

## **Receptive and Productive Knowledge of English Collocations among Thai EFL High School Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This cross-sectional research investigated 314 Thai high school learners' receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations. Two different tests of receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations were used in this study, and the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Moreover, the relationship between receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations was assessed using correlational analysis. The results indicated that the collocational knowledge of Thai EFL high school participants was relatively low. Notably, the participants showed better performance on the receptive English collocational test than the productive test. The correlational analysis showed that receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations was related. This study provides insights into vocabulary acquisition and the development of receptive and productive knowledge.

**Keywords:** receptive knowledge, productive knowledge, English collocations, Thai EFL high school learners

## Introduction

Collocation is an essential aspect of vocabulary knowledge for EFL learners to communicate effectively (Hill, 2000; Scrivener, 2005). Indeed, learners have to acquire collocations rather than single words (Celce-Murcia et al., 2013). Collocations are a group of words that generally occur together and can combine predictably (Hill 2000; Lewis, 1993). For instance, it is suitable to say *strong coffee* in English, but people do not say *powerful coffee* (Benson et al., 2010).

In vocabulary acquisition, collocations can improve a learner's language use and develop fluency and native-like selection (Nation & Shin, 2008). While learners may know single words, this may not be sufficient to communicate efficiently. Learners also need to acquire collocations to use a language accurately and naturally (Deveci, 2004; Károly, 2005; Scrivener, 2005). Collocations also occur frequently in the English language, and it is therefore critical that learners acquire this knowledge as soon as possible. More than 70% of what people speak, hear, read, and write are collocations, and they are the most common of English multi-word expressions (Hill, 2000).

Nevertheless, vocabulary studies have revealed that it is difficult for EFL learners to manage collocations and produce them fluently (Benson et al., 2010; Lewis, 1997). Collocations are difficult to predict, and second language learners have to remember collocations as single items (Hill, 2000). Previous research has shown that, overall, learners have poor collocational knowledge, and their first language may interfere with collocational learning. Moreover, even though learners generally have poor collocational knowledge, their receptive knowledge of collocations is typically better than their productive knowledge of collocations (Begagić, 2014).

Some studies conducted in a Thai context have also shown that Thai English learners do not possess sufficient knowledge of collocations (Hsu & Chiu, 2008; Mallikamas & Pongpairroj, 2005; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013). Indeed, little effort has been made to investigate the acquisition process of English collocations, and teaching English collocations is often neglected in Thailand's learning and teaching programs (Dokchandra, 2019; Pisitsenakul & Khamnok, 2019; Sridhanyarat, 2018). Moreover, few studies have examined collocation knowledge in Thai EFL learners, especially at a high school level. As such, the current study investigated receptive and productive English collocational knowledge of Thai high school learners. Receptive knowledge is the ability to recognize a form-meaning link of a word, whereas productive knowledge is the ability to recall a word and produce it correctly in the context (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002; Sukying, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Understanding high school students' collocational knowledge levels will provide a platform for pedagogical practices and vocabulary knowledge development.

### **Research objectives**

The current study aimed to investigate Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations. It focused on six types of English collocations, which were adjective + noun, verb + adverb, verb + noun, preposition + noun, noun + preposition, and verb patterns. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations?

2. What is the relationship between receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations of Thai high school EFL learners?

## Literature review

### Construct of collocations

Collocations are groups of words that generally occur together (Lewis, 1993). Hill (2000) defined collocation as words that can combine predictably. For instance, the word *shrug* is typically followed by *one's shoulder*. As such, to *shrug one's shoulder* can be defined as a strong collocation. Conversely, some collocations are considered weak collocations. For example, the word *good* can be associated with many nouns (e.g., *a good doctor*, *a good way*) (Hill, 2000). Also, some combinations of words are incorrect but can be understood. For instance, *do a mistake* is likely to be understood by English speakers. However, a fluent English speaker will say *make a mistake* instead (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017).

