

# MỘT ĐIỂN CỨU VỀ SỰ ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA TIẾNG MẸ ĐỂ ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC SỬ DỤNG CÁC CỤM TỪ CỐ ĐỊNH TRONG TIẾNG ANH

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*Bài viết thực hiện nghiên cứu đối chiếu nhằm kiểm tra ảnh hưởng của tiếng mẹ đẻ đến việc sử dụng cụm từ vựng cố định trong tiếng Anh của người học. Đây là một điển cứu trên một đối tượng đã học tiếng Anh trong 8 năm. Để đáp ứng các mục tiêu nghiên cứu, phương pháp phân tích lỗi được áp dụng để xem xét các loại lỗi liên quan đến cụm từ do sự ảnh hưởng của tiếng Việt. Một bài kiểm tra bao gồm bài viết tiếng Anh và dịch thuật từ tiếng Việt sang tiếng Anh, cùng một bài phỏng vấn đã được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu định tính từ người tham gia. Kết quả cho thấy tiếng mẹ đẻ của người học có tác động lớn đến việc sử dụng từ vựng theo cụm trong tiếng Anh và là nguyên nhân quan trọng gây ra lỗi khi sử dụng từ vựng theo cụm.*

**Từ khóa:** cụm từ cố định, chuyển di ngôn ngữ, tiếng mẹ đẻ, lỗi, sự tiếp thu ngôn ngữ thứ hai.

*This contrastive case study attempts to investigate the impacts of the EFL learners' mother tongue on their use of English collocations. It involves one participant who has been learning English as a foreign language for 8 years. Error analysis was conducted to examine different types of collocational errors made due to the interference of Vietnamese. An English performance test including translation and writing tasks and an interview were used to collect qualitative data from the participant. The findings indicated that the learner's mother tongue had great impacts on their use of English collocation and appeared to be the major cause of their collocational errors.*

**Keywords:** collocation, language transfer, mother tongue, error, second language acquisition.

## A CASE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE EFL LEARNER'S MOTHER TONGUE ON THE USE OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS

### I. Introduction

In the literature on second language acquisition, the influence of native language has been subject to considerable

discussion over the past decades. Especially, mother tongue (L1) transfer phenomenon in which second language learners rely on their first language to comprehend or produce the target language is considered the most significant role of native language in the acquisition of second language

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(Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). In fact, whenever my non-English major students are assigned a writing task, their performances often contain non-native expressions, especially the collocational errors that cannot be understood without some knowledge of Vietnamese. In other words, the students tend to rely on their mother tongue and come up with erroneous expressions that are unacceptable or non-existent in the native corpus reference and, consequently, incomprehensible to the English native speakers. Thus, this paper investigated the case of a Vietnamese EFL learner in order to make an analysis off the influence of her mother tongue on the acquisition of English collocations.

To serve the aims of the study, the following questions were raised:

1. To what extent does the learner make the erroneous collocation in different types of task?
2. How are the deviant collocations possibly influenced by the learner's native language?

## **II. Literature review**

### **1. Definitions of collocation**

Although most of language learners have heard about the term *collocation*, many of them might find it hard to frame an explicit, clear definition for this concept. The Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (Lea, 2002, p. vii) formally defines collocation as “the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and

writing”. Scholars and researchers, however, propose several definitions of collocation; hence, the difference among perceptions of what can be seen as an acceptable collocation is inevitable. For instance, Sadeghi (2009) uses the term “collocation” to refer to the sets of lexical items occurring together in predictable patterns that are consistent with their contexts. In a more general perspective, collocation is defined as “items that occur physically together or have stronger chances of being mentioned together” (Sinclair, 1991, p. 170) or sequence of words that occur with high frequency in language. In this paper, collocation is simply interpreted as common, predictable combination of words that is broadly accepted and expected in native-like communication.

### **2. Lexical and Grammatical Collocations**

According to Benson, Benson & Ilson (1987), lexical and grammatical collocations are two main types of collocations. Lexical collocations are made up of two or more content words, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, as shown below:

- noun + verb (e.g. the dogs bark)
- verb + noun (e.g. catch a cold)
- adjective + noun (e.g. a heavy smoker)
- adverb + adjective (e.g. fully aware)
- adverb + verb (e.g. deeply regret)

Grammatical collocations, on the other hand, are formed by the combination of a

content word and a function word, as illustrated below:

noun + preposition (e.g. fear of)

verb + preposition (e.g. suffer from)

adjective + preposition (e.g. envious of)

preposition + noun (e.g. on foot)

### 3. Significance of collocation

Evidence suggests that collocation is one of the most important issues in acquiring a foreign language because learning isolated words is not enough for effective communication which should be the ultimate goal of language learning. There is a fact that even when students know the meaning of words, they may still struggle with selecting appropriate words for specific contexts, great emphasis therefore has been placed on the importance of collocations over years. Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004) point out that lexical bundles account for a large proportion of English actually used in realistic contexts. Consequently, collocation considerably contributes to second language learners' nativelikeness. This idea is supported by Phoocharoensil (2014) who states that the knowledge of the frequent multiword units will afford great facilitation for second language comprehension and production.

