

# Spoken Collocational Errors of Iranian Postgraduate Students

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## Abstract

The present study investigated collocational errors of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language in speaking. A total of 43 postgraduate Iranian learners at the Intermediate level of the Intensive English Course at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia participated in this study. Each participant's public speech test was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for collocational errors

**Keywords:** spoken collocational errors; foreign language; iranianlearners

## Introduction

The present study investigated collocational errors of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language in speaking. A total of 43 postgraduate Iranian learners at the Intermediate level of the Intensive English Course at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia participated in this study. Each participant's public speech test was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for collocational errors. The collocational errors were extracted and matched with their correct forms based on The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English, The British National Corpus, and The Corpus of Contemporary American English. The collocational errors were categorized as either lexical or grammatical and the subcategory of each collocational error was also determined. The results indicated that lexical errors exceeded the grammatical ones and interference of second language was the dominant source of the collocational errors. Hence, Iranian English teachers should raise Iranian students' awareness of collocations and pay twofold attention to lexical collocations in English classes. Regarding the sources of collocational errors, they should prevent students from interchangeably using the words that have the same meaning in Farsi or are synonymous in English.

## Present study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyze the collocational errors of Iranian EFL learners in speaking. The analyses of the collocational errors included investigating the extent to which the participants made lexical and grammatical collocational errors and their subcategories as well as the extent to which the participants made interlingual and intralingual collocational errors and their types as detailed in the following sections.

To answer research questions 1, 1A, and 1C, frequency analysis of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors in public speech showed that

the participants made a total of 996 collocational errors out of which 571 errors were lexical and 425 errors were grammatical, illustrating that the lexical collocational errors significantly outnumbered the grammatical ones based on the results of the Wilcoxon test,  $z = -5.716$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . It is worth mentioning that statistically significant results are indicated by asymptotic significance values below 0.05 in this research. To answer research question 1B, frequency analyses of subcategories of lexical and grammatical collocational errors were conducted. The results showed that Verb + Noun (216) and Adjective + Noun (198) were identified to be the most frequent subcategories of lexical errors. Regarding the grammatical collocational errors, Preposition + Noun (93), Verb + Complement (69), and Verb + Preposition (61) subcategories were identified to be the most frequent subcategories. The results of the Friedman test,  $\chi^2 = 111.557$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , showed that there was significant difference among the mean ranks of the six identified subcategories of the lexical collocational errors. Then, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test,  $z = -1.323$ ;  $p > 0.05$ , indicated that Verb + Noun subcategory does not show significant difference with Adjective + Noun subcategory. However, Verb + Noun subcategory showed significant difference with Noun + Verb subcategory,  $z = -4.595$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , and the other three subcategories of lexical collocational errors. In addition, Adjective + Noun subcategory showed significant difference with Noun + Verb subcategory,  $z = -4.595$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , and the other two subcategories of lexical collocational errors.

To answer research question 1D, the results of the Friedman test,  $\chi^2 = 316.810$ ;  $df = 21$ ;  $p > 0.05$ , showed that there was significant difference among the mean ranks of the 22 identified subcategories of the grammatical collocational errors. Then, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test showed that Preposition + Noun (G4) did not show significant difference with Verb + Complement (G8S),  $z = -1.505$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . However, G4 showed significant difference with Verb +

Preposition (G8D),  $z = -2.137$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and the other 19 subcategories of grammatical errors. In addition, the results of the Wilcoxon test,  $z = -.572$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , revealed that Verb + Complement (G8S) did not show significant difference with Verb + Preposition (G8D). However, G8S showed significant difference with Noun + Preposition (G1),  $z = -2.746$ ;  $p < 0.05$  and the other 18 subcategories.

