

An Investigation of the English Collocational Knowledge of Jordanian Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the English collocational knowledge of Jordanian graduate students and at analyzing quantitatively and qualitatively the collocational errors they made. The sample of the study involved thirty M.A TEFL graduate students at the Hashemite University in Jordan. The researcher adapted a completion test that measured students' knowledge of four types of lexical collocations: free combination, restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms. The results showed that free combination created the least amount of difficulty, whereas pure idioms were the most challenging. Additionally, students had unsatisfactory performance on restricted and figurative idioms. In general, the students' deviant answers demonstrated their insufficient knowledge of the English collocations. It has been concluded that their errors can be attributed to first language interference.

Keywords: Collocation, Free Combination, Restricted Collocation, Figurative Idioms, Pure Idioms.

INTRODUCTION

Collocational knowledge has been recognized as a crucial part of phraseological competence in English as a foreign language (Fontenelle, 1994; Herbst, 1996; Lennon, 1996; Moon, 1992). Every language has its own lexical structure and this structure varies from one language to another, which in accordance causes difficulties to foreign language learners. In the language system, sentence constituents enter into different relationships. These relationships are of two kinds: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. Lyons (1977) discussed the two kinds: "The syntagmatic relations which a unit contracts are those which it contracts by virtue of its combination (in a syntagm, or construction) with other units of the same level. For example, the lexeme (**old**) is syntagmatically related with the definite article '**the**' and the noun '**man**' in the expression '**the old man**'. The paradigmatic relations contracted by units are those which hold between a particular unit in a given syntagm and other units which are substitutable for it in the syntagm. E.g. '**old**' is paradigmatically related with

'**young**', '**tall**', etc. in expressions like '**the old man**' '**the young man**', '**the tall man**' etc. (Lyons, 1977: 240)

Here, we are concerned with syntagmatic relations which specify the possibilities of combination of one lexeme with another in a well formed lexical item. There are individual words or sequences of words which often collocate with a number of words that have something in common semantically. There are rules that determine the co-occurrence of lexical items, and any violation of these rules will result in the wrong use of collocations. The syntagmatic relations of a lexical item help define its semantic range and the context where it appears. Awareness of the restrictions of lexical occurrence can facilitate ESL/EFL learners' ability to encode language (Nattinger, 1989; Seal, 1991). It also enables them to produce sentences that are grammatically and semantically acceptable. Thus, they can conform to the expectations of academic writing or speech communication (Bahns, 1993; Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Granger, 1998).

Research on foreign language learners' vocabulary development has mainly focused on the knowledge and production of individual lexical items. In contrast, researchers have devoted scant attention to the knowledge of collocations. As Bahns and Eldaw (1993) indicated in an empirical study, EFL students did not acquire collocational knowledge while acquiring vocabulary.

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.Instead, their collocational proficiency tended to lag far behind their vocabulary competence. Among the small number of studies on learners' performance in English collocations, the majority has observed the difficulty of learners whose native languages are similar to English. Investigations of the collocational knowledge of learners, who have a very different linguistic system-for example, Arabic, remain scarce. Research on the difficulty that learners from different L1 backgrounds encounter in acquiring English collocations would prove valuable and would enable teachers to identify effective ways of promoting phraseological competence in their learners.

Statement of the Problem

Jordanian EFL learners at all educational levels commit various grammatical, phonological, and lexical errors. Little attention is paid to lexical errors attributed to collocation. Jordanian EFL graduate students are no exception. It has been observed by the researcher that they tend to produce unacceptable co-occurrences when they try to convey their ideas in writing and spoken English. The result is failure to express a variety of ideas. This study is an attempt to validate this observation by investigating the collocational knowledge of Jordanian EFL graduate students.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is specifically to investigate Jordanian graduate EFL students' knowledge of different types of English collocations. These include free combinations, restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms, as proposed by Howarth (1998b). More specifically, the study will consider the following questions:

1. What is the actual collocational knowledge of Jordanian EFL graduate students?
2. What kinds of difficulties do Jordanian EFL graduate students encounter in dealing with the different types of English collocations?
3. What strategies do Jordanian EFL graduate students employ to deal with different types of collocations?.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study emanates from the value of the area under investigation and the subjects involved in the study on which the researcher is unaware of the existence of any similar study. In addition, the pedagogical implications of the findings of the study

could be of importance to teachers of English in particular, and perhaps for teachers of English in Arab speaking countries. It may provide practitioners with practical insights which can be of some help in the process of language acquisition. Also, language teaching has much to gain from collocational studies. The study is also expected to contribute comparative data to the area of foreign language learning.

