AN INVESTIGATION INTO LEXICAL COLLOCATIONAL ERRORS IN ESSAYS COMMITTED BY ENGLISH-EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY AT HANOI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at classifying main types of lexical collocational errors and identifying the possible causes of those errors in 63 essays by third-year students majoring in both English and Early Childhood Education at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) based on the taxonomy proposed by Benson et al (1997) and Richards (1973). It was found that Type 1 (verb+noun) in lexical collocational errors occurred most frequently in the participants' writings and the lexical collocational errors are mainly due to the interlingual interference of Vietnamese. Some pedagogical implications are presented to alleviate those errors.

Keywords: *Lexical collocations, errors, essays, case study*

1. Introduction

Over seven years of teaching English to Vietnamese learners, the writers of this paper have realized that despite having sufficient lexical or grammatical knowledge, Vietnamese EFL learners seem to experience serious problems with the production of collocational patterns. Such erroneous expressions as *discuss about the causes of pollution*, *make decrease*, and *go travel*, just to name a few, are not due to poor mastery of grammar or lexis but stem mainly from lack of appropriate collocational knowledge. Therefore, identifying the problems that Vietnamese EFL learners have with different types of collocations, reasons for those errors and remedies to deal with them seems to be necessary and highlights the significance of the present study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of collocations

According to Firth (1957) [1], a pioneer in collocation research, collocations are "words in habitual company".

Richards and Schmidt (2002:87) [2] describe collocation as "the way in which words are used together regularly." Based on this notion, collocation refers to the restrictions on how words can be collocated together; for example, which verbs and nouns go together, or which adjectives are used with particular nouns. For example, in English, the verb make collocates with friends, mistakes, or a phone call, but not with exercise.

Carter (1987) [3] regarded collocations as crucial factors of lexical coherence and stressed the need of teaching collocations at all levels of language proficiency. In many cases, native speakers may find it difficult to understand a non-native speakers due to unfamiliar accents and inaccurate pronunciation; nevertheless, native speakers can unconsciously anticipate the meaning of sentences based on collocations. In other words,

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collocations, to some extent, may help compensate for such conversational problems.

In the present study, the definition of collocations focuses on co-occurrence of words, and the classification of collocations is based on the categories of collocations proposed by Benson et al (1997) [4]. They classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, such as acquire knowledge, arouse my interest, relieve pressure, high ambitions and follow closely. On the other hand, grammatical collocations are phrases containing a dominant word, such as a noun, an adjective, or a verb and a preposition or grammatical structure like an infinitive or clause, such as feel sorry to, listen to the music, major in, and had to write.

2.2. Errors and mistakes

An error and a mistake are not identical, so they should be differentiated from each other. According to Yulianti (2007:9) [5],

- A mistake is a performance error, which is either a random guess or a 'slip', such as a failure to utilize a known system correctly.

- An error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the inter language competence of the learner.

The author also clearly differentiated a mistake from an error by stating:

- A mistake is a slip that a learner can self-correct.

- An error is what a learner cannot self-correct.

From those definitions above, the writer goes to a conclusion that a mistake is just a slip that the learner forgets the right form. While, an error is a deviation that is made by the learner because he/she does not know the rule and he/she may make it repetitively.

2.3. Sources of error occurrence

The sources of error occurrence according to Ancker (2000:1) [6]:

(1) Interference from the native language: The learner may assume that the target language and his native language are similar. Then, he will over generalize the rules of his native language and the target language.

(2) An incomplete knowledge of the target language: Because of the incomplete knowledge, the learner may make guesses. When he has something that he does not know, he may guess what it should be there.

(3) The complexity of the target language: Certain aspects in target language are sometimes difficult for some learners and even more complex than their native language, which can cause students many troubles.

3. Research objectives

This paper is an attempt to analyze lexical collocational errors that constantly occur in English essays of the EFL Vietnamese learners. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What lexical collocational error types are made by the participants?

2. What are the possible causes of the lexical collocational errors?

Possible lexical collocational errors found in the students' writing are underlined according to the seven subtypes of lexical collocations mentioned in Table 1 below. The first six labels of subtypes are suggested by Benson et al (1997) [4] while the seventh 'noun+ noun' subtype proposed by Hausmann (1999) [7].

