The investigation of collocational errors in university students’ writing majoring in English
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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the collocational errors in EFL college learners' writing. A total of 68 sophomores University students in Hamadan city participated in this study. Thirty-eight assignments and thirty-eight in-class practice were collected and analyzed for collocational errors. The unacceptable grammatical and lexical collocational errors were identified based on the modified version originally proposed by Benson, et al. (1986) and Chen (2002). The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations, the British National Corpus, was employed to analyze the participants' collocational errors and to provide suggestions for correction. Moreover, a questionnaire was administered to explore the participants' perceptions of difficulty in collocations. The results of the questionnaire showed that the participants' perceptions of collocational types were different from the collocational error types the participants made in their writing samples. Ignorance of rule restrictions was the major source of collocational errors. EFL students make collocational errors in their writing because of the interference of their mother tongue, lack of the collocational concept, the interlingual or intra lingual transfer, paraphrase and their shortage of their collocational knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Previous studies (Channell, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Gitsaki, 1997; Liu, 1999a; Lien, 2003; Hsu, 2004) indicated that EFL learners made many collocational errors in their writing and speaking for lack of collocational competence in English. For example, many EFL learners refer to "take medicine" as "eat medicine" since the noun "medicine" regularly collocates with the verb "eat" rather than "take." Thus, several researchers proposed that teacher would increase EFL learners' collocational knowledge through raising EFL learners' awareness of collocations. If teachers can find out learners' collocational errors and point out these errors to learners, they can raise learners' awareness of collocations. Thus, studying learners' mis-collocations will be important because it can help teachers understand difficult collocations for EFL learners and realize what should be emphasized in classes for teachers to raise EFL learners' awareness of collocations. So in this research we are going to answer these questions:

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1) What collocational error types are made by the participants?
2) What are the participants' perceptions of difficulty in collocations?
3) What are sources of collocational errors?

2. Definition of the term
As far as the term "collocation" is concerned, previous studies seem to fall into two broad categories. Most researchers defined collocations from the aspect of partnership or co-occurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified collocations from the aspect of discourse. In the present study, the definition of collocations focuses on co-occurrence of words, and the classification of collocations is based on the categories of collocations proposed by Benson et al (1986b). They classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Collocations are further divided into seven types, and grammatical collocations are divided into eight types.

3. The Notion of "Collocations"
McIntosh (1961) and Palmer (1976) classified collocations on the basis of the restrictions on words. Palmer (1981), furthermore, proposed three kinds of collocational restrictions as follows:
(1) Some restrictions are based fully on the meaning of the item such as green cow
(2) Some restrictions are based on range-a word may be used with a whole set of words that have some semantic features in common. This explains the unlikeness of the pretty boy (pretty being used with words denoting females).
(3) Some are collocational in the strictest sense, involving neither meaning nor range, as addled with eggs and Brains (p.79).

4. Types of collocations

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compounds</td>
<td>completely frozen; no variations at all are possible</td>
<td>1. aptitude test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idioms</td>
<td>Relatively frozen expressions</td>
<td>1. to have one's back to the wall</td>
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5. Sources of Making Collocational Errors

Recent experimental studies have pointed out several factors that may influence EFL learners' performance in making correct collocations. The researchers discovered that the causes of collocational errors are related to analogy, overgeneralization, paraphrase, the L1 interference, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and shortage of collocational knowledge. (Channell, 1981; Bahas, 1993; Bahns & Eldaws, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Liu, 1999a, 1999b). In terms of the L1 interference, Bahns (1993)

The sources of collocational errors

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<th>intralingual transfer:</th>
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<td>False concepts hypothesized</td>
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| Approximation            |

With regard to one of sources of making collocational error—the shortage of learners' collocational competence, Howarth (1998) compared the writing corpora of EFL learners and native English speakers. He reported that both learners have insufficient knowledge of collocations in general. When compared with native English speakers, EFL learners made a lower percentage of conventional collocations but a higher percentage of deviant combinations (e.g. perform a project, write a table, pay effort, and reach finding). Other researchers such as Bahns and Eldaw (1993) and Farghal and Obiedat (1995) also found that L2 learners had a big gap between their receptive and productive knowledge of collocations.

6. Conclusion

To conclude the above research, EFL students make collocational errors in their writing because of the interference of their mother tongue, lack of the collocational concept, the interlingual or intralingual transfer, paraphrase and their shortage of their collocational knowledge. These can be the possible reasons for explaining why EFL students frequently make unacceptable collocations in their writing. Pedagogical suggestions are provided for EFL/ESL teachers and learners including learners’ awareness of collocations, reinforcing learners’ of
collocations, increasing learners’ collocational competence in L2, and avoiding literal translation. Raising learners’ awareness of collocations helps learners more efficiently and effectively, and produces collocations more accurately in their English writings. In terms of reinforcing students’ concept of collocations, EFL teachers need to recommend dictionaries to their students which consist of common collocations, corpora and concordancing programs. The study showed that most of the learners have not sufficient collocational competence, either grammatical or lexical, in L2. The findings suggest that EFL teachers should maximize the amount of appropriate quality input available to the students. As for one of the sources of collocational errors – negative transfer, implies that EFL/ESL teachers need to remind their students that literal translation should be used with great cautious. Therefore, teachers may try to encourage learners to seek parallels equivalents in L1 and L2.

References