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Lexical Difficulty of Fixed Word Combinations in the Writing of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study has explored one of the most important types of word combination, collocations, which are two or more words that have a strong tendency to co-occur in a language and prefabricated combination of two or more words in a context. Thirty postgraduate students participated in this study and their academic writings were analyzed to identify the basis for their difficulties in producing this type of word combination. The findings revealed that students produced 367 collocations and the total number for lexical collocations were 270. The results showed that learners have difficulties with lexical collocations in their writing. Among the lexical collocations subtypes, verb+noun type was the most difficult for the participants to produce. The results also indicated that learners are not aware of word combinations that they produced in their writings.

Key words: Lexical, word combination, collocation, writing, EFL

INTRODUCTION

For learners, writing efficiently in an L1 is a challenge but writing efficiently in an L2 raises more challenge. The L2 learners should have a fair vocabulary store that they can use correctly and appropriately. For academic writing, in addition to the regular vocabulary range, learners need to have entry to a more purified lexis which is specially used in the academic sphere. Collocation, as a particular aspect of vocabulary, assists learners to use their vocabulary more efficiently. So much of language teaching over the years has been based on the dichotomy of grammar and vocabulary, master the grammar system, learn lots of words and then the speaker will be able to talk about any topic. This means that teaching of language involved the teaching of a vocabulary starting with verbs, pronouns, then nouns, adjectives and adverbs, etc. The teaching would then advance to the instruction of grammatical rules governing the usage of the language. This is the reason why there are so many grammar mistakes (Lewis, 2001). People use grammar to do what it was never meant to do. Learners are at such a disadvantage in constructing their new language as they do not have these ready-made word combinations or phrases at their disposal from their internal lexicon like proficient users of English and are literally working from scratch in their new language (Lewis, 2001). Producing collocations in writing poses particular difficulties.

To enhance EFL learner's writing competence, English teachers have been making significant efforts, spending a great deal of time devoting themselves to correcting student's writing and attempting to identify the difficult areas in student's English compositions. Despite this effort, the same errors continue to occur (Lewis, 2001). In fact, as Bahns and Eldaw (1993) state, it is usually the case that the majority of EFL learners have different problems in their oral and written production. According to Lewis (2001), "Students with good ideas often lose marks because they do not know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about". Therefore, learners have to write lengthier scripts and in so doing increase their likelihood of errors. It happens because the learner has failed to appreciate the value of the relationship between words. To write English correctly calls far more than just being linguistically correct.

The use of phrases in written text is plentiful and so often contributing to better communication than actual form of a sentence. L2 non-native speakers do appear to experience difficulty in this area, hence, they often overuse some well-known phrases which shows their limited word range or word store. Knowledge of vocabulary and size of lexicon are essential to enable writing. Hyland (2007) postulated that non-native L2 need to understand the vocabulary choices and cohesion patterns in order to achieve literacy in a second

language. For example, if learners are familiar with collocations such as a convenient situation and a convenient time but not a convenient person, they will subconsciously realize that the adjective convenient is only used with inanimate nouns.

According to Robins (1967), studies on collocations started 2300 years ago in Greece. The Greek Stoics related collocations to semantics and used the concept of collocation to study the meaning relationships between words. According to these ancient scholars, words “Do not exist in isolation and they may differ according to the collocation in which they are used” (Robins, 1967).

