Collocations as a Part of an English LSP Course – The Importance of Congruence for Achieving English Language Proficiency

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Abstract—The importance of collocational proficiency and its various aspects has been attested in numerous recent studies. Not only does the proper usage of collocations enhance fluency and accuracy of the speaker, but the lack of awareness of collocational patterns leads to over-reliance of L1 transfer, and consequently, to awkward and unnatural-sounding word combinations. Because of this, the importance of collocational proficiency for teaching English, both in general and as a language for specific purposes, remains unquestionable. This research will be conducted among the students of the Professional Studies of Hospitality at the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences. The fluency of intercultural communication is one of the fundamental prerequisites in the field of tourism and hospitality, which underlines the importance of teaching collocational patterns to these students. The results of this research should provide useful insights for developing language skills and teaching materials in an LSP course.

Index Terms—collocations, congruence, LSP, proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world of ever-expanding world-wide communication, the role of language is vital. This is especially prominent in the fields of economy, marketing, and tourism in which exchange of information and ideas is a constant. Because of this, the importance of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is becoming increasingly crucial, both in verbal and written communication. Taking this into consideration, teaching LSP in educational institutions plays an important role in facilitating international interaction which is why its more detailed implementation into the curriculum of all educational institutions should be emphasized.

As a recurring phraseological phenomenon, collocations represent one of the most important aspects of communication and LSP. In order for foreign language teachers and lecturers to find better ways for teaching collocations, it is necessary to examine all possible problems that may occur in their acquisition. The native language influence on LSP proficiency and acquisition is certainly not insignificant and it needs to be examined if and to which extent L1 affects L2 proficiency.

The concept of collocations and their meaning is one of the main problems the learners of English language are faced with and one of the most interesting areas of linguistic research [1]. The reason collocations are useful to all speakers is their ability to express certain ideas or concepts regarding a certain topic without sounding unnatural as they increase both accuracy and fluency of the speaker [2]. The necessity for such skills is increasingly apparent in a wide-ranging area of LSP.

Seeing how many foreign language learners are not aware of the existence of collocational patterns, they tend to rely on L1 to L2 transfer for processing collocations, which often leads to utterances that sound awkward despite being grammatically correct [1]. One of the reasons for this is that language learners tend to operate on the “open-choice principle”, which means they use individual language elements, as opposed to native speakers who operate on the “idiom principle”, and use prefabricated linguistic segments [3].

Generally, conventionality is regarded as an important factor for dealing with collocations, and as one of the prominent reasons some word combinations sound natural and others do not [4], [5]. According to ref. [6], our vocabulary requires knowledge of various prefabricated chunks, the most important of which are collocations, which is why teaching collocations should be of the utmost importance in every language course [6].
DEFINING COLLOCATIONS

THE ORIGIN AND THE APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF COLLOCATIONS

The first mentions of the term “collocation” in the English lexicon appeared relatively late, in the 1920s, while the first definition of the term was given by Firth in 1957 [7]. The concept itself remains somewhat unclear and hazy, as some studies do not differentiate between collocations and free combinations [2]. This is explained by the fact that it is often difficult to provide definite demarcations between categories of word combinations, such as collocations, idioms and free combinations.

Although there are numerous studies of collocations, and the works take various standpoints [8], two main approaches to collocations that appear in the majority of works published on this topic can be underlined – the frequency-based, or, statistically-based approach, and the phraseological, or, significance-oriented approach [9]. The former examines the collocations in terms of frequency of co-occurrence within a certain textual segment that is, as combinations of certain words that co-occur more frequently than other combinations [9]. The latter approach perceives them as abstract word combinations with instantiations in actual texts that are fixed to some degree, although not entirely. Their definition is derived through differentiation from other word combinations, most prominently idioms and free combinations. The frequency-based approach is often used in the computational analysis of syntagmatic relations and its main proponents are, among others, Firth, Halliday and Sinclair, whereas the phraseological approach is more used in the lexicographic and pedagogic research and can be seen in the works of Cowie, Mel’čuk and Hausmann [9].

