THE IMPROVEMENT OF COLLOCATIONAL COMPETENCE AMONG THE EFL LEARNERS

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

ABSTRACT

NUR RIZKY ALFIANY. *The Improvement of Collocational Competence* (supervised by **Hamzah A. Machmoed** and **Etty Bazergan**).

This research is aimed to know if the improvement of EFL learners' collocational competence can be gained. The vocabulary lists are taken from the lexical collocations. The pre-experimental design is taken by the researcher and the data are analyzed using the SPSS 16.1. 30 Indonesian learners from the Just Say English Course are tested on their knowledge of vocabulary before the treatment(Pre-test) and immediately after treatment (Post-test). The results showed a significant word gain between the Pre-test and Post-test, where both of the vocabulary and writing test show the same sig (2-tailed) of 0.000 lower than 0.05 . Of the six different types of lexical collocations, concrete nouns were a little easier to retain than abstract nouns. However, the characteristics of the collocations, free and restricted combinations, also the lack of understanding about the concept of metaphor gave effect to the poor gain of vocabulary. The success of gain in vocabulary skill was eventually followed by the writing test but the result is preceded by the former, which means that there are still many EFL learners have sizable vocabulary but are not able to produce it into the appropriate sentence.

ABSTRAK

NUR RIZKY ALFIANY. *Peningkatan Kompetensi Kolokasi pada Pembelajar EFL* (di bawah bimbingan **Hamzah A. Machmoed** and **Etty Bazergan**).

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui apakah peningkatan kompetensi kolokasi dapat tercapai. Daftar kosakata yang akan diteliti adalah kolokasi leksikal. Desain pra-eksperimental digunakan oleh peneliti dan data dianilisis dengan menggunakan program SPSS 16.1. 30 pembelajar Bahasa Inggris dari Just Say English Course diberikan tes kosakata kolokasi sebelum perlakuan (pra-tes) dan segera setelah perlakuan (pasca-tes). Hasil menunjukkan adanya peningkatan jumlah kosakata antara pra-tes dan pasca-tes, dimana kedua tes kosakata dan tes tertulis menunjukkan dua sig (2-tailed) yang sama, yaitu 0.000 lebih kecil dari 0.05. Dari keenam tipe kolokasi leksikal, kata benda kongkrit lebih gampang diakuisisi daripada kata benda abstrak. Akan tetapi, karakteristik dari kolokasi, yaitu kombinasi bebas dan terikat, serta kurangnya pemahaman atas konsep metafora memberikan efek pada kurangnya jumlah kosakata yang diperoleh. Keberhasilan peningkatan kosakata reseptif diikuti oleh kosakata produktif tetapi kosakata reseptif berada jauh di atas produktif. Ini berarti bahwa masih banyak pembelajar EFL yang mempunyai jumlah kosakata yang banyak dan pemahaman yang lebih tapi belum mampu memproduksinya ke dalam kalimat yang benar.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Language competence is not confined to linguistic competence; that is, the knowledge of lexis and grammar, but it requires the learners to have adequate communicative competence or language fluency, the ability to perform the linguistic knowledge appropriately in the context of collocation. This communicative competence is known as collocational competence (Hill, 2000).

Collocations have been recognized as one of the ways that differentiate native speakers and second language learners. If a non-native speaker wants to help someone, s/he will say, "Can I help you?" whereas a native speaker will say, "Can I give you a hand?" (Salkauskiene, 2002). The English language is full of collocations, recurrent combinations of words that co-occur more often than expected by chance. Why do we say 'last year' and not 'last hour'? And why do we go somewhere 'by car' or 'by train' but 'on foot'? The reason is 'collocation'. Knowing the 'meaning' of a word not only requires knowing its dictionary definition; one must also know the type of words with which it is often associated. Collocations, either fixed or more flexible, are the result of many years of habitual use by fluent speakers of the English language (Prodromou, 2004). It is believed that automation of collocations helps

native speakers to fluently express themselves since it provides 'chunks' of English that are ready to use. Second language learners, however, lacking this automation, may make non-native errors when producing utterances. In order to achieve native-like competence and fluency, second language learners need to be aware that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce collocations as unanalyzed chunks. Both learners and teachers of the English language realize how complicated the area of collocation is. *Teaching Collocation* (2000) edited by Michael Lewis, who is also a contributing author to the book, encourages teachers to raise students' awareness of collocations and to initiate their own action research to make sure the changes they make are of benefit to students.

