiguity is only 18%. Concerning elliptical ambiguity, only 28% of the responses associated with it were accurate. The table also indicates the percentage of incorrect responses for each type of ambiguity: analytical ambiguity (75%), attachment ambiguity (70%), referential ambiguity (67%), coordination ambiguity (82%), and elliptical ambiguity (72%).

The result shows that the students of the first year have a higher comprehension of referential ambiguity than other types, with 33% of correct responses. In contrast, coordination ambiguity is considered to be most incomprehensible for students, with 82% of incorrect answers.

These results suggested that the respondents largely struggle to comprehend the different types of structural ambiguity. The figures obtained from Table 5 clearly reveal that first-year English students encounter great difficulty in comprehending the types of structural

ambiguity. However, *coordination ambiguity is considered to be the most incomprehensible type for first-year English students.*

Fi. 8. First-year students' comprehension of structural ambiguity types.

The results showed that coordinational ambiguity is the most incomprehensible type for first-year students, at 82%, followed by analytical ambiguity at 75%, attachment ambiguity at 70%, then elliptical ambiguity at 72%, and finally referential ambiguity at 67%.

2. Fourth-year responses:

Table 7. Fourth-year students' responses to structural ambiguity types.

Noo	Category of structural ambiguity	Accuracy rate of responses	Number of accurate responses	Inaccurate rate of responses	Number of inaccurate responses
1.	Analytical ambiguity	37%	22	63%	28
2.	Attachment ambiguity	40%	24	60%	36
3.	Referential ambiguity	30%	18	70%	42
4.	Coordination ambiguity	27%	16	73%	44
5.	Elliptical ambiguity	23%	14	77%	46

As shown in Table 7, the percentage of correct responses varies across the different types of structural ambiguity. Analytical ambiguity recorded 37% correct answers, followed by attachment ambiguity with 40%. Referential ambiguity received 30% correct responses, while coordination ambiguity accounted for only 27%. The lowest percentage was observed in elliptical ambiguity, with just 23% correct answers. The table further shows that the percentage of incorrect responses for each type, according to their order in the table, is analytical ambiguity 63% of incorrect responses, attachment ambiguity 60% of incorrect responses, followed by referential ambiguity with 70% of incorrect responses, then coordination ambiguity with 73% of incorrect responses, finally, elliptical ambiguity with 77% incorrect answer.

The results showed that students in the fourth year have a higher comprehension of attachment ambiguity than other types, with 40% of correct responses. By contrast, elliptical ambiguity is considered to be most incomprehensible for students, with 77% of incorrect answers.

Such results indicated that the respondents, to a great extent, struggle to comprehend the types of structural ambiguity. The figures obtained from Table 6 clearly reveal that fourth-year English students encounter great difficulty in comprehending the types of structural ambiguity. However, elliptical ambiguity is considered to be the most incomprehensible type for English students in the fourth year.
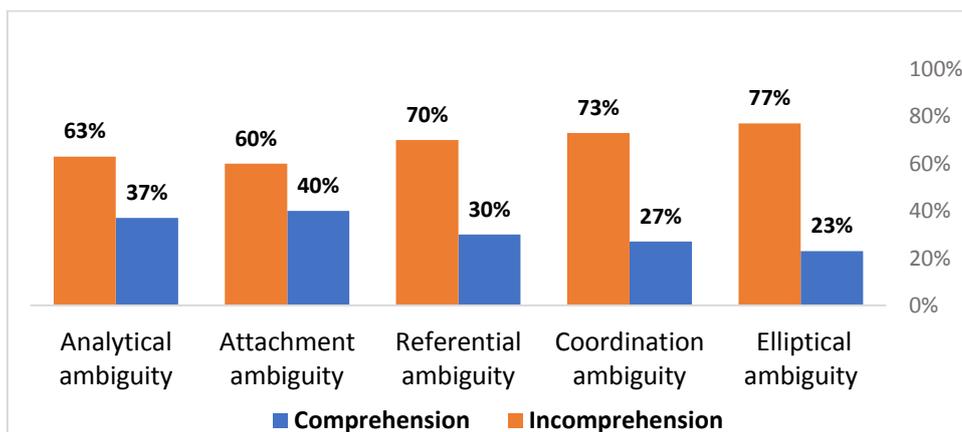

