

An Investigation of Advanced Iraqi Learners' Recognition of Some English Collocations

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Abstract:

This paper presents an investigation of advanced Iraqi learners' (hence forth AILs) recognition of some English collocations and the collocational errors they made as well as the degree of difficulty they have faced while conducting the test. The subjects were 60 third year students at the Department of Translation at the University of Basra, College of Arts. The research instrument was a self-designed Simple Completion Test that measured the subjects' recognition of two types of lexical collocations: free combinations, restricted collocations according to Howarth's (1998b) categorization. It is hypothesized that the degree of difficulty for AILs is subject to an items' position in the collocational continuum, starting with free combination as the easiest type and restricted collocations as the most difficult ones. Hence, the results indicated that, restricted collocations were challenging for the participants than free combinations and this is due to the subjects' insufficient knowledge of English collocations. It is concluded that the errors made by AILs in recognizing the two types of collocations can be attributed to negative L1 transfer.

تفحص ادراك الطلبة العراقيين في المراحل المتقدمة لبعض أنواع التلازم في اللغة الانكليزية

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الملخص:

يتفحص البحث الحالي إدراك الطلبة العراقيين في المراحل المتقدمة لنوعين من التلازم في اللغة الانكليزية و تحليل الأخطاء التي ارتكبتها الطلبة بالإضافة إلى الصعوبات التي واجهوها في الإجابة أثناء الاختبار. كان المشتركون في الاختبار ستين طالبا من المرحلة الثالثة في قسم الترجمة في كلية الآداب في جامعة البصرة. كانت أداة البحث عبارة عن اختبار ذاتي متكامل بسيط لقياس مدى استيعاب الطلبة لنوعين من تلازم المفردات في اللغة الانكليزية: الترابط الحر و التلازم المحدد وفقا لتقسيم هاورث(١٩٩٨ب). افترضت نظرية البحث إن درجة الصعوبة التي يواجهها الطلبة العراقيين في المراحل المتقدمة مشروطة بموقع المفردة في الكيان التلازمي ابتدا من التلازم المحدد الأكثر صعوبة وانتهاءا بالترابط الحر الأسهل بالنسبة للطلبة. وهكذا فان التلازم المحدد كان يمثل صعوبة فائقة للطلبة أكثر من الترابط الحر. وهذا يعود لمعرفة الطلبة القاصرة للتلازم في اللغة الانكليزية. استخلصت الدراسة أن الأخطاء التي ارتكبتها الطلبة العراقيين في المراحل المتقدمة في استيعاب هذين النوعين من التلازم في اللغة الانكليزية يعزى للتدخل السلبي للغة الأم.

1. Introduction

Research in the field of teaching English as a second language (hence forth TESL) has recognized collocational recognition and knowledge as a crucial part of phraseological competence in English (Moon, 1992, Fontenelle, 1994; Herbst, 1996; Lennon, 1996). Nattinger (60:1989) notices that the syntagmatic relations of a lexical item help define its semantic range and the context in which it appears. Awareness of the restrictions of lexical co-occurrence can facilitate ESL learners' ability to encode language (Seal, 1991: 296). It also enables them to produce sentences that are grammatically and semantically acceptable. Thus they can conform to the expectations of academic writing or speech communication (Granger, 1998: 150).

According to Bahns and Eldaw (1993: 20) EFL students do not learn collocational recognition while acquiring vocabulary. Instead, their collocational proficiency tends to lag far behind their vocabulary competence. Among the small number of studies on learners' performance in English collocations, the majority have observed the difficulty of learners whose native languages are similar to English. Moreover, research on ESL learners' vocabulary development has mainly focused on the knowledge and production of individual lexical items. In contrast, researchers have devoted limited attention to realization of collocations (Ibid.).

After long time of foreign language study, many Arab learners of English make collocation errors. Thomas (1984: 187) points out that this is "hardly surprising, given the vast scope and very idiosyncratic use of lexical items and collocations".

