

## The Role of Collocations in the English Teaching and Learning

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### ABSTRACT

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English collocations are a considerable part of the English language. Collocations are commonly used in English speech and writing and are considered an indispensable factor in the proficiency of the learners of English. Acquiring collocations is crucial, challenging, and problematic to non-native English speakers. Nevertheless, it is noticed that collocations are still underestimated in different EFL contexts, which may hinder English learners' fluency in speaking and writing. This article aims at reviewing the literature relating to the term collocations. First, the paper presents the definitions of the term collocations. Next, the paper reviews the studies in the field of collocations. Finally, the paper states some rationales for the inclusion of collocations in English teaching and learning.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that each language has its own natural order in which words appear or are put together in sentences or utterances. This is known as collocations in English. Collocations are easy and natural to native speakers but problematic to language learners. The reason for this problem is understandable. In Swan's words, "Language of this kind is notoriously challenging for learners" (p.518). Admittedly, English learners spend years learning a vast stock of vocabulary and grammar rules, but still, their speech and writing do not belong to the so-called native-like selection. It has been observed that such collocations as "feel headache" or "feel stomachache", "drink some medicine", "a fast lunch", "problems happen", "She has yellow hair", "We are meeting many difficulties", "She smiled with me", "I very like music", "I often go to eat in a restaurant near my school" and so on are commonly used by Vietnamese learners. These would probably be understood, but they are not what would naturally be said in English. It is proved by Liu (1999), Hsu (2004), Tang (2004), Mahmoud (2005), Shitu (2015), Phoocharoensil

(2011), Shih (2000) that deficiency in knowledge of collocations and the mother tongue interference mostly account for the errors in collocations.

Since the advent of online corpora such as the British National Corpus or the Corpus of Contemporary English several decades ago, there has been an observable awakening of vocabulary research. Among the wide-ranging vocabulary-oriented research topics, collocations grasped closer attention of lexicographers, pedagogies, and researchers. According to Hoang (2021), language learning is up to the individual differences. Due to their perceived significance in the fluency and proficiency of English, many researchers have suggested that collocations should be the requisite aspect of English teaching. Good command of collocations enables learners not only to communicate effectively but also to achieve native-like fluency.

However, the importance of collocation is not taken into consideration in many contexts. In Vietnam, most teaching materials in secondary and high schools focus on teaching grammar and words in isolation, not in collocation. This leads to collocation deficiency and hindrance in fluency. As a consequence, most students cannot use good English in speaking and writing. In the light of that, this article provides the theoretical basis of collocations and some empirical studies related to collocations. Hopefully, it will raise the perception of the significance of collocations among teachers and learners of English.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Definition of Collocations*

The term "collocations" has a long history, and Firth first mentioned it in 1957 as 'a word by the company it keeps. On account of its perceived role in vocabulary mastery as well as in the learners' fluency in English, many linguists attempted to define this term from different perspectives. For example, Nation (1990) gave a morphological analysis of collocation based on its constituents in which 'col' means 'together'; '-loc-' means 'to place or put.' Meanwhile, Haliday and Hasan (1976) consider collocation as 'lexical cohesion,' which is the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of the vocabulary. This definition is different from the notions of other linguists. Celce- Murcia (2000) refers to collocation as " words come together or 'chunks that native speakers can access for comprehension or production'. Similarly, McCarthy (2008) defines collocations as 'pairs of words that occur regularly together, with a high degree of probability (p.5). Also, Colin et al. (2019) regard collocation as 'the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing.'

In conclusion, despite the fact that there are various elucidations of this notion, most scholars share the same view on the sense of collocations, which are natural co-occurrence of words. As such, the realm of collocations is the relationship between words or other co-words in a sentence, i.e., lexical collocation.

### *2.1.1 Collocation versus Colligation*

According to Firth (1957), colligation is 'the interrelation of grammatical categories in syntactical structure.' We can see that colligation concerns the grammatical patterns required by certain words or types of words while collocation focuses on lexical items. In other words, collocation is on a lexical level, while colligation is on a syntactic level.