Fig. 9. Fourth-year students' comprehension of structural ambiguity types

The results showed that elliptical ambiguity is the most incomprehensible type for fourth year students 77%, followed by coordination ambiguity 73%, referential ambiguity 70%, then analytical ambiguity 63% and finally attachment ambiguity 67%. The percentage of comprehension of types of structural ambiguity as classified per types in the two study groups: first-year students and fourth-year students, shows that the fourth-year students performed better in comprehending the structural ambiguity types than the first-year students.
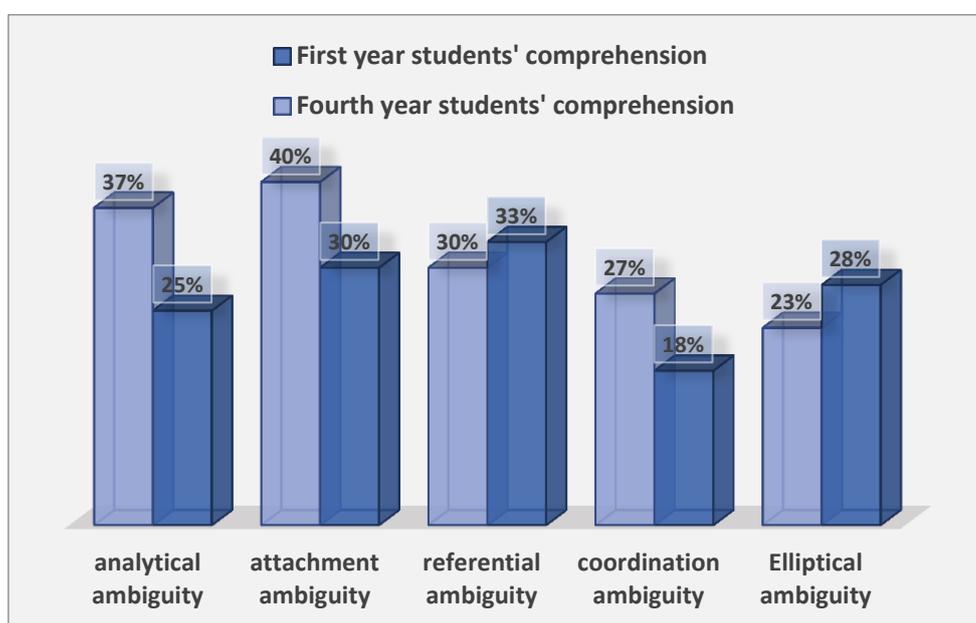

Fig. 10. Comprehension of structural ambiguity by year level

6.3. Responses to Question Three

This part addresses Question Three, which focuses on teachers' strategies for assisting students in comprehending the intended meaning of ambiguous words and sentences. The responses were obtained by interviewing three teachers.

Understanding lexical and structural ambiguity is a significant challenge for second language (L2) learners, as words or sentences may carry multiple meanings depending on context. Therefore, teachers employ various strategies to help students infer the intended meaning and overcome misinterpretation, and develop comprehension. By guiding

students to interpret words within authentic discourse, teachers promote deeper semantic processing and reduce confusion caused by polysemy or syntactic ambiguity (Cruse, 2011).

6.3.1. Teacher 1 reported that:

Building a bridge to convey the intended meaning is important. When students do not understand, I often use paraphrasing or provide an alternative word or sentence with the same meaning. In cases of lexical ambiguity, I explain the different possible meanings of the ambiguous word. Employing a variety of strategies gives students greater opportunities to grasp the teacher's intended message.

6.3.2. Teacher 2's responses regarding the inquiry of question three, clarifying that:

One of the most effective strategies for helping students understand statements is to place the ambiguous word within a sentence or context. Referring to a learner's dictionary is also useful, as it allows students to see the different interpretations and uses of each word.

6.3.3. Teacher 3's explanation for helping students in understanding, saying that:

From my experience, I prefer teaching students to understand words in context, as this strongly supports them in avoiding ambiguity in both writing and speaking. Additionally, I encourage students to use words correctly by listening to recorded materials.