Table 1: *Types of lexical collocations*

Type	Pattern	Example
1	**verb +noun**	*make an impression*
2	**verb +adverb**	*appreciate sincerely*
3	**adjective + noun**	*heavy rain*
4	**adverb +adjective**	*strictly accurate*
5	**noun + noun**	*a school boy*
6	**noun of noun**	*a bunch of banana*
7	**noun + verb naming an action**	*bees buzz*

In order to decide on the acceptability of the learner-made collocations, Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English, which gives access to over 150,000 collocations for nearly 9,000 headwords, available online at http://oxforddictionary.so8848.com/, is utilized.

4. Data collection

The participants, 21 third-year students who major in English and Early Childhood Education from Hanoi National University of Education, were asked to write essays on three different topics (Advantages and Disadvantages of Mobile Phones, Smoking, and Public Transports) as homework assignments without knowing that their writings were going to be under investigation. 63 pieces of essays were analyzed to identify lexical collocational errors.

5. Discussion of findings

After finishing the process of analyzing the participants' essays, it was found out that there were **160** lexical collocational errors in the subjects' writings. These errors were classified and distributed according to the seven subtypes of lexical collocations (as shown in the following table).

Table 2: *Types of lexical collocations, their number and percentage*

Type	Pattern	Number of errors	Percentage (%)
1	**verb +noun**	**95**	**59.4**
2	**verb +adverb**	**11**	**6.9**
3	**adjective + noun**	**31**	**19.4**
4	**adverb +adjective**	**3**	**1.9**
5	**noun + noun**	**11**	**7**
6	**noun of noun**	**7**	**4.4**
7	**noun + verb naming an action**	**2**	**1**
Total		**160**	**100**

According to the above table, it was found out that Type 1 (verb + noun) in lexical collocational errors occurred most frequently in the participants'

writings, occupying 59.4%, followed by Type 3 (adjective + noun) with 19.4 %. The rate for Type 2 (verb + adverb) is as high as for Type 5 (noun + noun), with about 7%. Type 6 (noun1 of noun2), Type 4 (adverb + adjective), and Type 7 (noun + verb naming an action) make up 4.4 %, 1.9 %, and 1 %, respectively.

In order to answer the second question of this study to understand and investigate why the participants made the lexical collocational errors, it is important to find out the sources of these errors. According to Richards (1973) [8], the incorrect lexical collocations could be attributed to the following sources:

Table 3: *Sources of Collocational Errors*

Sources of collocation errors		Percentage (%)
Inter-lingual Transfer	Negative Transfer	34
Intralingual Transfer	Ignorance of Rule Restrictions	19
	False Concept Hypothesized	12.5
	Overgeneralization	18
	Misuse of Synonym	5.5
Paraphrase	Word coinage & Approximation	11

5.1. Negative Transfer

Richards (1974:35) [9] states that inter-lingual errors are errors caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue. Errors of this nature are frequent, regardless of the learner's language background. Therefore, inter-lingual errors are caused by interference from native language to the target language that they learn. Before someone masters the concept of the target language they will use the concept of their native language. This kind of error is called inter-lingual errors.

As Zhiliang (2011) [10] put it: the main impediment to learning was interference from prior knowledge. Proactive inhibition occurrs when old habits get in the way of attempts to learn new ones. In such cases, the old habits have to be "unlearnt" so that they can be replaced by new ones. In the case of the second language (L2) learning, however, the notion of "unlearning" makes little sense, as learners clearly do not need to forget their mother tongue (L1) in order to acquire an L2, although, in some cases, the loss of the native language might take place eventually. Where the two are identical, learning can take place easily through positive transfer of the native-language pattern, but where they are different, learning difficultly arise and errors or inappropriate forms in the target language resulting from negative transfer are likely to occur.

The followings are some extracts taken from participants' writings for illustrating the lexical collocational errors resulting from negative transfer.

