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Exploring the Collocational Competence in the Writing of Iraqi Efl Learners and Some Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

This study investigates the collocational competence of advanced Iraqi EFL learners. Collocational competence refers to the ability to use words in combination with other words in a grammatically correct and idiomatic manner. The study found that, while Iraqi EFL students have a strong command of syntax and vocabulary, they frequently misuse collocations. For instance, they can employ incorrect prepositions with verbs or misuse a phrase in an idiomatic way. The study also discovered that certain collocations are particularly difficult for Iraqi EFL learners to use correctly. Collocations with verbs of action, collocations with adjectives, and collocations with nouns are a few examples of these. The study's conclusions are then discussed about pedagogy. The researcher advises EFL teachers to concentrate on teaching collocations and allowing students to practice using collocations in context. Additionally, it is recommended that teachers be aware of the specific collocations that Iraqi EFL learners are more likely to misuse. Finally, the paper provides a valuable overview of the challenges that Iraqi EFL learners face in acquiring collocational competence, and helps to guide the creation of more efficient teaching strategies for EFL students.

Keywords: *collocational competence, EFL learners, Syntax, language acquisition.*

1.1 Introduction

The competence to use words in combination with others in a grammatically accurate and idiomatic manner, known as collocational competence, plays a pivotal role in effective language use (Nation, 2001). This paper aims to show the fact that although Iraqi advanced EFL learners of English possess an excellent command of the English Language regarding grammar, syntax, and lexical knowledge; it was found that they have been negatively affected by an improper mastery of collocations, idiomatic expressions and combinations of lexical items in general. The statistical analysis of second language acquisition studies has revealed that the students' collocational competence lags behind their general linguistic competence. Accordingly, collocational competence can be regarded as a source of difficulty not only for beginners or intermediate students but for advanced learners and even translators as well.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study attempts to investigate the collocational competence of advanced Iraqi EFL learners by focusing on the following questions:

- 1- Does EFL learners' knowledge of collocations expand in parallel with their knowledge of vocabulary in general?
- 2- How can we teach collocations in classrooms and which types do we need to pay special

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attention to?

2. Review of Literature

2.1- Development of Second Language Acquisition Theories

EFL teachers and reformers in the 1950s and early 1960s were interested in Behaviorism, the dominant learning theory in psychology at that time (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013). Certainly, here's a paraphrase of the literature review:

According to behaviorists like Skinner, language learning is similar to other types of learning and involves the formation of habits based on stimulus and response. Fries also believed that repetition and practice are essential for developing accurate and fluent foreign language skills, and teaching should involve comparing the learner's L1 and L2 to identify differences. Understanding second language acquisition theories is vital for EFL teachers in any circumstance.

2.2- Three Approaches to Second Language Acquisition

According to Krashen (2009), Second Language Acquisition Theory applied linguistics research, and the approach that relies on teachers' experience and observations. The study being discussed focuses on the collocational competence of EFL learners using the applied linguistics approach.

The lexical component of the English language was neglected for many years, with instructors focusing only on grammar and pronunciation, and teaching vocabulary by memorizing individual words. Anderson and Freebody divided lexical competence into depth and breadth of knowledge, with breadth being the quantity of vocabulary and depth addressing quality, including concepts, connotations, collocations, and associations. Daller et al. (2013) divided learner's knowledge of vocabulary into lexical breadth, lexical depth, and lexical fluency. Despite criticism of these dimensions, recent studies have emphasized the importance of vocabulary teaching that goes beyond knowing the meanings of individual words, focusing on co-occurring words. For example, Farhani's study (2010) found a direct relationship between lexical depth and inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words, while Ehsanzadeh's study (2010) found that both breadth and depth of knowledge contribute to inferring meaning, with depth being more important in successful reading comprehension. The lexical approach emphasizes the importance of vocabulary in language teaching. Lewis (as cited in Boonyasquan, 2009, p. 99)

3- Methodology

3.1 Design

The methodological instruments utilized for the data collection in the study include a pencil-and-paper writing test for a class of students enrolled in a university and a questionnaire emailed to the instructor who is currently teaching the writing course for the students. It also indicates that the study involves gathering information from several participant groups, including teachers and students, and using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including exams and a questionnaire.