### 4. Cross-linguistic influence on the acquisition of second language (L2) collocation.

Up to now, a large and growing body of literature on L2 collocation learning has

affirmed the pivotal role of the learners' native language in their L2 collocation acquisition (e.g. Koya, 2003; Laufer & Waldmen, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003; Phoocharoensil, 2013, 2014; Sadeghi, 2009; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010). It has been observed that EFL learners often depend on their first language to cope with lexical difficulties in learning English, and producing collocations is by no means an exception. Unfortunately, resorting to L1 could result in deviant collocations where collocational conventions in their native language and English are incongruent.

As noted by Phoocharoensil (2013, 2014), relying on L1 collocational patterns is the most common strategy used by Thai EFL learners to produce English collocations, most of their non-standard collocations therefore can be attributed to negative transfer. His conclusions result from the analysis of the erroneous English collocations used in the argumentative essays written by Thai university students of English. These results further support a previous study by Sadeghi (2009) who used a multiple choice collocation test to identify the collocational errors caused by the difference between Persian and English among 76 Iranian EFL learners. According to Sadeghi's (2009) findings, second language learners, especially learners with lower levels of proficiency seem to be affected by negative transfer due to the disparities between L1 and L2.

It is interesting to note that language transfer seems to be inevitable regardless

of the mother tongue of L2 learners. In consistency with the aforementioned studies, Nesselhauf (2003) states that L1 impact on German speakers' English collocation production is far higher than predicted. More specifically, the extent of difficulty in learning L2 collocation is consistent with the degree of congruence between L1 and L2. In the same vein, Yamashita and Jiang (2010) examine the influence of L1 on the acquisition of L2 collocation among Japanese EFL and ESL learners. The participants in their study are required to determine whether the collocations presented to them are acceptable in the standard English as quickly as possible. Significantly, different performances between these groups of participants reveal that although L2 learners initially depend upon their native language, the increase of exposure to and use of the L2 can gradually help L2 collocations to be "processed independently of the L1 lexicon" (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010, p. 661).

Laufer and Waldmen (2011), in their study investigating the use of English verb-noun collocations in Hebrew native speakers' writing, also provide a strong evidence of negative transfer in L2 collocation acquisition. They maintain great influence of mother tongue on L2 collocation production by pointing out that half of the learners' erroneous collocations are likely to pertain to negative L1 transfer. Another interesting finding is that, contrary to popular supposition, "the advanced learners and

the intermediate learners produce significantly more deviant collocations than the basic learners" (p. 665). This result is in line with those of Koya (2003) who discovered that high level students usually apply their native language knowledge in attempt to produce collocations and accordingly suffer from negative transfer. Conversely, the lower level ones simply "refrain from producing sentences whenever they do not know some words" (Koya, 2003, p. 139).

### **III. Method**

#### **1. Participant**

The subject of this study was a student whose pseudonym is Duy, a Vietnamese undergraduate non-English major student in Tra Vinh university. Because English is compulsory in Vietnamese secondary and tertiary educational system, Duy has studied English for almost 8 years. However, her English proficiency is only equivalent to A2 in Common European Framework of Reference. This evaluation is based on her result in the university's English placement test at the beginning of the semester.

#### **2. Procedures**

In order to investigate the influence of Vietnamese on the participant's acquisition of English collocations, an English performing test and an interview were used to collect data from the participant. The data were collected in a 2 stage process in about 60 minutes. In the first stage, an English test was delivered to the participant after a clear explanation

about the purpose of this study. Specifically, in order to effectively elicit participant's collocation production, the participant was asked to translate 15 short Vietnamese sentences into English then write a narrative paragraph in English on a familiar topic within 45 minutes. In the second stage, a semi-structured interview was conducted to explore the participant's consciousness of L1 transfer. The interview was conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that the language barrier will not lead to miscomprehension or prevent the participant from freely expressing her ideas.

### 3. Data Analysis

The participant's translation and performance in the writing tasks were analyzed to determine the collocations based on the collocational framework presented by Benson, Benson and Ilson (1987). In the present study, the researcher focused on three types of lexical collocations including verb + noun, noun + verb, adjective + noun and four types of grammatical collocations including verb + preposition, adjective + preposition, noun + preposition and preposition + noun.

