The Use Of Collocations By Advanced Learners Of English: Noun –Noun And Adjective-Noun Collocations

Gözde Balıkçı
Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education
Middle East Technical University, Turkey
balikci@metu.edu.tr

Abstract: The study's main aim is to find out how advanced learners of English whose mother tongue is Turkish are dealing with collocations and where these learners' main errors stem from. In order to have a basic insight into the sources of error, the learners' written works will be exploited. The students are at the department of langugage teaching education and they will be the prospective teachers of English. This paper attempts to investigate these students' written works to figure out to what extent they make use of collocations, their sources of errors and mistakes.

Introduction

In the field of second language learning and teaching, the question of how to learn/ teach huge amount of vocabulary of a foreign language has always been discussed. There have been lots of methods and techniques developed to find solution to this vocabulary learning problem. "With the growth of corpus linguistics there has been increasing interest in collocations. In addition, Lewis' influential Lexical Approach (1993) stressed the importance of learning collocations." (Shin& Nation, 2008). Firth who was the introducer of the term "collocation" claims that "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (as cited in Kennedy, 2003).Therefore, he claimed that collocations should be taken into consideration while teaching and learning vocabulary.

This small scale study primarily concerned with the concept of collocation and the use of collocations by advanced learners of English who are also prospective teachers' of English. It is important to know how advanced learners of English who are probably learning and using that language for at least five years are dealing with collocations. While the necessity of teaching and learning collocations are widely accepted among the researchers, it is worth investigating the use of collocations by the prospective teachers who are real practitioners in the classroom. If they give importance to the collocations and make use of them, then it may be concluded that they will teach collocations to their students, as well.

Therefore, this study attempts to investigate twenty advanced learners' of English writings studying in the Foreign Language Teaching Department to explore their use of collocations specifically adjective- noun and noun -noun collocations. The main questions are; do they use these types of collocations while writing essays, how many noun-noun and adjective-noun collocations do they use and what are their mistakes while producing these collocations.

In order to answer these questions, twenty students' analysis papers are investigated and noun-noun and adjective-noun pairs are manually extracted from the text. Then, these pairs are counted and it is decided whether they can be called as collocations so their collocational strength is determined by using Oxford Collocations Dictionary (OCD) and British National Corpus (BNC) and Google. It is believed that the results obtained from this study will probably make positive contribution to the field and it will provide us with insights into the use of collocations by advanced learners.

Firstly, as there are various definitions of collocations among the linguists, these definitions and different approaches to collocations and the classification of them will be mentioned and discussed. Then, the importance of collocations for second language learners will be discussed. The studies carried out to investigate the use of collocations by advanced learners will be under investigation and their common findings will be thoroughly examined. Afterwards, the procedure of the study and the results will be explained. The findings and the implications of the study for the field will be carefully examined.

Defining Collocations

As stated above the term "collocation" was first introduced by Firth (1957) who argued that "you shall judge a word by the company it keeps." "Although the concept has long been a popular topic in linguistics there is no universally accepted formal definition of collocation (Lewis, 2001; Grant and Bauer 2004, as cited in Wang& Shaw,2008). "Therefore, there are various terms such as "fixed expression, word-combination, idiom, phrase, prefabricated language." (Wang& Shaw,2008) Leśniewska (2006) has stated that "collocations are notoriously difficult to define and different (often slightly contradictory) definitions proliferate in the literature". In his much quoted study, "Phraseology and Second Language Proficiency" Howarth (1998) has examined various approaches to define collocations and he defines them as "combinations of words with a syntactic function as constituents of sentences (such as noun or prepositional phrases or verb and object constructions). He also pointed out another problem and stated that:

> Although the term phraseology (the study of word combinations) is increasingly used by writers in a number of language related disciplines, the field has perhaps not yet achieved wide recognition in applied linguistics nor are the implications of research within the field fully understood by or easily available to language teachers. (p.24).

