

## LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, GRADING, AND THE USE OF LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS IN ESSAY WRITINGS BY ALGERIAN EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract :

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of semiotic multimodal literary narrative in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. The study hence provides an insightful review of the potentials of the multiplicity of the semiotic modes in feminist historiography metafiction.

The correlation between the concrete poetics, typography, layout and illustration and the textual poetics indeed allows for the combination of codes of history and gender.

### ملخص:

في هذا المقال بيان لظاهرة تعدد الأنماط السيميائية في الرواية المعاصرة، إذ أخذت الدراسة على عاتقها الكشف عن جماليات السيميائية وأنماطها المختلفة في رواية (ذوديفانيس) للكاتبة الكندية مارغريت لورانس، فضلا عن بيان فاعلية السيميائية في المتن الروائي وعلاقته بالمعنى وإمكانيتها في إثراء النص الروائي وخص بالذكر منه التاريخي النسائي.

ولا يخفى على القارئ أن الدراسة تبنت فكرة العلاقة التوافقية بين جمالية النص المرئي المتمثل ب(النسق والصورة) وجمالياته الفنية التي نلمسها في ظاهرة التشفير. تسمح هذه العلاقة التوافقية بتواجد سياسات تاريخية ونسوية معا في هذا المتن الابداعي.

Inadequate research has been carried out in the area of collocation. Although some researchers have shown interest in collocations, extensive research still needs to be undertaken to highlight its practical importance in improving EFL learners' overall linguistic competence. The topic of collocation raises many questions concerning the measurement of learners' collocational competence, the best methods to teach collocations, or the types of collocations to emphasise on. In order to be able to answer these questions, it is necessary to, first, identify difficulties in mastering collocations (Nesselhauf, 2003). This study, unlike previous studies (Halliday & Hassan 1976; Benson et al. 1986), focuses on Verb + Noun lexical collocations as the mostly used type of collocations. Hatch and Brown (1995) stated that learners acquire collocations in chunks rather than as separate words. The same thing goes to L1 users. In other words, L2 learners learn collocations like infants. The main problem with some studies about collocation is that the definition is vague, no clear and specific definition is given, which makes experimentation difficult (Hussein, 1990; Farghal&Obiedat, 1995). Firth (1957) defines collocation as the best company a word keeps. Such definition might seem ubiquitous of the notion; however, with closer attention, one would respond by saying that not all words that co-occur are collocations. In Algeria, research on collocation repeatedly tackles its translation (Moussa, 2007; Boussalia, 2010). The present study attempts to shed some light on Algerian EFL learners' knowledge of collocation in essay writing. It investigates the correlation between collocational failure and overall grading in written expression.

## 1. Literature Review

An essential introduction to the study of language is made by tackling the topic of word knowledge. A distinction is drawn between the three types of word knowledge: knowledge of form, knowledge of meaning, and knowledge of use. These three types make up for the whole study of language. In light of this concept, the notion of collocation can be defined and explained. By understanding what collocations are, one will be able to identify them on the language continuum, and distinguish them from free combinations and idioms.

### 1.1. Definition of Collocation

Collocations have been recognised to distinguish a native speaker from a foreign language learner. Usually, one way a non-native

speaker may offer help is by saying ‘Can I help you?’ Meanwhile a native speaker would say ‘Can I give you a hand?’ (Salkauskiene, 2002, as cited in Farrokh, 2012, p. 56). Although a non- native speaker might succeed syntactically, he/she may not sound a native-like in terms of which words combine with which. English, similar to many languages, has its own share of re-occurring word combinations. These word combinations arbitrarily co-occur. A native speaker says ‘ultimate goal’ and not ‘last goal’; one ‘pays a visit’, but does not ‘make a visit’ (ibid). Prodromou (2004, as cited in ibid) says:

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.

Palmer (1933) introduced the notion of collocation. According to him, it is “a string of words that must or should be learned, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts” (Ganji, 2012, p. 125). Firth (1957) followed later, and was recognized as the one who introduced this concept to the world.