Linguists have proposed certain criteria to classify collocations into grammatical and lexical collocations related to the word classes that are combined (Benson et al., 2010; Lewis, 2000). Grammatical collocations include a content word (a noun, a verb, or an adjective) and a function word, usually a preposition. For example, *familiar with* is an example of a grammatical collocation where *familiar* is a content word (an adjective) and *with* is a function word (a preposition). Grammatical collocations are classified into eight categories: noun + preposition, noun + to-infinitive, noun + that clause, preposition + noun, adjective + preposition, predicate adjective + to-infinitive, adjective + that clause, and verb patterns (Benson et al., 2010).

In contrast, lexical collocations are a combination of content words, nouns, verbs, and adjectives. For example, the sentence *A lion roars* is an example of lexical collocation, where *a lion* is a noun, and *roars* is a verb. Lexical collocations are separated into seven types: verb (usually transitive) + noun/pronoun/preposition phrase, verb (which means eradication/nullification) + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, qualifier + noun, adverb + adjective, and verb + adverb (Benson et al., 2010).

Vocabulary knowledge is separated into receptive and productive (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Receptive vocabulary knowledge is the ability to recognize a form-meaning link of a word, whereas productive vocabulary knowledge is the ability to recall a word and produce it correctly in the specific context (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002; Sukying, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). In this study, receptive knowledge of English collocations was assessed by the ability to choose the correct collocations among several options. In contrast, productive knowledge was measured by the ability to recall lexical items and complete them to form the collocation correctly.

### **Previous research on collocations**

Previous studies have shown that learners lack collocational knowledge when compared to vocabulary knowledge, and they face challenges when learning and using collocations (Begagić, 2014; Hill, 2000; Fan, 2009; Huang, 2001). A lack of collocational knowledge might negatively influence learners' communication and language performance (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Kamarudin et al., 2019; Nesselhauf, 2005). In the Thai context, learners also struggle with acquiring collocations and using them appropriately and, at present, the collocational knowledge of Thai

learners is considered insufficient (Phoocharoensil, 2011; Thep-Ackrapong, 2005; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013).

EFL learners may find collocations challenging because teaching in EFL contexts often focuses on learning single-word items (Hosseini & Akbarian, 2007). Furthermore, teaching methods emphasize grammar and neglect the importance of collocations in language teaching and learning (Begagić, 2014; Sridhanyarat, 2018). Native language and learning strategies, such as synonyms, can also cause collocational errors (Boonyasquan, 2006; Mongkolchai, 2008; Ying, 2009). Learners may also have insufficient exposure to collocations and not comprehend the content in the context (Tran, 2012).

Previous research has also investigated receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations. The results indicate that learners perform better on receptive collocational tasks than productive tasks (Bueraheng & Laohawiriyanon, 2014; Kamarudin et al., 2020; Shehata, 2008; Torabian et al., 2014). Like vocabulary, receptive knowledge is easier to acquire than productive knowledge because learners may recognize the form and meaning of the collocation before they can recall and use them in different contexts (Henriken, 1999; Sukying, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Although learners perform well on receptive measures, they may show poor performance on productive measures because of adopted strategies, such as guessing, L1 dependence, and using their creativity (Begagić, 2014; Bueraheng & Laohawiriyanon, 2014). Also, learners generally can produce the spelling of the base form of target words, but they often cannot produce some of the word's derivative forms and meanings (Schmitt, 1998).

To conclude, collocational knowledge is an essential aspect of EFL learning. Teaching vocabulary as a chunk is more beneficial to learners than teaching

single words, and classroom activities should focus on frequent collocations to promote collocational knowledge (Nizonkiza et al., 2013; Talakoob & Koosha, 2017; Sridhanyarat, 2018). Understanding how collocational knowledge is acquired will provide critical information for pedagogical practices.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study was investigated in a high school in northeastern Thailand with a population of 1,038 Thai EFL senior high school learners. The convenience sampling was used to select the participants, and all participants were Thai native speakers. Related to the sampling method, 536 senior high school learners voluntarily participated in this study. Nevertheless, only 314 participants could complete all two tests because of a lack of internet access on the test days. Thus, the data analysis was only based on the responses of 314 participants. The participants were Thai EFL senior high school learners in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. Before the data collection procedure, they had never been taught about English collocations.

