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Students' Errors in the Translation of English Collocations into Albanian – A Case Study with Undergraduate English Students at the University of Tetova

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Abstract

Collocations are combinations of usually two, sometimes three or more words that are paired and naturally go together, be that in a spoken or written form. In other words, collocation is an integral unit of every language, and as such, it occurs commonly and adds spontaneous and vivid coloring to the written and spoken language. English collocations with all their semantic, grammatical, and lexical characteristics have their equivalents in many languages, but they may or may not appear in the same grammatical form. In some languages, it is difficult to find equivalents for all the English collocations, which can make their transfer and translation complicated. The purpose of this study is to locate errors that undergraduate English language (EFL) students at the University of Tetova make while translating English collocations into Albanian. The theoretical support of this study relies on other similar studies of collocations and various problems that researchers face while translating collocations from one language into another. Additionally, this study is of mixed type, both qualitative and quantitative. The study data were collected through a test, in which 71 undergraduate students of different academic years were presented with 60 collocations, with the purpose of identifying some of the most common errors students make while translating them from English into Albanian. The collected data contains demographic information, as well as the types of errors that undergraduate English language students make while translating collocations. The findings suggest that students' errors during translation are mainly of lexical and grammatical types.

Keywords: English and Albanian collocations, lexical errors, grammatical errors, undergraduate students.

Introduction

In all languages, there are words that go together and sound natural as such. Still, their occurrence in groups cannot be combined freely, nor can they always be analyzed separately in such combinations. According to Sinclair (1991), the process of speech and its formation, how it functions and develops, is regulated by two different factors: creativity and unrestricted use of language potentiality, and unproductiveness and fixed use of predefined and tightly connected word groups. Further, Sinclair (1991) provides two key principles for models concerning language: *the principle of free (open) choice* and *the principle of idiom*. The author suggests that *the principle of open choice* views a linguistic text as the outcome of a multitude of complex decisions. At each position where a unit ends (be it a word, a sentence, or a phrase), many options are open, but the only requirement is for the units to be grammatically correct. Yet, it is evident that words do not appear irregularly and randomly in the text. It would be impractical to create a normal text using the principle of free choice alone. The freedom that the speaker uses to combine words can be limited by language criteria, its grammatical patterns, and internal language rules. Differently, the co-occurrence of words must follow certain grammatical rules.

The principle of idiom considers constraints that are not included in the open choice model. The central meaning of this principle is that people do not formulate sentences word by word, but they use a group of words or ready-made phrases that come to their minds as natural units.

According to Mohammed (2023), collocation is explained as a grammatical word combination that is conditioned by the co-occurrence of words with synchronic syntactic patterns and rules that enable the connection of words of a certain class. Moreover, O'Dell & McCarthy (2017, p. 6) define collocation as "A pair or group of words that are often used together". Danilevičienė & Vazonienė (2012) suggest that the freedom given to a speaker when connecting words in verbal expression can be influenced by the rules of the language, its grammatical structure, and its internal norms and laws. This can be shown and better explained through colligations and collocations as it follows. Danilevičienė & Vazonienė (2012) present several types of collocations, such as: N + V, Adj. + N, V + N, Adverb + Adj., V + Adverb, N + N, V expr. + prep, etc. Since collocations are conditioned lexically and grammatically, Ibrahim & Adeeb (2019) distinguish the following structures:

- lexical collocations:

Adverb + Adj – seriously ill

Adj. + N – fatal accident

N + V – tigers roar

V + N – make plans

- grammatical collocations:

V + Prep. – waiting for

Adj + Prep. – interested in

N + certain V form – permission to leave

This study emerges from the significance that collocations have in foreign language learning and their role in achieving communicative fluency. Lastly, it is necessary to consider collocations in several aspects, such as: they are often the subject of discussions among language teachers and linguists; there are different categorizations about collocations; they are essential when mastering a second language, and being complex as units, they lead to errors while translating from one language to another.

