Collocational Errors in the Use of English among First Year Students of Linguistics, University Of Nigeria, Nsukka

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Abstract

Inappropriate use of any language constitutes communication problem. This paper examines grammatical collocation errors committed by undergraduate students of Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (henceforth, UNN) in the use of English. The specific objectives of this study are to identify the errors of collocation, examine the causes of the errors and proffer suggestions of collocation misuse. The study is a descriptive survey design using qualitative approach. The study population comprises all the first year students of the Department of Linguistics, UNN in 2021/2022 academic session numbering 135 students. Fifty students were sampled in this study using purposive sampling techniques. Written essay is the instrument used for data collection. The data were analysed qualitatively. The findings show that the respondents' corpora deviated from the rules of grammatical collocation in English. Additionally, the study identify inappropriate use of collocation such as omission of collocational elements, inclusion of redundant collocational elements or reduplication, restructuring of collocations, substitution of lexical elements within the collocational structures, and literal translations of L1 structure. The study reveals that partial understanding or

misunderstanding of lexical meanings, interference, and lack of collocation knowledge among others are the causes of the collocation errors. The study suggests that efforts should be made to draw the attention to collocation in the teaching of English registers. Moreover, extensive reading of English medium texts by learners and their participation through the extensive use of aids to vocabulary learning should be encouraged.

Keywords: collocation, English, error, grammar, students

1. Introduction

Each language has its own natural order in which words appear or words are put together in sentences or utterances. This is known as collocation in English. Simply put, collocations are concerned with words; that is relationship between a word and other co-words in sentences. Unlike the native English language speaker, research evidences abound in the literature that show that learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and as well as English as a Foreign Language Learners (EFL) have problems with putting or arranging words together in a characteristic natural native speaker-like manner during speech and writing, hence collocation errors are made. The seemingly lack of collocation competence among most learners of English as a second language and learners of English as a foreign language has been associated to a number of factors. Most studies conducted point to the effect of native language transfer or interference, inadequate collocation knowledge and learning strategy use as the major causes of collocation errors among ESL and EFL.

English language learners must pay more attention to collocation because it is an important thing to learn. It can increase language competence, can enhance learners' communicative skill, and can develop the fluency to be native-like (Li, 2005). Despite the importance of grammatical collocation in terms of making students' writing more understandable as well as natural, truthfully, most students ignore grammatical collocation, and their lack of collocational grammar competence in English is very worrisome. There are traces of grammatical collocation errors in students' writing. Students often make inappropriate grammatical collocation because they assume that it does not influence the

sentence meaning. It is argued that the use of grammatical collocation is not really important as long as the sentence is understandable. However, grammatical collocation is a part of grammar in which "grammar is one thing that determines the correct meaning of a sentence or utterance and it is also the basic rule in every language" (Israwati, 2015)

Learning grammatical collocation is essential since it makes writing and speech more stimulating and natural. However, learners of English as a second language are found deficient in using grammatical collocation. Some scholars (Fan, 2009; Hashemi, 2012; Nesselhauf, 2020) investigated the grammatical collocation errors based on ESL and EFL. It has been observed that the learners of English are deficient in grammatical collocation usage both in their speech and writing (Nesselhauf, 2020). ESL students have problems with putting or arranging words in a characteristic, natural, native like manners. Other studies found that language learners are often not aware of restrictions of potential words they know and insecure in the production of collocations. Grammatical collocation problems are more serious than general vocabulary problems (Chan, 2018). At a glance, it is easy to spot in an essay where students slide in grammatical collocation. This is corroborated by Hill (2020) who opines that analysis of students' speech or writing shows a lack of grammatical collocation competence.

Despite the large number of studies on grammatical collocation errors, yet not much has been done on investigating the grammatical collocation errors of ESL students in the Nigerian context. This lacuna in research is a propelling force that necessitated this study. This study is targets to find out the level competence in the use of grammatical collocation by the students of the Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

2. Literature review

This section of the study reviews relevant literatures done by the earlier scholars. This is done in this order: collocation, grammatical collocations and error analysis.

