



RESEARCH PAPER

A Study of Problematic Areas of English Collocations at Higher Secondary Level in Pakistani ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Collocations are a significant challenge in Pakistani L2 acquisition due to grammar focus, and limited lexical knowledge. The objectives of this descriptive quantitative study were to find out the problematic areas of English lexical Collocations among the Pakistani students of Higher Secondary level. This study investigated the role of the mother tongue in lexical collocations errors and the role of Collocations in second language learning with the framework of Benson, Benson, and Illson (1997). The data was collected through a multiple-choice questionnaire of English collocations with 600 randomly sampled (300 male/300 female) students of 6 Lahore government colleges. Findings showed that Collocations are problematic (Adj+N, 62.4%, V+N, 58.2%, Adv+Adj, 43.64%, N+N, 40.9%) due to interference of mother language and limited knowledge. This study suggests the solution as early material introduction, comprehensive collocation knowledge with updated teaching methods. Other researchers can include teachers' survey with different educational levels and approaches.

KEYWORDS

Problematic Collocations, Higher Secondary Level, Mother Tongue Interference, Lexical Collocations Errors

Introduction

Words always occur in a pattern with a variety of items (noun, adjective, verb, adverb, etc.), and this variety in lexical combinations always creates problems for second language learners. Collocations are one of the most problematic areas of the English language for second language learners. The role of L1 influence could be one of the major causes of errors in the production of L2 Collocations (Biskup, 1992). Native speakers use vocabulary with a systematic and psychological pattern while Urdu learners use English Collocations by translating them into the Urdu language. For example, 'strong tea' is a perfect combination of English Collocations, but Urdu learners will tend to use it as "fast tea" due to the lack of knowledge and interference of the mother tongue. This tendency leads to wrong practice in the second language due to interference of the mother tongue. For students of higher secondary level, it is always problematic in the sense of right selection of combination of words due to lack of knowledge, unnatural composition patterns of words in writing and speaking (Meng & Li, 2005), and interference of mother tongue, lack of training in listening and understanding strategies (Quping, & Pramoolsook, 2012). They face the same problem because they depend mostly on their mother tongue and use it without proper knowledge of the rules of Collocations (Akhtar, Anwar, & Qureshi, 2018).

Jing (2008) explained collocations as linguistic chunking with lexical units. Gries (2008) defined collocations as the co-occurrence of one or more lexical items with or

without the combination of a grammatical item that works as a single semantic unit. Collocations are useful to improve English vocabulary and comprehension. Collocation is part of semantics. It has two types: Lexical collocation and Grammatical Collocation (Benson, & Ilson, 1985). Lexical Collocations usually consist of nouns, adjectives, and verbs without prepositions, infinitives, and clauses. Grammatical Collocation is normally a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun, verb, and adjective), preposition, or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause. The word Collocation is a new addition to the lexicon of English. It emerged in the writing of Palmer (1938) as cited in (Brashi, 2009), and was introduced in 1957 by Firth (as cited in Lehecka, 2015) for the first time. It is derived from the Latin word 'Collocare' which means to set words in sequence. Collocation is very important in learning any language because words are learned and used in context. Firth pointed out that without knowing collocations; we are unable to communicate effectively. If a student knows a word and the correct relationship of it with another word with which a lexical item can be used, he or she will be able to use words with the right combinations.

In Collocation, words are combined with a logical link and not haphazardly joined to each other such pair of words give special meaning. Collocations are building blocks in written and spoken (Wray, 2002) and the main purpose of Collocations is to link correct words with other words to produce an effective meaning e.g. 'hard work' and 'make and do'. Synonyms words create ambiguity and promote the wrong tendency of using wrong Collocation words. Sometimes synonymous words 'marry and happy' can be replaced when used for Christmas-day but there is some other occasion these can't be replaced. We can say 'happy birthday but not 'marry birthday'. So, understanding these restrictions of certain words is helpful for successful learning. Collocation plays an important role in communicative competence, teaching, and learning. Lewis, Gough, Martinez, Powell, Marks, Woolard, and Ribisch (1997) stated that competence and proficiency in a language is a matter of fixed and suitable items. The lexical item plays an important role not only in first language acquisition but also in second language learning.

