

A STUDY ON LEXICAL COLLOCATIONAL ERRORS IN ORIENTED WRITING PRACTICE FOR PET OF ENGLISH NON-MAJOR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Pham Thi Nga

University of Economics and Business Administration, Thai Nguyen University

ABSTRACT

The students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration as EFL learners found it difficult to get higher scores in trial tests for PET (preliminary English tests) which they are expected to satisfy as a requirement to graduate in the future. It was found that errors were made when students did not understand the constituents of the collocations.

Lexical collocations form forty-eight writing tasks were collected and analyzed based on the category proposed some famous authors. The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations and the British National Corpus were employed to analyze the participants' collocational errors and to provide suggestions for correction.

Keywords: *lexical collocation, PET, collocational errors, Thai Nguyen University of economics & business administration – Thai Nguyen University*

INTRODUCTION

“No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocation” (OCD, 2009). Therefore, learning collocation is important for EFL learners to increase their language competence. For students, choosing the right collocation will make his/her speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like. Poor collocation in exams is also likely to lead to lower marks. However, during the time working as a teacher of English at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), the author has found out that English non-major students at different levels often make mistakes in using collocations.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

Having defined the purpose of the study, and then stated the research questions, in this chapter the researcher provided some principles governing the choice of research type as well as for research design. After that the researcher specified the population and drew a sample from the population. Next, the researcher decided the method of data collection, developed instruments, collected data and then analyzed them. Two research questions were raised as following:

Question 1: What is the current state of collocational errors committed by non-major students of English as PET candidates at TUEBA in using collocations?

Question 2: What are the possible solutions to students' errors to these types of errors and some pedagogical suggestions for both teachers and students?

Sample choosing

Participants: Some writers on survey research suggest 30 is the minimum acceptable size for any survey and this is generally acceptable for a small-scale, exploratory study. Therefore, a sample of 48 of non-major students of English was randomly chosen among the population. They are at pre-intermediate level of English and accounting is their major.

Instrumentation: 48 written tests from the students were used to collect data. The data were analyzed by using descriptive (mean, median, and percent)

Scope of the study

The survey was conducted at TUEBA. The population was not large, only 48 students of accounting who were at pre-intermediate level of English. Only errors related to the use of lexical collocations were taken into consideration.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Collocation

Forming a precise definition of collocation is not easy, though there is a vast literature on this subject because there are both conflicting definitions and conflicting terminologies: 'Regrettably, collocation is a term which is used and understood in many different ways'. (Bahns, 1993:57)

There have been a lot of ideas when considering the term 'collocation'. Different linguists have their own ways to define what a collocation is. A collocation is mainly considered as a lexical relationship between words. It is assumed that words receive their meanings from words they occur with. One of the works should be noticed is Second Interim Report on English Collocation (1933) by H.E.Palmer who is considered the first linguist to use the term Collocation in the present-day sense. According to Palmer, collocation is defined as word combinations containing one or more words having meanings only in that collocation. According to Halliday (1966:152), collocation is one of the main components and central part in his lexico-grammatical system. He defined collocation as syntagmatic relation of words which is linear co-occurrence together with some measure of significant proximity. It is a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance.

In his study, Greenbaum approached collocation as an integration between lexis and grammar which are different in lexical and syntactic patterning but interrelated. "Collocation meaning is changed according to different syntactic patterning" (Greenbaum, 1960:12). The term 'collocation' introduced by Firth (1957) is often defined as a characteristic word combination whose lexical constituents developed an idiomatic relation based on their frequent co-occurrence. According to Cruse, 1984 a collocation, along with a lexeme and an idiom, is a kind of lexical item and is "Sequences of lexical items, which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent" (Cruse, 1986:40).

Although different writers have investigated collocations with their own points of view, they all came to a conclusion that collocation is a lexical, grammatical or research phenomenon containing a focus on the co-occurrence of words.

Lexical collocations

Benson et al.'s (1986) divided collocations into two main categories.

According to Bahns (1993), lexical collocations do not contain clauses, infinitives, or prepositions; instead, they are combinations of nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. It can be easily seen that lexical collocations consist of any subordinate element, and are composed of two equal open-class lexical items (Fontenelle, 1998).

Errors and mistakes

Brown (2000) agrees that a "mistake" (in performance) refers to a performance error in that it is the learner's failure to utilize a known system correctly, while an "error" (incompetence) is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. While an error cannot be self-corrected when pointed out to the speaker/writer, a mistake if is pointed out to the speaker/writer can be corrected.