2.1 Collocations

Collocations have a long history and it had its debut in Firth (1957). Firth says that collocation is a word known by the company it keeps. A classic publication by

Nation (1990) presents a morphological analysis of collocation based on its constituents in which 'col' means 'together'; '-loc-' means 'to place or put'. Haliday and Hasan (1976) consider collocation as lexical cohesion which is the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of the vocabulary. Collocations are combinations of serial or series of lexemes. Collocations occasionally include non-compositional and ambiguous idioms, and in some cases, they are compositional and transparent combinations of words. Collocations are both stored and retrieved from the memory as single words and there is also no need for language users try to formulate these combinations based on syntactic rules (Kim, 2020).

Celce- Murcia (2000) refers to collocation as" words come together or 'chunks that native speakers can access for comprehension or production,' (p. 34). Similarly, Mackey and Gass (2008) defines collocations as 'pairs of words that occur regularly together, with a high degree of probability. From every indication, collocations are the manner words are combined in a language that produces sequence of speech and writing. Collocations play a vital role in the acquisition as well as rapid and fluent production of language. They help the producers to better express ideas and convey meanings. In fact, using formulaic language is not a matter of grammatical restrictions but it is a matter of convention. Normally, life-long exposure to conventions of a language makes their acquisition easy and conscious. That is why first language learners have no difficulty in acquiring these important aspects of language. But these conventionalized strings of words should be taught to foreign / second language learners due to their limited exposure to the target language (Shehata, 2005). Moreover, the language-specific nature of collocations may require learners to create combinations which are common in their first language but unconventional or impossible in the second language. Therefore, students who are writing in a language other than their native language may have little awareness about the use of these collocations in comparison to expert writers (Groom, 2009).

Nevertheless, the bottom line of the various perspectives of collocations borders on natural co-occurrence of words. As such, the realm of collocations is the relationship between words or other co-words in a sentence. The researchers, therefore, operationally see collocations as the acceptable way words are combined to form phrases or sentences and the chosen restrictions that cause

certain words to go together and others not to. Some words are orthographically polywords, phrasal constraints, sentence builders, and prepositional verbs. Such words collocate together and any attempt to rearrange them renders the words erroneous and grammatically ineptitude.

2.1.2 Grammatical collocations

Grammatical collocations are dominant unlimited class words that consist of content words such as a noun, a verb and adjective plus preposition or infinitive. Grammatical collocations usually consist of a noun, an adjective or a verb plus, a preposition or a grammatical structure such as 'to-infinitive' or 'that-clause'. According to Lewis (2000) grammatical collocation at least combines two words together with other words, for example aware of problem and interested in football. Grammatical collocations are sometimes idiomatic in nature. Following Lewiss (2000), there are eight subtypes of grammatical collocation, such as: (i) Noun + Preposition combination, for examples, blockade against, claim on, pride in, and protest against. (ii) Noun followed by to + Invinitives combination, for examples, it was a pleasure (a problem, a struggle) to do it, they had the foresight (instructions, an obligation, permission) to do it and they felt a compulsion (an impulse, a need) to do it. (iii) Noun + That-Clause combination, for examples, we reached an agreement that she would represent us in court; He took an oath that he would do his duty. (iv) Preposition + noun combinations, for examples, by accidence, in advance, to somebody's advantage, on somebody's advice and under somebody's aegis. (v) Adjective + Preposition combination, for examples, angry with, rely on and proud of . (vi) Adjectives and a following to + infinitive combination, for examples, it was necessary to work, it was necessary for him to work, and it was stupid of them to go. (vii) Adjective + That-Claus combination, for examples, she was afraid that she would fail and It was imperative that I be here. And the last (viii) Verb + Preposition combination, for example, began to speak. Based on the explanation above, this study defined grammatical collocation as combination of open class words consist of the major lexical class plus a preposition.

2.1.3 Error analysis

Error analysis (EA) is a brainchild of Corder's (1967) publication entitled *The significance of learners' errors*. Prior to this publication, error used to be "flaw" that

needed to be eradicated. Corder (1967) presents a completely different point of view. He contends that those errors are "important in and of themselves". For learners themselves, errors are indispensable, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. In his subsequent publication (1981) he argues further, "we live in an imperfect world, and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts. Our ingenuity should be concentrated on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred (hence the concept of error analysis)" (p. 6). Brown (2000) sees error analysis as the processes to observe, analyse, and classify the deviations from the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by the learner.

