

DEVIATIONS IN VERB+NOUN LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS: A CASE OF ALGERIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract :

'Pseudo-native speaker' is the term given to a foreign language learner who has reached a high level of proficiency. Such level of proficiency is characterised by the mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Consequently, a distinction must be drawn between grammatical proficiency and the idiomatic one. The present research work investigates the mastery of Verb+Noun lexical collocations by Algerian EFL learners at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. It is hypothesised that Algerian EFL learners have a low level of mastery in the usage and comprehension of Verb+Noun collocations. It is also hypothesised that Algerian EFL learners have more difficulty with verbs than nouns in using Verb+Noun lexical collocations. An online corpus (BNC) and two other online websites (Collocation Checker & O.O.C.D) were used as tools to measure learners' collocational competence. Examined collocations were extracted from the learners' examination essays. The analysis was done manually through identification and corpus usage. The findings of the study indicate that Algerian EFL learners have more difficulty with verbs than nouns when it comes to using Verb+Noun lexical collocations-confirming the aforementioned hypotheses.

ملخص:

تطلق عبارة "شبه المتحدث الأصلي" على المتعلم الأجنبي للغة الذي بلغ مستوى عاليا من الإتقان من خلال التحكم في النحو و مفردات اللغة و النطق، و منه يجب التمييز بين الإتقان النحوي و الإتقان الاصطلاحي. يقوم هذا البحث بدراسة مستوى إتقان طلبة اللغة الانجليزية الجزائريين في جامعة الإخوة منتوري- قسنطينة 1 للمتلازمات اللفظية الفعل و الاسم. تقترح الفرضية الأولى أن طلبة اللغة الانجليزية الجزائريين لديهم مستوى ضعيف من الإحاطة بالمتلازمات اللفظية بين الفعل و الاسم. أما الفرضية الثانية فتقدر أن طلبة اللغة الانجليزية الجزائريين يجدون صعوبات في توظيف الفعل أكثر من الاسم في استعمالهم للمتلازمات اللفظية بين الفعل و الاسم. استعملت -في هذا البحث- المدونة الوطنية البريطانية و موقعان على شبكة الانترنت كوسائل لقياس مدى تمكن الطلبة من المتلازمات اللفظية. تم استخراج المتلازمات اللفظية -التي جرت عليها التجربة- من مقالات الطلبة في الامتحان -الإنشاء- كما تم تحليل المعطيات يدويا. توصلت الدراسة من خلال النتائج المتوفرة إلى أن طلبة اللغة الانجليزية الجزائريين يجدون صعوبة في توظيف الفعل أكثر من الاسم في استعمال المتلازمات اللفظية بين الفعل و الاسم.

Introduction

Inadequate research has been carried out in the area of collocation. Although some researchers have shown interest in collocations, extensive research still needs to be undertaken to highlight its practical importance in improving EFL learners' overall linguistic competence. The topic of collocation raises many questions concerning the measurement of learners' collocational competence, the best methods to teach collocations, or the types of collocations to emphasize on. In order to be able to answer these questions, it is necessary to, first, identify difficulties in mastering collocations (Nesselhauf, 2005). This study, unlike previous studies (Halliday and Hassan 1976; Benson et al. 1986), focuses on Verb + Noun lexical collocations as the mostly used type of collocation. Hatch and Brown (1995) stated that learners acquire collocations in chunks rather than as separate words. The same thing goes to L1 users. In other words, L2 learners learn collocations like infants. The main problem with some studies about collocation is that the definition is vague. No clear and specific definition is given, which makes experimentation difficult (Hussein 1990; Farghal and Obiedat 1995). Firth (1957) defines collocation as the best company a word keeps. Such definition might seem ubiquitous of the notion; however, with closer attention, one would respond by saying that not all words that co-occur are collocations. In Algeria, research on collocation repeatedly tackles its translation (Moussa 2007; Boussalia 2010). The present study attempts to shed some light on Algerian learners' use of collocations in essay writing. It investigates the prevalence of either verb or noun difficulties in Verb+Noun collocational errors.

1. Literature Review

An essential introduction to the study of language is made by tackling the topic of word knowledge. A distinction is drawn between the three types of word knowledge: knowledge of form, knowledge of meaning, and knowledge of use. These three types make up for the whole study of language. In light of this concept, the notion of collocation can be defined and explained. By understanding what collocations are, one will be able to identify them on the language continuum, and distinguish them from free combinations and idioms.