Howarth (1998) has provided us with a figure illustrating this continuum;

	Free combinations	Restricted collocations	Figurative Idioms	Pure idioms
Lexical composites verb+noun	Blow a trumpet	Blow a fuse	Blow your own trumpet	Blow the gaff
Grammatical composites Preposition+noun	Under the table	Under attack	Under the microscope	Under the weather

Figure 2 Collocational continuum (Howarth, 1998)

According to Howarth (1998);
> Free combinations (also referred to as open and free collocations) include elements used in their literal senses and freely substitutable (carry a trumpet, on top of the table). Restricted collocations have one component (usually the preposition, verb or adjective 'collocator' of the base noun, to use Haussmann's (1979) terms) that is used in specialized, often figurative sense only found in the context of a limited number of collocates. (p. 28)

Wang&Shaw (2008) define restricted collocations (also referred to as fixed combinations or collocations) usually have one item used in a non-literal sense, often a specialized, or figurative sense, and the other used in its normal meaning such as run a company, bitterly contested. The vocabulary choice is less predictable in this category of collocations than in free collocations. In terms of idioms, figurative ones have metaphorical meanings and have a literal interpretation, pure idioms have a unitary meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of the components, and are the most opaque and fixed category. (p. 28).

The role of collocations in second language learning and teaching

Lewis (1997), in his 'lexical approach' theory points out that fluency in a foreign language is conditioned by the acquisition of a number of pre-fabricated chunks. He also regards collocation as central feature of a language production. (as cited in Leśniewska, 2006). Lewis (2000) has also claimed that the number of collocations understood as word combinations is greater than the number of all words because the same words can occur in various collocations. That is the reason why even advanced learners have difficulties in producing collocations. In addition, collocational competence which is suggested by Hill (1999) enables learners to produce texts which not only grammatically correct or merely probable or hypothetical but, authentic, which means it is this collocation which a native speaker would use in this specific situation. (as cited in Leśniewska, 2006).

Shin & Nation (2008) has discussed the question of why collocations should be learned and taught. They stated that the main reason is "they help learners' language use, both with development of fluency and native like selection." (p.340).

Pawler and Sydner (1983) argue that there is usually more than one possible way of saying something but only one or two of these ways sound natural to a native speaker of the language. (as cited in Shin & Nation ,2008)

Moreover, Oxford Collocations Dictionary claims that "with the right choice of word combinations you can express your ideas much more convincingly". Therefore knowledge of collocations can be considered very important for developing writing skills in a second language, as well.

Collocations as a source of difficulty for advanced learners

Although Nesselhauf (2003) has stated "especially at an advanced level, learners' difficulties with collocations have not been investigated in much detail so far", some important researches have been carried out in this field. DeCock et al(1998), Oppenheim (2000), Foster (2001), and Adolphs and Durrow (2004) have all looked at the use of formulaic language in advanced non-native speech, while Yorio (1989), Granger (1998), Lorenz (1999), Howarth (1998), Kaszubski (2000) and Nesselhauf (2005) have investigated writing (as cited in Durrant &Schmitt, 2009).

Durrant and Schmitt (2009) pointed out the general picture emerged from these studies;

Advanced learners do appear to use formulaic language (in some cases quite self-consciously (Oppenheim 2000), but often not to the same extent as natives (Foster 2001, Granger 1998; Howarth 1998). At the same time, learners tend to overuse (in comparison to native norms) a small range of favourite phrases, especially if they are frequent/ neutral items or are cognate to L1 forms. (Foster (2001) Granger (1998) Kaszubski (2000) Lorenz (1999), Nesselhauf (2005), DeCock et al(1998).

Wang & Shaw (2008) have summarised the results of some other studies investigating collocational errors made by EFL learners. They have stated that one of the difficulties in collocation use is the lack of knowledge as to collocational possibilities of verbs (Lennon, 1996); hence mismatches between lexical items as in *stop the fire* instead of *put out the fire*. A second type of error is blending (Howarth, 1998) such as *pay care* (blend of pay attention and take care). Nesselhauf (2003), in his much quoted study, found out that all errors made by advanced learners of English stem from the mismatch between the verb and noun. Prepositional errors as in the *raise the question about* (raise the question of) and determiner errors as in *get the permission* (get permission) are also fairly frequent among advanced EFL learners.

