

# The Investigation of Collocational Errors in University Students' Writing Majoring in English

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present study was to investigate the collocational errors in EFL college learners' writing . A total of 68 sophomores University students in Hamadan city participated in this study. Thirty-eight assignments and thirty-eight in-class practice were collected and analyzed for collocational errors. The unacceptable grammatical and lexical collocational errors were identified based on the modified version originally proposed by Benson, et al. (1986) and Chen (2002). The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations, the British National Corpus, were employed to analyze the participants' collocational errors and to provide suggestions for correction. Moreover, a questionnaire was administered to explore the participants' perceptions of difficulty in collocations. The results of the questionnaire showed that the participants' perceptions of collocational types were different from the collocational error types the participants made in their writing samples. Ignorance of rule restrictions was the major source of collocational errors. EFL students make collocational errors in their writing because of the interference of their mother tongue, lack of the collocational concept, the interlingual or intra lingual transfer, paraphrase and their shortage of their collocational knowledge. These can be the possible reasons for explaining why EFL students frequently make unacceptable collocations in their writing.

**Keywords:** Collocation, Students' Error, Lexical Collocation, Grammatical Collocation

## 1. Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Collocation has become one of the primary concerns in EFL teaching and learning for decades. Several researchers have perceived the significance of collocations and the requisite of collocation teaching in EFL courses (Brown, 1974; Nattinger, 1980, 1988; Channell, 1981; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Howarth, 1998). They also pointed out the benefits of learning collocations such as increasing learners' language competence, enhancing learners' communicative competence, and being toward native-like fluency. Hence, collocational knowledge is essential for EFL learners and collocation instruction in EFL courses is required.

However, previous studies (Channell, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Gitsaki, 1997; Liu, 1999a; Lien, 2003; Hsu, 2004) indicated that EFL learners made many collocational errors in their writing and speaking for lack of collocational competence in English. For example, many Chinese EFL learners refer to "take medicine" as "eat medicine" since the noun "medicine" in Chinese regularly collocates with the verb "eat" rather than "take." Thus, several researcher proposed that teacher would increase EFL learners' collocational knowledge through raising EFL learners' awareness of collocations. For instance, Woolard (2000) claimed an effective way to raise awareness of collocations is to help EFL learners pay more attention to their mis-collocations in their production of the language. In that way, learners gradually realize that learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, but being familiar with word combinations. Lewis (2000) also proposed that EFL learners need to know not only what is right but also what is wrong. If teachers can find out learners' collocational errors and point out these errors to learners, they can raise learners' awareness of collocations. Thus, studying learners' mis-collocations

will be important because it can help teachers understand difficult collocations for EFL learners and realize what should be emphasized in classes for teachers to raise EFL learners' awareness of collocations.

## 2. Research Questions

- 1) What collocational error types are made by the participants?
- 2) What are the participants' perceptions of difficulty in collocations?
- 3) What are sources of collocational errors?

## 3. Background

### Definition of the term

As far as the term "collocation" is concerned, previous studies seem to fall into two broad categories. Most researchers defined collocations from the aspect of partnership or co-occurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified collocations from the aspect of discourse. In the present study, the definition of collocations focuses on co-occurrence of words, and the classification of collocations is based on the categories of collocations proposed by Benson et al (1986b). They classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Collocations are further divided into seven types, and grammatical collocations are divided into eight types. Lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, such as *acquire knowledge*, *arouse my interest*, *relieve pressure*, *high ambitions* and *follow closely*. On the other hand, grammatical collocations are phrases containing a dominant word, such as a noun, an adjective, or a verb and a preposition or grammatical structure like an infinitive or clause, such as *feel sorry to*, *listen to the music*, *major in*, and *had to write*.

