

## A Study of Undergraduate English Major Students' Ability in Using English Collocations

การศึกษาความสามารถของนักศึกษาปริญญาตรีสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษในการใช้คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษ

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### Abstract

The objectives of this research were 1) to investigate the problems of using English collocations by the undergraduate English major students and 2) to examine the types of errors of using English collocations by the undergraduate English major students. The sample was 46 undergraduate second-year English major students at Udon Thai Rajabhat University enrolling in Mass Media English in semester 2, academic year 2018. The instrument was a test of two sections: the first was in a sentence completion and the second was in a multiple choice. The findings revealed that 1) students' ability in using English collocations was fair with the percentage, and the standard deviation was at 4.23 and 2) there were seven types of errors and classification of the students' ability in using English collocations which *verb + noun* collocation was at the highest level (69.87).

**Keywords:** English Collocations

### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ศึกษาปัญหาการใช้คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาปริญญาตรี และ 2) ศึกษาประเภทของข้อผิดพลาดของการใช้คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษ กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยนักศึกษาปริญญาตรีสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 2 มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏอุดรธานีที่เรียนรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษในสื่อมวลชน ภาคเรียนที่ 2 ปีการศึกษา 2561 จำนวน 46 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยได้แก่แบบทดสอบคำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งประกอบไปด้วย 2 ส่วน ส่วนแรกคือการเติมคำในช่องว่าง และส่วนที่ 2 คือการเลือกตอบแบบมีตัวเลือก สถิติที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลคือ ค่าเฉลี่ย และค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ผลวิจัยพบว่า 1) ค่าเฉลี่ยของความสามารถในการใช้คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษ อยู่ที่ร้อยละ 54.65 ค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน อยู่ที่ 4.23 2) ประเภทของคำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษที่นักศึกษามีปัญหาในการใช้ทั้งหมด 7 ประเภท ซึ่งคำกริยา + คำนาม เป็นประเภทของคำปรากฏร่วมที่นักศึกษาใช้ผิดมากที่สุดเป็นอันดับ 1 คิดเป็นร้อยละ 69.87

**คำสำคัญ:** คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษ

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## Introduction

Vocabulary learning plays an important role to make good communication. Therefore, vocabulary should be at the mainstream of language teaching. Since English is very important nowadays, the ability to use English has become increasingly necessary for Thai people. English is a compulsory subject for all Thai students in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008). To promote learners' English ability for communication, the Basic Education Core Curriculum (A.D. 2008) stated that English instruction shall enhance learners' competence in using English for communication.

One of the problems of learning English for Thai students is collocations (Mongkolchai, 2008). Nevertheless, collocation teaching is traditionally restricted to the learning of definitions of a single word and its usage (Malligamas and Pongpairroj, 2005). Mother-tongue interference is a major problem in communication for Thai students. Collocation is named differently by many linguists, for example prefabs, multi-word units etc. Normally, collocations mean the co-occurrence of words that always go together in a text (Hill, 2001; Lewis, 2001; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008; Sinclair, 1991). Many teachers tend to aim at correcting grammatical mistakes, but they fail to notice those mistakes which are made due to a lack of collocational background knowledge. To be able to communicate in English; therefore, it is important that both communicative English grammar and collocations have to be taught to encourage students perform better in terms of speaking and writing abilities.

Collocations are words that always co-occur naturally. Collocations are common combinations of words that native speakers use instinctively (Lewis, 2000). English collocations have specific characteristics; hence, they can be problematic for EFL learners. It is obvious that learners continue to make collocations mistakes considering the teachers' focus on grammar rather than collocation instruction. "It is self-evident that the teaching of collocation should be a top priority in every language course", (Kuo, 2009). Even though the role of collocations plays an important part in language acquisition, very few systematic studies can be found that address this issue. One clear thing for certain is that Hatch and Brown (1995) discovered that L2 learners learn or acquire those phrases or chunk language as a unit rather than as individual words of a phrase. Compared to L1 learners, who gained their phrases or chunk language and developed the competence to reconstruct the language with phrases from exposure to the environment, L2 learners

seemed to have the same ability to obtain the same strategies as L1 learners to learn chunk language (Schmitt 2000). As a result, it is possible for L2 learners to reach native-speaker like competence if the learners are able to use the idioms fluently (Ellis, 1997).

EFL/ESL university students should have some knowledge of collocations since they started learning the English language when they were in primary school. Collocations may have been acquired automatically because they have probably met a number of simple chunks of such as *to take a bath, to do an exercise, or make progress* or more advanced or difficult ones such as *to go for good* or *to pass away*.