Previous studies

Sohrab Darvishi (2011) investigated the collocational errors in EFL college learners' writing. The researcher collected collocational errors from students' assignments and in-class practice. The collocational errors were then classified into two main categories namely grammatical and lexical collocational errors. A questionnaire was applied to find out the students' perception of the difficulty of collocation. The study results revealed that there was a great difference between the students' perception of collocation types and the collocational errors that they had made. The researcher also figured out the source of collocational errors which was mainly about the interference of their mother tongue, the lack of the collocational concept, the interlingual or intra lingual transfer, paraphrase and their shortage of their collocational knowledge.

Similarly, Owu-Ewie and Lomotey (2016) had a study L1 interference in the L2 writing of Akan Junior High School Students in Ghana, Africa. Data were collected by the use of students' written essays. The researcher used content analysis collocational approach to analyze 90 written essays of the students to find out the writing errors of students in their essays having to do with L1 interference. The researcher found that transliteration, omissions, wrong word use, L1 induced spelling errors, and wrong pronoun uses were main sources of errors

committed by students. The study also showed that transliteration and omission errors were the most frequently committed L1 interference errors in the writings.

Nesslhauf (2003) carried out an exploratory study about the use of verb-noun collocations by advanced learners of English and some implications for teaching. The researcher pointed out the types of mistakes that learners make and the influence of the degree of restriction of a combination and the influence of the learners' L1 on the production of collocations. The research showed that the highest rate of mistakes occurs in combination with a medium degree of restriction in combination where the verb only takes a few nouns, they are less aware of restrictions in combination where the verb takes a wider range of nouns. And, in free combinations and idioms, only a few minor types of mistakes that were not observed in the analysis of collocation were identified. The findings pointed out that the major types of mistakes that occurred were the same as in collocation. The degree of restriction does not have a major influence on the types and amount of mistakes learners make, except that collocations with a low degree of restriction are the most difficult kind of combination for the learners. In short, the results showed that almost a quarter of the combinations contained one or several mistakes with non-lexical elements like the articles and prepositions belonging to a combination, not only verb-noun mismatches. However, the most common type of mistake was the wrong choice of verbs. Therefore, the researcher recommended that teachers should focus on the verb in the teaching of verb-noun collocations.

In the study "A study of collocation behaviors on lexical pragmatics", Lee C.Y (2010) described how collocation behaviors of near synonyms can be recognized from contextual usage data in corpora to improve L2 lexical meaning. Concordance and computational techniques were used to analyze collocates in corpora. Three transitive verb; *cause*, *promote* and *commit* in students' corpus were analyzed to explore the potential of lexical collocation information, and to observe their collocation behaviors and pragmatic implications. The study showed that the use of collocation profile as an effective instrument in recognizing and learning semantic meaning and pragmatic implications of lexical items was necessary. The findings suggested that it could be beneficial for L2 learners to observe the collocates of near synonyms so that recognition of pragmatic characteristics could help improve their lexical usage.

Taken together, these studies focused on studying collocations in use, and examined learners' competence of using English collocations. The instruments used to collect results were mainly the application of different tests. It could be said that the use of tests was effective for researchers to evaluate learners' errors on using collocations. Most of the researchers reached conclusions that collocation knowledge of learners studying English as foreign language was insufficient and teaching or learning collocations should be paid more attention due to the assumption that collocation teaching and learners' development of their collocation competence are necessary and important in order to achieve the globalized standards of English.

RESULTS

Data collected from the writing tests

249 lexical collocations were selected from 48 students' writing tests.

Lexical collocations	Selected items of collocations
L1 (Verb + Noun)	129
L2 (Adjective + Noun)	83
L3 (Noun + Noun)	37
Total	249

(source: students' writing tests)

Table 1: The number of categories used and the number of selected items of collocations

As can be seen from Table 1, more verb and noun collocations were used in students' writings than any other types of lexical collocations. L2 accounted for fewer items than L1. In another study, the students performed quite well with "verb + noun" collocations. This indicates that the combination of verb and nouns seemed to be more common and frequently used among the students.

Lexical collocations	Correct items	Percentage
L1 (Verb + Noun)	56	59 %
L2 (Adjective + Noun)	19	20 %
L3 (Noun + Noun)	20	21 %
Total	95	

(source: students' writing tests)

Table 2: The percentage of correct collocational items

In all, there were 95 correct collocational items selected from students' writings in which L1 and L2, made up 56 (59.0%) and 19 (20.0%) respectively.

Table 3 indicates that noun and noun combinations could be easier for student to use in their writing. Although more correct L1 and L2 were seen in their writing, incorrect ones still accounted for the majority as they found it difficult to choose the suitable adjective to go with a specific noun to express their ideas which are native-like.

