



EXPLORING USERS' AWARENESS AND USE OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS IN EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

English language users are highly reckoned to acquire collocational knowledge as part of their language acquisition to ensure greater fluency is achieved when using the language. Despite the obvious significance of collocation knowledge, many users have shown poor mastery of collocations, leading to their improper and incorrect use of the language be it in writing or speaking. The present study aimed at exploring further ESL learners' awareness and use of collocations in their everyday communication. To this end, six users at different age range (12 years old to 40 years old) were interviewed in the study, to gain input on their collocation awareness and use. The results revealed two interesting findings. Firstly, the young and adult users were observed to have different level of collocation knowledge, as the young ones responded they know fewer English collocations than the adults. Interestingly, one of the respondents reported that he never heard of the word collocation before. Resulting from their lack of knowledge, the respondents were found to hardly use collocations in their everyday communication. Even if they do, this was by coincidence and not as a demonstration of their collocation knowledge and awareness. The findings of the present study bring an implication to language teaching and learning practices to include collocations as a focus in language teaching and learning process.

Keywords: English collocations, awareness, English language users, everyday communication



1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, English communication skill has become a must for people to be able to communicate in global context. To enable users deliver their intended messages to a wider range of audiences, no languages in the world seem to fit the role better other than the English language. Moreover, English language has become the language widely spoken and used on the internet with billions of users. Thus, the importance of English language is getting heightened over the years despite differences in perspectives of its users around the world.

In Malaysia, English language has been regarded as the second language for majority of its users. With formal teaching of the language is received since kindergarten, adult Malaysians generally spend about 10 years to learn the language formally through the national education system. Despite this fact, concerns and complaints are constantly raised by various parties especially employers from multinational companies regarding poor command of English language of Malaysia graduates. In other words, there are still many of Malaysian learners who fail to master the language as they are unable to show good proficiency of the language when they are using it. The reason to this however remains unknown.

In this regard, Nation and Webb (2011) claim vocabulary as one instrumental aspect that learners should master to gain ability to use the language effectively. Vocabulary or word is the most basic component of a language which every learner is first taught when learning a new language. From the vocabulary they learn, learners will be able to form sentences then paragraph then text. This implies the significance for English language learners to have with them substantial knowledge of English language vocabulary to be able to perform effectively in the language.

In the word knowledge framework proposed by Nation (2001) he explains that word knowledge is built of learners' knowledge of three knowledge aspects namely word form, word meaning and word use. According to Nation, to acquire words successfully, it is compulsory for learners to master the form, meaning and use of the words. Thus, in the present study, learners' knowledge of word use is investigated, in which their knowledge on how to use associate words (collocations) is focused on. The learners' experience in using collocations in everyday communication is also examined in the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Collocation

A collocation consists of associated words that cooccur in texts. Collocation is generally understood as words that co-occur and commonly found to be used together (Firth, 1957). There are two categories of collocation knowledge namely lexical collocation and grammatical collocation (Benson et al., 1997). Table 1 below shows examples of grammatical and lexical collocation.



Table 1. Examples of Grammatical Collocation and Lexical Collocation

Type	Example
Grammatical collocation	angry at, hungry for, afraid of
Lexical collocation	walk slowly, heavy rain, commit a murder

2.3 Past Studies on Collocation

Although there is emerging evidence (Mohammadi & Enayati, 2018; Saito & Liu, 2021) showing that collocation knowledge plays a considerably important role to learners' language proficiency, abundant of research findings have reported that learners are still not getting close enough to proficient use of English language collocations as they are communicating in the language (Dokchandra, 2019; Harida & Hamka, 2019). In this regard, past studies have found that learners are still struggling in employing correct collocations where collocation errors can be largely traced in their work either written or spoken. In some situation, their limited collocation knowledge is found to impede learners' performance in the language. Why is this happening? This could result from the lack of awareness which learners have on the subject matter (collocation) which lead to ineffective acquisition hence poor command of it.

The current study aims to add to the literature examining learners' collocation knowledge. This will be done through checking their awareness level and the extent to which they use collocations (lexical and/or grammatical) in their daily communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the present study is twofold. First, the study aimed to investigate the awareness of Malaysian English language users on collocation. Next, the study intended to explore the extent of their practices and applications of English collocations in their everyday communication.