Operational Definition of Terms

Collocations: the sequences of lexemes that co-occur due to an individual speaker's choice of words that have a certain degree of mutual predictability.

Free combination: the meaning that can be derived from composing the literal meaning of individual elements, and its constituents are freely substitutable. A typical example is provided by Howarth is *blow a trumpet*.

Restricted collocation: is more limited in the selection of compositional element and usually has one component that is used in a specialized context. eg. *blow a fuse*. For idioms that are semantically opaque or highly frozen, Howarth further divides them into figurative and pure idioms.

Figurative idioms: the metaphorical meaning as a whole that can somehow be derived from its literal interpretation.

Pure idioms: the unitary meaning that is totally unpredictable from the meaning of its components. The example Howarth gives for the two types are: *blow your own trumpet* and *blow the gaff*, respectively.

Jordanian graduate students: Jordanian students who are enrolled in the M.A program in TEFL at the Hashemite University .

Limitations of the Study

1. The study involved a sample of thirty Jordanian TEFL graduate students. This may be viewed as a restriction that limits the generalization of results.
2. The study investigated the collocational knowledge of students in four types of collocations: free combination, restricted collocation, figurative collocation, and pure collocation as proposed by Howarth (1998 b).
3. The generalizations of results are limited to the test which was adapted by the researcher.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To obtain a holistic picture of the issues related to the acquisition of English collocations by FSL/EFL learners, this section reviews the literature on the topics of (a) discussion of collocations, (b) factors influencing FSL/EFL learners' performance in collocations, (c) learners' strategies in dealing with collocations' and (d) studies on collocational knowledge.

Some sequences of lexemes can co-occur due to an individual speaker's choice of words, but others appear in a predictable way. When the co-occurrence of lexical items has a certain degree of mutual predictability, the sequence of these items is considered a collocation (Cruse, 1991; Jackson, 1989). As Crystal (1995) has pointed out, the collocation of particular lexemes is not necessarily based on the subject's knowledge of the world. Rather, what is required for one item to attract another is, to some extent, dependent on the intuitive understanding of a native speaker. The predictability of certain word combinations can be weak; for instance, *dark* is an item with a diverse range of collocates. In contrast, an item such as *rancid* tends to have strong predictability because it can collocate with only two or three items. Researchers generally agree that different types of collocations should be placed on a continuum (Fontenelle, 1994; Herbst, 1996; Howarth, 1998a; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Palmer, 1991). They indicate that, simply by relying on the meanings of collocational constituent elements, it is hard to draw a clear distinction between collocations that are either predictable or not.

As far as the dividing points on the continuum are concerned, researchers have yet to reach an agreement. Nonetheless, the criteria for categorizing different types of word combinations basically include semantic transparency, degree of substitutability, and degree of productivity (Carter, 1987; Howarth, 1998b; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992). On the one end of the collocational continuum are free combinations with the highest degree of productivity, semantic transparency, and substitutability of items for their constituent elements. On the other end are idioms that are the least productive, the most opaque in semantics, and the most frozen in terms of substitutability of elements. Between these two extremes are different types of restricted collocations.

At present, we still lack a clear, non-controversial and all-embracing definition of collocation (Fontenelle, 1994). Consequently, researchers tend to use different

terms and scopes to describe the syntagmatic relationships between lexical items (Granger, 1998; Moon, 1992). The current study adopts Howarth's (1998b) categorization model of lexical collocations because the model provides a thorough explanation of the classification criteria and easy-to-follow examples. In the model, the collocational continuum contains four categories of collocations: (a) free combinations, (b) restricted collocations, (c) figurative idioms, and (d) pure idioms. A free combination derives its meaning from composing the literal meaning of individual elements, and its constituents are freely substitutable. A typical example provided by Howarth is *blow a trumpet* restricted collocation is more limited in the selection of compositional elements and usually has one component that is used in a specialized context, e.g., *blow a fuse*. For idioms that are semantically opaque or highly frozen, Howarth further divides them into figurative and pure idioms. While a figurative idiom has a metaphorical meaning as a whole that can somehow be derived from its literal interpretation, a pure idiom has a unitary meaning that is totally unpredictable from the meaning of its components. The example Howarth gives for the two types are *blow your own trumpet* and *blow the gaff*, respectively.