Table 4: *Examples of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from negative transfer*

Type	Learner Collocations	Target Collocations
1	*When people take part in public transport, people can save money.*	*When people use public transport, people can save money.*
3	*Travelling by bus is a beautiful culture.*	*Travelling by bus is a good habit.*
5	*Studying aboard can give students chance job.*	*Studying aboard can give students job opportunities.*
1	*Without mobile phones, we can meet a lot of difficulties.*	*Without mobile phones, we can have a lot of difficulties.*
1	*Smoking can have an influence to human health.*	*Smoking can have an influence on human health.*

In the first extract, instead of using the phrase *use public transport,* the participant uses *take part in public transport,* which might confuse the native speakers and challenge their interpretation. This error can be explained by the fact that in Vietnamese it is common to say *tham gia giao thông*, which is literally translated as *take part in public transport* in English.

In the final extract, it can seen that both English and Vietnamese languages have prepositions, but it seems that Vietnamese people look at things from a different angle and hence sometimes use prepositions differently. When talking about "influence" as "ảnh hưởng", Vietnamese people often use the prepositions "tới", which is a Vietnamese equivalent of "to" in English. This explains the reason why one participant writes "*Smoking can have an influence to human health.*" instead of "*Smoking can have an influence on human health.*"

5.2. Ignorance of Rule Restrictions

Errors of *ignorance of rule restrictions,* which belong to *intralingual transfer,* are caused by the failure to observe the restrictions of existing structure. According to Richards (1974) [9], ignorance of rule restrictions is the inability to uphold the limits of present formations, specifically, administering rules to inappropriate situations.

Misordering can be a good example of such errors which are caused by ignorance of rule restrictions. Here are some of the participants' writing samples which are incorrect.

Table 5: *Examples of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from ignorance of rule restrictions*

Type	Learner Collocations	Target Collocations
2	*The mobile phone affects your life both pros and cons.*	*The mobile phone affect your life positively and negatively.*
2	*Mobile phone can help people connect easy.*	*Mobile phone can help people connect easily.*
5	*Lungcancer is the problem serious in our society today.*	*Lungcancer is the serious problem in our society today.*

In the extracts above, the students failed to observe the English grammar, in which adverbs modify verbs and adjectives often precede nouns.

5.3. Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization means the creation of a deviant structure in place of two regular structures on the basis of the students' experience of the target language. For example, some learners think that *is* is the marker of the present tense, so they produce: He is talk to the teacher. Similarly, they think that *was* is the past tense marker. Hence, they say: It was happened last night.

In the sample below, the student use the collocation *the following essay discusses about the pros and cons of smoking* instead of *the following essay discusses the pros and cons of smoking* based on their generalization of *talk about.*

Table 6: *Examples of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from overgeneralization*

Type	Learners' Collocations	Target Collocations
3	*The following essay discusses about the pros and cons of smoking*	*The following essay discusses the pros and cons of smoking*

5.4. False Concept Hypothesized

Another category of *intralingual transfer* is *false concepts hypothesized errors*, known as *semantic errors* resulting from faulty or partial learning of L2, rather than from language transfer (Richards, 1973) [8].

The learners might form hypotheses about some grammatical rules of the L2. For example, an L2 learner might interpret using the forms 'was or did' wrongly when he/she thinks that these forms are markers of the past tenses; therefore, he/she produces utterances such as *'one day it was happened'* or *'she was finished the homework'* (Richards, 1971) [11].

Table 7: *Examples of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from false concepts hypothesized*

Type	Learners' Collocations	Target Collocations
2	*It is increasing fastly.*	*It is increasing fast.*
2	*When you use the mobile phone, you often stay up lately.*	*When you use the mobile phone, you often stay up late.*

In the examples above, it can be seen that the committed errors are closely connected with and not totally different from overgeneralization, the use of previously available strategies in new situations. Specifically, the learners create a deviant structure of *increasing fastly,* in which *fastly* does not exist in English, and *lately,* which has a diferent meaning from *late,* on the basis of their experience of forming adverbs from adjectives.

