

COLLOCATIONS: THE MISSING LINK IN VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AMONGST EFL LEARNERS¹

RIYAD FAYEZ HUSSEIN

Yarmouk University Irbid, Jordan

PARADIGMATIC VERSUS SYNTAGMATIC RELATIONS

Linguistic units enter into different types of relations. A word or phoneme enters into a paradigmatic relation with all units which can also occur in the same context; and it enters into syntagmatic relations with the other units of the same level with which it occurs and which constitutes its context.

In phonology, sound elements can enter into paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. For instance in the context /-ed/ (l) stands in paradigmatic relation with /b/ and at same time (l) stands in syntagmatic relation with /e/ and /d/.

Sentence constituents can enter into paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. In the phrase "green tree", the adjective "green" stands in paradigmatic relation with "big", "small" etc., whereas it stands in syntagmatic relations with the headword "tree".

Here we are not concerned with paradigmatic but rather with syntagmatic relations of linguistic units as they shed some light on the co-occurrence of lexical items. Any violation of co-occurrence rules inevitably results in an incorrect use of collocations. Such violation which is ordinarily committed by inexperienced EFL learners results in a language output which can at best be characterized as unidiomatic and at worst as unintelligible.

One may venture to state, though prematurely that EFL learners commit errors in collocating words simply because they tend to join words which are semantically compatible, but unfortunately joining words which are semantically compatible does not always produce an acceptable co-occurrence. For example the word "several" is a synonym of "many" but the co-occurrence of "several thanks" is unacceptable, whereas "many thanks" is acceptable. Likewise, in English we can say, "seized the opportunity", but not "caught the opportunity".

¹This is a revised version of paper presented at the 8th Annual TESOL Convention in Athens Greece, April 1987. The author would like to thank Dr. Kapur Ahlawat for his useful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Each of the co-occurrences "several thanks", and "caught the opportunity" would be understood the first time it was heard, because the hearer would already know the meaning of the separate parts. "Similarly, the learner himself might produce them without ever having heard them because he knows the meanings of the parts are compatible" (Wilkins 1972:127).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The major goal of this study was to assess and evaluate third-year and fourth-year students majoring in English as to their ability to collocate words correctly in English. For this purpose a 40 item test measuring students' ability in collocations was developed. Each test item was followed by four options from which students were instructed to select the correct one and circle it. (See Appendix 1).

The majority of items were followed by synonymous words which were at the same time familiar to students since the goal was not to test students' ability in vocabulary but rather in word-collocations, i.e. their ability to co-occur words properly as seen in item 26.

He was sentenced to five year's imprisonment fora signature.

- a). falsifying
- b). forging
- c). imitating
- d). copying

The answers were tabulated on computer sheets and a program was run to calculate frequencies and percentages.

The sample of the study consisted of 200 students majoring in English at Yarmouk University, Jordan. The sample comprised nearly 40% of the third and fourth year students in the English department in the second semester 1986-1987, the time when the study was undertaken. For the sake of convenience, entire classes were randomly selected but with proportionally greater selections from the fourth year. Fourth year students made up 61% of the sample and the female-male student ratio was slightly in favor of females (52%).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Students' Achievement

Generally speaking, the students' level of performance was not satisfactory considering the fact that the subjects were majoring in English and not in other subjects. Only 3879 out of 8000 (48.4%) were answered correctly. That was far below the anticipated 60%.

English major students have been described as linguistically lacking in overall language proficiency. Reference here can be made to proficiency testing conducted at Yarmouk University by Zughoul (1985). Three groups of English major graduates took the Michigan Test of English language Proficiency. The mean of their equated

scores was 67.7, which was far below the average of 82% required by American Universities for admitting undergraduate foreign students. If students are immensely lacking in overall language proficiency, one should not be surprised if their language ability was also lacking in specific areas: vocabulary, structure, pronunciation, and writing for instance.

However, the pattern of responses in individual items revealed a very interesting phenomenon. For instance in item 25, the frequency of correct responses was 174 (87%) for the collocation "Have a seat", but in item 8 it was only 10 (5%) for the collocation "to wear (her) make up". The interpretation for such a wide gap can be sought in the fact that the former is commonly used and is familiar to students while the students are barely familiar with the latter one.