Factors Influencing Performance in Collocation

Recent empirical studies have identified several factors that may influence learners' performance in producing collocations. These factors include semantic fields, meaning boundaries, and collocational restrictions. The semantic field of a lexicon is determined by its conceptual field. Examples of conceptual fields include color, kinship and marital relations (Allan, 2001). Biskup (1992) examined Polish and German EFL learners' performance in English collocations. He concluded that the wider the semantic field of a given lexical item, the more L1 interference errors it might trigger. For example, a number of subjects provided **lead a bookshop* for the target collocation *run a bookshop*, which was clearly an instance of L1 interference. In the same vein, the more synonyms an item had, the more difficulties learners encountered in producing a restricted collocation. Lennon (1996) also pointed out the reasons accounting for learners' erroneous use of high frequency verbs such as *put*, *go*, and *take*. The main reason lays in these verbs' rich polysemy and syntactic complexity. As they formed phrases with prepositions, these verbs created

collocational restrictions that required special attention to their collocational environments. These lexical properties surely created different degrees of difficulty for learners.

The second factor concerns the influence of learners' native language. Because of the commonality of some human situations, different languages have parallel fixed expressions that are syntactically and semantically similar (Moon, 1992; Teliya, Bragina, Oparina and Sandomirskaya, 1998). Due to cultural specificity, however, certain elements embedded in these expressions differ across languages. For example, English and Russian have a restricted collocation to express the process of forming a person's character. The English collocation is to mold someone's character, whereas the Russian expression *vuikovuivat' kharakte* means literally, to forge someone's character. This Russian collocation is associated with a blacksmith hammering at a metal object to give it firmness and hardness. Though the English expression is also connected with a firm object, it emphasizes the idea of giving shape to an originally shapeless mass (Teliya et al., 1998). These similar but distinct expressions may cause a negative transfer from learners' L1 (Granger, 1998). L1 influence is most prevalent when learners perform translation tasks. Lacking collocational knowledge, learners rely heavily on the L1 as the only resource and thus do better in those collocations that have L1 equivalents than those that do not (Bahns, 1993; Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995).

The third factor has to do with individual learners' collocational competence. Granger (1998) and Howarth (1998a), by comparing the writing corpora of ESL/EFL learners and native English speakers, both reported that these learners generally demonstrated deficient knowledge of English collocations. Compared with their native-speaker counterparts, the FSL/EFL learners produced a lower percentage of conventional collocations but a higher percentage of deviant combinations. These learners tended to have a weak sense of the salience of collocational patterns. Other researchers such as Bahns and Eldaw (1993) and Farghal and Obiedat (1995) reported likewise. They found that L2 learners had a big gap between their receptive and productive knowledge of collocations.

Teliya et al. (1998) identified culture-related knowledge as another dimension embodied in the issue of lexical competence. They argued that the use of some lexical collocations was restricted by certain cultural

stereotypes. Metaphorical collocates, for instance, served as clues to the cultural data associated with the meaning of restricted collocations. Lack of cultural competence might be responsible for learners' failure to acquire such culturally-marked collocations. This was especially true in the case of idioms because their metaphorical meanings were highly connected with cultural connotations and discourse stereotypes.

Idioms represent a unique form of collocation; arid several factors affect their comprehension and production. These include the context, in which the idioms are situated, the meanings of the constituents of an idiom, and learners' conceptual knowledge of metaphors and figurative competence (Gibbs, 1995; Hamblin and Gibbs, 1999; Levorato, 1993). Idioms are perceived to be more appropriate by native speakers when the context of the idiom is aligned with the intended meaning. Gibbs (1995) argued that for every analyzable idiom salient part-for example, the main verb-could determine the meaning of the entire idiomatic expression. Based on the outcomes of a series of studies, Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) concluded that learners' figurative competence would also influence their comprehension of idioms.

Strategies in Dealing with Collocations

Due to insufficient knowledge of collocations, English learners may adopt certain strategies to produce collocations and thus create certain types of errors. The strategy used most commonly is transfer in which learners rely on L1 equivalents when they fail to find the desired lexical items in the L2. The Polish subjects in the study by Biskup (1992) mentioned above, for instance, were aware of the significant difference between their L1 and English in terms of linguistic structure. Hence, their error types reflected an extension of L2 meaning the basis of L1 equivalents. On the other hand, the group of German learners was inclined to assume formal similarities between their L1 and English. As a result, they made errors such as language switches and blends. The transfer strategy may also reflect the learners' assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between their L1 and L2. As Farghal and Obiedat (1995) pointed out, positive transfer occurred when the target collocations matched those in the L1, while negative transfer appeared when no corresponding patterns could be found in the L1.

The second strategy is avoidance (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Howarth, 1998).

Second language learners may avoid the target lexical items because they fail to retrieve the appropriate items of which they have passive knowledge. As a consequence, they alter the intended meaning of the collocations (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Howarth, 1998b).

