

More on Categorizing ESL Learners' Problems with Acquiring Collocations: Composition Errors of Japanese College Students

英語のコロケーション習得に関する問題点の再考：
日本人大学生の英作文における誤用分析

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present my ongoing research in ESL learners' performance in verb + noun collocations. In this paper, 60 Japanese college students' compositions were analyzed. Students produced both intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. Some errors were frequently caused by the lack of collocational knowledge, while other errors resulted from insufficient knowledge of morphological, lexical, grammatical, semantic or phonological components of English. I will discuss eighteen error types identified in this study and provide some thoughts about the current state of the study of second language collocations and implications for further study and language pedagogy.

Keywords: collocation, second language learning, language pedagogy

要約: 本論文の目的は、日本人英語学習者の「動詞＋名詞」のコロケーションの運用能力について研究報告を行なうことである。日本人大学生 60 人の英作文の分析を行なった結果、誤用の原因は学習者の母語である日本語の干渉によるもの (inter-lingual errors) と、学習者の母語とは関係なく現れるもの (intra-lingual errors) があった。また、コロケーションの知識不足による誤用が多く見受けられる一方、英語の形態素、語彙、文法、意味、音声に関する知識など、コロケーションの知識以外のさまざまな要因もコロケーションの誤用に関わっていることが分かった。本分析で見つかった 18 種類の誤用パターンについて考察し、コロケーションの第二言語獲得に関する最近の研究に触れながら、今後の研究課題や英語教育への示唆を提示する。

キーワード: コロケーション、第二言語学習、英語教育

Introduction

A collocation is two or more words that tend to occur together (Lewis, 2000: 73). For example, native speakers of English say *strong wind* and *heavy rain*, but it is not normal to say **heavy wind* or **strong rain*. Native speakers do not normally say **yellow wine* instead of *white wine* even though yellow is as good a description of the color of white wine. Although such combinations of words as **heavy wind*, **strong rain* and **yellow wine* follow syntactic rules, native speakers simply do not produce them in speech or

wine follow syntactic rules, native speakers simply do not produce them in speech or writing (Pawley & Syder, 1983, Oxford, 2002). The ability to combine words to produce natural-sounding speech is part of a native speaker's collocational knowledge.

The acquisition of collocations is one of the most difficult parts of second language learning. Native speakers develop an unconscious sense of the appropriateness of collocations through repeated exposure. In contrast, L2 learners have much more limited experience, so that their attempts may be perceived as non-nativelike, unidiomatic or unintentionally amusing, leading to communication disruptions. Various problems with acquiring collocations have been reported, including transfer of L1 (Gabry-Biskup 1992), over-and-under-extension of collocational restrictions (Benson 1985, Yorio 1989, Granger 1998), analogy (Howarth 1998), blending (Peters 1983), phonological similarity (Howarth 1998), and so forth.

Miyakoshi (2009) attempted to formulate a rudimental categorization of Japanese learners' problems in acquiring English Verb + Noun collocations. The procedure was an open-ended fill-in-the-blank test where the object noun of the collocation was presented and the verb had to be produced by 66 Japanese learners of English. The subjects were asked to think of combinations which would match the Japanese translation provided above the English sentence, and produce as many combinations as they could think of. The following eleven error types were identified:

(1) Paraphrases of Verbs

The commonest strategy was paraphrasing. L2 learners used semantically related verbs, such as ...if it matches/ fits your convenience and It means no difference to me..., or used verbs whose meaning was roughly the meaning of the whole target collocation, such as Please watch/ look an eye on children... and Donna suicided her life.... There were a few instances in which L2 learners made up creative expressions, such as Mary's sweater froze my eyes and Maria killed her voice.... Some of the paraphrases did not successfully achieve the intended meaning, such as Please lose an eye on the children... and Maria taught her voice to tell me the secret.

- a. Please copy this photo right away. (*develop this photo*)
- b. Please screw the eggs. (*beat the eggs*)
- c. You can judge a man's character by the company he contacts. (*by the company he keeps*)
- d. Mail me a line when you have time. (*drop me a line*)

(2) Misuse of Light Verbs

L2 learners often used light verbs, extremely frequent verbs, such as *take*, *make*, *do*, *be*, *get*, and *have*, which can freely combine with a variety of nouns. L2 learners probably hoped that their collocations would sound native-like by using such frequent verbs, although their attempts were not really successful.