During the last decades, research in linguistics has given much importance to collocation. Scholars, teachers, and corpus designers understood its importance during the language learning process. They mentioned that the increase in linguistic competence is primary in the enhancement of learners’ communicative competence, and the approximation to native-like fluency (Darvishi, 2011, p. 52). On the same note, teachers’ ability to identify collocational errors to EFL learners can significantly increase their awareness of the subject. Therefore, studying miscolllocations is equally important to studying correct ones, for it helps instructors to focus on the difficult ones (ibid, p. 52-53).

Focus on collocation by many scholars led to a variety of definitions. For Firth (1957, p. 179, as quoted in Salman and Mansoor, 2013, p. 04) “you shall know a word by the company it keeps.” According to Lewis (1997, p.44, as quoted in Farrokh, 2012, p. 57) “collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency. Collocations co-occur, but not all

words which co-occur, are collocations.” This states clearly that collocations have their specific characteristics which distinguish them from other word combinations like free combinations and idioms. Hardi (2008) defines collocation as “words that occur together in a text. This co-occurrence, he believes, is frequent enough to make a pair of words as a collocational phrase” (ibid). Hardi’s words denote the characteristic of frequency which is primary to identifying collocations. However, frequency hits which qualify a certain word combination to move from free combination to collocation differ according to scholars and corpora. Some scholars set the bar to 40 hits per 100 million words; others suggest the hits should reach 50 hits per 100 million words.

### 1.2. Collocational Competence

As much as grammatical competence is important to reach native-like proficiency, collocational competence makes a foreign language learner a pseudo-native speaker. There are many advantages that collocational competence offers. According to Henriksen (2013), collocational competence helps:

- 1) to make idiomatic choices and come across as native-like; 2) to process language fluently under real-time conditions (Columbus, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008); 3) to establish ‘islands of reliability’ (Dechert, 1983; Raupach, 1984) which enable the language user to channel cognitive energy into more creative production; 4) to disambiguate meaning of polysemous words, e.g. the verb *commit* in the following collocational contexts: *commit a crime*, *commit oneself*, *commit to memory*; and 5) to understand connotational meaning (what Sinclair, 2004 has described as semantic prosody), e.g. the fact that the verb *cause* is often associated with negative connotations as in *cause an accident*.(p. 33)

In other words, appropriate understanding of collocations allows the reader or listener to achieve communicative competence.

### 1.3. Types of Collocations

The various perspectives the notion of collocation was viewed from led to a different categorisation. According to Chia-Chuan, “Cowie and Mackin (1973) classified idioms and collocations into four

categories based on idiomaticity from most to least fixed: pure idioms, figurative idioms, restricted collocations, and open collocations (2005, p. 11). On a different note, Wood (as cited in Darvishi, 2011, p. 53) categorised collocations into idioms, colligations, and free combinations. His categorisation was based on semantic and syntactic criteria. For Lewis (1997), collocations were classified into strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent (ibid). The categorisation adopted in this research is developed by Bahns. According to Boussalia (2010, p. 15), collocations can be classified into two main categories: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations.

Grammatical collocations contain prepositions, sometimes occurring with verbs, nouns, or adjectives, e.g. (*reach down, put forth*), (*by car, on foot*), or (*interested in, happy with*) (McKeown & Radev, p. 05). Bahns (1993, p. 57, as cited in Boussalia 2010, p. 15) notes that they “(usually) consist of a noun, an adjective or a verb, plus a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause.”

On the other hand, lexical collocations are “restricted lexically” (McKeown & Radev, p. 05-06). Benson (1985, p. 62) explains that “lexical collocations contain no subordinate element; they consist of two lexical components” (Boussalia 2010, p. 15-16). This means that there are no grammatical components within the word combination, only lexical ones (content words). According to Gabrielatos (1994, p. 02):

there are three factors determining the categorising of a lexical collocation: the degree of probability that the items will co-occur, the degree of fixity of the combination (i.e. grammatical restrictions), and the degree to which the meaning of the combination can be derived from its constituent parts.

There are six types of lexical collocations:

1. Verb + noun: pay a visit.
2. Adjective + noun: heavy rain.
3. Noun + verb: the cat cuddles.
4. Adjective + adjective: closely related.
5. Verb + adverb: announce happily.
6. Adverb + adjective: totally bewitched (Bahns, 1993, p. 57 ).