### **Research instruments**

Two tests, a receptive and a productive collocational test, were used in this study. This study focused on three types of lexical collocations (adjective + noun, verb + adverb, verb + noun) and three kinds of grammatical collocations (preposition + noun, noun + preposition, and verb patterns). The receptive collocational test was divided into two parts and included 120 items. The productive collocational test was also divided into two parts and included 90 items.

The Ordinary National Educational Tests (O-NET) between 2017 and 2019 academic years, required to sit before high school graduation (Ministry of Education, 2008), were used to determine the target collocations in the tests (The National Institute of Educational Testing Service [NIETS], 2018, 2019, 2020). Also, the target collocations were based on the collocational classification established by Benson et al. (2010). After selecting the target collocations, the most frequent categories of English collocations in the O-NET tests of senior high school learners, which were adjective + noun, verb + adverb, verb + noun, preposition + noun, noun + preposition, and verb patterns, were included (NIETS, 2018, 2019, 2020). Then, target collocations were identified by the CEFR standard to ensure that the tests were not too difficult. Only B1 and A2 CEFR levels of the target collocations were included in the tests. This is because high school graduates are expected to know these two levels of collocations in English (Council of Europe, 2001).

To measure the receptive knowledge of English collocations, the receptive collocational test was divided into two parts. The first part was a multiple-choice format, and participants had to choose the option that they thought was the most frequent and natural collocation. This part focused on adjective + noun, verb + adverb, verb + noun, and included 60 items. An example of the item used in this test is presented below:

1. a. *do* homework (*a correct answer*)    b. *make* homework    c. *clear* homework

The second part of the receptive collocational test was yes/no format, and participants had to answer *yes* if the given collocation was correct or *no* if it was incorrect. This part focused on preposition + noun, noun + preposition, and verb patterns and included 60 items. Examples are shown below.



1. defense *with*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
|   | yes |
| X | no  |

2. *on* danger

|   |     |
|---|-----|
|   | yes |
| X | no  |

3. study *for*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| X | yes |
|   | no  |

To assess the productive knowledge of English collocations, the productive collocational test was separated into two sections. In the first part, participants were asked to translate the meaning of English collocations from Thai into English. This part included 45 items and focused on adjective + noun, verb + adverb, and verb + noun. Examples are provided below.

1. เครื่องดนตรี = \_\_\_\_\_ instrument (*musical*)2. ทำความสะอาดอย่างอ่อนโยน = clean \_\_\_\_\_ (*gently*)3. กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ = \_\_\_\_\_ a speech (*give*)

The second part of the productive collocational test was a ‘fill-in-the-blank’ format, and participants were required to choose the suitable answers to complete the given sentence. This part also included 45 items and focused on preposition + noun, noun + preposition, and verb patterns. An example is given below.

1. He died last week after a long \_\_\_\_A\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_ cancer.

A. 1. flight      2. competition      3. fight (*a correct answer*)B. 1. between      2. with (*a correct answer*)      3. in

### Data collection procedure

All the tests were piloted before the main study, and reliability analysis was conducted on the test items. Specifically, the receptive and productive collocational tests returned Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients of 0.88 and 0.94, respectively. Also, the tests’ content validity was confirmed by seven raters, who had more than ten years of

experience teaching English in Thai contexts. Based on the feedback from these raters, some items were revised for semantic and grammatical transparency.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tests were conducted online via Google forms and Microsoft teams. The participants were given 60 minutes to complete each test, with a 30-minute pause between each test to avoid fatigue. The productive knowledge test was given to participants before the receptive knowledge test to ensure that participants did not transfer knowledge from a receptive test to a productive test (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). While completing the tests, participants had to open the camera via Microsoft team meeting to ensure that they did not find the answer from other sources. Furthermore, participants were required to submit the answer via Google forms punctually as the forms were closed after 60 minutes. A summary of the data collection procedure is shown in Table 1.

