

## Translatability of Collocations: A Constant Challenge to EFL Learners

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**Abstract:** Successful production of English collocations seems to be a challenge to EFL learners at all levels. This paper purports to be an assessment of the proficiency of advanced university students in the area of English lexical collocations as manifested in their translation from Arabic into English. A number of varied and relatively sizeable texts translated by nine MA students majoring in translation were subjected to thorough scrutiny of deviant collocational clusters in their written performance. The findings showed a relatively inadequate proficiency level in this linguistic area as well as a scale of acquisition difficulty in the different collocational forms. Besides, the paper sketched eight distinct strategies speculated to have been manipulated by the subjects while engaged in the translation process. The results ushered into the need to concentrate, formally and explicitly, on lexical learning in general, and collocations in particular, at all levels. (**Keywords:** English collocations, EFL learners, Students' Proficiency, Lexical Collocations).

**Introduction:** Collocation is an integral constituent of linguistic knowledge. Foreign language (FL) learners need to know that we say weak tea but not feeble tea though the two adjectives are semantically equivalent (cf. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English). Thus, synonymity may not work equally smoothly in all sequential contexts. It is widely assumed that the proper use of lexical sequence is a characteristic feature of the FL user's fluency, native-likeness, idiomaticity, and informativeness. Axiomatically, lexis is the core of the linguistic communication. Without it, as Wilkins (1972) rightly pronounces, "nothing can be conveyed". Fluency, according to Lewis (1993 : 15) results from "the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed items." Kjellemer (1991) remarks that fluency is enhanced by the "automation of collocations". The more the FL user is capable of producing conventional collocations, the fewer hesitations or pauses he\* is likely to make in sustained discourse, the more fluent he becomes. A plausible explanation of this observation is that our brain tends to process language as chunks rather than as individual words, which ultimately promotes fluency (also see Kaledaite and Palevicien 2008). Conversely, uncommon word clusters may slow down our receptive and productive faculties; hence, our predictability of the communicative event.

\* The masculine pronoun is used here generically for both sexes.

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### ترجمة التلازم اللفظي: تحد دائم لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة اجنبية

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**ملخص:** يشكل الاستخدام الناجح للتلازم اللفظي تحدياً لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية في مراحل التعليم كافة. هدفت هذه الدراسة الى تقييم مدى كفاءة طلبة الدراسات العليا في حقل التلازم اللفظي في اللغة الإنجليزية وذلك كما تجلى في ترجمتهم من اللغة العربية الى اللغة الإنجليزية. ولهذا الغرض تم التدقيق في ترجمة عدد من النصوص المتنوعة قام بها تسعة من طلبة الدراسات العليا في تخصص الترجمة وقد دلت النتائج على مستوى غير مرض من الكفاءة في هذا الجانب اللغوي. كما أظهرت وجود سلم متدرج من صعوبات التعلم بين تراكم التلازم النحوية المختلفة يشير ربما الى مستوى سرعة الاكتساب. وعلاوة على ذلك، خلصت الدراسة الى التكهّن بثمان استراتيجيات يحتمل ان يكون الطلبة قد استخدموها أثناء انشغالهم بعملية الترجمة. وقد ختمت الدراسة بالدعوة الى ضرورة التركيز في برامج تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية على تدريس المفردات في جميع المراحل وبخاصة التلازمية منها. (**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التلازم النحوي، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، كفاءة الطلبة، التلازم اللفظي).

Furthermore, lexical deviance, which is inclusive of collocational deviance, can be more disruptive in discourse than grammatical deviance.

Thus, "Can you tell me where's the bank?" is comprehensible whereas "The message was useless" perverts the meaning when message is what is intended.

The argument about the concept of collocation seems to be inconclusive. Palmer (1933) was the first linguist who defined idiomatic expressions as "successions of two or more words the meaning of which can hardly be deduced from a knowledge of their component words". Yet, it was Firth (1957:196) who first introduced collocations as a technical term in linguistic research. Firth also ascertained that the sense of "word company" is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and not directly affiliated with the conceptual or ideational content of the collocated components. Leech (1974:20) endorsed Firth's view that collocative meaning is construed from "the associations a word acquires on account of the meaning of the words which tend to occur in its environment". To him, pretty and handsome invite different companions: a pretty girl but a handsome young man.

As these examples show, a certain lexeme is arbitrarily bound to attract a particular lexeme, or lexemes to conjoin with it. Thus, rancid, for instance,

adjoins butter, but not milk; and sour adjoins milk, but not butter. It is the native speaker who judges whether a certain collocation is appropriate or otherwise (Crystal 1995 ; McCarthy 2004). Besides, some words exhibit variant distributional patterns. A word like night conjoins with almost an unpredictable range of collocations while a word like rancid conjoins with only a very limited range of other easily predictable words. Likewise, crime in both English and Arabic conjoins with a limited set of collocants, e.g. vicious/heinous/ odious/ atrocious compared to جريمة / مروع / بشعة / نكراء. An incompetent interlingual speaker, writer, or translator of جريمة / بشعة / نكراء, for instance, might opt for the corresponding improper L1-triggered ugly/ or denied crime.