When a writing test is employed as a methodological tool in a study, the researcher should take into account some considerations for the validity such as the time allowance given to the

students to complete their task, whether it was conducted as an assignment at home or as an exam in the classroom and the scoring validity (Weir, 2005). Weir believes that the texts the students are requested to produce should be long enough for them to ensure that they are marked reliably. The length of the text is a vital aspect in defining whether a student can establish his written essay as a coherent element or not.

Various techniques have been developed for tests designed to measure the writing ability of the students (Weir, 2005). A researcher must choose the appropriate test for the subjects he is in charge of in his particular context and as per his requirements. Gap-filling tests are one type of indirect assessment that can be used to evaluate both writing and reading skills. However, it is unclear whether the results of these examinations should count toward either reading or writing proficiency. Such exams are sometimes referred to as tests of "general proficiency" by researchers. It can be challenging to determine what indirect test results mean. Although they are somewhat connected to writing ability, they do not accurately reflect it. Weir suggests that direct writing tasks, such as direct writing tests, offer a more accurate measure of writing proficiency, aligning better with both theoretical and context-based validity considerations (Weir, 2005). The importance of corpora in developing writing scales directly related to the evaluated texts is emphasized, as demonstrated by Cambridge ESOL's continuous efforts (Hawkey & Barker as cited in Weir, 2005).

Example W1: Open-Ended Essay Tests

- 1- Christmas Celebrations
- 2- Describe what you did on your Christmas vacation last year

Example W2

Write a short essay of not less than 25 sentences (300-400 words) within one hour on the following subject: *Using Android cell phones*. The following ideas should be tackled in the essay:

- The current applications used in Android cell phones
- The advantages and disadvantages of using them

The topics in the above tasks (W1 and W2) are very general and depend mainly on the student's background information or imagination without any clear instructions or guidance. One of the major advantages of this technique is the production of a writing sample which enables the researcher or the tester to use more than one criterion to assess the quality of the writing and serves as a reference that can be used for comparison with similar tasks in the future. This enables the researcher to monitor the progress of the candidates after taking a course in writing. In comparing W1 with W2, it was found that W2 is more likely to produce a reliable indicator for writing proficiency than W1. Scoring validity increases by providing an organizational structure for carrying out the writing tasks. A direct extended writing test is strongly recommended to be included where possible because it enables the researcher to elicit more important production skills than indirect ones.

In the present study, the direct writing task W2 was selected to measure the students' competence in collocations. A total of fifteen learners were given the test, thirteen females and two males who majored in English language at the university. A placement test was conducted for the students before entering the university to determine their English proficiency level. The test examines the main English language skills such as reading, structure, vocabulary, comprehension, and listening. Moreover, all of the students received English instruction for a period between eight to thirteen years before they entered the university. They were all in their

second year and accordingly have already attended an adequate number of compulsory subjects that have improved their general English competency such as linguistics, translation, poetry, pragmatics, Comprehension, and comparative literature. They were similar in age ranging from 18-20 years old. They received little instruction in writing in the English language at their secondary school since writing was not taught as a separate subject at this level. However, they are second-year students at the university who are presently enrolled in a specialized writing course. All of the students speak Arabic as their first language, and they generally have advanced knowledge of English. Hence, the sample was selected purposively to meet the specific requirements of the study.