1.2. Objectives

The purpose of this research is to specifically investigate the recognition of AILs of two types of English collocations. These include free combinations and restricted collocations as proposed by Howarth (1998b: 45-72).

The answer to the following questions will also be the objectives of the present study:

1. To what extent can certain strategies be generalized for learners from different L1 backgrounds?



2. What kinds of difficulties do learners from different linguistic backgrounds encounter in dealing with English collocations?

1.3. Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the degree of difficulty for AILs is subject to an items' position in the collocational continuum, starting with free combination as the easiest type and restricted collocations as the most difficult ones.

1.4. Procedures

The present paper is divided into two parts the theoretical and the practical part:

The theoretical part deals with a presentation of collocations in English and some factors influencing students' performance in recognizing different types of collocations. The theoretical part also includes a review of learners' strategies to choose the correct collocational item. It also provides an understanding of the processes they go through to attain L2 collocations.

The practical part includes a description of the test, subjects, data and analysis of results as well as discussion. In addition, the research investigated critically the errors the learners produced in the target test.

An analysis of the subjects' responses would reveal their difficulty in learning English collocations and uncover the strategies they used to deal with the problems.

2. Collocations: Definition and Importance

Most of the researchers who define collocations agree that it is a lexical unit consisting of a cluster of two or three words from different parts of speech, (see e.g. Baker, 1992; Williams, 2002). Most of the definitions are paraphrases of Firth's (1957:190) definition that collocations are "words in habitual company".

Ying (2009:2) rightly notes that "collocations are both pervasive in language and difficult for language learners to master even at an advanced level. Despite the increasing recognition of collocational knowledge as an indispensable part of target language (L2) proficiency, research on collocations has indicated that collocations are an inherent problem for L2"

Moreover, Jukneviene (2008:5) explains that collocational competence is often recognized as an important component of vocabulary acquisition which might contribute to a better understanding of specific difficulties faced by learners of different mother tongues.

Notably, James (1998: 152) agrees that the correct usage of collocations "contributes greatly to one's idiomaticity and nativelikeness." Taiwo (2004:3) sees lexical errors and grammatical errors as equally important. Sonaiya (1988:71) goes even further to say that lexical errors are more serious because effective communication depends on the choice of words.

Benson et al. (1986:50) divide collocations 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. They also classify common types of lexical collocation, which have been adopted by most researchers. They are typical errors occurring frequently in learners' production (Sun, 2004: 9).

Consequently, there are two types of collocations in English: grammatical and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations are combinations where a preposition is used with a noun, a verb or an adjective, (e.g. by accident, admiration for, agree with, account for, afraid of, amazed at). Lexical collocations include: (Al-Salmani, 2001:61)

1. Verb + Noun (e.g. break a code, lift a blockade)
2. Verb + Adverb (e.g. affect deeply, appreciate sincerely)
3. Noun + Verb (e.g. water freezes, clock ticks)
4. Adjective + Noun (e.g. strong tea, best wishes)
5. Adverb + Adjective (e.g. deeply absorbed, closely related)

Significantly, the current study adopts Howarth's (1998b: 45-72) categorization model of lexical collocations because the model provides a thorough explanation of the classification criteria and easy-to-follow examples. In the model, the collocational continuum contains four categories of collocations: (a) free combinations, (b) restricted

collocations, (c) figurative idioms, and (d) pure idioms. A free combination derives its meaning from composing the literal meaning of individual elements, and its constituents are freely substitutable. A typical example provided by Howarth is “blow a trumpet”. A restricted collocation is more limited in the selection of compositional elements and usually has one component that is used in a specialized context, e.g., “blow a fuse”. For idioms that are semantically opaque or highly frozen, Howarth (Ibid.) further divides them into figurative and pure idioms. While a figurative idiom has a metaphorical meaning as a whole that can somehow be derived from its literal interpretation, a pure idiom has a unitary meaning that is totally unpredictable from the meaning of its components. The example Howarth gives for the two types are “blow your own trumpet” and “blow the gaff”, respectively.

