

## Exploring EFL Teachers Attitudes towards Utilizing Corpora to Solve Collocation Learning Difficulties

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to examine corpus utilization to solve collocation learning difficulties from teachers' perspective. To do this, the qualitative approach to data collection was adopted and then five Sudanese EFL teachers were selected to take part in the study. The subjects were interviewed, the data were collected and then linguistically analyzed by the researcher. Results of the interview confirmed that the participants showed positive attitudes towards employing corpora to solve collocation learning difficulties encountered by Sudanese undergraduates. Conversely, the results indicated that nearly all the participants do not practically use corpora in collocation teaching. Hence, it could be concluded that corpora are beneficial in language teaching and learning, especially collocations but more research need to be conducted on their practicality and teacher training on how to use them.*

**Key words:** collocational awareness, qualitative knowledge, language proficiency, foreign language learning, contextualization, corpus.

### INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the corpus (i. e. large collection of language data stored on the computer and used in language

analysis and investigation) is of undeniable contribution to language learning due to many factors; prime among them is being rich and authentic source of language data, available and easy to use, etc. The corpus is especially helpful to EFL learners due to the lack of exposure to the language (Sinclair, 1991, 2004; O'keeffe and McCarthy, 2010). As a result of that, many studies have been conducted on the use of corpora in English language learning but it is rare to find studies conducted to assist EFL learners in developing their collocational competence. Taking the Arab world as an example, it is hard to find studies that attempt to raise learners' collocational awareness (Salih, 2016; Alharbi, 2017). Despite all the above mentioned facts, the direct use of corpora in EFL classes is still rare. In this concern, Granger (2004) put it clearly that the number of concrete corpus-informed achievements was not proportional to the number of publications advocating the use of corpora to inform pedagogical practice. These could be attributed to the fact that corpus usage presents teachers with many practical obstacles. Such as the large amount of search results teachers get when using a corpus and the time they spend in familiarizing their students with corpus use. In addition to that, teachers themselves are not fully trained on how use corpora in their classes. Hence, this paper is trying to investigate corpus usage by Sudanese learners from teachers' perspective. It is also trying to shed the light on the significance of using corpora in EFL classes. Specifically, the paper attempts to examine the following research questions:

- What are the attitudes of English language teachers towards the utilization of corpora in solving collocation learning difficulties encountered by Sudanese undergraduates?
- In what ways do EFL teachers use corpora in their classrooms?

## Concept of Collocation

Researchers and scholars seem not be in agreement in defining collocation. This could be attributed to the complex nature of collocations and the functions they take. Collocations could be multiword units as Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) explain that in English as in any other language there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called recurrent combinations, fixed combinations or collocations, e.g. *commit suicide*. Similarly, Lewis (1997) explained that collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency. In the same line, Baker (1992) stated that the patterns of collocations are largely arbitrary and independent of meaning. For example, consider the adjectives *quick* and *fast* which mean the same thing but native speakers do not say *fast snacks* but *quick snacks* (cited in Nasr, 2011, 15). Hence, collocations are arbitrary and they do not follow any rule in English as in any other language. Sinclair (1991) claimed that this arbitrariness is the only explanation why we say to break rules but not to break regulations; to hold a funeral but not to hold a burial; to make an attempt but not to have an attempt and to have a try but not to make a try,” (cited in El-Dakhs, 2015).

Collocations sometimes convey meanings different from their component parts, such as idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions. According to Nattinger and Decarrico (1992), collocations are strings of certain items that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance and have not been assigned particular pragmatic functions. Lexical phrases are collocations such as *how do you do?*, that have been assigned pragmatic functions. In summary, an important characteristic of collocations is their arbitrariness and the fact that each and every lexical item has to some extent collocational relationship

with other ones. So collocations do not follow any logic but linguistic conventions.

