

The investigation of collocation errors in writing of EFL learners' at Bac Lieu University

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the collocation errors in EFL sophomores' writing to obtain information about the common collocation errors they use. The design of this corpus is quantitative research which employed document analysis as the instrument to collect data. A total 20 EFL sophomores at Bac Lieu University participated in this study and the samples were obtained through two writings production to check the collocational errors that students made. The data was collected and identified base on the types of collocational errors occurrence in the two writings. The result reveals that students have a tendency of using two common collocation errors the Quantifier + Noun (14.8%), Verb + Preposition (14.8%) more than other types and they are also the top types in which students made errors. Based on the pattern identified, the study suggested some pedagogical implications for lecturers as well as students in using and learning collocations.

Keywords: collocation, collocation errors, sophomore students

1. INTRODUCTION

It is truly that collocation plays a crucial role in language learning because it helps English learners express their idea fluently and proficiency in the target language. As Runcie & Moira [1, p.137], "collocation runs through the whole of English language. No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocations". Meanwhile, knowing how to combine words to make other special meaning are essential for language learners.

In Bac Lieu University context, based on the writer's experience in teaching Writing, the writer found that students just understood the meaning of the words but did not know which word it would go with. Thus, they frequently made collocation errors in their writing. Additionally, in high school, students are taught with Grammar Translation methods which focus on translating from L1 into L2, paying little attention to phrases which create natural speech. Meanwhile, students suppose that

there exists a one-to-one correspondence between L1 and L2 lexical items. As the result, they are in the habit of expressing their ideas, their viewpoints or communicate with foreign people by translate from their native language to English. Apart from that, cultural differences are reflected in the vocabulary of every language. For instance, when they learn a new word "hair", they should also learn to say "blonde hair" not "yellow hair" For native speakers, "yellow hair" sounds strange and incorrect. In addition, language learners also have problems in selecting and combining the lexical items in native-like production and usage because they are unaware of collocational patterns and restrictions. McCarthy stated that learners often make inappropriate or unacceptable collocations [2]. This is definitely the case for EFL Bac Lieu University learners. Therefore, this study is conducted to investigate some common collocation errors that Bac Lieu University sophomores make in

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their writing. This study aims to answer the following question:

What are the common collocation errors that EFL sophomores make in their writing?

The results of this research hope to help instructors and EFL students at Bac Lieu University acquire clearly what types of collocation should be paid more attention to when they use collocations in teaching and learning.

2. BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH COLLOCATION ERRORS

2.1. Definition of collocations

There have been different definitions of collocations. Longman applied linguistic dictionary defines collocations as the way in which words are used regularly. Lewis [3, p.27] treated collocation phenomenon is observable when certain words keep company with other words in natural text with greater than random frequently. McCarthy & O'Dell [4, p.20] stated: "a collocation is a pair or group of words that are often used together" and "they are difficult to guess." Tanihardjo [5, p.39] asserted: "No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocations, collocation is a combination of words which do not co- occur freely and randomly."

2.2. Types of collocations

Collocations are classified into many different ways. In this study, the researcher classified collocations into grammatical collocations, lexical collocations and parts of speech.

2.2.1. Grammatical collocations

A grammatical collocation is generally a dominant open class words (Noun, Adjective or Verb) and a Preposition or particular structural pattern such as an infinitive or a clause. The eight major types of grammatical collocations are:

Noun + Preposition (contact with, demand for, fear of)

Noun + to + Infinitive (a problem to do)

Noun + that clause (agreement that...)

Preposition + Noun (in advance)

Adjective + Preposition (surprised by, skill at)

Adjective + to + Infinitive (easy to do)

Adjective + that clause (afraid that...)

A verb combining in different ways with a preposition, an infinitive with to, an infinitive without to, a verb form ending in -in, that clause (thank for, keep for,...)

2.2.2. Lexical collocations

A lexical collocation does not normally contain infinitive or clauses. It typically consists of open class words (Noun, Adjective, Verb or Adverb). In terms of syntactic characteristics, Lewis classifies lexical collocations into six major types [3]:

Adjective + Noun (big brother, high standard)

Noun + Noun (head teacher, case study, child care)

Verb + Noun (make an impression, set an alarm)

Verb + Adverb (gently on, live dangerously, and smiled proudly)

Adverb + Adjective (worried about, deeply unhappy)

Noun + Verb (companies merged, pose a problem).

2.2.3. Parts of speech

According to Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English, collocations are categorized into fourteen types as follow [6].

