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## EFL Learners' Command of English Collocation

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### Abstract

Indonesian learners when learning English as a foreign language often make mistakes in collocation. The collocation mistakes may be due to the ignorance of collocation and the transfer of collocation of their first language, Indonesian to English. The aim of the present study is to find out the command of English collocation by the Third Year students of SMA Bhayangkari 1, Medan. Before teaching them English collocation, a pretest on collocation is administered and after the teaching of collocation a post-test on collocation is administered in order to find out if their command of collocation increases. Findings show that there is an increase of score 4.425. The average score of the students' command of collocation is 65.78 out of 100 as the maximum score. It can be concluded that the students' mastery of collocation is still moderate. Therefore an extensive teaching of collocation for the students is still needed.

**Key Words:** collocation, English collocation, collocation lessons, pretest, post-test

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In learning a foreign language a learner is exposed to a set of new language rules: phonological rules (how words are pronounced, how syllables are stressed, when a sentence intonation should be raised and lowered), syntactic rules (how words are arranged to form grammatically correct phrases, clauses and sentences) and discourse/text rules (how one sentence is semantically and logically related to another or how the present paragraph is orderly related to the previous paragraph).

Learning grammar of a foreign language like English usually causes learners to face problems. They find the grammar of the language they are learning different from the grammar of their native language.

Another aspect of any language including English which often causes problems to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is collocation. Collocation is not similar to grammar. For some language learners the term 'collocation' is still foreign. The idea of collocation was first claimed by Firth in 1957 as cited in (Duan & Qin, 2012). The term "collocation" was derived from Latin which means "place together" (Nordquist, 2019). A collocation according to Nordquist (2019) is "a familiar grouping of words, especially words that habitually appear together and thereby convey meaning by association".

When a learner makes a grammatical mistake, the linguistic form the learner has created is called wrong as when *He write a letter for his parents yesterday* is written instead of *He wrote a letter for his parents yesterday* where the wrong form of verb has been used in the first sentence.

Unlike grammar, collocation deals with choice of an appropriate word which can collocate (habitually go together with) with another word. If a learner says *I will follow an exam tomorrow*, the sentence is grammatical. There is no a grammatical mistake in it and its meaning is also clear. However since in native speaker's English an "examination" is never "followed" but "taken", so the sentence is not natural or it is different from the sentence a native speaker of English normally makes i.e. *I will take an examination tomorrow* or *I will sit for an examination tomorrow*. Or as McCarthy & O'Dell say "Sometimes, a pair of words may not be absolutely wrong, and people will understand what is meant, but it may not be the natural, normal collocation. Again if someone

says *I did a few mistakes in the exam*, it will be understood, but a fluent speaker of English would probably say *I made a few mistakes in the exam*". As cited in Duan & Qin (2012) Robins defines collocation as the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences.

Wrong collocation is generally made by EFL learners especially when they are firstly exposed to the structure of the foreign language. The present author has found out a number of wrong collocations made by Indonesian learners (Lubis, 2013) where most of the wrong collocations were made due to the influence or the transfer of structure of collocation in their native language, Indonesian.

The present study also deals with how Indonesian learners of English understand and master collocation in English. The study was focused on students of Senior High School in Medan, Indonesia and the main aims of the study were:

1. To find out the degree of the students' mastery of English collocation before a collocation workshop was carried out;
2. To find out if the degree of the students' mastery of collocation increased after the implementation of the workshop and
3. To find out the average students' mastery of English collocation.

### 1.1 Nature of Collocation

Syntactic constructions like phrases and sentences or fixed expressions like idioms and metaphors are built by arranging words as building a wall by arranging building blocks orderly. One block should go well with another block in size, form and colour in order to construct a strong and good-looking wall of blocks. This is an analogy to how one word should fit with another to form an acceptable collocation (acceptable combination of words). For example, both *handsome* and *beautiful* cognitively mean similar i.e. 'good-looking' but *handsome* goes with *man*, not with *woman* and in contrast *beautiful* goes with *woman*, never with *man*. Why? In English that is the habit of its native speakers to combine *handsome* with *man* and *beautiful* with *woman*.

A native speaker of English would say "I woke up *early* yesterday" or "The train runs *fast*" but an Indonesian native speaker would say "Saya bangun *cepat* kemarin" and "Kereta Api itu melaju *cepat*" where he uses the same word *cepat* for both situation. He does not make a distinction as the English native speaker does. Also the word *lambat* 'slowly' in Indonesian may collocate with *bergerak* 'move' and *bangun* 'get up' (Imran et al., 2009) where in English *move* collocates with *slowly* but *get up* does not collocate with *slowly* but with *late*.