- a. The former champion had an attempt to come back after a year's retirement but failed. (*made an attempt*)
- b. You sometimes have to get a risk to succeed in an undertaking. (*take/run a risk*)
- c. To take her justice, Julie is a better cook than Helen. (*to do her justice*)
- d. Shall we do the carpet here? (*lay the carpet*)

(3) L1 Transfer

L2 learners produced some inter-lingual errors in which they created collocations that were obviously literal translations of Japanese collocations involving verbs with the same or quite similar meanings. The collocations that originated from Japanese figurative expressions such as *me-ni tomaru* (literally 'to stop one's eyes' which means *to catch one's eye*) and *iki-o korosu* (literally 'to kill one's breath' which means *to hold one's breath*) were nearly unintelligible by native speakers.

- a. She met an accident on her way home from school.
(*had an accident* < *jiko-ni au*, literal translation in English: 'meet an accident')
- b. All the students sent Prof. Sumitomo a big hand when his final lecture ended.
(*gave a big hand* < *hakushu-o okuru* 'send applause')
- c. Seeing the horrible scene of the accident, he blued color.
(*changed/lost color* < *aozameru* 'turn blue')
- d. Please foam the eggs. (*beat the eggs* < *tamago-o awadateru* 'make-foam the eggs')

(4) Morphological Synonymy

There were a few instances in which L2 learners produced morphological synonymy of nouns.

- a. We need to gather more information before we act action. (*take action*)
- b. To judge her justice, Julie is a better cook than Helen. (*to do her justice*)
- c. The fish negotiations progressed rapid progress last week. (*made rapid progress*)
- d. You can judge a man's company by the company he accompanies. (*by the company he keeps*)

(5) Unnecessary Articles and Particles

Unnecessary articles, possessive pronouns, and particles were occasionally inserted between verbs and nouns.

- a. Skinheads, who killed an Armenian, stood the trial in Moscow on July 26, 2004. (*stood trial*)
- b. Farmers use the latest technology to grow up rice. (*grow rice*)

(6) Blending Two Collocations

There were a few collocations in which L2 learners mixed the target collocation with another collocation which involves one or more common word with the target collocation and usually has quite similar meaning.

- a. None your own business. (*'None of your business' + 'Mind your own business'*)
- b. May I help a favor of you? (*'May I help you?' + 'May I ask a favor of you?'*)
- c. May I do a favor of you? (*'Would you do me a favor?' + 'May I ask a favor of you?'*)
- d. Donna committed her life when she was 20 years old. (*'commit suicide' + 'take her life'*)

(7) Intransitive vs. Transitive Distinctions

Low-intermediate learners used intransitive verbs with similar semantic content. Errors were particularly common when verbs denoted existence of an element or occurrence of an event.

- a. At eight Stella existed a class in General Biology. (*had a class*)
- b. This year we have happened a cut in case-management funding of \$150,000. (*had a cut*)

(8) Creating Collocations from Compound Nouns

Learners decomposed compound nouns and created collocations from the parts.

- a. On September 13th we eyed witness to an event that should serve as a turning point in the history of the Middle East. (*'eye-witness', bore witness*)
- b. This year we have budget a cut in case-management funding of \$150,000. (*'budget-cut', had a cut*)

(9) Mistakes with Actors

There were a few errors in which learners misunderstood the roles of the actors in a sentence. For example, the subject of 'take an order' is a person who collects orders from customers (i.e., waiters, sellers, businessmen); the subject is not the person who places the order. Similarly, the Subject of *deliver a newspaper* is the person who visits houses to distribute newspapers to his/her customers, and not the person who subscribes to the newspaper.

- a. Have you ever taken an order online with your credit card? (*placed an order*)
- b. Over 20% of the students are delivering a newspaper each day. (*taking a newspaper*)

(10) Phonological Errors

Phonological similarity may also lead to errors in collocations. For example, a learner may produce the erroneous form *That is why rising questions about what happened on Haifa Street is very important*, because of the phonological similarity between the word *rising* and *raising*. Here are a few more examples.