Adjective + Noun (bright/ harsh/ intense/ strong light)

Quantifier + Noun (a beam/ ray of light)

Verb + Noun (cast/ emit/ give/ provide/ shed light)

Noun + Verb (light gleams/ glows/ shines)

Noun + Noun (a light source)

Preposition + Noun (by the light of the moon)

Noun + Preposition (debate on, confusion about, knowledge of)

Adverb + Verb (quite agree, strongly support)

Verb + Verb (be free to choose)

Verb + Preposition (choose between two things)

Verb + Adjective (make/keep/declare something safe)

Adverb + Adjective (perfectly/not entirely, deeply affected)

Adjective + Preposition (talented in, admire for, agree on)

Adjective + Verb + Adjective + Noun + Preposition

2.3. The role of collocation in learning

Collocations play an important role in L2 learning process; particularly they enhance improvement of learners' oral communication, listening comprehension, and reading speed [3, 7, 8]. Collocations help learners to use phrases in a right way and improve their vocabulary. Additionally, collocations are not only a necessary element of language but also an outstanding feature that makes language specific and correct. Therefore, to learn English well learners should attach much importance to collocation [9]. Thanks to collocations, people do not have to face challenges about the uses of confusing words and they can use more phrases in a right way.

2.4. Definition of errors

Making error is considered a part of language learning. It will usually occur when people try to speak and write the target language. Many researchers [10, 11] stated errors are usually defined as systematic deviations from the rules of a target language. They may occur because learners lack knowledge of the target language, and are systematic in which they occur repeatedly since the learners do not recognize them and an error cannot be self-corrected.

2.5. Previous studies on collocation errors

There have been many studies focusing on students' ability in using English collocations in Vietnam. In Nguyen conducted a research to find out some common mistakes students faced in their learning collocations [11]. There were 59

second-year English majors participated in this study. The data were collected by give students a collocation test and a questionnaire. The test was adapted from the basis of the classification of Lewis [3]. There were seven passages; each of which represented one type of collocations. Each passage had 3 blanks with 4 items provided and the questionnaire consisted of 20 statements. The findings demonstrated students faced a problem on learning and using English collocations. The two most difficult types of collocations were Adverb + Adjective and Noun + Noun with the highest percentage, 75.3% and 74.1% respectively. Next, they were Adjective + Preposition (60%) and Verb + Adverb (59%). Lastly, Verb + Preposition, Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun were at the lowest proportions with the percentage of 56.9%, 55.9% and 53.6% respectively. Hence, Adverb + Adjective and Noun + Noun were the most two collocation types that trouble English majors the most. Nguyen [12] carried out a study with 76 third- year English majors at Can Tho University. The data were collected by using a collocation test and questionnaires for students. The results demonstrated that the advanced Vietnamese students faced a problem on learning and using English collocations. Based on the score of the correct answers, the researcher concluded that the two highest levels of the informants' ability in using English collocations were 52.63% (Verb + Adverb) and 52.3% (Verb + Noun), and the two lowest levels were 48.8% (Noun + Noun) and 44.08% (Adverb + Adjective). Thus, this result indicates that the most typical collocation mistakes were Noun + Noun and Adverb + Adjective.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design and data collection

The study adopts the quantitative research which was conducted to investigate some common collocation errors that English major sophomores at Bac Lieu University made in their writing.

The samples included a total of 20 EFL

sophomores. The students age ranged from 20 to 21, fifteen of the participants were females and five were males, who have been studying English for approximately ten years in high school and have nearly two years studying English as their major at Bac Lieu University.

The instruments used in this study were two essays written by 20 EFL students. They were written in different topics. With the first writing test, students were asked to write an essay on the topic "Write about an embarrassment experience you have had when you were a child". With the second writing test, students were asked to write an essay on the topic "How did you spend your last holiday? There are many reasons for choosing two topics. Firstly, the first writing write about a personal matter. Hence, it is assumed to be motivating and thought-provoking. In the second writing, the topic is familiar to the students and induces them to produce lots of collocations.

In the first day teacher came to class and asked students to write an essay with the first topic as mention above and they had 45 minutes to write an essay of not more than 250 words. The next day, the researcher asked them to write the second topic mention above and they also had 45 minutes to write an essay of not more than 250 words. Besides, they were not allowed to use dictionaries.

Finally, a total of 40 pieces of essays were collected and all the collocation errors that appeared in EFL sophomores' writings were systematical analyzed to check collocation errors. The number of collocation errors were converted and identified by using SPSS program 18.0.