As with defining the concept of collocation, scholars and researchers have provided a number of classifications for collocations. The commonest among these classifications is Benson, Benson and Illson's (1986) which rely on word class. According to them, collocations are divided into lexical and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations are characterized by the fact that their meanings mostly reflect the meaning of their lexical constituents. As Benson et al. (1986) put it, lexical collocations are only made up of verbs, adjectives, nouns and verbs in different possible combinations. Unlike lexical collocations, grammatical collocations can be defined as phrases made up of a dominant word (verb, noun, and adjective) and a preposition or grammatical structure like infinitive or clause. According to Benson et al. (1986) grammatical collocations fall into the following combinations: Noun + preposition, noun + to-infinitive, noun + that-clause, preposition + noun, adjective + preposition, predicate adjective + to-infinitive, adjective + that-clause, and the English 19 verb patterns. According to Lewis (1997), collocations are; strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent. The distinction between strong and weak collocations is based on the items' fixedness, relatedness and likeliness to appear together in a context. On the other hand, the distinction between frequent and infrequent collocations is based on the items' frequency of occurrence. A similar classification is provided by Hill (2000) which divides collocations into unique, strong, medium-strength, and weak. Unique collocations are fixed so that their meaning is highly predictable from their constituent parts such as *rancid butter*. Strong collocations are less frozen than unique collocations and their meaning is less predictable. For example, *magnificent house*. Medium-strength collocations are closer to weak collocations which refer to words that freely combine with many other words in the language and hence their meaning is easy to be predicted from the component

parts. According to El-Dakhs (2015), good examples of weak collocations are *dark green*, *light green*, *pale green*, *bright green*, *emerald green*, *lime green*, *lush green*, *rich green*, *olive green*, *dull green*, etc. Unlike weak collocations, medium-strength collocations constitute some difficulty for language learners. For instance, the word *key* is relatively easy but it would be difficult to guess the meaning of *key person* (El-Dakhs, 2015). To conclude, the classifications provided above are some of various categorizations of collocations. Some of these taxonomies rely on word class, some rely on the frequency of occurrence, others are based on the predictability of meaning, etcetera.

### **Collocations and EFL/ESL Learning**

Despite the significance of collocational competence to EFL/ESL learners, attention is rarely paid to it in language teaching, language learning and language research. This notion is supported by El-Dakhs (2015) stating that despite its prime importance for language proficiency, collocational competence is one of the most neglected areas in vocabulary studies and second language teaching/learning (p. 68). This negligence of learners' collocational competence has resulted in poor knowledge of collocations and consequently poor knowledge of English language. A fact that justifies the need for integrating collocations into foreign/second language research (especially corpus-based research) and curriculum development because this aspect of vocabulary knowledge is crucial to effective and more natural language learning and use. Indicating the significance of collocations to accurate language use, Nation (2001) suggested that word knowledge involves knowledge of word form, word meaning and word use. The aspect of word form refers to the spoken and written forms of words as well as their morphological composition. As for the aspect of word meaning, it entails knowledge of a number of constituents,

including reference, sense, connotative meaning and sense relations. The last aspect which is word use, refers to knowing the grammatical, lexical and stylistic constraints of the use of words in the linguistic context (cited in El-Dakhs, 2015, p. 69). Although the third aspect of word knowledge (knowledge of collocates) is highly required to achieving more natural language production, it received the least attention among the three aspects.

In the past three decades, research in the field of corpus linguistics have dominated language research, but scant amount of this research has been directed to English language learners' knowledge of collocations. This is considered to be the underlying motive of this paper. It is believed that having solid knowledge of collocations is essential for achieving effective learning of English language. To do so, effective strategies to language learning and teaching should be adopted. Such as the use of corpora because they are helpful in terms of the language data they provide.

### **Concept of Corpus**

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2014) defines corpus as a collection of written or spoken texts. From the linguistic perspective, a corpus is a large amount of language data stored on a computer for the purpose of linguistic analysis. The Expert Advisory Group on Language Engineering Standards (EAGLES) provided a general definition of corpus saying that " it can potentially contain any text type, including not only prose, newspapers, as well as poetry, drama, etc., but also word lists, dictionaries, etc." (cited in Meyer, 2004, p. xi). According to this definition, a collection of any language meant to represent something would constitute a corpus. Bussmann (2006), defines corpus as a finite set of concrete linguistic utterances that serves as an empirical basis for linguistic research. The value and quality of the corpus depend largely

upon the specific approach and methodology of the theoretical framework of the given study. Note, for example, the different value placed on empirical data in structuralism and in generative grammar (p, 260). According to the researcher, corpus can be defined as a collection of linguistic data compiled from different sources of language use meant to represent a language or variety of a language. This language data forms the bases for language analysis and investigation.