The third strategy often used by learners is paraphrasing, or using synonyms. Learners may substitute the target item with a synonymous alternative and use paraphrasing to express the target collocations with which they are not familiar. For example, the German learners in Biskup's study (1992) adopted more creative strategies than the Polish learners. They thus provided more descriptive answers such as substituting *crack a nut* with *break a nut open*.

Also, noteworthy is the study by Farghal and Obiedat (1995), who investigated the use of synonyms by Arabic EFL learners; the study revealed that the subjects' heavy reliance on the open choice principle for item selection led to deviant and incorrect collocations. Additionally, the researchers found that the more collocations learners acquired, the fewer paraphrases they used in their L2 production. In this case, paraphrasing was generally used as an escape-hatch that helped communication proceed.

There are of course other strategies frequently adopted by learners. For example, learners may experiment by creating a collocation that they think is substitutable for the target one (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Granger, 1998). Granger (1998) noticed in her corpus of French essays that learners created collocations they considered to be acceptable such as *ferociously menacing* and *shapelessly exploited*. Apparently, these unconventional word combinations were a result of learners' creative invention. Howarth (1998b) examined the errors in the corpus of non-native writers and identified some other strategies including analogies and repetition. These writers created collocations based on a familiar L2 collocation. For instance, they drew an analogy between *adopt a method* and *adopt an approach*. However, this strategy might also lead to the overgeneralization of collocability. An example of this would be *adopting ways*, an idiomatic expression which would likely have marginal usage among non-native speakers. The non-native writers in Granger's (1998) study tended to use a limited number of collocations repeatedly such as the combination of *very* with a variety of adjectives. The strategy of repetition was particularly favored when learners did not possess sufficient knowledge of collocation.

Studies on Collocational Knowledge

In fact, local studies on collocational knowledge are very rare. Hussein (1988) assessed EFL college students' competence in collocating words correctly in English. The results indicated that the overall students' level of performance was low. Errors were due to negative transfer, unfamiliarity with idiom structure, and overgeneralization. Hajjawi (1991) duplicated the above study and tested the students' competence in collocating words correctly in English. The results showed that the subjects did relatively well in collocating words which are frequently used in daily life. Errors were also attributed to interference from the native language, unfamiliarity with idiom structures, and overgeneralizations.

In another context, Channel (1981) tested a group of eight advanced students in collocating words. The result of the test showed that how learners fail to realize words which collocate even if they know them well. Channel believed that knowing the meaning of words only is not enough. Students need to know how words are related to each other, and which words can be used together and in which contexts.

Gitsaki (2002) examined how the development of collocational knowledge relates to the overall development of language proficiency with a particular intention in identifying possible stages in the development of L2 collocational knowledge. Results show that there are patterns of development of collocational knowledge across and within the different levels. Collocational knowledge was shown to increase steadily as the level of proficiency increased. It was found that the collocational knowledge to be influenced by the syntactic complexity of the collocation types, and also by exposure and maturation.

Sagiura (2004) investigated the English collocational knowledge of Japanese learners. The study used a corpus of learner data with paraphrases by a native speaker. This parallel corpus made it possible to compare differences between usage by learners and native speakers on a word-by-word basis. The results indicated that the amount of learners' collocational knowledge was proven to be smaller than the native speaker's. The results also suggest that these differences concerning collocational knowledge may explain the unnaturalness of language learners' sentence production.

Li (2005) examined the acquisition of collocational in the Chinese students from the productive aspect by investigation the acquisition of collocations at three

proficiency levels. The results have shown that there are indeed proficiency-related differences in the acquisition of collocations and that there are specific types of collocations that are acquired in the early stages of language learning, and some types are acquired in the later stages of language learning.

Design and Methodology

Subjects of the Study

The sample is perse the population of the study. It consists of thirty M.A students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language (11 males and 19 females who ranged from 25 to 35 years). All of them are B.A (English) holders and teaching English as a foreign language. Their teaching experience ranged from 5-10 years.

Instrument of the Study

The instrument was a completion test adapted by the researcher that measured the subject's knowledge in four types of lexical collocations: free combinations, restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms (Howarth, 1998 b). Most sentences involved in the test were adapted from Booker's *Longman active American idioms* (1994).

The test consisted of 40 items in the form of free response with ten items in each collocational category (Appendix 1). Each item contained two or three sentences that provided a context in which a specific collocation or idiom about, food or animals were embedded. By referring to the sentential context, a subject was required to fill in an appropriate word to complete the target collocation or idiom.

The 40 test items were distributed to four sections according to their roles as a part of speech. Each section comprised separate test items falling into the four types of collocations previously mentioned. Section A required subjects to fill in an appropriate verb, Section B an adjective, and Section C a noun about food. Target items in Section D were nouns related to animals. Examples for each type of lexical collocations are given below. (The number in front of each example is its item number in the test).