*Table 1*

*Summary of the data collection procedure*

| Tests                             | Time (mins) | Items |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| The productive collocational test | 60          | 90    |
| <i>Break time</i>                 | 30          |       |
| The receptive collocational test  | 60          | 120   |

## Results

### **Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge**

Receptive and productive collocational tests were used to examine participants' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge. Descriptive statistics were collated, and the raw total test scores of two tests were converted into

percentages to analyze the data. A paired samples t-test was examined to find significant differences between receptive and productive collocational tests, and the effect size was also calculated. Table 2 shows Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge.

*Table 2*

*Thai high school EFL learners' English collocational knowledge*

| <b>Tests</b>                  | <b>Mean</b>    | <b>SD</b> | <b>T</b> | <b>Effect-size</b> |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Receptive collocational test  | 70.70 (58.91%) | 9.92      | 43.86    | 2.77               |
| Productive collocational test | 40.05 (44.50%) | 13.35     |          |                    |

*Note:*  $p < .001$

Overall, the results revealed that participants performed better on the receptive assessment of English collocations, indicated by the higher average performance than the productive assessment of English collocations. Specifically, the receptive collocational test performance (58.91%) was higher than the productive collocational test performance (44.50%)

A paired-samples t-test was used to determine if there were any significant differences between test performance on the receptive versus productive tests. As shown in Table 2, the receptive and productive collocational test performance was significantly different ( $t = 43.86, p < .001$ ), with a large effect-size ( $d = 2.77$ ). A summary of Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge is shown in Figure 1.

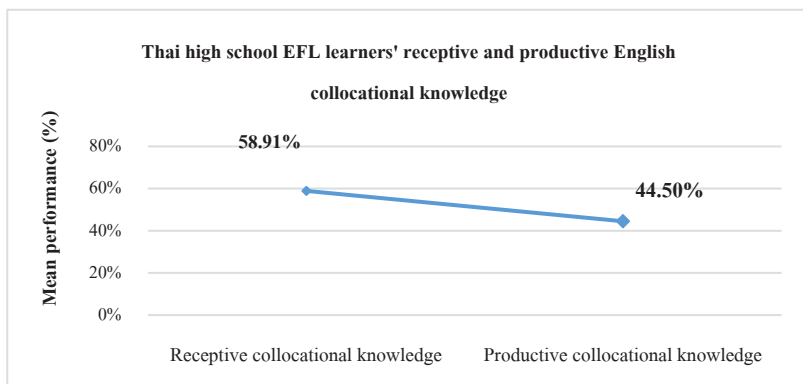


Figure 1: Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge

Overall, the results revealed that participants had a higher average performance on receptive collocational knowledge than productive English collocational knowledge. Indeed, they performed better on the receptive measure of English collocations (58.91%) than the productive measure of English collocations (44.50%).

### Relationship between receptive and productive English collocational knowledge

A correlational analysis was used to examine the relationship between different tests, including receptive and productive collocational tests. Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the strength and the direction (positive and negative) of these relationships. The correlations between receptive and productive collocational knowledge are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Correlations between receptive and productive collocational knowledge*

| <b>Productive collocational knowledge</b> |               |
|---|---------------|
| <b>Receptive collocational knowledge</b>  | <b>.581**</b> |

*Note:*  $p < .001$ , \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

This analysis revealed that receptive and productive English collocational knowledge were positively correlated, with a large effect size ( $r = .581$ ). This indicates that higher performance on the receptive collocational knowledge is related to higher performance on the productive collocational knowledge. That is, with an increase in the receptive collocational knowledge performance, the productive collocational knowledge performance also increased. In contrast, participants with lower performance on the receptive collocational test may have a lower performance on the productive collocational test.