The purpose of this study, therefore is to investigate the Just Say English Course's EFL Learners' knowledge of different types of English collocations in order to determine their improvement in English Collocations.

B. Statement of Problem

The problem based on the observation that most of the EFL learners suffer from lack of understanding about collocational expressions. This also leads to the failure of the EFL learners to be able to produce it into the sentences thus gain poor performance in writing.

C. Research Questions

The research question of this study is:

1. What is the collocational competence among the EFL intermediate Learners' in Just Say English Course?

2. Are the Just Say's EFL Learners able to produce the collocational expressions into the sentences?

D. Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is:

1. To know the competency of collocational expressions among the Just Say English Course's EFL Learners.

2. To know whether the Just Say English Course are able to produce the collocational expressions into the sentences.

E. Scope of the Study

The scope of the study covers the collocational competence and its improvement among the Just Say English Course EFL Learners.

F. Significance of the Study

Studying the improvement of collocational competence among the Just Say English Course's EFL Learners has two significances :

1. Practical significance. This study is expected to enhance the EFL learners' insight about how the EFL learners could be able to be competent in collocational expressions.

2. Theoretical significance. This study also provides critical data for lecturers, researchers and EFL learners in the light of the improvement of collocational competence.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Review of Related Studies

Two studies (Bonk, 2000; Haung, 2001) have explored the collocational competence of second language learners. These studies have examined a variety of subject populations and included collocation tests of various kinds. For example, in one study (Bonk, 2000), ESL learners of a wide range of proficiency levels were asked to complete a collocation test consisting of three subtests in order to determine among other things the reliability and validity of the tests that Bonk had designed himself. In his quest to make collocation testing more systematic, Bonk's study used a carefully developed and analyzed collocation test to address testing concerns and to determine the relationship between collocational knowledge and more controlled measures of language proficiency. Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for the test administration were calculated, and the characteristics of the test items were also examined. Two of the three subtests were found to perform well as norm-referenced measures of construct, and areas for further testing and research were pinpointed. Observed collocational knowledge was found to correlate strongly with general English proficiency, while length of residence had little or no effect on the subjects' collocational knowledge.

Haung's study investigated Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' knowledge of English collocations and the collocational errors they made. The subjects were 60 students from a college in Taiwan. The research instrument was a simple completion test which the researcher designed himself. The results indicated that free combinations created the least amount of difficulty for his subjects, whereas pure idioms were the most challenging. Additionally, students performed about equally well on restricted collocational and figurative idioms. In general, the students' deviant answers demonstrated their insufficient knowledge of English collocations.

B. The Origin of the Word "Collocation"

This term was first introduced by Firth (1957) to define a combination of words associated with each other, to mean that the meaning and the function of a word could be determined by a habitual occurrence of the word with other words. This theory which is known as the 'contextual theory of meaning' claims that the meaning of a word, for example, *dark* can be determined by the neighbouring word *light* in the phrase *dark light*.

The term 'collocation' has its origin in the Latin verb 'collocare' which means 'to set in order/to arrange'.

Although collocation has been defined differently by quite large number of scholars, many have come to an agreement that collocation is

"the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text" (Sinclair, 1991) or the co-occurrence of two or more lexical items as realizations of structural elements within a syntactic pattern (Cowie, 1978). Meanwhile, Bahns and Eldaw (1993) mention that the major characteristics of collocations are that their meanings reflect the meaning of their counterparts and that they are used frequently, spring to mind readily, and are psychologically salient. Collocation ranges in a continuum from very fixed expressions, i.e. idioms, particles, and complex collocations of prepositions to less restricted collocations (allow limited combinability with other words).