Although we consider the frequency of occurrence an important factor for collocations, especially to determine which collocations appear most frequently and should be emphasized in L2 teaching, this work follows the phraseological approach in terms of definition and classification.

CLASSIFICATION OF WORD COMBINATIONS

One of the representatives of the phraseological approach, A. P. Cowie, distributes word combinations into two categories – semantic combinations, or composites, and pragmatic combinations, or formulae [9], [10]. The semantic combinations are further distributed into free combinations, collocations and idioms, while pragmatic combinations are further divided into proverbs and routine formulae (Fig.1).

According to this classification of semantic combinations, free combinations are not preconstructed, they are used in a literal sense and unrestrictedly in combinations, such as drink tea [2], [4], [9], [10]. The substitution of both elements of the free combinations for another element can be done based on the semantic constraints.

![Figure 1. Cowie’s distribution of word combinations](image-url)

Collocations are considered to be preconstructed [4], at least one element of the collocation is semantically literal, with some possibility of substitution of elements, but based on arbitrary rather than semantic limitations [9], such as in take a picture. Idioms are preconstructed word combinations [4] with non-literal meaning, i.e., the meaning of which cannot be deduced from the
individual meaning of the words, and with little or no possibility for substitution of elements [2], [9], such as in spill the beans.

Similarly to this, reference [11] defines collocations as loosely fixed and semantically transparent combinations, somewhere between idioms and free combinations.

Reference [5] defines the border between collocations and idioms by comparing the two categories in terms of idiomaticity, stability and reproducitivy. According to this work, collocations have concrete/literal meaning, while idioms have metaphoric meaning. Collocations have a certain degree of stability, but are not fully stable, meaning a certain word can be inserted between the collocation elements. This does not apply to idioms, which are fully stable. Ultimately, when reproduced, idioms are not re-created anew from individual parts, but are stored inside the mind as complete units, whereas the collocations have to be re-created from individual parts [5].

This view is supported by reference [12] which claims that some word combinations are processed as wholes. According to this work, fixed multi-word combinations involve very strong links between the words, while collocations use links of variable strength, that is, the links between certain words are more elusive and subtle than between others. Native speakers perceive collocations as individual lexemes while learners have to recognize them as bound syntagms, so as not to translate each element individually [5]. Because of this, collocations are more liable to cross-linguistic influence than other word combinations, although there is relatively little data about the extent of this [12].

### Congruence of Collocations

When comparing the collocations in L1 and L2, the concept of congruence stands out as one of the crucial aspects. When examining collocational proficiency, only the collocations that sound natural in both languages when translated word for word can be considered congruent (taking into consideration certain syntactic constraints of the two languages in question), while the remaining collocations are regarded as non-congruent [2]. Some authors, however, recognize three degrees of congruence: full, partial and zero congruency [5], [13], [14]. The research presented in this paper follows the distribution from reference [2] which divides collocations into two types – congruent and non-congruent collocations.

Congruence and non-congruence should be important factors for language teaching, and non-congruent collocations should receive particular attention in language teaching, as they represent a bigger challenge for the learners [15]. However, some congruent collocations pose problems for language learners as well. It is necessary to expose the learners to patterns of foreign language in question from which to derive the rules, and to make them aware of differences between collocations in the two languages in question, in order to decrease the number of L1 mistakes.

The learners’ preference for following the “open-choice principle” in the creation of linguistic elements is manifested in their tendency to opt for less restricted but acceptable word combinations, in case of study in reference [12] “general-purpose” intensifiers, as a way of producing linguistic content without the risk of it sounding unnatural or incorrect. Learners also prefer collocations congruent in L1 and L2 [15], and generally rely on familiar and reliable structures [15]. On the other hand, they tend to avoid elusive or obscure collocations [12]. According to ref. [2], restricted word combinations are usually less congruent, which is why collocations pose far more difficulties to foreign language learner, especially subtle and more elusive collocations [12].