## 2. The Study

The present work investigates the use of Verb+Noun lexical collocations in the essays of Algerian second year undergraduate EFL learners at the department of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. It is to discuss the following questions:

1. To what extent do second year EFL undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine master the use of Verb+Noun collocational language while writing essays?

2. To what extent do the Verb+Noun collocational errors influence the grades received by second year Algerian EFL undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine?

It is hypothesised that:

1. Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine have a low level of mastery in the usage and comprehension of V+N collocations.

2. The essays of Algerian EFL second year undergraduate students of English at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine lack the use of appropriate collocations, which influences the grades they receive.

### 2.1. Data Gathering Tools

The study used three research tools: Collocation checker, Oxford Online Collocation Dictionary (O.O.C.D), and the British National Corpus (BNC).

Collocation checker is an online software, which permits the researcher to identify correct and erroneous collocations. It shares the same database of BNC. All word combinations retrieved from students' essays were analysed via this software.

The second tool is O.O.C.D, which is an online software, too. It provides all the possible collocational hits for the searched word, in addition to examples retrieved from the BNC. Its main function -in this study- is to distinguish collocations from free combinations.

The British National Corpus is the third tool. It is an online corpus that comprises 100 million words. BNC contains authentic data, and is considered as a reliable source for examining collocation. A high-frequency hit in BNC is proof of a well-combined word combination. Examples are provided in Table 01. The basic threshold in

this study is 40 hits per word combination. All collocations which did not score 40 hits were considered as free combinations, instead.

## 2.2. Research Method

The present section describes the research method applied in the study. It contains the frequent examples, the main criteria for selecting collocations, and the method of application of the research tools.

| Pattern | Correct Collocation                                   | Erroneous Collocation   | Suggestion for Improvement  |
|---------|---|---|---|
| V+N     | attend classes<br>do homework<br>answer a<br>question | stare star<br>promote<br>appetite<br>do preparation<br>pay time | watch star<br>increase appetite<br>make preparation<br>spend time |

**Table 01: Typical V+N Collocation Type Found in this Study**

The study was based on three criteria to identify acceptable collocations and erroneous ones. Table 02 illustrates these criteria.

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Criterion 01</b> | The sense of the verb is so specific that it can only combine with a small set of nouns.  |
| <b>Criterion 02</b> | The verb in this sense cannot be replaced by their syntactically and semantically possible choices.                                   |
| <b>Criterion 03</b> | Word combinations which have high frequency hits in the British National Corpus are considered as well-formed collocations (40 hits). |

**Table 02: Criteria for Choosing Collocations in this Study**

The initial two criteria are flexible; however, the third one is fixed. In other words, the verb is considered to be 'restricted' if one or both of the restrictedness and substitutability criteria were met. Nonetheless, the combination has to score, at least, 40 hits.

A primary task was to identify erroneous collocations. The three research tools were used in the aforementioned order.

Collocation checker was used to spot wrong collocations. After a word combination is inputted, collocation checker indicates whether the combination is correct or erroneous. However, that does not entail that all acceptable word combinations –according to collocation checker—are collocations. After identifying wrong collocations, the send task was to distinguish free combinations from collocations.

O.O.C.D was used to determine whether the verb + noun investigated collocate or not.

BNC came as a final step to ensure that word combinations labelled as ‘collocations’ by O.O.C.D thoroughly fulfil the third criterion, high frequency of co-occurrence. If a combination were labelled as a ‘collocation’ by O.O.C.D, but did not score, at least, 40 hits in BNC, it would be classified as a free combination.

The efficacy of using all of the three online tools is that they share the same database, which ensures congruence in results.

### **2.3. Population and Sample**

The sample of the study consists of second year EFL students at the University of ‘Frères Mentouri’ (Constantine, Algeria). These students have been studying English for nine years. They studied written expression for 3 sessions a week, which is an equivalent of 4.5 hours for the last 2 years. The samples analysed in the study are students’ essays that were written during the second semester examinations. The reason behind the selection of examinations’ essays is to ensure seriousness in production since these essays were rated by written expression teachers. The topics were mainly social ones: gifts received in the past, students’ dream house, and the consequences of moving out of one’s native town. Such topics are common to students, and they, presumably, possess the appropriate vocabulary and ideas to elaborate on them. 66 randomly-selected essays were analysed, which is fifth of the total number of students. It is worthy to mention that the examples reported from students’ essays were copied with all the mistakes.

