

## ***Lexical Collocations in EFL Writing\****

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The present study deals with collocations as a challenging feature of foreign language learning and as an integral component of communicative competence. It examines lexical collocations in Kuwait University EFL learners' essay writing. The learner database consists of a 100 essays written as final examinations for ENG 208 (Essay Writing). Collocational errors are first examined in terms of head type and collocator vs. collocate orientation. Then they are discussed in light of their etiology, i.e. whether they are the output of L1 interference or creative construction.

**Key words: communicative competence, lexical collocation, writing**

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The production of human discourse in both the spoken and written mode is governed by two important principles: the Open Principle (OP) and the Idiom Principle (IP), which significantly differ in their orientation (Sinclair, 1991). The OP represents the Chomskyan school of linguistics with a theory of Universal Grammar that is theoretically capable of grammaticalizing

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meaning in natural language in accordance with subcategorization and selectional restrictions rules, while leaving room for parametric variation between individual languages. Thus, the English sentence *The dog is reading an article on collocations* will be sanctioned by subcategorization rules (i.e. grammatical rules) but blocked by selectional restrictions rules (i.e. semantic rules) because the verb *read* must select a [+human] subject. By contrast, the IP accounts for phraseologies whose entity does not derive from free grammaticalization as in the OP but from a combination of socio-lexical conventions in any given language. For example, the English greeting *Good morning* derives its acceptability from the IP rather than the OP; hence the unavailability of *Excellent morning* or *Wonderful morning* as greetings in English. It should be noted that the lexeme *morning* freely collocates with adjectives such as *excellent*, *wonderful*, *nice*, *terrible*, *humid*, etc. by utilizing the OP but exclusively collocates with the adjective *good* in the greeting, thus producing the frozen collocation *Good morning* by the IP rather than the OP.

In addition to collocations, the IP lies behind the production of a variety of multi-word units in the English lexicon including gambits, formulaic expressions, idiomatic expressions, clichés, proverbs, etc. (Aisentdat, 1981; Alexander, 1978, 1984; Cowie, 1981, 1988, 1992; Nattinger, 1980, 1988; Sinclair, 1991; Yorio, 1980). Thus, the role of the IP in native speaker as well as bilingual lexical competence can, by no means, be taken lightly as is tacitly implied by those who see the OP as the main explanation for successful performance. Apparently, the IP captures an important insight into natural language by rendering it susceptible to socio-lexical constraints which are inadvertently omitted by the OP. Consequently, we are convinced that the two principles should go hand in hand in foreign language acquisition the way they do subconsciously in first language acquisition. Foreign language educators should be aware of the fact that a workable bilingual competence is the output of the two principles operating together rather than the undue overemphasis on the OP at the expense of the IP.

Lexical collocations, the topic under investigation, represent an area *par excellence* to shed more light on the dynamic interaction between the OP and

IP. Cowie (1981, p. 224) defines a collocation as “a composite unit which permits the substitutability of items for at least one of its constituent elements”. In a more down-to-earth definition, collocations can be simply viewed as ‘words keeping company with each other’. The strength of the company that a word may keep with another may vary from weak to strong to fixed company. On the one hand, weak company is the most akin to the OP because the lexeme can freely select company (i.e. its collocates) as far as selectional restrictions rules are not violated. For example, the English verb *read* can freely collocate with a host of object nouns involving printed material such as *book, newspaper, instructions, leaflet, poetry*, and so on to produce open lexical collocations. On the other hand, fixed company is the most removed from the OP. For instance, the same verb *read* might figuratively collocate in a prefabricated manner with a few object nouns that are [- printed material] such as *read someone’s mind* or *read someone as an open book*. In some cases, a lexeme may only have one or two collocates such as the verb *dial* that collocates only with the noun *number* and the adjective *hazel* that may collocate only with the nouns *eyes* and *nuts*. These collocations, it should be noted, show a degree of frozenness comparable to that of pure idioms such as *bury the hatchet* (to end a dispute) and *under the weather* (not feeling well). However, the collocations are transparent, whereas the idioms are opaque in terms of interpretation, that is, collocational meaning can be worked out on the basis of constituent elements, while idiomatic meaning cannot.