The questionnaire was conducted to record the attitude of one of the teachers concerning the students' competence in collocations and word combinations in general. The questionnaire which includes seven open-ended questions was emailed to the teacher who is currently teaching a specialized writing course in the English Language to the students, the subjects of the study. The comments given by the teacher support the importance of teaching the lexical component explicitly in the classroom with special emphasis on phraseology and collocations.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Students were given two hours to produce a brief essay of between 300 and 400 words on the same subject, "The most influential person in your life." The subjects were not informed beforehand that the essays intended to investigate their knowledge and skill of collocations so that their performance would not be compromised. The essays were prepared during the writing class as a workshop activity without the use of dictionaries. Three different sets of tools were used in this study since it can be difficult for non-native speakers to recognize collocations.

The British National Corpus is the initial resource. The Corpus contains native and genuine language and is therefore regarded as an effective criterion for locating collocations in student writings. A collocation would be justified and proof of a proper collocation would be provided if a collocational phrase was searched for in the corpus and obtained high frequency hits. The British National Corpus is regarded as a reliable resource to see collocations utilized in authentic sources because it contains samples from a variety of texts, including newspaper articles, college essays, and transcriptions of casual conversations. The British National Corpus was chosen since it is both cost-free and regarded as an accurate resource for the right word combinations.

The second tool utilized in the study is the online collocation checker (<http://miscollocation.blogspot.com/>) which corrects the inadequate V+N collocation usage and provides alternative suggestions for correct collocations as well. This demonstrates that both accurate and inaccurate collocations were detected. The third tool to determine whether word combinations are acceptable or not is using online collocational dictionaries such as Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, and Online Oxford Collocational Dictionary of English. The Online Oxford Collocational Dictionary of English includes more than 150,000 collocations for 9000 headwords. The dictionary presents all the words that collocate with each headword: nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositions. It contains over 50,000 examples which reveals how the words are used in context and grammar.

The process of calculating the different types of collocations was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2010 with great care and attention. Three English language translators and the researcher examined the essays to create a taxonomy and error categorization for the many kinds of collocational mistakes committed by the students. There was almost a unanimous agreement

on most of the collocational errors identified in the study. First, all the possible grammatical and lexical collocations written in the essays were underlined and highlighted as per the classifications of grammatical and lexical collocations suggested by Benson et al. which was stated earlier in the research. Second, the differentiation between the correct and erroneous collocations was done using three tools: the online British National Corpus, the collocational checker, and the different collocational dictionaries. Lexical and grammatical collocations that were written with grammatical or spelling mistakes were counted as correct and valid word combinations. Such deficiency in grammar or spelling is supposed to be deducted later from the students' total writing scores. In addition, the misspelled collocations did not affect the accuracy of calculating the correct and erroneous collocations.

On the syntactic level, collocational errors were classified into lexical, and grammatical collocations and the errors caused by L1 transfer. On the semantic level, they were divided into literal collocations, figurative collocations, and phrasal verbs. The errors were extracted from the written essays in the following manner:

Table 3: Collocational Types Observed in the Study.

Type	Correct Collocation	Wrong Collocation	Suggestions For Improvement
Lexical	strong point	pass situation	overcome situation
Grammatical	By nature	With fondness	With happiness
Interlanguage	Take photos	Follow method	Adopt method
Literal	Participate in	Search about	Search for
Figurative	Fair skin	Take her opinion	Seek her opinion
Phrasal Verbs	Work out	Fall from	Drop out

4. Results and Discussions

A total of 133 grammatical and lexical collocations were found. They were listed and checked using the British National Corpus and the online collocational checker as previously mentioned. The lexical collocations amounted to 80 (60%) whereas the grammatical collocations were 53 (40%). This means that most of the collocations produced by the students were lexical ones. The students produced 61 correct collocations which represent (46%) of the total number of collocations.

Table 4: Frequency of Acceptable and Unacceptable Collocations.

