

Translating Collocations from English to Arabic among Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

This paper will thoroughly examine the notion of collocation and will analyse translations of English collocations into Arabic while detailing other related points. It will also incorporate a detailed explanation of the various types of collocations in English. A collocation is defined as a combination of two or more words that usually occur together in different language contexts. Although there have been many published literatures on collocation, there is limited examination of collocation in Iraq, and the specific problems faced by Iraqi EFL students translating English collocations into Arabic. This study examines the effect of mother tongue interference on the translation of English collocations into Arabic among Iraqi EFL students. The results reveal that 67% of the participants failed to achieve the pass mark, and only 33% achieved an acceptable level of understanding and translation. A detailed explanation of the results will be presented, as well as a conclusion and recommendation of this study.

Keywords: English collocations, English-Arabic translation, Iraqi English, Iraqi EFL learners, Iraqi students in Malaysia

1. Introduction

A collocation refers to the mix of two or more words that dependably appear together in common language. For example, a particular noun regularly occurs with the same adjective e.g. 'heavy metal' (وجبة دنسمة), a verb frequently occurring with the same noun, e.g. 'catch the meaning' (يفهم المعنى), a noun with a noun, e.g. some collocations can be translated (in a direct way very appropriately), as some collocations of the current test prove. After all, learners should be wary and reject to surrender from the first endeavor to the direct translation of any collocation. (Faris & Sahu, 2013) Collocations appear to be significant in taking in a language in light of the fact that words are found out and utilized as a part of connection, and without knowing the fitting setting in which a word can be utilized, one can't make a claim that he or she has comprehended that word (Agah & Soori, 2015). Because of the significance of collocations in language learning and practice, collocation word references in diverse languages have turn out to help learners over come difficulties that face them. The English language, in specific, has a gigantic abundance of word references that have dependably been discovered to be helpful and convenient for learners of English (Galal, 2015).

Baker (1992) states that collocations form an essential part of language, further explaining that they are a wonderful part of language and infuse in it an "invigorating soul". Collocations will exist at all times, be inescapable in any context, with no special case. Therefore, they are an essential part of translation. Al Kasimi (1993) states that learners must truly understand collocations in Arabic in order to render the same magnificence that collocations add to the English language. This means that overlooking the translation of the English collocations in Arabic will result in poor, debilitated content in Arabic. On a basic level, settled expressions and representations of various types can be defined under the umbrella of collocations (Hedad, 1987). The majority of English and Arabic lexicons do not deal with the matter. English and Arabic lexicons manage phrases, however not with collocations. Additionally, learners cannot comprehend a collocation in the SL when he or she is not equipped for recalling its equivalent in the TL.

The student's disappointment during such an attempt will typically reveal his selection of systems for lexical improvement, such as reduction, synonymy, reparation, summarising, and exchange. In these situations, unless the collocation example becomes part of the memory bank of the understudy, translator or learner, correspondence is destined to be limited. Generally, this disappointment is a direct result of the language instructor or educator's inclination to teach words exclusively rather than collectively. Therefore, syllabus planners should consider collocation, harnessing L2 learners' thoughtfulness regarding the methods in which collocational divergence occurs between L1 and L2. Collocations, rather than expressions, are not given due consideration by etymologists (Nofal, 2012).

2. Statement of Problem

Collocations consume a large portion of everyday language and add an additional source of flare and uniqueness to language, which increases the pleasure and fascination learners can obtain from adequate comprehension. However, translating collocations can prove to be an endless battle for L2 learners, with difficulties experienced in the correct selection of accompanying verbs, nouns and adjectives. The delivery of correct English lexical collocations has generally proved to be a problem for students learning English (Howarth, 1998; Hussain, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003; Mahmoud, 2005; Falahi, 2012; Sadighi, 2013). Collocations are considered difficult for learners of a foreign language due to the unexpected instruments used. These problems can be credited to the similar qualities that both English and Arabic collocations show: low level of speculation, unpredictability, and variability. Interpretation of collocations can cause troubles for non-local speakers. Some collocations will be particular in the sense that they will be unexpected in terms of syntactic or semantic highlights. Additionally, "an interpreter can without much of a stretch misjudge a collocation in the source message because of obstruction from his/ her local language" (Baker, 2011, p. 59). Therefore, learners are obliged to be particularly sensitive to collocations and profoundly intrigued in discovering the equivalent collocation in Arabic, when it is accessible. Despite the fact that the translation of English collocations into Arabic by Arab learners has been examined, specific issues for Iraqi EFL learners have not been highlighted. Therefore, this study aims to address specific issues of translating English collocations into Arabic for Iraqi EFL learners at a Malaysian university, and how the translations influence the English translation into Arabic. This research endeavours to diagnose the challenges by examining the test results of an exam comprising fifteen sentences, each containing a collocation.