While the need for research on collocations has been identified a long time ago, academic investigations have only been conducted recently. Among the small number of recent studies on collocation there is a study by Du (2013) compared the usage of lexical bundles between the native academic writing and the L2 student writing. She tried to provide new evidence to describe the gap between these two different writing genres from a phraseological perspective. The findings of her study revealed that L2 students are still far from mastering those lexical bundles commonly used by native academic writers and have clung on a different group of lexical bundles with an unthinkable high frequency. However, her study has investigated only one type of word combination, lexical bundles and has not touched the grammatical area. Alsakran (2011) investigated the productive and receptive knowledge of Arabic-speaking learners of English regarding the use of collocation in ESL and EFL contexts. His findings showed that English language learners have problems in learning the collocations. Liu (2000) and Wang (2005) investigated Taiwanese EFL learners' written production and found that the verb-noun lexical collocations were the most difficult for the Taiwanese EFL learners. Nesselhauf (2005) reviewed the written work of Austrian and German second language student learners of English by looking at their use and construction of verb+noun collocations. The intention was to discover the cause of their difficulty in using collocation. Her results indicated that the highest rate of errors in using collocations belongs to those with a medium degree of restriction (e.g., exert influence, where a number of other nouns such as control, pressure and power are also possible) and a much lower rate of errors belongs to ‘a lot of restrictions’ (e.g., fail an exam/test, where fewer nouns are possible). Wilcoxon (2014) examined use of preposition+verb in the writing of second language learners. The findings clearly showed that students use prepositional verbs at all levels of proficiency and that the frequency increases throughout the levels, from 3.93 per 1000 words in to 7.58 per 1000 words. As students gain proficiency in their writing skills, they are using more prepositional verbs in general. However, her study is limited only to preposition+verb combination and she did not explore the other types of collocations.

The focus of this study is on construction and production of collocations among EFL learners. The importance of collocations and the difficulty they pose to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as Second Language (ESL) learners have been underscored by various researchers but few attempts have been done in this related field (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Nesselhauf, 2005; Sadeghi, 2009). Knowledge of collocation is important for natural language processing because collocation comprises the restrictions on how words can be used together (Gelbukh and Kolesnikova, 2013). The aim of this study is construction and production of collection among EFL learners. This study is beneficial to students who are not aware of collocations and their importance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects: The participants in this study are 30 Iranian, male and female, postgraduate students at University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) University. Their age varies from twenty four to thirty five. Their level of English is intermediate and above as it is compulsory for students to have a minimum IELTS 5.5 to be able to register at the University. English language is their foreign language. Those students who do not have IELTS are required to take a placement test and they are required to score at least 80%. The University has an intensive English course program to accommodate those who score less than 80% in the placement test. Placement test consists of speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. Students remain in this program until they managed to obtain the University's admission requirement.

Statistical analysis: The data collection instruments used in this study was a writing task. For analyzing the data SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) V19 has been used to show the quantitative data clearly.

Writing task: The instrument used in this study was a writing task. Students were asked to write two essays on these topics: (1) Write about unforgettable experience you have had and (2) How did you spend your last Norouz holiday (Iranian New Year holiday).

The reason for selecting these titles was that writing about an unforgettable experience is a personal matter and therefore it is assumed to be motivating and thought provoking. A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the topics given were appropriate for the subjects. In addition, the pilot study was conducted to investigate if the writing task was able to provide information about participants' collocation production.

Data analysis procedure: There was a coding procedure after data collection. All the materials were placed into folders with an identifying number on each. To assure participants' anonymity, identifying numbers were used instead of names. In the present study, the writings of the participants were analysed manually to identify the collocations by using the

Oxford Collocations Dictionary (McIntosh *et al.*, 2009). The grammatical and lexical collocations found in the participant's writings were further classified into sub-types based on the classification of collocation in this study. Those collocations that could not be identified based on Oxford Collocations Dictionary were presented to the two native experts to be clarified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the frequency of use for both grammatical and lexical collocations by the subjects in their writings. In total, the students produced 367 collocations. The total number of grammatical collocations was 97 (25.2%) and the total number for lexical collocations was 270 (74.8%).

Table 2 shows the frequency of use for all lexical collocations. In total, they produced 270 lexical collocations. The analysis showed that the performance of the subjects on different subtypes of lexical collocations is significantly different. The participants produced 95 verb+noun collocations which equates to 36%. They produced 146 adjective+noun collocations (54.4%), 10 noun+noun collocations (3.4%), 12 verb+adverb collocations (4.2%), 3 adverb+adjective collocations (0.8%), 1 noun+adjective collocations (0.4%) and 3 verb+adjective collocations (0.8%). In addition, analysis of the subtypes of lexical collocations revealed that adjective+noun appears to be the easiest for learners to acquire in comparison to other types of lexical collocations.