Most of the studies focusing on the analysis of verb- direct object collocations in a corpus of academic writing (Nesselhauf, 2003, Howarth, 1998) suggest that "the most problematic area for learners in terms of collocational knowledge is made up by the collocations which are on the borderline between free combinations and restricted ones." (as cited in Leśniewska, 2006). Howarth claimed that;

It may be claimed that the problem facing the non-native writer or speaker is knowing which of a range of collocational options are restricted and which are free. Unlike idioms and more restricted collocations, the 'somewhat restricted' word combinations are not learned as wholes. It appears that the ability to manipulate such clusters (collocations which are partly restricted) is a sign of true native speaker competence and is a sign of true native speaker competence and is a useful indicator of degrees of proficiency across the boundary between non-native and native competence"(p.38).

Although it is not possible to find out studies analysing noun-noun or adjective-noun collocations, most of the studies investigating verb- noun collocations find out that the most problematic category for even advanced learners of English is the use of restricted collocations such as *take a picture* (as we cannot say take a movie or film). Leśniewska (2006) states that these findings fit in with certain implications of the psycholinguistics research, namely, that fixed multi-word units, such as idioms, may be less problematic for learners than subtler kinds of restrictions. Because when a second language learner encounters idioms that are opaque and figurative compared to the collocations, the idioms will probably attract the attention of the learners. Therefore; they will be more permanent as they are perceived as salient. In addition, Leśniewska (2006) has claimed that "because of the demanding nature of foreign language production, learners seem to rely on familiar expressions, which recalled as wholes, contribute fluency.

While there is no empirical support for the view that the learners use fewer formulaic expressions, there is evidence that they use fewer restricted collocations." Siyanova&Schmitt (2008) conducted a study investigating processing of adjective –noun collocations (*social services*) among advanced learners of English. Overall, the studies carried out by them suggest that "L2 learners are capable of producing a large number of

appropriate collocations but that underlying intuitions and the fluency with collocations of even advanced learners do not seem to match those of native speakers."

Waller (1993) has carried out research exploring the characteristics of near-native proficiency as they are thought to demonstrate themselves in writing. The texts are collected from both native speakers and non native speakers at the advanced level. In the light of this study, Waller concluded that in learners' writings the most tangible marker of non- nativeness is the use of collocations. He states that "what is even more interesting, however, is that problems in collocational usage were found to be restricted to the texts written by non-native speakers, whereas other problems (e.g. syntactic errors, or lexical errors other than collocational) were found in both groups of texts. Therefore, Waller concludes that the use of collocations may create "a foreign accent in writing". (Waller, 1993, as cited in Leśniewska, 2006).

Kälkvist (1998) reached similar conclusions in his study analyzing the types of collocational errors made by advanced Swedish learners of English. "The most common type of error was that of overextension, which resulted in awkward collocations, pointing to the unawareness of usage restrictions on the part of the students."(as cited in Leśniewska, 2006).

Three main findings aroused from Durrant and Schmitt' study (2009) which investigated both advanced learners and native speakers of English. When compared to native speakers, learners use more high frequency collocations. Also learners make at least as much use of collocations as do natives. In addition, they overuse strong collocations in comparison to native norms. Learners rely on forms which are common in the language. Thus, it may be concluded that second language learners do acquire quite effectively much of the high-frequency phraseology of the target language. (Durrant&Schmitt, 2009). It is suggested that " language teachers wishing to hasten their students along the route of developing an authentic native like phraseology may benefit from drawing their attention to collocations that are less common but strongly associated items (e.g. *densely populated, bated breath, preconceived notions*)" (Durrant&Schmitt, 2009).