In Pakistan, collocations always remained a problematic area in L2 learning at all academic levels due to the main focus on grammatical structures but still, there is a lack of knowledge about other types of collocations such as lexical, and this is the reason behind conducting this study. L2 is different from L1 acquisition and it is always learned deliberately informal settings. It is not free from errors and this is also the reason for investigating how L2 learners use the individual items of vocabulary efficiently for communication purposes accurately. To understand the problematic nature of collocations a questionnaire was used to find out the difficult areas of collocations among Pakistani learners.

Literature Review

It first emerged in the work of Palmer (1938). Then this term was completely introduced by Firth (1957) when he started to find Collocational relations. Firth was the inventor who said that meaning is not bound only by a lexical item. According to Firth Collocation or the lexical item is one of the five types of meaning (phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic). Collocation is a lexical item and is important to understand the meaning. To know about collocations is the company of words with phonological knowledge, and syntactic and semantic connections to construct useful meanings. Halliday and Hasan (1976) called collocations "questionable, the most problematic part of lexical cohesion (p. 288).

It is important to draw a line between words like idioms collocations and free connection. Collocations are multi-words that have special meaning, for example, 'let the cat out of the bag' this sentence has a deep meaning that can't be understood without a sense of its context. Bhans (1993) stated that contrastive study is helpful to understand the Collocations of other languages.

Quping and Pramoolsook (2012) explored the most difficult collocation in the Chinese EFL context by using 100 essays corpora and concluded that verbs and nouns collocations were the most difficult collocation in the Chinese context. Shooshtari and Karami (2013) checked the influence of instruction on Iranian EFL students' speaking ability. Alzi'abi (2017) investigated the use of online dictionaries for identifying the V + Adv collocations effectively among Arab learners. Shiri, Sadighi, Azizi, & Nekoueizadeh (2017) identified the difficult areas of collocations among thirty advanced EFL students through essay writing and findings revealed that the most problematic type of collocation was ADj + N and the easiest ones were Adv + Adj and NN. Huang and Tsao (2019) utilized the application of software to determine and correct the L2 collocational VN and Adj + N errors through collocation clusters and found the software helpful to assist the L2 learners to use collocation with minimum errors.

From the Pakistani context, Anwar and khan (2012) investigated to check whether Pakistani advanced learners use wrong collocations or not and if they do what type of errors they repeat and what are the reasons behind these errors. They selected 90 ESL learners and MCQ tests and essays were used to check the errors of collocations through receptive and productive skills. Findings revealed that students performed better on the receptive level but they committed errors on production levels. Awan and Qureshi (2014) worked on collocation and described four levels- inherent, restricted, non-restricted, and semi-restricted collocations to make easy and understandable learning of English collocation for Pakistani students.

Jamsaid (2015) checked the only three types of collocation errors at the secondary level with fifty participants and found that VN collocations are less problematic than ADJ + N and NN collocations. Akhtar, Behzad, and Qureshi (2018) worked on the pedagogical aspect of Urdu and English collocations with the help of corpus methodology, and data were gathered from newspapers. Through the help of contrastive analysis, they identified and categorized the collocational errors in terms of equivalent/non-equivalent MT and TL collocations. It is important to learn English collocations for the betterment of the student's understanding and learning. L1 interference may produce problems while using L2 collocations. Many learners can't find out the correct collocations equality between two languages. These are a few studies that have been conducted in Pakistan by focusing on two or three types of collocation errors but not a single study is conducted at Higher Secondary level with all types of lexical collocations. This is also the gap in the study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of Benson, Benson, and Illson (1997) was used. According to their classifications collocations are divided into grammatical and lexical categories. The list of lexical collocations is given below:

- Adjective +Noun--- the rich vocabulary
- Verb +Noun---made a visit
- Noun +Noun--- car park
- Adverb +Adjective--- highly profitable

- Verb +Adverb--- tried hard

This study utilized a variety of lexical collocations to locate the problematic areas of lexical collocations among Pakistani learners at the Higher Secondary level.