Apparently, collocations are generally language-specific and, therefore, mirror cultural connotations (Baker 1997; Kaledaite and Palevicien 2008; Koya 2006; Zughoul 1991). This means that languages have different collocational modes. We find that English false teeth / beard are collocationally incongruent with the corresponding Arabic اسنان (اصطناعية)/الحيية (ذقن) مستعارة\* i.e. borrowed teeth/ beard). Baker (1997) showed how deliver-collocations, e.g. deliver a letter/ a speech/ a blow/ a verdict / a baby are translated variably in Arabic as يسلم رسالة/ يلقي خطابا/ يلکم / يصدر حکما / قرارا/ يولد respectively. Interestingly, moreover, Baker demonstrated that "deliver a baby" in English is incompatible with Arabic "يولد امرأة" (literally \* deliver a woman) which is not used in English. Baker explains this incongruence claiming that English focuses on the baby while Arabic focuses on the mother. Earlier Heliel (1989) exemplified the adjective heavy as a lemma word to demonstrate the volume and complexity of translating collocations as well as the variable distribution of cultural differences involved in that process. Thus, English heavy has a wide range of collocants, e.g., heavy fog/sleep/ seas/ meal/ smoker/ buyer/ industry that have variable corresponding Arabic descriptors e.g., ضباب كثيف/ سيات عميق/ بحار هانجة/ وجبة دسمة / مدخن مفرط / مشتر مسرف / مبدر/ صناعة ثقيلة. In the same line of pursuit, Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah (2003) demonstrated a wide range of 16 incongruent renditions of the Arabic verb كسر - (break) collocations. The interlingual incompatibility of such lexical sequences is a serious challenge to FL users which may lead to a complete failure to produce natural discourse (cf. Abdul-Fattah 2001; Fan 2009; Farghal and Obeidat 1995; Hsu 2007; Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah 2003). A relevant conjectural remark that may explain this deficiency is that FL learning until quite recently was the product of the tenets of traditional pedagogy which marginalized lexical learning – including collocations—and gave primacy to grammar

and usage. The result was unsatisfactory learning outcomes, a fact which motivated researchers and practitioners to shift focus to lexis.

Hsu (2007) advances four major factors for this research shift. They are (i) current teaching materials which downplay the role of vocabulary; Lewis's (1993) lexical approach and collocation-based syllabus; (iii) the availability and easy access to on-line corpora (British and American corpora), and (iv) the publication of several collocational dictionaries, such as the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English, Oxford Collocational Dictionary for Learners of English, the LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations, and Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms. Apparently, the available current, general monolingual and bilingual dictionaries fall short of meeting the needs of FL users in the area of collocation (cf. Abu Ssaydeh 1995; Oleimat 2010). Besides, one would rather speculate that Jordanian translation students at the English departments have little access, if any, to these modern collocational dictionaries.\*

To recapitulate, the observable low proficiency of FL users in collocation may be triggered partially by the inadequate attendance to this area in the teaching / learning programs. Research in the acquisition of English collocations is appreciably valuable, but, as Huang (2001) suggests, it should ultimately enable educators to implement effective strategies and techniques which enhance students' phraseological competence. Stated otherwise, this line of research should have direct bearing on the selection of the collocations to be incorporated in the FL programs. The present study is an attempt to assess the proficiency of MA students in English collocation as reflected in their translation of the course assignments.

### Typology of Collocations

As hinted at previously, collocations are arbitrary lexical sequences based on the intuitive knowledge of the native speaker. What possible links are there among the conjoined elements of It's raining cats and dogs (idioms being one level of collocation)? Nonetheless, Kaledaite and Palevicien (2008:63) report Baker's (1997) view that word sequence does not occur in free variation; rather, words have "a certain tolerance to compatibility." The BBI Combinatory Dictionary (Benson et al, 1997) defines collocations as "words which regularly combine with other words or grammatical constructions." This definition is both lexical and grammatical. Grammatical combinations naturally involve both lexical and structural clusters. A grammatical combination shows sequences of V+N;

\* In my Arabic dialect artificial teeth are called اسنان عيرة.

V+prep; Adj.+N; N+ prep; Adj.+ prep. etc. such as lay the table, account for, tall tree, the need for, fond of, and the like.

More recently, Hsu (2007: 2) defines word clusters as the tendency of one word to co-occur with one or more other words in a particular domain. Mahmoud (2005:2) notes that they may be open or restricted: whereas the former allow a wide scope of clusters, the latter are limited.

Moreover, Newmark (1988) points out the structural nature of collocations being syntagmatic or paradigmatic. The former refer to the horizontal sequence of the collocating constituents, and the latter to clusters that derive from the same semantic field which may be commutable. The syntagmatic types are based on formal lexical combinations and formal sequences of grammatical parts of speech like the previous sequences. The paradigmatic types, by contrast, reflect hierarchies of semantic entities and relationships, such as kinship, colours, scientific taxonomies, and the like.

On the other hand, collocations may be semantically transparent or opaque. A transparent collocation derives its sense directly from its conjoined elements, e.g., fine weather / high winds whereas an opaque one is idiomatic, e.g., foot the bill.