These are the studies analysing advanced learners' use of collocations in their written productions. In essence, most of them suggest that advanced learners make use of collocations however; they make mistakes while using the restricted collocations rather than free combinations or idioms. In addition, they may overuse most frequent collocations probably due to the greater exposure to these collocations. Although these various studies appear to give the same results, prior to making generalisations, one should be careful. As Howarth (1998) has warned;

> While analyzing what makes an individual collocation non-standard can help in understanding what the non-native has done on a particular occasion, and some general conclusions can be drawn, there is a need for alternative perspectives to increase our understanding of deeper processes of acquisition such as learner strategies. In discussing strategies in relation to phraseology, one must distinguish between two different phenomena. On the one hand, there is the repeated use of routines and patterns as an early communication strategy used by a speaker to overcome a lack of linguistic resources (discussed in Krashen and Scarcella 1978), on the other hand, there are cognitive strategies used by more advanced learners when consciously attending to collocational knowledge. (p.39).

Howarth (1998) has also listed five strategies the learners adopted while using collocations. Therefore, one should take these strategies into consideration while investigating the use of collocations by the learners. These strategies are "*avoidance, experimentation, transfer, analogy*, and *repetition*." Avoidance refers to the strategy that learners adopt when they cannot produce the target collocation, they can simply avoid using it. Experimentation can be adopted by the risk taker learners. When they do not know an English restricted collocation, they can try to find a synonymous one (free combination). Also the learners can simply transfer a L1 collocation to L2 if they cannot find a suitable one. The process of adapting a known L2 collocation which is called analogy (by substituting one element for another known lexical item) could be regarded as a form of intralingual L2 transfer and it is claimed to be highly productive. Lastly, "repetition can be adopted if the learners do not have enough confidence or inclination to extend collocations by analogy, a writer may fall back on the repeated use of a limited number of known collocations". (p. 41).

Methodology

The participants: For this study, I worked with twenty students nearly at the age of twenty who are first year students in the Foreign Language Education Department at METU. Their educational background and level of English is nearly same. All of them graduated from teacher training high school. They passed YDS and EPE exam to enter the department at which they are studying now. Therefore, they are at advanced level. At the department, they are taking courses contextual grammar, linguistics, advanced reading and writing, oral

communication skills, English literature. Therefore, they are mainly focusing on English language; they also try to develop their language skills. In addition to these must courses, all of them took an elective course; "Critical Reading and Thinking". Throughout the semester, I attended that course in order to make observations.

The Data: During the course, they read articles on some controversial issues such as abortion, gun control, bilingualism, gay marriages and international adoption. Each week is spent on one controversial issue. Besides reading articles on the topic, they watched a movie about the same issue. Then each student is required to write a rhetorical analysis of one issue. In these analysis, they are expected to evaluate the writer's and the director's point of view, their approach to the topics, their way of expressing their thoughts and refuting other people's ideas. While analysing the articles and movies, they try to detect the specific strategies that the writers and directors use. In addition, they try to find out the appeals (logical, emotional, and ethical) that writers achieve to have. Finally, they try to examine the fallacies in the movie or in the articles. Therefore, my data include twenty rhetorical analysis reports sixty seven pages long. Their topics are gun control, gay marriages and international adoption.

According to Leśniewska (2006), there are different ways of assessing collocational knowledge such as analyzing the language production of learners either written or spoken, using corpora of L2 writing analyzing only specific, pre-selected collocations, eliciting collocational decisions of learners for specific items using gap filling tasks or in the form of closed tasks such as multiple choice.(p.96).

The procedure: Of these data collection methods mentioned above, I only used the first one, analyzing the language production of learners in a written form. First of all, I read all of the papers, and then I chose to investigate noun-noun and adjective-noun collocations. In the literature, nearly all of the researchers study the verb-noun collocations as they are more frequent and they are more widely used than the noun-noun or adjective- noun collocations.

