

## **Collocations Revisited**

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**Abstract.** The present study is aimed at investigating students' ability to collocate English words correctly and finding out the strategies that they tend to use (transfer, synonymy, avoidance) when they are unfamiliar with the correct collocation. For this purpose, fifty junior and senior students majoring in English took part in this study. They were given a 40-item test and were required to fill in the blank in each item by choosing the correct word which collocated with the preceding or following constituent. The findings have shown that students are incompetent in their production of English collocations. Of the total number of collocations, only 39 % were rendered correctly. With regard to the percentages of various strategies, negative transfer ranked first 30%, followed by synonymy 22.2% and avoidance 8.8% respectively.

### **Collocations Revisited**

The lexicon has long been viewed as being secondary to syntax and phonology in the foreign language context which emanates from the fact that both phonology and syntax are the most susceptible to scientific analysis in both the structuralist's and transformationalist's framework. The traditional view of lexis as being marginal to syntax and the viewing of lexis as a means rather than an end in itself has inevitably led to Level 2 (L2) learners' lexical deficiency and incapability to function properly in real-life situations. Judd states "that upon leaving the sheltered atmosphere of the classroom, students often find themselves at a literal loss for words in the uncontrolled English-speaking environment which they encounter in the normal American university. Thus he suggests that vocabulary instruction should begin early in L2 teaching and that more emphasis should be given to direct vocabulary teaching" [1].

Wilkins who is not in favor of subordinating the teaching of vocabulary to grammar emphasizes that a command of both grammar and vocabulary is necessary if

the learner is to communicate at all seriously and adequately through the language. Furthermore he states, "..... there is not much value either in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say. One is literally 'at a loss of word' [2].

The long-held tradition of emphasizing syntax and grammar over lexis must be rectified in favor of a more balanced view which places lexis in its proper context.

Verstraten (1992) in Arnaud and Bejoint states, "Learning a second language involves familiarizing oneself with at least part of its vocabulary and learning to apply the rules of its grammar. This means that a great many lexical elements have to be learnt by heart: L2 student has to get acquainted to require a greater learning effort than single words. The ability to use fixed phrases seems to be a fairly good indication of the command one has of the second language" [3]. It is paramount therefore that we emphasize the teaching of words not only as single units but also as multi-words units MWU.

Kjellemer (1992:125) compares the output of only moderately fluent native speakers with that of only moderately fluent learners of the same language. While the typical moderately fluent native speaker makes few hesitation pauses between long sequences of words, the typical moderately fluent learner pauses far more often than the native speaker. According to Kjellemer the difference between them in this regard can be ascribed largely to a difference in the automation of collocations [4].

It is well-known that the spoken language of EFL learners is characterized by being replete with collocation errors. Wardell states that [5], "One peculiarity of the English of second language learners is their failure to produce these collocations in the proper order. For example such linked forms as "white and black" "death or life", and "wiser but sadder", which do not follow the prescribed pattern have a false ring to native speakers. We expect each of these pairs to follow the prescribed patterns: "black and white", "life and death", and "sadder but wiser." Wardell adds that no grammatical rules govern these collocations and that native speakers learn them during the normal acquisition process. Foreign language learners must, however, be trained to recognize and produce these forms in the proper context.

Abu Ssaydeh who takes a stand similar to that of Wilkins maintains "the claim that the major problems the learner frequently encounters are predominantly lexical rather than grammatical is probably nowhere more apparent and valid than in the area of collocation, the generation of collocably compatible strings in a foreign language has always plagued even advanced learners" [6].

According to Abu Ssaydeh, the inability to produce correct collocation can be attributed to several factors:

- a) The inadequacy of current dictionaries and their failure to explicitly state the complex collocational range certain items may have.
- b) The frequent, and inherently, dangerous reliance on synonymy and near synonymy in dictionaries to illustrate the meanings of head words which usually creates the erroneous impression amongst learners that conceptual equivalence entails distribution equivalence.
- c) Native language interference, whereby a learner carries over the collocational distribution of a certain item into the foreign language.

### **Definition of collocations**

There seems to be no consensus as to the exact definition of collocations which widely varies from one linguist to another depending upon one's orientation and the paradigm he subscribed to. However, one factor common to these definitions is the explicit statement of the interrelationship between one lexeme and another and how they combine to form a collocation.

The term was first introduced by Firth. In Firth's view "collocation is the company the words keep together." He says: "Meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words. He believes one of the meanings of night is its collocability with dark" [7].

Leech gives a more comprehensive definition of collocation. He states that collocative meaning consists of the association a word acquires on account of the meaning of words which tend to occur in its environment. For example, "pretty" and "handsome" share common ground of the meaning "good-looking" but may be distinguished by the range of nouns with which they are likely to co-occur. Whereas one can say "a handsome man," one can not say "a handsome woman" [8].