Free combination -11. Those boys and girls don't----orange juice. They prefer something special, like pineapple juice or punch. (Fill in a verb.)

Restricted collocation -25. They also provide -----

drinks at the party for those who don't drink alcohol. (Fill in an adjective.)

Figurative idiom -34. A lazy person always gives the excuse that working is not his cup of ----- . (Fill in a noun about food.)

Pure idiom -47. The Browns bought a very cheap house, but later they spent a lot of money repairing it. We all think that they bought a-----in a poke. (Fill. in a noun about animal).

Validity of the Test

The test content was validated by jury of five English language EFL specialists. The jury were asked to validate the content of the test with regard to test instructions, its suitability to the research goals and objectives, the number and arrangement of questions, and the suitability of the time allocated to the test. The remarks of the validating team, their notes and suggestions were taken into consideration, and the researcher made the necessary modifications before administering the test.

Reliability of the Test

The test reliability was obtained through a test-retest method, which was applied on a pilot group of five students who were randomly chosen from the population of the study and excluded from the sample. The test was repeated on the same group to check its reliability two weeks later. The reliability correlation coefficient of the test-retest was calculated using Pearson correlation formula. It was found to be (0.95), which is considered to be suitable from a statistical point of view.

Data Collection Procedures

The test was administered in a special session arranged by the researcher who is the instructor of the students. Each subject was allowed sufficient time to work individually on the test items. It took about 35 minutes for all the subjects to finish the test. Before the test started, the researcher provided directions and encouraged the subjects to answer each question or take educated guesses if they were unsure of the answer.

The subjects' answer sheets were collected and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The correct answers provided by each subject were first marked. Special consideration in scoring was given to test words under the categories of free combinations and restricted collocations. An answer that showed a correct choice of lexicon but had wrong

inflections was judged to be correct. Note the example below.

It is possible that after several decades, children may not know how a pig (...). This may happen because they have never seen a pig.

In this case, answers such as *walks, walk, walking* were all counted as correct because the focus of the SCT was on the correct choice of collocates. The response word *walk* can collocate perfectly with *pig* in this sentence, and thus the inflectional errors in verbs or numbers of nouns were ignored.

The criteria applied to items under the categories of figurative and pure idioms were slightly different. Look at the following example:

We -----a whale of time at Paul's birthday party yesterday: It was really fun.

The answers *had, have, has* were all counted as correct. The choice of the verb to *have* was correct for this idiom and the error in verbal inflection did not affect the meaning of the idiom. Accordingly, the above responses were all considered correct. This principle does not apply to the following example.

Ten years ago, the streets in Chicago were dirty and public services were awful. The city had really gone to the -----But now it's much better.

In this situation, the word *dogs* was the only correct answer while the alternative word *dog* failed to fit this pure idiom, a type of collation that is completely frozen. No freedom was allowed for a subject to change plurality to singularity in this idiom.

In the quantitative analysis, the number of correct responses for each test word was counted, as were the numbers of blank responses and deviant answers.

Descriptive statistics were then generated to compare subjects' performance in each category and observe the relative difficulty of different categories. The mean under each category represented the average number of subjects who answered the test items in the category correctly. The average number of blank responses in each category was also counted because it indicated the difficulty level perceived by the subjects. Since students were encouraged to answer each test item without leaving any blanks, the blank responses may suggest that they were unable to provide even an educated guess due to the difficulty of the item. Another indicator of item difficulty is the number of variations in subjects' incorrect answers. It was suspected that subjects would provide more variations for the items they perceive more challenging.

In addition, a qualitative paradigm was used to analyze the collocational clusters subjects provided for each category. This application aimed to reveal which words caused confusion in terms of their collocability and which lexical collocations were especially challenging to the respondents.

Findings of the Study

Table (1) displays the average percentage of correct responses for each category. The mean of the free combination category is dramatically higher than that of the other three. The category of figurative and pure idioms, as predicted, has the lowest means. The results have confirmed the hypothesis that free combinations appear to be the easiest to deal with, whereas pure idioms are the most challenging. The results also revealed that figurative idioms are more difficult than restricted collocations.