1.1. Definition of Collocation

Collocations have been recognised to distinguish a native speaker from a foreign language learner. Usually, one way a non-native

speaker may offer help is by saying ‘Can I help you?’ Meanwhile a native speaker would say ‘Can I give you a hand?’ Although a non-native speaker might succeed syntactically, he/she may not sound a native-like in terms of which words combine with which. English, similar to many languages, has its own share of re-occurring word combinations. These word combinations arbitrarily co-occur. A native speaker says ‘ultimate goal’ and not ‘last goal’; one ‘pays a visit’, but does not ‘make a visit’. Prodromou (2004, as cited in Farrokh, 2012, p. 56) argues that knowledge of a word’s meaning requires more than a dictionary meaning to include words with which it associates. Both fixed and partly flexible collocations are the outcome of continuous use by native speakers over the years.

Palmer (1933) introduced the notion of collocation. According to him, it is “a string of words that must or should be learned, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts” (Ganji, 2012, p. 125). Firth (1957) followed later, and was recognized as the one who introduced this concept to the world.

During the last decades, research in linguistics has given much importance to collocation. Scholars, teachers, and corpus designers understood its importance during the language learning process. They mentioned that the increase in linguistic competence is primary in the enhancement of learners’ communicative competence, and the approximation to native-like fluency. On the same note, teachers’ ability to identify collocational errors to EFL learners can significantly increase their awareness of the subject. Therefore, studying miscollocations is equally important to studying correct ones, for it helps instructors to focus on the difficult ones (Darvishi, 2011, p. 52-53).

Focus on collocation by many scholars led to a variety of definitions. According to Lewis (1997, p.44, as cited in Farrokh, 2012, p. 57) “collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency. Collocations co-occur, but not all words which co-occur, are collocations.” This states clearly that collocations have their specific characteristics which distinguish them from other word combinations like free combinations and idioms. Hardi (2008) defines collocation as words occurring together in text. This results in collocational phrases due to frequent co-occurrence of

word combinations (ibid, p. 57). Hardi's words denote the characteristic of frequency which is primary to identifying collocations. However, frequency hits which qualify a certain word combination to move from free combination to collocation differ according to scholars and corpora. Some scholars set the bar to 40 hits per 100 million words; others suggest the hits should reach 50 hits per 100 million words.

1.2. Collocational Competence

As much as grammatical competence is important to reach native-like proficiency, collocational competence makes a foreign language learner a pseudo-native speaker. There are many advantages that collocational competence offers. According to Henriksen (2013, p. 33), collocational competence helps

1) to make idiomatic choices and come across as native-like; 2) to process language fluently under real-time conditions (Columbus, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008); 3) to establish 'islands of reliability' (Dechert, 1983; Raupach, 1984) which enable the language user to channel cognitive energy into more creative production; 4) to disambiguate meaning of polysemous words, e.g. the verb commit in the following collocational contexts: commit a crime, commit oneself, commit to memory; and 5) to understand connotational meaning (what Sinclair, 2004 has described as semantic prosody), e.g. the fact that the verb cause is often associated with negative connotations as in cause an accident.

In other words, appropriate understanding of collocations allows the reader or listener to achieve communicative competence.

1.3. Types of Collocations

The various perspectives the notion of collocation was viewed from led to a different categorisation. According to Chia-Chuan, "Cowie and Mackin (1973) classified idioms and collocations into four categories based on idiomaticity from most to least fixed: pure idioms, figurative idioms, restricted collocations, and open collocations" (as cited in Li, 2005, p. 11). On a different note, Wood categorised collocations into idioms, colligations, and free combinations. His categorisation was based on semantic and syntactic criteria. On a similar note, collocations were classified into strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent (Darvishi, 2011, p. 53). The categorisation adopted in this research is developed by Bahns (1993). According to Boussalia

(2010, p. 15), collocations can be classified into two main categories: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations.

Grammatical collocations contain prepositions, sometimes occurring with verbs, nouns, or adjectives, e.g. (*reach down, put forth*), (*by car, on foot*), or (*interested in, happy with*) (McKeown & Radev, p. 05). Bahns (1993, p. 57, as cited in Boussalia 2010, p. 15) notes that they “(usually) consist of a noun, an adjective or a verb, plus a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause.”

