

Analysis of Collocational Errors of Thai EFL Students

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Abstract

The present study aimed to analyze collocational errors produced by Thai EFL students at two proficiency levels, to examine whether such errors are attributed to first language interference, and to investigate other plausible sources of errors. A total of 60 high school students were recruited to participate in this study. Each student was required to take two collocational tests: (1) a 45-item multiple-choice test and (2) an 18-item Thai-English translation test. The two tests consisted of nine major types of collocations, which included nine lexical and three grammatical collocation patterns. The results revealed that the performance of Thai EFL students in both the receptive test and the productive test appeared to be influenced by mother-tongue transfer when they were confronted with difficulties in dealing with English collocations. Furthermore, it was discovered that there were other potential factors that contributed to the high degree of collocational errors committed by the high-proficiency and low-proficiency groups, namely the synonymy strategy, the learners' creative invention and the strategy of analogy, the paraphrasing strategy, and low knowledge of collocational skills.

Keywords: Collocation, Collocational error, EFL learner, Language transfer, Learners' proficiency levels

Introduction

It is undeniably difficult for EFL learners to perform native-like writing. This is not only the case for intermediate-level EFL learners but even for advanced-level learners. Great attention is paid to grammatical aspects, whereas the importance of collocations is overlooked; likewise, lexical choices in a second language structure are often arbitrarily and improperly produced. As a result, certain combinations of words may become awkward although they are grammatically accurate. Such erroneous combinations are called miscollocations.

In Thailand, grammatical structures as well as definitions of new words have been more heavily emphasized in foreign language classes than collocations (Boonyasquan, 2006). "when learning a new word, it is important to learn it with its frequent co-occurrence/s or word partner/s, or what is called a collocation. Learning a new word in isolation is not meaningful and can easily cause problems for learners" (Boonyasquan, 2006, p. 79). Accordingly, non-native learners of English should pay more attention to knowledge of collocations so as to reduce errors they make in the target language (TL). Wang & Shaw (2008) confirm this notion by saying, "In learning another language, it is evident that we have to learn both grammatical correctness and idiomatic preference", otherwise the production of lexical errors and improper use of words could result. The problem probably involves the interference of EFL learners' native language, which affects the acquisition of the second language (L2) due to differences in

the systems of the native language and the target language (p. 202). It is likely that EFL learners express their ideas through their mother tongue first and then translate them literally to the second language (Odlin, 1989). Sadeghi (2010) claims that EFL/ESL learners tend to encode and decode language through their native language; however, this can cause learners to make collocational errors because of incorrect assumptions about word-for-word translation of equivalence from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2).

It is hoped that the results of this study will provide EFL learners with some helpful guidance in order to minimize the number of collocational errors in second language production. In the following part, the literature review relevant to definitions and categorization of collocations and L1 transfer is presented.

Literature Review

Definitions and Categorization of Collocations

Overlapping definitions of collocations have been discussed for a number of years (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986a; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005; Nation, 1990; Sinclair, Jones, & Daley, 2004). However, the consensus on a definition of collocation focuses on the co-occurrence of words. The term *collocation* can be separated into parts, containing its own meaning, “*col-* (from *com-* meaning “together, with”), *-loc-* (meaning “to place or put”), *-ate* (a verb suffix), and *-ion* (a noun suffix)” (Nation, 1990, p. 32). In other words, collocations refer to words that are placed together. This concept is related to that of McCarthy & O'Dell (2005), who define collocation as a close word combination with other words as in the following examples: *too* collocates with *much* or *late*; the word *tall* seems to collocate with *building* and *high* with *mountain*. Lewis (2000) has elaborated that collocation can be considered as the method of unexpected natural co-occurrence with lexical items in a context. A more interesting definition has been given by McCarthy & O'Dell (2005), who claimed that collocations could be constructed semantically and syntactically from words developing as chunks that are acceptable and understandable by native speakers; for instance, *tall person* instead of **high person* and *statistically significant* instead of **statistically important*.

A number of researchers have attempted to classify collocations into different categories (Benson, E., Benson, M., & Ilson, R., 1986a; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000). Collocations, according to Lewis (2000), can be divided into two main classifications: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations.

