

Understanding Collocations in English: Linguistic Nature, Learning Challenges, and Pedagogical Implications

 ¹ Sema Semiyeva

<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.0250020017>

Keywords	Abstract
lexical collocations grammatical collocations translation challenges semantic mismatch lexical approach corpus linguistics fluency development	Collocations, or habitual word combinations, play a pivotal role in achieving fluency and naturalness in English language use. Despite their importance, they often present significant challenges for learners and translators due to their fixed nature and limited translatability. This article examines the definition, classification, and types of collocations, with a focus on lexical and grammatical groupings. It also highlights the difficulties non-native speakers face in acquiring collocational competence, particularly issues related to semantic mismatch and cross-linguistic interference. Additionally, the paper discusses pedagogical approaches and strategies that can help learners develop better control over collocational patterns. Emphasis is placed on the role of explicit instruction, contrastive analysis, and the use of corpus-based resources in enhancing language teaching and translation effectiveness.

Introduction

Collocations—combinations of words that frequently occur together—form a crucial aspect of fluent and natural English usage. They are more than random word pairings; they reflect conventional language use that native speakers rely on subconsciously. For learners of English as a second or foreign language, mastering collocations is essential for achieving language proficiency and accuracy in both spoken and written communication. Despite their importance, collocations often present challenges in language acquisition and translation due to their semantic opacity and cross-linguistic differences. This paper explores the nature of collocations, their types and classifications, challenges learners face, and strategies for effective teaching and learning.

Relevance of Research

The study of collocations holds significant relevance in the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and translation studies. Mastery of collocations is essential for achieving fluency and naturalness in English, yet it remains a persistent challenge for language learners due to the unpredictable and arbitrary nature of many word combinations. By exploring the semantic, lexical, and grammatical

¹ Semiyeva, S. Master's Student, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: sema_semiyeva@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9887-1087>



features of collocations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language learners process, acquire, and use collocational patterns.

Furthermore, the findings of this research have practical value for English language teachers, curriculum designers, and textbook authors. A focused approach to collocation instruction can lead to improved vocabulary retention, more accurate language production, and greater communicative competence. In translation studies, understanding interlingual collocational mismatches can aid in producing more idiomatic and culturally appropriate translations.

In an increasingly globalized world where English functions as a lingua franca, developing learners' collocational competence is crucial not only for academic success but also for effective professional communication. This research, therefore, serves to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and pedagogical application, offering insights that can enhance both teaching practices and learner outcomes.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design supported by elements of corpus analysis and literature review. The methodology involves the following components:

Literature Review: A comprehensive review of scholarly works on collocations was conducted to define key concepts, identify classifications, and examine existing challenges in learning and translation. Sources include books, peer-reviewed articles, and academic papers published between 2000 and 2024.

Corpus Analysis: Authentic examples of collocations were extracted and analyzed from well-established English corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This analysis was used to identify frequent lexical and grammatical collocations and assess their usage in context.

Error Analysis in Learner Language: Studies and data from language learners' written output were reviewed to detect common errors related to collocational misuse. This helped to highlight patterns of semantic mismatch, overgeneralization, and L1 interference.

Pedagogical Review: Current teaching strategies and classroom practices related to collocation instruction were examined through analysis of English language textbooks, teaching syllabi, and methodological research.

This multi-method approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both the theoretical framework and practical implications of collocations in English language learning and translation.

Definition and Nature of Collocations

A collocation refers to a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance. Firth (1957) introduced the concept by stating, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps." For example, English speakers say "make a decision" instead of *do a decision*, even though *make* and *do* can both be used as general action verbs. These combinations become fixed through habitual usage and are often resistant to substitution.

Collocations are typically divided into two main types:



Lexical collocations (e.g., *strong tea, fast food*), which consist of combinations of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Grammatical collocations (e.g., *interested in, capable of*), which pair a content word with a grammatical structure like a preposition or an infinitive.

2. Classification of Collocations

A foundational framework for understanding collocational patterns in English was introduced by Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986), whose classification remains widely accepted in both linguistic and pedagogical contexts. They divided collocations into two primary categories: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. This distinction provides a systematic approach to analyzing word combinations and has been influential in both lexicographic studies and language instruction.

Lexical collocations consist of content words that frequently co-occur and are relatively free from syntactic constraints. These collocations are semantically motivated but not entirely predictable, making them a critical focus for vocabulary acquisition. Common types include:

Verb + Noun (e.g., *make a mistake, commit a crime*): These combinations often reflect idiomatic usage and require learners to memorize specific pairings rather than rely solely on literal meaning.