## 4. The Notion of "Collocations"

With regard to the term "collocations," previous studies fall into two broad categories. Most researchers defined collocations from the aspect of partnership or co-occurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified collocations from the aspect of discourse. In terms of partnership of words, Mitchell (1971, as cited in Carter & McCarthy, 1988) defined collocations from the view of grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, most other researchers tackled collocations from the lexical aspect.

McIntosh (1961) and Palmer (1976) classified collocations on the basis of the restrictions on words. Palmer (1981), furthermore, proposed three kinds of collocational restrictions as follows:

- 1) Some restrictions are based fully on the meaning of the item such as *green cow*
- 2) Some restrictions are based on range—a word may be used with a whole set of words that have some semantic features in common. This explains the unlikeliness of the pretty boy (pretty being used with words denoting females).
- 3) Some are collocational in the strictest sense, involving neither meaning nor range, as *addled* with *eggs* and *brains* (p. 79).

## 5. Types of collocations

Since the term "collocation" has been discussed in many linguistic areas such as semantics, phraseology, corpus linguistics and systematic linguistics, researchers categorized collocations from different perspectives. Cowie and Mackin (1975) classified idioms and collocations into four categories based on idiomaticity from most to least fixed: pure idioms, figurative idioms, restricted collocations, and open collocations. Wood (1981, as cited in Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), on the other hand, grouped collocations into idioms, colligations and free combinations on the basis of a semantic criterion and a syntactic criterion in a continuum,

In The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations, Benson et al. (1986a) separated lexical combinations into five groups according to their degree of cohesiveness, as shown in following Table 1. Lewis (1997) adopted different perspectives to 11 categories to categorize collocations into strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent. The distinction between strong collocations and weak collocations is based on their fixedness and restriction, whereas the distinction between frequent ones and infrequent ones is on the basis of their

frequency of co-occurrence in a corpus. Strong collocations such as *drink beer* and *drug addict* are recognized as tightly linked phrases which function like single words, while weak ones, like *a nice day* and *a good chance* are combined with two common words, and each of which may occur with other words. Collocations, furthermore, can be any combination of strong and frequent, strong and infrequent, weak and frequent, and infrequent.

**Table 1. Types of lexical combinations**

Type	characteristics	Examples
Compounds	completely frozen; no variations at all are possible	1. aptitude test 2. floppy disk
Idioms	Relatively frozen expressions whose meanings do not reflect the meanings of their component parts.	1. to have one's back to the wall 2. hammer and tongs
transitional	more frozen and less variable than collocations; their meanings are close to those suggested by their component parts	1. foot the bill 2. to be in the tight spot
combinations	the meaning of the whole does reflect the meaning of the parts	6. pure chance 2. to commit murder
Free	their components are the freest regard to combining with other lexical items	1. To analyze/report investigate a murder 2. to recall an event/ adventure/accident

## 7. Collocations in Second Language Acquisition

Brown (1974) was one of the first few pioneers to propose the incorporation of collocations in the EFL/ESL classroom. She underscored that learning collocations not only increases ESL/EFL learners' knowledge of collocation but also improves learners' oral fluency, listening comprehension, and reading speed. Additionally, Brown pointed out that learning collocations enables learners gradually to realize language

chunks used by native speakers in speech and writing and to get the feel of using words in natural combination with other words as well.

Recently, several researchers, including Liu (1999b), Huang (2001), Chen (2002), Liu (2002), and Tong (2004), investigated EFL learners' difficulty in producing collocations. First of all, Liu (1999b) examined collocational errors in students' writings- 127 copies of final exam papers, and 94 copies of their compositions. Sixty-three collocational errors were found in students' compositions and examination papers. Among these errors, it was found that the verb + noun pattern and verb + preposition + noun pattern were noticeable errors and there were five sources of learners' error. According to Liu (1999b), negative transfer was the most noticeable source of collocational errors in these five sources of errors.