It would be informative to list collocations with the highest correct frequencies and percentages and to attempt to explain why they were easier than others for students to answer correctly.

Table 1 shows that students did relatively well on collocations commonly used in everyday life. Such collocations are read and heard frequently in routine transactions such as, "have a seat" 87%, "Fine Arts" 72.5%, "alarm clock" 66.5%, "safety belts" 66%, "term paper" 58.5%. The relatively high frequency of correct responses of this category did not come as a surprise, since terms in this category are frequently used and encountered in everyday transactions.

Table 1. Collocations Ordered by Rank According to Frequencies and Percentages of Correct Responses (N=200)

Item No.	Correct Collocation	Frequency	Percentage
25	have a seat	174	87%
20	Fine Arts	145	72.5%
27	alarm clock	133	66.5%
02	safety belts	132	66%
31	income tax	125	62.5%
28	radio set	122	61%
17	term paper	117	58.5%
36	Doctor's clients	112	56%
19	senior citizens	104	52%
06	hijacked a plane	103	51.5%
34	missing link	100	50%
18	weather forecast	98	49%
37	spare parts	91	45.5%
13	second thought	86	43%
		1624/2800	58%

The frequency of correct responses in this category was 1624 out of an ideal score 2800. Obviously, only 58% of the total collocations in this category were answered correctly.

INCORRECT COLLOCATIONS DUE TO NEGATIVE TRANSFER

In foreign language learning, learners are sometimes believed to make use of the forms and patterns of the native language and transpose them on the second language. When forms are identical in the two languages and the learner uses the first language in producing the second, positive transfer occurs. The result is a correct second language form or pattern. "When they are different, using those of the native language to produce the equivalent form or pattern in the second language causes negative transfer. The resulting errors are called interference errors". (Irujo 1986:289).

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentage of incorrect collocations due to negative transfer, which can be defined as a strategy of literal translation from L1 into L2 by students.

Table 2. Collocations Ordered by Rank according to Frequency and Percentage of Incorrect Responses due to Negative Transfer (N=200)

Item No	Incorrect Collocation	Frequency	Percentage
08	put make up	145	72.5%
35	moving sand	128	64%
32	red eye	106	53%
05	death number	103	51%
33	front lights	98	49%
01	group line	88	44%
09	hot blood	78	38%
12	formulation committee	74	37%
22	bitter drinker	70	35%
		890/1800	49.4%

In Item 8 a high percentage 72.5% used "to put make up" in analogy with the expression used in Arabic. Only a meagre 5% used the correct form "to wear make up". Likewise, the incorrect responses in items 35, 32, 5, 33, 1, 9, 12, 22 can be attributed to the strategy of translation, whereby the percentage of incorrect answers in these items ranged from 64% in item 35 "moving sand", to 35% in item 22 "bitter drinker". In Arabic the terms, "quick sand", "black eye", "death toll", "head lights", "party line", "cold blood", "drafting committee" and "hard drinker", are not used; however, their equivalents in Arabic are: "moving sand", "red eye", "death number", "front lights", "group line", "hot blood", "formulation committee", and "bitter drinker" respectively.

The percentages of correct responses related to the items in Table 2 were: "quick sand" 16%, "black eye" 23%, "death toll" 14.5%, "head lights" 33.5%, "party line" 23%, "cold blood" 27.5%, "drafting committee" 23%, and "hard drinker" 19%. These low percentages indicate the overwhelming influence exerted by the translation process employed by EFL Arab Learners.

The percentage of incorrect responses due to negative transfer in Table 2 was (49.4%), the highest for any category.

