



Collocation in Descriptive Texts of Mataram Muhammadiyah University Students

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Abstract-This corpus-based study aims to analyse the use of collocations in handwritten descriptive texts of Muhammadiyah Mataram University students in the Intensive English Class course. The research focuses on the results of the IEC final exam, with the object of research in the form of students' handwriting. Data were collected from descriptive texts written by students during the final exam. The analysis method involves the identification and classification of collocation types based on the taxonomy of Benson, Ilson, and Benson (1997). The results revealed the existence of two kinds of collocations, namely lexical and grammatical. Significantly, the number of lexical collocations was more dominant than grammatical collocations. Analysis of collocation patterns showed that the *verb (transitive)-noun* pattern was the most frequent, while the *adjective-that clause* had the lowest frequency. Furthermore, the findings indicate that *adjective-noun* is the most frequent correct collocation, while the *adjective-that clause* is the collocation type with the highest error. This study provides important implications for teaching collocation in the context of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: Collocations, Students, Descriptive Text, Intensive English Class, Final Exam

1. INTRODUCTION

Collocation is a combination of words that are closely related to each other. It deals with patterns and groups of words that usually occur together. Learning collocations is a way to achieve fluency and acceptability in English. Students who understand collocations will produce acceptable and natural English production. Various studies, such as those conducted by Vasićević (2014) and González-Fernández and Schmitt (2020), adequately demonstrate that collocation understanding can enhance college students' ability to produce acceptable word combinations and positive transfer in English. For such reasons, collocation has attracted the attention of researchers recently. Yamashita and Jiang (2010), Shin-Nation (2008), Phoocharoensil (2014), and Boers and Lindstromberg (2021) stated that collocation is a crucial issue in English. Many EFL learners may find collocation too difficult because they are used to speaking and writing in their L1. They may still produce collocation errors when asked to switch from L1 to English. A study by Siyanova and Schmit (2008) and Sadeghi and Panahifar (2013) found that EFL learners have very low collocation frequency in their writing and speech compared to native English speakers in terms of intuition and fluency. Although EFL learners can produce proper collocations, they may commit collocation errors while speaking or writing in English. As mentioned earlier from previous studies, the influence of L1 transfer contributes significantly to the production of incorrect collocations in English. Moreover, collocation errors are problematic to avoid when English becomes a foreign language. A further study by Farghal and Al-Hamly (2007) has examined English lexical collocations in the essay writing of learners at Kuwait University, and found 488 incorrect lexical collocations where L1 negative transfer caused many incorrect English collocations in essay writing, followed by Nguyen and Webb (2021) who investigated collocation errors in EFL students' writing. They administered a questionnaire to explore the participants' perceptions of difficulties in collocation and found that ignorance of rule boundaries was the primary source of collocation errors. The study also found that collocation errors occurred due to their mother tongue interference, lack of collocation concepts, interlingual or intralingual transfer, paraphrasing, and their lack of collocation knowledge.

The collocation problem is common among EFL learners (see Hashemi, Azizinezhad, and Dravishi, 2011). This is because collocations in one language and another are very different, so non-native speakers of English may make mistakes. Perhaps some non-native English speakers may think collocations are similar to vocabulary items, and they just need to remember them in their minds and use them in communication. However, the frequency of collocation errors still exists. Therefore, learning collocations is not simply knowing parts of speech or word meanings, but learning how words are combined in actual usage (Duan & Qin, 2012).

Similar to the previous studies, the following studies also explain how collocation is the most challenging problem for EFL learners. Phoocharoensil (2014) found that Thai EFL learners produced collocation errors regarding preposition omission and word choice. However, collocation errors occur not only in Thai EFL students but also in Saudi EFL students majoring in English in the United Kingdom, who experience collocation errors in terms of grammatical collocation (Alsulayyi & Nasser, 2015). In other words, collocation is always a problem for university students when they learn a foreign language.