- a. Mary's dream is to find a school for young children and to develop a curriculum that blends art and science. (*found a school*)
- b. In Manila seaweed farmers failed victim to a strong peso. (*fell victim*)

(11) Use of Words Other than Verbs

Low-intermediate learners sometimes used words other than verbs. They commonly used prepositions but also used adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and auxiliary verbs.

- a. I often up a kite when I was a child. (*flew a kite*)
- b. She often off class. (*cuts/skips class*)
- c. I'll come to your place if it good your convenience. (*met your convenience*)
- d. To average her justice, Julie is a better cook than Helen. (*to do her justice*)

Collocational Errors in Learners' Compositions

The results of my previous study conform to Gabry-Biskup (1992), Benson (1985), Yorio (1989), Granger (1998), Howarth (1998), and Peters (1983) in spite of the differences in the learners' L1 backgrounds (European languages, including French, German and Polish vs. Japanese). It is possible that ESL learners from any language background may face similar problems when they acquire English Verb + Noun collocations.

A major limitation of my study, however, is that the focus was restricted to the types of verbs learners produce. This is due to the experimental design that the learners were asked to produce only verbs while the object nouns of the collocation were presented in the questionnaire sheet. If a more naturalistic setting is provided, learners can produce other types of errors, such as errors with the object noun and the subject nouns, misuses of prepositions, errors with the word order, and so on.

In order to understand Japanese learners' problems more fully, I analyzed Verb + Noun collocations in free compositions written by Japanese students. The subjects were 60 Japanese college students from two universities (30 students from Tama University, School of Global Studies; and 30 students from another private university in Kanagawa prefecture, Japan). The students wrote a process paragraph/essay on a topic of their choice as part of in-class exercises. All the compositions were returned to the students after their mistakes were corrected by the instructor (the author of this paper).

The following eighteen error types were identified: (1) Paraphrases of verbs; (2) Misuse of light verbs; (3) L1 transfer; (4) Morphological synonymy; (5) Unnecessary articles and particles; (6) Blending two collocations; (7) Intransitive vs. transitive distinctions; (8) Creating collocations from compound nouns; (9) Mistakes with actors; (10) Phonological errors; (11) Use of words other than verbs; (12) Paraphrases of object nouns; (13) Use of words other than nouns for object nouns; (14) Omitting required prepositions; (15) Omitting Object Nouns; (16) Switching verbs and object or oblique nouns; (17) Active vs. passive distinctions; and (18) Adding unnecessary verbs or auxiliary verbs. Error types (1)-(11) were observed in the previous study. Error

types (12)-(18) are new types found in this analysis. Examples of these are provided below:

(12) Paraphrases of Object Nouns

Paraphrases were observed as one of the common strategies. L2 learners often used semantically related noun, such as *Next, you should be check the place, get a map, and reserve a shop* (*reserve a table at a restaurant*), and *Children can do assimilation of knowledge better than adults* (*absorb knowledge*). Some of the paraphrases can be inter-lingual errors in which learners translated Japanese Noun + Verb combinations into English. For example, the learner produced *reserve a shop* by translating the corresponding Japanese collocation *mise-o yoyaku-suru* (reserve a shop).

(13) Use of Words Other than Nouns for Object Nouns

Learners used words other than nouns. They often used semantically related verbs and prepositional phrases. The commonest errors, produced even by advanced learners, were to insert unnecessary propositions before object nouns. This type of errors was particularly common when the verbs are allowed to take prepositional phrases in other contexts. For instance, verb *share* can take a prepositional phrase *with + person* (*share a room with my sister*) but cannot take a prepositional phrase *with + location* (**share with a room*). Some of the errors may be intra-lingual errors in which learners translated corresponding Japanese phrases word for word into English. For instance, *vacuum on the floor* appears to be literal translation of Japanese phrase *yukano-ue-o souji-suru* (*clean up on the floor*).

- a. Then maybe you can become friendly with teacher and maybe can get good evaluate. (*get a good evaluation*)
- b. That actor who is my favorite star is dating with her like that. (*dating her*)
- c. Second, we put on pizza sauce in the dough, and put on vegetable, and put on cheese. (*put pizza sauce on the dough, put vegetable, put cheese on it*)
- d. I want to share with a room with a assigned by university. (*share a room with a person assigned by the university*)
- e. I am going to introduce to great plan. (*introduce a great plan to you*)
- f. It's easy to catch a fire if you try to that. (*try that*)
- g. Third, vacuum on the floor. (*vacuum the floor*)

(14) Omitting Required Prepositions

Some learners conversely omitted required prepositions. All levels of learners committed this type of errors.