3.2. Data analysis

The data for this study were obtained from the analysis of the part of speech collocation errors in EFL sophomore writings. A total number of 40 essays written by 20 samples on two topics were collected and the paper were checked to find out the errors. Then, the students' collocation

errors were analyzed and classified according to fourteen types of collocation in Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English [6]. Collocations are categorized into fourteen types as follow:

Adjective + Noun

Quantifier + Noun

Verb + Noun

Noun + Verb

Noun + Noun

Preposition + Noun

Noun + Preposition

Adverb + Verb

Verb + Verb

Verb + Preposition

Verb + Adjective

Adverb + Adjective

Adjective + Preposition

Adjective + Verb + Adjective + Noun + Preposition

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

Dealing with the research question, "What are the common collocation errors that EFL sophomores make in their writing?" the researcher had been collected the data then analyzed and identified the students' writings that contained collocation errors from 40 samples. The researcher has calculated 257 errors of 14 types in total. Among 257 collocation errors there were 144 collocation errors in the first writing topic. The other writing topic had 113 collocation errors. The result of the written tests on types of collocation errors can be seen in the following table: table 1 reflected the number of types of collocation errors and figure 1 showed the percentage of types of collocation errors in the two writings production:

Table 1. The number of types of collocation errors in two writings production

Essay	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	Total errors
1	1		1						1						3
2											2				2
3			1						3	1					5
4		2	1					2		2	2		1		10
5	1									3					4
6		3				1	1		3		1				9
7	1	1					1			3		1	1		8
8		1						1	4	1					7
9	1		1					1	2	2	2		1		10
10	1		1							1	1				4
11		4		4		3			1	2	1				15
12		3			2	1	1		2	1					10
13			3		2	2	1		3		1		1		13
14				2		2		1							5
15	1	2	1			1	1	1	3	1			1		12
16						1				2					3
17			1			1	1								3
18		1		3		2	1				4				11
19					1	2			2			1			6
20		2	1							1					4
21			1					2	1	1					5
22	1	4	1	1		2		1	1		1	1			13
23	1					3									4
24		1				2			3	2					8
25	3	2	1												6
26	2		1	1					2	1					7
27	1	1	4								1				7
28	1			1		1				5					8
29		1				1									2
30		3	2		1	1				3					10
31	1	2	1							4					8
32			1						1						2
33	1	1	1	2		1	1				1				8
34		2	1			1									4
35			1												1
36	2		1					2		2					7
37				1		1						1			3
38		1		1		1							1		4
39	1														1
40	1	1			2				1						5
Total errors	21	38	27	16	8	30	8	11	33	38	17	4	6	0	257

Note: T (type)