Material and Methods

This study used a descriptive quantitative approach to find out and analyzed the problematic areas of English Collocations for students of Higher Secondary level and the interference of mother tongue in second language learning. Ghani et al. (2024), Sarwar and Ghani (2024) and Mustafa and Ghani,(2025), found in their works that the descriptive quantitative approach enhances the generalizability of the data and minimizes the risk of biasness.

Participants

It was impossible to cover the whole area of Pakistan and Punjab for data analysis, so, the target population was the students of six Higher Secondary levels of Govt. Colleges of Lahore (Punjab). By using a random sampling technique, 600 participants (300 males and 300females) of the Higher Secondary level were taken to collect data through multiple choices Questionnaire.

Data collection Tools

A questionnaire was the tool for data collection and was designed to carry out the current study. Multiple choice question items were used to check the problematic areas of English collocation with the interference of mother tongue in second language collocations. Ozturk (2007) mentioned that the MCQ test is highly popular among teachers for language assessment tasks due to its characteristics such as availability, accessibility, reliability, time-saving, and ease of scoring. The Questionnaire was based on twenty-five items with four possible answers for each and participants were asked to choose the suitable Collocation word with the correct option.

Procedure

Data for this study was gathered after conducting a pilot study. The participants were asked to guess the suitable answers of options. They knew that questionnaire was only for study purposes and any incorrect reply would not affect their marks. So, they filled out this questionnaire willingly. The time duration was 50 minutes to solve the questionnaire. To check the claim of the study, items for the questionnaire were selected from different types of English Collocations from their English syllabus with the guidance and help of their English teachers.

Results and Discussion

The most problematic areas of English Collocations for Higher Secondary students after result Findings are mentioned below.

Table 1
Frequency and percentage of correct and incorrect lexical collocations

Collocation items list	Correct items frequency and percentage	Incorrect items frequency and percentage
Adjective + Noun	1128/3000 (37.6%)	1872/3000 (62.4 %)
Verb + Noun	1254/3000 (41.8%)	1746/3000 (58.2%)

Adverb + Adjective	1691/3000 (56.36%)	1309/3000 (43.64%)
Noun + Noun	1773/3000 (59.1%)	1227/3000 (40.9%)
Verb + Adverb	2400/3000 (80%)	600/3000 (20%)
Total	8246/15,000 (54.97%)	6754/15,000 (45.02%)

After checking the results of the questionnaire, the study revealed that for the participants, the most problematic areas in collocations were adjective + noun (Adj+N), verb + noun (VN), and noun + noun (NN), while adverb + adjective (Adv + Adj) and verb + adverb (V + Adv) are the least problematic ones. Most participants provided the wrong answers due to many reasons such as lack of knowledge about the combination of words and ignorance of the standard pattern of English collocations, cultural and linguistic patterns variations and the major reason behind these errors was the interference of their mother tongue. Some examples from the data are mentioned in Table 2 which reveals the learners' strategy in the right or wrong choices of lexical collocations.

Table 2
Examples of correct/ incorrect use of lexical collocations

Correct collocations	Incorrect collocations
Heavy breakfast, rich vocabulary	Traditional breakfast, huge vocabulary
Take a taxi, made a joke	Catch a taxi, did a joke
Deeply shocked, so stupid	Hopelessly shocked, pretty stupid
Loaf of bread, car park	Slice of bread, car point
Tried hard, increased rapidly	Tried actively, increased sharply

In the first type of collocation Adj + N option three, '*In the immense stretches of space beyond the Milky Way, it is still colder*', 274 respondents selected the wrong adjective *vast* before noun due to their reliance on the strategy of paraphrasing to fill the gap of insufficient knowledge about the English (target language) collocation *immense* (226). In another example, 373 participants out of 600 selected the wrong collocations in response to the sentence '*he has a rich vocabulary*' such as *huge vocabulary* (227), *large vocabulary* (146) due to the presence of variation between lexical-semantic combinations of Urdu and English language instead of selecting right English collocation *rich* which is selected by only 227 participants. On the other hand, in the second example, '*The baby was fast asleep*' 385 students out of 600 selected *deep asleep* instead of *fast* that is selected by just 171 students. These wrong choices of the adjective with nouns are the results of a lack of knowledge about the patterns of English collocations and the interference of the mother tongue in L2 patterns.

