AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF COLLOCATION BY INTERMEDIATE EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

It may seem easy for advanced learners to use collocation properly. This is not the case for students who are at the intermediate level. At this learning stage, students struggle to use words correctly. This study looks at students' usage of collocation qualitatively and quantitatively, hoping to give suggestions to teachers to help students work on certain errors. 98 writing samples under two topics written by 49 students were collected. Error analysis is adopted in this work to provide a measure of students' learning.

1. Introduction

In Taiwan, teachers have been placing great emphasis on written skills within the context of EFL Language learning. The students' written work is corrected and rewritten several times. Unfortunately, these efforts are mainly wasted. As Hill (2000) points out, teachers tend to focus on correcting grammatical mistakes, failing to notice those mistakes which are made due to a lack of collocation. Consequently, although

accurate grammar is used, problems concerning areas such as lexical selection still remain. It is reasonable that learners continue to make such mistakes considering the teachers' focus on grammar rather than collocation instruction. It is self evident that the teaching of collocation should be a top priority in every language course. Several issues are addressed in the following paragraphs, with regards collocation in language teaching.

Though the role that collocation plays in language acquisition is an important topic, very few systematic studies can be found that address this issue. One thing for certain is that Hatch and Brown (1995) found that L2 learners learn or acquire those phrases or chunk language as a unit rather than as individual words of a phrase. Compared to L1 users, who acquired their phrases or chunk language and developed the competence to reconstruct the language with phrases from exposure to the environment, L2 learners seemed to have the same ability to resort to the same strategies as L1 learners to learn chunk language (Schmitt 2000). Consequently, it is possible for L2 learners to reach native-speaker like competence if the learners are capable of using the idioms fluently (Ellis 1997).

Krashen and Terrell (1983, cited in Lewis 2000) have introduced the distinction between language acquisition, which is unconscious, and language learning, which is conscious. They claimed that only language which is unconsciously acquired, is later available for spontaneous use. Partly agreeing with Krashen's idea, Lewis (2000) argues that in the lexical approach conscious learning does facilitate language learning. He states that to some extent focusing learners' attention: "explicitly on some aspect of the linguistic form of the input is helpful in accelerating

the acquisition processes (p160)." In other words, although input is important, intake is what is really helpful to the learners, and the turning point of input to intake starts with the ability to notice the difference and similarity. Therefore, Lewis (2000) urges teachers to help learners to notice the kinds of chunks they met in text and the kinds of prefabricated chunks that are the prerequisite of fluency. It is suggested to having students noticing the nature of the language in the materials, or 'the chunks of language' (p162). However, the limitation of this is that it would be difficult for the teachers to know whether the students are ready for the new concepts and to be aware of the precise degree of sensitivity to the language of students. Moreover, it is not easy for students to 'notice' the language itself in a short period of time. Therefore, teachers need to spend a lot of time discussing the importance of this skill, consistently drawing the students' attention to collocations. As pointed out by Lewis (1993), students with low English proficiency would usually fail before they even reach the point of having a sense of the target language. This study looks into students' usage of collocation in their essays by analysing their written production.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have different definitions of collocation. In the aspect of cohesive word combination in content, Halliday and Hasan (1976) treat collocation as words used in lexical cohesion of text and contain 'a cohesive force'. In terms of the degree of cohesiveness of lexical combination, Benson et al. (1986) state collocation are 'fixed phrases' stored in the mind. Taking the pragmatic view of collocation, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:36) consider collocations as high frequency word combinations.

Adapted from these definitions, three criteria for determining collocations are shown in Table 1. They are the norms used here to identify collocations in students' essays.

Table 1 Criterion for choosing collocation in this study

Criterion 1	The sense of the verb (adjective) is so specific that it can only combine with a small set of nouns.
Criterion 2	The verb in this sense cannot be replaced by their syntactically and semantically possible choices.
Criterion 3	Word combinations which have high frequency hits in the British National Corpus are considered as well-formed collocations.

For example, achieve results: here achieve means to succeed in doing something or causing something to happen, usually after a lot of effort. In this sense, results and agreements are nouns which can combine with achieve. The word achieve also cannot be replaced by its synonym accomplish. Final agreement is the adjective + noun type of collocation. Here final describes the last one in a series of events, things, or people. It can go with words such as agreement, decision, invoice, and draft. In this sense, the word final cannot be replaced by its synonyms like last, concluding, and terminal. Moreover, due to the characteristics of their various combinations and varied meanings with different words, de-lexical verbs like make, do, give and get are more likely to be misused or abused by students; consequently, these verbs were given more attention in this study.