In a related sense, Crystal (2007) notes that error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures founded by linguistics. It follows from the above observations that errors are interesting phenomena on the road to success. That is to say that they are strictly informative about the learner. In fact, this view reflects the important contribution of the individual to the task of learning and understanding. Errors are systematic deviations from the rules guiding the use of a language. They (errors) are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norms of normal language performance. Teachers and mothers who have waged long and patient battles against their students' or children's language errors have come to realize that making errors is an inevitable part of learning; people cannot learn a language without first systematically committing errors. Grammatical errors show that the language user is incompetent in the mastery of the language while Corder (1974), an applied linguist, sees errors as "deviant structures" or unacceptable utterances, which are signs of imperfect knowledge of the linguistic code. Errors, to him, are those systematic deviances of learners from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language data, which is his transitional competence. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009) note thus:

> "… Error Analysis does not actually involve the comparison of the native language and the target language and no predictions are therefore, made of the possible error. It examines every error, committed by the second

language learners, whether interlingual or intralingual and the presence of errors is a welcome development in the process of language learning".

Linguistic errors are common features of the language learning process, especially in a second language situation, where the learner's first language (L1) differs from the target language in its structure. These differences in learner's L1 and L2 informed the choice of studying these subjects to ascertain the collocation errors students commit in the use of English as a Second Language.

3. Methodology

The study is a descriptive survey design using qualitative approach. The population of the study comprises all the first year students of the Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka who enrolled in 2021/2022 academic session numbering 135 students. Fifty students were sampled in this study using purposive sampling techniques. Written test is the instrument used for data collection. This instrument used for data collection is scripts of essay tests of the students that were administered to them strictly under examination condition. The essay topics were drawn from the four basic essay types: argumentative, descriptive, expository and narrative. This instrument was subjected to content validation using three experts in the Department of Linguistics from University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The data were analysed qualitatively.

4. Data presentation and analysis

Below is the presentation of data collected for this study. The erroneous grammatical collocation structures are presented in sentences and also corrected. The sentences are numbered serially for easy reference.

4.1 Grammatical collocation error patterns in the written essays of subjects/students

4.1.2 Omission of collocational elements

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S1.	He had headache.	He had a headache
S2.	It enables students prepare for external examination.	It enables students to prepare for external examinations
S3.	You suppose to be in class.	You are supposed to be in class
S4.	He was on phone.	He was on the phone

S5	The students have bitten more than they can chew.	The students have bitten off more than they can chew
S6.	She didn't reply my messages.	She didn't reply to my messages
S7.	The incident occurs once a while.	The incident occurs once in a while
S8.	Don't make noise about that.	Don't make a noise about that

It is evident from the data presented above that there are omissions of grammatical words that are function words. They are explained below as follow:
a. article definite and indefinite (S1,S4 and S8)
b. the 'to' element of a to-infinitive verb (S2)
c. the auxiliary verb 'are' and the past tense marker 'ed' (S3)
d. the preposition 'in ' and 'to' (S6 and S7)
e. the phrasal verb particle 'off' (S8)

It is observable that no content word is omitted which shows a concern to retain the meaning of the collocation intact. But it appears that some function words are peripheral to meaning, they could be omitted.

4.1.3 Inclusion of redundant collocational elements/reduplication

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S9.	She offered me cold ice water	She offered me cold water / ice water
S10.	He is going on sabbatical leave.	He is going on sabbatical / leave
S11.	The student repeated the task again.	The student repeated the task
S12.	The teacher frowned his face and looked away from me.	The teacher frowned and looked away from me
S13.	There is an adage which says...	There is an adage that....
S14.	We were invited to the wedding ceremony.	We were invited to the wedding/ marriage ceremony.
S15.	The stone was broken into small small pieces.	The stone was broken into small pieces.

The data presented above on 4.1.3 show the features of reduplication or cases of redundancy which involves saying the thing twice in different ways. For example, if water is icy, it is usually cold enough to be called cold water. Sabbatical denotes a period of leave granted to someone. Repeat means to do or say again, so it is normally unnecessary to add the word 'again'. A frown is a facial expression that shows anger, sadness and displeasure. Since frown is all about face, it is a repetition to use 'frown your face'. In like manner, an adage is a saying. Wedding is a ceremony, so it will be redundant to use ceremony after wedding. In sentence 15, 'small small pieces' is a reduplication which involves direct transfer from the mother tongue, where concept like uniformity is expressed by repeating the relevant lexical items.