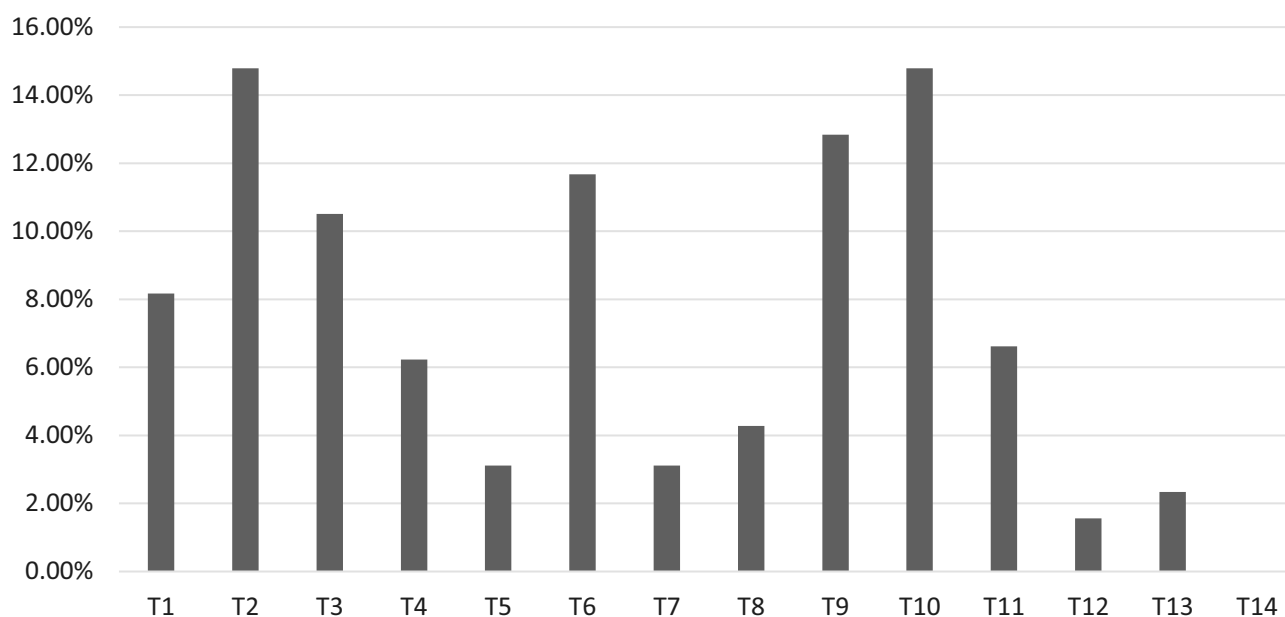


Figure 1. Percentage of types of collocation error in two writings production

As can be seen in this figure, it is noticeable that almost all writing samples students made collocation errors with type 2 (Quantifier + Noun) and Type 10 (Verb + Preposition), with 38 writings made constituted 14.8%, therefore, ranked the first from the list. Type 9 (Verb + Verb), used by 30 samples which equaled 12.9%. Type 6 (Preposition + Noun) 30 writings made errors constituted 11.7%. Type 1 (Adjective + Noun) occurred in 21 writing productions which represented 8.2 %, type 11 (Verb + Adjective) with 6.6 %. Meanwhile, (Adjective + Noun) and (Verb + Adjective) made less errors than (Verb + Preposition) and (Verb + Verb). The other three types of collocations made least errors type 8 (Adverb + Verb) with 11 samples made errors which equaled 3.5%, type 13 (Adjective + Preposition) 6 writings have errors which is 2%, type 12 (Adverb + Adjective) four writings have errors which equals 1.2%. Besides, the participants did not make any errors in type 14 (Adjective + Verb + Adjective + Noun + Preposition + Noun). It does not reflect students are good at this kind of combination because they cannot combine such a high type of collocation.

4.2. Discussion

The findings showed that there were three typical collocation errors in writing that EFL

sophomores at Bac Lieu University made. First, the combination of Quantifier and Noun were considered as the highest groups of collocation errors the researchers found in forty essays. For example, in writing sample 9 “many a lot of famous places” should be changed into “many famous places”, and in writing production 13 Verb and Preposition were also combined incorrectly such as “solution of problem” should be changed to “solution to problem”. Second, some errors in combining between Verb and Noun were found in many writing productions. Additionally, some students find it is difficult to combine Verb and Noun. For instance, “have a reservation” should be changed into “make a reservation” (writing production 30), and Verb + Verb in writing 13 “decided travelling” should be changed into “decided to travel”. In the combination of Preposition and Noun, some writings made errors as “in the noon” should be changed into “at noon” (writing production 14).

5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTION

5.1. Conclusion

This study represents the investigation of collocational errors made by Bac Lieu University sophomore'. It is obvious the common types of collocation errors which committed by students are collocation errors in Quantifier + Noun and

Verb + Preposition, with 38 writings made constituted 14.8% and Verb + Verb used by 30 samples which equaled 12.9%. It could be concluded that Quantifier + Noun and Verb + Preposition and Verb + Verb are more problematic than Preposition + Noun and Adjective + Noun. In contrast, other collocational errors like Verb + Adjective; Adverb + Adjective; Adjective + Preposition; Adjective + Verb + Adjective + Noun+ Preposition make less errors in combination.

5.2. Pedagogical suggestion

Base on the conclusion above, there are some suggestions given by the researcher as follow:

For lecturers, lecturers need to emphasize on the use of correct collocation so that the students' writing will be more natural and accurate. To do this, lecturers may introduce some common types of collocations associated with the new vocabulary to the learners. As Woolard [8] suggested that collocations are best taught to learners when they learn new

words as learners need to know how to use the new vocabulary with other words in context, not in isolations. Apart from that, instructors should raise awareness in their students of transferring English from their mother tongue does not always result in acceptable production of English collocations. As the result, lecturers should encourage their students to use collocation dictionaries as Oxford Collocation Dictionary for Students to reinforce students' concept of collocations.

For students, they need to be aware of using collocation because they cannot combine words freely in Writing. To do this, learners have encouraged to use collocational dictionaries to learn how words work together. These dictionaries are available online and they can be download by each student. Students should use these dictionaries in Writing. Furthermore, learners should access the native corpora as a way to compare their writing with the native thereby learners can use collocations in their writing effectively.

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Khảo sát lỗi về việc sắp xếp các ngữ cố định ở môn Viết của sinh viên chuyên ngữ tại Đại học Bạc Liêu

Ngô Ngọc Thảo

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo này nghiên cứu các lỗi về trật tự sắp xếp của những ngữ cố định mà sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ hai gặp phải ở môn Viết để tìm ra đâu là những lỗi về trật tự sắp xếp các ngữ cố định phổ biến mà sinh viên thường mắc phải. Nghiên cứu này dùng phương pháp định tính để thu thập dữ liệu. Tổng cộng có 20 sinh viên năm thứ hai tham gia và các mẫu được lấy thông qua hai bài viết. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sinh viên mắc nhiều lỗi về các ngữ cố định trong bài viết của mình là "Từ định lượng + danh từ" và "động từ + giới từ" là hai loại ngữ cố định mà sinh viên mắc lỗi nhiều nhất với tỷ lệ là 14.8%. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu được, đề ra những kiến nghị cho người dạy về các ngữ cố định cho sinh viên.

Keywords: ngữ cố định, lỗi ngữ cố định, sinh viên năm thứ hai

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