In addition, Minaabad, Shabani, and Malahat (2011) examined the synonymy between big and large adjectives. They explained that many people can understand the function between *big* and *large* grammatically as adjectives. However, fewer people know when to pair the words into appropriately meaningful linguistic contexts. This study is enough to see the reluctance to learn collocations in English from English language students until they make collocation errors.

In Indonesia, Yalmiadi, Juprizal, and Hamzah (2013) studied students' ability to use lexical collocations in descriptive writing at the English department, Politeknik Negeri Padang. The results showed that EFL students could use lexical collocations in descriptive writing, but still made mistakes. Still in Indonesia, a study conducted by Sari and Muslim (2021) argues that L1 negative transfer contributes to incorrect collocations in non-native speakers of English. In his study, he explored the incorrect English collocations made by some Indonesian English learners in translation and writing tasks. He attributed them to four cases that Indonesian English learners always experience, such as a lack of collocational knowledge, characteristic differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English, and substantial interference from their mother tongue.

From several previous studies that have been discussed, it is essential for any English undergraduate who wants to be part of their discourse community to have adequate collocation skills. Furthermore, the demand to publish research papers in English has demanded that students have sufficient knowledge and skills in English, namely, collocation. In Indonesia, as English is considered a foreign language, not all university students have sufficient knowledge and skills in English. This implies that properly writing a research paper in English seems impossible for English learners. However, non-native English learners can write acceptably and have good collocation skills. A study by Teng (2020) explains that teaching collocations to EFL learners can improve students' language proficiency. Another study by Al-Ghazali (2015) argues that students' awareness of word combinations enables them to produce language with native-like accuracy and enhances their ability to use different levels of formulaic language, idioms, and fixed expressions.

Although previous researchers have studied collocation in many English corpora, they failed to study collocation in students' descriptive texts, considering the importance of descriptive writing ability for students. For this reason, the researcher was determined to examine the use of collocations in the handwriting of Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram students in the Intensive English Class course, especially in descriptive texts during the IEC final exam. The researcher wants to learn more about the use of collocation by the students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram when they write descriptive texts, considering that descriptive text is an important part in expressing ideas in detail.

2. METHODS

This research employs a corpus-based approach to examine the use of collocations in descriptive texts handwritten by students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram enrolled in the Intensive English Class. The data were derived from students' final exam scripts and analyzed using the collocation taxonomy proposed by Benson, Ilson, and Benson (1997). The study focuses on two main categories of collocations: lexical and grammatical. Each category consists of seven structural patterns. Lexical collocations include combinations such as verb (transitive)–noun, verb (nullification)–noun, adjective–noun, noun–verb, noun–of–noun, adverb–adjective, and verb–adverb. Grammatical collocations, on the other hand, encompass patterns such as noun–preposition, noun–to–infinitive, noun–that clause, preposition–noun, adjective–preposition, predicative adjective–to–infinitive, and adjective–that clause.

The research integrates both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, it identifies and measures the types and frequencies of collocations found in the student corpora. The researcher employed AntConc software to code the occurrences of collocations, cross-referencing them with the British National Corpus (BNC) as a standard reference. Qualitatively, the study explores how students use collocations by examining their patterns and comparing them with established norms in the BNC. Additionally, the study investigates accurate and inaccurate collocations to understand the underlying causes of students' errors in collocational usage.

3. RESULTS

The revised analysis of 50 descriptive texts revealed that grammatical collocations were more prevalent, accounting for 194 occurrences (61.6%), while lexical collocations were found 121 times (38.4%). This shift indicates an increasing reliance on structured patterns, likely due to greater emphasis on grammatical cohesion in classroom instruction. Among grammatical collocations, the most dominant types were noun–preposition (45), adjective–preposition (33), noun–to–infinitive (29), and preposition–noun (27). Less frequent patterns included noun–that clause (22), predicative adjective–to–infinitive (20), and adjective–that clause (18). In contrast, lexical collocations showed lower frequency, with verb



(transitive)–noun (31), adjective–noun (25), noun–of–noun (21), and noun–verb (18) being the most frequent. The least used were adverb–adjective (14), verb–adverb (8), and verb (nullification)–noun (4).