Literature Review

Firth (1962, p. 13) was the first linguist to single out collocations as 'grammatical abstractions' and gave them a separate status in a language. Concretely, he suggested that collocations needed to be distinguished as separate units, which have the tendency to be grammatically or lexically associated. Being based on Halliday (2013), there are examples of collocations that are not only semantically connected, as are hyponyms, synonyms, and others, but also are lexically connected, which means they have the tendency to appear together in a cohesive context. Further, Sinclair (1996) defined collocations as co-occurring words and emphasized that their meaning does not come from single words but from words that co-occur and produce meaning.

In his theory, Hoey (2010) describes collocation as a phenomenon of cohesion in a text, which arises through the choice of words and their combinations by the author of the text. Additionally, Carter (1998) states that a collocation represents a group of words that frequently appear in language, while Murcia & Schmitt (2010) note that collocations are chunks of words that appear together and are frequently

used by native speakers. Hill (2000) views collocations as a combination of words that can be predictable and recognizable, but he also considers as collocations the following multi-word units, such as phrasal verbs, compounds, and idioms, where phrasal verbs and compounds have literal and natural meaning, whereas idioms have figurative meaning. In terms of defining collocations, Lackman & Associates (n. d.) offer some peculiarities by which collocations can be recognized, such as: they are words that often appear together; they are made up of all parts of speech; it is possible to separate them with other words in between; that phrasal verbs are counted as one verb; that the auxiliary verb *be* cannot be used in collocation, and that proper nouns cannot be counted as collocations either.

Previous Research

There are many studies on the importance and role of collocations in developing English fluency, as well as developing teaching strategies in learning and using collocations appropriately among EFL students. Sun & Park (2023) recognized in their study that higher education institutions are leading in teaching corpus-based collocations, but they have not been neglected in secondary schools either. They further suggest that in order for students to achieve natural communication efficiency and master language skills properly, the teaching of collocations should be introduced and elaborated professionally and responsibly by the teachers. Asado-va (2024) also investigated the impact of teaching English collocations, and she came to the conclusion that mastering them can significantly affect the knowledge and correct use of the language. Nhung & Thom (2024) conducted research with EFL teachers and came to the conclusion that teachers, apart from students, have a superficial knowledge of this combination of words and do not give the necessary attention to structure and use of collocations. Next, they concluded that, although the teachers recognized the importance of collocations, they still admitted that in the teaching and learning process, more attention is given to other parts of English vocabulary and grammar. Further, Eid, I. and Al-Jamal, D. (2023) in their study dealt with the presence of collocations in English textbooks, concluding that their poor presence, presentation, emphasis, and their explicit teaching lead to EFL students having difficulty mastering them, and their translation into the students' native languages was particularly challenging. In his research with EFTL and ESL students on the use of collocations in written essays, Trang, N. T. (2024) concluded that greater use of collocations leads to more advanced language knowledge. The author also located the most frequent errors and challenges in the use

of collocations, which are mainly errors made due to the influence of the mother tongue and literal word-for-word translation, as well as the limited understanding of collocations. The above-mentioned works emphasize the importance of mastering collocations, but also the most common challenges of their correct use are related to translation. The same issue was treated by Ali (2019), who suggests in his study that the best solutions for translating collocations are: using an equivalent, if there is one, or using an equivalent based on the situation, and when you have to go for a word-by-word translation, it should be supported by well-illustrated examples. He also underlined that collocations linked to culture are the most challenging for translation and illustration, while Do & Le (2023) highlighted the problem of translation by the fact that this group of words represents natural co-occurrence and recommend learning collocations with understanding, applying accurate translation techniques, and using the existing online vocabulary of collocations in order to avoid translation errors. Moreover, Kwong (2020) mentions literal translation, which is very often possible, and when it is not, then one goes to transposition, paraphrase, creativity, and modulation, stressing that collocations related to culture often require a change in the word class or the use of idiomatic expressions when necessary. However, in terms of mastering the right translation techniques of collocations, the author states the following aspects, such as the need for richer lexical associations, prioritizing equivalents, and enriching the mental lexicon. Finally, Mounassar (2021) studied the strategies that are most effective in the translation of collocations. In his work, he also concluded that literal translation, equivalence, transposition, paraphrasing, deletion, and modulation are the most appropriate strategies in the translation of collocations.