Analysis of the teachers' responses suggests that the strategy most valued in addressing lexical ambiguity is placing the ambiguous word within a contextualized sentence, as this approach provides students with clearer cues to determine the intended meaning. Helping students interpret ambiguous words or sentences by teachers remains a crucial component of effective language instruction. Teachers play a central role in guiding learners to infer meaning through contextual analysis, metalinguistic awareness, and communicative interaction. Recent studies emphasize that explicit strategy instruction, such as paraphrasing, providing contextual examples, and encouraging peer discussion, significantly enhances learners' interpretive competence and reduces misunderstanding (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2020., Thornbury, 2020). Furthermore, meaning-

focused and task-based approaches create opportunities for learners to process ambiguity as a natural feature of language, promoting both comprehension and communicative confidence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001., Ellis et al., 2019). By adopting these strategies, teachers not only facilitate accurate understanding but also foster learners' critical thinking and adaptability in authentic communication contexts (Nation, 1990).

7. Discussion of the Results

This part offers a closer examination of the language phenomenon under investigation by means of an elaborate exposition. This section is divided into two: the first half discusses findings of the research with potential considerations on what may have affected them, and the second half discusses students' perception of lexical as well as structural vagueness. The results showed that students' performance in sentence disambiguation and the manner in which they process lexical and structural ambiguity vary. The results show that the students cannot read or comprehend a majority of the ambiguous sentences.

7.1. Discussion of Section One

The results showed that first-year students performed poorly on both levels of the research. As contended by Schultz (1973), factors such as age, overall language competence, and exposure level influence the ability to interpret ambiguity. The students' poor performance can therefore be linked to their limited exposure to the English language. In contrast, fourth-year students outperformed first-year students in understanding ambiguous sentences. Their better performance may be due to greater exposure to English; however, their overall understanding of ambiguity was not significantly better. This may suggest that even with increased exposure, fourth-year students still face challenges in interpreting ambiguity, possibly because their learning has focused more on structural aspects of language rather than on meaning interpretation. They have forgotten some of what they learned in previous years (Bacon,2006). The research indicates that students disambiguate and acquire structural ambiguity more easily than lexical ambiguity. They perform better in perceiving and disambiguating structural ambiguity than lexical ambiguity. Karpf (1986) believes that the perception of lexical ambiguity depends on the richness of vocabulary

knowledge. Overall, the research showed that lexical and structural ambiguities are perceived differently. Students performed better on structurally ambiguous sentences than on lexically ambiguous ones.

7.2. Discussion Section Two

This section explains the understanding of first- and fourth-year students regarding lexical and structural ambiguity, with variation defined by the distribution of their answers.

(A) Students' Interpretations of Lexical Ambiguity:

Student participants from the Faculty of Education provided various accounts. The answers form the ground on which one can assess students' knowledge and unawareness of lexical and structural ambiguity. 20 sentences are examined, referring to students' choice of each alternative.

(1) First-year students' interpretations of Lexical Ambiguity.
Examples
1. I saw her duck.

The word duck is ambiguous. It may be read as 'I saw her when she lowers her head', or it may be read as 'I saw a duck (bird) of her.' Five students read the word duck as the first reading. 19 students read it as the second reading. The remaining six students selected both readings.

2. The fisherman went to the bank.

The term 'bank' can be used to refer to a bank as a financial institution or the area along a river or lake. Seventeen students applied the first sense, and four applied the second. Nine students accepted both senses, indicating knowledge of the ambiguity of the word 'bank'.

3. Mary is wearing a light coat.

The term light in this case is ambiguous. It can be defined as a coat light in colour or light in weight. (15) students understood the first sense as 'light in colour'; however, (8) students understood it as the second sense, 'light in weight'. (6) students favored both senses.

4.   Ali   is   employed   in   a   private   company.
The term private would be either 'personal or secret'. (18) students

understood it as a personal company, (6) students used the other sense 'secret company', and (6) students believe that both senses can be used.

5. Did you see her dress?

The pronoun 'her' can be a possessive pronoun. The sentence is two-meaning in this example: either as "Did you see the dress belonging to her?" or as "Did you see her while she was dressing (wearing clothes)?" Fifteen students interpreted the pronoun her in the first sense, eleven interpreted the second sense, and four interpreted both senses only.

6. After he shot an elephant.

The past tense 'shot' can either kill or take a picture. Ten students took the former (killed), and seventeen of them ignored this and took the latter (took a picture). The other three recognized both meanings 7. She teaches French.

French can either be the nationality of the person or can be used for the language she teaches. (7) of students indicated 'She is from France', while (20) of students indicated 'She teaches the French language'. Only 3 of the students selected both meanings.