The importance of collocational knowledge in L2 competence is beyond dispute because it enables learners to use English more fluently and sound more native-like (Fan, 2009; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Pawley and Syder, 1983; Wray, 2002). Likewise, collocation is problematic to L2 learners who need collocational competence for effective communication. To illustrate, some students tend to use the word *\*make* understanding which is not acceptable in English because the word “understanding” can occur or collocate with *gain, enhance, full, good, profound*, and so on (Fan, 2009). A large amount of collocational knowledge is included in one’s knowledge of a language and that a native speaker’s knowledge includes an awareness of collocational patterns in the language. Thus, students have to use collocations appropriately to be accepted for standard English.

In a nutshell, the study was employed to investigate the undergraduate English major students’ ability in using English collocations. After the result was analyzed, the researcher examined the problems that caused the errors of undergraduate students’ ability in using English collocations. Then, some guidance of how to teach collocations would be elaborated to both ESL/EFL teachers as well as learners.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the problems of using English collocations by the undergraduate English major students.
2. To examine the types of errors of using English collocations by the undergraduate English major students.

## Scope of the Study

The population of this current study was the second-year undergraduate students majoring in English in Udon Thani Rajabhat University, Udon Thai province in Thailand.

## Methodology

### 1. Subjects

The subjects were 46 second-year undergraduate students in Udon Thani Rajabhat University in Udon Thani Province who studied Mass Media English in semester 2, academic year 2018.

### 2. Research Design

This current study was one-group experimental design comprising of a number of tests that investigated the undergraduate English major students' ability in using English collocations. Each test was based on Lewis (2000)'s strategy and validated by both English lecturers and a native speaker.

### 3. Research Instruments

3.1 The research instruments used to investigate the undergraduate English major students' ability in using English collocation was a test of two sections: the first was in a sentence completion and the second was in a multiple choice. Seven patterns of collocation by Lewis (2000)'s strategy applied in the study were shown as follows:

- |                            |                           |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. adjective + noun        | e.g. a difficult decision |
| 2. verb + noun             | e.g. submit a report      |
| 3. noun + noun             | e.g. a radio station      |
| 4. verb + adverb           | e.g. apologize humbly     |
| 5. adverb + adjective      | e.g. sound asleep         |
| 6. adjective + preposition | e.g. fond of              |
| 7. phrasal verb            | e.g. turn on              |

3.2 The tests were measured and validated by three specialists who are English lecturers. One of them is an English native speaker.

#### 4. Data Collection

1. The participants took the test in the second semester of the 2018 academic year.
2. The allotted time was 1 hour.
3. The participants' answers were marked and the information gained was analyzed.

#### 5. Data Analysis and Statistics

1. The data were analyzed and calculated in ways of percentage, applying the following formula:

$$\frac{S \times 100}{N}$$

S = Score of the correct answer

N = Total number of the test

2. The collocation errors were counted and categorized.

#### Findings

Research question 1: What are the problems of using English collocations by the undergraduate English major students?

Research hypothesis 1: Learners' ability in using collocations will improve after being learned from the mistakes.

The research instruments used to investigate the undergraduate English major students' ability in using English collocation was a test of two sections: the first was in a sentence completion and the second was in a multiple choice adapted from seven patterns of collocation by Lewis (2000). Three experts of English: two Thai lecturers and one native speaker approved the test before being carried out. Originally, the test was

composed of 60 items. However, it was adjusted by the experts and only 50 items were applied to test the students' ability in using English collocations.

Basic statistics, mean and standard deviation, were employed to investigate the students' ability in using English collocations. The results are presented in the table below.

**Table 1: The mean, percentage and standard deviation of the test scores**

| No. of Students | Total Score | Mean  | Percentage | S.D. |
|-----------------|-------------|-------|------------|------|
| 46              | 50          | 24.56 | 54.65      | 4.23 |

The table shown above explains the students' ability in using English collocations was fair with the mean of 24.56 while the total score was 50. The standard deviation, nonetheless, was at 4.23 indicating that the whole group of the students' ability in using collocation was close to each other. It could be implied that the test was quite difficult for the students.

Research question 2: How many types of errors are there in the study?

Research hypothesis 2: Learners will know the causes that mislead them the use of the correct collocations.

**Table 2: Types of errors and classification of the English major students' ability in using English collocations**

| Types of Errors            | Raw Score | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. verb + noun             | 5.68      | 69.87      |
| 2. adjective + noun        | 5.52      | 67.74      |
| 3. noun + noun             | 5.30      | 64.36      |
| 4. adjective + preposition | 4.94      | 59.80      |
| 5. phrasal verb            | 4.71      | 56.42      |
| 6. adverb + adjective      | 3.95      | 52.21      |
| 7. verb + adverb           | 3.40      | 45.57      |

The table 2 below shows the types of errors and the classification of the students' ability in using English collocations which were found in the study. The findings showed

the English major students' ability in using verb + noun collocation was at the highest level (69.87), followed by adjective + noun (67.74), noun + noun (64.36), adjective + preposition (59.80), phrasal verb (56.42), adverb + adjective (52.21), and verb + adverb collocation (45.57) respectively.

