

Collocation Competence

: A Case Study of Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the collocations competence by Thai university students, classify the type of grammatical collocation and lexical collocation that is the most problematic and explore the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation. The participants of the study were 34 fourth-year English major students of the University of Phayao. The research instruments used to investigate the participants' competence of English collocation were 30 lexical collocation and 30 grammatical collocation bases on Benson et al. (2010)'s strategy and explore the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation by semi-structured interview. The results revealed that the competence in English collocations of the participants was quite low (44.46%). The findings showed that the most problematic lexical group was found in Verb + Adverb (32.35%), followed by Adjective + Noun and Verb + Noun are the same score (47.35%). For grammatical collocation, the most problematic was found in Adjective + Preposition (41.76%). This was followed by Preposition + Noun (46.18%) and Noun + Preposition (51.76%), respectively. The results also pointed out that the word retrieval strategy was

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most frequently used (58.33%), followed by the approximate translation strategy (41.67%) respectively.

Keywords: Collocation, Collocation Competence, The strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation.

Introduction

Previous research (Hsu, 2004; Lien, 2003; Liu, 1999; Gitsaki,1997; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Eldaw&Bahns,1993) revealed that EFL learners made many collocational errors in their writing and speaking task according to lack of collocational competence in English. For example, some EFL learners refer to "answer the telephone" as "receive the telephone" according to the noun "telephone" regularly collocates with the verb "receive" rather than "answer." Likewise, numerous studies on collocation in foreign language learning have been conducted by utilizing various methodologies of investigation, different types of collocations, and learner groups with different language backgrounds. The results of most studies have indicated that second language learners have problems in the production of collocations (Burgschmidt & Perkins 1985; Bahns & Eldaw 1993; Nation 2001).

Moreover, Woolard (2000) stated that an efficient way to increase awareness of collocations is to help EFL learners pay more attention to their mis-collocations in their production of the language. Lewis (2000) also emphasized that EFL learners need to know what is wrong not only what is right. Teachers can encourage learners' understanding of collocations by identifying errors in collocation use and pointing these errors out to learners. And lastly, Wang (2001) revealed that even students who are majoring in English have not enough knowledge of collocations. Also, learners gradually realize that learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words but being familiar with word combinations.

The term collocation was first introduced by Firth (1957) to describe a combination of words associated with each other and refers to a multi-word construct that occurs in a procedure of locating. Furthermore, Martynska (2004) concluded that the word collocation is derived from the Latin verb collocare, which means to arrange/place in order. Hill (2000) emphasized that collocation is a predictable mixture of the content words such as weather forecast, foot the bill.

Collocation has been defined differently by many scholars and researchers. Lewis (2000) divided collocations into three categories, Strong collocations, Weak collocations, and Medium-strength collocations. Likewise, Hill (2000) classified collocations as Unique collocations, Strong collocations, Weak collocations, and Medium-strength collocations. In addition, Benson, E. Benson, & R. Elson (2010) categorized English collocations into two major groups: grammatical and lexical.

As we know, English as a foreign language is significant in today's world of globalization. English has been a required subject of study in Thailand's secondary schools, and some primary schools too, for a decade. Students are taught to memorize the spelling and meaning of words and the grammatical rules and their exceptions. After leaving school, most of them forget what they learned. Even those college students majoring in English perhaps with some exceptions, cannot work independently after finishing their four-year course of study at college.

“Why so many Thai students cannot write good English after acquiring a working vocabulary and knowledge of grammar.”

Regarding the question of the failure above, Wattanapichet W. (1999) stated that students are taught grammar, including the parts of speech and the building of different types of sentences. They are taught many rules and

exceptions. Even after acquiring a considerable vocabulary and memorizing all the grammatical rules, they still cannot speak or write as the native speaker does. To the native ear or eye, their English is incorrect or unidiomatic or even un-English. Because there is a large area of language structure that is not covered by general grammatical rules but must be learned one by one separately. That is the area that the teacher and student alike have neglected (VI).

Therefore, collocation knowledge is important for EFL students because it can assist English lecturers to understand difficult collocations for EFL learners clearly. Referring to several researchers recommended that collocation knowledge in EFL students is necessary, and teachers can increase learners' collocational knowledge by raising EFL learners' understanding of collocations.