More detailed classifications have also been suggested by researchers. Huang (2001) identifies four types of conjoined lexemes, viz., (i) free, (ii) restricted, (iii) figurative, and (iv) idiomatic. The last two types are subsumed under idioms. A figurative collocation implicates a metaphorical sense inferred from the literal interpretation of its constituents, e.g., He's just a paper tiger / a whirlwind in a cup. Idioms, by contrast, are often syntactically restricted and have a holistic unitary interpretation, e.g., blow the gat / kick the bucket. Such idioms are structurally unchangeable: we cannot say, for instance, the bucket was hit, or it is raining dogs and cats. However, it is not feasible to draw a clear-cut line between the restricted and the very restricted collocations because even a very fixed combination may have some variation.

Other researchers highlight a formal and an informal typology (O'Dell and McCarthy 2008). Thus, clusters like to secure a place/ short of space /leave space are informal in contrast with the more formal to get a place/ short of room / leave room, respectively.

Furthermore, besides being lexical or structural, collocations may be contextual. The structural type may accept the insertion of a variety of items and the collocation still remains acceptable, e.g. if I had the chance. Other examples are car and bus which are used only with certain sets of words, e.g., go on a bus, not in a bus or enter a bus; we took the bus to school, not we drove the bus to school, but we drove to Aqaba in her car. A contextual collocation, on the other hand, is

singled out as situationally bound. For example, in a strictly formal situation, a worker would hesitate to greet his boss saying: What's up? whereas he would use the expression get in a car in almost all situations.

So far, we have not reviewed Arabic collocations. Apparently, the lexical research trend has also extended to Arabic (cf. Al-Qasimi 2003; El-Hassan 1984; Emery 1991; Ghazala 2006; Shararye 2010 to mention but a few). El-Hassan (1984) suggests a tripartite typology of Arabic collocations based on the semantic relationships between the elements of the lexical cluster. These three major types are: (i) opposites, e.g., بين ايديهم

/'night and day' / 'causes life and causes death' / before and behind them', respectively); (ii) synonyms and near synonyms, e.g., 'بمزيد من الحزن والاسى/ولقاهم نضرة وسرورا' ('to our great grief and sorrow' / 'God will reward them brightness and cheerfulness', respectively), and (iii) complementaries where pairs of combinations have some kind of semantic, spatial, temporal, or functional link, e.g., 'في البر والبحر/ الحاضر والمستقبل/ لم تبهكم الارض ولا السماء' ('on land and at sea' / 'the present and the future' / 'neither earth nor heaven had compassion on them', respectively). El-Hassan also subsumed idioms and proverbs under lexical collocation and labeled them unproductive.

Emery (1991) also worked on Arabic collocations identifying four types, namely, open, re-restricted, bound, and idioms. In open collocations, the elements are freely commutable and each one can be used in a common literal sense. Restricted collocations, by contrast, require restricted commutability, e.g., 'جريمة نكراء/ خسارة جسيمة' ('atrocious crime' / 'a big loss', respectively). Besides, bound collocations fall between these two types and idioms so that one partner of the cluster selects the other, e.g., 'لفظ انفاسه/ اطرق براسه/ حرب ضروس' ('he passed away' / 'he nodded his head' / 'a fierce war', respectively). Finally, an idiom functions as an opaque, fixed, unitary whole having its unique sense.

Moreover, Al-Qasimi's (2003) used both grammatical and semantic collocational typology. He used mixed configurations, including: (i) Adj.+prep +N, e.g., 'مطروح للنقاش' ('open for discussion'); (genitive construct, e.g., 'رجال الامن/ المعدة بيت الداء' ('security men' / 'the stomach is the source of ailment'); (iii) conjunctions, e.g., 'العلم والايمان / الليل والنهار / التعاون' ('science/knowledge and faith' / 'day and night' / 'cooperation and solidarity'); (iv) quantity, e.g., 'جموع غفيرة' (large crowds); (v) temporality, e.g., 'في القريب' ('in the near future' / 'at the same time'); and (vi) location, e.g., 'هنا وهناك / من بعيد او قريب' ('here and there' / 'from far or near').

Furthermore, Ghazala (2006) identifies a good number of distinct grammatical types of collocation that are formally common in both English and Arabic, including V+N, e.g. (تجرع السم) 'sipped poison'; Adj.+N, e.g., (بعيد النظر) 'far-sighted'; N+N, e.g., (رجالا وركبانا) 'on foot and riding'; V+prep, e.g., (رغب في / عن) 'desired/averted'; Adj+prep, e.g., (خارج عن السياق) 'out of context'; N+ prep., e.g., (صيحة في واد) 'a cry in the valley/desert'; Prep +N, e.g., (على راسه الطير) -- idiomatically 'silent'; Adj + Adj, e.g., (القريب العاجل / ما طل باطل) 'near future' / 'all in all'; N+of N, e.g. (يبني قصورا في الهواء) 'builds castles in the air', and idiomatic phrases, e.g., (لا دخان) : ' no smoke without a fire').