It is not within the scope of this study to delineate the socio, psychological conceptualization of reality as manifested by different languages. Therefore, issues of why in a language a certain expression is used while in another a different one is used as in "cold blood" and "hot blood" are not dealt with

INCORRECT COLLOCATIONS DUE TO IDIOM STRUCTURE

Idioms which are another form of collocations are fossilized forms and tend therefore to be learned *en bloc*. The attempt to construct them by joining semantically compatible items is invariably doomed to failure. A student who has not come across the idiom "maiden voyage" may construct unacceptable parallels such as "primary voyage", "first voyage" or even "prime voyage"; likewise, he may say "to break alike", "to break similar", or "to break equal" as substitutes for the idiom "to break even".

Table 3 shows the collocation errors that cannot be attributed to negative transfer from L1, but rather to a lack of familiarity with the structure of the whole expression or idiom.

Table 3. Collocations Ordered by Rank According to Frequency and Percentage of Incorrect Responses Due to Unfamiliarity with Idiom Structure (N=200)

Item No.	Incorrect Collocation	Frequency	Percentage
10	raise doubt	130	65%
21	primary voyage	91	45.5%
04	false raid	82	41%
30	raise (their) morale	80	40%
40	to break equal	75	37.5%
15	blind meeting(s)	74	37%
03	merit of the doubt	67	33.5%
		599/1400	42.8%

The production of correct idioms presupposes prior familiarity with them either through reading or listening. As can be seen in Table 3, errors cannot be attributed to negative transfer from L1, but rather to a lack of knowledge of the structure of the whole unit or expression. In this category the percentages of incorrect responses ranged between 65% for item 10 "raise doubt" and 33.5% for item 3 "merit of the doubt".

However, the percentages of correct responses related to the items in Table 3 were as follows: "cast doubt", 15%, "maiden voyage", 15%, "mock raid", 16.5%, "boost (their) morale" 13%, "to break even" 16%, "blind dates" 23% and "benefit of the doubt" 29%.

INCORRECT COLLOCATIONS DUE TO OVERGENERALIZATION

In learning a foreign language, a typical learner constantly attempts at reducing the syntactic and lexical aspects of the language under study by adopting the phenomenon of overgeneralization as a strategy to achieve his goal. In lexicon, this is evident in students' attempts to learn the most frequent words due to their usefulness and practicality. A student thus discerns that the word "animal" is more frequent and useful than the words hyena, beaver, llama, and goat since the former encompasses the whole class of animals.

Table 4. Collocations Ordered by Rank According to Frequencies and Percentage of Incorrect Responses due to Overgeneralization (N=200)

Item No.	Incorrect Collocation	Frequency	Percentage
39	take highway 12	98	49%
29	pipe water	97	48.5%
16	cooperation government	80	40%
11	objection party	77	35%
14	bread pieces	77	35%
07	great punishment	75	35%
24	back mirror	70	35%
23	team supporters	68	34%
38	maternity section	64	34%
26	imitating a signature	60	30%
		766/2000	38.3%

Errors in Table 4 can be attributed to a strategy of overgeneralization; i.e. substituting generic term for specific terms as the latter do not lend themselves easily to the learner. Before we proceed, one would want to qualify these terms further; generic terms serve to designate the categories into which are fitted the terms of narrower scope, i.e. specific terms; thus for instance, a generic term such as "tool" will be used to create a category under which specific terms such as "pliers", "hammer", "saw", etc., are subsumed.

A major strategy generally adopted by EFL learners is the reduction of the target language to a simple system which is materialized through generalizations. As part of a reduction strategy aimed at learning economy, the learner by and large ignores acquiring and consequently using specific terms and subsumes them in generic terms. (See Jain 1974:197).

The percentage of incorrect responses due to overgeneralizations (i.e. substituting generic terms for specific terms) ranged from 49% on item 39 "take highway 12" to 30% on item 26 "imitate a signature". The incorrect responses in Table 4 can be attributed to substituting generic terms with which students are familiar for specific terms with which students are unfamiliar; the former characterized by frequency, usefulness and availability. Following are some generic terms with the specific terms subsumed under them.

	Generic	Specific
Item 29	Pipe	hose, hookah, faucet, tap, tube, line, etc.
Item 16	Cooperation	unity, union, participation, collaboration, confederation, coalition, etc.
Item 14	Pieces	parts, crumbs, shreds, fragments, etc.
Item 24	Back	rear, posterior, etc.