Table (1): Descriptive statistics of the subjects' performance in four categories (N =30)

	Free combinations	Restricted collocations	Figurative Pure idioms	
Mean	24.10	10.05	7.30	4.00
SD	4.25	4.15	5.04	5.00

The same tendency emerged when the researcher examined the average numbers of subjects' deviant answers (exclusive of the correct answers provided) and blank responses. As shown in Table (2), the subjects gave

considerably fewer deviant answers and blank responses for free combinations than in the other three categories. The figures in the categories of restricted collocations and figurative idioms do not show a great difference;

indicating that subjects faced an equal level of difficulty for these two categories. Among the four types, pure idioms triggered the most deviant answers and blank responses. Although subjects were encouraged not to skip

any items by engaging in guessing, on average approximately one fifth of the subjects failed to provide at least a guess for at least one of the pure idioms.

Table (2): Average numbers of blank responses and variations of incorrect answers in four categories (N = 30)

	Free Combinations	Restricted collocations	Figurative idioms	Pure idioms
Blank responses	1.7	7.6	9.7	12.8
Incorrect answers	7.6	18.3	23.2	26.6

For restricted collocations and both figurative and pure idioms, the subjects created a large number of variations of incorrect answers. The enormous amount of varieties of deviant answers implies their lack of collocational knowledge.

An analysis of subjects' collocational errors in each category suggests that test items created different degrees of difficulty for the subjects. For all test words in free combinations, more than two thirds of the subjects answered correctly except for items 14 (*how a pig -*) and 22 (*-food*). Only 21 out of 30 responded correctly for these two items. For item 14, some subjects provided deviant answers that did not comply with the syntactic structure of the indirect question starting with *how*, e.g., *is*, *like*. Item 22 required the subjects to fill in an appropriate adjective that collocates with *food*. Many of the deviant answers, however, contained lexical items of other parts of speech and spelling errors. As for the category of restricted collocations, no subjects correctly answered items 19 (*milk their cows*) or 27 (*soup. ..too thick/solid/stiff to stir*). Items 18 (*hen. ..hatch produce eggs*), 33 (*food stamps*), 17 (*make/propose/drink a toast*), and 25 (*soft/non-alcoholic drinks*) were also very difficult, as fewer than ten subjects responded appropriately.

The subjects had an equally unsatisfactory performance in figurative idioms. None of them could give a correct answer for items 110 (*smell a rat*), 210 (*a dark horse*), 211 (*beat a dead horse*) and 45 (*a bull in a china shop*). By contrast, more than half of the subjects correctly answered item 43 (*a paper tiger*). Similarly, their performance in item 34 (*his cup of tea*) was also remarkable, with 12 out of 30 subjects providing the correct answer. Pure idioms, as expected, proved to be

extremely demanding for the subjects, as none of them managed to provide a correct answer for half of the test items. The other half of the test items with the exception of item 111 (*had a whale of a time*) was also difficult, as only one or two subjects came up with the correct answers. 17 subjects out of 30 provided a correct choice for item 111, though they made a great number of inflectional errors. The reason may be that these subjects made an analogy of this idiom with *have fun* or *have a good time*. Otherwise, they would not be able to answer it correctly because pure idioms are frozen in terms of lexical collocability and meaning fixation. On the other hand, their deviant answers may, to a great extent, also have resulted from guessing. Taking this into account, the researcher did not further analyze their collocational errors in pure idioms.

In comparison with pure idioms, the subjects' deviant answers for restricted collocations and figurative idioms may shed light on their knowledge of collocations since these two categories allow a certain degree of flexibility in lexical combinations. For this reason, a qualitative approach was utilized to analyze the collocational errors the subjects created in these two categories. Table (3) shows the deviant answers for each test item. Only test items involving more than 5 respondents are displayed.

Note: The number in the parentheses indicates the number of subjects who responded to a target item. The deviant answers provided here are incomplete, since only test items involving more than 5 respondents are counted.

The deviant answers provided by the subjects may demonstrate L1 transfer. For example, for item 15 the subjects chose *eat* to collocate' with, *a bite*, which is a direct translation from Arabic. Other collocations that have L1 equivalents include *trees "grow fruit* (item 16),

.red tea (item 24), *pure coffee (item 26), soup. ..too ~dry to stir (item 27), and *black horse (item 210) in the case of figurative idioms. The influence of the first language is not always negative. There could be positive transfer that helps the subjects to locate the correct idioms, an

example being a paper tiger (item 43). This English idiom has an Arabic equivalent that shares exactly the same meaning with its English counterpart. This explains why it is the only test word answered correctly by more than half of the subjects.