On the other hand, lexical collocations are lexically restricted (McKeown & Radev, p. 05-06). Benson (1985) explains that the subordinate element lacks in lexical collocations. Instead, they are composed of two lexical components (Boussalia, 2010, p. 15-16). This means that there are no grammatical components within the word combination, only lexical ones (content words). According to Gabrielatos (1994, p. 02), “there are three factors determining the categorising of a lexical collocation: the degree of probability that the items will co-occur, the degree of fixity of the combination (i.e. grammatical restrictions), and the degree to which the meaning of the combination can be derived from its constituent parts.” There are six types of lexical collocations:

1. Verb + noun: pay a visit.
2. Adjective + noun: heavy rain.
3. Noun + verb: the cat cuddles.
4. Adjective + adjective: closely related.
5. Verb + adverb: announce happily.
6. Adverb + adjective: totally bewitched (Bahns, 1993, p. 57),

2. The Study

The present work investigates the use of Verb-Noun lexical collocations in the essays of the Algerian second year undergraduate EFL learners at the department of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. It is to discuss the following questions:

1. To what extent do Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri master Verb+Noun collocational language while writing essays?
2. Do Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri have more difficulty with verbs or nouns in using Verb+Noun lexical collocations?

It is hypothesised that:

1. Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students at Université des Frères Mentouri have a low level of mastery in the usage and comprehension of V+N collocations.
2. Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students at Université des Frères Mentouri have more difficulty with verbs than nouns in using Verb+Noun lexical collocations.

2.1. Data Gathering Tools

The study used three research tools: Collocation checker, Oxford Online Collocation Dictionary (O.O.C.D), and the British National Corpus (BNC).

Collocation checker is an online software, which permits the researcher to identify correct and erroneous collocations. It shares the same database of BNC. All word combinations retrieved from students' essays were analysed via this software.

The second tool is O.O.C.D, which is an online software, too. It provides all the possible collocational hits for the searched word, in addition to examples retrieved from the BNC. Its main function -in this study- is to distinguish collocations from free combinations.

The British National Corpus is the third tool. It is an online corpus that comprises 100 million words. BNC contains authentic data, and is considered as a reliable source for examining collocation. A high-frequency hit in BNC is proof of a well-combined word combination. Examples are provided in Table 01. The basic threshold in this study is 40 hits per word combination. All collocations which did not score 40 hits were considered as free combinations, instead.

2.2. Research Method

The present section describes the research method applied in the study. It contains the frequent examples, the main criteria for selecting collocations, and the method of application of the research tools.

Pattern	Correct Collocation	Erroneous Collocation	Suggestion for Improvement
V+N	attend classes do homework answer a question	stare star promote appetite do preparation pay time	watch star increase appetite make preparation spend time

Table 01: Typical V+N Collocation Type Found in this Study

The study was based on three criteria to identify acceptable collocations and erroneous ones. Table 02 illustrates these criteria.

Criterion 01	The sense of the verb is so specific that it can only combine with a small set of nouns.
Criterion 02	The verb in this sense cannot be replaced by their syntactically and semantically possible choices.
Criterion 03	Word combinations which have high frequency hits in the British National Corpus are considered as well-formed collocations (40 hits).

Table 02: Criteria for Choosing Collocation in this Study

The initial two criteria are flexible; however, the third one is fixed. In other words, the verb is considered to be 'restricted' if one or both of the restrictedness and substitutability criteria were met. Nonetheless, the combination has to score, at least, 40 hits.

A primary task was to identify erroneous collocations. The three research tools were used in the aforementioned order.

Collocation checker was used to spot wrong collocations. After a word combination is inputted, collocation checker indicates whether the combination is correct or erroneous.

However, that does not entail that all acceptable word combinations –according to collocation checker—are collocations. After identifying wrong collocations, the second task was to distinguish free combinations from collocations.

O.O.C.D was used to determine whether the verb + noun investigated collocate or not.

BNC came as a final step to ensure that word combinations labelled as 'collocations' by O.O.C.D thoroughly fulfil the third criterion, high frequency of co-occurrence. If a combination were labelled as a 'collocation' by O.O.C.D, but did not score, at least, 40 hits in BNC, it would be classified as a free combination.

The efficacy of using all of the three online tools is that they share the same database, which ensures congruence in results.