The percentage of correct responses related to the items in table 4 were: "take route 12" 20%, "tap water" 25%, "coalition government" 23%, "opposition party" 20%, "bread crumbs" 19%, "capital punishment" 28%, "rear mirror" 23%, "team fans" 22.5%, "maternity ward" 23.5%, and "forging a signature" 25.5%.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted to identify English major students' ability in collocating English words correctly. The overall students' performance was not satisfactory in light of the low rate of collocations answered correctly (48.4), and this is far below the rate (60%) initially set. Their relatively low achievement may be attributed to a host of factors.

1. Teachers' overemphasis of grammar in both teaching and testing at the expense of lexicon. Students' negligence of lexicon, and relegating it to a minor position is certainly a reflection of their teachers' attitudes. We tend to agree with Wilkins that "the fact is that while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (1972:111). I should like to extend this argument further and state that without the appropriate use of vocabulary, vocabulary learning is meaningless. Students should observe the restrictions on the co-occurrence of items within a sentence and heed lexical restrictions; the latter ruling out the co-occurrence of some words with others because of their incompatibility.

2. Students' insufficient reading experience is assumed to restrict their knowledge of vocabulary, synonyms, lexical restriction etc. It is known that knowledge of vocabulary is directly related to the amount of reading done by students. Idioms and collocations such as "cast doubt", "capital punishment" and "death toll" are acquired through reading and the chances are that an EFL learner cannot combine them correctly without having previously read or heard them.

3. Reduction and simplification which seem to characterize the components of the teaching situation. Jain (1974:197) reports, "In a second language teaching situation the learner alone is not engaged in this process." In fact all other components in the teaching situation – teaching materials, teaching techniques, popular school grammars, teaching and learning goals – are attempting to bring about learning economy through reduction of the second language along one dimension or another. Limited vocabulary, limited structures, abridged and simplified texts, simplified and very often oversimplified school grammar books are attempts in the same direction. Thus oversimplified generalizations seem to be built into a second language situation.

4. Students' overuse of guessing strategies in answering the test items. Such strategies do not generally arise in vacuum and are due to lack of solid knowledge of the structure of collocations.

Collocation errors by students are traceable to both L1 and other – than L1 sources; more specifically errors are due to: (a) negative transfer which was responsible for the highest percentage (49.4%) of incorrect collocations, (b) unfamiliarity with idiom structure which accounted for the second highest percentage (42.8%) of incorrect collocations, and finally (c) overgeneralization (i.e. substituting generic for specific terms), which accounted for 38.8% of the incorrect collocations.

The study concludes by making two broad suggestions, one for EFL teachers and the other for translators.

1. The correct use of collocations especially of those traceable to idiom structure cannot be under-estimated. Teachers can isolate some collocations of this category and systematically introduce them to students.

2. Finally, the implication of proper use of collocations to a theory of translation is too obvious to belabour. Since a translator's failure to produce correct collocations inevitably results in producing extracts devoid of idiomaticity, acceptability and perhaps intelligibility.

REFERENCES

- Irujo, S. 1986. "Don't put your leg in your mouth: transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language". *TESOL Quarterly* 20. 287-304
- Jain, M. 1974. "Error analysis: source, cause and significance". In Richards, J. (ed.). 1974. 189-215.
- Richards, J. (ed.). 1974. *Error analysis*. New York: Longman.
- Wilkins, D.A. 1972. *Linguistics in language teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Zughoul, M. 1985. "Formulating objectives for the English Departments in Arab universities: rationale and assessment". *Dirasaat: A Research Publication of the University of Jordan* 12/3. 32-43.