There are several approaches to studying collocation: the lexical, semanticist, and structural approaches, as follows:

1. The Lexical Approach

It is Firth who is widely regarded as the father of collocation and the developer of a lexical and the most traditional approach to this phenomenon. The supporters of the lexical approach claim that the meaning of a word is determined by the co-occuring words. Thus, a part of the meaning of a word is the fact that it collocates with another word. However, those combinations are often strictly limited, e.g. *make an omelette* but *do your homework.*

One of the Firth's revolutionary concepts was to perceive lexical relations as syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic ones. Sinclair (1991) and Halliday (1966) are Firth's followers.

For Halliday, collocations are examples of word combinations; he maintains that collocation cuts across grammar boundaries. For instance, *he argued strongly* and *the strength of his argument* are grammatical transformations of the initial collocation *strong argument*. In his works he highlights the crucial role of collocations in the study of lexis.

Sinclair introduces the terminology: an item whose collocations are studied is called a 'node'; the number of relevant lexical items on each side of a node is defined as a 'span' and those items which are found within the span are called 'collocates'. Later on Sinclair slightly changes his attitude forming an 'integrated approach' and dismisses the previous idea that lexis is rigidly separated from grammar. In this new approach both the lexical and grammatical aspects of collocation are taken into consideration. As a result, Sinclair (1991) divides collocations into two categories: the 'upward' and 'downward' collocations. The first group consists of words which habitually collocate with the words more frequently used in English than they are themselves, e.g. *back* collocates with *at*, *down*, *from*, *into*, *on*, all of which are more frequent words than *back*. Similarly, the 'downward' collocations are words which habitually collocate with words that are less frequent than they are, e.g. words *arrive*,

bring are less frequently occurring collocates of *back*. Sinclair makes a sharp distinction between those two categories claiming that the elements of the 'upward' collocation (mostly prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions, pronouns) tend to form grammatical frames while the elements of the 'downward' collocation (mostly nouns and verbs) by contrast give a semantic analysis of a word.

2. The Semantic Approach

This approach goes beyond the sheer observation of collocations and tries to determine their specific shape. Its supporters attempt to examine collocations from the semantic point of view, also separately form of grammar. Their main goal is to find out why words collocate with certain other words, e.g. why we can say *blonde hair* but not *blonde car.* This question still represents a challenge for linguists today.

3. The Structural Approach

According to this approach, collocation is determined by structure and occurs in patterns. Therefore, the study of collocation should include grammar (Gitsaki, 1996), which contrasts with the two aforementioned approaches: the lexical and semantic ones. Lexis and grammar cannot be separated and, consequently, two categories are defined: lexical and grammatical collocation, which represent two distinctive but related aspects of one phenomenon. 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', e.g. *by accident*, *to be afraid that*. Lexical collocations do not contain grammatical elements, but are combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs (Bahns 1993). Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) define collocation as specified, identifiable, non-idiomatic, recurrent combinations. In their dictionary they divide them into two groups: grammatical and lexical collocations. The first category consists of the main word (a noun, an adjective, a verb) plus a preposition or '*to*+infinitive' or '*that*-clause' and is characterized by 5 basic types of collocations.

Lexical collocations do not contain prepositions, infinitives or relative clauses but consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. There are 6 types of them:

Table 1. The Two Types of Collocations

Type	Examples
Grammatical Collocations: - Verb + Preposition - Adjective + Preposition - Adjective + Preposition + Preposition - Preposition + Noun	(to) get at, (to) go for - Different from, curious about, full of. - Fed up with. - For sale, on time.