Recently, a corpus has come to be regarded as a body of text made available in computer-readable form for purposes of linguistic analysis (Meyer, 2004). Increasingly large corpora (especially of English) have been compiled since the 1980s, and are used both in the development of natural language processing software and in such applications as lexicography, speech recognition, and machine translation. Not only these, each and every field in which language is a central component benefit from the corpus.

### **Corpus Application in Teaching Collocations**

Recently, language learning and teaching, especially collocations, have received attention from scholars and researchers in the field of corpus linguistics, but scant attention has been given to the direct use of corpora in developing learners' collocational competence in the classroom setting such as using concordance lines to assist in the learning and teaching of collocations. Li (2017), confirmed that it is rare to observe direct uses of corpora in a course to develop learners' collocational competence, probably because it presents teachers with several practical obstacles (p. 154). These obstacles could be the large amount of data learners might get when searching the corpus and the possible difficulty of the language of corpora, especially to lower level learners as well as the time teachers spend to familiarize their students with corpus use. Despite all that, corpus assistance to learners and teachers is undeniable.

Such as helping students become autonomous learners by accessing corpora and practically using them, the accessibility of authentic language that learners can exploit, and many other advantages. Wu et al. (2016) added that, corpus use not only facilitates learning and writing but also arouses learners awareness of collocations and increases their confidence in language use (p. 20). Similarly, Vyatkina (2016) claimed that, paper-based DDL materials were more effective than traditional methods for teaching new collocations to students at lower-proficiency levels (cited in Li, 2017, p. 154). In addition, the researcher believes that it is easy for language learners to get access to corpora via their smart phones anywhere anytime so that the process of learning is not restricted to the classroom and learners can maintain learning as long as it is possible for them to regularly and constantly exploit corpora.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To provide a clear image of the problem under investigation, this part reviews local and external previous studies. These studies are reviewed in the light of their similarity or relatedness to the present paper in terms of their methodology adopted, the results obtained, the findings reached, etc. In Sudan for instance, Nasr (2011) carried out a study on assessing English collocational knowledge among Sudanese EFL university students. The study was an attempt to investigate the knowledge of collocations and to come out with constructive recommendations for both teachers and learners in order to improve the process of teaching and learning the language. Emphasizing the significance of collocations, Nasr (2011) highlighted that, collocations are both indispensable and problematic for language learners and therefore should play an important part in second language teaching, especially to advanced learners (p. 3). Participants of the study were 150 students drawn from second, third, and fourth year students

majoring in English language from Khartoum University, Faculty of Arts. A collocation test of 50 items was used to collect the data, and then the data was statistically analysed using the SPSS program. Results of the statistical analysis proved that there is a significant difference in students' knowledge of collocations between the three levels. It is also revealed that the adjective-noun collocation is the easiest while the verb-noun is found to be the most difficult one. The findings of the study indicated that the subjects' knowledge of collocations is poor.

The study above confirmed that, collocations, especially verb-noun collocations cause difficulties to Sudanese English language learners even for those of advanced levels majoring English language. Nasr's (2011) study is in line with the present one in terms of collocations as an area of challenge to Sudanese learners of English but different strategy for tackling these difficulties (the use of corpora) and different tools of data collection are adopted by the present paper.

In the Iranian context, Manafi et al. (2013) examined the effect of collocational competence on translation accuracy of translation trainees. The study aimed to scrutinize the effect of productive and receptive knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations on the accuracy of translation done by Iranian EFL learners studying translation course at university. Manafi et al. (2013) stated that, although it is widely acknowledged that collocations play an important role in second language acquisition, a number of previous studies have reported students' lack of collocational competence and the difficulties they encounter in learning and using collocations. The study subjects were 60 M.A students studying English language at Azad University. Their productive knowledge of collocations was measured by three gap-filling tests: verb-noun and adjective-noun collocation tests where the initial letter of the collocate was provided, and a verb-preposition test where the meaning of the phrasal verb was supplied. On the other hand, the subjects' receptive knowledge of collocations was measured

by an appropriate judgment in which subjects have to circle the number corresponding to the underlined part of a sentence that is judged unacceptable. Concerning the translation quality of learners, a test including five paragraphs was given to them, and then the accuracy of the translated work was measured by Khanmohamad and OsanoRubic (2009) model.

