

Observing Grammatical Collocation in Students' Writings

Beaty Novita Sari¹, Ingatan Gulö²

beatynovita@gmail.com¹, atan@teknokrat.ac.id²

Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia^{1,2}

Abstract

This research aimed to describe the types of grammatical collocation errors produced by English learners in their writings. The writers used a qualitative method for collecting and analyzing the data. The data were taken from first-year students' essays. Collocations from fifteen essays were collected and analyzed. As the standard for the collocations being analyzed, *The Oxford Collocation Dictionary* and *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* were used by the writers. The results showed that the students made grammatical collocation errors in their writings, with a total of 35 grammatical collocations. It was also found that verb-noun collocation is the most dominant error made, which indicated that the students faced difficulties in using proper verbs in collocations.

Keywords: Collocation error, grammatical collocation, students' writings

Introduction

Learning English means that learners must learn how native speakers use the language. For this objective, studies on English as a foreign language have been conducted covering areas such as phonetics (Dosia and Rido, 2017), writing (Kuswoyo and Susardi, 2017), and structure (Afrianto, 2017). However, learners of English in Indonesia still have weaknesses in understanding and using English grammatical rules. The way they apply the rules is influenced by their first language. According to Mahmoud, EFL learners depend on interlingual strategies to facilitate learning (Mahmoud, 2005). For instance, they tend to produce the phrase *different with* instead of *different from* since in Bahasa Indonesia the phrase means *berbeda dengan*. This shows that the way the learners use English is influenced by their mother tongue or primary language. Because in Bahasa Indonesia the word *with* means *dengan*, the learners tend to produce the phrase *different with* in their speaking or writing.

According to Benson *et al.* (1997), collocation refers to words that combine with certain other words or grammatical constructions. This means that there are words that have their pair to be put together to create natural semantic units. It can be stated that a meaningful language can also be obtained through correctly made collocation. Besides, collocation is an important part of English since it makes the language produced naturally and meaningfully.

Darvishi (2011: 52) claims that collocation has become one of the primary concerns in EFL teaching and learning for decades. Several studies (Darvishi, 2011; Salehuddin *et al.*, 2011, Gulö and Rahmawelly, 2018) indicate that EFL/ESL learners make collocation errors in their writings due to lacking relevant knowledge and interference from their primary languages. Besides, Bahardoust and Moeini (2012) state that the lack of knowledge of collocating words properly can affect second language acquisition and make problems in the learning process.

Theory and Method

Since collocation is a part of word combination which plays an important role in students' English proficiency, this study elaborates students' essays at the university level.

The writers chose fifteen essays written by first-year students majoring in English Literature at a private university in Lampung province, Indonesia. The language used as the medium of instruction in teaching and learning process here is English. In the second half of their first year of study, the students write one-page essays on randomly chosen topics and are expected to apply English grammatical rules they have already learned.

The essays were asked from the teacher and then copied. The copies were then examined by reading them comprehensively. While reading, structurally incorrect sentences or phrases were underlined. Those underlined parts were further processed by making sure that they contain grammatical errors. The findings were then classified according to the theory proposed by Benson *et al.* (1997).

According to the above theory, grammatical collocations are divided into eight major types namely:

1. Noun + Preposition
2. Noun + To Infinitive
3. Noun + That Clause
4. Adjective + Preposition
5. Adjective + To Infinitive
6. Adjective + That Clause
7. Verb + Preposition
8. Preposition + Noun

Having been classified, the findings were reexamined and elaborated by the writers to finalize and report the results. The results are presented in forms of tables showing incorrect collocations on the left and correct ones on the right columns. Correct and incorrect collocations were made distinct by using *The Oxford Collocation Dictionary* and *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English*.

Findings and Discussion

From eight types of grammatical collocations stated by Benson *et al.* (1997), there are only five errors found in the data collected and analyzed. Those five collocations are Noun + Preposition, Noun + To Infinitive, Preposition + Noun, Adjective + Preposition, and Verb Preposition. They are presented here below one by one.

1. Noun + Preposition Collocation

About this type, there are four collocation errors found in the students' writings. From the sentences below in datum (1), it can be seen that the student made an error in collocating the noun *relationship* and the preposition *of*. In this case, the preposition should be changed into *between* in order to be natural in English. There is no collocation between the noun *relationship* and preposition *of* listed in *The Oxford Collocation Dictionary* and *The BBI Dictionary of English*.

Table 1 Noun + Preposition

No.	Incorrect Collocation	Correct Collocation
1	Thus making the <i>relationship of</i> parents and children stronger.	Thus making the <i>relationship between</i> parents and children stronger.
2	Marriage at a young age has a fairly positive <i>impact for</i> the development of child itself.	Marriage at a young age has a fairly positive <i>impact on</i> the development of child itself.