- a. Also, participate internship. (*participate in internships*)
- b. Your mother always think your health. (*think about your health*)
- c. Toyama is blessed great nature. (*blessed with great nature*)
- d. Not only rely medical treatment, but we need to think about our health and life style independently. (*rely on medical treatment*)

(15) Omitting Object Nouns

There were a few errors in which learners, especially low-intermediate learners, omitted object nouns. This type of error was common when the learners used verbs with reciprocal meanings where two or more people engaged in activities.

- a. If you meet Ø, greeting to him/her. (*meet him/her*)
- b. She doesn't want to kiss Ø. (*kiss him*)

(16) Switching Verbs and Object or Oblique Nouns

Learners switched the order of verbs and object nouns or oblique nouns. This type of error was not very common. Only a few errors were observed.

- a. Do you think necessary to tax increase? (*increase tax*)
- b. They sunflower made drink. (*they made drink out of sunflowers*)

(17) Active vs. Passive Distinctions

Low-intermediate learners used active voice when passive voice is required or vice versa. Errors were common when verbs denote states rather than actions.

- a. Old castle situated this place long long ago. (*an old castle was situated in this place*)
- b. Your take s positive attitude, teacher is felt good impression. (*feels good impression*)

(18) Adding Unnecessary Verbs or Auxiliary Verbs

Unnecessary verbs or auxiliary verbs, such as *be* and *do*, were added before verbs. This error type was common when verbs were preceded by auxiliary verbs, such as *should*, *do*, and *don't have to*. It is possible that learners memorized *should be*, *do not have*, and *don't have to do* as single chunks while they were using them over and over. As a result, learners can commit errors when these auxiliary verbs do not precede verbs *be*, *have*, or *do* respectively.

- a. Next, you should be check the place, get a map, and reserve a shop.
(*you should check the place*)
- b. Japanese people do not have dislike dialects.
(*do not dislike dialects / do not have dialect which they dislike*)
- c. Because I don't have to do keep the rules if I am living alone.
(*don't have to keep the rules*)

Discussion and Conclusion

These results show trends in L2 learners' performance in V + NP collocations. L2 learners produce various types of intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. Eighteen types of errors were found in this study. Errors were observed in verbs and object nouns as well as other lexical categories, including auxiliary verbs, prepositions, articles and particles. Errors also existed at the phrasal and clausal levels, such as mistakes with actors, switching verbs and object nouns, and errors in active-passive distinctions. Moreover, some errors resulted from non-lexical or non-syntactic factors, such as phonological similarities and blending two collocations with similar meanings.

This study provides some implications about learning and teaching collocations. First, this study has shown that the learners' L1 plays a role in creating transfer of forms from L1 to L2. They made mistakes by translating word for word from their native Japanese. Gabry-Biskup (1992) suggests that risk-taking by learners may result in interference errors. Explicit instruction which directs learners' focused attention to differences between L1 and L2 in the formation of collocations would be effective for avoiding inter-lingual errors.

Second, the use of paraphrases of verbs and object nouns indicates that learners are not aware of the fact that words which have similar meanings may have different

collocational restrictions and that they can only co-occur in specific combinations. The instruction would help learners understand overlapping collocational restrictions between words with similar meanings and to correct their mistaken over- or under-extensions. Third, some errors resulted not simply from the lack of collocational knowledge, but from insufficient knowledge of morphological, lexical, grammatical, semantic or phonological components of the target language. Materials for learning collocations, especially the ones for intermediate learners, would be considerably improved when they are combined with instruction of grammatical rules as well as developing vocabulary and teaching pronunciation.

In this paper, I have examined second language production of Verb + NP collocations by Japanese learners of English. In the future, I will extend my research to effective instruction of collocations, development of classroom materials, cross-linguistic differences in learners' collocations, and psychological and socio-cultural issues of collocations. All these research projects are very important to deepen teachers' understanding of learners' performance and to improve instructional methods. I will continue my efforts in contributing to and improving the field of language acquisition both for academic professionals and language learners.

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Received on Nov. 30, 2011.