• Dative movement transformation	• She sent the book to him/She sent him the book
Lexical Collocations: • verb + noun (pronoun, prepositional phrase • adjective + noun • noun + verb • noun + *of* + noun • adverb + adjective • verb + adverb	• *(to) reach a verdict, (to) launch a missile, (to) lift a) blockade, (to) revoke a license* • *reckless abandon, sweeping generalization* • *adjectives modify, alarms go off* • *a bunch of flowers, a piece of advice* • *deeply religious, fiercely independent* • *(to) apologize humbly, (to) affect deeply*

Kjellmer (1990) tries to establish to what extent individual word classes are 'collocational' or 'non-collocational' in character. The results of his research show that articles, prepositions, singular and mass nouns as well as the base forms of verbs were collocational in their nature whereas adjectives, singular proper nouns and adverbs were not. Kjellmer claims

that English words are scattered across a continuum which extends from those items whose contextual company is entirely predictable to those whose contextual company is entirely unpredictable. According to his results, most words tend to appear towards the beginning of the continuum, which can also be described as a scale of fixedness of collocation. Then it extends from totally free, unrestricted combinations to totally fixed and invariable ones. Kjellmer's theory about collocational continuum is relevant also in regard to lexical collocations although they are linked together in a different way than grammatical ones, that is they refer more to semantics.

Lewis (2000) argues that most collocations are found in the middle of this continuum, which means that there are very few 'strong' collocations. He makes a distinction between 'strong' collocation e.g. *avid reader*, *budding author;* 'common' collocation which makes up numerous word combinations, e.g. *fast car, have dinner, a bit tired* and 'medium strong' one, which in his view account for the largest part of the lexis a language learner needs, e.g. *magnificent house, significantly different.* Hill adds one more category - 'unique' collocation such as *to foot the bill, shrug one'shoulders.* In terms of the strength of collocation, it is worth noting that it is not reciprocal, which means that the strength between the words is not equal on both sides, e.g. *blonde* and *hair. Blonde* collocates only with a limited number of words describing hair colour whereas *hair* collocates with many words, e.g. *brown, long, short, mousy.* It happens

very often that the bond between the words is unilateral, e.g. in the phrase *vested interest, vested* only ever collocates with *interest* but *interest* collocates with many other words.

Hunston (1997) concluded that there are correlations between grammatical patterns and lexical meaning. All words can be represented by specific patterns and the meanings of words which share patterns have a lot in common. That means that a word has a specific meaning when it co-occurs with a certain word. This hypothesis is followed by Hoey (2000), who maintains that some meanings of the same word have their own grammatical patterns, which is called 'colligation'. This concept started by Firth is concerned with relationship between grammatical classes, whereas collocation is concerned with the words which belong to these grammatical classes. Grammatical pattern [verb+*to*-infinitive] is an example of colligation and [*dread+think*] is an example collocation of this colligation. In short, colligation defines the grammatical company and interaction of words as well as their preferable position in a sentence. Another key point in the study of collocation started by Firth is the notion of syntagmatic (horizontal) as opposed to paradigmatic (vertical) relationship between its elements. In the syntagmatic dimension we can clearly see the relationship between linearly lined up words, which make up an individual syntactic unit, here a collocation. In the sentence: *It writhed on the floor in agonizing pain* the syntagmatic relationship is the one between the words: *writhed, floor, agonizing* and *pain,* whereas the paradigmatic

relationship is between a word and a group of words which can replace it in this sentence:

It   writhed   on the floor   in   agonizing   pain.

bed   burning

pavement   stabbing

paradigm1   paradigm2

Lewis (1994) defines collocation as a subcategory of multi-word items, made up of individual words which habitually co-occur and can be found within the free-fixed collocational continuum. In his opinion, they differ from another important subcategory of multi-word items called institutionalized expressions because collocations tell more about the content of what a language user expresses rather than what the language user is doing, e.g. apologizing or denying. Lewis (1997) points out that collocation is not determined by logic or frequency but is arbitrary, decided only by linguist convention. Dzierżanowska (1988) adds that words that make up collocation do not combine with each other at random. Collocation cannot be invented by a second language user. A native speaker uses them instinctively. In every language collocations comply with the rules characteristic of that language and therefore they cause serious problems both for

learners and translators, e.g. *menggapai tujuan* has two English equivalents *achieve/reach an aim* but _____ can be translated with the verb *reach* but not *achieve- reach an agreement.* Consequently, collocations must be memorized or looked up in an adequate dictionary.