### 1.2 Collocation is a Matter of Habit not Rules

Why do EFL learners often make collocational mistakes? One possible answer to that question is that collocation is not similar to grammar. In grammar learners know what is correct and what is wrong. In collocation since it is the habit of the native speakers in using their native language so EFL learners may get confused. Why does *ride* cannot collocate with *car* and why does *drive* cannot go with *bike*? In English dictionaries *ride* and *drive* are synonyms, i.e. they have the same meaning. Why medicine is *taken* not *eaten* or *drunk* as food and drink? What is wrong if one says *I have eaten/drunk my flu medicine*. Grammar does not tell anything about that. But to the ears of a native speaker of English it sounds odd and unusual. Thus as cited in Duan & Qin (2012) collocation is defined by Robins as the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences.

For Indonesian EFL learners only *to ride a bike* not *to drive a bike* or only *to take medicine* not *to eat* or *drink medicine* which is collocationally acceptable make them confused since in Indonesian the word *mengendarai* as the equivalent of *to ride* and *to drive* can collocate with all kinds of vehicle (bike, motorcycle, bus, except horse). And *obat* as the equivalent of *medicine* can

be either *makan* (eaten) or *minum* (drunk) depending on the substance of the medicine. If the medicine is solid it is eaten (*makan*) and if its liquid it is drunk (*minum*). In English *kind* collocates with *to*, *angry* collocates with *with*, and *afraid* collocates with *of* while in Indonesian *baik*, *marah* and *takut* collocate with the same preposition *kepada*. (*baik kepada*, *marah kepada*, *takut kepada*).

What makes Indonesian EFL learners more confused is that why do *handsome* which is equivalent to *tampan* and *beautiful* which is equivalent to *cantik* have the same "collocational habit"? In English *handsome* collocates with *man* and *beautiful* collocates with *woman* and the same is true that in Indonesian *tampan* collocates with *laki-laki* (man) and *cantik* collocates with *perempuan* (woman). Another example of collocation of Indonesian which is similar to English is *upah pekerja* (worker's wage) and *gaji pegawai* (employee's salary) (Lubis, 2013). In Indonesian it is neither common to say *gaji pekerja* (worker's salary) nor it is usual to say *upah pegawai* (employee's wage) as in English *worker's salary* and *employee's wage* are not usual either. So in some respects collocation may be similar or different in two languages.

### 1.3 Collocation in English

In English collocation is generally distinguished into (1) lexical collocation and (2) grammatical collocation. By lexical collocation, it means the habitual combination of one content word with another content word like *fast* (adj.) *food* (n), *university* (n) *student* (n), *highly* (adv) *competitive* (adj.) while grammatical collocation is a combination of a verb and an adverb like *carry out*, *consist of*, *depend on*, *take care of*, *pay attention to*, *different from*, *based on*, and *kind to*.

## 2. METHODS

The collocation workshop was attended by 49 Senior High School students of Grade 3. They were derived from two classes: 28 students were from *Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam* (Physical Sciences Class) and 21 students from *Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* (Social Sciences Class). They were students of SMA Bhayangkari 1 Medan located at Jalan Wahid Hasyim.

The procedures of running the workshop were as follows.

1. First, the students attended a general speech on English in order to motivate them to learn English more seriously and to inform them about the purpose of the workshop.
2. Second, to administer a pretest on English collocation in order to see their knowledge and command of collocation.
3. Third, the implementation of the workshop by explaining firstly what collocation is, the importance of mastering collocation, by learning how one word collocates with another word in English texts, and by drilling them about the correct use of collocation, and
4. To administer a post-test in order to find out the degree of increase of the students mastery of collocation in English.

The collocation pretest consisted of 50 items. One item contained 2 core. The content of the test was moderate, i.e. using general words with which the students were familiar. The post-test also consisted of 50 items. The content of the post-test was in general different from that of the pretest but it still used words which were familiar with the students.

The workshop lasted for two days where one session consisted of 100 minutes. One day consisted of three sessions. Thus the total time spent for the workshop is 600 minutes.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The mean score of the pretest result of the Science Class was 70 (the range of score was 0 – 100) and the mean score of the Social Sciences Class was 57.14. There was a slight difference of score between the Science Class and the Social Sciences Class that is 12.86.

The result of the post-test of the Science Class was 74.85 and the result of the post-test of the Social Sciences Class was 61.14.

When the result of the pretest and the post-test of Science Class is compared it indicates that the post-test score is higher 4.85 (0.64%) than the score of the pretest. And when the score of the pretest and the post-test of Social Sciences Class is compared it was found out that the post-test score is higher 4 (0.65%) than that of the pretest. Thus we can conclude that the students' mastery of collocation in English increased after the application of the workshop even though the increase is not significant. It can be also concluded that the average mastery of English collocation of the students is 65.78.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As learning collocation is not similar to the way grammar is learnt while the contribution of acceptable collocation to make a native-like English is so significant paying great attention to collocation can not be neglected. A sentence which is correct according to grammar may not be acceptable in terms of collocation.

The mean score of the students obtained after taking a pretest and post-test on collocation indicates that their mastery of collocation is not satisfactory. If the highest score is set up to be 100, 65.78 is still a moderate score even though it is not poor. Therefore it is recommended that the students' command of English collocation needs improvement.

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