An obvious difference is elaborated in the following examples. 'I enjoy reading novels' or 'you can enjoy fresh fruits here' refers to colligation concerning the grammatical relationship between enjoy and a gerund or a noun. Meanwhile, sentences like 'I enjoy death' or 'I enjoy committing a crime' are grammatically correct but semantically incorrect as the verb 'enjoy' does not go with these nouns, which refer to bad things.

### *2.1.2. Collocations versus Idioms*

A distinction should be made to clarify the ambiguity between collocations and idioms. As denoted in the idioms dictionary, an idiom is a phrase, saying, or a group of words with a metaphorical (not literal) meaning. An idiom's symbolic sense is quite different from the literal meaning. In the same way, O'Dell (2008) denotes 'Idioms are groups of words in a fixed order that have a meaning that cannot be guessed by knowing the meaning of the individual words' (p.6). In brief, the words and word order of an idiom is fixed. We cannot usually change the order or replace one of the words with a synonym, whereas we can guess the collocation meaning by guessing its component words' meanings. 'It rained cats and dogs is an idiom while "It rained heavily' is a collocation.

In this case, idioms can be regarded as fixed collocations, which is not discussed in this paper.

### *2.1.3. Classification of Collocations*

Collocations are classified according to many criteria. Considered the correlation between the semantic relation of the words or phrases in context, collocations are divided into strong collocations, fixed collocations, and weak collocations. In strong collocations, the words are very closely associated with each other. For instance, in the sentence 'she has auburn hair, the word auburn only collocates with words connected with hair. Fixed collocations are called idioms as mentioned above. Weak collocations consist of words that can collocate with other words. For example, broad can be used with a number of words like a broad avenue, a broad forehead, a broad smile, a broad hint, etc. ( O'Dell and McCarthy 2008, p.12)

Concerning the grammatical feature of collocations, collocations are commonly classified as follows:

- i) Adjectives and nouns, e.g., the key issue, a brief chat, mounting concern
- ii) Nouns and verbs, e.g., an opportunity arises, standards slip economy booms
- iii) Verbs and nouns, e.g., pose a problem, launch a product, withstand the impact
- iv) Nouns and nouns, e.g., a surge of anger, a sense of pride, a flock of birds, a school of fish
- vi) Verbs and expressions with prepositions, e.g., fill with sorrow, burst into tears, swell with pride
- vii) Verbs and adverbs, e.g., drive recklessly, fail miserably, whisper softly
- viii) Adverbs and adjectively, e.g., blissfully unaware, stunningly attractive, utterly ridiculous

## *2.2. An overview of studies on Collocations*

Given the growing recognition of collocations gained in recent years, there has been numerous research focusing on this issue, especially on the importance of collocations in improving four skills and the nature of errors in collocations.

In the Chinese university setting, Lien (2003) and Hsu (2010) carried out two studies that involved 85 Taiwanese college students majoring in English. Before taking three immediate reading comprehension tests, including ten short essay questions, the students participated in three kinds of language practice: vocabulary learning, collocation use, and no instruction. The study's major findings brought to light that knowledge of collocations greatly contributed to reading comprehension as the subjects' performance boosted after receiving instruction in collocations, and the subjects showed their interest in the direct teaching of collocations.

In a similar research background, Hsu and Chiu (2008) also reported positive effects of collocation competence on the speaking skills of college EFL learners in Taiwan. The study was conducted with 56 participants, who were English- significant students. The data collected from three tests asserted that mastery of collocations facilitates the subjects' speaking proficiency.

Additionally, in a context in Iran, Shooshtari and Karami (2013) and many other researchers conducted many studies on this aspect, and then they confirmed that a good command of collocations is effective in the improvement of oral proficiency.