Regarding verb+noun collocations, the participants produced 59 collocations of this type. They used *do* instead of *make*, *take* instead of *give* and *take* instead of *get* in their writings. For example they produced collocations such as; *do mistake* instead of *make a mistake* and *take divorce* instead of *get divorce*.

There are three Persian verbs that occur with high frequency. These verbs are; *do*, *take* and *give*. Probably the six most frequent verbs of this type in English are *have*, *make*, *take*, *give*, *get* and *do*. These verbs are confusing for the participants. Persian speakers often use *do* instead of *make*, *take* instead of *give* and *take* instead of *get*. These verbs are

often used as light verbs in collocations (Family, 2006). Light Verb Constructions (LVCs), also known as complex predicates or compound verbs, consist of a semantically weak verb (the light verb) and a non-verbal constituent (Family, 2006).

The use of *do* in verb-noun collocations is identified as negative L1 transfer. One pattern was identified as semantically associating *do* with the noun node, by literally translating according to the conventional usage in Persian language, such as *do (make) a mistake*, *do (make) a reservation*.

In spite of the fact that *make* and *do* are different in meaning and use in English language, they share the same Persian equivalent *anjam dadan (do)*.

As Altenberg and Granger (2001) noted, *make* has a variety of meanings and uses that can be grouped into two main categories; to create and to use. They claim that delexical structure category is the one "that accounts for the majority of learner's confusion with MAKE" (2001: 2). Therefore, from its use of *produce*, *make* has another Persian equivalent *sakhtan*. In the sense of their individual core meaning, Iranian learners generally regard the verb *do* as *anjam dadan* which is a more general term denoting to act or perform an action and perceive *make* as *sakhtan* which indicates specific meaning such as to produce. As shown in example 6 and 7, Persian speakers *do a mistake (eshtebah kardan)* and *do a reservation (reserve kardan)*. Therefore, learners replaced *make* with *do* as we see in the following example:

- *Ma/eshtebah/mikonim/vali/nabayd/eshtebah/ratekrar/konim*
- *We/mistake/do/but/shouldn't/mistake/repeat/do*
- *We can do mistake but we shouldn't mistake again*

After verb+noun collocation, adjective+noun collocation was the type most produced by the participants. The participants used a near synonym adjective based on a Persian collocation by translating the adjective into English. For instance, they produced collocations *hard rain* for *heavy rain* and *strong language* for *rich language*.

Table 1: Total collocations produced by the participants

| Valid | Frequency | Percentage (%) | Valid (%) | Cumulative (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Grammatical collocations | 97 | 25.2 | 25.2 | 25.2 |
| Lexical collocations | 270 | 74.8 | 74.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 367 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 2: Total lexical collocations produced by participants

| Types | Frequency | Percentage (%) | Valid (%) | Cumulative (%) |
|------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Verb+noun | 95 | 36.0 | 36.0 | 36.0 |
| Adjective+noun | 146 | 54.4 | 54.4 | 90.4 |
| Noun+noun | 10 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 93.9 |
| Verb+adverb | 12 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 98.1 |
| Adverb+adjective | 3 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 98.9 |
| Noun+adjective | 1 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 99.2 |
| Verb+adjective | 3 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 270 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Regarding noun+noun collocations, the participants of this study produced 10 noun+noun collocation. The participants translated these noun+noun collocations from Persian into English. For example collocation branch of education was produced instead of field of education. In Persian for both branch and field word shakheh is used, therefore, when they want to write in English they use the first word that they remember. It can be either field or branch.

For the three types of lexical collocations, verb+adverb, verb+adjective and adjective+noun, the participants used word for word translation method to produce these collocations. For instance, the collocation feel lively was produced which is not a standard lexical collocation but a direct translation from Persian language into English language. In another example for verb+adjective, I learn it hard is a direct translation from Persian into English because in Persian both hard and difficult share the same meaning sakht (hard/difficult).

In general, Persian speakers learning English face one major difficulty that stems from the interference of their native language. In some instances, they managed to find an exact correspondence between an English preposition and its Persian equivalent and this encourages them to continue to translate directly. However, more often, such translation does not yield the proper equivalent.