As for strong company, which is found halfway between weak and fixed company, it represents the bulk of lexical material that is collocationally relevant in English. We will divide lexical collocations that belong to this category into stable and restricted collocations. Stable collocations, on the one hand, represent consistent lexicalization tendencies that may sanction collocator x but not collocator y with collocate z although x and y are synonyms. For example, *perform/carry out* are cognitive synonyms but they behave differently in collocations, viz. *perform a task* but not *\*perform a project*. Similarly, *gain, obtain* and *earn* are cognitive synonyms but they

collocate differently, viz. *gain/earn confidence* rather than *\*obtain confidence*, *earn marks* rather than *\*gain/obtain marks* and *obtain an application form* rather than *\*gain/earn an application form*. In some cases, the collocators are contextually rather than cognitively synonymous, for example, *make* and *give* are synonymous when they collocate with *comment* and *response* in *make/give a response*. However, only *give* collocates with *reaction*, hence *give a reaction* is licensed but *\*make a reaction* is not. These clusters of overlapping collocations are thought to lie behind most collocational errors in foreign language learning (Howarth 1998). On the other hand, restricted collocations show a stronger degree of company than stable collocations. More importantly, they mainly involve single collocators (no synonyms are available) which keep restricted company with collocates that apparently belong to alien semantic sets, although a firm syntagmatic relation is established between the collocator and collocate. For example, *strong* and *weak*, which freely collocate with a host of nouns to produce weak company that denotes (physical) strength/weakness, may collocate with drinks to produce restricted collocations such as *strong tea* and *weak tea*. That is to say, the collocators *strong* and *weak* are employed in these restricted collocations to the exclusion of any other possible candidates. Similarly, we have a single collocator in the collocation *do a favor*, which cannot be replaced with *make* the way *pay* and *make* can readily interchange in the collocation *pay/make a visit*.

## Objectives

The present study aims to examine essay writing by prospective Kuwait University (KU) English majors for the purpose of pinpointing the problems they may face in producing lexical collocations that involve fixed and strong company. Due to the common complaint made by Kuwait University instructors of subject-matter courses about their students' poor quality writing and the claims in the existing literature (e.g. Farghal & Obeidat, 1995; Howarth, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003), it is hypothesized that Kuwait

University English majors' deficiency in collocational competence will affect their performance in writing tasks. Most importantly, it is noted that many EFL students will show a weakness in what may be termed 'middle ground' lexical collocations, where errors stem from clusters of overlapping collocations such as *\*arrange one's time* instead of *organize one's time*, *\*gain a language* for *learn/acquire a language* and *\*do effort* instead of *make/exert effort*. These collocations, which are not as fixed as *dial a number* or *hazel eyes*, seem to play a key role in the production of natural discourse in EFL writing. To shed light on the etiology of such problems, role of L1 (Arabic) in the production of unacceptable English lexical collocations is explored, in addition to the role of creative construction within L2.

It should be noted that it is not the purpose of this paper to assess overall EFL writing quality. Rather, this study is intended to highlight collocational competence as one of the writing variables, to the exclusion of grammatical and rhetorical competences, which are equally important, if not more so than lexical collocations.

After collecting collocational errors, they are divided into general categories and subcategories. For example, lexical collocations are first divided into verbal, adjectival, nominal and prepositional collocations. Then, the collocational problems in each category are classified into collocator-based and collocate-based errors, in order to highlight the source of error. Next, the errors in each category are examined for L1 interference or creative construction. An elaborate quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data is presented for general as well as fine categorization.

### **Significance**

Although there have been a few studies that have analyzed learner collocations on the basis of a reasonable amount of natural production data (Chi *et al.* 1994; Howarth, 1996; Granger, 1998; Lorenz, 1999; Nesselhauf, 2003), most studies on non-native speaker collocations have relied on small-scale elicitation tests that involve discourse completion and/or translation

tasks (e.g. Bahus & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obeidat, 1995; Gabrys-biskup, 1990, 1992; Hussein, 1990; Shakir & Farghal, 1992). The present study is, therefore, well positioned to shed light on EFL learner collocations as naturally produced in a large amount of essay writing (approximately a learner database of 35000 words). The study is also potentially important because it deals with homogeneous groups of EFL learners whose native language is Arabic, a situation which will allow ample room for comparisons between L2 and L1 collocations on the one hand and Kuwaiti EFL learners' collocations and L2 collocations by EFL learners from other cultures on the other. Finally, and more importantly, this study seeks to diagnose learner collocational competence in a bilingual situation (KU) and, subsequently, provide guidelines toward giving collocations their due emphasis in writing courses, with implications for other similar bilingual situations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Subjects**

The subjects in this study are 100 KU English majors enrolled in ENG 208 (Essay Writing) at the last stage of the language skills period, which is intended to qualify them in terms of English language proficiency for subject-matter courses in the literature and linguistics tracks leading to a Bachelor of Arts. They have already covered other skills including listening, speaking and reading. In addition, they had had English as a school subject for 12 years prior to joining KU with a score of 75% or above on the *Tawjihi* examination (a Ministry of Education supervised test at the end of the High School period).