Research Methodology

The focus of this study is to identify the types of errors students make while translating collocations from English into Albanian. Specifically, the students were given 60 sentences taken from "The Education of Little Tree" by Forrest Carter; each of these sentences contained a collocation, and the students were asked to locate them and translate them into Albanian. Thus, we collected both quantitative and qualitative data, which were further processed in charts and percentages and accompanied by comments on the findings. The aim of this research is to answer the following questions:

- 1. Can English collocations be translated into Albanian?**
- 2. Do undergraduate EFL students make errors when translating collocations from English into Albanian?**
- 3. What type of errors are the most common among undergraduate EFL students when translating collocations from English to Albanian?**

The data collector was a student's sheet with 60 sentences from "The Education of Little Tree" by Forrest Carter, which also required demographic data of students regarding their gender and academic year of study. The sheet was administered to a sample of 71 EFL students, aged 18 to 23, where 42 of them were females, and 29 males, and all of those EFL undergraduate students were from Ist to IVth academic year in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Tetova. The participants were familiar with the collocations, and it was explained to them how to fill in the sheet. The demographic data included in the students' sheet were collected on-site, simultaneously with the students' responses. The number of student participants in the study per academic year was: First year - 20, Second year - 11, Third year - 17, and Fourth year - 23. The aim of this study was to see the translatability of English collocations into Albanian, as well as to see what errors students make while translating and what type of errors are most common when translating English collocations into Albanian. Student errors are presented in the total number of errors per academic year, with the additional graph including the types of the most frequent errors observed during the translation of collocations from English into Albanian.

Research Findings and Discussion

The collected data were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed using statistical and descriptive methods, with results expressed in both numbers and percentages, with the aim of determining the translatability of English collocations into Albanian, students' errors during translation of collocations, and the most common types of errors when translating English collocations into Albanian. The result tables and charts are followed by comments on findings.

Table 1.

Participants divided by gender and academic year as EFL students

Academic year N = 71							
I		II		III		IV	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
8	12	5	6	6	11	10	13
11.26%	16.90%	7.04%	8.45%	8.45%	15.49%	14.08%	18.30%

Table. 1 contains demographic data and presents the total number of participating students sorted by academic year and gender, presented in numbers and percentages. The number of female participants is higher (42 – 59.15%/) than male (40.85%) participants, which means that the majority of EFL students at the University of Tetova are females.

Figure 1.

Student's Total Errors

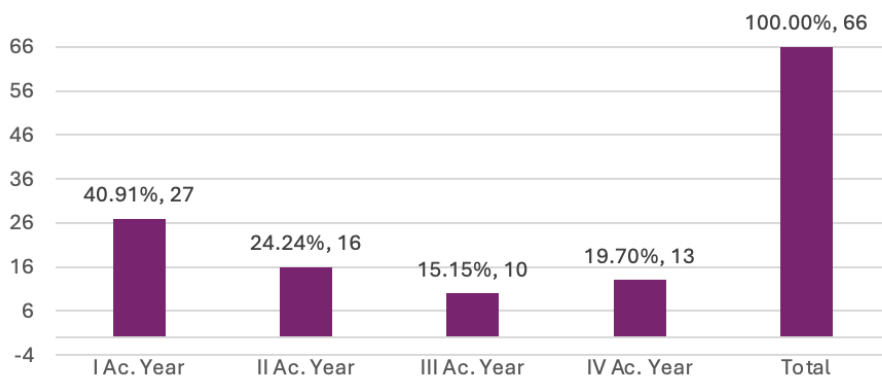


Figure 1 presents the total number of students' errors across all 4 years. From the chart, we can determine that the highest error count comes from 1st year students, with a total of 27 or 40.91% error count in a lexical and grammatical dimension. The remaining errors come from 2nd year students with 16 or 24.24%, 3rd year students with 10 or 15.15%, and 4th year students with 13 or 19.70% error count.

Figure 2.