Adjective + Noun (e.g., *heavy traffic, strong argument*): Such combinations convey specific nuances of meaning and often carry cultural or contextual connotations.

Noun + Noun (e.g., *data analysis, arms race*): These often form compound nouns or technical terms, particularly relevant in academic and professional discourse.

Adverb + Adjective (e.g., *deeply concerned, highly effective*): These combinations enhance the intensity or precision of the adjective, contributing to stylistic richness in expression.

Adverb + Verb (e.g., *strongly recommend, fully understand*): These are essential for conveying modality, emphasis, or degree, particularly in formal writing and speech.

Grammatical collocations, on the other hand, involve a content word paired with a grammatical element such as a preposition or an infinitive. These combinations are often more challenging for language learners due to their syntactic irregularity and limited predictability. Examples include:

Verb + Preposition (e.g., *depend on, approve of*)

Adjective + Preposition (e.g., *interested in, capable of*)

Noun + Preposition (e.g., *access to, advantage of*)

Verb + Infinitive/Gerund (e.g., *decide to leave, avoid making mistakes*)

The acquisition of grammatical collocations is particularly problematic for learners because errors in these structures can lead to ungrammatical or awkward expressions, even when individual lexical items are correctly chosen. Therefore, a clear understanding of both types of collocations is essential for developing fluency, stylistic appropriateness, and syntactic accuracy in English.

This classification continues to serve as a critical framework in applied linguistics, helping educators design effective instructional strategies and aiding learners in achieving more native-like proficiency.



Challenges in Learning and Translation

The acquisition and accurate use of collocations pose significant challenges for non-native speakers, particularly due to the divergences between collocational norms in their first language (L1) and those in English (L2). One of the most frequently encountered difficulties is semantic mismatch, which occurs when learners transfer collocational patterns directly from their native language into English. This transfer often results in grammatically correct but pragmatically or stylistically inappropriate expressions. For example, learners might produce phrases such as *"do a party"* instead of the idiomatically correct *"have a party"*, illustrating the impact of negative language transfer.

Research based on learner corpora—databases of written or spoken language produced by learners—has shown that collocational errors are prevalent even among advanced language users. These errors include miscollocations (e.g., *"strong rain"* instead of *"heavy rain"*) and the overuse of general-purpose verbs like *do*, *make*, or *get*. Such findings suggest that incidental exposure alone is insufficient for mastering collocational competence. Instead, learners require focused instruction, repeated practice, and corrective feedback to internalize the acceptable combinations of lexical items in English.

From a translation perspective, collocations represent a critical area where literal rendering from one language into another can lead to awkward, incorrect, or even misleading translations. Because collocations are often language-specific and culture-bound, a literal approach frequently fails to capture their idiomatic or contextually appropriate equivalents in the target language. For instance, the direct translation of the Azerbaijani expression *"çox susuzdu"* as *"he is very thirsty"* may be acceptable, but collocationally inappropriate if the target language uses a different structure to express the idea.

Professional translators must, therefore, develop a high degree of collocational awareness, particularly in the domain of interlingual collocations, which differ significantly across languages. To mitigate these challenges, translators are encouraged to consult bilingual collocation dictionaries, parallel corpora, and specialized translation software that provide context-sensitive usage patterns. Moreover, developing intuition about native-like usage through extensive reading in the target language can enhance sensitivity to collocational norms and reduce reliance on literal translation.

In sum, both language learners and translators must recognize that mastering collocations is not merely a matter of vocabulary knowledge, but a complex process that involves syntactic accuracy, semantic appropriateness, and cultural fluency.

Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Collocations

Effective teaching of collocations should involve both explicit instruction and contextual exposure. Suggested strategies include:

- **Collocation dictionaries and corpora:** Encouraging students to use resources like the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* or online corpora to discover common word pairings.
- **Chunking exercises:** Teaching students to memorize and use word chunks rather than isolated words.
- **Translation comparison tasks:** Engaging learners in comparing collocations in English and their L1 to develop contrastive awareness.



- **Error analysis:** Using authentic learner errors to highlight common problems and reinforce correct usage.

Incorporating collocational competence into curriculum design can significantly improve learners' language fluency and translation skills.

Conclusion

Collocations are fundamental to mastering English language fluency and achieving accurate translation. Their fixed or semi-fixed nature reflects patterns of natural language use that pose unique challenges for learners and translators. Understanding the types, classifications, and common errors associated with collocations allows educators to design more effective instructional approaches. By combining exposure, analysis, and practice, language teachers can support learners in developing the collocational competence necessary for academic and professional success in English.

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Received: 04.27.2025

Revised: 05.01.2025

Accepted: 05.06.2025

Published: 05.09.2025



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Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718