Although several researchers and linguists who conducted collocation-related research reveal that there are collocation problems that occur in EFL learners' English proficiency. The examples are: they have an intralingual problem, produce a negative transfer from mother tongue language, overgeneralize collocation rules, fail to make sense of idiom, and learn words through definition. (Boonyasaaquan, 2006; Martynska, 2004; Mongkolchai, 2008; Suwitchanphan and Phoocharoensil, 2008; Wang and God, 2007; Youmei and Yun, 2005). But very little researches have been conducted on collocation competence in Thai EFL learners.

Consequently, the current study intends to fill the gaps identified in previous research. In the current study, the researcher will examine the collocation competence applying on the types of collocations by Benson et al. (2010) since their two major groups are cover a wider range of collocation patterns, classify the type of grammatical collocation and lexical collocation is the most problematic and examine the strategy used in facing difficulties of collocation.

Objectives of Research

1. To investigate the collocations competence of Thai university students.
2. To classify the type of grammatical collocation and lexical collocation which is the most problematic defined by Benson et al. (2010)'s strategy.
3. To explore the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

Thirty-four fourth-year English major students participated in this study who enrolled in the first term of the academic year 2020, University of Phayao.

2. Research instruments

2.1 The research instrument used to investigate the competence of participants was a test of English collocation in the form of multiple-choice questions and semi-structured interviews. Three groups of grammatical collocation and three groups of lexical collocation based on Benson, et al (2010)'s strategy used in this study as follows;

Grammatical collocation: 1. Adjective + Preposition

2. Preposition + Noun

3. Noun + Preposition

Lexical Collocation: 1. Verb + Noun

2. Adjective + Noun

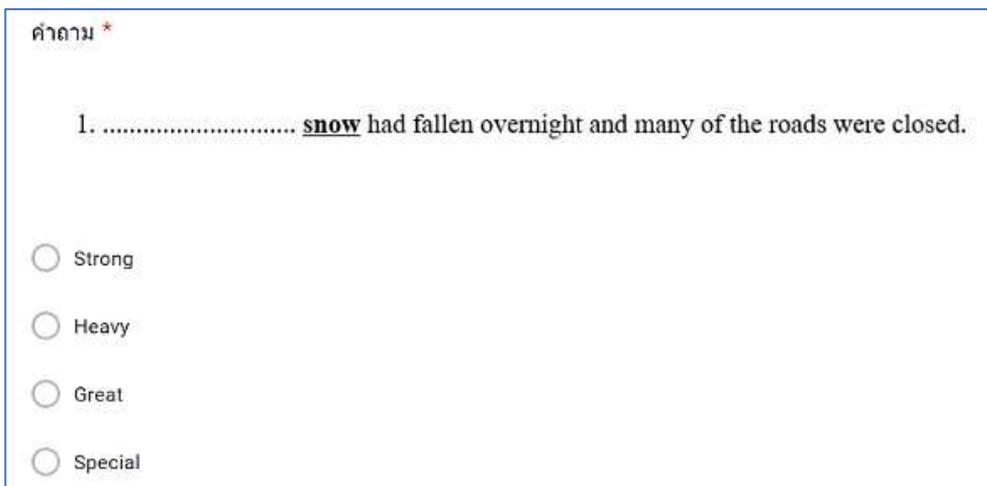
3. Verb + Adverb

2.2 The test was approved by English lecturers who are experts in the field for validity and reliability.

2.3. The test was comprised of 30 lexical collocation and 30 grammatical collocation bases on Benson, et al (2010)'s strategy. The researcher adapted examples from Oxford English Collocation Dictionary, the collocation dictionary for writing (1999), and Using Collocations for Natural English (2010). Almost Headwords in the test adapted from the Longman Corpus Network 'the Longman communication 3000 is a list of the 3000 most frequent words in both spoken and written English', based on a statistical analysis of the 390 million words contained in the Longman Corpus Network and a list of frequently occurring collocations has compiled by María Moreno Jaén University of Granada.

According to the duration of the test is the outbreak of the Corona Virus (Covid-19), the University of Phayao has changed its approach to online teaching and learning. Therefore, the researcher used the online test from google form and send the link to all participants on a specific day and time in this test. The researcher explained the detail and instruction to all of them. The participants were not allowed to consult any dictionary and each of them was given sufficient time to individually do the test questions. The test took about 1 hour to finished and sent back to the researcher. On the online test page, the participants were given 60 items. Each item comprised an English sentence with a blank. The participants were asked to choose the best answer that can make the sentence complete from multiple choices, for example;

Figure 1 Sample of collocation test online by google form



คำถาม *

1. snow had fallen overnight and many of the roads were closed.