3. Factors Influencing Performance in the Recognition of Collocation

Myers and Chang (2009:1) explain that “acquiring an adequate vocabulary is a cognitive challenge for foreign language learners. Varied exposures to newly acquired words as they occur in meaningful contexts may facilitate the process of vocabulary learning”. Recent empirical studies have identified several factors that may influence learners’ performance in recognizing collocations. These factors include semantic fields, meaning boundaries, and collocational restrictions (Allan, 2001:30):

1. The semantic field of a lexicon is determined by its conceptual field. Examples of conceptual fields include color, kinship and marital relations. (Ibid.). Biskup (1992:88) examined Polish and German EFL learners’ performance in English collocations. He concluded that the wider the semantic field of a given lexical item, the more L1 interference errors it might trigger. Lennon (1996:33) also pointed out the reasons accounting for learners’ erroneous use of high frequency verbs such as put, go, and take. The main reason lay in these verbs’ rich polysemy and syntactic complexity. As they formed phrases with prepositions, these verbs created collocational restrictions that required special attention to their collocational

environments. These lexical properties surely created different degrees of difficulty for learners.

2. The second factor concerns the influence of learners' native language. Because of the commonality of some human situations, different languages have parallel fixed expressions that are syntactically and semantically similar (Moon, 1992: 13; Teliya et al,1998: 166). L1 influence is most prevalent when learners perform translation tasks. Lacking collocational knowledge, learners rely heavily on the L1 as the only resource and thus do better in those collocations that have L1 equivalents than those that do not (Bahns,1993: 23)
3. The third factor has to do with individual learners' collocational competence. Granger (1998: 155) and Howarth (1998a: 180), by comparing the writing corpora of ESL learners and native English speakers, report that these learners generally demonstrated deficient knowledge of English collocations. Compared with their native-speaker counterparts, the ESL/EFL learners produced a lower percentage of conventional collocations but a higher percentage of deviant combinations. These learners tended to have a weak sense of the salience of collocational patterns.

4. General Strategies for Dealing with Collocations

Due to insufficient knowledge of collocations, English learners may adopt certain strategies to produce collocations and thus create certain types of errors. The most commonly used strategies are as follows:

1. Transference in which learners rely on L1 equivalents when they fail to find the desired lexical items in the L2. The transfer strategy may also reflect the learners' assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between their L1 and L2. As Farghal and Obiedat (1995: 315) points out, positive transfer occurred when the target collocations matched those in the L1, while negative transfer appeared when no corresponding patterns could be found in the L1.

2. The second strategy is avoidance (Howarth,1998a: 166). Second language learners may avoid the target lexical items because they fail to retrieve the appropriate items of which they have passive knowledge. As a consequence, they alter the intended meaning of the collocations (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993: 22).
3. The third strategy often used by learners is paraphrasing, or using synonyms. Learners may substitute the target item with a synonymous alternative and use paraphrasing to express the target collocations with which they are not familiar (Farghal & Obiedat,1995: 320).

5. The Practical Part

5.1. Subjects

Sixty third year students at the Department of Translation, University of Basra, College of Arts were the subjects of the test. Of these sixty students, 15 were male and 45 were female, and they ranged from 19 to 22 years of age. However, the gender factors are not important to the analysis of results.

The test was administered in the classroom where the regular instruction for the participants took place. Each participant was allowed sufficient time to work individually on the test questions. It took about 60 minutes for all the subjects to finish the test. Before the test started, the researcher provided directions in English and encouraged the subjects to answer each question without leaving any blanks.

5.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The test consisted of 20 items in the form of free-response with ten items in each collocational category. Each item contained two or three sentences that provided a context in which a specific collocation about food or animals was embedded. By referring to the sentential context, a subject was required to fill in an appropriate word to complete the target collocation. Most sentences involved in the test were adapted from Booker's Longman active American idioms (1994: 40-5).