2.3. Population and Sample

The sample of the study consists of second year EFL students at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. These students have been studying English for nine years. They studied written expression for 3 sessions a week, which is an equivalent of 4.5 hours for the last 2 years. The samples analysed in the study are students' essays that were written during the second semester examinations. The reason behind the selection of examinations' essays is to ensure seriousness in production since these essays were rated by written expression teachers. The topics were mainly social ones: gifts received in the past, students' dream house, and consequences of moving out of one's native town. Such topics are common to students, and they, presumably, possess the appropriate vocabulary and ideas to elaborate on them. 66 randomly-selected essays were analysed, which is fifth of the total number. It is worthy to mention that the examples reported from students' essays were copied with all the mistakes.

2.4. Results and Discussion

The study resulted in 616 word combinations (free combinations, collocations, and idioms). In table 03, proportionate numbers of each category are represented.

Total	Free Combinations	Collocations	Idioms
616 (100%)	379 (61.53%)	237 (38.47%)	0 (0%)

Table 03: Total Number of Word Combinations in Students' Compositions

It is predictable that learners use free combinations more than collocations, and that idioms will be of a lesser use. The reason is that collocations and idioms are context-bound and of arbitrary use. What is noticeable is that in 66 essays written by the students, no idiom was identified. This could be due students' ignorance of idioms as essential in improving the quality of writing.

237 collocations were found in students' compositions. Only 38.82 % of them were correct. Table 04 illustrates the findings.

Composition	Acceptable Collocations	Unacceptable Collocations
	92 (38.82 %)	145 (61.18 %)

Table 04: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable Collocations in Students' Compositions

The high percentage of erroneous collocations shows clearly that second year EFL learners at Université des Frères Mentourilack collocational competence. Although students were given freedom to choose topics to write about, they were unsuccessful in using the appropriate V+N combinations -based on the context of writing. These results open speculation on students' ability to use the most common type of lexical collocations (V+N) if writing topics were more difficult and more science-based

Type of Deviation	Number of Occurrences
Verb	77
Noun	12
Whole Collocation	22
Inappropriate Other Deviations	29
Total	141

Table 05: Types of Deviations in Collocations

Table 05 shows the types of deviations that occur in V+N collocations together with the frequency with which each type occurs. A number of previous studies have focused mainly, or even exclusively on the verb, or more generally, on the collocator (e.g. Chi Man-lai et al. 1994; Granger 1998c; Al-Zahrani 1998; Farghal&Obiedat 1995 as cited in Nesselhauf, 2005, p. 71). Table 05 reveals that many components of

collocations may be deviant. The verb has the highest deviation frequency. The second highest deviation case is the whole collocation, which is inappropriate. This type of deviation scored 22 cases amongst 141 erroneous collocations, which makes 15.60 %. The noun deviation, which was expected to rank second, came third. This suggests that the Algerian learners do not face difficulty in nouns as much as with verbs. This is well-documented in the literature dealing with written production in EFL. This is to be explained in the light of the restricted nature of these elements. In other words, it is the verb which carries the formulaic meaning. Consequently, learners usually fall into the trap of logically selecting a verb, ignoring the fact that, in a collocation, the choice is, to a great extent, arbitrary. 77 unacceptable instances due to the verb make 54.61%. This signifies the difficulty EFL learners face in producing appropriate verbs. In a similar study, the verb deviation frequency was 389 out of 836 scored in the essays of German learners (ibid).

Type of Deviation	Number of Instances
Simple verb for simple verb	70
Simple verb for phrasal verb	03
Phrasal verb for phrasal verb	01
Phrasal verb for simple verb	03
Total	77

Table 06: Deviations Concerning the Verb: Types and Frequencies

Verb deviations come in different forms; the most prominent ones are presented in Table 06. The most frequent problem in verb deviations is that EFL learners resort to more general verbs, and combine them with a wide range of nouns. What was obvious in the present study is the lack of the employment of phrasal verbs. If phrasal verbs are compared to simple ones, it is obvious that phrasal verbs are undoubtedly more difficult for the EFL learner. This is related to their more restricted nature, i.e. they are not compositionally free. In

addition, they are different from prepositional verbs in that the latter are made up of a verb and a preposition.