8. I swear to call you.

The word 'ring' can be a 'finger ring' or a 'phone call'. The latter sense is chosen by (8) students. Where (17) students have chosen the former one 'phone call'. The sequence in which their number is (5) is found in both senses.

9. Tom is still too young for this job.

The term young used in the above sentence can be interpreted as 'young in age' or 'inexperienced. 15 students interpreted young to be young in age. 10 students interpreted it as an expert, and the rest of 5 students interpreted it as both meanings are correct.

10. He found a bat in the forest.

The term bat can be a 'cricket bat' or a 'creature animal'. 12 students understood 'bat' as a 'cricket bat'. 8 students understood it as a 'creature animal'. Other students 10 opted for both meanings.

(2) Fourth Year Students' Interpretations of Lexical Ambiguity.

1. I saw her *duck*.

The word *duck* is ambiguous. It could be interpreted as 'I saw her when she lowers her head', or it could be interpreted as 'I saw a duck (bird) belonging to her. 6 students interpreted "duck" as the first meaning. 19 students interpreted it as the second meaning. The rest of the students (5) chose both interpretations.

2. The fisherman went to the bank.

The word '***bank'*** can refer either to a financial institution or to the land beside a river or lake. Twelve respondents selected the first meaning, six chose the second, and another twelve recognized both. The latter group demonstrated an awareness of the ambiguity in the word '***bank'***.

3. Mary is wearing a *light* coat.

The word 'light' here is ambiguous. It could refer to the coat as light in colour or light in weight. 12 students interpreted it as 'light in colour', while 5 students interpreted it as 'light in weight.' Both interpretations were chosen by the 13 students.

4. Ali is working in a *private* company.

The word *private c*ould either mean 'personal or secret'. 13 students interpreted it as a personal company, 6 students chose the other meaning 'secret company', while 11 students considered that both interpretations are possible.

5. Did you see **her** dress?

The pronoun 'her' could be a possessive pronoun. In this case, the sentence can be understood in two ways: either as "Did you see the dress (clothes) belonging to her?" or as "Did you see her while she was dressing (wearing clothes)?" 13 students chose the first interpretation of the pronoun her, nine selected the second, and eight recognized both meanings.

6. He once *shot* an elephant.

The past verb shot can mean either "killed" or "took a photograph." 13 students interpreted it as the first meaning (killed), seven selected the second (took a photo), and ten recognized both interpretations.

7. She is a French teacher.

French could describe the nationality of someone or could describe the language that she teaches. 4 students interpreted it as 'She is from France', while 15 students interpreted it as 'She teaches the French language'. Only 11 of the students chose both meanings.

8. I promise to give you a **ring**.

Ring could mean a finger ring or a telephone call. The first meaning has been chosen by 11 students. Where 11 students chose the other one's telephone call. The others, whose number is 8, considered both meanings to be possible.

9. Tom is still **young** for this job.

The adjective *young* in the above sentence could either mean ***young in age*** or ***inexperienced***. 11 students interpreted young as young in age. (8) students interpreted it as an expert, and the other 11 students interpreted it as both meanings are correct.

10. He found a **bat** in the forest.

The word bat could mean either a 'cricket bat' or a 'creature animal' (10). Students interpreted bat as a 'cricket bat'. 11 students interpreted it as a 'creature animal'. The rest of the 9 students chose both meanings.

(B) Students' Interpretations of Structural Ambiguity

This section presents students' interpretations of structural ambiguity, illustrating how they perceive and understand the meanings of structurally ambiguous statements in English. It aims to reveal the patterns in their reasoning and the challenges they encounter in resolving such ambiguities.

(1) First-Year Students' Interpretations of Structural Ambiguity.

This section presents first-year students' interpretations of structural ambiguity, highlighting how they comprehend sentences with multiple possible grammatical structures:

(I) *Analytical Ambiguity*

Analytical ambiguity occurs when a sentence can be interpreted in multiple ways due to its grammatical structure, requiring learners to analyze how modifiers and phrases relate to different elements. The samples below show the explanation of ambiguity:

1. *He is an American history teacher.*

This sentence is structurally ambiguous and can be interpreted in two ways:

a. He is a teacher who is American by nationality and teaches history.

b. He is a teacher who teaches American history.