1. **Lexical collocations** consist of two content words or open class words, which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Lewis has classified lexical collocations into six types, as illustrated below:

e.g.

adjective + noun	<i>a difficult decision</i>
verb + noun	<i>submit a report</i>
noun + noun	<i>radio station</i>
verb + adverb	<i>examine thoroughly</i>
adverb + adjective	<i>extremely inconvenient</i>
noun + verb	<i>the fog closed in</i>

(Lewis, 2000, p. 133)

2. Grammatical collocations are derived from the combination of one open class word, e.g. noun, verb, adjective, etc., and one closed class, which is mainly a preposition.

e.g.

adjective + preposition	<i>aware of</i>
verb + preposition	<i>step into</i>
noun + preposition	<i>emphasis on</i>

(Lewis, 2000, p. 134)

L1 Transfer

First language transfer is regarded as a crucial factor of second language acquisition influencing EFL learners' production of collocations (Nesselhauf, 2003). For example, Boonyasquan (2006) examined erroneous use of English collocations among Thai EFL university students. She concluded that the effect of cross-linguistic influence accounted for participants' erroneous answers. In addition, Mongkolchai (2008)'s findings revealed that L1 transfer may lead participants to make collocational errors, whereas Chen (2008) found that the lexical and grammatical miscollocations were the result of inadequate collocation knowledge. Nonetheless, Ellis (1994) proposed that "Where the two collocations were identical, learning could take place easily through *positive transfer* of the native-language pattern, but where they were different, learning difficulty arose and errors resulting from *negative transfer* were likely to occur (p. 300)." For instance, Swedish and Chinese learners in Wang & Shaw's study (2008) formed L2 collocations such as **do changes*, **do a great effort*, **make damage* and **make the cleaning*, which reflected negative L1 transfer.

Furthermore, Phoocharoensil (2011) discovered evidence of L1 transfer in Thai learners' writing. Most of the problems found are concerned with prepositions. That is, they seemed to drop a preposition where there must be one. For instance, the verb *listen* was used as if it were a transitive verb immediately followed by a noun, e.g. *music*. In other words, the obligatory preposition *to* is often omitted. By contrast, preposition addition was noticed in the learner corpus. For example, the preposition *from* ungrammatically appears right after the verb *left*, which reflects the pattern of this verb in L1 Thai. Apart from grammatical collocation errors, the subjects apparently also produced erroneous lexical collocations based on direct translation from Thai. They, for instance, created deviant constructions, e.g. *play Internet* and *play computer*, both of which probably stemmed from L1 interference.

Learners' strategies in L2 collocation learning

In addition to L1 transfer, past studies also revealed learning strategies applied in the process of L2 collocation acquisition. One of the most common strategies employed concerns synonymy. As indicated by Farghal & Obiedat (1995), Arabic EFL students replaced an English word with its synonym probably on the assumption that they can be used interchangeably, which by and large results in deviations in the target language. Likewise, Howarth (1996, 1998) showed English learners' problems emanating from a false analogy between collocates of two synonymous words. For instance, the erroneous combination **adopt ways* was believed to be caused by analogy with *adopt an approach*.

As regards Thai EFL students' collocational use, Phoochaorensil (2011) demonstrated that the participants evidently depended on the synonymy strategy in their L2 English collocation production. They, in other words, may take the view that a word can be replaced by its synonyms in every context, which is not always that case. Such a strategy often leads to improper collocations in the target language (Phoocharoensil, 2010). Some examples of deviant combinations influenced by synonymy are **peaceable home* for *peaceful home* and **authentically believe* for *truly believe*.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between English collocational errors in Thai EFL learners' writing and native language transfer?
2. What are other sources of collocational errors, in addition to native language transfer, produced by Thai EFL learners?

Hypotheses 1

Thai EFL learners' native language influence contributes to their English collocational errors.

Hypotheses 2

In addition to native language transfer, other factors contributing to Thai EFL learners' collocational errors are the strategy of paraphrasing, the strategy of synonymy, learners' creative invention and the strategy of analogy, and low knowledge of grammatical collocations.

Research Methodology

Participants

A total of 60 twelfth-grade students at Satri Si Suriyothai School in Bangkok were the participants in this study. They were equally assigned to a high-proficiency group (30 students) and a low-proficiency group (30 students) according to their English scores on the General Aptitude Test (GAT). The score range considered as the high group was 90 or above out of 150. Those whose scores were below 81 were assigned to the low group.