According to Benson, Benson and Ison, the compilers of BBI combinatory dictionary of English, "In English as in any other language there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called recurrent combinations, fixed combinations or collocations" [9]. They cite two characteristics of collocations: Relative fixedness on the one hand and non-idiomaticity

on the other hand. They give the example of murder and its collocations: Commit, investigate, describe and witness. It is immediately recognized that the verb to commit is more closely associated with murder than the other three verbs. To commit a murder is a far more fixed collocation than those with the other three verbs.

Jackson states that "collocation refers to the combination of words that have a certain mutual expectancy. The combination is not a fixed expression but there is a greater than chance likelihood that the words will co-occur." Jackson further states that the adjective "false" modifies nouns such as eye, can, beard, passport, and tooth. Whereas we say a false beard, and a false tooth, we tend to use artificial with legs and arms" [10]. What these examples illustrate is that words regularly keep company with certain other words, and it is such combinations that we refer to as collocations. The collocation that a lexeme regularly enters is a factor that must be taken into consideration in the description of its meaning. Part of the meaning of false therefore is its tendency to be regularly found in combination with teeth, eye, passport, etc. "since collocation involves mutual expectancy, then part of the meaning of tooth is that it combines regularly with false among other lexemes. However, the strength of the expectancy may not be equal in both directions: Tooth is probably more likely to occur in combination with false than false is to occur in combination with tooth" [11].

### **Objectives and Data Collection**

The major goal of this study was to assess third-year and fourth-year students majoring in English as to their ability to collocate words correctly in English. Furthermore, the researcher aimed to find out the strategies students tended to use (transfer, synonymy, or avoidance) if they are unfamiliar with the correct collocation.

For this purpose a 30 item test measuring students' ability in collocating words was developed (see Table 1), where each item was followed by four alternatives, only one of which constituted the correct collocant of the word under investigation. For instance in item 7: Huda collapsed near the ..... line. Subjects were asked to select one of the following words and circle it, namely, (a), (b)ending, (c) closing, or (d) finish, which they thought was the correct answer.

The sample of the study consisted of 50 students majoring in English at the Applied Sciences University, Amman. Their age ranged from 20-22 and they have learnt English as a foreign/second language for a minimum of ten years. The female/male student ratio was in favor of females (80%).

After having administered the test, the researcher analyzed and categorized students' responses, which fell in one of three categories each of which corresponded to

one of the strategies: Transfer, synonymy or avoidance. So, in the above example if a subject marked “ending” as the correct answer, then his incorrect response was attributed to transfer from Level 1 (L1) since this is the form used in Arabic. If the subject, however, circle “final”, then he was believed to rely on synonymy since “final” and finish are somewhat synonymous. If the subject did not circle any word, he was believed to rely on the avoidance strategy.

### Discussion of Results

The results clearly show that the subjects were incompetent in their perception and production of English collocations. This ties in well with Hussein [12] and Arabaski [13], who showed that collocational errors constitute a high percentage of all errors committed by L2 learners. Out of the correct target collocations of this study totaling 1500, only 585 (39%) were rendered correctly. The number of incorrect collocations due to transfer from L1 was 450 (30%), while that due to the use of synonymy as a strategy totaled 1333 (22.2%). In essence, this strategy implies that subjects circled a word which of items not circled and ignored by the subjects totaled 133 (8.8%). Ignoring some item and not attempting to answer them seems to entail a lack of knowledge and a reluctance at risk-taking amongst some of the subjects.

This strategy can be called for lack of a better term the avoidance strategy. Now, it is plausible to list down the highest ten correct collocations along with their percentages.

**Table 1. Collocations ordered according to frequencies and percentages of correct responses (N=50)**

Target collocation	Frequency	Percentage
Credit card	38	76%
Commit a murder	36	72%
Descending order	33	66%
The public opinion	31	62%
Hard cover	31	62%
Birth control	30	60%
Plastic surgery	30	60%
Crack a nut	24	48%
Austerity measures	23	46%
Blood transfusion	23	46%

One way to explain the relatively high percentage of the correct rendering of the above can be attributed to (a) the high frequency of using them in everyday life, in the press and in the media as concepts of public concern such as birth control, the public

opinion, and credit cards, (b) and the belief that these collocations may constitute indivisible entities and are thus learnt as linked pairs where one of the pairs immediately elicits its collocant.

Below are the collocations that received the lowest percentages of correct responses: Lift the sanctions (18%), front pages (16%), hardship allowance (16%), fringe benefits (6%) and duty -free shop (1%).

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of incorrect collocation due to transfer from L1.

**Table 2. Collocations ordered according to frequency and percentage of incorrect responses due to transfer**

Target collocation	Frequency	Percentage
Free market	36	72%
First pages	33	66%
Difficulty allowance	32	64%
Ethnic purification	29	58%
Group farms	25	50%
World systems	25	50%
Secondary advantages	24	48%
Superiority knot	21	42%

The relatively high percentage of incorrect collocations in Table 2 is attributed to transfer from L1 and more particularly to translation from L1. In Arabic the term *first pages* and not *front pages* is used. It is unusual therefore that subjects substituted *first pages* for *front pages*. Likewise, the collocations, *hardship allowance*, *ethnic cleansing*, *collective farms* and *world order* were substituted for *difficulty allowance*, *ethnic purification*, *group farms*, and *world system* respectively.