All of this highlights the importance of L1 influence when dealing with collocations, especially with non-congruent collocations. Several studies reveal a high proportion of collocational mistakes that can be traced to L1 influence [2], [16], [17].

### Assessing Collocational Proficiency

One of the central questions in the study of collocations among the L2 learners is whether collocational proficiency improves as the general L2 proficiency improves [18]. The previous works provide rather contrasting answers to this question – while some studies show that general proficiency does have a positive correlation on collocational proficiency, other studies claim not to have found such correlation [18]. Some works show that learners tend to rely on familiar and common structures [12] and word combinations congruent in L1 and L2 [15].

As ref. [1] states, word combinations such as collocations constitute a diverse category that is hard to define and because of this, they are hard to understand for the learners, and the most problematic aspect of collocations is their production.
Among the methods for assessing the L2 collocational proficiency, translation stands out as one of the most commonly used methods, followed by sentence cloze tasks, sentence generation tasks [13] decontextualized prompts, and various discrete receptive tasks [18]. Three types of tasks were chosen to be used in this study – multiple-choice sentence cloze tasks, translation cloze tasks, and a modification to the sentence cloze tasks, dubbed the CONTRIX task (‘content matrix’) [13]. The CONTRIX task consists of a sentence prompt with a blank space that a collocation is inserted into and a constituent matrix with 9 fields – 3 columns and 3 rows. The participants have to combine one out of three elements from each column to produce the appropriate collocation (i.e. fill + out + a cheque).

The multiple-choice tasks were intended to test the receptive knowledge of collocations, the CONTRIX task was intended both as a receptive and a productive method, while the translation task aimed to test the participants’ productive skills.

**METHODODOLOGY**

The research presented in this work was conducted among the students of the Professional Studies of Hospitality at the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences and it involved 52 participants, all of which have been taking an English LSP course as a part of their curriculum. The participants’ age, sex, number of years spent learning English, and the year of study were not a relevant factor for this study and were not taken into consideration. The students’ general English language proficiency was chosen as a variable to be compared with their knowledge of LSP collocations.

The participants were given a questionnaire consisting of two parts – a general English proficiency, and a collocational proficiency test. The general proficiency test is an abridged placement test for CEF levels based on the Cambridge English Unlimited Placement Test and contains 30 questions. It was administered to determine the correlation between general proficiency and collocational proficiency.

Bearing in mind the possibility of getting results that would not be representative enough due to a small corpus used [18], this study used 60 different collocations distributed into 3 types of tasks described in the previous section. These tasks will show which segment of collocation knowledge poses more problems to the learners, receptive or productive, and which types of tasks need to be emphasized more in the LSP course to address this matter. Among the collocations used, 30 are congruent in Croatian and English and 30 are non-congruent. The aim of this part of research was to check whether the congruence of collocations has an effect on their proficiency, that is, if the L1 has an influence on collocational proficiency in L2. All collocations used in the study belong to the business domain and were taken from the materials used in the creation of their LSP course, most notably from references [19], [20], [21], [22].

The aim of the research was to provide the answers to the following research questions:

1. Does general language proficiency affect knowledge of collocations in LSP and to what extent?
2. Which types of exercises pose the biggest problem to English language learners and should be emphasized more in teaching English as an LSP?
3. How important is congruence of collocations for their recognition?

**RESULTS**

According to the conducted general proficiency test, the participants were distributed into four groups, ranging from B1 to C2. There were 6 participants on B1 level, 19 B2 participants, 24 C1 participants and 3 participants which were categorized as C2l level. It is worth mentioning that no participants were characterized as A1 or A2 level participants, which means that the minimum English proficiency level was intermediate.