### **2.4. Results and Discussion**

The study recorded 616 word combinations (free combinations, collocations, and idioms). In table 03, proportionate numbers of each category are represented.

| Total      | Free Combinations | Collocations | Idioms |
|------------|-------------------|--------------|--------|
| 616 (100%) | 379 (61.53%)      | 237 (38.47%) | 0 (0%) |

**Table 03: Total Number of Word Combinations in Students' Compositions**

It is predictable that learners use free combinations more than collocations, and that idioms will be of a lesser use. The reason is that collocations and idioms are context-bound and of arbitrary use. What is noticeable is that in 66 essays written by the students, no idiom was identified. This could be due students' ignorance of idioms as essential in improving the quality of writing.

237 collocations were found in students' compositions. Only 38.82 % of them were correct. Table 04 illustrates the findings.

| Composition | Acceptable Collocations | Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
|             | 92 (38.82 %)            | 145 (61.18 %)             |

**Table 04: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable Collocations in Students' Compositions**

The high percentage of erroneous collocations shows clearly that second year EFL learners at Frères Mentouri university lack collocational competence. Although students were given freedom to choose topics to write about, they were unsuccessful in using the appropriate V+N combinations -based on the context of writing. These results open speculation on students' ability to use the most common type of lexical collocations (V+N) if writing topics were more difficult and more science-based.

The following section focuses on the essays with the lowest grades. It attempts to examine the influence of V+N collocational errors on the grades. It also investigates written expression teachers' awareness of

collocations during the correction. In this sense, it considers 06 copies that were awarded the lowest grades.

### The Compositions with the Lowest Grades:

#### Copy 01:

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 07.5  | 01                                | 04                                  |

#### Table 05: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 01

The only case where the V+N collocation was correctly used was in this example:

- Moving to a new town puts you in a situation where you must *to have a good and strong control* your self to have a nice life.

Compared to the other 04 unacceptable V+N collocations, it is obvious that the learner has a low level of mastery of Verb+Noun collocations. What needs to be stressed, though, is the grade. Taking into consideration the importance of V+N collocations among other types of lexical/grammatical collocations, the teacher, in this case, was accurate to reward 7.5 as a grade.

#### Copy 02:

In the second copy, there were 04 V+N free combinations. What was unexpected is the low number of erroneous collocations, because, regarding the final grade, it can be assumed that either the learner ignored other important techniques of essay writing, or the teacher did not consider the fact that he/she made few a few collocational errors.

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 08    | 04                                | 02                                  |

**Table 06: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 02**

In essay writings, it is usually expected that free combinations are used more than collocations, especially for EFL learners. However, using collocations more than free combinations is not a sign that there is a lack of use in the latter. What is more important is the frequency of collocational error in the essays; the less collocational errors a learner makes, the better the grading should be.

Some of the instances where free combinations were used include the following:

1. For me, I like *to give gifts*, because I feel that is the most thing that makes people so happy, and you can sometimes achieve their dream.
2. First of all, computure is a wonderful gift. I like *to receive computure* [unclear word] the one who I like so much especially if he secced in his study.

**Copy 03:**

In this copy, the number of V+N acceptable collocations surpassed that of unacceptable ones. What is obvious is that the student did not receive 08/15, because he/she failed to adhere to the writing techniques (introduction, body, conclusion, punctuation, etc.). Although V+N free combinations were not used intensely, it must be noted that that did not influence the gist of the essay.

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 08    | 04                                | 01                                  |

**Table 07: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 03**

The mistake that was made in the recorded unacceptable V+N collocation was the absence of the preposition “in”. The example is phrased in the following way:

- Moving from one place to another sometimes creates social problems such as lake of communication. They find lot of

difficulties to contact with the other's and they find themselves which *results some illnesses* for them as phobia xenophobia or a fear of being among people.

#### Copy 04:

For the other word combinations, there were 04 correct Verb+Noun collocations, and only 02 erroneous ones. The essay, however, received a grade 07/15. Such grade might be considered not enough for a student who only made 02 mistakes in Verb+Noun collocations. Nonetheless, there were other factors coming into play when the paper was corrected.