APPENDIX 1

Major Year	2'nd	3'rd	Fourth
Sex	Male	Female	
Age			

Choose the correct answer (a, b, c, or d) from the following to fill in the blank spaces:

1. A telephone which is shared by two or more subscribers is called a line.
- team
 - group
 - crowd
 - party

2. belts save people's lives in accidents.
- Security
 - Safety
 - Saving
 - Salvation
3. If you really trust him, you should give him the of the doubt.
- benefit
 - advantage
 - use
 - merit
4. The Civil Defense authorities announced that there would be a/an raid next week.
- false
 - unreal
 - mock
 - wrong
5. By the weekend the death had reached 95, and those injured were 106.
- list
 - toll
 - number
 - tax
6. One of the planes was and forced to change its destination.
- kidnapped
 - stolen
 - robbed
 - hijacked
7. Anyone convicted of manslaughter is liable to punishment in this country.
- grand
 - capital
 - great
 - big
8. She excused herself and went upstairs to her make up.
- dress
 - lay on
 - put
 - wear

9. The poor peasant was murdered in blood.
- cool
 - hot
 - warm
 - cold
10. The recent incidents doubt on the sincerity of the organization to provide services for the disabled.
- give
 - cast
 - raise
 - put
11. The party held the government responsible for the high inflation.
- objection
 - counter
 - contrary
 - opposition
12. The committee was assigned the task of writing the final agreement.
- composing
 - drafting
 - formulation
 - writing
13. If somebody changes his idea about a matter, he is said to have second
- thoughts
 - notions
 - ideas
 - concepts
14. We used to feed our pigeons bread
- pieces
 - crumbs
 - shreds
 - chips
15. The habit of arranging blind is alien to Arab Society.
- appointments
 - dates
 - meetings
 - arrangements

16. If he fails to win a majority vote in the election, the Labour Party will have to form a government with the Democrats.
- co-ordination
 - co-operation
 - coalition
 - group
17. Students are supposed to submit a paper for Eng. 215 by May, 5.
- period
 - yearly
 - term
 - semester
18. According to last night's weather, a snowstorm may hit the area soon.
- prediction
 - forecast
 - prophecy
 - expectation
19. An elderly person, especially one who is retired is called a citizen.
- senior
 - top
 - first
 - superior
20. The visual arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture are called the arts.
- nice
 - beautiful
 - pretty
 - fine
21. The first voyage of a new ship is referred to as a voyage.
- maiden
 - primary
 - first
 - prime
22. George drinks a lot. He is a drinker.
- hard
 - bitter
 - strong
 - tough

23. The team were terribly disappointed when the captain was injured.
- supporters
 - encouragers
 - advocates
 - fans
24. The driver could see the traffic police through the mirror.
- back
 - rear
 - behind
 - backward
25. Have a , please.
- chair
 - couch
 - seat
 - sofa
26. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for a signature.
- falsifying
 - forging
 - imitating
 - copying
27. My sister bought me a beautiful clock as a birthday present.
- alarm
 - ringing
 - warning
 - bell
28. The burglars ran away with a T.V. and a radio
- device
 - instrument
 - set
 - machine
29. After the current repairs of the city's water supply system, water will be safe for drinking.
- pipe
 - tap
 - faucet
 - cable

30. The airraid on the enemy the morale of the infantry troops.
- increased
 - boosted
 - raised
 - enhanced
31. The government has announced a 10% reduction on the tax to be paid by civil servants.
- revenue
 - income
 - earning
 - input
32. The boxer gave him a eye, so he was taken to hospital.
- brown
 - black
 - red
 - blue
33. Our driver stopped because the lights of the approaching cars were blinding him.
- head
 - face
 - front
 - foreward
34. The missing that could solve the current crisis in Africa is to stress the role of agricultural development.
- bond
 - connection
 - contact
 - link
35. Before they went for a stroll in the valley, they were warned to beware of the deadly sand.
- moving
 - sinking
 - quick
 - rapid
36. The doctor's had to pay three dinars for consultation.
- customer
 - client
 - patron
 - patronizer

37. We can't fix the car because we have to get some parts.
- a). auxiliary
 - b). replacement
 - c). spare
 - d). extra
38. The nurse directed them to the maternity
- a). wing
 - b). section
 - c). ward
 - d). hall
39. To get to the airport, truck drivers must take
- a). road 12
 - b). route 12
 - c). street 12
 - d). highway 12
40. You won the first round and I have won this round. We break
- a). alike
 - b). similar
 - c). equal
 - d). even