The general mean result of collocation proficiency test was 33.61 %. The score of 52 % participants was above the mean value. The group of B1 participants got a mean score of 17.4 %, which is almost two times below than the general mean value, while the B2 group got a mean score of 27.9 %. The C1 group had a mean score of 40.5 %, which is more than two times above the B1 group, while the smallest group of C2 participants got the best mean score – 47.2 %. The first conclusion that can be drawn from the results in hand is that general language proficiency has a positive correlation on the knowledge of collocations (Fig. 2), i.e. the students with lower general proficiency have more problems understanding collocations than the students with higher general proficiency who have better understanding of collocations.
Another interesting thing to note here is that neither group of participants got a mean score above 50%. Considering that the collocations used in this research were taken from the books used in their English LSP classes, this clearly shows that collocations should be given more attention in the LSP courses.

As it was mentioned above, the collocational proficiency part of the questionnaire included three types of tasks – the multiple choice cloze tasks, the CONTRIX tasks, and the translation cloze tasks. The first task type was intended to test the receptive knowledge of collocations, the translation task for productive knowledge and the CONTRIX task was used to test both of these segments. The mean success rate for all groups for multiple choice tasks was 53.7%, 27.55% for CONTRIX tasks, and 20% for translation tasks. This overall trend is reflected in the mean results for each group, as can be seen in Fig. 1, as all four groups had the best success rate for the multiple choice tasks – 34.17% for B1, 49.21% for B2, 60.42% for C1, and 60% for C2. The CONTRIX task yielded the second best mean results for each group of participants – 11.67% for B1, 19.08% for B2, 36.15% for C1, and 44.17% for C2. Finally, in concordance with the overall mean results, the translation tasks had the worst success rate among all four groups – 6.25% in B1, 15.26% in B2, 25% in C1, and 37.5% in C2 group of participants. In accordance with the mean results for each group (Fig. 1), the mean results of each task are in direct correlation with the general proficiency level, i.e. each group’s mean result for a certain task is higher than that of the group with lower proficiency, and lower than the result of the group with higher proficiency. It is also very indicative that the results for the CONTRIX task were closer to the results of translation tasks rather than the results of the multiple choice cloze tasks, which leads us to believe that the productive knowledge plays a more vital role in this type of task.
An overall conclusion can be inferred that productive task and exercises are more troublesome for the participants than the receptive ones. The implications of this should become even more apparent in communication, as the fluency of speech is bound to be affected by a somewhat poorer collocational proficiency. This also underlines the general need for foreign language teachers and lecturers to put more emphasis on productive tasks, such as translation tasks and, judging by the results in this research, tasks such as CONTRIX.

Another interesting conclusion can be inferred when comparing the results of receptive and productive tasks between groups. As can be seen from the Table 1, the mean success rate ratio between receptive and productive tasks is in negative correlation with their general proficiency levels. This means that although all groups of participants got lower mean results for productive tasks, the difference between productive and receptive tasks is much smaller for students with higher general proficiency (C1 and C2). In other words, the lower proficiency students are much better at recognizing the meaning of collocations than at reproducing them on their own, while the ability of higher proficiency students to recognize the collocations and produce them on their own is on a similar level, i.e. the difference between those two skills is not so radically different.