Results of the study indicated that there is a significant relationship between the receptive knowledge and the productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation.

In their study above, Manafi et al. (2013) examined the relation between collocational competence and translation accuracy, claiming that learners' performance in translation tasks clearly projects their collocational knowledge; a fact that emphasized the significance of the knowledge of collocations even to translation learners. This high requisition for collocational competence for all users of English language has placed corpus-based techniques on the top effective learning strategies for corpora help foster learners' knowledge of English language. Concerning the relation between collocation knowledge and translation accuracy, corpora can be used to compare texts of different languages via what is called parallel corpora so that learners can identify similarities and differences between their L1 and English language.

Akbar et al. (2013) carried out a study entitled; a corpus-based approach toward teaching collocation of synonyms. The study aimed to provide insights into the use of the corpus-based approach in L2 classes as well as comparing the effects of the corpus-based with the effects of the traditional approach on learning collocations of near-synonymous pairs. Subjects of the study were two intact groups of L2 learners. The first group named the experimental group studies with concordancing line, while the other group called the control group studies with traditional approach. The participants were similar in terms of their collocational competence and English language

proficiency. The instruments employed in the data collection process were a pre-test, a post-test, a pre-writing, and a post-writing. Through running a t-test and descriptive statistics, results of the study proved that there is a difference between the two approaches about their effect on the comprehension and production of collocations of synonyms.

The above study employed corpora in teaching near synonyms in English language. Such words are considered synonymous and identical in meaning by thesauruses and dictionaries. Whereas, in corpora the situation is totally different where these synonyms are easily distinguished by their collocates, context of use, and register differences. In the context of corpora, considering such words as identical synonyms is misleading because synonymous words are used in completely different ways. In this regard, Biber et al. (1998) highlighted that synonymous words are typically used in very different ways so that corpus-based lexicographic analysis are particularly well suited to uncover such systematic differences in the patterns of use. The study is similar to the current paper in terms of employing corpora in collocation learning. According to both, corpora have the potential of providing real and authentic language data that students can exploit to improve their proficiency in English language.

To conclude, this part has reviewed and discussed previous literature related to the problem under investigation. The studies reviewed are either related to English language learners' difficulties of learning and using collocations or using corpora in solving these difficulties. Some of these studies have come to the fact that corpora as a new strategy have the potential of effectively learning collocations in comparison to non-corpus-based strategies.

## **ADOPTED METHODOLOGY**

This paper is descriptive and analytic study that adopts the qualitative approach of data collection. Particularly, teacher interview is employed. The interview is defined by Cohen, et al. (2005) as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data (p.267). The interview could either be oral or sometimes written, or either be face to face or by phone depending on the access and availability of respondents.

Subjects for the study are five Sudanese teachers of English as a foreign language were selected to participate in the study. These participants teach at different Sudanese universities and university colleges. They were chosen according to their knowledge and experience in corpus linguistics and their willingness to participate in the study. Concerning the tools of data collection, a teacher interview was used to obtain the views of English language teachers on the usefulness of using corpora in English language teaching, collocations in particular. To do so, a semi-structured interview was designed by the researcher, and then distributed to the participants. With regard to the analysis of data, after conducting the interview, the data was transcribed, coded into themes, and then linguistically analysed by the researcher.

## **RESULTS**

This part explores the views of five EFL university teachers from different universities and university colleges (in Khartoum State) on corpus usage in collocation learning by Sudanese undergraduates. These teachers were selected to take part in the study because of their knowledge and experience of

corpus linguistics and their availability and willingness to participate. The interview aimed to explore the following:

- What is corpus.
- Corpora and their helpfulness in teaching English language, especially collocations.
- How often corpora are used by the interviewees in English language teaching, collocations in particular.
- Teaching collocations through corpora in comparison to other vocabulary teaching strategies.
- Using corpora for other purposes besides teaching collocations.

Concerning what is corpus, nearly all the interviewees defined corpus as a collection of written or spoken texts that meant to represent a language or variety of a language. One of them claimed that corpus is purposefully collected to provide an archive of authentic linguistic data, while another one stated that corpus influences or helps in learning authentic language.