5.5. The Misuse of Synonym

As can be seen from the data, some incorrect lexical collocations occur because of the misuse of synonyms. It

was found out that the participants failed to know the collocabitity of *broaden* with *vision* (instead of *broaden your eyesight*) or *hurried* with *pace of life* (instead of *rapid pace of life*)**.** The following table shows some examples of incorrect lexical collocations caused by the misuse of synonym.

Table 8: *Example of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from the misuse of synonym*

Type	Learner Collocations	Target Collocations
3	*Studying abroad is a big dream of many students.*	*Studying abroad is a great dream of many students.*
3	*Hurried pace of life*	*Rapid pace of life*
3	*We aren't afraid of <u>big rain</u> when we travel by bus.*	*We aren't afraid of heavy rain when we travel by bus.*

5.6. Word coinage & Approximation

Word coinage is a kind of method adopted to build new words or new collocations based on something already known in order to express a desired concept.

Approximation refers to the fact that learners use incorrect words or structures which share enough semantic and morphological features to satisfy the needs of expressing the desired meaning. For example, *safe* is used to get the sense of *protect; talk* is used to express the idea of *tell*; or *boat* is for *ship*.

Table 9: *Examples of data on participants' lexical collocational errors resulting from word coinage and approximation*

Type	Learner Collocations	Target Collocations
1	*They must wait for a long time to <u>have a bus or a train</u>.*	*They must wait for a long time to catch a bus or a train.*
1	*They should not smoke to <u>safe the environment</u>.*	*They should not smoke to protect the environment.*
3	*Smoking can cause <u>unaccept behaviors</u>.*	*Smoking can cause unacceptable behaviors.*

6. Pedagogical suggestions and conclusion

Having explained the sources of interlingual and intralingual errors, it could be clearly noticed that they are interrelated and quite similar to one another. These sources can only give us ideas about the ways in which such errors can perhaps occur, and how pedagogical and psychological factors might result in errors (Mohammad, 2016:56) [12].

The research findings fuel the demand for a more effective educational method to improve the usage of collocations in English. Three practical approaches are believed to be necessary for both lecturers and students to utilize optimally English lexical collocations.

6.1. Stressing the importance of error–based analysis: First, teachers should do research on categories of mis-collocations. Through identifying the learners' miscollocations, teachers not

only understand the learners' miscollocations but also incorporate them into the classroom at proper times to improve and extend vocabulary teaching. Then comes the designing lexical collocation exercises for the learners to practice. This way will enable the learners to develop and distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable lexical collocations. Here is an example.

Choose the correct choice.

1. Single parents ____children without a partner's support are entitled to financial help from the government. (*grow/raise*)

2. I've never been very successful at _____ plants. (*raise/grow*)

3. Jack has already _____ a very good reputation as a talented lawyer. (*achieve/win*)

4. I hope your flight is on time tomorrow. Safe_____ (*trip/journey*)

5. He has to stay at home and take care of his wife. His wife is _____ a baby. (*expect/wait*)

In order to improve students' sense of collocation, it is important for teachers of English to attach sufficient importance to the teaching of collocation when teaching vocabulary. The teaching of a new word must be conducted in a given context rather than in isolation. The teacher should divert students' attention to the exact context the new word used in and encourage them to try to remember the collocation the word appears in.

6.2. Asking students to pay attention to error correction and make use of English collocation dictionaries: Although there are many techniques which help language learners notice the language, teachers should put responsibility for error correction first and foremost on the student. This can be done through self-correction, group correction, and student-to-student correction. Following these techniques offers the language learners the opportunity to notice their errors.

More importantly, to encourage students' responsibility in learning how to use English collocation properly, a good dictionary can work. Dictionaries such as Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary or Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English can help the learners develop better awareness of lexical collocations. Online collocations dictionary for students of English is also a suggested alternative to meet the demand of developing a good sense of collocation.

The following is the collocation of *love* on the online OXFORD Collocation Dictionary with detailed and comprehensive explanations and examples.