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 07    | 04                                | 02                                  |

**Table 08: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 04**

Analysing copy 04 carefully, one would highlight the following mistakes:

1. Difficulty in using the appropriate tense
2. Numerous mistakes in punctuation.
3. Absence or inappropriateness of the thesis statement.
4. Lack of parallelism within sentences.
5. An insufficient development of the essay, in general.

Although all these problems contributed in the degeneration of the quality of the essay, what is noticed in copy 04 (as well as other copies) is that the teachers did not signal the collocational errors of the learners. This could be due to the significant number of copies to correct; however, skipping such mistakes shows that the teachers were not aware of these mistakes.

The mistakes that were constantly highlighted were spelling, tense, and, sometimes, punctuation mistakes. Such finding provokes speculation about the teachers' attitude toward collocational knowledge and collocational competence. The most justifiable interpretation is that teachers are not aware of the importance of collocations in writing.

**Copy: 05**

Copy 05 has the highest number of acceptable collocations among all the lowest grades' copies, and with only one erroneous collocation. Although there were no Verb+Noun free combinations in the whole essay, that did not affect the message delivery.

Similar to the other copies, the teacher did not highlight any of the collocational errors made in the essay –including V+N collocations. Copy 05 contained some grammatical mistakes:

1. Articles
2. Tense
3. Prepositions

There were also spelling and punctuation mistakes.

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 06.5  | 06                                | 01                                  |

**Table 09: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 05**

The essay composed in copy 05 was cluttered with many mistakes the affected the negatively. The fact that it received a mark of 6.5/15 is acceptable. In other words, even though the collocational success frequency was high, that did not help in increasing the mark. Such result is acceptable since writing is an interconnected organism of various elements and techniques, carefully interwoven to produce a solid composition.

**Copy 06:**

Copy 06 received the lowest grade amongst all the lowest grades' copies. What is contradictory about this copy is that no unacceptable V+N collocation was recorded. Since this last section focuses mainly on errors –as well as other aspects- and their influence on the grading of learners' compositions, what resulted in such a low grade is the shortness of the essay. Even the teacher commented “is this an essay????” The essay recorded:

1. Absence of thesis statement
2. Spelling mistakes

3. Insufficient development of ideas
4. Punctuation mistakes

Since there were no erroneous collocations in the study, it is obvious that the aforementioned remarks led to the low copy 05 received.

| Grade | Number of Acceptable Collocations | Number of Unacceptable Collocations |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 05    | 05                                | 00                                  |

**Table 10: Frequency of Acceptable/Unacceptable V+N Collocations in Copy 06**

The following are some of the cases of acceptable collocations in copy 06:

1. Some parents are so strict with their children. First, parents have a big responsibility which is *protecting their children* a maximum because parents have more experience than them.
2. Some parents are so strict with their children. First, parents have a big responsibility which is protecting their children a maximum because parents *have more experience* than them.

This paper sketched the collocational status quo of the Algerian second year EFL learners at Université des Frères Mentouri, Constantine. It confirmed the hypothesis that Algerian EFL learners have a low level of mastery of Verb + Noun lexical collocations. As a whole, it is to be concluded that considering all word combinations as collocations is incorrect. It is now admitted that identifying collocations from other word combinations is difficult due to their vague nature that falls between free combinations and idioms. The study stated that in order to be able to classify a given word combination as collocation, three criteria –or at least two- need to be met: restricted sense, restricted substitutability, and high frequency of co-occurrence. The obtained results show the indispensability of collocational competence in achieving efficiency in essay writing, therefore, language proficiency. The majority of the essays which contained numerous mistakes were

graded from average to low. The essays with the lowest grades did not necessarily contain the highest frequency of unacceptable V+N collocations, a result indicating that collocational errors were not taken into consideration when putting grades. This shows that written expression teachers are unaware of the importance of collocations in determining the writing quality. Therefore, the study encourages teachers and instructors to give more importance to teaching collocations as an inseparable factor to becoming a pseudo-native speaker. Moreover, they are encouraged to take collocations into consideration when correcting students' essays. In addition to that, not only do learners need to be exposed to correct collocations, but, to erroneous ones, too. This is because the trial-error mechanism used by L2 learners cannot be applied to ready-made chunks. To sum it up, it is necessary to carry out further research in this field of study through the investigation of other types of collocations.

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