Zhang (1993) probed into the correlativity between the excellent command of English collocations and college students' writing quality in another context in the United States. Based on the data analyzed, he concluded that knowledge of collocations is a source of proficiency in writing. Besides, the familiarity with collocations distinguishes between native and non-native as well as the good and poor writing. To further probe the effectiveness of collocation instruction over the development of the writing skill of Iranian EFL learners, Ghonsooli, Pishgaman, and

Mahjoobi (2008) pointed out that the subjects achieved considerable improvement in the writing performance owing to collocation use.

Also, in another study to examine the effects of explicit collocation instruction on EFL learners' listening comprehension, Hsu (2005) claimed that the subjects' performance in listening was the best after being instructed with collocations. Furthermore, the data collected in the questionnaire showed their preference for the collocation instruction. They also expressed their willingness to learn more about lexical collocations and their belief in the usefulness of knowledge of collocations in the progress of their skills.

Besides, a variety of research was conducted to elaborate and explain the nature of errors in collocations of non-native English learners. For example, in an investigation into errors in English collocations made by Arabic learners of English, Mahmoud (2005) pointed out that mother tongue interference accounts for the errors in collocations. The learners tend to seek an equivalent expression in their mother tongue when they do not know the proper collocation in the target language.

In the Nigeria context, to explore the collocation errors in Essay Writing of ESL college students in Nigeria, Shitu (2015) conducted an experiment involving 300 advanced students. His findings were worth spotlighting that the sources of students' collocation errors were the lack of collocation knowledge and native language influence.

Similarly, other empirical research on errors in collocations conducted by scholars such as Phoocharoensil (2011), Shih (2000), Tang (2004), Liu (1999), Hsu (2004) gave results which were in accord with the findings obtained in the Arab and Nigeria settings.

In Vietnam, there are also some noticeable studies on collocation teaching and learning. Nguyen carries out the first noteworthy study. She investigated the knowledge of English collocations of EFL Vietnamese learners. The results revealed that the participants were not familiar with the mastery of collocational knowledge; knew less than 50% of each type of collocations overall. The follow-up one was conducted by Lê (2017) to look into the perceptions of teachers about collocations and the approach to the treatment for collocations in high schools. The study results unveiled that the teachers' understanding in the field of lexical collocations is insufficient. Also, inadequate guidance on collocation is offered to students.

In brief, collocations have confirmed their importance over time. Sound theories and strong empirical evidence now pledge the need to place them in the syllabus.

### **3. SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLOCATIONS**

As proved in many research, knowledge, and collocation are a criterion of the dissimilarities between native speakers and foreign language learners. Particularly, failure to use collocations accurately for EFL learners is a major indicator of foreignness ( McCarthy, 1990; Nattinger, 1980). According to Pawley and Syder (1983), Shih (2000), Lewis (2004), ESL/EFL learners' English is not considered as ordinary, natural, or fluent without the competence in collocations. In other words, a learner needs to gain adequate knowledge of collocations and use them properly in communication so as to be fluent and native-like.

It is acknowledged that knowledge of collocations helps to improve learners' language skills, enhance learners' communicative competence, and achieve native-like fluency. Hence, knowledge of collocations is essential for EFL learners, and collocation instruction in EFL courses is required. That is to say, the mastery of collocations is imperative in the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. (Lewis, 1997, 2000; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Furthermore, evidence revealed that the deficiency in collocations is a factor attributing to EFL learners' errors, which hinder the learners' fluency. In many cases, learners tend to transfer the English collocations to the equivalent ones in their mother tongue if they do not know exactly which words occur together in the context. Therefore, collocations should be included in teaching materials, and much attention should be paid to the instruction and practice of collocations. There is no doubt that the key to fluency lies in collocations. Linguists and language researchers have suggested collocations as an effective aspect of language learning and teaching. According to McCarthy, teaching vocabulary without paying attention to collocations means providing the learners an incomplete picture. Once being carefully instructed with the knowledge and use of collocations and fully aware of their significance, the learners will certainly make considerable progress in their fluency.