3.1 Participants

Six respondents of different age groups (12 years old to 40 years old) were interviewed to elicit desired data of the study. The respondents were picked based on their age factor, to represent users of different age groups. In this study, the respondents who age from 12 to 20 years old are categorised as young users of the language. On the other hand, the 21- to 40-year-old respondents were considered as the adult users. Three of the respondents are male and the other three are female. The respondents were randomly chosen to participate in the study based on convenience factor. Nonetheless, all of them have learned English language for at least 10 years since they were in primary school. All the respondents use English as their second language.



3.2 Instrument

A semi-structured interview was conducted in the study. There are items or questions being asked in the interview session as follows.

Item 1: Have you heard of the word 'collocation' before?

Item 2: If yes, what do you understand about it?

Item 3: How do you get to know or learn English collocations?

Item 4: How frequent do you use collocation in your everyday communication?

Item 5: How and Why do you use collocations when communicating?

Item 6: Is collocation important for successful communication?

Generally, the interview questions were aimed at eliciting responses relating to the respondents' awareness and knowledge on collocations as well as to obtain input on how often do they use collocations in their daily communication. It was also an objective of the study to identify any discrepancy in collocation awareness and use among the young and adult users of the language.

3.3 Data Analysis

As the interview was completed, the, the interview recording was then transcribed. Following that, thematic analysis was performed to the transcriptions in order to answer the research questions of the study.

4. MAIN RESULTS

The results revealed two interesting findings. Firstly, the respondents were observed to have different level of collocation knowledge, as the young ones responded they know fewer English collocations than the adults. When the researcher asked the young learners to list out English collocations which they know about, the young respondents relatively gave fewer collocation examples as compared to the adults. Interestingly, one of the young respondents (respondent 1) reported that he does not even know what collocation is as he said *"I have never heard of the word before. What collocation is, how and when to use it I totally have no idea about it. Maybe I did not focus on what my teacher was teaching in schools, or I just forgot about it."*

Some of the random collocations pointed out by the respondents during the interview include *get started, get permission, keep promise, fall in love, make decision, start a new life, do your best, make money as well have a good time*. When asked about what contributes to their knowledge of abovementioned collocations, the respondents in general stated that they learn these from others. As respondent 6 stated *"I always hear my teacher said do your best when I was in school, so I somehow got an idea that these words should be used together as I want to encourage someone to do their best."* In the



case of respondent 5, he claimed that his knowledge of the collocations come from watching English movies. *“I often heard actors say the words have a good time and they fall in love when I watch movies, hence I thought the words should occur after one another. Moreover, I have never heard people say jump in love or go a good time when they speak or write in English.”*

The next findings reveal that the respondents’ lack of collocation knowledge has led them to rarely use collocation as they are communicating in the language. This is the same for both the young and adult respondents. As respondent 6 mentioned, *“I even have problems in searching for single words to communicate my messages to other people because I do not enough English vocabulary. How could I possibly know how to use collocations in my speaking or writing.”* For respondents 2 and 4 however, they mentioned that even if they happen to include English collocations as they are using the language, this could be due to coincidence and not as a demonstration of their collocation knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, respondent 3 stated *“I think I find it very hard to use a suitable collocation especially when speaking in English because I do not have enough vocabulary knowledge. So, most of the time I would just use whatever words that come across my mind as long as my message is delivered successfully. “*

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the present study highlights lack of collocation awareness and knowledge among Malaysian users of English language. The findings obtained suggest for an approach to be taken, particularly in teaching collocations to English language learners in Malaysia. Since they have been taught words in individual form, learners tend to store in their memory hence remember the words individually instead of in combinations. As a result of this, they miss out the opportunity to acquire knowledge of collocations. In sum, English language instructors should put more efforts in planning for effective yet fun ways to learn English collocations especially when it comes to young learners. Only by having a good command of collocation knowledge, learners will sound more native-like hence easier to be comprehended by those whom they communicate with.

Despite the findings, it is worth to note that the current study had been conducted under some limitations which impede the generalizability of the findings. The samples of the study especially are small and of limited background. Hence, further research is welcome to look further into collocation competence of Malaysian learners with different education and proficiency background.



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