Celce-Murcia (1991) defines collocation as a co-occurrence of lexical items in combinations, which can differ in frequency or acceptability. Items which collocate frequently with each other are called 'habitual', e.g. *tell a story,* whereas those which cannot co-occur are called 'unacceptable', e.g. **powerful tea* instead of *strong tea.*

Similarly, in Carter's view (1987), collocation is a group of words that recurrently co-occur in a language. He agrees with Benson that there are grammatical collocations which result from grammatical relationship between the words and lexical collocations which result not only from grammatical relationship, but most of all from co-occurrence of lexical units in a specific company. The total number of words which can collocate with an X word is called a 'cluster' of X. He also points out that certain elements of a cluster are more central than other, which means that they are more likely to co-occur with X. Carter divides collocations into four categories, depending on how restricted they are: 'unrestricted', which collocate freely with a number of lexical items, e.g. *take a look/a holiday/a rest/a letter/time/notice/a walk;* 'semi-restricted', in which the number of adequate substitutes which can replace the elements of collocation is

more limited, e.g. *harbor doubt/grudges/uncertainty/suspicion.* The other two categories include 'familiar' collocations whose elements collocate on a regular basis, e.g. *unrequited love, lukewarm reception* and 'restricted' collocations which are fixed and inflexible, e.g. *dead drunk, pretty sure.* Carter distinguishes between 'core' and 'non-core' words claiming that the more core a lexical item is, the more frequently it collocates. Core words are more central in a language than other, non-core words and that is why the non-core words can be defined or replaced by the core items, e.g. *eat* is a core word for *gobble, dine, devour, stuff, gormandize* because its meaning is the basic meaning of every item from the group but this relationship is not reciprocal. In Carter's view, words are scattered across a core–non-core continuum and their position on this scale determines their collocability. The nearer to the core end of the continuum a word is, the more frequently it collocates, e.g. *bright >radiant>gaudy:*

bright: sun/light/sky/idea/colour/red/future/prospects/child

radiant: sun/light/smile

gaudy: colour

According to a dictionary definition (Szulc, 1984), collocation is an ability of lexical items to build steady, conventionalized syntagmatic relationship with other words, e.g. *putrid*, *rotten*, *rancid* and *addled* are synonyms which designate rotten food but they collocate only with a limited number of words: *putrid fish*, *rancid butter/oil*, *addled eggs*, *rotten*

fruit. Individual collocations are determined by the lexical system of a language and can result from historical changes.

According to Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2002), collocation is a means of combining words in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. Incorrect combinations such as *heavy wind* or *strong rain* do not sound naturally in English. Apart from the prevalent grammatical/lexical distinction, the authors also mention 'word' collocation, none of whose elements can be replaced even with its synonym, e.g. *small fortune* but not *little fortune and 'category' collocation whose elements can collocate with any items of a precisely determined group of words. This group can be quite large and its elements- predictable because they make up the same category, e.g. measurements of time for a noun *walk*: *five minutes' walk/three-minute walk.*

Why are collocations important? Collocations have been claimed to be dominant in academic texts especially in the texts of specialised disciplines (e.g.. law, medicine, biology, etc.) where they become the basic building blocks of specialised language and constitute the expressions of knowledge, concepts, and ideas in these discourses (Halliday, 1992). They also perform specific functions and are the organising thoughts in those texts (Fuentes, 2001). Students who are competent in collocation (have collocational competence) are regarded as those who have attained an advanced or higher level of English fluency or communicative

competence (Hill, 2000). Collocation knowledge becomes the determinant factor for students' success in their academic and professional careers (Howarth 1998). In addition, learning vocabulary in chunks may expedite the second language acquisition process. Since our short term memory (STM) can only remember a few words at a time, storing word phrases which are meaningful rather than discrete single word items may facilitate and ease the retrieval of the phrases from our mental lexicon. In this way, it resembles the acquisition of one's first language (Wray, 2002).