As has been shown, most researchers suggest different typologies of linguistic collocation, but they have almost ignored establishing well defined criteria for their classifications, probably due to the intricacy and variability of this lexical phenomenon. Nevertheless, some researchers attempted some general, broad criteria. For example, Cruse (1986) developed certain indicators to discern collocations from idioms. His view was that the former refer to sequences which habitually co-occur but whose constituents are nonetheless fully transparent showing semantic cohesion and mutual selectivity. Likewise, Huang (2001:2), drawing on research findings, suggested some other general criteria based on the notions of transparency, degree of commutability, and degree of productivity. In the same line, some Arab researchers (e.g., Al-Qasimi 2003; Husamaddin 1985) argue that words do not co-occur randomly, rather, they are constrained by certain linguistic features, such as collocant associations, collocational distributive range, and regular compatibility. Al-Qasimi adds context as a fourth constraint, especially when the cluster is triggered by the situation, e.g., مكة المكرمة. To illustrate, collocant associations refer to the compatibility of lexical features in the conjoined words, e.g., (بحر لحي / جبل شاهق/ نخلة باسقة) ('deep, dark sea' / 'high mountain' / 'tall palm tree', respectively). On the other hand, the collocational distributive range refers to the syntagmatic distribution of conjoined words. For example, (مات) (die) can adjoin an animate noun only. Also, regular compatibility as in (كسر انفه) ('humiliated him') refers to clusters that co-occur regularly though their co-occurrence is necessarily grammatically determined.

Nevertheless, while the typologies suggested above seem to be inconclusive and lacking clear-cut division, most researchers view collocations along a continuum ranging from completely free to fixed or restricted sequences both syntactically and semantically. In this regard, Sinclair (cited in Fan 2009:3) distinguishes frequent and casual collocations along this

continuum. He views no impossibilities, though some collocations may sound more likely than others. However, all researchers assert the syntagmatic relations of the conjoined items (ibid.) .

To conclude this section, the various collocational types in English may not always have equivalent forms in Arabic. Hence, they may constitute a challenge to Arab learners of English. As concluded in the Introduction above, lack of formal attendance to these collocational sequences in the teaching-learning programs may leave this important linguistic area to the learner's conjecture, and ultimately to L1 intervention leading to unidiomatic, unnatural production of the FL.

### Problem, purpose and significance of the study

The researcher taught an Arabic-English translation course to a class of nine MA students at Yarmouk University in winter 2010. He noticed the lexical difficulties challenging the students, particularly in the collocational choices: students exhibited a low level of proficiency in this area. This study is an attempt to assess such difficulties that encounter advanced EFL students in the various collocational types as reflected in their free translation of different genres of Arabic texts. The focus of the study has been on the identification of the students' errors in the area of English collocation as well as the procedures or strategies they opted for to produce what they thought to be an acceptable collocational use. Thus the purpose of this study is tripartite: (i) to provide evidence for the low proficiency level of advanced EFL students in English lexical use, (ii) to establish a scale of learning difficulty of the different collocational types, and (iii) to speculate about the learning strategies which were employed by the subjects in the process of hypothesis testing as they were engaged in rendering Arabic forms into acceptable idiomatic English expressions. Presumably, this study forms a humble contribution to research in lexical acquisition, drawing special attention to collocational learning. Besides, the study highlights the need for a more serious, more explicit focus on collocations in the FL programs at all levels.

### Review of related literature

Researchers approach linguistic collocations for different purposes and from different perspectives. They manipulate numerous proficiency elicitation techniques and productive tests ranging from multiple choice formats, blank filling, cloze tests, translation of particular collocational types in well-defined contexts to productive techniques of free essay writing on variable genres (narrative, expository, legal, etc.). The focus has been to assess FL learners' and users' proficiency in particular lexical combinations, e.g., V+N; Adj+N; N+ prep; V+prep; Adv +Adj (cf. Mahmoud 2005; Fan 2009). Some studies probed just one or two collocational types using a single elicitation technique. For instance, Kharmah and Hajjaj (cited in Mahmoud

2005) used a multiple-choice task focusing on V+N clusters. Below is a brief account of some more recent studies.

Reviewing a number of studies on the various collocational categorizations, Huang (2001) assessed Taiwanese EFL college students' knowledge of English collocations and examined the factors influencing their performance and the strategies pertinent to their deviation. In this study, Huang used a simple completion test that measured the students' knowledge of four types of lexical clusters, viz., free, restricted, figurative, and idiomatic (see typology). His findings indicated that free collocations created the least challenge to students whereas pure idioms were the most challenging. Besides, the students performed equally well on restricted and figurative clusters. Huang also noted that students' errors generally ushered in a poor proficiency in this lexical area. He concluded that students' weakness could have been incurred by L1 negative transfer. Furthermore, Huang (2001) pointed out that the syntagmatic relations of a lexeme help define its semantic distribution and contextual use. Awareness of the restrictions of lexical co-occurrence signals EFL learners' proficiency at both the receptive and productive levels.

In a related line of interest, Hsu (2007) also evaluated the use of English collocations by Taiwanese college English majors in relation to their on-line writing. Each student was asked to take a 45-minute on-line English writing test to assess their use of lexical collocations in terms of frequency and variety. The findings ushered in a significant correlation between the students' frequency of collocations and their writing scores. The study also reported a certain mode of lexical collocation development observed among the writers of different scores, ranging from the lowest to the highest.

Similarly, Fan (2009) used a corpus of writing tasks to assess the competence of Hong Kong learners in lexical collocations in comparison with English native speakers. His findings showed inadequacy of the FL learners in this area as well as in grammar. His analysis showed a negative L1 intervention, which suggests the need for implementing a more effective pedagogical approach to lexical learning, particularly collocations at all educational levels.