The subjects' answer sheets were collected and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The correct answers provided by each subject were first marked. An answer that showed a correct

choice of lexicon but had wrong inflections was judged to be correct as in the example below.

It is possible that after several decades, children may not know how a pig ____.

In this case, answers such as walks, walk, walking were all counted as correct because the focus of the test was on the correct choice of collocates. The response word (walk) can collocate perfectly with (pig) in this sentence, and thus the inflectional errors in verbs or numbers of nouns were ignored.

Descriptive statistics were then generated to compare the subjects' performance in each category and observe the relative difficulty of different categories. The mean under each category represented the average number of subjects who answered the test items in the category correctly. The average number of blank responses in each category was also counted because it indicated the difficulty level perceived by the subjects. Since the students were encouraged to answer each test item without leaving any blanks, the blank responses may suggest that they were unable to provide even an educated guess due to the difficulty of the item. Another indicator of item difficulty is the number of variations in the subjects' incorrect answers. It was suspected that the subjects would provide more variations for the items they perceive more challenging.

In addition, a qualitative paradigm was used to analyze the collocational clusters subjects provided for each category. This application aimed to reveal which words caused confusion in terms of their collocability and which lexical collocations were especially challenging to the respondents.

5.3. Procedures

The research is a self-designed Simple Completion Test (Hence forth SCT) that measured the subjects' performance in recognizing two types of lexical collocations: free combinations, and restricted collocations (Howarth, 1998b: 45-72). The test consisted of 20 items in the form of free-response with ten items in each collocational category. Each item contained two or three sentences that provided a context in

which a specific collocation about food or animals was embedded. By referring to the sentential context, a subject was required to fill in an appropriate word to complete the target collocation. Most sentences involved in the SCT were adapted from Booker's Longman active American idioms (1994).

The 20 test items were distributed into two sections. Each section comprised separate test items falling into the two types of collocations previously mentioned. Section "A" is for free combinations and it required the subjects to fill in an appropriate verb, an adjective, a noun about food, or nouns related to animals. Section "B" is for restricted collocations and it required the subjects to choose the appropriate word that collocates with the neighboring word. Please refer to the Appendix for the complete list of test items.

5.4. Results and Discussion

5.4.1. Results

Table 1 displays the average percentage of correct responses for each category. The mean of the free combination category is dramatically higher than restricted collocations. The results have partly confirmed the hypothesis that free combinations appear to be the easiest to deal with, whereas restricted collocations are the most challenging ones.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the subjects' performance
in the two categories (N = 60)

	Free Combinations	Restricted Collocations
Mean	49.20	8.1
SD	7.51	7.67

The same tendency emerged when the researcher examined the average numbers of subjects' deviant answers (exclusive of the correct answers provided) and blank responses. As shown in Table 2, the

subjects gave considerably fewer deviant answers and blank responses for free combinations than in the restricted collocations. The subjects were encouraged not to skip any items by engaging in guessing. For restricted collocations, the subjects created a large number of variations of incorrect answers. The enormous amount of varieties of deviant answers implies their lack of collocational knowledge.

Table 2
Average numbers of blank responses and variations of incorrect answers in four categories (N = 60)

	Free Combinations	Restricted Collocations
Blank responses	1.7	7.6
Numbers of variations of incorrect answers	7.6	23.3

An analysis of subjects' collocational errors in each category suggests that test items created different degrees of difficulty for the subjects. For all test words in free combinations, more than two thirds of the subjects answered correctly except for items 4 (how a pig ___) and 6 (___ food). Only 37 out of 60 responded correctly for these two items. For item 4, some subjects provided deviant answers that did not comply with the syntactic structure of the indirect question starting with how, e.g., is, like. Item 6 required the subjects to fill in an appropriate adjective that collocates with food. Many of the deviant answers, however, contained lexical items of other parts of speech and spelling errors. As for the category of restricted collocations, no subjects correctly answered items 15 (milk their cows) or 19 (soup... too thick/solid/stiff to stir). Items 14 (hen...hatch/produce eggs), 20 (food stamps), 13 (make/propose/drink a toast), and 17 (soft/non-alcoholic drinks) were also very difficult, as fewer than ten subjects responded appropriately.