As indicated above, 22.2 % of the collocations were rendered incorrectly due to the use of synonymy. Table 3 demonstrates some of the incorrect collocations. In brief the synonymy strategy means the use of a synonymous word of a certain collocant without heeding the selectional restriction principle; the inevitable result being the production of an incorrect collocation. For instance, we can use the adjective *rancid* to describe butter or bacon and the adjective *addled* to describe eggs or brains. Therefore, the collocations *rancid butter* and *addled eggs* are correct and acceptable but *addled butter* and *rancid eggs* are incorrect and therefore unacceptable [10]. Table 3 demonstrates some of the incorrect collocations due to the use of synonymy.

**Table 3. Examples of incorrect collocations due to the use of synonymy and their percentage**

Target collocation	Students' rendering of collocation	%
Lift the sanctions	Raise the sanctions	60
Conventional weapons	Traditional weapons	52
High commissioner	Eminent commissioner	44
Blood coagulation	Blood thickening	42
Museum curator	Museum guardian	42
Mass graves	Group graves	36
Finish line	Ending line	43
Plastic surgery	Cosmetic surgery	34

### Summary and Conclusions

Collocations in general and fixed pairs in particular are standard features of idiomatic English; yet these forms are regularly overlooked in second language instruction. This is evident by the results obtained in this study, which clearly indicate that English majors, not to mention non-English majors, do extremely badly in the area of collocation. Only 39% of the collocations under investigation were rendered correctly by the subjects. It is pathetic to know that the percentage was even higher (48%) in an earlier study conducted by Hussein among similar groups of subjects. The results clearly pinpoint to the deteriorating situation which will only be remedied through constant awareness of the gravity of the problem, and subsequently adopting a set of measures aiming primarily at introducing and systematically teaching collocations in the classroom [12].

Another suggestion for tackling this problem lies in enriching students' reading experience. It is imperative that students do a lot of reading of English newspapers, international magazines, and modern novels on their own; this type of reading not only broadens their vocabulary range but also vastly enhance their capability of collocating words.

Another remedy for the problem is put forward by Kjellemer [14]. He suggests shifting the emphasis from individual words to the collocations in which they normally occur. He advocates that a collocational approach to word learning is desirable at every stage of learning, even at fairly elementary levels of vocabulary learning. He adds, "Pupils and students who have acquired 'collocational learning habits' at an early stage can be expected with some confidence to pursue their further studies of lexis in a more fruitful way than would otherwise have been the case" [14].

Abu Ssaydeh who is concerned with the issue of collocation in as much as it relates to translators and translation attributes the deficiency of correctly collocating words to the inadequacy of current dictionaries and their failure to explicitly state the complex collocational range some items may have [6]. He adds that the translator will be able to

use any given lexical item provided that he can identify the entire potential network of collocants for that word. To illustrate some near synonyms in English such as *deep*, *keen* and *profound*, which demonstrate the following partial and sometimes overlapping distributional network. Whereas *deep*, *keen* and *profound* can modify sorrow, only *deep* can modify feeling, and whereas *profound* can modify hatred, only *keen* can modify sensation [6].

To conclude, we sincerely call for the compiling or supplementing currently used monolingual English dictionaries which include collocational information and thus respond to EFL learners' needs. As they stand, current dictionaries which rely heavily on synonymy and near synonymy to illustrate the meanings of head words create the impression amongst learners that conceptual equivalence entails distributed evidence which is not always the case. Jackson states that the Collins English Dictionary contains as part of its definition of rancid (of butter, bacon, etc.) whereas other dictionaries contain no such indication of collocational restrictions [10].

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## دراسة ظاهرة التلازم اللفظي في اللغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث . هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن قدرات الطلبة في اكتسابهم لظاهرة التلازم اللفظي في اللغة الإنجليزية، كما هدفت إلى تحديد الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلبة مثل تأثير اللغة الأم على اللغة الثانية، والترادف وغيرها عند جهلهم بقضية تلازم المفردات مع بعضها البعض . وقد تألفت عينة الدراسة من ٥٠ طالبا وطالبة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ومن مستوى السنة الثالثة والرابعة ، وقد طلب منهم اختيار الكلمة المناسبة التي تتلازم مع غيرها من المفردات الواردة في النص . وقد أشارت النتائج إلى قصور الطلبة الواضح في استخدامهم لظاهرة التلازم اللفظي حيث بلغت النسبة لتلازم المفردات الصحيحة (٣٩٪) وجاء ترتيب الاستراتيجيات الأخرى على النحو التالي : تأثير اللغة الأم (٣٠٪) ، واستخدام المترادفات (٢٢٪) ، والتغاضي (٨٪) .