4.1.4 Substitution of lexical element or elements within collocation structure

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S16.	I was advised to eat my medicine regularly.	I was advised to take my medicine regularly
S17.	The work interview was scheduled the next day.	The job interview was scheduled the next day
S18.	The innocent baby smiled for me.	The innocent baby smiled at me
S19.	Everybody wants to dabble into politics.	Everybody wants to dabble in politics
S20.	As a man, one needs to find money.	As a man, one needs to make money
S21.	There was a big traffic along Epe road.	There was a heavy traffic along Epe road
S22.	Chief was a heavy spender.	Chief was a big spender
S23.	We were directed to enter the pin in the ATM.	We were directed to key in the pin in the ATM
S24.	Emily was short of words	Emily was lost for words
S25.	He was supported for his good course.	He was supported for his good cause
S26.	I couldn't agree less.	I couldn't agree more
S27.	Then, came a heavy wind.	Then, came a strong wind

S28.	More grease to your elbow.	More power to your elbow
S29.	The thief searched every nook and corner.	The thief searched every nook and cranny
S30.	She got admitted into the university.	She got admitted in the university

The erroneous structures presented above reveal that there are substitutions of lexical elements within the collocational structures. The substitution of the elements is as a result of factors like:

i) inability of the learners to recognize right lexical items in formulaic structure. This is evident in (S29; nook and corner, S28; more power to your elbow, S26; I couldn't agree less and S23; enter your pin).

ii) confusing of meaning by the learners. For example, S16; eat my medicine confuses the meaning of eat and take. We eat food but take medicine. This is also the case in S17 and S20 where there are confusions in the meaning of work and job ; find and make respectively. Further investigations reveal that S16,S17 and S20 are the results of direct transfer of mother tongue.

iii) misuse of preposition. These errors are evidenced in S18; smile for, S19 ; dabble into, S30; admitted into the university. These errors seem as the most pervasive factor. The misuse of prepositions in English has proved to be a widespread and lingering problem, resulting from the lack of usage rules to guide the learners.

iv) breach of grammar: There are cases of outright breach of collocational structures in S21, S22, S24, S25 and S27.The learner violated the structures of the collocation in their writing.

4.1.5 Alteration of the grammatical property of collocational items

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S31.	The boy was at loggerhead with his girlfriend.	The boy was at loggerheads with his girlfriend
S32.	Sally is tied to his wife's apron-string.	Sally is tied to his wife's apron-strings
S33.	They ran for their dear lives.	They ran for dear life

S34.	We all attended the ten -days crusade.	We all attended the ten- day crusade
S35.	Lucy delivered a child.	Lucy was delivered of a child
S36.	After six years, she put to bed.	After six years, she put to birth
S37.	The student did not describe the event in details	The student did not describe the event in detail
38.	...the meeting will hold.	...the meeting will be held
S39.	... solicit for assistance	...solicit assistance
S40.	The police should secure lives and properties.	The police should secure life and property

It is observable from the data presented above that there are cases of alterations of grammatical property of the collocational items. Some of these alterations result in questionable variations while the others yield outright ungrammatical forms.
The alterations can be classified as follows:

a) those that involve the pluralisation of nouns (S33, 34, 37,40)
b) those that involve reducing plural forms of noun to singular (S31, 32)
c) those that involve turning lexical verbs to prepositional verbs (S 39)
d) those without the appropriate item of collocation (S35, S36,S8)

It is worthy to note that the alterations involving pluralisation of nouns occur more frequently than other. It may be due to the fact that the plural forms of the nouns involved seems logical than the singular forms

4.1.6 Literal translation of l1 (idiomatic/figurative) structures

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S41.	Tinubu closed the mouth of the PDP members	Tinubu silenced members of the PDP
S42.	His head is not correct.	He is mentally unbalanced
S43.	Abiodun was my eyes at the event.	Abiodun represented me at the event
S44.	Other parties need to water the ground.	Other parties need to lobby

Many literal translations of Nigerian English are the direct result of the unconscious influence of mother tongue interference. One may also see these expressions in literary works like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God* and his other artistic works. It was a conscious effort to produce a new English known as Nigerian English.