Table (3): Correct and deviant answers for restricted collocations and figurative idioms (N = 30)

Restricted Collocations			Figurative Idioms		
Item	Correct answers	Deviant answers	Item	Correct answers	Deviant answers
15	Take(4), have(1)	Eat(18)	110	Smell(0)	Like(6), have, Haven't (4)
16	Have(9),produce(1)	Are(8),grow/grows/ growing/grew (6)	28	Big (3)	Important (60)
17	Make(5)	Take(7), go(6)	29	Hot(7)	Big (6)
18	Produce(2), have(3)	Get (8)	210	Dark(10)	Good(7), black(5)
19	Milk(0)	Take (6)	211	Dead(0)	Big (6)
24	Black(11)strong(1)	Red (70)	34	Tea(11)	Coffee(10)
25	Soft(4),non Alcoholic (7)	---	42	Fish(4)	Pig (5), dog(5)
26	Black (7)	Pure (6)	43	Tiger(17)	Dog (6)
27	Thick(0),stiff(0) Solid(0)	Dry (6), sweet(5)	44	Dog(6)	Donkey (6)
33	Food (2)	-----	45	Bull(0)	Monkey (6),cat (6)

For some items, the subjects seemed to fail to recognize the target collocations as somewhat fixed expressions. They then provided a lexical item that did not form a restricted collocation or an idiom with the neighboring words. For example, 10 subjects substituted tea with coffee in the idiom one's cup of tea (item 34). The other examples were an important cheese instead of a big cheese (item 28) and a good horse instead of a dark horse (item 210). They also avoided using the target item by adopting another one and thus altered the meaning of the expression. An instance of this would be -take their cows instead of milk their cows (item 19).

When choosing answers for idioms about animals, the subjects tended to activate their cultural stereotypes of the characteristics of certain animals. They employed this strategy when confronted with the puzzle of an unfamiliar collocation. Unfortunately, they quite often ended up with the wrong answers. For instance, a dog's life (item 44) means a life of hardship. Subjects who substituted dog with donkey might be inspired by the phrase work hard in the preceding sentence. They then made the analogy of the donkey, which is associated with the image of a hard-working animal in the Arab culture. For item 45, subjects who chose a monkey in a china shop might think that

monkeys tend to fool around and mess up things. When they could not obtain any clue for the answers, they tended to choose high-frequency words. This inclination becomes clear when we notice a certain number of subjects providing the deviant answers of are, take, go, get, like, have, and big.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to investigate Jordanian EFL graduate students' knowledge of English collocations in four categories of collocations. The results indicated that free combinations created the least amount of difficulty, whereas pure idioms were the most challenging. Restricted collocations and figurative idioms were equally difficult for the subjects, who performed only slightly better in these two categories than in the pure idioms category. Most subjects' collocational errors could be attributed to negative transfer from their first language. Also, some subjects chose to adopt the strategies of avoidance and analogy. In some instances, their deviant answers demonstrated the influence of cultural stereotypes and a lack of awareness of collocational restrictions.

Overall, the quantitative results show that these EFL learners have insufficient knowledge of English collocations. In the face of idioms that are frozen in meaning or highly restrictive in the selection of collocates, they have little choice but to give up. These learners' poor performance in restricted collocations lend credence to the viewpoints of Bahns and Eldaw (1993), who assume that learners' collocational knowledge seems not to parallel their competence in vocabulary. Taking this into consideration, many researchers have proposed that restricted collocations are the most important categories to teach or learn (Biskup, 1992; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Granger, 1998; Howarth, 1998). It is the type of word combination that falls between the two ends of the collocational continuum. It is fair to claim that idioms have a more restricted context for their usage and can be easily avoided since avoidance is a strategy adopted frequently by learners lacking the passive/active knowledge for a target task. In comparison, restricted collocations are almost unavoidable in learners' speech and writing production. This is also an area that is often neglected because no specific perception problems are posed when learners encounter a new collocation. As Biskup (1992) and Balms and Eldaw (1993) suggest, learners' understanding of English collocations does not imply satisfactory productive knowledge of collocations nor does their collocational competence progress with the development of their vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, collocations should be explicitly taught with emphasis on the restricted type and on learners' productive knowledge.

As shown in the analysis of the error types produced by the subjects, the L1 plays a crucial role in their production of English collocations. The prevalent strategy of transfer reflects learners' assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the L1 and L2. Positive transfer thus occurs when the target collocations match those in the L1. The figurative idiom a paper tiger is one such example. Conversely, negative transfer appears when no corresponding patterns can be found in the L1, such as *eat a bite for take a bite, a *black horse~ for a dark horse, and *red tea for black tea, just to name a few. Accordingly, when teaching collocations, teachers need to compare and contrast similar collocations in the L1 and L2. It would also be useful to point out the different lexical items used in the parallel collocations in English and learners' L1 by presenting a variety of examples. Learners can thus attend to the lexicon-semantic distinctions between the two languages and

reduce errors caused by L1 interference.