There might be doubts about the first criterion provided above. The term: 'a small set of nouns' would be confined here to, at most, two words based on the

simplest type of collocations identified by Benson et al., although collocation can be identified as a string of words.

As shown in Table 2, to precisely describe collocation, Benson et al. (1986) divides it into two categories: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjective, verbs and adverbs. A grammatical collocation consists of a dominant word (like a verb, a noun, or an adjective) and a preposition or grammatical structure. Benson et al. (1986) also classifies common types of lexical collocation, which have been adopted by most researchers and are adjusted for use within the focus of this study.

Table 2 Types of collocation based on Benson *et al.*

Type	Pattern	Example
L1	Verb+noun/pronoun	Set a record
L2	Verb+noun	Dispel fear
L3	Adjective+noun	Strong tea
L4	Noun+verb	Bombs explode
L5	Noun1 +noun 2	A pack of dogs
L6	Adverb+adjective	Closely acquainted
L7	Verb+adverb	Appreciate sincerely

L1=lexical collocation type 1, etc.

In this study, two main types of collocations were analyzed. These are V+N (L1) ,and Adj +N (L2) as they are typical errors occurring frequently in learners' production (Al-Zahrani 1998, Liu 1999, Sun 2004).

3. The subjects

The subjects of this study are college students who major in English and have enrolled in a private language school for 4 years. They have been learning English for at least 6 years. In this school, proper language training for four skills is provided and Advanced English Proficiency Test is given in every first semester. The test results show that they are at a pre-intermediate level in writing usage and at the level of 3000-4000 words for vocabulary, which is about at intermediate level. The subjects are restricted to this level of students due to the fact that certain extends of sensitivity to the target language and mother tongue is required. Students were asked to produce their essays in four or five paragraphs (200~300 words), with the same topic in the same genre. Students were free to choose their writing topic from a topic pool.

3.1 Procedures of Collocation Analysis

It is not easy for a non-native speaker to identify collocations. Therefore, in this study, two sets of tools were applied in the analysis. The first tool is the online British National Corpus. Since there is native and authentic language in that corpus, it would provide a norm for examining collocation in students' essays. Examples are provided in **Table 3**. The high frequency of collocations shown in the corpus was considered as one of the criteria to justify the existence of the collocation. If a phrase or word was searched for in this data base and had high frequency hits, it would be the evidence of a well-formed collocation. The British National Corpus is a good resource as a reference to see collocations used in authentic materials due to its balanced database, which uses different kinds of statements.

The second tool, collocation checker (http://candle.cs.nthu.edu.tw/vntango/), should be able to provide valuable references on mis-collocation. This tool is based on collocational errors collected from Taiwanese students along with the use of British National Corpus.

Table 3 Typical lexical collocation type found in this study

Type	Pattern	Correct Collocation	Erroneous Collocation	Suggestion for improvement
L1	V+N, V+ pronoun	attend classes, do homework, keep healthy, answer a question	stare star, promote appetite, do preparation, pay time	watch star, increase appetite, make preparation, spend time
L2	Adj. +N	black list, leisure time, daily life, extracurricular activity, deaf ear	serious promise, middle exam, negative direction	firm promise, midterm, opposite direction

*L1=lexical type 1; L2= lexical type 2

This study was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In analysing collocation errors, who were treated from a qualitative perspective and at the same time their frequency and accuracy was calculated quantitatively. Firstly, 98 written paragraphs were collected in a real class setting. During the time of data collection, the class teacher was teaching process writing, materials collected were students' actual writing assignments. Two written tasks were completed using the same context restriction. Students were encouraged to choose one topic freely from eight topics. the British National Corpus and collocation checker were used to identify collocations. The result of analysis was also checked by two native speakers. This is to prove that both correct or erroneous collocations are identified. This validation process ensures that the data conforms to acceptable formats.

4. Result and Discussion

As presented in **Table 4**, 346 collocations were found in compositions. 82.37% of them are correct collocation.