### **Database**

To ensure that the data represent the best work of the subjects, the

collection consists of 100 essays (approximately 350 words each), which are written as final examinations on topics of general interest, such as types of restaurants, learning a foreign language, test anxiety, and so on.

### **Procedure**

The essays have been carefully examined by the two present researchers to pinpoint erroneous lexical collocations. Lexical collocations are divided into verbal, adjectival, nominal and prepositional. This classification is based on the part of speech of the linear head of the collocation, e.g. a verbal collocation is a collocation whose head is a verb, whereas an adjectival collocation is one whose head is an adjective. Then, each category is checked in terms of collocator-based vs. collocate-based errors, as well as creative construction vs. L1 interference errors. Based on this categorization, the procedure includes both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The study of lexical collocations in EFL students' writings is not an easy task, because the overall poor quality of some compositions may overshadow and complicate the search for collocations. Therefore, the 100 compositions have been assessed impressionistically in terms of quality of writing. The impressionistic survey reveals that 26 compositions can be rated as 'high', 47 as 'middle', and 27 as 'low' in terms of writing proficiency. While it is easy to detect collocational errors in 'good' and, to a lesser degree, in 'average' compositions, the task becomes highly complicated and unnatural in 'poor' compositions, where not only local errors but also global errors dominate the scene. To illustrate this point, following are three excerpts from 'good', 'average' and 'poor' compositions, respectively:

- (1) Movies, in general, have always influenced people over the past years. Ever since they were made movies **have captivated people's emotions and thoughts**. Various movies influence people in very different ways. They either make people happy, sad, angry, etc. Certain movies **express real situations**, help people understand different cultures and even entertain them. Movies

screened via the television usually have a larger audience, since the movies shown are at a click of a button in a comfortable environment for the viewer.

- (2) The first thing that new students have to do is attending classes regularly. Some teachers do not like their students to be late so they begin to **lose grades**. The second important thing is participating in the class and writing home works. It is very important to participate in the class because It helps the students to **increase their grades**. Another thing is writing home works. Writing home works make the students able to answer the exams' questions because they practiced very well. And in another way it **increases the students' marks**. The final thing is studying for the exams hardly. The students should study hard because If they did not study they will **lose more grades**.
- (3) The television is a great invention and a **big communication instrument**. Though it's very useful of providing us of information, it's also **damage the brain** and have a bad influence on people especially children.

Children are the most people who are effected easily by television. They watch television and notice and learn bad things from it, like violence, Madness and being powerful. They don't just watching but even they try to do exactly what they saw, and this is really **lead to serious matters** or should I say a disasters. For example, the boy who jump from the seven floor trying to fly like Superman.

As can be observed, it is relatively easy to pinpoint the collocational problems in the first excerpt (collocational errors are indicated in bold type in the above excerpts and henceforth), due to the reasonable quality of the English. Similarly, but to a lesser degree, it is reasonably manageable to identify such problems in the second excerpt. By contrast, the bad quality of the English in the third excerpt overshadows the task of detecting collocations and makes it much less valid. In particular, lexical collocations, which clearly stand out in idiomatic writing, may simply find a natural disguise in awkward circumlocutions in badly written compositions, hence escape detection altogether. In fact, the third excerpt suffers from various local and global problems that are more serious than the collocational



problems in it. Thus, collocational problems in poor compositions shed only little light on the overall quality of students' writing.

With the above remarks borne in mind, the discussion of collocations in this study is only meant to explore collocational competence in KU prospective English majors rather than gauge their general proficiency in English writing. The main objective is to see what collocational mishaps these EFL learners fall victim to and how these errors can be analyzed and explicated, in order to sensitize KU composition teachers (and elsewhere in other Arab EFL contexts) to such problems, to allow for comparisons with other EFL learners in comparable situations, and to attempt to find possible solutions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The total number of erroneous lexical collocations in the corpus came to 488. They are divided into four categories: verbal (those whose heads are verbs, e.g. 'do extra effort'), adjectival (those whose heads are adjectives, e.g. 'expensive prices'), nominal (those whose heads are nouns, e.g. 'mother language'), and prepositional (those whose heads are prepositions, e.g. 'in their houses'). The notion of 'head' in collocations is linearly rather than syntactically defined, i.e. it is the first item (collocator) regardless of the syntactic head. Thus, the linear and syntactic head coincide in a verbal collocation, but diverge in an adjectival collocation. In other words, the verb is both the syntactic and linear head of a verbal collocation, whereas the adjective is the linear head and the head noun the syntactic head in an adjectival collocation. Then, each category is broken down into collocator-based and collocate-based errors. Table 1 below presents a breakdown of erroneous lexical collocations into the four categories above, as well as the collocator- vs. collocate-based dichotomy.