Regarding corpora and their usefulness in teaching English collocations, it is believed by most of the interviewees that corpora are of great help to English language teaching, especially collocations in many ways. To begin with, they are considered to be an authentic source of data for language teachers. In addition, they provide real texts in which words and their collocates are actually used by native speakers as well as they show the different uses and senses of words in different contexts or situations of language use. Finally, they influence our way of thinking about language and what we use in language teaching.

With regard to how often corpora are used by the interviewees in teaching English collocations, four of the interviewees stated that they do not use corpora in collocation teaching but one confirmed that he uses them to do so from time to time.

Concerning teaching collocations through corpora in comparison to other vocabulary teaching strategies, all the interviewees claimed that corpora are better than the other vocabulary teaching strategies for many reasons. In the beginning, corpora are better in terms of contextualization, because unlike the other strategies, corpora have the potential of providing vocabulary items within context. Secondly, they have authentic data and they are easy to use and modern. Thirdly, for teachers, corpora are considered to be the most important source of information for they help them consult, categorize and then how to use certain words in different situations or contexts. Fourthly, through the corpus-based approach, learners take part in the learning process by investigating collocates of words and looking at how words are differently used in different contexts. In conclusion, through using corpora, learners have the chance of becoming autonomous learners, so that they can better learn the language.

Regarding using corpora for other purposes besides teaching collocations, two of the interviewees confirmed that they use corpora to look at how language is actually used by native speakers. On the other hand, the third interviewee stated that he uses corpora in translation and the fourth interviewee uses them in conducting his on-going Ph.D project due to the facts that they have authentic data and they are easy to use and modern. It is worth notifying that the fifth interviewee confirmed that he does not use corpora in teaching collocations but claimed that they are used to expand students' knowledge of the language.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper set out with the aim of examining corpus utilization to solve collocation learning difficulties from teachers' perspective. The results show that most of the interviewees

agreed that corpora assist in English language teaching, particularly collocations in many ways. For instance, they are considered to be an authentic source of data for language teachers. Another important finding was that corpora provide real texts in which words and their collocates are actually used by native speakers and they show the different uses and senses of words in different contexts or situations of language use. In addition, it is proved that through the corpus-based approach, learners can take part in the learning process by investigating collocates of words and looking at how words are differently used in different contexts. It is also confirmed that, via using corpora, learners have the chance of becoming autonomous learners so that they can better learn the language. In this concern, Biber et al. (1998) stated that a corpus allows us to investigate the meanings of words through the use of concordance listings, which can provide an exhaustive list of all occurrences of a word in context. One unanticipated finding was that most of the participants do not practically use corpora in their classrooms. There are several possible explanations for this result. It could be attributed to the fact that using corpora presents teachers with several practical obstacles such as the time they require to familiarize their students with corpus use. In addition, the large amount of search results they might get when searching the corpus, etc. Despite these challenges, teachers can make using corpora both easy and beneficial. For instance, they can limit the search results by telling their students exactly what they have to do so that they can avoid being confused by the large results. They can tailor these data to suit the needs of students. Based on the findings, and for EFL teachers and learners to fully exploit corpora, it is suggested by the researcher that both teachers and students should be trained on how to practically use corpora in language teaching and learning.

## CONCLUSION

This aim of this paper is to investigate corpus utilization solve collocation learning difficulties from teachers' perspective. The research questions raised are as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of English language teachers towards the utilization of corpora in solving collocation learning difficulties encountered by Sudanese undergraduates?
2. In what ways do EFL teachers use corpora in their classrooms?

The study adopts the qualitative approach. Particularly, teacher interview is adopted. The subjects were EFL teachers from different Sudanese universities. The findings of this paper showed that English language teachers have positive attitudes towards employing corpora in solving the difficulties encountered by Sudanese undergraduates in learning English collocations. This is attributed to many factors such as being authentic source of data for language teachers, they show the different uses and senses of words in different contexts, etcetera. Another surprising finding is that nearly all the teachers involved in the study do not practically use corpora in their classrooms. These findings have an important implication for the cruciality of training EFL/ESL teachers on corpus usage in language teaching.

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