Table 1. Success rate ratio between receptive and productive tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Success rate ratio</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>5.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing the results of congruent and non-congruent collocations, it can be seen that the mean score for congruent collocations is significantly higher (41.92 %) than the one for non-congruent collocations (25.29 %). The B1 group of participants had a mean score of 22.78 % for congruent and only 11.94 % for non-congruent collocations, the B2 group had a mean score of 35 % for congruent and 20.7 % for non-congruent collocations, the C1 group had a 50.21 % mean score for congruent and 30.83 % for non-congruent collocations, and the C2 group had a mean score of 57.78 % for congruent and 36.67 % for non-congruent collocations (Fig. 3). This confirms the conclusion from previous studies that non-congruent collocations pose bigger challenges to learners than congruent ones and also highlights the necessity for bigger emphasis on collocations non-congruent in L1 and L2. The foreign language learners need to be taught to process collocations as complete units, regardless of their congruence with L1. Although transfer from L1 does not necessarily imply negative connotations, over-reliance on it may result in creating some awkward and unnatural word combinations.
A similar situation that was noted between receptive and productive tasks can be noted when comparing the success rate ratio of congruent and non-congruent collocations between groups. Although this difference is not as apparent as that between receptive and productive tasks, a certain trend of negative correlation between general proficiency level and success rate ratio of congruent and non-congruent collocations can still be observed (see Table 2). So, not only do learners in general have a preference for collocations congruent in L1 and L2, the lower proficiency students in particular rely more on congruence in understanding collocations than higher proficiency students.

Table 2. Success rate ratio between congruent and non-congruent collocations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Success rate ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

From a phraseological perspective, collocations represent a preconstructed combination of words with some degree of stability and some possibility of substitution of elements, but the possible substitutions are based on arbitrary limitations, rather than semantic. While some word combinations include strong links between words, these links have variable strength for collocations, which means they are not memorized and used in the same way as idioms, for instance. Another reason why they are much harder for language learners to process is because learners tend to operate on the so-called “open-choice” principle, i.e. they analyze and store each part of the word combination individually rather than processing them as a fixed word combination.

Collocations are an important aspect of language proficiency, both in general English discourse and LSP and the speakers which master them achieve higher fluency in their L2 production. Conversely, the speakers with lower collocational proficiency tend to produce sentences which sound unnatural or incorrect. Because of this, learners opt for safer and generally more familiar collocations, so as to avoid the risk of producing incorrect word combinations.

While not all previous studies confirm the correlation between general language proficiency and collocational proficiency, most studies agree that language learners prefer collocations congruent in L1 and L2. This research provided definite confirmations for this tendencies as participants with higher general proficiency levels showed markedly higher collocational proficiency levels as well. The participants score better results for tasks with congruent collocations, both on the overall level and in each of the proficiency subgroups. In addition, the results show that the preference for congruent collocations is more noticeable among the lower proficiency participants, than among the higher proficiency participants. Not only do learners with better general proficiency have better understanding of collocations, the congruence of collocations seems to play a less vital role for them, which means they rely less on transfer from L1 to L2 and more on their own knowledge of collocations. Although transfer from L1 is not necessarily a negative thing, the students should be taught to process the collocations as complete units in the foreign language, regardless of their congruence between languages. Over-reliance on L1 as a source for collocations in L2 can lead to some infelicitous mistakes on their part.

It is generally accepted the productive aspect of collocations is more troublesome than their receptive aspect. This was also the case in this study, which showed marked differences between receptive and productive tasks. On a general level, the participants solved more receptive than productive tasks, while its ratio was noted to be higher among the lower proficiency groups than among the higher proficiency groups. So not only do higher proficiency learners have better understanding of collocations, their production seems to cause markedly less problems to them than it poses to the lower proficiency learners. Considering how important collocations are for
communication and how important production is for communication, this implication shows which aspect needs to be focused on more when teaching both LSP courses and general language courses, especially among the lower proficiency students. An interesting and useful method in achieving this should be Revier’s CONTRIX task, as it requires both receptive and productive skills, although its mean results in this study showed that the productive knowledge is slightly more significant in this type of task.

Although the results are indicative for students of the Hospitality and Tourism studies, we believe a more conclusive and representative information for general English language learners could be obtained by doing a similar research on a larger number of participants. However, two important implications can be seen – collocational proficiency does go hand in hand with general language proficiency, but it is up to the foreign language teachers to make the learners aware that collocations are not necessarily transferable from their native language, and to insist on productive rather than receptive collocation tasks when teaching English LSP courses.

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