First Ac. Year Students' Errors

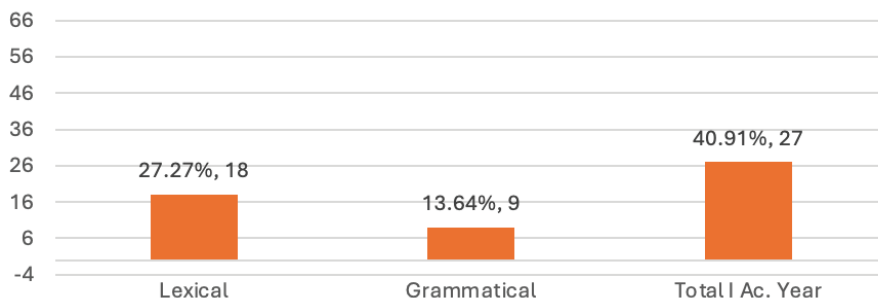


Figure 2 presents the analysis of collocation errors produced by 1st year students. From the chart, we can deduce that 1st year students especially struggle with lexical errors (made out – *shpikëm* instead of 'kuptuam', creek bank – *bregu i lumit* instead of 'bregu i përroit', had passed on – *kaloj* instead of 'ndërroi jetë', across the yard – *nëpër oborr* instead of 'përmes oborrit', etc.), with 18 collocation errors or 27.27% of the total number of students' errors. On the other hand, it is noted that they have produced a large amount of grammatical errors (9 or 13.64% of total errors), mostly related to the verb *make* and *auxiliary verbs* (make sense – *bëj kuptim* instead of 'ka kuptim', make out – *bëj kuptim* instead of 'kuptojmë', do away with – *bëjmë largim* instead of 'të hek dorë nga', do the gathering – *bëj tubim* instead of 'mbajmë tubim', have a trade – *kam tregti* instead of 'bëj tregti, etc.), due to them still being in the early stages of learning the parts of speech. These errors amount to 27 or 40.91% of the total amount of errors produced by all students.

Figure 3.

Second Ac. Year Students' Errors

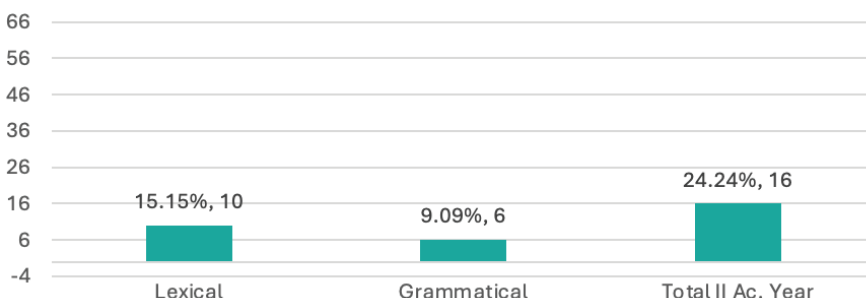


Figure 3 presents us with the analysis of errors produced by 2nd year students. Here we see a total of 16 errors or 24.24% of the total number of students' errors, divided into 10 or 15.15% lexical errors (back porch – *dera e pasme* instead of 'terraca prapa shtëpisë', grazing ground – *barishte* instead of 'tokë kullotash', plaited hair – *flokë të thinjura* instead of 'flokë të gërshetuara' – before too long – *para shumë kohe* instead of 'brenda pak kohe', honest day's work – *ditë pune e sinqertë* instead of 'ditë pune me nder' etc.) and 6 or 9.09% grammatical errors, mostly related to the verb make and verb tenses (make a living – *bëj jetesë* instead of 'siguroj jetesën', make a speech – *bëj fjalim* instead of 'mbaj fjalim', have to bend – *kam për tu përku-lur* instead of 'duhej të përkulesha', have figured this out – *e kuptova* instead of 'e kam kuptuar', etc).

Figure 4.