**TABLE 1**  
**Erroneous Lexical Collocations (Collocator-based vs. Collocate-based Errors)**

	Total	Erroneous Collocator No. (%)	Erroneous Collocate No. (%)
Verbal Collocations	313	235 (75.08%)	78 (24.92%)
Adjectival Collocations	112	95 (84.82%)	17 (15.18%)
Nominal Collocations	52	19 (36.54%)	33 (63.46%)
Prepositional Collocations	11	10 (90.91%)	1 (9.09%)
Total	488	359 (73.57%)	129 (26.43%)

As can be seen in Table 1, erroneous verbal collocations account for the lion's share among the four categories totaling 313/488 (64.14%). This result points to the key role played by English verbal predicators in the creation of stable collocations in the predicate of any sentence. It also indicates that verbal collocations are more problematic than other combinations such as adjectival collocations, which significantly lag behind in terms of difficulty, as can be observed in the above Table. Another important observation from Table 1 is that collocator-based errors are considerably more frequent than collocate-based errors (73.57% vs. 26.43%, respectively). This shows that the collocator (being the head of the collocation) is more problematic than the collocate when phrasing a collocation.

### Verbal Collocations

By definition, a verbal collocation is a collocation whose head is a verb in the semantic representation and regardless of whether the verb linearly heads the collocation. That is to say, in some cases the verb is a linear and semantic head, e.g. 'do extra effort', whereas in other cases it is only a semantic head, e.g. 'the service that is done'. To start looking at the first realization of verbal collocations (where the verb is linear and semantic head), consider the following examples (henceforth all examples will be drawn from our data):

- (1) **take** a lot of benefits from it
- (2) **do** extra effort
- (3) **use** restaurants
- (4) **introduce** Italian food
- (5) **attend** tests
- (6) **gain** new vocabulary

All the verbal collocations in (1)-(6) feature an erroneous head, which appears next to the collocate (i.e. the linear and semantic head coincide). The target heads of the above collocations are *get*, *make*, *go to*, *serve*, *take* and *learn*, respectively. The errors are readily discerned due to the fact that the collocator and collocate are contiguous.

In some cases, the verbal collocation may feature a correct head (collocator) but an erroneous collocate. Following are three illustrative examples:

- (1) open business projects [Bold Type]
- (2) enjoy the appearance of new cultures [Bold Type]
- (3) study the quantity well [Bold Type]

In (7), the head 'open' collocates with either 'business' or 'projects' but not with 'business projects'. In (8), the verb 'enjoy' does not collocate with 'appearance'; rather it collocates with 'taste', in order to produce an acceptable collocation. As for (9), the correct collocate is 'material' rather than 'quantity' in the context of preparing for exams.

In other cases, the collocate in the verbal collocation may be missing, superfluous, or repetitious, as can be illustrated below:

- (10) attend regularly
- (11) eating out **of their houses**
- (12) restaurants are categorized **and classified**

In (10), the collocate ‘classes’ is missing; hence the erroneous collocation. By contrast, the collocate ‘of their houses’ in (11) is superfluous, as the head ‘eat out’ includes sufficient information, that is, the suppressed information in the superfluous collocate cannot be phonetically realized in English. As for (12), the error arises from using coordinate synonyms as collocates of the same head; hence the collocationally unlicensed repetition.

The second realization of verbal collocations (the head is semantic only) may involve distance between the collocator and its collocate, as well as change in word order, as can be shown in the following examples:

(13) the kind of **food** that **is used** here (a restaurant)

(14) **the service** that **done**

(15) **the specialization** that Italian food **acquires** throughout the years

(16) invitations **take place** in restaurants

The students’ inability to activate the correct verbal collocations ‘to serve food’ and ‘to offer service’ is the source of errors in the passive structures in (13) and (14), respectively. As for (15), the problem lies in the word ‘specialization’, being an erroneous collocate for the head ‘acquire’, which may collocate with nouns such as ‘expertise’ and ‘fame’ but not ‘specialization’. Finally, (16) features an error in the collocator, i.e. the use of the erroneous head ‘take place’ instead of the correct head ‘are made [to]’, along with a change in the word order, i.e. the collocate ‘invitations’ linearly precedes the collocator at surface structure (which is also the case in (13)-(15)).