Chen (2002) conducted a study by using high school students as participants to investigate their collocational errors in writings. The unacceptable grammatical/lexical collocational errors were classified according to types of errors they contained, using a modified classification originally established by Benson, et al. (1986b). Findings revealed that a total of 272 collocational errors consisting of 147 grammatical collocational errors and 125 lexical collocational errors in the subjects' writing. It was also found that adjective noun, and verb-noun were the most frequent lexical collocational error types. Preposition-noun, and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocational errors. Other common lexical collocational error types in descending order were (v + adv), (n + v), and (adv + adj). The least frequent types were (n + to infinitive), (adj + to infinitive), (n + that clause) and (adj + that clause). In addition, more grammatical collocational errors (147: 54.04%) than lexical ones (125: 49.96%) were found, and more collocational errors were found in the low achievers' writings. With a view to answering this question that, whether we should teach collocations or not, Brown (1974) and Smith (1983) all believed that knowledge of collocations is important for EFL learners, especially for college-bound advanced learners, and that they should be taught predictable collocations. Marton (as cited in Bahns, 1993) proposed that "mere exposure to the target language is not sufficient for the advanced learner to acquire the knowledge of conventional, which equate with collocations." (p. 58). He argued that if language teachers want to guide advanced learners towards a native-like command of the foreign language, they should pay "special attention to their effective learning of conventional syntactic and grammars" (p. 58).

In the lexical approach, Lewis (1993, p. 35) pointed out his methodological implications to teach collocations.

1. Early emphasis on receptive skills, especially listening, is important.
2. De-contextualized vocabulary learning is a fully legitimate strategy.
3. The role of grammar as a receptive skill must be recognized.
4. The importance of contrast in language awareness must be recognized.
5. Teachers should employ extensive, comprehensive language for receptive purposes.
6. Extensive writing should be held as long as possible.
7. Nonlinear recording formats, such as collocation tables, word trees, are central to the lexical approach.
8. Teachers' reformulation should be the natural response to student error.
9. Teachers should always react primarily to the content of student language.
10. Pedagogical chunking should be a frequent classroom activity.

## **8. Sources of Making Collocational Errors**

Recent experimental studies have pointed out several factors that may influence EFL learners' performance in making correct collocations. The researchers discovered that the causes of collocational errors are related to analogy, overgeneralization, paraphrase, the L1 interference, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and shortage of collocational knowledge.(Channell, 1981; Bahas, 1993; Bahns & Eldaws, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Liu, 1999a, 1999b). In terms of the L1 interference, Bahns (1993)

### **The sources of collocational errors**

**Cognitive Strategies**      **intralingual transfer:**      overgeneralization

		Ignorance of rule restrictions
		False concepts hypothesized
		The use of synonym
	<b>Interlingual Transfer</b>	negative transfer
<b>Communication Strategies</b>	<b>paraphrase</b>	word coinage
		Approximation

## 9. Conclusion

To conclude the above research, EFL students make collocational errors in their writing because of the interference of their mother tongue, lack of the collocational concept, the interlingual or intra lingual transfer, paraphrase and their shortage of their collocational knowledge. These can be the possible reasons for explaining why EFL students frequently make unacceptable collocations in their writing. Pedagogical suggestions are provided for EFL/ESL teachers and learners including learners' awareness of collocations, reinforcing learners' of collocations, increasing learners' collocational competence in L2, and avoiding literal translation. Raising learners' awareness of collocations helps learners more efficiently and effectively, and produce collocations more accurately in their English writings. In terms of reinforcing students' concept of collocations, EFL teachers need to recommend dictionaries to their students which consist of common collocations, corpora and concordancing programs. The study showed that most of the learners have not sufficient collocational competence, either grammatical or lexical, in L 2. The finding suggest that EFL teachers should maximize the amount of appropriate quality input available to the students. As for one of the sources of collocational errors – negative transfer, implies that EFL/ESL teachers need to remind their students that literal translation should be used with great cautious. Therefore, teachers may try to encourage learners to seek parallels equivalents in L 1 and L 2.

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