Instruments

The research instrument consists of two collocational tests: (1) a 45-item multiple-choice test that measured the receptive skill of collocation use and (2) an 18-item Thai-English translation test that examined the productive collocational knowledge. Each collocational test contained two main categories: the grammatical and lexical collocations, which consists of six lexical and three grammatical collocational patterns proposed by Lewis (2000).

The test items in the multiple-choice test and the translation test were mainly chosen from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2009). The selection of items was based on 3,000 English words that EFL learners should know in order to understand a basic English text.

Table 1.1 Collocational Categories of Items in the Two Writing Tests

Item Types	No. of Items in Each Test	
	Multiple-Choice	Translation
Lexical	30	12
Grammatical	15	6
Lexical Patterns		
Adjective + Noun	5	2
Verb + Noun	5	2
Noun + Noun	5	2
Verb + Adverb	5	2
Adverb + Adjective	5	2
Noun + Verb	5	2
Grammatical Patterns		
Adjective + Preposition	5	2
Verb + Preposition	5	2
Noun + Preposition	5	2
Total Items	45	18

Procedure

The two tests were administered to the two groups of participants after the regular class. They were asked to complete the multiple-choice test and the translation test without any interaction with their classmates. Clear test instructions were provided for them and they were not allowed to use any kind of dictionary or reference during the tests.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The students' responses were analyzed in terms of whether they were acceptable collocations in English based on the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2009), *British National Corpus (BNC)*, and *Google Search*. Then, possible sources of collocational errors were identified.

With regard to the multiple-choice test and the translation test, the students' answers were scored as correct and incorrect answers (correct = 1, incorrect = 0). Blank answers were excluded from the data analysis. The errors found were then analyzed to determine the sources of collocational errors. Moreover, as regards the translation test, the present study adopted Boonyasquan (2006)'s framework for investigating other possible sources of collocational errors existing in EFL learners' process of writing.

Table 1.2: Sources of Collocational Errors

No.	Plausible Sources of Collocational Errors
1	The Strategy of Synonymy
2	Learners' Creative Invention and the Strategy of Analogies
3	The Strategy of Paraphrasing
4	Low Knowledge of Grammatical Collocations

(Boonyasquan, 2006, pp. 86-87)

Results and Discussion

Lexical and Grammatical Collocational Errors and L1 Transfer

The research findings reveal that a number of miscollocations produced by both the high and low proficiency groups in the multiple-choice test and the translation test may have resulted from their native language transfer.

In relation to the multiple-choice test, it was discovered that many Thai EFL students with high and low proficiency were unable to properly select lexical collocations. As for the adjective + noun collocation shown in (1), Thai students chose *thick* to combine with the noun *traffic*, which results in a collocational error. It may be assumed that they transferred the pattern of the Thai collocation /*gaan jà-raa-jon*/ 'traffic' + /*nǎa nǎen*/ 'heavy, thick' into *thick traffic*, rather than the target collocation *heavy traffic* in English. Similarly, regarding the verb + noun collocation in (2), the students made the error **build an impression* instead of *make an impression*. Such an error seemed to be caused by L1 transfer as they probably relied on the direct translation of the L1 structure /*sāang*/ 'build' + /*kwaam bprà-táp jai*/ 'impression'.

(1) *The **thick** *traffic* made me late for my appointment.

- Thai collocation: /*gaan jà-raa-jon*/ 'traffic' + /*nǎa nǎen*/ 'thick'
- Thai equivalent: ***thick** *traffic*
- Target English collocation: *heavy traffic*
-

(2) *The new manager failed to **build** *an impression* in the first meeting.

- Thai collocation: /*sāang*/ 'build' + /*kwaam bprà-táp jai*/ 'impression'
- Thai equivalent: ***build** *impression*
- Target English collocation: *make an impression*

Another clear instance of L1 interference was the misuse of grammatical collocations. In (3) and (4), wrong combinations of the adjective + preposition and the verb + preposition can be noticed respectively. The participants incorrectly selected **skillful in* for *skillful at* and **depend with* for *depend on*. These errors reveal that they tended to resort to L1 knowledge to form the target collocation since **skillful in* equals to /*mee fěe meu*/ 'skillfu' + /*nai*/ 'in' and **depend with* is equivalent to /*kêun yòo*/ 'depend' + /*gàp*/ 'with', which are comprehensible in Thai. Therefore, they freely used the preposition *in* and *with* to collocate with *skillful* and *depend* respectively, which is inappropriate in English.

