

Patterns of Development in the Use of Verb-noun and Adjective-noun Collocations in the Writing of Young EFL learners: Evidence from the International Corpus of Cross-linguistic Interlanguage (ICCI) and Implications for Teaching

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A cross-linguistic analysis of the use of verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations in the writing of young EFL learners was conducted with sample essays from the ICCI corpus, to explore possible patterns of development in the use of such structures.

Fixed expressions have been shown to be prevalent in native speakers language (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2008) and to be retrieved faster than individual lexical items (Erman, 2007). Accordingly, being able to use these expressions is considered an indication of native-like competence (Bogaards, 2001) and, therefore, important for foreign language learning. Following the phraseological approach, collocations are defined in this paper as a fixed expression characterized by relative transparency in meaning and a restricted binary co-occurrence of lexical units between which a syntactic relation holds (Nesselhauf, 2004). Such a definition highlights the problems EFL learners might have with understanding why a person can be both 'strong' and 'powerful', whereas the coffee one drinks can be 'strong' but not 'powerful'.

Fifteen to twenty passages were sampled from each of the school grades six to twelve, in each of the countries represented in the ICCI, unless certain data was missing in any of the countries. To limit the degree of variation, an equal number of approximately 500-600 properly used tokens was sampled from each of these sub-corpora. To identify which of the verb-noun and adjective-noun combinations in these sub-corpora are acceptable collocations in native speakers' language, three sources based on native-speakers corpora were consulted: the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 5 (Mayor, Fox, & Combley, 2009), the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (Crowther, Dignen, & Lea, 2008) and the word frequency list of American English (Davis & Gardner, 2010). The percentages of collocations in each of the sub-corpora were then compared by means of numerous one-way chi-square tests. The preliminary results of the present study corroborate previous findings, (Laufer & Waldman, 2009; Nesselhauf, 2005), showing a very limited use of collocations. Given the prevalence of collocations in the language of native speakers and their effect on fluency, such lack of use should be considered in terms of its effect on the general language proficiency of the learners. Furthermore, while such lack of knowledge can be accounted for by the obvious understandable limited proficiency of beginning or young EFL learners, the present study clearly demonstrates that the use of collocations shows no significant progress even in the course of seven years. Hence, if the purpose of language learning is to at least progress *towards* native-like level, then any such lack of progress,

despite learners' limited proficiency, should not be disregarded. The present study thus also includes suggestions for the teaching of collocations as chunks of meaning, along with the teaching of single words, already in the early stages of language learning. Only by gradually and systematically introducing them, will collocations eventually become an integral part of the language of EFL learners.

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