Identification of word combinations: The present analysis is limited to directly noun-noun and adjective-noun combinations. They are chosen because they are particularly common in the texts analysed. First of all, all of the noun-noun and adjective- noun pairs are extracted manually. Combinations such as pronouns, possessives, semi determiners- as listed in Biber et al. (1999), i.e. same, other, next, such (as cited in Durrant& Schmitt, 2009) are not included. Also the quotations are not included in the analysis as they do not represent learners' real performance. However, as these papers are analysis papers so learners quoted extensively from the writers of the articles. In addition, when encountered such phrases *currency of the subject matter* I did not separate them. The total number of words that learners write in their papers (including content and function words) is 43986. This procedure retrieved a total of 937 noun-noun and adjective- noun combinations. However, this number includes repeated word combinations as well. I do not name them as collocations yet as some of them have never appeared in the British National Corpus (BNC) or Oxford Collocation Dictionary (OCD).

Calculation of collocational strength: While evaluating these combinations in terms of collocational strength I used BNC, OCD and Google. The main aim of the evaluation is first to find out if the words are really collocating with each other and how frequently they are collocating. BNC is apparently preferred by many researchers (Nesselhauf, 2005, Shin &Nation, 2008, Durrant&Schmitt, 2009). Nesselhauf (2005) explains why he uses BNC in his much quoted study;

> The British National Corpus consists of 100 million words of modern British English. It contains about 90 million words of written language and 10 million words of spoken language of various text typed ranging from formal academic prose and popular fiction to transcribed radio shows and informal conversation. (Nesselhauf, 2005).

OCD is also well known collocation dictionary which contains 150.000 collocations of 9.000 nouns and verbs and adjectives. (Oxford Collocation Dictionary, 2002).

The reason why I used *Google* is trying to find out the frequency of the word combinations. *Google* can be unreliable source of information; therefore I used it with meticulous care. I examined the websites that Google offered to find out whether they are trustable or not. For most of the word combinations I looked at first OCD to find out if the dictionary gives the collocation. If the word combination is in the dictionary, it is accepted as collocation. If not, then I searched the word combination in the BNC. When I could not find the pair in the BNC, then I googled it. If the number of the results given by the *Google* is under thousand, then the word pair is not accepted as collocation, some of them are accepted as free collocations.

The results: The total number of words is retrieved from the twenty papers are 43989. (including content, function words and quoted words). There are sixty seven pages of papers. 285 word combinations are noun –noun collocations, 652 combinations are adjective-noun combinations. All of the collocations in the papers can be found in Appendix A. If we exclude the repeated collocations, there are 698 combinations in which 188 noun-noun combinations and 510 adjective noun combinations occur. Only one noun-noun combination is considered as wrong; *humane sentiment.* (it may be *human sentiment*). 15 adjective-noun combinations are considered as wrong. These findings can be seen in the table and in the figure below;

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Number of papers analysed:	20
The total number of words :	43989
Total page of the papers:	67
The number of combinations (repeated combinations included) :	937
The number of noun-noun combinations (repeated combinations included):	285
The number of adjective-noun combinations (repeated combinations included) :	652
The number of collocations (repeated ones are excluded):	698
The number of noun-noun collocations (repeated ones are excluded):	188
The number of adjective-noun collocations (repeated ones are excluded):	510
The number of noun-noun combinations that are not accepted as collocations	1
The number of adjective-noun combinations that are not accepted as collocations	15