Strong

Heavy

Great

Special

2.4 Semi-structure interview

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in six subjects with the lowest scores and six subjects with the highest scores from each group, a total of 12 subjects by telephone. The interviewee asked questions as to -What is the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation? Following this, a content analysis was perfumed based on five types of strategy use in producing collocation adapted from Liu (2000) details as follows;

2.4.1 Word retrieval.

2.4.2 Literal translation.

2.4.3 Approximate translation.

2.4.4 Use of de-lexicalized verbs.

2.4.5 Use of synonyms.

3. Data collection

3.1. The time allowed only one hour for the test.

3.2. The test was an individual task; thus, consulting books and/or online dictionaries were prohibited.

3.3. The responses of the participants were marked, and the data acquired were analyzed.

3.4. The interview was conducted with the six subjects with the lowest scores and highest scores from each group (total 12 subjects). The interviewees were asked questions about what strategy is using in facing difficulties of collocation referring to the previous test.

3.5. Content analysis based on five plausible explanations adapted from Liu (2000) was used to determine strategy producing collocation.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Data from the English collocation test had been collected. They were classified into six groups between three groups of grammatical collocation and three groups of lexical collocation based on Benson et al. (2010)'s strategy. The subject's answer sheets were collected and analyzed. The correct answers were marked.

4.2 The collocation data test was analyzed and in percentage.

4.3 The strategy producing collocation were accumulated and analyzed using five plausible explanation adapted from Liu (2000).

Results of Research

The findings will be presented based on the following research questions;

Research question 1

Do Thai university students have the competence of the collocations use?

To answer these research questions the collocational errors collected from the collocation test, regarding the collocational framework of Benson et al. (2010) percentage and frequency are used, as below table.

Table 1 The overall score separated by lexical and grammatical Collocation

	Grand Total score of test	Total correct score from 34 participants	Percentage
Lexical Collocation	1,020	432	42.35
Grammatical Collocation	1,020	475	46.57
Grand Total	2,040	907	44.46

According to table 1, the table showed the correct use of Lexical collocation and grammatical collocation by item 30 lexical tests, 30 grammatical tests, and 34 participants. Firstly, it was presented that the total score of lexical grammatical was 42.35% and 46.57% from grammatical collocation. And lastly, the total score of lexical and grammatical collocation was 44.46%.

Research question 2

Which type of grammatical collocation and lexical collocation subgroup among the one selected complied with Benson et al. (2010) is the most problematic?

Referring to the correct and incorrect collocation used of lexical collocation and grammatical collocation examined earlier, the most problematic group were also analyzed and presented in table 2, as shown below;

Table 2 The comparison of the most problematic subgroup of lexical collocation and grammatical collocation

	Lexical Collocation test			Grammatical collocation test			Grand total
	Adjective+ Noun	Verb+ Noun	Verb+ Adverb	Prepositon+ Noun	Adjective+ Preposition	Noun+ Preposition	
Total collect use score by 34	161	161	110	157	142	176	907
Everage by collocation subgroup	47.35	47.35	32.35	46.18	41.76	51.76	44.46

The table 2 demonstrated the total corrected use score of three types of lexical collocation groups and three types of grammatical groups. The finding revealed that the most problematic of the lexical group was found in Verb + Adverb, total score 110 (32.35%), followed by Adjective + Noun and Verb + Noun are 161 scores (47.35%). For grammatical collocation, the most problematic was found in Adjective + Preposition 142 scores (41.76%). This was followed by Preposition + Noun 157 scores (46.18%) and Noun + Preposition 176 scores (51.76%), respectively.

Research question 3

What is the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation?

For answer research question 3, six subjects with the lowest scores and six subjects with highest score from each group, a totally 12 subjects were interviewed, and the interview data were analyzed using content analysis to find the strategy uses when facing difficulties of collocation adapted from Liu (2000) as follows;

Table 3 Comparison of five strategies used when the participants facing with the difficulties of collocation

Types of strategy uses	Frequency	Percentage
Word retrieval.	7	58.33
Literal translation	0	-
Approximate translation.	5	41.67
Use of de-lexicalized verbs.	0	-
Use of synonym	0	-
Total	12	100

According to the interview with 12 participants, the finding revealed that word retrieval was the most frequent occurrence (58.33%), followed by an approximate translation (41.67%) respectively. However, literal translation, use of de-lexicalized verbs, and use of synonyms were not found in this present interview.