Research questions 2, 2A, and 2C of this study aimed to investigate the dominant source of the collocational errors of the Iranian EFL learners or the extent to which L1 and L2 interference result in the production of collocational errors in Iranian EFL learners' speaking. In this regard, the collocational errors were categorized as either interlingual or intralingual. It was shown through frequency analysis that out of 996 collocational errors, 384 errors were categorized as interlingual and 612 collocational errors were categorized as intralingual. In other words, 384 collocational errors of the Iranian EFL learners resulted from L1 interference and 612 collocational errors resulted from L2 interference, illustrating the dominant influence of L2. To statistically prove the significant difference between the interlingual and intralingual collocational errors, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was conducted. The results,  $z = -4.314$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , showed that the extent to which L1 interference and L2 interference resulted in the collocational errors of the Iranian EFL learners in public speech test were significantly different since the asymptotic significance value is below 0.05. In other words, it was confirmed that the intralingual collocational errors significantly outnumbered the interlingual collocational errors of the participants in the public speech test.

To answer research question 2B, the type of each interlingual and intralingual collocational error was also determined. Based on Prator (1967), two types of interlingual errors were found in the participants' speeches: *split* (342) and *underdifferentiation* (42). Frequency analysis of the two types of interlingual collocational errors showed that *split* was the major type of the interlingual collocational errors of the participants. The results of the Wilcoxon test,  $z = -5.499$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , also showed that the interlingual collocational errors categorized as *split* significantly outnumbered the interlingual collocational errors that were categorized as *underdifferentiation*.

The Iranian EFL learners' intralingual collocational errors consisted of five types and all of them except *mispronunciation* were mentioned by Liu (1999): *ignorance of rules restriction* (458), *the use of synonyms* (109), *mispronunciation* (25), *overgeneralization* (16), and *false concept hypothesized* (4). To answer research question 2D, frequency analysis of the five types of intralingual collocational errors showed that *ignorance of rules restriction* and *the use of synonyms* were the major types of intralingual collocational errors.

The results of the Friedman test,  $\chi^2 = 132.877$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , showed that there was significant difference among the mean ranks of the five identified types of intralingual collocational errors. Then, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test,  $z = -5.558$ ;  $p > 0.05$ , revealed that the intralingual collocational errors of the type *ignorance of rule restriction* significantly outnumbered the errors categorized as *synonym* and the other three types of intralingual errors. In addition, *synonym* showed significant difference with *mispronunciation*,  $z = -4.484$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , and the other two types. In other words, *ignorance of rule restrictions* and *synonym* showed significant difference with the other three identified types of intralingual collocational errors of the participants in the present study.

The results of the analyses of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors showed that the participants' lexical errors significantly outnumbered the grammatical ones. The results revealed that lexical collocations are more challenging for Iranian EFL learners than grammatical collocations. In addition, the findings showed that intralingual errors

significantly outnumbered the interlingual errors. Therefore, it can be inferred that L2 interference was the dominant source of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors. *Ignorance of rule restrictions* was the major type of intralingual errors, illustrating that the majority of the participants' intralingual errors resulted from ignoring rule restrictions in the English language. *Split* was identified as the major type of interlingual errors, illustrating that the majority of the participants' interlingual errors were in cases that an item in Farsi had two or more equivalents in English. Hence, the above summary of findings of this study indicates that all objectives of the present study were achieved and the findings could show the extent to which the participants made lexical and grammatical collocational errors and their subcategories as well as the extent to which the participants made interlingual and intralingual collocational errors and their types.

## Implications of the Study

Based on the findings of the present study presented in Chapter Four and Section 5.2, the following implications arise for EFL learners and instructors: raising EFL learners' awareness of collocations, learning words in context, and avoiding word for word translation.

"Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about" (Hill, 1999:5). This will result in inevitable production of longer structures which is subject to more errors. Using "his disability will continue until he dies" rather than "he has a permanent disability" is an example of producing long structures due to the lack of knowledge of collocations (Hill, 1999:5). The concept of collocation is difficult for learners. For learners, the most difficult aspect of acquiring the lexical system is that word choice is seriously limited by the surrounding words (Thornbury, 2002). "Explicit instruction" or "consciousness-raising" (Ellis, 1997:133) by the teachers can be significantly advantageous to raise awareness to collocations in students. In other words, the teacher becomes more of a facilitator and guideline provider for the learners, by the strategies he recommends to be used outside the classroom. Nattinger (1980:341) suggests that teaching should be on the idea that language production is the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation. Comprehension of such units is dependent on knowing the patterns to predict in different situations. Instruction, therefore, should center on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur.

In this regard, designing collocation exercises for the EFL learners can be advantageous and helpful to raise the learners' consciousness or awareness of collocations. Hill, Lewis and Lewis (2000:98-106) suggest general and specific classroom activities which focus on collocation. These activities could easily be incorporated into lessons to raise students' awareness of collocations or English word combinations. Based on Hill, Lewis and Lewis (2000:98-106), a few examples of such activities are:

- 1) Students can be given a text to read or listen to and then assigned to find some collocations which are based on a topic.
- 2) Students can be provided with a list of individualized words and then they have to find the word that collocates with them in the text.
- 3) Students can do a cloze test or collocation exercise based on the text.
- 4) Students can do a matching exercise based on the collocations in the text.
- 5) Students can be assigned to find the odd one out in a list of words which is supposed to be combined with another word.

- 6) Students can be given a word and they are assigned to brainstorm as many collocates as possible.
- 7) Students can be provided with a list of words which collocate with one word and then they are supposed to guess the headword.
- 8) Students can be given a text to read and then assigned to orally reproduce it briefly using collocations.
- 9) Students can be assigned to translate sentences / short texts containing collocations.
- 10) Students can be assigned to spot collocational errors in a text.

The results of the analysis of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors showed that they had problems in both lexical and grammatical collocations. The results also showed that lexical collocations were more challenging for the participants. In this regard, Yang (2010) pointed out that the native speakers consider lexical errors to be more disruptive as compared to the grammatical ones since lexical collocations are content words playing a more important role in meaningful production of language. Thus, Iranian teachers and learners should pay twofold attention to lexical collocations. Findings also revealed the participants' poor knowledge of L2 lexical and grammatical patterns that could result from memorizing a list of individual words.

The above exercises can help the students to avoid learning and memorizing a list of individual words. In this way, the students learn a word along with its context of surrounding words and they learn that each word has its own primings or typical collocations (Hoey, 2007). They also become aware of the L2 lexical patterns which show typical association of words with each other and how they form meaningful units (Hunston and Francis, 2000). Hunston and Francis (2000:83) stated that "the different senses of words will tend to be distinguished by different patterns, and secondly, that particular pattern will tend to be associated with lexical items that have particular meanings". In other words, the meaning of a word is determined in association with other words. Therefore, it can be inferred that without knowledge of word patterns or collocations, a learner has failed to convey the meaning he/she has in mind.

Teachers can play an important role in raising the learners' awareness of collocations. They should try their best to raise the learners' awareness of collocations and make them collocationally competent. Hill (2000) suggests that EFL teachers should try their best to increase collocational competence of the learners disregarding the difficulties.

Surrounding words or context play an important role in the selection of the other word. This notion has been illustrated in Firth's contextual theory of meaning. According to Firth (1957), contextual theory of meaning is based on high consideration of context. Among the three contexts mentioned by Firth (1957), this study focuses on "the context of surrounding words". Halliday (1966:150) also points out the fact that the surrounding words affect the choice of the other word.

Learning surrounding words of a word will lead to mastery of a word. Without knowledge of surrounding words or collocations, a learner has failed to learn a word completely since he/she does not know how to use a word and what the accompanying words are. In this regard, studying and memorizing a list of individual words must be avoided. By memorizing individual words, learners usually focus on learning meaning of individual words regardless of the relations those words make with other words. Learners must be reminded that language does not consist of words but of chunks. This is the case where context and surrounding words are disregarded. Furthermore, ESL/EFL learners face problem of how to use a word in production due to this strategy of vocabulary learning.

## Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis of the interlingual errors, two types of interlingual errors were found in the participants' speeches based on Prator (1967): *split* and *underdifferentiation*. The findings revealed that the interlingual errors categorized as *split* significantly outnumbered the errors categorized as *underdifferentiation*. In other words, the majority of the interlingual errors were cases in which two items in the second language were present for an item in the first language. Using *return the data* instead of *retrieve the data* is an example of this type. This collocational error was produced since the verbs *return* and *retrieve* have the same meaning in Farsi. Thus, the student used them interchangeably without attention to the fact that the verb *return* cannot collocate with the noun *data*.

Based on the results of the analysis of the intralingual errors, five types of intralingual errors were found in the participants' speeches based on Liu (1999): *ignorance of rule restrictions*, *the use of synonyms*, *mispronunciation*, *overgeneralization*, and *false concept hypothesized*. It is worth mentioning that the type *mispronunciation* was not mentioned by Liu (1999). The findings revealed that the intralingual errors categorized as *ignorance of rule restrictions* and *the use of synonyms* significantly outnumbered the errors categorized as the other three types. In other words, the majority of the intralingual errors were the cases in which the students ignored rule restrictions and used synonyms.

Based on the results of analyses of the Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors in speaking, this study can provide useful information for Iranian EFL teachers and learners regarding the most frequent subcategories of Iranian EFL learners' lexical and grammatical collocational errors and all their subcategories based on Benson et al. (1997). Thus, the teachers and learners can put more emphasis on the most frequent ones in English classes. In addition, it provides useful information regarding the extent to which L1 and L2 interference resulted in collocational errors or the extent to which the Iranian EFL learners produced interlingual and intralingual collocational errors and their types. In this way, the teachers and learners become familiar with and aware of how and in which ways L1 and L2 interference can result in Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors. Consequently, they can prevent the learners from the production of interlingual and intralingual collocational errors. Through this information, the teachers' and learners' consciousness is raised about the cases of interference. By raising the consciousness, the teachers and learners become aware of the sources and causes of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors and through applying appropriate strategies, they can reduce the effect of L1 and L2 interference resulting in fewer collocational errors.

The results of the analyses of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors in speaking can also be of high importance for research community since there are hardly any studies on investigating lexical, grammatical, interlingual, and intralingual collocational errors of Iranian EFL learners. This study can illustrate the extent to which Iranian EFL learners produced lexical and grammatical collocational errors and all their subcategories based on Benson et al. (1997) as well as the ways in which L1 and L2 interference resulted in collocational errors of Iranian EFL learners. In addition, this study intended to investigate lexical, grammatical, interlingual, and intralingual collocational errors of Iranian EFL learners in speaking, whereas the majority of other similar studies on EFL learners of other nationalities have focused on investigating the collocational errors in writing (Chen, 2002; Li, 2005; Fan, 2009). That is why this study found *mispronunciation* as the new type of intralingual collocational error. *Mispronunciation* is the new type of intralingual collocational errors identified in this study. This study categorized the participants' intralingual errors based on Liu's (1999) four types of intralingual collocational errors. This study could identify all four types of intralingual errors introduced by Liu (1999) in Iranian EFL learners'



intralingual collocational errors. In addition, *mispronunciation* was identified, showing that some intralingual collocational errors in speaking could result from the way the learners pronounce a word. Investigating the types of interlingual collocational errors in the present study can be another significant contribution of this study since the other studies on EFL learners' collocational errors did not consider any types for the interlingual collocational errors and did not investigate the extent to which the participants produced the types of interlingual collocational errors (Chen, 2002; Li, 2005; Poocharoenkil, 2011).

