

TEACHING COLLOCATIONS TO INTERMEDIATE-LEVELED VIETNAMESE EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The author's teaching experiences and observations reveal that intermediate Vietnamese EFL university students frequently make collocation errors, reducing their writing clarity and naturalness in speech. Despite the importance of collocational knowledge, limited research provides practical strategies for its acquisition, and the best approach remains unclear. Using Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate, the authors analyzed 43 academic papers addressing collocation errors, their causes, and expert recommendations. Synthesizing these findings with personal experience, this paper identifies common causes of collocation errors and proposes effective strategies to enhance students' skills. It aims to improve intermediate-level Vietnamese EFL students' collocational competence for better communication.

Key words: collocations, EFL, implications, university students, chunk

INTRODUCTION

Lewis advises educators to make sure their modifications are beneficial to students by having them do their own action research and bringing up the topic of collocations with their students [20]. Hill addresses the central question of what it means to be a language learner, highlighting the importance of collocational knowledge in second language teaching [14]. He claims that "[students] do not really 'know' or 'own' a word unless they also know how that word is used [emphasis in original]". Collocations have two functions [37]. Firstly, since they seem to be the building blocks of creative language, they are essential for language learning. A number of students employ collocations because their lecturers frequently urge them to be expressive and creative [27]. In addition, Hill argues that the usage of fixed expressions can enhance the fluency, naturalness, and effectiveness of language use [14]. He asserts that intermediate students' lack of understanding of collocational phrases prevents them from moving on to the advanced level.

Collocational knowledge is crucial for second language teaching, as it enhances fluency, creativity, and overall communicative competence. Researchers emphasize that mastering a word involves understanding its usage within collocations. Encouraging students to engage with collocations through action research and targeted discussions can improve their learning outcomes. Fixed expressions are highlighted as essential tools for fostering naturalness and effectiveness in language use. However, many intermediate learners struggle with collocational phrases, which limits their progress to advanced proficiency levels. By focusing on collocations, educators can help students develop both linguistic accuracy and expressive creativity. Limited research has provided practical strategies for acquiring collocational knowledge, and the most effective approach to developing collocational competence remains undefined, particularly in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, this

study explores the underlying causes of collocation errors among intermediate-level Vietnamese EFL university students and suggests targeted strategies and interventions to enhance their collocation proficiency.

Research questions:

1. What are the reasons for the collocation errors made by intermediate-level Vietnamese EFL university students?
2. What are effective strategies to help students improve their collocation skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Collocations

Collocations are frequent word pairings that occur more frequently in English than one may anticipate by coincidence. "Knowing the meaning of a word not only requires knowing its dictionary definition; one must also know the type of words with which it is often associated. Collocations, either fixed or more flexible, are the result of many years of habitual use by fluent speakers of the English" [29]. Collocations are acknowledged as a means of distinguishing between second language learners and native speakers. In order to assist someone, a non-native speaker will say, "Can I help you?", a native speaker, however, will say, "Can I give you a hand?" [31].

Benson, Benson, and Ilson gave the following broad description of collocations: "English, like other languages, has a large number of fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and structures [6]. These groupings of words are called repeating combinations, fixed combinations, or collocations (p. ix). Furthermore, they separated collocations in English into two primary groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations are further divided into seven types, whereas grammatical collocations are divided into eight categories. Lexical collocations contain nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Lexical collocations include verb+ noun, adjective+ noun, noun+ verb, adverb+ adjective, and verb+ adverb.

The term "collocation," which has multiple definitions and interpretations, comes from the discipline of lexicon studies [3]. Generally speaking, there were two opposing viewpoints regarding this phrase. One of them maintained that collocation and meaning were connected, while the other maintained that collocation and word meaning were unrelated. Firth has been credited with popularizing the term "collocation" in lexicon studies because of his claim that it was a matter of meaning [8, 14]). According to Firth, a word's meaning should be evident from the company it keeps. Stated differently, collocation refers to a word's meaning and its association with other terms.