In comparison to free combination, the subjects' deviant answers for restricted collocations will shed light on their knowledge of collocations since this category allows a certain degree of difficulty and flexibility in lexical combinations. For this reason, a qualitative approach was utilized to analyze the collocational errors the subjects created in this category. Table 3 shows the deviant answers for each test item of restricted collocations. Only test items involving more than 5 respondents are displayed.

Table 3
Correct and deviant answers for restricted collocations (N = 60)

Restricted collocations		
Item	Correct answer(s)	Deviant answer(s)
11	take (8) have (2)	eat (34)
12	have (18) produce (1)	are (15) grow/grows /growing/grew (10)
13	make (5)	take (11), go (11)
14	produce (2) have (5)	get (13)
15	milk (0)	take (7)
16	black (21) strong (0)	red (9)
17	soft (7) non-alcoholic (0)	
18	black (14)	pure (7)
19	thick (0) stiff (0) solid (0)	dry (10) sweet (6)
20	food (3)	

The number in the parentheses, in the above table, indicates the number of subjects who responded to a target item. The deviant answers provided here are incomplete, since only test items involving more than 5 respondents are counted.

The deviant answers provided by the subjects in table 3 demonstrate L1 transfer. For example, for item 11 the subjects chose eat to collocate with a bite, which is a direct translation from Arabic. Other collocations that have L1 equivalents include trees *grow fruit (item 12), *red tea (item 16), *pure coffee (item 18), and soup... too *dry to stir (item 19). The influence of the first language is not always negative.

For some items, the subjects seemed to fail to recognize the target collocations as somewhat fixed expressions. They then provided a lexical item that did not form a restricted collocation with the neighboring words. For example, 20 subjects avoided using the target item by adopting another one and thus altered the meaning of the expression. An instance of this would be *take their cows instead of milk their cows (item 15).

5.4.2. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to first investigate AILs' recognition of English collocations and then analyze their errors and the degree of difficulty they have faced in two categories of collocations according to Howarth' (1998b) classification. The results indicated that free combinations created the least amount of difficulty, whereas restricted collocations were the most challenging. Most subjects' collocational errors are attributed to negative transfer from their first language. Also, some subjects chose to adopt the strategies of avoidance and analogy. In some instances, their deviant answers demonstrated the influence of cultural stereotypes and a lack of awareness of collocational restrictions.

Overall, the quantitative results show that AILs have insufficient knowledge of English collocations. The subjects' poor performance in restricted collocations lend credence to the viewpoints of Bahns and Eldaw (1993:33), who assume that learners' collocational knowledge seems not to parallel their competence in vocabulary. Taking this into consideration, many researchers have proposed that restricted collocations are the most important category to teach or learn (Biskup, 1992; Farghal & Obiedat; 1995; Granger, 1998; Howarth, 1998). It is

the type of word combination that falls between the two ends of the collocational continuum. Furthermore, restricted collocations are almost unavoidable in L2 learners' speech and writing production. This is also an area that is often neglected because no specific perception problems are posed when learners encounter a new collocation. As Biskup (1992:88) and Bahns and Eldaw (1993:35) suggest, learners' understanding of English collocations does not imply satisfactory productive knowledge of collocations nor does their collocational competence progress with the development of their vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, collocations should be explicitly taught with emphases on the restricted type and on learners' productive knowledge.

As shown in the analysis of the error types produced by the subjects, the L1 plays a crucial role in their production of English collocations. The prevalent strategy of transfer reflects learners' assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the L1 and L2. Positive transfer thus occurs when the target collocations match those in the L1.