In summary, achieving mastery of how words co-occur is essential for L2 learners. In other words, learning collocations or how words co-occur in context is necessary for L2 learners' meaningful productions. The results of the present study showed that Iranian EFL learners produced lexical and grammatical collocational errors to a large extent. It can be inferred that lexical and grammatical collocational errors are produced because learners may not know how words co-occur in a specific context. Lexical collocational errors are produced since L2 learners do not know some collocations or lexical relations between words. In other words, they ignore that a word has its own primings or typical collocations (Hoey, 2007). If learners become familiar with L2 lexical patterning, collocational errors which result from *split* and *the use of synonyms* will be less probable to occur. In this regard, grammatical collocational errors are produced since L2 learners do not know some colligations or the grammatical relations between words. In other words, they ignore that a word has its own grammatical patterning or colligation (Hoey, 2000). If learners become familiar with L2 grammatical patterning, collocational errors which result from *ignorance of rule restrictions*, *overgeneralization*, and *underdifferentiation* will be less probable to occur. Effective vocabulary learning is yielded when the learners know how to use the words together in a specific context. Based on this, learning and teaching vocabulary in the process of second language acquisition must be based on the notion that language does not consist of words but of chunks. Learners must avoid learning and memorizing a list of individual words since in this way, they do not become familiar with typical collocations or context of surrounding words.

Firth (1957) focused on learning collocations and context of surrounding words in his contextual theory of meaning. Firth (1968:181) mentioned that "collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word". Halliday (1966:150) also pointed out the fact that the surrounding word affects the choice of the other word. Without knowledge of surrounding words or collocations, a learner has failed to learn a word completely since he/she does not know how to use a word and what the accompanying words are. By focusing on context of surrounding words, effective vocabulary learning happens, correct lexical and grammatical collocations are produced, and communication or conveying of meaning is successfully conducted, leading to high communicative competence.

By considering the effect of surrounding words and regarding the relation of words in English, L2 learner becomes aware of the L2 lexical patterns. Hunston and Francis (2000:37) defined the patterns of a word as all the words and structures which have regular association with the word and which contribute to its meaning. In line with Firth (1957), Hunston and Francis's (2000) 'pattern grammar' focused on patterns of words and the typical context in which words are used. Hoey's (2007) theory of 'lexical priming' also focuses on the relation of words and how they are primed to be co-selected with their appropriate collocates. According to Hoey (2007), a word is primed to collocate with its own primings or typical collocations. For example, the word *winter* is primed to collocate with the preposition *in* or the noun *majority* is primed to collocate with the adjective *vast*. With reference to Firth (1957), Hunston and Francis (2000), and Hoey (2007), it is concluded that memorizing individual words is not recommended and EFL learners are required to learn words in the context of surrounding words.

In addition, EFL learners should focus on Sinclair's (1991) 'idiom principle'. It means that EFL learners should avoid recalling isolated or individual words and collocates from their memory without understanding the notion that language does not consist of words but of chunks. In this regard, learners should avoid using words interchangeably without considering the combinations they produce. EFL learners should consider that they cannot substitute a word for another since they have the same meaning in L1, *split*, or L2, *synonym*, without considering the context and the surrounding words. Otherwise, they fail to use the proper collocations they need when they communicate in either speaking or writing, and meaning may not be conveyed successfully. EFL learners should also be consciously aware that using words interchangeably can also result from phonological proximity of words, leading to *mispronunciation* collocational errors as discussed earlier. Therefore, they should avoid interchangeably using the words which have phonological proximity.

In conclusion, EFL teachers are required to raise EFL learners' awareness of collocations and how words co-occur. In this regard, EFL learners should be prevented from memorizing a list of individual words and learning vocabulary out of context. Instead, they should be reminded to learn words in the context of their surrounding words. EFL learners should learn vocabulary with reference to theories such as Sinclair's (1998) 'idiom principle' and Hunston and Francis' (2000) 'pattern grammar'. Furthermore, EFL teachers should prevent EFL learners from interchangeably using the words that have the same meaning in their first language or are synonymous in English.

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