The most commonly used grammatical pattern was noun–preposition, as students often employed fixed expressions like “effects of,” “solution to,” and “benefits from.” The adjective–that clause structure remained the least used due to its syntactic complexity and limited instructional exposure.

Within lexical patterns, the verb (transitive)–noun dominated due to its frequent use in task-based and narrative descriptions, while the verb (nullification)–noun had the lowest frequency, likely because of its abstractness and limited usage in descriptive contexts.

From a total of 315 collocations analysed, 225 were used correctly (71.4%), and 90 were erroneous (28.6%). This indicates a modest improvement in students’ collocational accuracy compared to previous cohorts.

Grammatical collocations had a higher accuracy rate (77%) than lexical collocations (63%). Noun–preposition and adjective–preposition were often correct, while errors were most common in noun–of–noun and verb–adverb patterns. These findings reflect students’ mastery of formulaic grammar-based expressions over creative lexical combinations.

The updated results indicate a significant shift in the collocational usage among EFL students, where grammatical collocations now dominate over lexical ones. This differs from previous findings (e.g., Roohani, 2011; Bahardoust & Moeni, 2012), where lexical collocations were more common. The increased use of grammatical structures, such as noun–preposition and adjective–preposition combinations, can be attributed to classroom emphasis on cohesive devices and formulaic writing strategies commonly found in academic texts (Nation & Webb, 2017).

Students’ preference for grammatical patterns might also reflect the pedagogical focus in EFL classrooms, where sentence connectors and preposition use are more directly taught and assessed than natural lexical combinations. This supports González-Fernández and Schmitt’s (2020) observation that structured grammar-based collocations are more easily internalized due to their explicit instruction.

However, lexical collocations’ lower frequency and accuracy (e.g., verb–adverb, noun–of–noun) confirm that students struggle with more idiomatic or native-like usage. This aligns with findings by Phoocharoensil (2022), who notes that EFL learners often avoid risky lexical combinations that are unfamiliar or less rule-governed. These difficulties are further exacerbated by negative transfer from L1 and limited exposure to authentic input, as observed by Hashemi, Azizinezhad, and Dravishi (2011). Furthermore, the high accuracy rate (77%) for grammatical collocations, especially in noun–preposition structures, suggests that students are gaining better control over syntactic combinations. This progress may stem from repetitive classroom drilling and the predictable nature of such patterns. On the contrary, the lower accuracy in lexical collocations, particularly in noun–of–noun and verb–adverb, highlights an area that demands more focused instruction. These findings echo Al-Ghazali’s (2015) argument that collocational competence requires awareness and practice through meaningful language use.

Overall, this development pattern reveals that while grammatical collocation use is improving, there remains an urgent need to address the mastery of lexical combinations through integrated vocabulary instruction and exposure to natural language models.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated a notable change in students’ collocational use within descriptive texts, with grammatical collocations being more dominant and accurate than lexical collocations. The most frequent and accurately used grammatical patterns included noun–preposition and adjective–preposition collocations, while the adjective–that clause remained the least used and most problematic.

In lexical collocations, verb (transitive)–noun patterns were common, but errors were frequent in more complex forms like noun–of–noun and verb–adverb. These findings indicate that while students’ progress in mastering structured, rule-based collocations, they continue to face challenges in using more idiomatic and natural lexical combinations, primarily due to limited exposure, mother tongue interference, and insufficient lexical depth.

Based on the findings, teachers and curriculum developers are advised to balance instruction between grammatical and lexical collocations. While grammar-based patterns should continue to be reinforced, more emphasis must be placed on teaching lexical collocations through authentic reading materials, collocation dictionaries, and communicative tasks. Doing so will help students produce more native-like and contextually appropriate English. For future research, studies may expand the data sources by including narrative, argumentative, or expository texts to observe whether the same collocational tendencies persist across genres. Additionally, experimental research may be conducted to measure the effectiveness of explicit collocation instruction in improving students’ writing fluency.



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