3	My mother always feel <i>pity on</i> people who need help	My mother always feel <i>pity for</i> people who need help
4	They always have <i>comments of</i> your clothes	They always have <i>comments about</i> your clothes

In datum (2) the student made an error in collocating the noun *impact* with the preposition *for*. However, this combination does not occur in English. The preposition should be changed into *on* so it will become *impact on*. It can be seen from the error that the student tends to employ their first language element of Bahasa Indonesia and transfer it into English. The meaning of *for* in Bahasa Indonesia is *untuk*, and thus the collocation meaning becomes *pengaruh untuk* which is the same as the meaning of *impact on*.

Further, datum (3) shows that the student made an error in collocating the noun *pity* with the preposition *on*. In this case, it would be unnatural combination since there is no collocation of noun *pity* with the preposition *on* listed in the dictionaries that the writers used as standard. Moreover, it is found that the student is influenced by his first language Bahasa Indonesia and transferred the language grammatical rules into English. In Indonesian, the phrase needed here is *kasihan pada* in which *pada* is also equivalent to *on* in English. Here, the noun *pity* should be followed by the preposition *for* to collocate.

Datum (4) shows that the student made an error in collocating the noun *comment* with the preposition *of*. However, it is not correct since the noun *comment* does not collocate with the preposition *of*. According to *The Oxford Collocation Dictionary*, the preposition should be changed into *about* to make the collocation acceptable. Therefore, the right collocation is *comments about*.

Those data show that the students used incorrect prepositions to combine with the nouns. These incorrect uses of prepositions are due to the generalization of Indonesian grammatical rules to those of English.

2. Noun + To Infinitive Collocation

There are only two collocation errors made by the students related to Noun + To Infinitive Collocation. Table 2 shows the two errors found. In datum (5) the student should put preposition *to* before the word *digesting*, which should be replaced by *digest*, to make the phrase correct. This is because the *-ing* form of the verb cannot be used after the noun. Therefore, the correct phrase must be *trouble to digest*. If preposition *to* that connects the phrase is absent, it would be grammatically incorrect in English. In contrast to datum (5), datum (6) uses preposition *to* but the word following the preposition is gerund. This is not grammatically correct because after preposition *to* there must be an infinitive form. Therefore, the verb should be changed into to infinitive and thus the correct collocation is *confidence to stand* in front of her friends.

Table 2 Noun + To Infinitive

No.	Incorrect Collocation	Correct Collocation
5	That is why heavy smokers have <i>trouble digesting</i> food	That is why heavy smokers have <i>trouble to digest</i> food
6	Create more <i>confidence to standing</i> in front of her friends	Create more <i>confidence to stand</i> in front of her friends

It can be concluded from the two data that the students have difficulties in understanding how to put infinitive verbs after prepositions and how to use gerund verbs in English. These are seen from data (5) and (6) in Table 2 above.

3. Preposition + Noun Collocation

There are four collocation errors in this type of collocation. Three of them are presented here below in Table 3. In datum (7), the student made an error in collocating preposition *at* with the noun *month*. According to *The Oxford Collocation dictionary*, the right collocation of this phrase should be *in the month*. Thus, the phrase *at the month* should be revised to be grammatical.

Table 3 Preposition + Noun

No.	Incorrect Collocation	Correct Collocation
7	It is usually <i>at the month</i> before the beginning of new semester	It is usually <i>in the month</i> before the beginning of new semester
8	It will make us learn <i>about honestly</i>	It will make us learn <i>about honesty</i>
9	I have clear understanding that there are no perfect people <i>in the earth</i>	I have clear understanding that there are no perfect people <i>on earth</i>

In datum (8), the student made an error in collocating the preposition *about* with the adverb *honestly*. This latter should not be in the form of adverb but noun. Therefore, the adverb *honestly* should be changed into noun *honesty* to make the phrase correct. The problem faced here is in differentiating the words that look similar in forms.

Another datum presented here is that in (9). The case is in using the preposition *in* with the noun *earth*. According to the dictionaries, there is a collocation existing between the preposition *in* and the noun *earth* but in a different context of meaning. These two words collocate if the sentence talks about *the earth* in the sense of soil. Meanwhile, in this case, the meaning of *earth* is the world as a place to live. So, this use is not grammatically acceptable in this context of the sentence. Therefore, the correct collocation is *on earth*.

These findings about Preposition + Noun collocation show that the students have difficulties related to this type of collocation. They made errors in choosing collocating prepositions to combine with the nouns or adverbs.