The second most difficult category of collocation is the V + N combination as mentioned above in Table 1. Some verbs are de-lexicalized in nature with common meanings e.g. take, do, and make, they can be used with lots of words to convey different meanings by associating with different nouns. Instead of understanding the clear difference between these verbs learners use them synonymously and interchangeably which causes errors. In the sixth option '*children made a joke with teacher*', only 146 students out of 600 gave the right answer. This answer showed the clear interference of the mother tongue as well as the lack of knowledge of the English pattern of the word combination. Most of the participants selected the options *did a joke* (310) and *committed a joke* (51) in the next option, which is equivalent to the Urdu verb "*Mazak Kia or Mazak banya*". Again, the seventh option '*Before legal separation, the couple made a pact not to talk about each other*' repeated the same pattern of an error on V + N Collocations. Only 200 participants out of 600 attempted the right option. The majority picked the verb *performed* (97) and *promised* (303) instead of *made*. This error showed the lack of knowledge of the right combination of words. The next collocational error from the same category '*The tourists can take a taxi with minimum wages for visiting the famous places of the city*' is also an example of transfer from the native tongue and participants selected the option *catch* 327 times and *grab* 166

times by relying on their cultural-linguistic expressions that are wrong and opposite from the accepted norms of English collocational expressions culturally and semantically.

The third problematic area for Pakistani intermediate-level learners in the field of Collocation was Adv + Adj Collocations. As compared to the first two categories this was less problematic for learners. Only 1309 responses were wrong and 1691 responses were correct for this collocational category. *Freelancing is a highly profitable earning trend during Covid-19*, a total of 160 participants selected the wrong adverb *widely* and *too* (100) with adjective *profitable*, and only 340 went with the right choice. In another option, *'The president was surrounded by the heavily armed guards during the interview'* the 172 respondents selected the completely wrong irrelevant answer *consciously* (80) and *widely* (103) respectively as compared to the right choice of adverb *heavily* (245). In the next option, the same pattern of error can be noticed such as 318 students showed their consent about the adverb *completely* instead of *selecting terribly* before the adjective *sorry* in *'I am terribly sorry for my rude behavior'*. Only 263 students were successful to determine the suitable combination of Adv + Adj collocation at the lexical level. Such types of errors indicate the unfamiliarity of the Higher Secondary students with Adv + Adj collocational pattern which is not frequently used by Pakistani learners as well as the ignorance of the Pakistani L2 learners about the basic knowledge of English collocations.

After Adj + N, V + N, and Adv + Adj, the second last problematic area in Collocations for Higher Secondary students was N + N. In this category, the frequency of lexical collocational errors was 1227/3000. In the thirteenth option, *'The guests were welcomed with a bunch of flowers in the annual function'* nearly half of the respondents (328) gave the right responses to the right options; and in the fourteenth option from this combination, *'Ali bought a loaf of bread from the market'* (227) out of 600 participants' responses were positive respectively. The errors *bundle of flowers* (274) and *roll* (91) / *slice of bread* (273) threw light on the phenomenon of ignorance toward English Collocations. Finally, the least problematic area was based on the Verb + Adverb category. Only 120 errors were made out of 3000 options by the participants. In the example, *'He sings loudly'* only 109 students selected the wrong collocation *openly* and *increasingly* (11) while 480 learners were successful to identify the right combination of verb + adverb. In another example, *the population in the world increased rapidly with the advancement in agriculture and methods for food preservation*. 527 out of 600 higher Secondary learners were able to select the correct adverb after the verb. This shows that familiarity with words combination can minimize errors. Despite the errors and problematic areas, the study also showed that correct knowledge of the pattern of collocations and the right use of these patterns with suitable words can improve the learning and understanding of a second language and options 8, 11, 15, 20, 24, and 25 supported the claim.

Figure 1. Summary of the problematic areas of collocations among Pakistani Higher secondary ESL learners

Conclusion

The present study tried to investigate the most problematic areas of collocations among Pakistani intermediate learners by focusing on lexical collocational items to know which types of collocations are more or less difficult and what are the factors behind them. After analyzing the data, the most frequent errors can be seen in Adjective + Noun, Verb+ Noun Collocations, and the easiest collocations were V + Adv.