Four Students chose the first interpretation, which has 'American' modifying the 'teacher', not the 'history'. 17 students chose the second interpretation, which has 'American' modifying the word history. Both interpretations were chosen by 9 students.

2. Sara gave a bath to her daughter wearing a pink t-shirt.

This sentence can be interpreted in two ways:

a. Sara was wearing a pink t-shirt when she gave a bath to her daughter.

b. Her daughter was wearing a pink t-shirt when her Mom bathed her.

Thirteen students chose the first interpretation and understood the sentence as (Sara was wearing the pink t-shirt). The other 11 students chose the second interpretation, as her daughter was wearing a pink t-shirt. Only 6 students chose both interpretations.

(II) *Attachment Ambiguity:*

Attachment ambiguity happens when it is unclear which part of a sentence a word or phrase (often a prepositional phrase or clause) is meant

to modify or attach to. This type of ambiguity usually affects meaning because the modifier can logically connect to more than one element.

3. *I saw the man with one eye*

The ambiguity in this sentence arises from the interpretation of the prepositional phrase *'with one eye'*, which, in like manner, can be attached either to the nominal phrase (***the man***) or the verbal phrase (***I saw***). The possible interpretations of the sentence are:

a. I saw the man who has only one eye.

b. I saw the man by using one eye.

seven students chose the first interpretation, where the prepositional phrase is linked to the noun phrase. Eleven students referred it back to the verbal phrase, while the remaining twelve expected the two interpretations.

4. *The policeman saw the children in the road.*

The prepositional phrase '***in the road***' is the source of the ambiguity in this expression, as it can be interpreted into two meanings:

• To the noun phrase (the children), meaning "The policeman saw the children who were in the road."
• To the verb phrase (the policeman saw), meaning "The policeman who was in the road saw the children."

As the learners subjected to this sentence, the present researcher noticed that fourteen students referred back the phrase to the verbal phrase; four linked it to the nominal phrase, and twelve recognized that it may refer to the two interpretations.

(III) Referential Ambiguity

5. John met Bill before he went to the store.

The reason for ambiguity in this sentence comes from the pronoun "*he*", which may refer to either the subject (*John*) or the object (*Bill*). This leads to two possible interpretations:

a. *John*, before *he* went to the store, met Bill.

b. Bill, before *he* went to the store, met John.

From the answers, it has been noticed that 11 students chose the first interpretation, in which the pronoun '*he*' refers to *John*. Consequently, 9 students selected the second interpretation, in which '*he*' refers to Bill. And 10 students chose both interpretations.

6. Fatima saw Asma, and she was happy.

Similarly, in the above example, the ambiguity refers to the pronoun '*she*', where it may refer either to *Fatima* or *Asma*. This leads to two possible interpretations:

a. *Fatima* was happy when *she* met Asma.

b. *Asma* was happy when *she* met Fatima.

From the results, 15 students preferred the first interpretation, specifying '*she*' as referring to *Fatima*. 7 students preferred the second choice, where '*she*' refers to *Asma*. The rest eight students accepted both interpretations.

(IV) Coordination Ambiguity

7. Bill and Mary got married.

This sentence can be interpreted in two ways:

a. Bill and Mary married each other.

b. Bill is married to another woman, and Mary is married to another man.

Eighteen students selected the first interpretation, four chose the second, and six considered both interpretations correct.

8. The young men and women are invited.

This sentence allows for two interpretations:

a. The men and women who are young were invited, where young modifies both men and women.

b. Only the young men were invited, but not the young women, where young modifies men only.

Seventeen students selected the first interpretation, six chose the second, and seven considered both readings correct.

(V) Elliptical Ambiguity

8. The young men and women are invited.

This sentence allows for two interpretations:

a. The men and women who are young were invited, where young modifies both men and women.

b. Only the young men were invited, but not the young women, where young modifies men only.

Seventeen students selected the first interpretation, six chose the second, and seven considered both readings correct.

10. I know a richer man than John.

The ambiguity in this sentence arises from ellipsis and allows two possible interpretations:

a. I know a man who is richer than John.

b. I know a man who is richer than any man John knows.

Fifteen students selected the first interpretation, seven preferred the second, and eight accepted both interpretations.