Total No. of Collocations	Acceptable Collocations	Unacceptable Collocations
133	61 (46%)	72 (54%)

As presented in Table 4, 72 (54 %) erroneous collocations were found. The incorrect grammatical collocations amounted to only 16 (22 %) whereas 56 (78%) were incorrect lexical ones. Statistically, the difference in the mean scores between the erroneous grammatical and lexical collocations is significant as shown in Table 5. This indicates that the students were more capable of managing their grammatical collocations than their lexical ones.

Table 5: Frequency of Unacceptable Collocations on the Syntactic Level.

Type	Raw Score	Mean	Mode	Median	Std. Deviation
Lexical	56 (78%)	3.7	3	4	2
Grammatical	16 (22%)	1.1	0	1	1

Interlanguage	37 (51%)	2.5	2	2	1
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N=15

Concerning the seven subtypes of the lexical collocations, it was found out that incorrect lexical collocations were 56 (78 %); 26 (46%) of which were verb + noun combinations and 17 (30%) were adjective + noun combinations. In other words, students made more mistakes with L1 and L2 types. It could therefore be assumed that these two types are more difficult than the other types of lexical collocations.

Examples

Make a subject
Conduct music
Encounter literature
Fragile person
Complete country

Predictably, the results suggest that almost more than half of the error occurrences in collocations are attributable to negative L1 transfer. 37 interlanguage errors were extracted, representing (51%) of the total number of unacceptable collocations found in the study. Also, Students didn't pay attention to the interference of their native language since they weren't aware of the differences between English and Arabic. As a result, when students attempt to write their essays, they turn first to their mother tongue.

Examples

My emotions are caged (= my emotions are suppressed)
Building up countries (= developing countries)
Take her opinion (= seek her opinion)
Put you on bed (= put you to bed)
Celebrate with Christmas (= celebrate Christmas)
Do her hair (= cut/style her hair)
Complete country (= fascinating/advanced country)

However, it was found that L1 transfer can sometimes lead to the appropriate usage of collocations:

Examples

Weak point
Dress nicely
Independent nation
Wonderful country
Interesting subject
Sarcastic comment
Successful concert
Receive your degree

The usage of assumed synonymy is the second main contributor to collocation mistakes. Since no two words in the English language have the same meaning, there are no exact synonyms. Although synonyms have identical meanings, when they co-occur with other words in a sentence, they are subject to various collocational limitations.

Examples

Famous countries (= populous countries)

Huge toy (= big toy)

Lovable man (= nice man)

Love rapidly (= love quickly)

Great manners (= good manners)

Separate country (= independent country)

Although "famous" and "populous" for instance are near-synonyms and convey the same meaning, the choice of a particular adjective depends on the noun following it. Thus, the adjective generally used with the noun "country" is "populous" not "famous".

Regarding the grammatical collocations, the errors were attributed to either selecting or adding inappropriate prepositions and most of them were also due to negative transfer:

Search about (for)

Excited to (about)

To do it my way (in) – omission

Regarding the semantic level, the results in Table 6 reveal that the mean of the literal errors made by the students was much higher than the figurative ones, the participants made more literal mistakes than figurative ones. Phrasal verbs were rarely used by the students and consequently, no errors occurred in using them. This could be attributed to the fact that phrasal verbs pose a great difficulty for Arabic L1 learners since they do not exist in Arabic.

Table 6: Frequency of Unacceptable Collocations on the Semantic Level.

Type	Raw Score	Mean	Mode	Median	Std. Deviation
Literal	52	3.5	3	4	4
Figurative	17	1	0	1	1
Phrasal verbs	3	0.2	2	0	0

N= 15

To sum up, the results obtained in table 5 and 6 reveals that the subjects have higher mean scores in the lexical and literal collocations than in the grammatical and figurative ones respectively.

5. Conclusion

Our results support the "no" response to our initial query about whether an advanced learner's collocational knowledge increases concurrently with his general linguistic understanding. Although the individuals had strong grammar and syntactic skills and had been studying English for more than ten years, their understanding of collocations was less advanced than their general vocabulary. Only fifteen essays have been prepared, however these sections contain 72 incorrect collocations. This may be partially explained by the fact that students may not have been aware of collocations as a potential barrier to mastering their English language because the lexical component, which includes collocations, has been skipped in EFL training.