### Conclusion of the study

The purposes of this study were to study the ability in using English collocations by the second-year English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, and to explain the types of English collocation errors which were found in the current study. Some feasible explanations for the students' violations on English collocations are discussed.

In this current study, the analysis and findings were from the seven patterns of collocation of Lewis's classification (2000). Then, the students' answers were calculated in term of percentage and categorized. Most strategies applied in the feasible explanations for the Thai students' violations on English collocations were, for instance, the students' limited knowledge of cultural-specific collocation (Baker, 1992), the engrossing effect of the source text patterning (Baker, 1992), the informants' application of the strategy of synonymy (Farghal and Obiedat, 1995). The informants' limited knowledge of restricted collocation (Howarth, 1998; Nation, 2001), and the informants' application of the strategy of transferring first language to target language collocation (Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; James, 1998; and Huang, 2001).

The first purpose of the study was to study the ability in using English collocations by the second-year English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. The findings revealed the students' ability in using English collocations was fair with the percentage of 54.65. The standard deviation, nonetheless, was at 4.23 indicating that the whole group of the students' ability in using collocation was close to each other. It could be implied that the test was quite difficult for the students.

The other purpose was to investigate the types of errors made by Thai students. The findings showed the students' ability in using verb + noun collocation was at the highest level (69.87), followed by adjective + noun (67.74), noun + noun (64.36), adjective + preposition (59.80), phrasal verb (56.42), adverb + adjective (52.21), and verb + adverb collocation (45.57) respectively.

It could be implied that students' English abilities were enhanced after taking part in the English Collocation and Form-Focused Instruction. Prior to the instructions, most of the students were lack of grammatical patterns as well as vocabulary to expose English speaking and writing. In contrast, students' ability in using collocation and grammatical structures was enhanced after they were drilled by the English Collocation and Form-Focused Instruction. It could be because the design of the instructional phases of the instruction that offered them a chance to practice and therefore could improve their abilities to apply grammar forms and collocations accurately in the assigned tasks. To illustrate, students were asked to do a group work. In each group, one student performed as a news reporter to report breaking news in Thailand.

Hence, getting the knowledge of collocations for L2 learners becomes imperative because they establish the vocabulary of language and vocabulary is considered the heart of the language. Without heart, no language can survive. The overall skills of L2 learners can be developed with the help of collocations because collocations make the listening, speaking, writing, and reading abilities of the L2 speakers better. By getting the awareness of collocations, they will be in a position to express their thoughts in a better way, to interpret the texts and to create quality written works. The procedure of learning collocations has become comfortable with the arrival of corpora. Understanding of English collocation improves the overall language ability of the L2 speakers.

## Discussion

The findings of the current study revealed that the English major students' knowledge of English collocations is rather limited. It can be said that Thai learners lacked an awareness of the correct and natural use of English collocations. Likewise, they were probably not well-trained on vocabulary usage. Correspondingly, Lewis (1993) states that raising awareness of English collocations can be combined with the teaching and learning process to expose the learners' mental lexicon efficiently. Hence, collocation should be focused in the foreign language classrooms to enhance effective language learning.

The results of this study revealed that the students' ability in using verb + noun collocation was at the highest level (69.87%). The finding also seemed concordant with the work of Monkolchai (2008) and Boonyasquan (2005) who examined the learners' ability in



using English collocations.

Likewise, Fan (2009) investigated an exploratory study of collocational use by ESL students using a task-based approach. This study attempted, from the perspective of L2 learners, to have a deeper understanding of collocation use and some of problems involved, by adopting a task-based approach, using two highly comparable corpora based on writing of Hong Kong ESL and native-speaker British students. Result of this study indicated that the performance of Hong Kong students in collocational use might be adversely affected by their L1, L2 as well as their inadequacy in the lexis and grammar of the target language. The findings of this study suggested the need for a broader view of collocational knowledge and a pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of this aspect of L2.

Additionally, the findings disclosed that the students applied the strategy of transferring L1 to L2 collocation when deciding to select word partnership. The results were also similar to those found by Farghal and Obiedat (1995). Farghal and Obiedat identified that students had a problem of collocational deficiency and they were unaware of collocation, so they employed the strategy of transfer from their mother tongue to produce English collocation.

### Recommendations for Further Research

The followings are suggested topics for further research:

1. A study of the collocation ability of students can be examined at other levels such as the secondary school or graduate levels.
2. A comparative study of each level either English majors or non-English majors can be conducted.
3. The use of English collocation ability in productive skills (speaking and writing) can be employed to measure Thai learners' ability in using English collocations.

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