(2) Fourth-year Students' interpretations of structural ambiguity

This section presents fourth-year students' interpretations of structural ambiguity, highlighting how they comprehend sentences with multiple possible grammatical structures

(I) Analytical Ambiguity

1. He is an American history teacher.

This sentence is structurally ambiguous. The possible interpretations of this sentence are:

A. He is a teacher who is American by nationality and teaches history.

B. He is a teacher who teaches American history.

9 students) chose the first interpretation, which 'American' modifies the 'teacher', not the 'history'. 12 students) chose the second interpretation, which 'American' modifies the word history. Both interpretations were chosen by 9 students.

2. Sara gave a bath to her daughter wearing a pink t-shirt.

This sentence can be interpreted as:

A. Sara was wearing a pink t-shirt when she gave a bath to her daughter.

B. Her daughter was wearing a pink t-shirt when her Mom bathed her.

9 students) chose the first interpretation and understood the sentence as (Sara was wearing the pink t-shirt). The other group of students, 12, chose the second interpretation, as her daughter was wearing a pink t-shirt. Only 9 students chose both interpretations.

(II) Attachment Ambiguity

3. I saw the dog with one eye.

The ambiguity in this sentence arises from the prepositional phrase with one eye, which may be attached either to the noun phrase (the dog) or to the verb phrase (I saw). The interpretations are:

a. I saw the dog that has only one eye.

b. I saw the dog by using one eye.

Seven students selected the first interpretation, eleven chose the second, and twelve considered both correct.

4. The policeman saw the children in the road.

Here, the prepositional phrase on the road can be attached in two different ways:

a. The policeman saw the children who were in the road (attached to the noun phrase the children).

b. The policeman who was in the road saw the children (attached to the verb phrase the policeman saw).

Fourteen students interpreted the phrase as modifying the verb phrase, four attached it to the noun phrase, and twelve accepted both readings.

(III) Referential Ambiguity

5. John met Bill before he went to the store.

The ambiguity in this sentence comes from the pronoun he, which may refer either to the subject (John) or to the object (Bill). The possible interpretations are:

a. John, before he went to the store, met Bill.

b. Bill, before he went to the store, met John.

Eleven students interpreted 'he' as referring to John, nine as referring to Bill, and ten accepted both interpretations.

6. Fatima saw Asma, and she was happy.

As in the previous example, the ambiguity lies in the pronoun she, which can refer either to Fatima or to Asma. The interpretations are:

a. Fatima was happy when she met Asma.

b. Asma was happy when she met Fatima.

15 students chose the first interpretation (where she refers to Fatima), seven chose the second (where she refers to Asma), and eight accepted both interpretations.

(IV) Coordination Ambiguity
7. Bill and Mary got married.
This sentence allows two possible interpretations:
a. Bill and Mary married each other.
b. Bill is married to another woman, and Mary is married to another man.

Eighteen students selected the first interpretation, three chose the second, and nine accepted both meanings as correct.

8. The young men and women are invited.

This sentence may also be interpreted in two ways:
a. The men and women who are young were invited, where young modifies both men and women.
b. Only the young men were invited, but not the young women, where young modifies men only.

Seventeen students chose the first interpretation, six selected the second, and seven considered both readings valid.

(V) Elliptical Ambiguity

9. *Adam loves his mother, and so does Roy.*

This sentence has two possible interpretations:
a. *Adam loves his mother, and Roy loves Adam's mother as well.*
b. *Adam loves his mother, and Roy loves his own mother.*

Nine students understood the sentence as the first interpretation, fifteen chose the second, and six accepted both.

10. I know a richer man than John.
The ambiguity in this sentence arises from ellipsis, allowing two readings:
a. *I know a man who is richer than John.*
b. *I know a man who is richer than any man John knows.*

Fifteen students selected the first interpretation, seven preferred the second, and eight considered both correct.

8. Findings of the Research

The findings of this research revealed significant insights into how Libyan EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Misurata University, perceive and interpret lexical and structural ambiguity. Overall, the results showed clear variations between first- and fourth-year students in both their understanding and ability to disambiguate sentences, as well as between the two types of ambiguity examined.

1. Student Performance Across Levels
   o First-year students performed poorly in identifying and interpreting both lexical and structural ambiguities.
   o Fourth-year students performed better, especially in structural ambiguity, but their overall comprehension of ambiguity remained partial and inconsistent.