3. Research Objectives

These are the main objectives of this study:

- 1) To examine the difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL students in translating English collocations into Arabic.
- 2) To investigate the effect of mother tongue interference on the translation of English collocations into Arabic among Iraqi EFL students.

4. Research Questions

Bearing in mind the objectives stated above, the following research questions are posted:

- 1) What are the difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL students in translating English collocations into Arabic?
- 2) How does the mother tongue influence the translation of English collocations into Arabic among Iraqi EFL students?

5. Significance of the Study

The significance of this paper is that it will further add to the body of knowledge of linguistic investigation. It will explore the nature of collocation in the English language as well as examine some of the related and interlocking fields of study surrounding collocation. Research up until this point in time is limited, and there are gaps in knowledge. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will contribute new information to this field of study, as well as confirm and further enhance previous research. It will present a clear definition of collocation and a thorough analysis and description of its uses in English study. A study involving the use of English by native Arabic speakers will be introduced as a means of further explaining the theories and testing the research evaluation.

6. The Concept of Collocation

A collocation is a lexical connection and is not subject to standards, more so to inclinations. Firth (1968) uniquely defines it as "the organisation that words stay with" or "actual words in on-going" (p. 182). Firth (1968) adequately joined the significance of this "level of signifying" and proposed the set-up of different collocational levels of investigating dialect, notwithstanding the situational, syntactic, phonological and different levels.

Halliday (1966) framed the idea of collocation, yet did not include Firth's concept of independent levels of collocation. In Halliday's (1966) hypothesis, syntax and lexis are two particular, however interrelated, levels of semantic structure, with each level possessing its own unique syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, such as structures and framework in punctuation, collocations and groups in lexis. Lyons (1966) argues that a complete theory of semantics cannot be achieved as the application of Firth's contextual theory of meaning and the analysis of patterns of co-occurrence without giving consideration to their semantic compatibility will not be sufficient. Mitchell (1965, p. 143) further delivers on this point, and offers an extended definition of collocation. He states that collocation is an association of the roots or the potential lexical meaning of words rather than the actual words themselves. He further states that "a linguistic item or class of items is meaningful not because of inherent properties of its own, but because of the contrastive or differential relationship it develops with other items or classes." Further to this, Mitchell (1965) also details the continuous nature of collocations. He states that they cannot run across sentence boundaries, which further stresses the continuously syntagmatic nature of Firth's, or "lexical" approach to linguistic analysis.

6.1 Types of Collocations

Appropriate identification of research participants is critical to the science and practice of psychology, particularly for generalizing the findings, making comparisons across replications, and using the evidence in research syntheses and secondary data analyses. If humans participated in the study, report the eligibility and exclusion criteria, including any restrictions based on demographic characteristics. Collocations can be categorised into several categories. This study mostly focuses on the recurrent collocations, and the ones that most interest the students being tested. Aziz (1982) states that collocations are easier to follow and understood when grammatical descriptions are adopted, and hence the translation to Arabic is easier. These examples are outlined in the following points:

1. Adjective + noun collocation:

- 1- "Wrong claim" (ادعاء خاطئ)
- 2- "Big mistakes" (أخطاء كبيرة)

In most cases, these collocations can be translated into identical Arabic collocations (noun + adjective).