Table 4 Frequency of acceptable/ unacceptable collocation in students' writing

Composition	Acceptable collocations	Unacceptable collocations
1st & 2nd	285 (82.37%)	61 (17.63%)

Sixty-one erroneous collocations were found, as shown in **Table 4**. The low frequency of mis-collocations may be due to the fact that students were asked to write on their own choice of topic. Predictably, students were more capable of managing the collocations of the vocabularies. The numbers of two lexical collocation types of errors are presented in **FIG. 1.**This result reveals that students made more mistakes with V+N types of errors than with the adj+n type of collocations. It could therefore be assumed that V+N type of collocation is more difficult for students to master.

FIG. 1. Frequency of acceptable/ unacceptable lexical collocation types
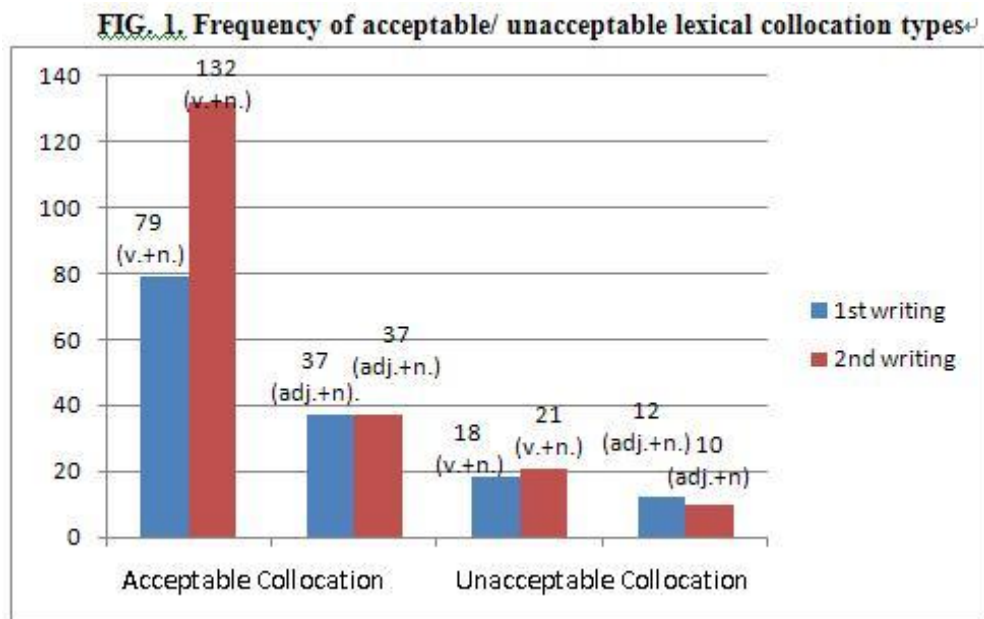
Three major kinds of causes to collocational errors were identified in this study. Based on Liu's (1999) method for categorising collocations errors, there are three error sources: negative transfer, the use of synonymy and approximation, negative inference, the latter of which is commonly called mother tongue influence. Approximation occurs when learners use incorrect words or structures but which share enough semantic features to satisfy the needs of expressing the desired meaning. For example, fell is used to get the sense of failed, talk is used to express the idea of tell. As for the use of synonyms, it refers to the fact that learners did know the synonyms but fail to know the collocability of accept with opinions (instead of receiving other people's opinions), and broaden with vision (instead of broaden your eyesight). Interestingly, in this study (see **Table 5**), students were more likely to produce the approximation type of erroneous collocations.

The result in this research echoed Liu's (1999) study with the abuse of synonym as a contributor to collocation errors. To help students with such errors, Liu

(1999) suggested that learners must rely more on the idiom principle. The students should be advised of the correct usage of collocation in such cases since they may not be aware of them. Accumulation of idioms in vocabulary will reduce the frequency of such errors.