2. Factors Influencing Performance
   o Limited exposure to English and lower language competence contributed to first-year students' difficulties.
   o Fourth-year students' higher exposure improved structural interpretation but did not fully enhance lexical ambiguity awareness, suggesting that years of study alone are insufficient without explicit instructional support.
   o
3. Lexical vs. Structural Ambiguity
   o Structural ambiguity was easier for students to interpret, relying on grammatical and syntactic cues.
   o Lexical ambiguity posed greater challenges due to the need for vocabulary richness, contextual understanding, and semantic flexibility.
   o Students often defaulted to literal or familiar meanings rather than recognizing multiple interpretations.
4. Teachers' Strategies and Perceptions
   o Teachers reported using strategies such as paraphrasing, contextualization, alternative expressions, and listening to materials to help students understand ambiguous words and sentences. They emphasized that explicit strategy instruction and contextual cues are the most effective methods for addressing lexical ambiguity.
5. Interpretive Awareness and Pedagogical Implications
   o Teachers play a central role in guiding students' understanding through contextual analysis, metalinguistic awareness, and communicative practice.
   o Strategies such as paraphrasing, contextual examples, peer discussion, and task-based activities enhance learners' interpretive competence and communicative confidence.
   o Meaning-focused instruction helps students process ambiguity naturally, fostering both comprehension and adaptability in real-life communication.
6. Overall Conclusion
   o Students' awareness of ambiguity is partial and uneven, with structural ambiguity easier to process than lexical ambiguity.
   o Teachers' interventions are crucial for bridging gaps in comprehension, emphasizing the importance of explicit strategy instruction,

217

contextualization, and meaning-focused learning to improve learners' ability to resolve ambiguous expressions.

9. Conclusion

Ambiguity is a key linguistic aspect that complicates the understanding of foreign language learners because it can refer to words, phrases, or sentences in multiple ways. This research examined lexical and structural ambiguity and found that students in the English Department at the Faculty of Education generally have a low understanding of ambiguous expressions. The results indicate that freshmen primarily struggle with lexical ambiguity and coordination ambiguity, while senior students face more challenges with structural and elliptical ambiguity. These findings suggest that exposure to language and linguistic experience greatly enhances the ability to understand ambiguity. Educators recommend that embedding ambiguous words or sentences in real-world contexts is the most effective way to guide students toward correct interpretation. Therefore, language teachers should explicitly teach ambiguity as part of their instruction, using context-based activities and authentic materials for examples and practice. These strategies not only increase students' awareness of multiple meanings but also improve their communicative skills, which, in turn, enable them to handle the language they encounter daily, which is inherently ambiguous.

10. References

[1] Akmajian, A., Demers, R. A., Farmer, A. K. & Harnis, R. M. (2010). *Linguistics: An introduction to language and communication (6th ed)*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[2] Almahameed, Y. (2020). Resolving lexical and structural ambiguity by Jordanian learners of English. *Journal of Critical Reviews, 7(8)*, 2565-2573.

[3] Awwad, M. (2017). Perception of Linguistic Ambiguity. *European Scientific Journal,13*(20, 185-205.

[4] Bach, K. (1982). Semantic nonspecificity and mixed quantifiers. *Linguistics and Philosophy, 4*(4), 593–605. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00355587.

[5] Bacon (2006). How Fast Do Students Forget What They Learn in Consumer Behavior? *A Longitudinal Study. 28* (3): 181-192.

[6] Baker, J. (1976). *Recognition of ambiguity. Alberta*, Canada: University of Alberta.

[7] Bhaskara, Swara. 2009. Penggunaan Kata Depan "of". Clare, C. (1993). Language ambiguity: *A curse and a blessing, 7* (1), 13-30.

[8] Barnard, K., & Johnson, M. (2005). Word sense disambiguation with pictures. *Artificial Intelligence, 167*(1–2), 13–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.artint.2005.04.009

[9] Boyarskaya, E. (2019). Ambiguity Matters in Linguistics and Translation. *Slovo ru Baltic accent, 10*(3):81-93.

[10] Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

[11] Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and discourse: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.

[12] Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). Handbook of qualitative research. Sage Publications, Inc.

[13] Elasfar, M. A.M., Aboubaker, M. M., & Bishti, T. (2002). Issue of Structure, Ambiguity and Meaning among Libyan University Students. *Linguistica Antependia, 3*, 3039-3054.