2. Verb + noun collocations:

- 1- "Seize opportunity" (يُنْتَهِزُ الْفُرْصَةَ)
- 2- "Offers gift" (يَقْدِمُ هَدِيَّةً)

The main difficulty in this example is matching a certain verb to a particular noun in Arabic (as the examples show).

3. Noun + noun collocations:

- 1- "Food dish" (صحن الطعام)
- 2- "Garden House" (حديقة المنزل)

Aziz (1982, p. 93) states that the collocations will usually have an Arabic equivalent. However, they may use a different grammatical structure. The two most frequently used structures in the Arabic language are: (i) noun + adjective (status quo) and (ii) noun + noun (as seen in several examples).

4. Noun + noun (the of genitive) collocations:

- 1- "Loss of money" (فقدان النقود)
- 2- "the heart of the matter" (جوهر الاشياء)

Mahmoud (1994, p. 43) views these collocations as translatable into equivalent Arabic collocations of identical grammatical structure, or "of genitive."

5. Noun + and + (addition) collocation:

- 1- "Good and bad" (الجيد والسيئ)
- 2- "Rights and duties" (الحقوق والواجبات)

These collocations are generally easy to translate and translatable into "noun + and + noun" collocations in the Arabic language (Adnan, 1996, p. 73).

6. Adjective + adjective collocations:

- 1- “hale and hearty” (بصحة جيدة)
- 2- “wealthy and well” (بصحة وعافية)

The problem with translating such regular collocations into Arabic is that the syntactic structure is diverse and very unusual (Usama, 1998, p. 104).

7. Adverb + adverb collocations:

- 1- “wholly and heartedly” (بالتمام والكمال)
- 2- “willy and nilly” (رغما انفه)

These two Arabic translations are collocations. However, they have diverse linguistic structures. They are syntactically diverse from the English collocations (Abu Risha, 1986, p. 77).

8. Noun + verb collocations (names of sounds):

- 1- “Crying Baby” (بكاء الطفل)
- 2- “Bird song” (تغريد الطيور)

Benson (1985, p. 177) explains that these collocations should not be difficult to translate into collocations in Arabic. The main issue for learners is the requirement to have a capacity to perceive the sound of the example required in Arabic.

9. Prepositional Collocations

Noun + preposition collocation:

- 1- “play on (words)” ((التلاعب بالالفاظ))
- 2- “a claim for” (ادعاء بـ)

Faruqi (1994) warns that language students must be aware of the direct translation of the preposition.

Preposition + noun collocations:

- 1- “by accident” (بمحض الصدفة)
- 2- “under the patronage (of)” (تحت رعاية)

Adjective + preposition collocations:

- 1- “Upset at” (منزعج من)
- 2- “Fugitive at” (هارب من)

Verb + preposition collocations (prepositional verbs):

- 1- “need to” (يحتاج الى)
- 2- “wait for” (ينتظر لـ)

10. Collocations of Similes

(as...as constructions)

- 1- “as beautiful as a lark”/ “as pretty as a picture” (احلى من الصورة)
- 2- “as White as a snow” (ابيض من الثلج)

11- Parts of countable nouns' collocations, e.g.:

- 1- “a bouquet of flowers” (باقة من الورد)
- 2- “a crowd of people” (حشد من الناس)

Parts of uncountable nouns' collocations:

- 1- “an act of violence” (عمل عنيف)
- 2- “ Piece of bread” (قطعة خبز)

These collocations are used to allude to parts of a noun that cannot be included in English. There are also comparative collocations in Arabic. However, there are a few nouns that are uncountable in English, yet countable in Arabic:

1- (اعمال.....عمل)

2- (اخبار.....خبر)

They should therefore not be translatable into collocations, but into single words only, like “a bit (piece) of information” and “a bit (piece) of advice.” (Heil, 1990, p. 74).