Third Ac. Year Students' Errors

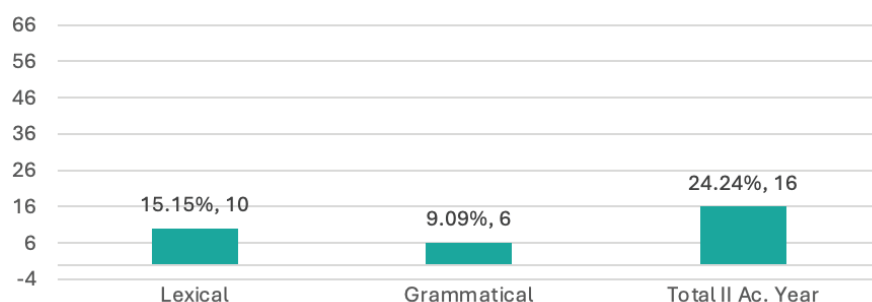
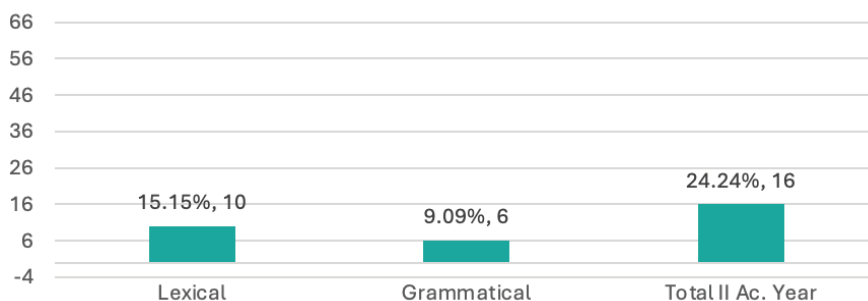


Figure 4 presents us with the analysis of the total number of errors produced by 3rd year students. From the total of 10 errors or 15.15% of the total students' errors, we see an uneven split of 8 or 12.12% of the total students' errors that relate to lexical aspect (hillside shack – *stan* or *kasolle mali* instead of 'kasolle në shpat të kodrës', across the yard – *nëpër oborr* instead of 'përmes oborrit', heavy rain – *shi i dendur* instead of 'shi i rrëmbyeshëm', wild cherry – *qërshi e egër* instead of 'thanë', mountain hollow – *gropë malore* instead of 'luginë malore', etc.), and 2 or 3.03% of the total students' errors being of grammatical nature (about that time – *për atë kohë* instead of 'rreth asaj kohe' and instead of – *në vend të* instead of 'përkundrejt')

Figure 5.

Fourth Ac. Year Students' Errors



Finally, Figure 5 presents us with the analysis of errors produced by 4th year students, where of the total of 13 errors or 19.70% of the total students' errors; we see that 9 or 13.64% of their errors are lexical (pearly gate – *porta me perla* instead of 'porta e parajsës', took the decision – *morri vendim* instead of 'solli vendim', get worked up – *të punosh* instead of 'të shqetësohesh', have a feeling – *kam ndjeshmëri* instead of 'parandjej', etc.), and 4 or 6.06% are grammatical (along the ridge – *përkrah kodrës* instead of 'përgjatë kodrës', at daybreak – *gjatë agimit* instead of 'në agim', take it over – *e merr përsipër* instead of 'e pushtoi', etc.). Though the results seen in this chart show great similarity to the results produced by 2nd year students, we must also take into account that there is a higher total amount of 4th year students than there are 2nd year students, with there being more than double the amount of students in the 4th year (23), than there are in the 2nd year (11). We would also like to mention that most errors, whether lexical or grammatical, are consistent and repeated by students across all academic years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that this study gave us an insight into the collocational errors made by undergraduate EFL students at the University of Tetova. The results showed us that lexical errors prevail over grammatical errors in terms of translating collocations. Grammatical errors were mainly limited to incorrect translation of verb make (*make a living, make a speech, make a point*, etc.); errors in the translation of verb tenses (*have to bend, have figured this out*), and prepositions (*along, about, across*). There were a large number of lexical errors due to insufficient knowledge of English collocations, but also due to the literal translation of collocations that have their appropriate Albanian equivalents (heavy rain – *shi i dendur* instead

of shi i rrëmbyeshëm, wild cherry - *qërshi e egër* instead of thanë, mourning dove - *pëllumb mëngjesi* instead of pëllumb vajtues, deep blue - *e kaltër e errët* instead of e kaltër e thellë, etc.). The collocation - *to jump a tooth* – a technical collocation was the collocation in which we recorded the largest number of students' translation errors, both grammatical and lexical. The limitations of this study are related to the number of participants. Future studies on the topic could include a larger number of participants, for the benefit of both, and more relevant results of raising awareness of similar translation issues.

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