### **4. SOME COMMON ERRORS IN ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS OF VIETNAMESE LEARNERS**

Collected from the author's observation, the following errors are the common ones made by many Vietnamese students in speaking and writing:

Table 1: Common errors in English collocations of Vietnamese learners

No.	INCORRECT	CORRECT
1	A fast lunch	A quick lunch
2	A fast growth	A rapid growth
3	A golden chance	A golden opportunity
4	A strong car engine	A powerful car engine
5	Catch the chance	Take the chance
6	Change my idea	Change my mind
7	Feel headache	Have headache/ feel dizzy
8	Tall mountains	High mountain
9	Do a transaction	Make a transaction
10	Do the preparation	Make the preparation
11	Drink medicine	Take medicine
12	Get knowledge	Acquire/gain knowledge
13	Go to travel	To travel or travelling
14	Deeply believe	Strongly believe
15	Live a life	Lead a life
16	Make research	Do research
17	She got a baby last month.	She had a baby last month.
18	Problems/difficulties happen/appear	Problems/ difficulties arise
19	Poisonous air	Toxic air
20	Win an opponent	Beat /defeat opponent
21	Think out an idea	Come up with an idea
22	The newest news	The latest news
23	He smiled with me.	He smiled at me.
24	He has a high spirit of responsibility.	He has a strong sense of responsibility.
25	We can buy almost everything by money.	We can buy almost everything with money.
26	We are meeting many difficulties.	We are encountering many difficulties.
27	I very like action films.	I really like action films.
28	I'm sorry I made you wait	I'm sorry I kept you waiting.
29	I go to eat with my family.	I go out for a meal or I eat out with my family.
30	I got crazy.	I went crazy.
31	I had a decision to find a part-time job.	I made a decision to find a part-time job.
32	I want to spend time for my family.	I want to spend time with my family.
33	The standard of living is increasing rapidly.	The standard of living is rising rapidly.
34	I can't say the difference between these twins.	I can't tell the difference between these twins.
35	His speech gave me a strong impression.	His speech left me a deep impression.

These errors are worth considering since they offered supporting evidence to the reviewed literature about the nature of errors. As we can see that 'medicine' does not go with 'drink'; and 'win a scholarship/the election' not 'win the opponent', or 'encounter many difficulties' rather than 'meet difficulties'. In these cases, the students would probably transfer the equivalent Vietnamese collocation to English collocation due to the unfamiliarity with the English collocations.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS

The results from many studies and research reviewed have proved that acquiring collocations is an integral part of achieving proficiency. Therefore, good teaching materials should comprise collocations and provide a variety of examples and practice in using collocations. Especially in the Vietnamese context, collocations should be included in the textbooks and teaching materials so that the teachers and students can explore and absorb the collocations and the learners can gradually improve their knowledge and language skills as collocations are not easy to master for second or foreign language learners. Above all, in the language class, teachers should convey the significance of the acquisition of collocations and give learners repeated exposure to typical collocations in spoken and written texts.

Nowadays, there are many excellent dictionaries of collocations, which are useful resources. A good case in point is *the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. Another interesting and informative source for learning collocations is *English Collocations in Use*. These materials are beneficial for enriching the knowledge of collocations, and they should be recommended to the learners of English.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Collocations are an important aspect of language acquisition. Knowledge and the use of collocations contribute to the improvement of four skills. It is widely known that fluency depends greatly on collocations. Errors in collocations indicate that many students lack the knowledge of collocations, which impacts fluency. Therefore, collocations should be included in the syllabus of schools. As English teachers, we should find out the best ways to instruct students with collocations and provide sufficient practice to acquire collocations effectively. As fluency is the goal that language learners make an effort to achieve, collocations are considered a useful tool to reach that goal. Today, Social Media is highly recommended for language learners to learn vocabulary and collocation (Nguyen, 2021; Tran, 2021; Hoang & Le, 2021), especially during the Corona Virus pandemic.



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