Conclusion and Discussion

The finding of the study can be summarized as follows;

1. The findings presented that the overall level of collocation competency of the participants was quite low with the total score of lexical grammatical was 42.35% and 46.57% from grammatical collocation. And lastly, the total score of lexical and grammatical collocation was 44.46%.

Referring to the findings of this research, the student's competence in English collocation is quite limited. This finding is supported by the studies conducted by Dokchandra (2019) who stated that the participants had a moderate level of collocational competence. They had difficulty learning

and using English collocations. Also, Rithy (2007) underlined that the level of ability of collocations of the participants was low. It may be possible to describe that the students lack collocational knowledge and awareness of collocations used. Likewise, they were probably a limitation of vocabulary knowledge. In addition, the result of the present study reflected the summary by Mongkolchai (2000), Wangsirisombat (2011), Mallikamas and Pongpairoj (2005), Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013, Dokchandra (2019). It seems that Thai students lack collocational skills, also they were probably a limitation of vocabulary knowledge. For the 21st-century teaching and learning approach, Educational institutions including teachers or lecturers, in addition to having students memorize many words and their meanings, including memorizing many rules of grammar and the part of speech. They still cannot speak or write as the native speaker does (Wattanapichet, W 1999). Teachers should have in mind that they will inspire students to think bigger than a word and to always look for a two- or three-word expression. This concept coincides with the viewpoint of Wattanapichet (1999) who suggested that for ear or eye native, their English is incorrect or unidiomatic or even un-English, there is a large area of language structure that is not covered by general grammatical rules, but must be learned one by one separately. That is the area that the teacher and students alike have neglected.

2. Verb + Adverb collocations may be the most problematic for lexical group and grammatical collocation, Adjective + Preposition collocation were the most problematic. As a result, it can be assumed that Verb + Adverb is the most problematic found in the lexical collocation group. It accorded with Junjoem (2017) who reported that All groups of participants had difficulty acquiring Verb + Adverb collocations. Junjoem claimed that the difficulty in acquiring Verb +

Adverb collocations might result from the fact that Verb + Adverb collocation is relatively uncommon in English texts. For grammatical collocation, Adjective + Preposition is the most problematic group. This result of this study was supported by Alotaibi (2015) who revealed that Noun + Preposition and Adjective + Preposition were the most problematic types of grammatical collocation that influence their comprehension and production of such collocations by Kuwaiti EFL students. The findings were coined with Alsulayyi (2015) who mentioned that the collocation patterns with the most grammatical errors in both classes were Noun + Preposition and Adjective + Preposition.

3. The third purpose was to explore the strategy uses in facing difficulties of collocation. According to the interview with six subjects with the lowest scores and six subjects with the highest scored from each group, a total of 12 subjects. The interviewees were asked a question about the strategy uses when they face difficulties of collocation referring to previous tests. Furthermore, a content analysis was performed based on five plausible explanations adapted from Liu (2000). It was found that word retrieval was mostly employed by the learners (58.33%) and approximate translation (41.67%). It was summarized that the strategy uses in facing the difficulties of collocations is word retrieval and approximately translation. The result of the study is like the study of Wangsirisombat (2011) that investigated Thai learners in using collocation and the strategy uses in producing collocations. Thus, leads to the instructor should pay attention to lexical proficiency and encourage learners to raise awareness among the meaning of a group of words. Moreover, Thai students should take time to collect the lexical items in the memory for long-term ability use in the collocations.

New Body of Knowledge

Collocation is a regular combination of a word that the native speakers habitually used. It may improve your language more natural and more easily understood. The researcher hopes the result of this study was useful for the learners and teachers who were interested in collocation. The findings may help teachers understand how their learners deal with lexical and grammatical collocations and what kind of difficulties they have. The result of this study may be useful for the learners to raise awareness of collocations used and reflect insight understanding about the student's competence of English collocation skill.

Suggestions for Research

1. further research should set a bigger number of participants or studying the other level such as high schools, graduated learners, or various universities.
2. The current study focused only on three groups of lexical and three groups of grammatical collocation defined by Benson's (2010)'s strategy. The further research should be studying the other six types of lexical and seven types of grammatical collocation.
3. The design of the instruments used can differ from the multiple-choice test as these can be changed to a translation form, a gap-filling test, or essay written form.

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