Still in a related, rather interesting concern, Kaledaite and Palevicien (2008) compared cross-culturally the "discourse prosody" or connotations of two parallel lexical collocations, namely of neighbor/kaimynas in English and Lithuanian. Drawing on Baker (2003), Kaledaite and Palevicien remind us that collocations are a direct product of material, social, and moral aspects of the surroundings. In light of this, we can understand, for instance, why bread and butter is typical in English whereas bread and tea / bread and olive oil / olive oil and thyme are typical in Jordanian

Arabic. Furthermore, these authors pointed out that certain collocational strings encode not only semantic but also pragmatic implications. For example, to live to a ripe age or to reach a grand old age not only denote advanced age, but also a further cultural value, namely an appreciable achievement (p.31).

With reference to the neighbor/kaimynas collocations, Kaledaite and Palevicien (2008) demonstrated that different senses of these words invite different sets of collocations. They reported some differential cross-cultural connotations in the different domains in the respective language. They conducted their analysis along two parameters, viz., types of collocation and semantic implication. Interestingly, these researchers found out that in both languages the verbal collocations (V+N) with these two words predominantly imply negative connotations while the modified collocations (Adj+N short phrases) predominantly indicate positive connotations. In both languages when the neighbor/kaimynas collocation refers to a person, it implies a positive, a negative, or a neutral perception. However, when the collocation refers to a country, it generally implies a positive semantic prosody. Nevertheless, a positive semantic prosody of all the neighbor-collocations prevails only slightly over the negative prosody whereas in the kaimynas-collocations, a negative semantic prosody is almost twice as frequent as a positive prosody. Kaledaite and Palevicien also demonstrated that even when the neighbor/kaimynas clusters express natural connotations, the kaimynas-clusters are more rich and more diverse than the neighbor-clusters. This implies that Lithuanians have more intimate relations with their neighbors than the English; that the English are more self-centered and more concerned about their privacy, as may be reflected in the common saying: Good fences make good neighbors. Additionally, these researchers demonstrated that neighbor-collocations referring to a neighbor country tend to express vigor and active strength whereas the corresponding kaimynas-collocations tend to indicate goodness and friendliness. However, they admit that it is not an easy task to precisely identify the discourse prosody (implication/connotation) of the used collocations since collocations are aspects of extended lexical units, and since their meaning typically pertains to the language users' role relationships and thus may be shaped by their assumptions, preconceptions, and world views. For example, lavish combines with e.g., style/party/spending/hospitality, implying behavior approval, i.e. generosity, but its synonym excessive goes with wastefulness, implying disapproval.

Other English-Arabic collocational acquisition studies using different elicitation techniques have been conducted in the last three decades (e.g., Abdul-Fattah 2001; Al-Khanji and Hussein 1999; Bahumaid 2006; Farghal and Obeidat 1995; Gorgis and Al-Kharabsheh 2009; Mahmoud 2005; Shaker and Shdeifat 1995;

Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah 2003). Most of these will be reviewed below.

Abdul-Fattah (2001) investigated Jordanian school students' competence in English collocations based on a completion multiple choice test covering 20 transparent collocations that were recurrent in the teaching materials for the basic education stage. The findings revealed an appreciable weakness of the students in this linguistic area. Besides, moving from a pedagogical perspective, Abdul-Fattah (2001) explored the strategies manipulated by the learners in order to cope with the target collocation tasks. Six distinct strategies were identified, viz., L1 transfer, substitution, synonymy, analogy and generalization, formal/semantic similarity, and avoidance.

In a later study, Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah (2003) assessed college English majors' proficiency in the area of lexical collocations. A two-form translation test of 16 Arabic collocations was administered to both graduate and undergraduate students. The first form included the English translation of the 16 Arabic collocations presented in a multiple-choice format whereas the other was given as a free translation task. The findings confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that Arab learners of English, even at an advanced level, still encounter much difficulty in English lexis, particularly collocations. Besides, the assessment probed a characterization of 12 strategies applied by the learners in their attempts to express the English equivalents to the Arabic collocations. The findings substantiated the role of L1 in FL production as well as the need for explicit instructional focus on collocation in school and college.

In the same trend, Mahmoud (2005) notes that collocational studies have different goals and different scopes. Some studies focus on one or two types of lexical clusters (e.g., V+N) using a multiple-choice task. Excluding binomials, Mahmoud anticipated inadequacy of advanced EFL Arab learners in free translation of different Arabic texts (i.e., narrative, expository, descriptive, and legal). Given the differential wide scope of English and Arabic collocations, his anticipation came true.

Following the same line of research, Buhmaid (2006) assessed the mutual translatability of Arabic and English collocations, particularly the culture-specific, register-specific, and metaphorical clusters with an eye to identifying the relative difficulty of their interlingual translatability and the likely applied translation strategies as well as assessing the potential assistance that can be provided by general monolingual dictionaries in the area of collocation. His findings revealed a low level proficiency standard which he attributed to lack of formal exposure to collocations in the prevalent teaching programs. Stated otherwise, it was due to their ignorance of the corresponding proper collocation in the TL that the testees resorted to

synonyms and near synonyms, L1 literal translation, or total abandonment of the task. Buhmaid (2006) also concluded that the most frequent strategy applied by the testees was giving the Arabic meaning of the English collocation instead of selecting from the list of English choices in the task, and the least used strategy was avoidance of the point at hand.