Further, the majority of erroneous verbal errors show an incorrect selection of a collocator (a verb) rather than a collocate, viz. collocator-based errors score 75.08% as opposed to only 24.92% for collocate-related errors. This indicates the key role of the verb in creating natural collocations in English.

### **Adjectival Collocations**

Erroneous adjectival collocations, which come second in frequency among

lexical collocations totaling 112 (22.95%), are those combinations whose heads function adjectivally. Most of these collocations involve errors in the selection of the collocator (an adjective), viz. collocator-based errors account for 84.82%. Following are some examples including wrong collocators:

- (17) **golden** services
- (18) **expensive** prices
- (19) **nervous** atmosphere
- (20) **strange** herbs
- (21) **easy** idea

As is clear in (17)-(21), the students failed to select the correct adjectival collocator in each of the above collocations, which should employ the adjectives *good*, *high*, *tense*, *exotic*, and *simple*, respectively.

As for collocate-related errors in adjectival collocations, they account for only 15.18%. Below are some illustrative examples:

- (22) high **rates in prices**
- (23) a **perfect correct** way
- (24) extra **accessories**
- (25) psychological **status**
- (26) the **successful** path

The error in (22) lies in the student's unawareness of the fact that the cognitive synonyms 'rates' and 'prices' cannot co-occur in a collocate of the adjective 'high', i.e. we can have either the collocation 'high rates' or 'high prices' rather than (22). Similarly, a cognitive synonym of the adjectival collocator cannot function as part of the collocate; hence we can have either the collocation 'a perfect way' or 'a correct way' but not the erroneous collocation in (23). The problems in (24) and (25) are straightforward – the students simply employed the wrong collocates. That is, the collocators 'extra' and 'psychological' may not select the collocates 'accessories' and

'status' (the correct collocates being 'services' and 'state'), respectively. Last, the adjective 'successful' in (26) may modify a host of noun collocates but not the noun 'path', to the student's bad luck. To remedy this error, the erroneous adjectival collocation should be rephrased as a nominal collocation, viz. 'the path to success'.

### Nominal Collocations

Erroneous nominal collocations, whose heads (collocators) are nouns, lag well behind adjectival collocations totaling only 52 (10.66%) among lexical collocations. However, unlike verbal and adjectival collocations, they show more collocate-based than collocator-based errors (63.46% vs. 36.54%, respectively). This may be explained by the fact that in a nominal collocation the collocator constrains the collocate, i.e. it is essentially a matter of selecting a noun collocate that suits a noun collocator rather than the other way round. By contrast, in a verbal or adjectival collocation, it is the collocator that is constrained by the collocate, that is, it is essentially a matter of selecting the correct verb or adjective collocator to suit a collocate. Below are some examples of erroneous nominal collocations:

- (27) restaurant **people**
- (28) waiters' **morals**
- (29) mother **language**
- (30) **heart** rate
- (31) **term** paper (for 'test paper')

In (27)-(29), the collocators *restaurant*, *waiters'* and *mother* constrain their collocates, hence the errors (*people* for *goers*, *morals* for *conduct* and *language* for *tongue*). By contrast, the errors are collocator-related in (30) and (31). In (30), the collocate *rate* does not select *heart* but rather *heartbeat* as a collocator. The error in (31) is subtler because it produces an irrelevant natural collocation (term paper) for the contextually relevant collocation (test

paper). Therefore, it is the context of (31) that determines the relevant collocator for the collocate *paper*.

### **Prepositional Collocations**

Erroneous prepositional collocations come last in the data totaling only 11/488 (2.25%). This does not mean that collocations involving prepositional usage are infrequent in the corpus. On the contrary, they are frequent, but they are grammatical rather than lexical collocations. To illustrate this subtle distinction, consider the following examples:

- (32) a) enjoy their meals **in their houses**  
b) **adapt with**
- (33) a) serve the customer right **at his seat**  
b) **in** their special **occasions**

In (32a), the collocation ‘in their houses’ is erroneously used instead of ‘at home’ in this context, despite the fact that it may be correctly employed in other contexts; hence the collocational error is lexical. By contrast, the collocational error in (32b) is grammatical, because the preposition that should follow the verb ‘adapt’ is predicted by the language system, viz. ‘adapt to’. Similarly, the lexical collocation ‘at his seat’ is erroneously employed in the context of restaurants instead of the correct collocation ‘at his table’ in (33a). However, the grammatical collocation in (33b) is predicted by the language system, i.e. the noun ‘occasion’ must select the preposition collocator ‘on’ rather than ‘in’ when used in the locative sense.