The results have pedagogical implications concerning the instruction of bilingual collocations. The errors indicate that EFL students depend mainly on L1 transfer to produce collocations. This might be because more experienced students use the transfer to swap out Arabic terms for English ones. After all, they have a large English vocabulary. As a result, bilingual collocations must be the main focus of collocation instruction to increase students' understanding of the juxtaposes between their home tongue and the English language. Such

collocation training. According to Nasselhauf (2005), such collocation education can aid students in avoiding incorrect collocations that involve interference from their home tongue.

Unexpectedly, some collocations were produced correctly by the students due to the positive interlingual transfer. Such lexical collocations should not be taught. Bahns (1993) suggested that the huge number of collocations which amounts to tens of thousands is considered one of the major problems in teaching collocations. This large number can be reduced if teaching lexical collocations should concentrate only on the ones in which there is no "direct translational equivalence" in English and the student's mother tongue. In other words, if some collocations can be easily and successfully paraphrased from Arabic to English, then it would be unnecessary to teach such types of collocations. Only the collocations which are not easily paraphrased should be taught.

To convey the meaning of their collocations, students often create their terms using presumptive synonyms that have the same semantic meaning as the appropriate ones. This happened as a result of accurate collocation instruction is rarely stressed by teachers. According to Lewis (as stated in Lin Kuo, 2009), teachers should utilize collocations to provide new vocabulary to their students to improve their collocational competency and decrease the use of synonyms in their collocations.

Boonyasquan (2009) stressed the importance of teaching collocations in EFL classrooms. She points out that "Collocation is arbitrary and unpredictable". For example, It is suitable to say "make the bed" rather than "do the bed" and "turn on the light" rather than "open the light,". Therefore, without sufficient training and practice, it would be quite challenging for EFL students to construct collocations appropriately. The second reason is that some collocations, particularly idiomatic ones like "it's raining cats and dogs," are extremely difficult to learn. ". Consequently, teachers must raise awareness and teach collocations to enable EFL students to master their English Language.

Sirinna Boonyasquan (2009) further suggested some implications on how to teach collocations. First, teachers should be selective when teaching collocations. They should avoid teaching passive, unclear collocations and dead metaphors. They should focus only on teaching active and direct collocations. They should, as mentioned earlier, also focus on teaching the collocations in which there is no direct translational equivalence between the mother tongue and the target language.

Second, when teaching vocabulary, English instructors should not introduce new words in isolation or let their students refer to dictionaries to acquire single words. Instead, they should introduce new words in collocation form, that's to say, along with the words which they frequently co-occur with. For example, if a teacher wishes to introduce a new word like "homework", she/he should introduce it along with its collocates such as "do homework" so that the students register in their memory from the beginning the single word and it collocates.

Third, teachers should emphasize to their students the value of collocations in learning the English language and developing a native-like accent. Students will be motivated and excited to learn collocations if they are aware of the possible benefits gained from doing so.

Fourth, teachers should train their students to identify and recognize collocational patterns in a reading and writing class. For example, when teaching reading, instructors can make their students identify the collocations and group the similar ones then incorporate these

collocations in writing their compositions. Teachers can give their students writing assignments on a topic relevant to the reading texts.

This study strongly suggested that collocations must be taught in EFL classrooms. According to the above findings, it is evident that EFL learners' knowledge of collocations does not advance at the same rate as their knowledge of vocabulary in general. This is because students are not taught how to identify collocations in EFL classrooms, so they are not aware that they exist. Teachers must provide adequate instruction on teaching collocations and train their students to acquire them successfully. The study also has suggested that not all collocations are equally important and that teachers should only concentrate on teaching the collocational phrases that are not easily paraphrased.

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