Lexical collocations	Incorrect items	Percentage
L1 (Verb + Noun)	73	47.5 %
L2 (Adjective + Noun)	64	41.5 %
L3 (Noun + Noun)	17	11 %
Total	154	

(source: students' writing tests)

Table 3: *The percentage of incorrect collocational items*

Overall, more L1 and L2 combinations were used and more errors were found in students' writings than L3 combination.

SOLUTIONS

It is not a simple task to eliminate collocational errors but students can overcome these errors with teachers' efforts on correcting their writing errors. Some of the possible reasons for students as PET candidates' frequent errors at TUEBA can be the interference of their mother tongue, lack of the collocational knowledge. One of the solutions to this problem is to raise students' awareness of collocations which can help them more efficiently and effectively, and produce collocations more accurately in their English writings. In addition, good dictionaries with common collocations, corpora may help reinforce their concepts of using right lexical collocations or seeking parallels equivalents in their mother tongue and the foreign language. Also literal translation should be used with great cautious.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Basing on the findings from different data collected, the researchers made the following suggestions with a view to help students reduce the errors as well as improve collocational knowledge for students.

More tasks on different patterns of lexical collocation should be assigned to students.

The number of collocational selected items from the writing showed that students did not apply a wide variety of different collocational types as more "verb + noun" and "adjective + noun" combinations were found in their writing rather than other pattern. Thus, they often lack recognition on other types which leads to their confusing in choosing word partners.

In the foreign language teaching process, students should be provided with substantial input and examples to help them understand lexical concepts taught.

As students' foreign language is intensively influenced by their mother tongue, more errors can be made. It is teachers' role to explain more about the collocation that students are about to apply in their writing. Therefore, students can differentiate the meanings in target language from their mother tongue. It's also helpful to pay attention to how collocations relate to the context around them. In some cases, especially with structures and longer phrases, the use of a collocation depends very heavily on the situation in which it's used.

Teachers should expose their students to authentic writing that will help them expand their vocabulary and write well-organized, reasonably cohesive essays.

The more students are exposed to the authentic writing, the more familiar they are to the new vocabulary items. As one of the characteristics of collocation is a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance, getting used to collocations in writing is of great importance.

English language teachers should employ better and modern approaches and methods to teaching of writing to improve their students' writing skills.

For examples, teachers can use collocational grids or brainstorming in which students are provided with words and then asked to list all the acceptable collocates present. However, it is not sufficient to merely teach lexical elements that go together, but to teach entire combinations. Teachers should point out which nouns are possible with certain verbs. Specifically, in teaching verb/noun collocations, the focus should be on the verbs because it is the verbs that cause the greatest difficulties. Teachers should improve the students' vocabulary proficiency by

helping them identify the words on their own may help. Last but not least, some possible criteria should be made to distinguish among similar lexical items.

Nonlinear recording formats, such as collocation tables, word trees, are central to the lexical approach, by Lewis (1993, p. 35). These types of format are considered to be interesting enough for students to involve in learning new lexical items.

There are various suggestions given by Lewis (1993) for collocation approaches that the author also takes into consideration:

- Early emphasis on receptive skills, especially listening, is important.
- De-contextualized vocabulary learning is a fully legitimate strategy.
- The role of grammar as a receptive skill must be recognized.
- The importance of contrast in language awareness must be recognized.
- Teachers should employ extensive, comprehensive language for receptive purposes.
- Extensive writing should be held as long as possible.
- Teachers' reformulation should be the natural response to student error.
- Teachers should always react primarily to the content of student language.

Pedagogical chunking should be a frequent classroom activity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the above research, students' current state of using lexical collocations in PET are not satisfactory enough as they just focus on some certain types of collocation which leads to the inflexibility of word choice. One of the main sources of lexical collocations should be mentioned is the students' unawareness of native-like collocations and literal translation. Some solutions and pedagogical suggestions were given namely changing students and teachers' approaches to teaching and learning to acquire collocation competence effectively.

Having significant findings, the present study contains some limitations. The first limitation of this study relates to the data collection instruments. That is the study used only some types of tests to examine errors made by the participants when studying collocation with verb and noun combination, which may not be enough to measure the collocation knowledge of the learners. Because more tests, which focus on more collocations, will offer a clearer picture of the participants' reception and production of collocations. The second limitation pertains to the number of the selected collocations used in the study. Due to the time constraints, this study made use of only some common collocations to measure both the reception and production of the participants' knowledge of collocations. However, the use of more collocations will be better to give a comprehensive measurement of learners' collocational competence. Finally, the study was limited in a minimum number of 30 participants, thus the results should be meaningful in a quite small area of language research and only work in the university where the researcher has been working.

Future research can be conducted on specific lexical collocation of "verb + noun" or "adjective + noun".

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