### **L1 INTERFERENCE VERSUS CREATIVE CONSTRUCTION**

The role of L1 in the creation of erroneous lexical collocations contrasts with the strategy of creative construction in wording erroneous collocations.

The assumption is that a learner of English as a foreign language faces three possibilities when phrasing a collocation in writing: employing the correct collocation, creatively constructing an erroneous collocation based on his interim knowledge of the foreign language, or coining a wrong collocation by falling back on his/her knowledge of L1. The implementation of one option rather than another depends on the learner's working knowledge of collocational competence in particular and overall proficiency in the foreign language in general. Therefore, if a learner fails to use the correct collocation, either the erroneous collocation can be tracked down to L1 interference, or it will be the result of creative construction, whereby the learner utilizes his limited lexical competence of L2. Both the use of L1 and creative construction are important communication strategies in the process of acquiring a foreign language in general (Brown 2000).

An overall examination of erroneous collocations in the corpus shows that 236 collocations (48.36%) manifest evidence of L1 interference, whereas 252 collocations (51.64%) instantiate creative construction. Although creative construction slightly surpasses L1 interference in the data, this finding points to the key role played by L1 when coining collocations in the foreign language.

The criterion used for determining whether the collocation is the output of L1 interference hinges on the way it is lexicalized. That is to say, if the erroneous L2 collocation bears a clear lexical resemblance to its L1 counterpart, then it is deemed to be caused by the interference of L1 collocational norms. Thus, erroneous collocations such as *put in his mind* for *bear in his mind* and *expensive prices* for *high prices* are considered the output of L1 negative transfer because they directly reflect the familiar Arabic collocations *yada'u fii dhihni-hi* (put in mind-his) and *'as'aarun yaaliyatun* (prices expensive). By contrast, erroneous collocations that do not show such a lexical resemblance but rather involve a deficient knowledge of collocational constraints in L2 are described as the result of creative construction. By way of illustration, erroneous collocations such as *classify/specify his time* for *organize his time* and *golden services* for *excellent*



*services* cannot be traced back to the influence of L1. These collocations, in fact, are unacceptable in Arabic - one cannot say *yusanniufu/yuhaddidu waqta-hu* (classify/specify time-his) instead of *yunađđimu waqtahu* (organize time-his) and *xadamaatun đahabiyyatun* (services golden) for *xadamaatun mumtaazatun* (services excellent). One should note that the students failed to employ positive L1 transfer between Arabic and English, as the two collocations above correspond in the two languages. This failure triggers creative construction in which the replacements usually exhibit semantic relatedness with the target lexical item. For example, 'classifying' is a kind of 'organizing' and 'golden' and 'excellent' may interchange when modifying a head noun such as 'opportunity'. It could be argued that the learner's opting out of L1 transfer in such cases is caused by his/her fear of engaging in negative L1 transfer.

Apparently, in the absence of a workable bank of collocations in L2 there will be a tug of war between L1 positive transfer and L1 negative transfer in the learner's consciousness. Whereas L1 may function as a reference point when facing a problematic collocation, there exists the fear for landing in negative L1 transfer, which leads to avoidance of positive L1 transfer and consequently lands the learner in creative construction. From our own experience, it is quite possible, for example, not to find one single student in a class of 40 senior English majors at KU who knows the lexical collocation 'weak tea'. When asked about such a collocation, most of them would either fall back on L1, producing 'light tea', which is the output of negative collocational transfer or, alternatively, fall back on their existing lexical knowledge of L2, thus creatively producing collocations such as 'not dark tea', 'transparent tea' or 'clear tea', which are all semantically related but collocationally unacceptable.

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Table 2 below presents a breakdown of the results of the frequency and percentages of L1 interference and creative construction in lexical collocations:

**TABLE 2**  
**L1 Interference vs. Creative Construction in Lexical Collocations**

Lexical Collocations	L1 Interference No. (%)	Creative Construction No. (%)
Verbal Collocations	162 (51.76%)	151 (48.24%)
Adjectival Collocations	46 (41.07%)	66 (58.93%)
Nominal Collocations	22 (42.08%)	30 (57.92%)
Prepositional Collocations	6 (54.55%)	5 (45.45%)
Total	236 (48.36%)	252 (51.64%)

The following two sections will explicate L1 interference and creative construction drawing examples from verbal and adjectival collocations.