More recently, Gorgis and Al-Kharabsheh (2009) experimented on a related theme, though indirectly, namely, examining the opposing views on the use of the dictionary in translation tests. The focus was to provide advantageous evidence for dictionary-referenced tests. Besides, they recommended that translators should refer frequently to collocational dictionaries, such as the BBI Combinatory Dictionary and Oxford Collocational Dictionary.

The last study to refer to here is Hamdan's (2005) on binomials. A binomial is a special type of collocation. Citing Malkawi (1995), Hamdan defines a binomial as a combination of two lexemes that belong to the same formal class, placed on a parallel level of syntactic hierarchy and adjoined by some kind of lexical link. This link is formally established by a preposition, e.g., little by little or a coordinator (and/ but/ or as in safe and sound/ last but not least / by hook or crook – in this fixed order). Some binomials, however, are reversible, e.g., snow and cold, / rain or shine. Hamdan (2005) examined how university English language majors interacted with a set of binomials in the domain of lexical acquisition. His findings offered evidence of the common observation that even advanced learners face difficulty in these special collocations and also provided evidence for their acquisition order. He concluded that the order of acquisition of the tested binomials by his testees may be determined by a combination of variables including transparency, frequency, and cultural specificity (p.152). Endorsing Malkawi's (1995) perspective, Hamdan attributed the learners' deficiency in these word twins to a plethora of factors including, inter alia, cultural incongruence, L1 and L2 disparity, literal translation, and the collocational structure itself. Moreover, he identified a number of students' strategies including message abandonment, compensation, paraphrase, filtering and approximation, literal translation, semantic contiguity, lexical L1 transfer, and synonymy.

To sum up, the previous studies indicate a universal trend characterizing the weakness of EFL learners and users in learning English collocations, a situation that entails the need for a heavy focus on this linguistic area in the EFL teaching/ learning programs.

## **Method**

During the semester's work, the subjects were given 12 different assignments, including three tests, to be completed at home and then read, analyzed, commented on, and improved in class. The students

were encouraged to use the dictionary in the practice assignments but not in the tests where they were required to draw on their mental dictionary. The assignments covered a corpus of varied text styles, e.g., narrative, expository, scientific, educational, and historical. For the purpose of assessing the collocational competence of the subjects, five different excerpts from the nine assignments, each averaging 250 words, were randomly extracted (i.e., from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the different assignments). Error detection was checked in consultation with two other

EFL specialists. Attention was given to lexical deviance in general and collocational clusters in particular in terms of six clusters, i.e., (V+N); (N+N); (V+prep); (N+prep); (Adj+N), and (Adj+prep) besides wrong phraseology and avoidance of the challenging translation tasks. The overall word count of those extracts timed by the number of subjects was 11250 words. The total number of deviant forms was 654 words on average, thus constituting 5.8% of the total words of the corpus. Table 1 below sums up error frequency and percentage of each collocational type.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Collocational Type Errors

Collocation Type	Examples	Frequency	Percentage %
N+N	garrison strength(force)/ battle square(field).	53	8.1
N+prep	example for (of) / contribution in (to).	46	7.03
Adj+N	distinguished (outstanding ) knowledge.	93	14.20
Adj+prep	fond in(of) / afraid from (of) .	16	2.43
V+N	arrange (organize) a talk/ break(remove) difficulties.	81	12.52
V+prep	insist to (on) / consist on (of) / reached in(--) .	70	10.70
Phraseology/ Paraphrase.	on the road going back... ( on the way back....)	67	10.24
Wrong lexical Choices	owners ( followers) of the other religions / (urgent ) situation. insistent	168	25.66
Gaps		60	9.16
Total Errors		654	100.00

## Discussion

In addition to the types of errors displayed in the table, the translations exhibited numerous other errors in grammar, spelling, and style, which ushers in a relatively low proficiency of the students in Arabic-English translation. A cursory look at the table indicates a scale of the lexical errors of the subjects in translating the Arabic texts into English with deviant lexical choices on top (25.66 %) and incorrect (Adj+prep) at the bottom (2.43%). Deviant phraseology and paraphrase (10.24%) is also a manifestation of the students' low-level proficiency in this linguistic area, probably more challenging than the (N+N), 8.1% or (N+ prep), 7.03% collocational types.

This is clear evidence of the scant lexical repertoire of these students at this advanced level. Retrospectively, the reason for this deficiency might be attributed to the fact that FL teaching-learning materials do not explicitly and formally present lexis, and/ or that the students themselves do not strive diligently to obtain more lexical knowledge. These error types also mirror the subjects' inadequate competence in English collocation. The figures also show a scale of difficulty, namely that the Adj+N collocational type is most challenging (14.2%), followed by the V+N clusters (12.52%) then V+prep(10.7%), then N+N (8.1 %), then, N+prep (7.03%) and then the least difficult Adj + prep (2.43%). The differential mean scores of the subjects on these

collocational types suggest a developmental scale of acquisition . This finding, which meets the second purpose of the study, is supported by other researchers (e.g., Mahmoud, 2005). What is remarkable about the students' performance in lexical translation was that a substantive percentage of gaps occurred in their production (9.16%). In numerous instances, the subjects failed to produce the correct form, so they refrained from attempting to complete the task and simply left out the target lexical item unattended. Many researchers would regard this fleeing behaviour as erroneous and subsequently would count gaps as errors (c.f. Mahmoud 2005; Hamdan 2005) though one cannot determine precisely their cause since one would suspect that students might have left out certain words under the spell of time constraint. Nevertheless, no pressure was exerted on the subjects: They completed the assignments at their convenience at home and even the tests, though very short, were allowed at least two hours each.