Table 5 Ratio of Subcategorised Errors in L1 and L2

Source	The use of synonyms		Negative transfer		Approximation	
Type	**L1**	**L2**	**L1**	**L2**	**L1**	**L2**
1st & 2nd	28%	3%	13%	7%	23%	26%
TOTAL	31%		20%		49%	

*L1=lexical type 1; L2= lexical type 2

Surprisingly, students did not make many mistakes in the area of negative transfer, which was the lowest ratio. Aware of the differences between English and Chinese, students seem to pay more attention to the interference of their mother tongue. Therefore, the mother tongue may be the last resort for students when writing a composition. A possible explanation for this finding may be that the collocation instruction provided by the class teacher, which focused on bilingual collocations, took effect. As mentioned by Bahns (1993) and Nesselhauf (2003), such collocation instruction can help students to avoid erroneous collocations involving interference by their mother tongue. However, due to the limited collocational competence and the avoidance of mother tongue interference, students resorted to the strategy of approximation to achieve their communicative goals, as this strategy is a quicker way to convey meanings. In addition, from class observations, subjects of this study are encouraged to use these strategies in many other language-training courses. Teachers, in consequence, seldom point out the importance of accurate collocations, thus the

subjects are likely to produce more approximation type errors. In consequence, in order to deliver what they desired, they created their own words or used words that share semantic meanings. For this problem, Lewis (2000) advises that teachers should help students to learn vocabulary in the form of collocations, resulting in the improvement of students' collocational competence and the reduction of the frequency of using approximation to produce collocations.

As shown in **Table 6**, 57.37% of V+N type of collocations are delexical verbs such as make, do, get, and give. This result showed that students were more capable of producing delexcial verb+ N types of collocation and able to use more varied verbs to deliver their thoughts. This result may suggest that students have no difficulty in using collocation in terms of types of verbs. The possible explanation for this result could be that language training in other courses may increase students' sensitivity to the language and broadened students' lexical storage.

Table 6 Frequency of Correct Delexical Verbs/ Non-delexical verbs collocation

Composition	Delexical Verbs+ N collocation	Non-delexical verbs +N collocation
1st & 2nd	107	144

4.1 Pedagogical Implication

Based on this study, some suggestions can be made as follows:

1. If students tend to make approximation type of collocational errors, then teachers are suggested to introduce vocabulary in collocation form.

2. To reduce negative transfer, teachers are suggested to provide collocation instruction with bilingual focus.

3. In terms of teaching students to pay attention to collocations, teachers should explain the potential benefits of collocations in learning English, which would arouse the students' interest and motivation to learn collocations. It is believed that with more capability in using collocations, the anxiety of using the language would probably be reduced.

4. When combining courses with collocations teaching, instructors' priority is to help students acquire collocations. Methods include, for example, provide vocabularies in a collocation form, adopt books that include collocations, train students to observe and note collocations in reading texts, encourage students to collect their collocation for future use. In terms of keeping their collocation for future use, Woolard (2000) suggested students to collect words from their own topics of interest. This would increase students' motivation to learn collocations and make good use of collocations in their essays, which also helps students to record and memorise words more systematically.

4.2 Limitation of the Study

Some limitations were identified in this study as follows:

1. The subjects are limited to a small number of students in a school which could not represent all teaching and learning situations.

2. Since the subjects in this study are learners with strong learning motivation, it was worthy to include more students from different schools and at different

language levels.

3. Due to time and resource restrictions, the data collected in this study are only a part of the students' performance. If the data in other courses could be gathered, a more comprehensive observation on students' usage of collocations can be done.

4.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Further research in the field of collocation could continue the study using the following ideas:

1. This study only looked for errors in v+n and adj.+n collocations. Further types beyond these two kinds of collocation need to be identified, such as the v+ pre collocation (e.g. prepare for), the v+adv/adv+v collocation (e.g. cry aloud), and the adj+pre collocation (e.g. familiar with).

2. This study focused on students' lexical collocational competence; further studies might wish to consider the students' ability with grammatical collocations. Thus, we can have a clearer and complete picture of EFL students' collocational knowledge.

3. Future study could also investigate the relationship between EFL students' collocational competence and their academic success. It would be of great value to understand whether or not collocational knowledge helps students to increase their academic achievement. The result of such a study would shed some light on the development of college students' collocational competence.

It is also suggested to look into the impacts of certain teaching methods. For example, it is worthy to study the merit of a deductive approach to different types of collocation learning and production.

5. Conclusion

Typical errors in collocation usage in writing productions by intermediate level EFL students in Taiwan were analyzed. It was found that 17.63% of collocation usages were impropriate. Three major types of errors were identified. Approximation was found to be more frequent (49.18%) compared to synonym errors (31.15%) and negative transfer errors (19.67%). Analyses of sources of error are provided. This result suggests the merit of collocation instruction, for example, teaching vocabularies in collocation forms, keeping collocation logs and reading texts with attentions to collocations.

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