[layout/Indent as other paragraphs]

### Verbal Collocations

Erroneous verbal collocations showing evidence of L1 interference are the most frequent in the corpus (51.76%), with creative construction slightly lagging behind (48.24%). It is clear that KU EFL learners find it difficult to cope with verbal collocations, whose correct wording mainly depends on the proper selection of the verb collocator. Following are two sets of examples

(34 and 35 below), which involve L1 interference and creative construction, respectively:

- (34) a. **enter/attend** a test  
b. **put** in their minds  
c. can **affect** a negative effect on  
d. respect your **doctor**
- (35) a. **classify/specify/divide** time well  
b. **have** a balance  
c. **fail** a chance  
d. take **notice**

The examples in (34) show clear evidence of L1 interference in the wording of the verbal collocations. In (34a), the students fell back on Arabic, which sanctions three collocations that correspond to ‘sit for/take a test’ in English, viz. *ya ’xuḍu/yaḥḍuru/yadxulu ’imtiḥānan* (take/\*attend/\*enter a test). In (34b), the erroneous English collocation literally corresponds to the familiar Arabic collocation *yada ’ū fi ’aḍhaanihim* (put-they in minds-their). In (34c), there is evidence of the Arabic cognate accusative interfering in the formation of the English collocation. To explain, Arabic familiarly employs the cognate accusative where a cognate object (an object derived from the head/verb collocator) can be used, e.g. *yu’əθiru ta’əiiran salbiyyan ’alaa* ‘affect a negative effect on’, hence the erroneous English collocation (for more details about Arabic cognate accusatives, see Farghal, 1993, 1995). Finally, (34d) replicates the common collocation *taḥtarim duktoor-ak* (respect-you doctor-your) instead of the correct English collocation ‘respect your professor’.

By contrast, the examples in (35) show evidence of the students’ utilizing their interim knowledge of L2 to word collocations creatively. In (35a), all the verb collocators bear a vague degree of semantic relatedness to the correct verb ‘organize’, but none of them can work in English, nor can any of them work in Arabic, in which lexical company in this collocation is

restricted to *yunaḏḏimu/yurattibu al-waqta* ‘organize/\*arrange time’. In (35b), the verb ‘have’ does not work as a collocator for ‘balance’ instead of the correct verb ‘strike’, despite the fact that they are synonymous in another collocation with a different collocate, viz. ‘have/strike a deal’. This error cannot be traced back to Arabic because Arabic employs different collocators, viz. *yuḥaqqiqu/yaxliqū tawaazunan* ‘\*achieve/\*create a balance’. These normality conditions are a major source of confusion when phrasing collocations in English. The problem in (35c) also results from sense overlap, that is, ‘missing’ is, in some way, a kind of ‘failing’, hence the erroneous collocation. Finally, the erroneous collocate ‘notice’ in (35d) both bears a phonological and semantic resemblance to the target collocate ‘notes’ as a collocate for the verb collocator ‘take’. This confusion may have evolved from a premature awareness of the semantics of the two lexemes in question, or even from a casual awareness of the contextually irrelevant collocation ‘take notice of’.

### Adjectival Collocations

Erroneous adjectival collocations came second in frequency in L1 interference as well as in creative construction among lexical collocations, with creative construction surpassing L1 interference by a medium margin (58.93% vs. 41.07%, respectively). The examples in (36) and (37) below illustrate the two processes:

- (36) a. **home’s** food  
b. **expensive** prices  
c. **easy** dream  
d. **scientific** material
- (37) a. **golden** services  
b. **perfect** food  
c. **nervous** atmosphere  
d. **great** will

On the one hand, all the examples in (36) indicate clear L1 interference as they directly reflect Arabic collocations, viz. *'aklu al-bayti* (home the-food), *'as'aarun yaaliyatun* (prices expensive), *hulmun sahlun* (a dream easy), and *al-maadatu al-'ilmiyyatu* (the-material the-scientific). These unacceptable collocations correspond respectively to 'homemade food', 'high prices', 'a feasible dream', and 'course material' in English. Among these English collocations, the second and last may back-translate naturally into Arabic as *'as'aarun 'aaliyatun/murtafi 'atun* (prices high) and *maadatu al-muqarrari* (material course). In cases like these, we have one-to-many rather than one-to-one correspondence between L1 and L2 collocations.