(3) *He became *skillful* **in** drawing.

- Thai collocation: /mee fěe meu/ 'skillful' + /nai/ 'in'
- Thai equivalent: **skillful in*
- Target English collocation: *skillful at*
-

(4) *The future of the company will *depend* **with** how consumers respond.

- Thai collocation: /kêun yòo/ 'depend' + /gàp/ 'with'
- Thai equivalent: **depend with*
- Target English collocation: *depend on*

With regard to the translation test, (5) and (6) also show that the high and low proficiency students relied heavily on their native language in the process of translation. As for **intensive coffee* and **concentrated coffee* in (5), it is obvious that the participants may have been unaware of the target collocation and unable to find the English semantic equivalent of /gaa-fae kêun kôn/ 'strong coffee'. Possibly, the literal translation from Thai may have led to **intensive coffee* and **concentrated coffee*. Moreover, the errors in (6) **find money* and **look for money* also demonstrate that the learners may have encountered considerable difficulty in dealing with English collocations influenced by L1 interference since in Thai collocations, the combination of *make money* or *earn money* is related to /hăa/ 'find' + /ngern/ 'money', which is literally equivalent to **find money* or **look for money*.

(5) *My father likes drinking an **intensive/ concentrated** coffee.

- Thai collocation: /gaa-fae/ 'coffee' + /kêun kôn/ 'intensive, concentrated'
- Thai equivalents: ***intensive** coffee, ***concentrated** coffee
- Target English collocation: *strong coffee*
- Source Text: พ่อของเขารับดื่มกาแฟเข้มข้น 'My father likes drinking *strong coffee*.'

(6) *His sister needs to **find/ look for** money to study for a Master's degree.

- Thai collocation: /hăa/ 'find, look for' + /ngern/ 'money'
- Thai equivalents: ***find** money, ***look for** money
- Target English collocation: *make money, earn money*
- Source Text: พี่สาวของเขาต้องการหาเงินเพื่อศึกษาต่อปริญญาโท 'His sister needs to *make/earn money* to study for a Master's degree.'

With reference to the abovementioned examples, i.e., (5) and (6), the students' most persistent errors can be traced to L1 since when the participants could not find L1 congruent collocations, they produced the L2 collocation based on collocational knowledge of their mother tongue, which was the major source of collocational deviations. The findings support the work of Shokouhi (2010), who discovered that the distinction of semantic and syntactic structure in the L1 and the TL leads to negative L1 transfer. Furthermore, the results support James (1998) and Gass & Selinker (2008), who claimed that interlingual errors come from foreign language learners' mother tongue (L1) in the target language structure.

Other Possible Sources of Collocational Errors

A large number of plausible sources of errors can be categorized into the strategy of synonymy, learners' creative invention and strategy of analogy, the strategy of paraphrasing, and low knowledge of grammatical collocations.

The Strategy of Synonymy

In addition to native language transfer leading to deviations of collocations, there was some evidence of collocational violations caused by the target language. For example, the miscollocations of verb + noun, as indicated in (7), i.e., **respond telephone* and **reply telephone*, were regarded as collocational errors resulting from the confusion of synonym use. Some of the students might have confused *respond*, *reply* and *answer*, thus interchangeably substituting those words for one another without being aware that the acceptable co-occurrence in English is *answer telephone*. Similarly, the errors in (8), **whispered slightly*, **whispered lightly*, and **whispered silently* potentially resulted from the influence of the native language. It is presumed that some of the high-proficiency and low-proficiency students were unable to differentiate the usage of those words, resulting in erroneous collocations.

(7) *We keep dialing this number but it seems that no one **responds/replies** the telephone.

- Target English collocation: *answer the telephone*

(8) *Mary *whispered* something **slightly/ lightly/ silently** in John's ears.

- Target English collocation: *whispered softly*
- Source Text: แม่ที่กระซิบที่ข้างหูจอห์นเบาๆ ‘Mary *whispered* something *softly* in John's ears.’