6.2 Collocations and Translation

Collocation refers to the lexical relationship between words. It is a phenomenon that is unique to language learning and which the nature differs slightly from one language to another. Cultural differences can also influence the nature of lexical relationships and make the study of collocations complex in nature. Because of this, translating collocations has been proven to be an area of great difficulty. There are several problems when translating collocations from one language to another. This is due to the discrepancies in the cultural and linguistic structures between the SL and TL, as well as different systems, conventions and lifestyles which add variety and colloquial inference to the nature of collocations (Al-Rawi, 1994). Accurate translations rely on the concept of understanding the exact TL equivalents. Catford (1965, p. 50) states that “translation equivalence occurs when an SL and TL text or item are related (or at least some of) the same features of substance”. That is, translating collocations can become inaccurate or difficult when a translator fails to identify the equivalent TL lexical item, which correlates to the lexical item within the SL, which can ultimately result in unnatural expressions (Al-Rawi, 1994)

7. Theoretical Framework of the Study

It has been suggested that meaning may not be restricted to single lexical units, and that collation, or lexical meaning, is part of the five dimensions of meaning, including lexical, morphological, phonetic, semantic and syntactic (Firth, 1935, 1957, p. 11). Firth (1957) describes collocation as “the company a word keeps.” Stubbs (2002, p. 225) offers a similar definition, stating that collocation is the “semantic relations between the node and collocates.” Stubbs (2001b, p. 14) further goes on to state that collocation is a basic unit of language, and that “combinations of words in phrases are...a good candidate for the basic unit of language in use.” It is evident from literature that there is more focus on lexical, instead of grammatical, collocation (Grimm, 2009; Sinclair, 1991; and Sinclair & Jones, 1974). This study will explore the aspects of meaning and the ability of respondents to use and understand the concepts. Palmer (1933, 1938) made note of the significance of collocation in verbal communication, explaining that rather than focusing on the importance of grammar in language learning, each word may be composed of its own grammar. To support this, Favretti (2008, p. 92) states the “polysemy of the word is disambiguated by the representation of its collocates.” Many authors agree that a translator will often be caught out by incorrect and inappropriate use of collocations, rather than their grammar and vocabulary, which may often be more developed or wider than a native speaker (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995); Al-Shormani & Al-Sohbani (2012).

8. Method

8.1 Participants

The participants of the research were twenty male Iraqi EFL students at a university in Malaysia. They are aged between 23 and 30 and studied English in primary and secondary schools and during their Bachelor degree. The students are now completing a Master degree at this university. It would therefore be assumed that a high level of English awareness and understanding would be obtained by the students, and that they should have a strong understanding of how to translate collocations from English to Arabic. All participants were native Arabic speakers, with English being learned as a secondary language.

8.2 Procedures

Twenty male Iraqi EFL students from a university in Malaysia were selected to participate in the study. Prior to the commencement of the test, the researchers read the test instructions loudly and clearly to ensure all participants were aware of the nature and intention of the testing. Students were asked to translate fifteen English sentences into Arabic in a thirty-minute timeframe. Students were asked to write their answers on a sheet of A4 paper. The use of reference dictionaries was strictly forbidden. Responses were collected in preparation for analysis. In the first state of analysis, the responses were checked for accuracy with assistance from a language professor from Baghdad University, who had taught English for more than twenty years. The emphasis was on analysing the translation of collocations within the sentences. The final result of each sentence was taken from the deduction of the average marks by two separate tests. Analytically, the method used for analysis was a qualitative one. The results of the test were then examined and the reasons for the common misuse of collocations, as well as weaknesses of the respondents, were analysed.