4.1.7 Restructuring of collocations

This involves the extensive alteration of the structure of well-known collocations, as in the following. The correct or usual structure is given after each example:

S/No	Error identification	Error correction
S45.	The husband left home for a good one year.	The husband left home for one good year
S46	... that your friend	...(that friend of yours)
S47	....on the steering	...(sitting behind the steering wheel/ driving)
S48	...knocking their heads together	(playing one off against the other / another)

While some of these, e.g. DS 48, may have resulted from an attempt to simplify the original collocations, others cannot be so easily accounted for. Many of the latter also involve grammatical breaches.

4.2 Sources or causes of grammatical collocation errors

4.2.1 Partial understanding or misunderstanding of lexical meanings

With the further study of English, the complexity and ambiguity of the glossaries will often make learners feel confused, and many collocation mistakes would occur.. For example, if students don't know the word "flood" has the meaning of "disaster", they will often use the fault collocation such as "flood disaster". It is also wrong to use the "productivity force" to denote the meaning of "productivity".

4.2.2 L1 Interference

L_1 Interference can be one causes of grammatical collocation errors among Nigerian students of higher institution. This cause shows that the students adopt

some part of their native language to create English. The students might directly translate words. The findings in S13 and S15 clearly show that.

4.2.3 Lack of grammatical collocation knowledge

The lack of collocation knowledge is generally manifested in the students' lack of adequate and appropriate words for self expression. Some examples are provided in S31, 32, 33, 34 etc.

4.2.4 Overgeneralization of rules

This is yet another cause and source of the grammatical collocation errors identified in the essays that were analyzed in this study. It is manifested in the students' over use, extension, and or overextension of morphological and grammatical rules resulting to incorrect combination of words and phrases.

4.2.5. Learning strategy type

It was observed that the use of certain learning strategy types e.g. synonym, repetition and overgeneralization by learners have negative effect on the acquisition of English collocation among ESL learners. It was found out that the learners studied here tend to substitute a word in second language with a synonym in the First Language thereby leading to errors. Although, synonyms are words that are similar in meaning yet there are no perfect synonyms in the English language. Therefore, learners who have limited proficiency in English language use this strategy because they lack the competence.

The use of repetition and overgeneralization strategies were identified as yet another cause of grammatical collocation errors. Due to limited competence in L2, ESL learners make use of familiar collocations repeatedly instead of using new ones. It is obvious from the data collected that overgeneralization or the extension of the use of certain L2 features to another is a source of erroneous collocation combinations among learners.

4.2.6 Lack of collocation competence

Lack of collocation competence is also a major cause of collocation errors. The learners lack knowledge of important collocates of a key word and consequently commit grammatical collocation errors. Other causes of grammatical collocation

errors are: approximation, ignorance of rules restrictions, false concept hypothesized etc.

5. Summary of the findings and conclusion

The study has examined the essays written by the students of the Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A total of forty eight sentences were analysed. Many erroneous grammatical collocations were identified. These identified grammatical collocation errors classified into six distinct characteristics of grammatical collocational structures. These are: omission of collocational elements, inclusion of redundant collocational element/reduplication, substitution of a lexical element(s) within the collocational structure, restructuring of collocations and alteration of the grammatical property of collocational items. The study suggests that efforts should be made to draw the attention to collocation in the teaching of English registers. Moreover, extensive reading of English medium texts by learners and their participation through the extensive use of aids to vocabulary learning should be encouraged.`

This study reveals clearly that words do not operate as independent and interchangeable parts of the lexicon, but as part of a lexical system. It is therefore necessary for any user of English not only to build up an active vocabulary, but also to be aware of collocation and the selectional restrictions on words as they enter into collocational relationships with other words. To nurture this awareness, it may be useful to isolate the concept, collocation in English as a topic on the school curriculum and teach it to pupils and students at every educational level. This is because while most collocational usages come to the native speaker intuitively, the ESL speakers struggle along throughout their learning process to master the collocational usage in English. Again, teachers of English at various levels should make it a point of duty to draw the attention of the students to the use of the dictionary as the dictionary, apart from giving the meaning of words also helps in providing the reader with the right collocational usage in their expressions.

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