C. Collocational Competence

The term collocational competence was coined by Hill (2000) means the ability to produce fluent, accurate, and stylistically appropriate language. This involves having both the knowledge of formulaic language and the knowledge of the structures. Meanwhile, Partington (1996) has also defined collocational competence as the knowledge of what is normal collocation in a particular environment. He adopted the concept of collocational competence from the concept of communicative competence introduced by Hymes (1972). To him, competence covers a much wider range of skills and knowledge than the internalisation of the grammatical system as claimed by Chomsky. Hymes (1972) then divides competence into four: (1) the knowledge of what is *formally feasible* (the language system), (2) of what is *feasible,* (3) of what is *appropriate*, and (4) of what is actually *performed.* The first kind of competence is similar to Chomsky's

concept of language competence (internalization of the grammatical system in our brain) whereas the other three types of competence are context-related or extra-linguistic. These four types of competence can be seen as an ordered set of refining mechanisms (Partington, 1996) and collocation choices are made at the latter stages of the refining process.

D. Theoretical Framework

To describe the nature collocational competence, the construct of vocabulary competence mainly based on:

1. Lewis' model of continuum (2000) illustrated that The connection between words in a formula lies on a continuum between strong—the presence of one word means you strongly expect the other, too—and weak.

   friendly dog strong coffee sibling rivalry throw in the towel

Weaker □--□**Stronger**

   old car heavy smoker mitigating circumstances Stars and Stripes

   Fig 1. Lewis' model of continuum (Lewis, 2000)

2. Howarth (1998) assumed that lexical items in these categories do not have definite boundaries, rather they are ranged on a cline from pure idioms to free combinations.

☐---☐

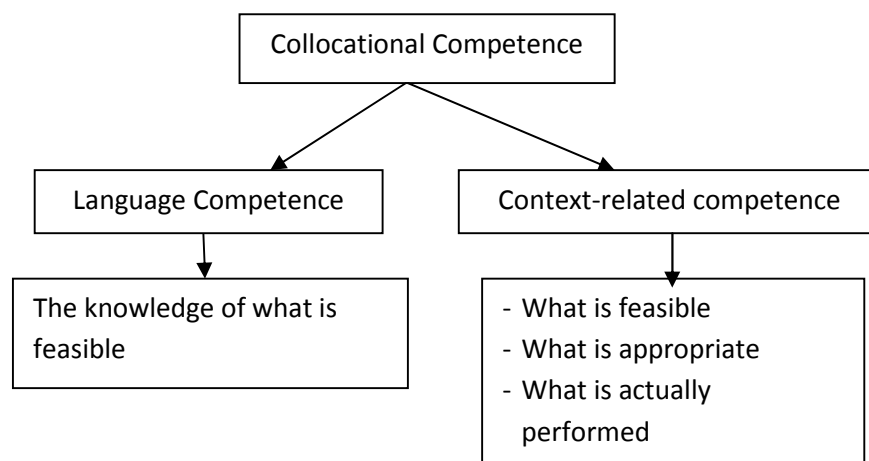Pure idioms figurative idioms restricted collocations   free combinations

[*blow the gaff*] [*blow your own trumpet*]   [*blow a fuse*] [*blow a trumpet*]

[*under the weather*] [*under the microscope*] [*under attack*] [*under the table*]

Fig 2. Howarth's model of continuum (Howarth,1998)

E. Conceptual Framework

Regardless of all arguments stated above, thereby we frame the concept of collocational competence.

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                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
                    │  Collocational Competence │
                    └──────────────────────────┘
                       /                    \
        ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
        │  Language Competence  │   │ Context-related competence │
        └──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
                   │                            │
        ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
        │ The knowledge of what │   │  - What is feasible       │
        │ is feasible           │   │  - What is appropriate    │
        │                       │   │  - What is actually       │
        │                       │   │    performed              │
        └──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
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F. Hypotheses

1. The EFL learners could improve the competence in collocation through the size of words in the target language and the quality of vocabulary knowledge (how well learners know a word in terms of meaning and use; depth of vocabulary knowledge), from the weaker to the stronger of collocation.

2. The operationalization of the previous two tests (through vocabulary and writing tasks) will lead to the improvement of collocational competence among the EFL learners.