First language is one of the factors that influences the production of collocation. According to Matikainen (2011), when acquiring a first language, lexical and semantic development evolve hand in hand. However, they are separated in L2 acquisition. Adults learning another language use their existing L1 semantic system and a major challenge in second language acquisition is the need to restructure this to fit to the L2 being acquired. First language interference is the result of learner's relying on old knowledge when he or she has not acquired competence in L2. It occurs most often among EFL learners where opportunities for real communication are few. As the results of this study shows the linguistic patterns of the students' L1 manifest themselves in the learners' L2. Language interference or transfer can be positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when the patterns of L1 and L2 are the same. Negative transfer occurs when the patterns of students' L1 and L2 are different. In general transfer has two forms: one is the direct one to one translation of L1 to L2 and the other one is the transfer of selective L1 lexical semantic information to express a lexical item or concept in L2.

Knowledge of the second language is another factor that influenced the production of collocation in this study. Much of one's L1 acquisition is completed before he/she starts school and this development normally takes place without any conscious effort. But by the time L2 learners start L2 learning, late-onset L2 learners already have extensive knowledge of the linguistic features of their L1. The extensive L1 knowledge interferes with the acquisition of L2 linguistic features. Furthermore, their cognition is already relatively developed which may lead to a decreased cognitive flexibility. However,

the development of learner language for L2 learners happen at an age when cognitive maturity cannot be considered an important factor; L2 learners have already arrived at a level of maturity where they can comprehend and produce complicated declarations in their L1. Therefore, as Saville-Troike (2006) confirmed that it is not possible for the learners to be totally native linguistic ability and the proficiency level that learners reach is very variable.

Iranian students learn their first language in the same way as people of other languages acquire their first language. Word combinations exist in any language. Iranian learners have learned the simple word combinations naturally before age six and they learn more difficult word combinations during their school years. During this process their mental lexicon is constructed according to their mother tongue. Later on when they start to learn a second language, their mental lexicon which is already complete based on the first language mediates the learning process of second language. Therefore, whenever the structure of the first and second language matches, it eases the learning and storing of the combinations. But if the structures of the first and second language are different, the mental lexicon of the first language leads the learner to construct the word combinations according to the existent mental lexicon. In other words, the learners will rely, often erroneously on the knowledge of their first language to construct a combination in a second language.

CONCLUSION

Collocations are very important in writing and using them properly enhances the writing skill. Acquisition of specialized collocations will enable learners to communicate in a professionally acceptable way. Additionally, when time is limited to formulate a message and get it across in writing, writers would feel a more pressing need to use prefabricated expressions to save processing time and energy. Including collocations in curriculum and preparing the students to use collocations effectively and appropriately in writing will contribute to efficient communication. Particularly, with adult ESL/EFL learners, who are uncomfortable about their limited structural and lexical knowledge, the teaching of collocations can have additional advantages. This is because collocations can decrease their affective filter by providing them with ready-made chunks and prepackaged building blocks so that their worry about structure and lack of words can be reduced.

Based on the findings of this study it is recommended that:

- Considering difficulty of the production in collocations, learners are in need of more practice to produce collocations. Also, they should receive as much collocation input as possible
- Non-congruent collocations should receive more attention in language teaching without neglecting congruent collocations

- Teachers need to incorporate collocations in their syllabuses. They need to enhance the students' consciousness about the importance of collocations. It is desirable to give the students a diagnostic test on their knowledge and use of collocations in the beginning of the course to assess the student needs. When selecting sample readings and texts, besides considering his or her course objectives, needs also to take into account the student needs with respect to collocational knowledge and effective and appropriate use of collocations. The teacher should guide the students to recognize the effectiveness and appropriateness of collocations. Gradually, the students' knowledge of collocations is likely to develop both in size and in scope. In the meantime, the writing teacher needs to make conscious efforts to encourage effective and appropriate use of collocations in students' writing

This study examined only lexical collocations. They may not necessarily reflect students' overall collocational knowledge. This study revealed findings about collocations produced by Iranian postgraduate students at UKM University. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized beyond the participants of the study.

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