Table 1 Summary of the numbers of retrieved combinations
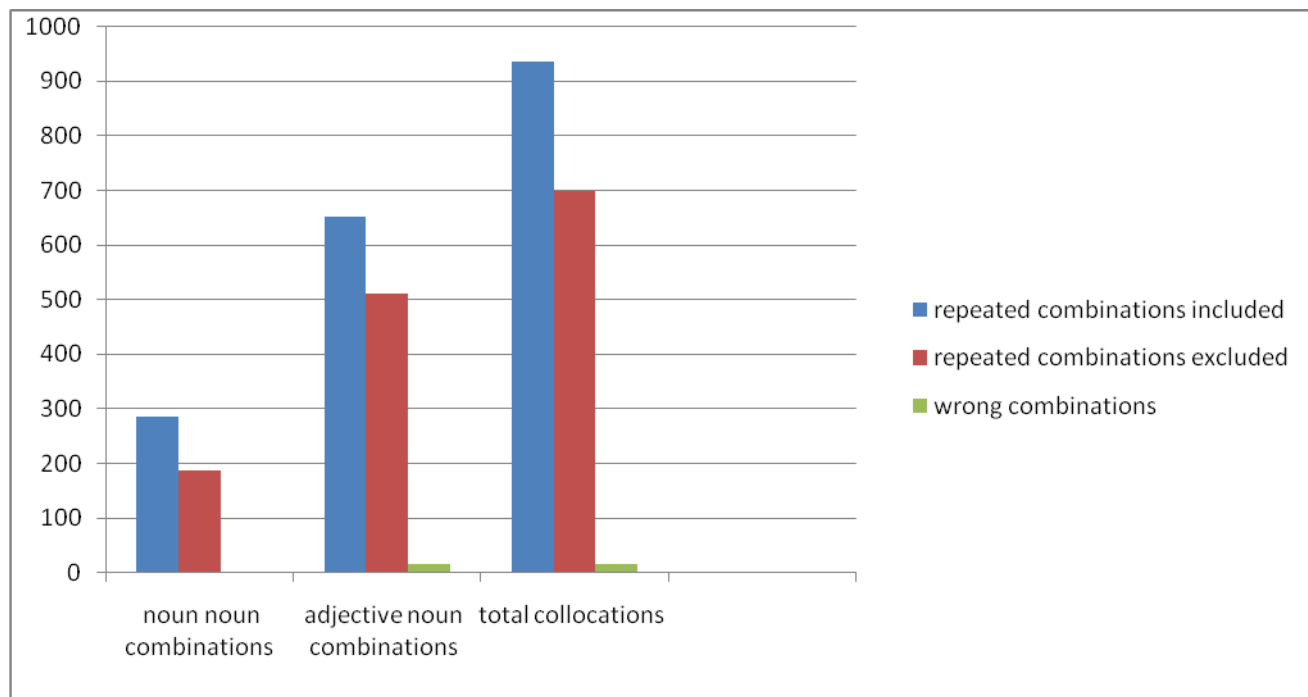
Figure 3 Analysis of the types of collocations

Word combinations that are not accepted as collocations	The possible source of error

1. interrupted internet	L1 transfer
2. first hand related events	Intralingual error
3. certain happenings	Intralingual error
4. neat mantage	Grammatical error
5. second hand alternative	Intralingual error
6. oncoming questions	Intralingual error
7. well known reputation	L1 transfer
8. ethnic roots	L1 transfer
9. respectable awards	L1 transfer
10. furious comments	Intralingual error
11. pathetic movies	Grammatical error
12. pitiable feelings	Intralingual error
13. legitimate judgements	L1 transfer
14. constant beliefs	Intralingual error
15. first hand opinions	Intralingual error

Table 2 Word combinations that are not accepted as collocations and possible sources of errors

The Discussion

The study has aimed to find out the extent to which advanced learners of English make use of word combinations, how learners are dealing with collocations. Although the learners wrote these papers at their homes without time pressure, it may be inferred from the results that they did not use collocations extensively. To be able to write effectively, they should have made use of these word combinations. As Howarth (1998) suggested that learners can use some strategies while using collocations, maybe these students opt to make avoidance and avoid using collocations.

If the collocations are examined thoroughly, it can be clearly seen that the collocations used frequently are the ones used in the course frequently. While they are reading the passages, watching the movies, discussing about the controversial issues, they both use the collocations and they are exposed to these collocations such as *controversial issue, striking movie, logical appeal, violent history, gun issue, emotional issue, single mother, contradictory issues....*Therefore, it may be inferred that exposure to collocations may affect the use of collocations in a positive way. Furthermore, the learners repeated these collocations so they use another strategy Howarth (1998) mentioned; repetition.

Although I did not intend to categorise collocations as free, restricted ones; the findings demonstrate that most of the collocations are free combinations. There are not much strong collocations. Therefore, this study also supports the other studies investigating the use of collocations in advanced learners' writings. As they also find out those learners heavily rely on free collocations as restricted ones are difficult to use (they can be considered more marked than the free collocations.)

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