2.2. Reasons for teaching collocations

For several strong reasons, the main emphasis of language classroom instruction should be on collocations. One is that collocational knowledge, which most language learners strive for, explains native-like proficiency. Collocational information aids learners in producing writing and speech in the target language that sounds natural. Moreover, collocational knowledge is crucial for fluency [10, 14, 18, 26, 38]. Collocations reduce processing time, which expedites communication, according to research. Chunking has this specific benefit as its main advantage [23]. Nattinger went on to describe collocations further, defining them as "Blocks that are already packaged" [24]. Learners reduce the effort and time needed for language processing each time they use it [21, 35] once they obtain these "building blocks," which promote "native-like selection") [28]. Gaps in grammar and vocabulary can be filled by collocations. Scrivener states that chunks and collocations "occupy an intermediate zone between vocabulary and grammar" [33].

Moreover, collocations save pupils from having to "go about reconstructing the language each time they want to say something," [24]. When concepts are mentally stored as discrete parts, "more

efficient retrieval" is feasible. In order for learners to communicate, collocations and idiomatic terms are essentially required, and as Wray points out, their absence "can impede communication" [37, p.58]. However, Nation argues that the "predictability of meaning" of collocations should be the teacher's main focus when teaching pupils receptive skills, or reading and listening [23].

In summary, collocations are essential in language instruction as they significantly contribute to native-like proficiency, fluency, and naturalness in communication. Research highlights that collocations expedite communication by reducing processing time, as learners use pre-packaged "chunks" of language, facilitating efficient retrieval and reducing cognitive effort. Collocations serve as a bridge between vocabulary and grammar, helping to fill gaps in both areas. They enable learners to communicate effectively without reconstructing language structures repeatedly. Additionally, collocations and idiomatic expressions are crucial for seamless communication, as their absence can hinder understanding. Teachers should emphasize the predictability of meaning in collocations, particularly for receptive skills like reading and listening.

METHOD

To generalize common information from 43 scholarly articles on collocation errors, a systematic procedure was followed. First, academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate were used to search for articles using specific terms like "collocation errors in EFL learners," "causes of collocation mistakes," and "collocation acquisition strategies." Relevant studies were filtered based on their focus on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and authoritative sources, selecting 43 articles centered on intermediate-level EFL learners. Each article was then skimmed to identify its scope, methodology, key findings, and conclusions, with important points annotated. The data was categorized thematically into causes of errors (e.g., interlingual transfer, overgeneralization), error types (e.g., synonym misuse, rule restriction violations), and teaching strategies (e.g., consciousness-raising, frequent exposure). Findings were compared across articles to identify recurring patterns, summarize common causes such as inadequate language exposure, and highlight frequently recommended solutions like increased exposure to authentic materials. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to assess the prevalence of specific issues and to gain deeper insights, including unique perspectives or case studies. The synthesized findings were validated by revisiting articles to ensure no critical information was missed, and the results were refined for clarity and coherence. Finally, the generalized information was presented in a structured format, such as tables or narratives, categorizing causes, errors, and interventions, while highlighting consensus and research gaps for a comprehensive overview. This systematic approach ensured an accurate synthesis of insights from the 43 articles.

1. Causes of errors in EFL students' use of collocations

There are many causes of collocational mistakes but the following have been found to be the main sources of collocational errors in numerous research:

Intermediate-level Vietnamese EFL students face several challenges with collocation errors due to various factors. Overgeneralization occurs when learners construct deviant structures based on limited knowledge, such as using *"I am concern about it" instead of "I am concerned about it." This stems from inadequate exposure to natural language use, unlike native speakers who acquire collocations intuitively. Poor knowledge of rule restrictions also leads to errors, as students fail to recognize structural limitations, e.g., using *"ask you a favor" instead of "ask a favor of you." Additionally, false concepts hypothesized result from misinterpreting target language nuances, producing errors like *"make a breakthrough" instead of "achieve a breakthrough." Synonym usage, such as *"broaden your eyesight" instead of "broaden your vision," reflects a misunderstanding of

collocational principles. Interlingual transfer influences errors like *“arrive at school” due to literal translations from Vietnamese. Word coinage, such as *“see sun-up” for “see sunrise,” highlights attempts to invent vocabulary. Lastly, approximation occurs when students use near-correct words, as in *“middle exam” for “midterm exam.” Addressing these issues requires frequent exposure and consciousness-raising to help students develop collocational competence.