Learners' Creative Invention and the Strategy of Analogies

Other sources that caused students to make collocational errors seem to concern learners' application of creative invention and the strategy of analogies. For example, in the incorrect use of the adjective + noun collocation in (9), the students substituted *steamed rice* with **boiled rice* and **jasmine rice*. They might have thought that the words *boiled* and *jasmine* could be used with the noun *rice* to convey the meaning of *steamed rice* because **boiled rice* could possibly be referred to as rice that is cooked and then steamed, whereas **jasmine rice*, “sometimes known as *Thai fragrant rice*, is a long-grain variety of rice” (Jasmine Rice, 2011). The creation of such deviant combinations may have been due to the false analogy of the adjective + noun collocation; it can be assumed that they relied on the application of creative invention and the strategy of analogies to create the erroneous L2 collocations because they were not familiar with the target collocation. As a consequence, the resulting combinations are considered non-standard.

(9) *I prefer **boiled/jasmine** rice to porridge.

- Target English collocation: *steamed rice*
- Source Text: ฉันชอบกินข้าวสวยมากกว่าข้าวต้ม ‘I prefer *steamed rice* to porridge.’

Application of the Paraphrasing Strategy

The results of the study further indicate that the students appeared to use the strategy of paraphrasing when they were unable to find target words. From (10), students could probably not figure out the equivalent of the source text, hence they paraphrased it into **exactly quiet*, **pretty quiet*, **too quiet* in order to retain the original meaning. Nevertheless, the acceptable collocation in English should be *unusually quiet* or *abnormally quiet*.

(10) *Everyone in this room was **exactly/ pretty/ too** quiet.

- Target English collocations: *unusually/abnormally quiet*
- Source Text: ทุกคนในห้องนี้ดู**เงียบผิดปกติ** ‘Everyone in this room was *unusually/abnormally quiet*.’

Low Knowledge of Grammatical Collocations

Another factor contributing to miscollocations is attributable to the limited knowledge of L2 collocations. In the study of lexical and grammatical use of collocations of Taiwanese, Chen (2008) reported that students’ collocational incompetence was related to insufficient knowledge of English collocations that resulted from different learning backgrounds and learning styles. Likewise, Thai EFL learners in the study seemed to have similar problems. For instance, as illustrated in (11) – (13), the miscollocations of **parallel at* and **parallel on* in (11), **divided toward* and **divided for* in (12), and **lack from* and **lack at* in (13) were probably due to the students having difficulty utilizing the prepositions *at* and *on* with the adjective *parallel* in (11), the prepositions *toward* and *for* with the verb *divide* in (12) and the preposition *from* and *at* with the noun *lack* in (13) as a result of the absence of L2 collocational knowledge. In other words, they may not have been aware of the obligatory use of the preposition with each of these words and ended up supplying an improper one, leading to an erroneous grammatical collocation.

(11) *The canal is roughly *parallel at/ on* the main road.

- Target English collocation: *parallel to*

(12) *This report is *divided* broadly **toward/ for** two parts.

- Target English collocation: *divided into*

(13) *I have lost those skills through *lack from/ at* practice.

- Target English collocation: *lack of*

Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that Thai EFL students with high and low proficiency have problems with English collocation formation, with the deviant answers collected from the receptive and productive test illustrating the learners’ confusion over the use of lexical and grammatical collocations. Such problems resulting in collocational violations may obviously originate from the negative transfer of the first language, which supports the results of previous studies (e.g. Boonyasquan, 2006; Koya, 2003; Mongkolchai, 2008; Wang & Shaw, 2008). Moreover, other reasons for the misuse of collocations were (1) the application of synonymy, (2) the strategy of learners’ creative invention and the strategy of analogies, (3) the strategy of paraphrasing and (4) inadequate collocational knowledge in English.

Pedagogical Implications

As this study found that Thai EFL learners committed collocational errors based on different sources, EFL teachers should raise awareness of the significance of collocations and foster collocational competence among Thai students. Instead of focusing merely on grammatical accuracy and definitions of single words, teachers should provide examples of collocational differences between L1 and L2, particularly collocations without an equivalent in L1, as this would diminish the number of errors in English collocations and develop more effective communication. As Fan (2009, p. 121) pointed out, “a pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of L2 collocations focuses not only on words in isolation but also on the using together of lexical words, or lexical and grammatical words in teaching”. Hsu (2010) further advised that collocation instruction enhances subjects’ performance and improves their vocabulary learning more than their reading comprehension.

Additionally, a collocation dictionary is relatively useful for the development of collocational knowledge and is recommended for EFL learners. As Lewis (2000, p. 99) suggested, the use of a collocational dictionary will facilitate students’ collocational usage and is necessary for some activities in classes “with intermediate and more advanced learners”.

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