[14] Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. (2019). *Task-based language teaching: Theory and practice.* Cambridge University Press.

[15] Felser, C., Roberts. L, Martinis, T., & Gross, R. (2003). The Process of Ambiguous Sentences by First and Second Language Learners of English. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 24*(3),453-489.

[16] Fortuny, J. & Payrato, L. (2024). Ambiguity in Linguistics. *Studia Linguistics, 78*(1), 1–7.

[17] Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2011). *An introduction to language (9th ed.).* Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

[18] Gillon, B. S. (1990). Ambiguity, generality, and indeterminacy. *Synthase, 85*(3), 391–416.

[19] Hirst, G. (1987). *Semantic interpretation and the resolution of ambiguity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[20] Hoefler, S. (2003). *Theory, implementation, and applications.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[21] Hurford, James. R., *Brendan, Heasley, and Michael B. Smith. (2007). Semantics (2nd ed): A Coursebook.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[22] Kadlub, M. (2017). Sources of Ambiguity in Language. *Studia Anglica, 14*(4), 44-57.

[23] Karpf, A. (1986). The Perception of Ambiguity in Second Language Learning. *IRAL, 24* (2), 157-169.

[24) Khawalda, M. I., & Al-Saidat, E. M. (2012, March). Structural Ambiguity Interpretation: A Case Study of Arab Learners of English. *Global Journal of Human Social Science, 12*(6), 1-6.

[25] Lamb, B. (2008). The Queen's English Society's practical guide to punctuation. *Queen's English Society*,1-20.

[26] Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching (3rd ed.).* Oxford University Press.

[27] Leech, G. N. (1981). *Semantics: The study of meaning (2nd ed.).* London: Penguin Books.

[28] Levinson, S. (1983). *Pragmatics. Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press.

[29] McNamara, C. (1999). *General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews*. Sage, Minnesota.

[30] Merriam-Webster. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.)*. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated 20.

[31] Mohunen, Kristiina, and Tanja Portunen. (2012). Detecting Semantic Ambiguity. *LiLT, 7(*17). 1-9.

[32] Nation, I. S. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice*. New York: Routledge.

[33] Nwala, M. A. (2015). *Introduction to linguistics: A first course*. (rev. edition). Port Harcourt: Obisco Nig. Enterprises.

[34] Okanlawon, B., & Oluga, S. (2008). Ambiguity and nominal group multiple post-modification in the written English of some selected Nigerian polytechnics. Ethiopian Journal of Business and Economics (EJBE): *A Multidisciplinary Journal, 2*(1), 124–151.

[35] Phillip. 2006. Introduction to the Study of Language. Los Angeles. UCLA.

[36] Quiroga-Clare, C. (2003). Language ambiguity: A curse and a blessing. *Translation Journal, 7*(1), 280–291.

[37] Reed, V. A. (2005). *An introduction to children with language disorders*. Bolton: Pearson.

[38] [39] Richards, J. C, & Rodgers, T. S (2001*). Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (2nd ed)*. Cambridge University Press.

[40] Roberts, L., & Liszka, S. (2019). Grammatical aspect and L2 learners' processing of temporarily ambiguous sentences: A self-paced reading study. *Second Language Research, 37*(4), 1–29. doi:10.1177/0267658319895551

[41] Rusche, H. (1980). *Ambiguity*. Washington: English Department of Emory University. Schlenker.

[42] Sennet, A. (2014). *Ambiguity. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2014 ed.)*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/ambiguity

[43] Semiz, Ö. (2014). EFL learners' understanding of linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies, 2*(2), 1–11.

[44] Shultz, T. R., & Pilon, R. (1973). Development of the Ability to Detect Linguistic Ambiguity. *Child Development, 44*(4), 728–733. https://doi.org/10.2307/1127716

[45] Simatupang, M. S. (2007). How Ambiguous is the structural Ambiguity*? Lingua Cultura, 1*(2), 99–104.

[46] Steven T. Piantadosi; Harry Tily; Edward Gibson.] (2012). The communicative function of ambiguity in language, *Cognition,122*(3), 280–291. DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2011.10.004

[47[Ullmann, Stephen. (1977*). An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[48] Winkler, S. (Ed.). (2015). *Ambiguity: Language and communication*. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter.

[49] Yule, G. (2006). *The study of language (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge Univer