Online OXFORD Collocation Dictionary

love *noun*

ADJ. **deep, great, overwhelming, passionate** *her deep love for him* | **genuine, pure, real, true** | **unconditional** | **abiding, eternal, undying** *He had an abiding love of the English countryside. You have my undying love.* | **hopeless, unrequited** *a sad tale of unrequited love* | **thwarted** *a play about thwarted love* | **mutual** | **free** *They were into free love and avoided commitment.* | **first** *I like most sports but tennis is my first love.* | **brotherly, maternal, parental, sisterly** | **courtly, platonic, romantic** *the cult of courtly love in twelfth-century Aquitaine* | **erotic, physical, sexual** | **heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian** | **redemptive** | **divine, human**

VERB + LOVE **feel, have** *She felt no love for him. He had a great love of life.* | **search for, seek** | **find** *At last she had found true love.* | **express, show** | **declare, profess** *They publicly declared their love for each other.* | **promise** *'You promised me love!' he cried despairingly.* | **return** *He didn't return her love.* | **share** *They share a love of music.* | **give sb, send (sb)** *Bob sends his love.* | **be in, fall in** *He fell in love with one of his students.* | **fall out of** | **make** (= have sex) *It was the first time they had made love. He wanted to make love to her.*

LOVE + NOUN **affair** | **life** | **letter** | **scene, song, story**

PREP. **for/out of** ~ *I did it for love!* | **in** ~ *We are very much in love.* | ~ **between** *the love between parent and child* | ~ **for** *He did not know how to express his love for her.* | ~ **of** *She had a great love of painting.*

PHRASES **an act of love, deeply/madly/passionately in love** *I was madly in love with her.* | **desperately/hopelessly in love, head over heels in love, love at first sight** *Do you believe in love at first sight?* | **the love of sb's life** *She was the love of his life.*

love *verb*

ADV. **dearly, deeply, passionately, really, tenderly, very much** *He loved his wife dearly.* | **unconditionally** *He wanted to be unconditionally loved.*

6.3. Asking students to staying away from literal translation: The majority of collocation errors collected in this study result from translating Vietnamese to English. The participants merely translated and combined words with words to make collocations; as a consequence, they mostly sound unnatural and illegitimate. Consequently, it is imperative for EFL lecturers to remind their students that literal translation should be used with great caution.

Despite stressing the need for an error–based analysis, this study also emphasizes that the errors can help and should be taken positively. These errors can be considered indicators of the learners' language competence at a certain point of time. They are also considered as an obligatory feature of learning because they give the researcher evidence of how far the learner has come and what he still must learn and they are devices learners used to test out their hypothesis concerning the language they are learning.

In this paper, seven main types of lexical error committed by the third-year double-majored students at Hanoi National University of Education are investigated and described. The study also reveals that the students normally have difficulties with collocations of the **verb + noun** pattern, which result from the interference of Vietnamese, the incomplete knowledge of the English and its complexity. Some pedagogical recommendations are also suggested to deal with those problems. The study is therefore hoped to be a valuable reference for both teachers and students.

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PHÂN TÍCH LỖI SAI VỀ MẶT KẾT HỢP TỪ VỰNG TRONG BÀI VIẾT LUẬN CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH – GIÁO DỤC MẦM NON: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU TÌNH HUỐNG TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM HÀ NỘI

TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu được tiến hành trên 63 bài viết luận của sinh viên năm thứ ba chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh - Giáo dục Mầm Non tại trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội nhằm chỉ ra những loại lỗi sai cơ bản về mặt kết hợp từ vựng và xác định các nguyên nhân gây ra các lỗi sai đó. Nghiên cứu dựa trên khung lý thuyết được đề xuất bởi Benson và cộng sự (1997) và Richards (1973). Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy lỗi sai về mặt kết hợp từ vựng xảy ra phổ biến nhất khi động từ được kết hợp với danh từ và nguyên nhân chính của các lỗi sai là do sự ảnh hưởng của tư duy và cách diễn đạt của tiếng mẹ đẻ. Từ đó, một số khuyến nghị về mặt sư phạm được đưa ra nhằm khắc phục vấn đề.

Từ khóa: *Kết hợp từ vựng, lỗi sai, bài luận, nghiên cứu tình huống*