The learners' tendency to use high-frequency words to substitute for the target lexical items is a significant finding. It reminds us that these learners have scant awareness of collocational restrictions and are also confused by the different collocates these words can take. For example, quite a few subjects substituted make with take or go for the collocation make a toast. About one fourth of the subjects substituted have/ produce with be in item 16 (trees-fruit). This practice recalls Lennon's (1996) study in which he explored advanced EFL learners' errors in producing some common verbs. Lennon concluded that learners' errors were due to a hazy lexical knowledge in polysemy, collocational restrictions, and phrasal verb combinations. These learners relied too heavily on their ideas of the core meaning of polysemous verbs. When learning the target language, therefore, EFL learners need to explore the meaning-range and collocational restrictions of high-frequency lexical items.

Likewise, Farghal and Obiedat (1995) emphasize teaching vocabulary collocationally instead of individually. In teaching collocations, both intralingual and interlingual approaches need to be addressed. With an intralingual approach, teachers can juxtapose various meanings of a lexical item with different collocates to sensitize learners to the differences. In comparison, an interlingual approach makes use of current corpora of collocations produced by native English speakers. It functions to attract learners' attention to the native like usage of collocations.

Another major type of subjects' collocational errors, especially those in producing idioms, is attributed to their lack of cultural awareness. Teliya et al. (1998) propose phraseology as a language of culture since cultural stereotypes are most prominent in the idioms of a language. The Russian collocations on emotions, for example, are connected with local images of nature and hence are culturally marked. The restricted collocation *food stamp* in the current study is another culturally specific concept that confuses Jordanian EFL learners unfamiliar with socio-cultural situations in the U.S. Since the meanings of idioms often involve cultural and historical data, teaching idioms through a cultural perspective may foster the processing and retention of L2 idioms. Making comparisons between similar L1 and L2 idioms may also allow learners to associate their mental images of the L1 idiom with the counterpart. They thus have a greater chance to enhance the processing of L2 idioms.

With regard to the acquisition of idioms, Harmblin and Gibbs (1999) propose a method quite different from the traditional ones, which tend to emphasize learning idioms mainly by rote memorization. In a series of experiments, they have found that figurative idioms are usually decomposable in such a way that the parts contribute to the overall meaning of the idioms. Even the frozen, non-decomposable pure idioms are, to some degree, analyzable in that their meaning is partly determined by the meaning of the idioms' main verbs. Therefore, learners can acquire L2 idioms by considering the historical origins of words, understanding the cultural stereotypes implied by the idioms, attending to contextual information, and capturing the meaning of the core verb of an idiom.

CONCLUSIONS

- Generally, the subjects in this study performed unsatisfactorily in producing English collocations.
- Free combinations created the least amount of difficulty, whereas pure idioms were the most challenging.
- Restricted collocations and figurative idioms were equally difficult for the subjects, who performed only slightly better in these two categories than in the pure idioms category.
- L1 plays a crucial role in the production of English collocations.
- A major type of subjects' collocational errors, especially those in producing idioms, is attributed to their lack of cultural awareness.
- Learners have scant awareness of collocational restrictions and are also confused by the different collocates these words can take.

Implications

- The performance of the subjects in the type of restricted collocations implies a general unawareness of the semantic range and selectional restrictions of the English lexicon. This problem may spring from

their habit of learning English vocabulary as isolated words. Theoretically, learning a new lexicon actually means learning its cultural connotations, semantic fields and collocational restrictions. Only through this can learners promote their phraseological competence to an ideal level for effective communication in written and oral language.

- The teaching of collocations inevitably needs to be integrated with the teaching of vocabulary, which can be effectively carried out by both intralingual and interlingual approaches.
- ESL/EFL teachers need to address the cultural data, metaphorical meanings, and the historical origins associated with the collocations to be introduced. In addition, dictionaries on collocations can foster the development of collocational competence so long as they provide examples of lexical items with different collocates, indicate different environments associated with a particular collocation, and highlight the subtle distinctions between collocations that appear to be structurally similar.

Recommendations:

- To get a clear picture of ESL/EFL learners' collocational knowledge in English, more research should target other types of collocation: phrasal verbs, the lexical combinations of adjectives and nouns, or collocations of other topics.
- The need exists for research on how the similarity between English and learners' L1s affects their performance in collocations.
- It would be useful to explore whether learners from diverse backgrounds encounter different degrees of L1 interference.
- We also need more data pertaining to learners' use of collocations in their L1 and English in order to determine how cultural and linguistic background or individual characteristics influence learners' performance. Based on empirical results from studies of this nature.

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