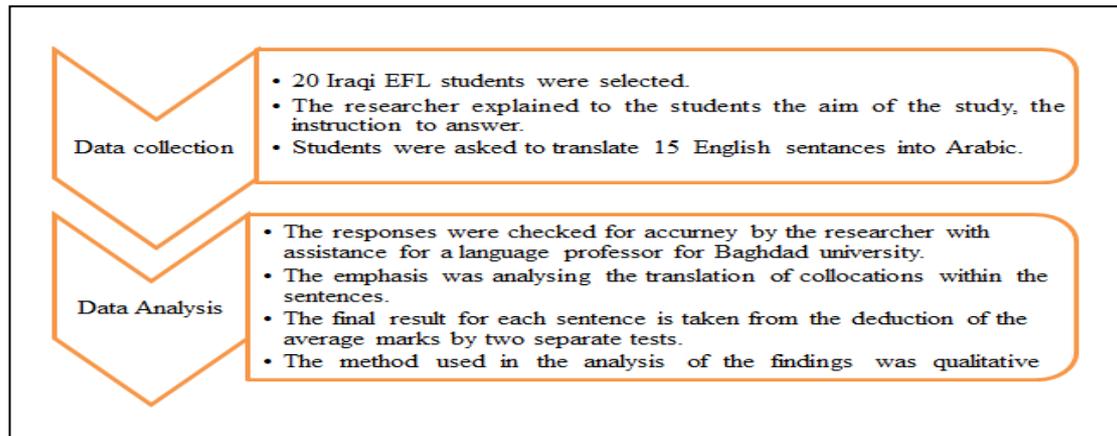


Figure 1. Research procedures

8.3 Instrument

The test was made up of fifteen separate sentences, each containing at least one collocation. The selected collocations were derived from Benson (1985), Mahmoud (1994) and Usama (1998). The researchers have chosen these references due to prove its success in giving the results of high-value and necessary were used as a source of data for many studies like the one conducted by Faris and Sahu (2013). In addition, these sources content of importance to achieve the goal of this study, which is investigating the phenomenon of translating English collocations into Arabic. The instructions given to the students were as follows: a). to translate each of the following sentences into Arabic, and b). to pay close attention to the translation of the underlined words.

- 1- He gave me a warm reception.
- 2- Today is a good day.
- 3- We must seize the opportunity when it comes.
- 4- English Literature is an essay bank.
- 5- It is hard to learn about the hour of decision.
- 6- The contract has terms and conditions.
- 7- She feels well and good.
- 8- I will stand with you secretly and publicly.
- 9- My girl gets alarmed by the door's creak.
- 10- Our ignorance of polling could be backfired.
- 11- I decided to attend Medicine College on my father's advice.
- 12- We are foreign to his ideals.
- 13- People almost protest against the unfamiliar.
- 14- She is as pretty as a picture.
- 15- In my dreams I saw a school of whales.