This work confirmed that collocations from a lexical point of view are the most problematic area for Pakistani Higher Secondary students in second language learning.

The overall percentage of correct use of collocations is 54.97% and the percentage of errors in the first three problematic collocation types Adj + N (62.4%) findings also strengthen by the previous study by Huang and Tsao (2019), V + N (58.2%) (results are aligned with najda's study conducted in 2003 and Kao: 2022) and Adv + Adj (43.64%) and N + N (40.9%) revealed the unsatisfactory performance of the learners and confirms the findings of Shiri, Sadighi, Azizi, and Nekoueizade (2017) and Huang and Tsao (2019). The results revealed that this problem is due to typological differences between MT and TL structures, rely on mother tongue, (e.g. *did a visit*) as well as students are unable to understand the combination of the words due to their lack of knowledge and reading (e.g. *wholly sorry*) related to the rules of English Collocations, and paraphrasing (e.g. *vast stretches*). After that, students faced problems in choosing V + N Collocation. 1746 errors out of 3000 options showed that students lack knowledge about the structure of Collocations. The difference between Adj + N and V + N percentage is only 4.2% which indicated the seriousness of errors in the correct use of English collocations. In other words, students learn vocabulary in chunks and whenever they have to use them in combination it brings confusion to them.

The difference between the score and percentage of Adj + N and Adv + Adj is 18.76% highlighting the fact about the better performance of learners in Adv + Adj as well as the difficulty due to less frequency of this collocation combination as compared to the first two. While at the same time, results of N + N (40.9%) and V + Adv (20%) indicated that the proper direct/indirect feedback on errors (Siengsanoh, 2021), knowledge about the right combination of English Collocations not only reduce the interference of mother tongue in second language learning but also improve the understanding in English language and increase the learning process of students (Trang, Anh, and Khanh, 2021). The variation between V + N and V + Adv errors is 38.2% which pointed out the minimum difficulty of learners and a better understanding of English collocations correctly. It can be stated that N + N and V + Adv combinations are common in L2 spoken and written teaching and learning materials. Overall data supported the claim that students at Higher Secondary level face difficulties in combining words on these above-mentioned levels. Deficiency of collocation competence, use of overgeneralization, synonym, approximation, and mother tongue also play a crucial role to increase these problems and proper knowledge of Collocations helps improve English language learning.

Recommendations

The findings and discussion of this study suggested that Collocations are a problematic area for students of Higher Secondary level in Pakistan and mother tongue and ignorance are the major factors responsible for this problem. To minimize the errors and improve the L2 learning some recommendations and implications for future studies are given below:

- Collocations are not only essential for increasing English vocabulary, and language understanding but also useful for enhancing the learning process of English without the interference of the mother tongue. So, the proper knowledge of Collocations is indispensable for students to learn a better English language. Different vocabulary items, formulaic expressions, classroom practices, exercises, and tests should be included in the syllabus with an updated variety of teaching methods.
- For better English learning proper awareness about the restrictions and categorization of mother and target language Collocations is necessary because

Collocations are culture and language-specific and are thousands in number which make confuse the second language learners. Linguistic items should be learned with the use of the most common collocation words of TL.

- Clarity is necessary to comprehend anything. Instead of teaching and learning vocabulary in isolation, teachers should design classroom activities based on collocations items, so students can identify the relationship among the specific combination of words in the company of other words and can improve their English learning.
- Collocations should be taught at the beginning level with the help of dictionaries and collocation-based materials, so students can use their previous knowledge in their further studies at Higher Secondary level with less frequency of errors. Attention should be paid to common collocation errors before moving to the next level of L2 instructions. Teachers should train the learners to identify and use the collocations with fewer errors in L2 language learning.
- It is hoped that this study will raise and pave the way for those researchers and learners who are interested to learn Collocations and want to improve English language learning. As it is ignored area in Pakistan and lots of work can be done in this area.
- This research only focused on the problematic areas of collocations among learners. Future work can be expended by utilizing survey methods with a wider population to collect information from teachers about their attitudes related to the phenomenon of collocations.
- The study can be conducted on different educational levels and systems with the combination of teaching methods, approaches, collocation models, and application of software such as corpus methodology to develop the learning of second language collocations.

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