## Discussion

### Thai high school EFL learners' receptive and productive English collocational knowledge

The results of this current study revealed that participants have relatively low performance on English collocational knowledge, including both receptive and productive knowledge. This clearly indicates that Thai EFL participants lack English collocational knowledge. The current results are consistent with previous studies showing that learners do not have sufficient collocational knowledge (Begagić, 2014; Phoocharoensil, 2011; Sridhanyarat, 2018; Thep-Ackrapong, 2005; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013). This insufficient collocational knowledge might be explained

by the vocabulary learning and teaching curricula in the Thai context. In a Thai context, vocabulary learning and teaching place an emphasis on single-word items instead of learning collocations as a whole (Hosseini & Akbarian, 2007). This means that while learners may know the meaning of a single word, they do not understand the meaning of English collocations in different contexts (Nguyen & Webb, 2016; Tran, 2012). Moreover, the teaching method in Thai contexts frequently focuses on grammar, and collocations are not given sufficient attention. Learners may also experience L1 interference and may use inappropriate learning strategies, such as synonyms, which can lead to collocational errors (Boonyasquan, 2006; Mongkolchai, 2008; Nesselhauf, 2005; Ying, 2009).

The current results also showed that participants were better on receptive measures of English collocational knowledge than on productive measures. It appears that recognizing English collocations is easier than recalling and producing English collocations (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). This suggests that the receptive ability requires fewer processing demands than the productive ability. It has been argued that productive performance requires a higher degree of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge (Hayashi & Murphy, 2011). The current results are consistent with previous studies that receptive ability is less difficult to achieve than productive performance. Indeed, receptive and productive knowledge lies on a continuum, and performance also moves from receptive competence towards productive ones as more is learned about the lexical item (Hayashi & Murphy, 2011; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021; Melka, 1997; Nation, 2013; Nontasee & Sukying, 2020; Nontasee & Sukying, 2021; Sukying, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Overall, this result suggests that EFL teachers should include their teaching activities that are designed to improve productive collocational knowledge, such as activities on conversation and essay

writing (Begagić, 2014; Bueraheng & Laohawiriyanon, 2014; Chorbwhan & McLellan, 2016).

To conclude, like vocabulary, the hierarchy of the acquisition of English collocations is complex and developmental (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). It appears that EFL learners' receptive English collocational knowledge may be larger than their productive English collocational knowledge, and receptive English collocational knowledge may act as a scaffolding mechanism for productive knowledge.

### **Relationship between receptive and productive English collocational knowledge**

The correlational analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between receptive and productive English collocational knowledge. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that receptive and productive English collocational performance is positively correlated (Detdamrongpreecha, 2014; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021; Kamarudin et al., 2020; Torabian, 2014). This suggests that when receptive English collocational knowledge increases, productive knowledge also increases. More specifically, when participants can recognize a form-meaning link of collocations (i.e., receptive performance), they are likely to recall collocations and produce them in the context appropriately (i.e., productive performance).

To summarize, the results revealed that English collocational knowledge should be promoted in a Thai context, both receptively and productively. Indeed, the current findings showed that Thai EFL participants' English collocational knowledge was relatively low, both on receptive and productive knowledge tests. Moreover, receptive and productive English collocational knowledge was found to be significantly positively correlated. Overall, vocabulary learning and teaching in a

Thai context should be focused on English collocations to ensure that learners can use the language accurately and naturally (Deveci, 2004; Károly, 2005). Teaching vocabulary as a chunk and emphasizing English collocations in a Thai context will be beneficial for Thai EFL learners.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an online data collection procedure, conducted via the Microsoft team and Google forms, was used in the current study. This may have also affected the results of the study. Also, the results of this current study may not generalize to other educational levels, and this current study was restricted to the high school level. Future studies may investigate English collocational knowledge at different education levels (e.g., primary school, junior high school, and university level). The current study measured six English knowledge types (adjective + noun, verb + adverb, verb + noun, preposition + noun, verb + preposition, and verb patterns), and future studies may investigate other types of English collocations for a more complete understanding of collocational knowledge in EFL learners. Moreover, future studies may consider longitudinal research to provide deeper insight into the developmental continuum of English collocations.



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