4. Adjective + Preposition Collocation

Based on the data found about Adjective + Preposition collocation, there are fifteen errors made by the students in their essays. In datum (10), for instance, the student made a mistake in the collocation between the adjective *similar* and the preposition *with*. It can be predicted that the student was influenced by his first language Bahasa Indonesia in understanding and combining these two words. The meaning of this phrase in Bahasa Indonesia is *mirip dengan*. Thus, Indonesian speakers often just use English preposition *with*, which is the lexical equivalent of Indonesian preposition *dengan*. However, according to the dictionaries used as the standard in this study, the adjective *similar* collocates with preposition *to* and not with the preposition *with*.

Table 4 Adjective + Preposition

No.	Incorrect Collocation	Correct Collocation
10	If we directly judge people from what we see it is <i>similar with</i> slander	If we directly judge people from what we see it is <i>similar to</i> slander
11	<i>Related with</i> the age at which children should be allowed to have their own Smartphone	<i>Related to</i> the age at which children should be allowed to have their own Smartphone
12	Parents are not <i>aware with</i> what the children do with their Smartphone	Parents are not <i>aware of</i> what the children do with their Smartphone

Datum (11) shows how the student incorrectly collocated the adjective *related* with the preposition *with*. Just like with the previous datum, this student also employed their first language grammatical collocation to that of English. In Bahasa Indonesia, the given phrase is *sehubungan dengan* which can literally be translated into English as *related with*, not as *related to*. However, when consulted with the dictionaries, *related* and *with* does not collocate.

Another incorrect collocation of preposition *with* occurs in datum (12). Here another proof that students transfer what they know in their primary language to the foreign language they are learning prevails. According to the dictionaries, the correct preposition that collocates with the adjective *aware* is *of* and not *with*.

Those three data above represent the other twelve data found related to the use of prepositions that collocate with particular adjectives. This number of data portrays how difficult it is for the students to see how these two languages employ collocations.

5. Verb + Preposition Collocation

There are ten Verb + Preposition collocation errors found in the writings. The three data presented below represent the other seven that have also been analyzed. From the data given, it can be seen that the students also have difficulties in using correct prepositions that collocate with the verbs.

Table 5 Verb + Preposition

No	Incorrect Collocation	Correct Collocation
13	We often <i>hear pregnancy</i> out of wedlock in our immediate neighborhood	We often <i>hear about pregnancy</i> out of wedlock in our immediate neighborhood
14	As a student, we must <i>focus in</i> what our teachers said	As a student, we must <i>focus on</i> what our teachers said
15	His father always <i>trusts with</i> God	His father always <i>trusts in</i> God

In (13), the preposition needed after the verb *hear* and that connects it with the following noun is missing. According to the dictionaries used in this study, the correct phrase that should be used here is *hear about pregnancy* and not just *hear pregnancy*. In the four other data that were analyzed, the case prevails that students often make incorrect Verb + Preposition collocations by omitting grammatically necessary prepositions from the phrases.

In datum (14) the student made an error in collocating the verb *focus* with the preposition *in*. This is considered incorrect as in English the verb *focus* has had its pair of preposition to be combined with. According to the dictionaries, the preposition *in* should be replaced by preposition *on* so that the collocation becomes grammatically correct.

In datum (15) the student made an error in collocating the verb *trust* with the preposition *with*. Although it can be understood, it is not a correct collocation in English. This is similar to the previous error related to prepositional collocation. The use of prepositions is difficult as the rules and their collocations are different from one language to another. According to the dictionaries, the preposition *with* must be changed into *in* for the collocation to be grammatical.

This type of collocation is the second dominant collocation error made by the students in their writing, after the Adjective + Preposition collocation. The errors vary from absent prepositions to the use of incorrect ones. Besides, the findings show that the students also made errors mostly because of the interference of their primary language. They carelessly generalized the rules of the one to the other language.

Conclusion

To sum up, the researchers found out that the students made grammatical collocation errors in their writings. Based on the findings, the total errors found were 35 collocation errors and the most dominant type of errors found is Adjective + Preposition collocation with a total of 15 errors. The second dominant is Verb + Preposition with a total of 10 errors. The third is Noun + Preposition with a total of 4 errors and the fourth is Preposition + Noun collocation with a total of 4 errors. The type of collocation about which the students made the least errors is Noun + To Infinitive with a total of 2 errors. These all show that the students have more difficulties in using prepositions than the other grammatical constructions such to infinitive and that clause since there is no error found about Noun + That Clause, Adjective + To Infinitive, and Adjective + That Clause.

As has been stated, collocation is important since it can improve students' English proficiency. The findings of this study suggest that the rules of collocation need to be learned and paid much attention to in English teaching and learning process in order that the students are more aware of the rules.

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