Furthermore, the table shows evidence for deviant or poor phraseology or loose paraphrase (phrasal and clausal paraphrase, 10.24%). This phraseological deviance is also counted as a collocational error. Such phraseological deviation or infelicitous formation is exemplified by the following: out of tasting (for tasteless); I didn't find the desire in myself; we don't know what to answer (for we were bewildered); with anger (for angrily); to this point (for to this end); of great deal (for a great deal of); not talked about (for

unspeakable/ taboo); beginning with (for to begin with); from year to the other (for year after year); on the going back (for on the way back); in the word factual meaning (for in the real sense of the word); although of that (for in spite of that); in the second degree (for in the second place), and many other like phrases.

### Hypothetical causes of errors

Another primary objective of this study was probing the subjects' hypotheses conducive to their production of the deviant collocations spotted in the corpus. This approach stems from the common notion that language acquisition is triggered by information processing and hypothesis testing, by making successive attempts to select and use what the FL user believes would be the proper lexical choice (Krashen 1981). Ordinarily, the translator assesses his lexical resources and then makes a conjecture of the target form based on the available linguistic context. His choice manifests his underlying knowledge of the FL system, and simultaneously, reflects his learning style, i.e., how he thinks, processes information, and selects the linguistic forms. However, it is not precisely clear how translators make their choices. It is likely that they use several strategies. They may, for instance, rely on L1, make conjectures, or lose patience and avoid rendering a certain word or expression altogether. They also may focus on extraneous factors, or, as Faerch and Kasper (1983) speculate, may give irrelevant translations just to fill in a perceived gap in their FL vocabulary. Concisely, there is no single distinct reason for the FL users' choices. Nonetheless, they must in all cases rely on some implicit or explicit, incomplete knowledge when opting for a certain form in the FL. In other words, translators draw on their existing interlanguage or what they assume to be FL norms.

In this study, the analysis of the advanced EFL students' translation of English collocations calls for a number of explanatory strategies hypothesized to explain the students' underlying deviant performance. The spotted collocational errors in the corpus usher in eight distinct strategies, viz., L1 transfer/literal translation; substitution/paraphrase; assumed synonymy; analogy and overgeneralization; formal/semantic association; idiomaticity; quasi-morphological similarity, and avoidance of the task. However, it goes without saying that some errors are incurred by a web of causes which are not easily discernible from one another. Below, a number of erroneous selections from the study corpus are exemplified to explicate each strategy.

#### 1. L1 Transfer/ Literal Translation

This strategy draws on the student translators' tendency to manipulate their NL (Arabic) in their English translation whenever they felt defective in authentic linguistic resources. Contrary to the developmental creative hypothesis (c.f. Dulay and Burt

1973 and others), L1 transfer is present in interlanguage production at all levels. The FL user escapes to his NL when he fails to find the appropriate collocant in his interlanguage lexical repertoire opting for a form equivalent or nearly so to his conceptual translation of the target element which might turn out to be deviant from the FL norms.

Kellerman (1979:38) argues that L1 transfer is the product of the FL user's cognitive system, psychological structure, perception of the L1-L2 distance, and his actual knowledge of L2. In this sense, not all L1 triggered translations are erroneous or infelicitous. According to Kellerman (ibid), L1 transfer is sometimes creative operating at varying levels of consciousness and emanating from a decision-making process. Kellerman (ibid) ascertains that the native speakers' intuitions about the 'semantic space' in NL can be exploited to explain their choice of the translatability of the 'morpho-semantic' forms from the NL to the FL, as in the following examples from the corpus.

1. To increase appetite (give good appetite) زيادة الشهية
2. Break (remove) obstacles يحطم القبعات
3. Owners (followers) of other religions أصحاب الديانات الأخرى
4. Snipe (seize/ get/ find) the opportunity يقتنص الفرصة
5. Social situation (marital status) الحالة الاجتماعية (الزوجية)

#### 2. Substitution/ Paraphrase

Failing to produce the commonly used collocations, the subjects resorted to false interlanguage assumptions as a compensatory strategy motivated by a substitute option based on some sense relationship, certain semantic properties, or some kind of 'semantic approximation' (c.f. Hamdan 2005:147). The outcome of this strategy produced anomalous or infelicitous collocational forms such as in the following citations:

1. UN declaration (Charter) ميثاق الأمم المتحدة
2. Education job (Teaching profession) مهنة التعليم
3. Foot fingers (toes) أصابع القدم
4. He led a public advertisement (publicity campaign) قاد حملة رعاية عامة
5. He respects the privacy (particularity) of the belief يحترم خصوصية المعتقد

#### 3 Assumed Synonymy

Blum and Levenston (1987) observed that the recourse to semantic affinity (called semantic approximation by Hamdan 2005) is a common lexical simplification strategy. FL users may not be fully aware of the complete collocational distribution of synonymous words in certain linguistic contexts. The subjects of this study, though graduate students, seem not to have learned the complete selectional restrictions



on the collocants of synonymous or near synonymous words. Their knowledge is restricted by the type and amount of instructional input and , consequently, their intake, and by the impact of the dictionary they usually use which normally glosses some words as synonymous and some other words with a few collocants without much detailed contextual distinction. Thus, when short of the appropriate collocant, the students looked for a synonym or a near synonym - the result was a non-idiomatic, unnatural, or infelicitous, anomalous FL expression. Below are some illustrative examples from the corpus:

1. Historical positions (historic sites). مواقع تاريخية
2. Waged labour (paid job). العمل المأجور
3. They reformed (reclaimed/ cultivated) the land. استصلحوا الأراضي
4. He knew the intention (the purpose) of her visit. علم مقصد زيارتها
5. Random (flighty) arrows. سهام طائشة
6. He will raise (lift) the blockade. سيرفع الحصار

#### 4. Quasi- morphological Similarity

Due to defective learning, FL users may feel that some linguistic forms resound or echo other words. The two words may have some sort of formal association. It is likely then that this clumsy mental image tempted the subject students to opt for the deviant choice. However, such errors could be typological or mere slips. Nevertheless, Duskova (1969) and Zughoul (1991), among others who studied learners of different linguistic backgrounds, have already identified this strategy which is also attested in the corpus of this study:

1. Caused by a violation (violent) attack. تسبب عن هجوم عنيف
2. Egressive (aggressive) act. عمل عدائي
3. Ethnic (ethical) duty. واجب أخلاقي
4. He bore turbulence (tribulations) bravely. تحمل الشقاء والمتعاب بشجاعة
5. Raising (rising) nations. الأمم الناهضة

#### 5. Analogy / Overgeneralization

Analogy and overgeneralization are characteristics of interlanguage errors. It is a psychological tendency of the FL users to extend the meaning of a certain word to other semantic situations where that word does not reasonably appeal. In (1) below, for example, the students know the synonymous meaning of confession and recognition (الاعتراف) and thus overgeneralized the use of the former to replace the latter though they belong to two different contexts. Here is a representative sample of such overgeneralizations:

1. Confessing (recognizing) the other. الاعتراف بالآخر

2. Demolished (distorted) image. صورة مشوهة
3. Despite of (in spite of) that. بالرغم من ذلك
4. The rest (other) elements. العناصر الأخرى
5. Regardless than (of) .... . بغض النظر عن
6. The UNSC resolution was a letter (message) to N.Korea. كان قرار مجلس الأمن بمثابة رسالة الى كوريا الشمالية

#### 6. Idiomaticness

It is axiomatic that idioms are not an easy target for translators as they comprise special whole entities having their own semantic signification. The strategy of idiomaticness, i.e. creating an idiomatic expression, is rooted in the subjects' translation endeavour. Not fully aware of the proper idiomatic collocation, the subjects tended to contrive idiomatic forms in English parallel to those in Arabic. The emerging expression was often deviant or anomalous as is clear in the following citations:

1. A small-size (quick) meal. وجبة سريعة
2. He will perform/ occupy (play) this role. يقوم بهذا الدور
3. Stomach bites (the stings of hanger). قرصات الجوع
4. They kept (continued) their hatred. استمروا في كراهيتهم
5. It took care of ( caught attention). الانتباه استرعى
6. He was with wet eyes (he gushed with tears). ترغرت عيناه
7. He exploited (played upon) her feelings. استغل عواطفها

#### 7. Formal/ Semantic Association

FL users might conceive some sort of formal or semantic link or affinity between the constituents to be collocated; hence, they might opt for adjoining them, with potentially erroneous results as in the following:

1. He remembered (reminded) them of that. ذكرهم بذلك
2. This requests (requires) political reform. هذا يتطلب إصلاحاً سياسياً
3. We cannot offer (afford) the fees. لا نستطيع تحمل الرسوم
4. The military are lying (laying) siege at the town. الجيش يحاصر المدينة
5. Raising (rising) prices. أسعار مرتفعة

As can be seen, the parenthetical words (collocants) in these examples exhibit some formal and semantic affinity in the mind of the student translator, so he used the one instead of the other on a false presumption that the former stands for the latter (compare: remind/ remember; offer/ afford; request/ require; lie/ lay; raise/ rise.)

## 8. Avoidance/ Abandonment

Here, the subjects left out many expressions unattempted. Some plausible reasons for this negative behaviour are ignorance, carelessness, failure to recollect/ recall/ retrieve from memory, and limited time constraints.

### Conclusion

The study investigated the collocation errors committed by MA translation students in a corpus of varied texts. The results ushered in a weak proficiency in English lexical use in general and collocational clusters in particular. This finding is in line with the common observation and research assertion that word collocation is a challenging area even for advanced EFL users. It thus entails a formal, explicit focus on lexis, including collocation, in the teaching programs at all levels. It also suggests that MA students of translation should make frequent reference to collocational dictionaries which display a wide range of word collocations, an advantage that is lacking in most of the ordinary current dictionaries.

Besides, the study showed a differential trend of performance patterns implied by the difference in the subjects' means on the investigated collocational types. This tendency may be taken as an indicator of the rate of the subjects' developmental acquisition of the target collocational types with (Adj+N) as the most challenging, followed by (V+N), (V+prep), (N+V), (N+prep)- in this descending order - and (Adj+perp) as the least challenging (see Table 1 above). Finally, the researcher has speculated eight distinct strategies that could have been used by the study subjects. Nevertheless, some errors could have resulted from the interaction of more than one single strategy.

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