Number of Inappropriate Items	12	07	06
High-frequency Deviated Verbs	Have	Receive	Give
Percentage of Deviation	19.05 %	87.5 %	37.5 %
Number of Learners	12	13	06

Table 07: Distribution of High-frequency Simple Verb Deviations over Learners

Data in Table 07 show the three verbs with the highest frequency of error: “have”, “receive”, and “give.” The verb “receive” was used 8 times in 66 essays; it was used mistakenly 7 times. The main reason is that the verb “receive” has a wide range of nouns to combine with. However, that range is limited, and other verbs are more appropriate. For example, it is more appropriate to say “get a car” instead of “receive a car”, because the verb “receive” does not collocate with ‘car’. 13 learners used it inappropriately. In other words, it was not relevant to the context, at least, 13 times if only a single error is counted. Two delexical verbs are among the high-frequency deviated simple verbs. The verb “give” was treated in the same manner of the verb “have.” It was usually inserted in the same formula.

Stretched Verb Construction	Number of Occurrences	Suggestion for Improvement
have a symbol	01	To symbolise
use discussions	01	To discuss
use speech	01	To speak
convey gratitude	01	To be grateful
result effects	01	To affect
have a research	01	To research
have a start	01	To start

Table 08: Stretched Verb Construction Instead of the Corresponding Verb

Collocational deviations do not just include a non-felicitous verb or an inappropriate noun. The category ‘whole collocation inappropriate’ includes a type of deviation where a stretched verb construction is used. What is in fact needed is a derivation of the verb used in the original collocation. As an example, the use of ‘to relax’ in lieu of ‘to give relaxation’ was spotted. The study recorded only 07 instances where a stretched verb construction was used, the equivalent of 4.96 % out of 141 erroneous collocations.

As far as the unacceptable collocations are concerned, the question which arises here is what makes these collocations erroneous. The answer is provided by Nesselhauf (2005, p. 113). She states that “in several cases, the reason why a certain stretched verb construction is inappropriate is because the construction can only express one of several meanings of the unstretched verb and/or one of the meanings of the noun.” In other words, an unstretched verb can be polysemous, and the derived stretched verb construction represents only one of its meanings. However, Algerian undergraduate EFL learners, unaware of this fact, treat the stretched verb construction as monosemous, i.e. conveying one meaning only.

Learner unawareness needs to be questioned, not only on the part of the learners, but, also, on the part of the teachers and teaching materials. Drawing a line between the semantic and pragmatic differences and stretched and unstretched verb constructions is important for EFL learners.

Noun	Number of Inappropriate Verbs	Combinations	Corrections
life	06	use the life continue life complete life create a life disturb life light life	get used to life spend life end life make life(enjoyable) affect (a person's) life lighten (our) life to develop a relationship
relationship	04	require a relationship compose relationships	form relationships foster the relationship break off relationships
habit	03	enhance the relationship lose relationships avoid habits	to not get into habits develop a habit discover habits

Table 09: Nouns Frequently Combined with Deviant Verbs

Corpus-based studies dealing with collocation usually focus on the verb since it is the element that conveys the arbitrary meaning within the combination. However, this study does not neglect the noun as an indispensable component of a V+N collocation. Table 09 investigates the high-frequency deviated nouns.

The causes of noun deviations can be traced back to several factors; one of which is that learners do not understand the meaning some nouns convey. Another reason is the misspelling or overgeneralisation of noun rules, i.e. applying the singular/plural rules for all the nouns, whether countable or uncountable. Ignorance of the whole V+N collocation is a strong reason for noun deviation as well.

Conclusion

This paper sketched the collocational status quo of the Algerian EFL learners at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. It confirmed the hypotheses that: 1) Algerian EFL learners have a low

level of mastery of Verb + Noun lexical collocations, and 2) Algerian EFL learners have more difficulty dealing with verbs than nouns in Verb+Noun lexical collocations. As a whole, it is to be concluded that considering all word combinations as collocations is incorrect. It is now admitted that identifying collocations from other word combinations is difficult due to their vague nature that falls between free combinations and idioms. The study stated that in order to be able to classify a given word combination as collocation, three criteria –or at least two- need to be met: restricted sense, restricted substitutability, and high frequency of co-occurrence. The obtained results show the indispensability of collocational competence in achieving efficiency in essay writing, therefore, language proficiency. The majority of the errors were spotted in verbs rather than nouns. The study encourages teachers and instructors to give more importance to teaching collocation as an inseparable factor to becoming a pseudo-native speaker. On the other hand, not only do learners need to be exposed to correct collocations, but, to erroneous ones, too. This is because the trial-error mechanism used by L2 learners cannot be applied to ready-made chunks.

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