9. Result and Discussion

Table 1. Results and Discussion

No.	The sentences	Discussion
1	He gave me a warm reception.	The collocation “warm reception” was translated as “استقبال ساخن” instead of “استقبال حار”. The solution in this example is simple. The students use the adjective (حار) instead of (ساخن) in this example. George (2009) states the “Arabic translation of all such collocations lean heavily on the transference of their literal meaning as closely and faithfully as possible.”
2	Today is a good day.	A second example can be seen in the collocation “a good day.” Generally, the correct grammatical structure used in this collocation in Arabic is (adjective + noun); however, they have not used the correct Arabic equivalent collocation. In a lot of cases, the students used “يوم جيد” rather than “يوم سعيد” which is a more appropriate word choice. Collocations like this often prove difficult for students translating into Arabic, as it is often difficult to find an English equivalent adjective.
3	We must seize the opportunity when it comes.	The third sentence proved difficult for many students to understand and select an appropriate Arabic translation for the collocation. The most common mistake was the use of word-for-word translation of the English collocation (verb + noun). Although this can sometimes work, it is incorrect in this example. The collocation used was “seize opportunity.” The majority of students translated the phrase literally into “تيمسك الفرصة”. The most appropriate and correct translation should be “تبتهرز الفرصة”.
4	English Literature is an essay bank.	“Essay bank” was the collocation used in the fourth sentence, and proved to contain major difficulties for English learners when translating into Arabic. A common mistake made by many students was to translate “essay bank” as “مصرف المقالة” instead of “مصرف المعلومات”. It appears that many students were unable to identify the proper equivalent collocation in Arabic, as it is a difficult literal translation from English.
5	It is hard to learn about the hour of decision.	Sentence five contained the example “the hour of decision.” Most participants translated the text as “ساعة القرار” when it should have been translated as “ساعة الحسم”.
6	The contract has terms and conditions.	In sentence six, “terms and conditions” Such a collocation shows that there is an equivalent collocation the students should insist on finding it. There are literal translations, and at the same time students should do their best to understand the English collocation properly.
7	She feels well and good.	The seventh sentence proved a common difficulty amongst most of the participants. It contained the phrase “well and good,” which has a different grammatical structure in Arabic i.e. it should be translated into “preposition + noun + noun.” It should be translated as “على خير مايرام”. However, most participants used “انها تشعر جيدة”.
8	I will stand with you secretly and publicly.	In sentence eight, the collocation “secretly and publicly” typically has a different grammatical structure from the Arabic translation. This proved to be challenging for most students, although most tended to understand the translation. In English, the grammatical structure of the collocation looks like “adverb + adverb” which differs from the Arabic translation which is “adjective + adjective” for “علانية” or “سرا” or “preposition + noun + noun” for “في السر في العلن”. In most cases it appears the students translated the phrase literally, as the most common response was “عموما وسرا”.
9	My girl gets alarmed by the door's creak.	Sentence nine, which contained the collocation “door creak,” posed a problem for most students as they did not know the name of a door’s sound in the target language. The grammatical structure of the collocation in Arabic should be “noun + noun,” not “noun + verb” as it is in English.
10	Our ignorance of polling could be backfired.	The collocation in sentence ten required participants to identify a suitable proposition after the noun in Arabic, regardless of the use of prepositions in English. The majority of students translated the collocation as “[]جهلنا في” instead of “جهلنا بـ”. This is a further example of the mistakes made through direct translation of prepositions.
11	I decided to attend Medicine College on my father's advice.	Sentence eleven used the collocation “on my father’s advice.” Arabic speakers do not say (جهلنا في الانتخابات), rather they say (جهلنا بالانتخابات). Most participants translated this sentence as “على نصيحة ابي” which is a direct translation. The correct translation is “بناء على نصيحة ابي”.
12	We are foreign to his ideals.	In sentence twelve, participants were required to understand collocation with a fixed expression in Arabic. The most common mistake was due to direct translation. The meaning of the preposition caused much confusion amongst the students with this specific collocation despite the grammatical construction of the collocation being the same in English and Arabic (adjective + preposition).
13	People almost protest against the unfamiliar.	Sentence thirteen also caused problems due to direct literal translation. The collocation “protest against” was translated by many participants as “يحتج ضد”. A collocation such as this can be a fixed phrase with a fixed meaning.
14	She is as pretty as a picture.	There appeared to be cultural differences which caused problems for all participants in sentence fourteen as the collocation cannot be changed or amended in the middle. The equivalent in Arabic is usually a comparative grammatical form of exaggerations (i.e. “better than”) as opposed to an equal form (i.e. “something = something”). Every participant translated the collocation as (كالصورة جميلة) when it should be translated as (أحلى من الصورة). Again, participants must be aware of the dangers of direct translation.
15	In my dreams I saw a school of whales.	It was difficult for the participants to distinguish the proper word in Arabic for sentence fifteen. They could use the generic word (مجموعة) or (عدد) to precede a group of anything countable (i.e. people, animal, insects or things). For example, (بجموعة ورد) a bouquet of flowers), (عدد من الاغنام) a flock of sheep). Therefore, the most appropriate translation for “a school of whales” would be as “قطيع من الحيتان”.

10. Conclusion

English learners could easily understand the selected collocations, but they had difficulties to correctly translated them into Arabic. Both Arabic and English use collocations, where words tend to be placed together within a lexical relationship, which is highly influenced and restricted by the language speakers' tendency as well as their culture. In both languages, collocations can be classified, depending on the range of their co-occurrence, into open collocations, where an item has a wide range of collocates. Correctly producing collocations depends a lot on cultural knowledge, more so than linguistics and semantic knowledge. The results show that Iraqi EFL learners were incompetent in collation patterning and they tended to associate words inappropriately. This is evident in the fact that 67% of participants failed to achieve the pass mark, and only 33% showed an acceptable level of understanding and translation. In most cases, errors were made due to the tendency to literally translate the text. Collocations are very important in truly understanding a language as they reveal the naturalness and cohesiveness of the text. Teachers of English as a foreign language in Iraq should pay great attention to collocations during the translation phase.

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