On the other hand, all the examples in (37) instantiate creative construction. The students creatively came up with these collocations which do not exist in English and Arabic. The collocates in (37a and b) may allow a host of favorable adjective collocators such as 'good/excellent/superb/fantastic/terrific services/food', although they do not sanction 'golden' and 'perfect'. The learners may have met these adjective collocators in collocations like 'golden rule/opportunity' and 'perfect answer/report' and, falling victim to overgeneralization, worded the said collocations wrongly. As for (37c and b), they feature more stable collocations involving limited lexical choice, that is, the collocate 'atmosphere' in this context may only select the adjective collocator 'tense'; similarly, the collocate 'will' may only select the adjective collocator 'strong' in the context in question. These collocational restrictions also apply to L1, viz. Arabic generates only *jawwun mutawattirun* (an atmosphere tense) 'a tense atmosphere' and *'iraadatun qawiyyatun* (a will strong) 'a strong will' in comparable contexts. One should note that the more lexical restrictions there are, the more challenging the foreign language learner's task becomes.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The paper has shown that the majority of KU prospective English majors

suffer from a range of mild to serious problems in the area of lexical collocations, among other things. Besides grammatical and rhetorical competences (which are not investigated in this study), the ability to employ natural collocations in foreign language compositions can be taken as an indicator of workable competence in writing. In particular, this study may help us to understand the common complaint about the poor quality of student writing made by the instructors of linguistics and literature courses in the Department of English at KU and other English departments at Arab universities (for example, the Department of English at Yarmouk University/Jordan). Apparently, many students progress to these courses without demonstrating reasonable writing competence, of which lexical collocations are an important component. This problem is often aggravated by the common practice that students are mainly evaluated on the basis of content more than language proficiency in subject-matter courses. Therefore, greater emphasis needs to be placed on improving the language skills of students who plan to major in English language and literature.

The results show that the majority of collocational errors (87%) belong to verbal collocations (64%) and adjectival collocations (23%), with nominal and prepositional collocations accounting for only (13%). This clearly indicates that collocations whose heads are verbs are the most problematic for EFL learners. Consequently, this category of collocations should receive special attention from writing instructors. Equally important, though to a lesser extent, are adjectival collocations which should receive their due weight in writing courses. The results also reveal that most collocational errors are collocator-based (73.5%) rather than collocate-based (26.5%), thus calling for more emphasis on collocators than on collocates when teaching writing.

As for the role of L1 interference vs. creative construction in producing L2 collocations, the empirical data show that they almost tie in terms of error attribution at (48.36%) vs. (51.64%), respectively. It is argued that while negative L1 transfer indicates the clear influence of L1 on learner collocational options in L2, creative construction strongly points to an

avoidance strategy which blocks positive L1 transfer in many cases where one-to-one correspondence is found between Arabic and English collocations, for fear of committing errors on the learner's part. In such cases, the learner's assumption is that collocations between the two languages should be different, which, to his/her bad luck, result in errors. The collocational context becomes more complicated when there is one-to-many rather than one-to-one collocational correspondence. In all cases, creative construction involves erroneous options that show varying degrees of semantic relatedness in L2. Such unworkable options are the output of the learner's interim collocational competence in the foreign language.

The study has many implications for foreign language writing courses. First, lexical collocations should be given their due attention, which should not be less than that given to various grammatical combinations and aspects of rhetorical organization, such as thesis statement, paragraphing, and logical relations. At the topic-based orientation stage, this can be done by a variety of enabling tasks including collocation-based completion exercises, collocation-based substitution exercises, and collocation-based error exercises, among other formats. At the writing product stage, some well-chosen compositions should be carefully examined for collocational features in class, in order to provide an elaborate feedback on both natural and erroneous collocations.

Another implication is to bring the problem of collocational restrictions to the consciousness of writing students. On the one hand, foreign language student writers should be alerted to the fact that cognitive synonyms may often fail to interchange in lexical collocations. For example, cognitive synonyms such as *get*, *obtain*, *earn*, *gain* can be variously shown to behave similarly and differently in collocations. At the end of the day, the foreign language learner is expected to establish a bank of collocations that is informed by fine distinctions between cognitive synonyms. On the other hand, it should be brought out to the learners that, in some cases, collocations may involve contextual rather than cognitive synonyms, for example, *pass* and *run*, which are not cognitive synonyms, can both collocate with 'traffic light' to denote the same illegal act. That is to say, the verbs above are contextually

synonymous in the collocation 'pass/run a traffic light'.

A third important implication is to point out areas of convergence and divergence between L1 and L2 collocations. Writing instructors should sensitize their students to the fact that collocations may or may not correspond between the students' mother tongue and the foreign language. In this respect, collocation-oriented translation tasks can be very helpful toward encouraging positive collocation transfer and, at the same time, discourage negative collocation transfer, in which collocational differences are inadvertently omitted. To conclude, we will cite an English traffic-instruction sign (posted in many places on the roads of Kuwait City) that reads "Crossing a Red Signal Leads to Death or Prison", which is meant to show how deficiency in collocations may reflect adversely on the EFL learners' output in their professional lives later on.

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