The primary cause of inadequate collocation knowledge, as observed by the author throughout the teaching process, is a lack of collocation-based practice, which results in insufficient exposure to the collocations on specific syllabus subjects. When they actually have to talk or write using the collocations they believe they understand well, they really struggle because they just have passive understanding of the collocations.

In conclusion, EFL students make collocational mistakes in their writing and speaking due to a variety of factors, including paraphrasing, lack of collocational knowledge, interlingual or intralingual transfer, and interference from their mother tongue, lack of practice and frequent use of the collocations they have learnt. These could be the causes of the frequent inappropriate collocations that EFL students use in their speech and writing.

2. Implications for teaching of collocation

Lewis discussed the methodological approaches of teaching collocation in the lexical approach [19]. Placing an early emphasis on receptive skills, particularly listening, is essential in language learning. Decontextualized language learning is a perfectly valid method, and it is important to recognize grammar's role as a receptive skill. Teachers should acknowledge the significance of contrast in developing linguistic awareness and utilize extensive, thorough language for receptive purposes. Writing extensively should also be prioritized, while nonlinear recording formats, such as collocation tables and word trees, are vital components of the lexical approach. When students make mistakes, teachers should naturally reformulate lessons while focusing primarily on the content of students' words. Additionally, pedagogical chunking should be a regular practice in the classroom to enhance learning outcomes.

In an error correction test, Sun and Wang found that the inductive group significantly outperformed the deductive group in learning grammatical collocations. They used a concordancer program to compare the relative efficacy of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching collocation at two levels of difficulty [34]. Hyland states that corpora and concordancing can be utilized as research tools in L2 writing classes to help students make sense of language and identify underlying rules and regularities from the provided concordance data, or as reference tools that students can use in addition to or instead of more traditional reference materials like dictionaries and grammar books when they are having trouble with their writing [15].

Kennedy advises promoting independent collocation learning as well, especially through reading [16, p.484]. Numerous scholars recommend teaching collocations using grids [32, p.88], [23, p.336]. Additionally, Nation offers various exercises such as locating and matching collocates, where students can utilize a dictionary or their own L1 and L2 knowledge [23, p. 106]. Additionally, digital flashcards have been the focus of both educators and students. The use of digital flashcards in vocabulary education is becoming increasingly common, and experts agree that these cards are important and useful. Research on the advantages of online flashcards for learning vocabulary as part of multimedia instruction has found that L1 equivalents, music, visuals, and text annotation all help English as a foreign language learners remember more words [11], [36], [22], [1], [7]. The results indicate that utilizing digital flashcards is more efficient than using paper ones [2], [5], [17].

Moreover, according teaching experience of the author, teachers can design some exercise in the form of games in a class room in a way he/she can involve the whole class, which can promote better retention

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of vocabulary and collocations they have been taught previously. In this way, all the students are forced to be fully engaged and participate the games. In particular, the games should especially attach importance to the right combinations of adjective+ noun, verb+ noun, noun+ verb, adverb+ adjective, and verb+ adverb. They should also involve students writing phrases, sentences using pens, chalk and paper to enhance their muscle memories of the knowledge they are dealing with. The fun aspects of the games can not only give better learning experiences but also more vivid memories of the collocations covered. The games should be included at the beginning of lessons for a review of the previous ones or at the end of a lesson as a summary tactic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's critical to acknowledge the significance and frequency of English language chunks and collocations. Collocations should therefore be taught in class and students should be exposed to them if language teachers want their students to become as proficient as native speakers. The purpose of this paper was to analyze the collocation mistakes made by Vietnamese EFL university students at the intermediate level, its causes and suggests useful tactics and interventions to assist students with becoming better at collocations.

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