Likewise, Farghal and Obiedat (1995:322) emphasize teaching vocabulary collocationally instead of individually. In teaching collocations, both intralingual and interlingual approaches need to be addressed. With an intralingual approach, teachers can juxtapose various meanings of a lexical item with different collocates to sensitize learners to the differences. In comparison, an interlingual approach makes use of current corpora of collocations produced by native English speakers. It functions to attract learners' attention to the native-like usage of collocations.

6. Conclusions

This research demonstrated that, due to their insufficient collocational knowledge, AILs performed unsatisfactorily in producing English collocations. In particular, their performance in the type of restricted collocations implies a general unawareness of the semantic range and selectional restrictions of the English lexicon. This problem springs from their habit of learning English vocabulary as isolated words. Theoretically, learning a new lexicon actually means learning

its cultural connotations, semantic fields and collocational restrictions. Only through this can learners promote their phraseological competence to an ideal level for effective communication in written and oral language.

The teaching of collocations inevitably needs to be integrated with the teaching of vocabulary, which can be effectively carried out by both intralingual and interlingual approaches. ESL/EFL teachers need to address the cultural data, metaphorical meanings, and the historical origins associated with the collocations to be introduced. In addition, dictionaries on collocations can foster the development of collocational competence so long as they provide examples of lexical items with different collocates, indicate different environments associated with a particular collocation, and highlight the subtle distinctions between collocations that appear to be structurally similar.

The results of the present study have indicated that many factors influence learners' performance. It is premature to determine whether a collocation is easier or more difficult to cope with unless more investigations of a similar nature are conducted. For instance, to get a clear picture of AILs' collocational knowledge in English, more research should target other types of collocation: phrasal verbs, the lexical combinations of adjectives and nouns, or collocations of other topics.

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Appendix List of Target Collocations

A. Free combinations

Full in with the indicated word:

1. Those boys and girls don't ___ orange juice. They prefer something special, like pineapple juice or punch. (verb)
2. Tina and her parents don't like lemons because they are too sour. So they ___ apples instead. (verb)
3. Today is Sunday. Do you want to ___ there to see some rare animals? (verb)
4. Is it possible that after several decades, the children may not know how a pig ___? This is because they have never seen a pig.
5. The supermarket often sells ___ fruit, so a lot of people buy fruit there. (adj.)
6. ___ food is more popular in America than in most Asian countries. (adj.)
7. Did you see the ___ rabbit over there? My parents bought it for my birthday. I like it very much. (adj.)
8. Mother is cooking ___ in the kitchen. It smells good. People in the party will surely like it. (food)
9. Please pass the ___ to me. I can't reach it. (food)
10. The little child asked me what a ___ likes to eat. I was not sure, so I looked at the book for information. (animal)

B. Restricted collocations

Choose the appropriate item that collocates with neighboring word(s)

11. This peach is sweet and delicious. Would you like to have (take) a bite?
12. Not all trees bear (produce/have) fruit. For example, an apple tree does, but a pine tree doesn't.
13. Let's make (propose/drink) a toast to the host and wish him good health and many years of happiness.
14. If our hen could lay (produce/have) gold eggs like the one in the fairy tale, we would become rich.
15. The farmers milk their cows every morning before breakfast so that their children can have fresh milk to drink.

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Recognition of Some English Collocations**

16. I don't like strong (black) tea because it upsets my stomach. Also, its dark color looks terrible.
17. They also provide soft (non-alcoholic/alcohol-free) drinks at the party for those who don't drink alcohol.
18. Remember to put cream into Jenny's coffee. Otherwise, she'll get angry because she never drinks black (strong) coffee.
19. Please put some more water into the soup, or it will become too thick (stiff/solid) to stir.
20. In the U.S., poor people are given food stamps with which they can get something to eat.