A combination of words would be determined to be acceptable or erroneous based on two criteria: Macmillan Collocations Dictionary and the evaluation from an adult English native speaker who has been working as an English teacher in Tra Vinh university for more than one year.

The incorrect collocations that were possible evidence of negative transfer

were put into three groups (erroneous collocations involving noun and verb, erroneous collocations involving preposition, erroneous collocations involving adjectives). These errors were then analyzed in relation to the disparity between Vietnamese and English collocational conventions. The participant's consciousness of L1 transfer was also considered as referential information for the analysis process.

## IV. Results and discussion

### 1. Erroneous collocations involving noun and verb

Collocational errors involving noun and verb were observed to appear with high frequency in the participant's performing tasks. It was revealed that when the participant had difficulty in choosing appropriate words for verb - noun combination, she was likely to end up selecting the word having most similar meaning to the Vietnamese expression used in this context. This phenomenon can be illustrated in the following instances extracted from her writing:

(1) "They often *cause noise* at midnight"

The non-standard use of language in (1) is presumably affected by Vietnamese where the noun "tiếng ồn" which means "noise" is always accompanied by the verb "gây" that is equivalent to "cause" in English instead of "make".

The erroneous collocations in (2) and (3) can be explained in similar way:

(2) She must *drink medicine* every day.

(3) Students usually *eat lunch* in the canteen.

In Vietnamese, the verb “uống” which can be directly translated in to “drink” is a versatile word and can combine with several objects such as water, coffee, tea, or medicine. Similarly, Vietnamese people only use one verb that means “eat” for all kinds of food or meals. It seems that the participant has applied these collocational patterns in producing English sentences and consequently made incorrect combinations.

In addition, the participant also created non-native-like collocations reflecting a combination that is very common in Vietnamese. For instance, this following phrase is extracted from her writing:

(4) ...lie in the room and *play the cellphone*

It is prevalent to use the verb “chơi” – “play” with objects like “điện thoại” – “cellphone” or “máy tính” – “computer” in Vietnamese. However, these phrases are strange to English native speakers.

In the interview stage, the participant said that “*When I don’t know how to express my idea in English, I will ... think of other idea or write down that sentence in Vietnamese and then translate it into English*”. Indeed, there is a collocational problem in her writing that can be probably ascribed to this word for word translation strategy, as shown in (5).

(5) I *take my dog walk* in the park.

Instead of “walk my dog”, the

participant made a longer expression by literally translating every Vietnamese word into English without changing the word order. This sentence can be easily understood by Vietnamese people because it constructs meaning in the way Vietnamese does, however, it is considered unacceptable in the standard English.

## 2. Erroneous collocations involving preposition

In terms of collocational errors involving preposition, the data have demonstrated two types of error that can be possibly explained in relation to the negative impact of the participant’s native language. The first problem is the preposition redundancy that occurs when the participant based on Vietnamese collocational patterns and accordingly inserts unnecessary preposition into English collocations, as can be seen in (6) and (7).

(6) She *tells to me* a story.

(7) She *forgives for me*.

The errors in (6) and (7) originate from the addition of preposition “tell” and “for”. According to common English, there is no need to use any preposition between the verbs “tell” and their direct objects. It is also unacceptable to add a preposition after the verb “forgive”. Conversely, the verb “kể” – (tell) and “tha thứ”- (forgive) in Vietnamese need to be followed by preposition “với” and “cho” which respectively equivalent to “to” and “for” in English. It is probable that the participant has transferred these features

of Vietnamese to English and therefore constitutes ungrammatical structures.

(8) I have many *memories with* this school.

(9) We *go out a beautiful beach*.

Obviously, (8) and (9) have offered an illustration of another collocational problem relating to preposition: the inappropriate use of preposition that may emanate from L1 negative transfer. To be more specific, in (8), the noun “kỷ niệm” is always followed by the preposition “với”-“with”, whereas its English counterpart “memory” should be accompanied by the preposition “of”. Similarly, the unacceptable appearance of preposition “out” in (9) perhaps stem from a common Vietnamese expression: “đi ra biển”. In actuality, there is congruent collocational convention with the verb “go” between English and Vietnamese: Vietnamese people also use “đi đến” which is exactly equivalent “go to” before a place. However, the noun “biển”, the Vietnamese counterpart of “beach”, is a special word and usually follows the phrase “đi ra” – “go out”. This distinctive feature may explain why the participant made a wrong choice of preposition here.

### 3. Erroneous collocations involving adjective

Collocations containing adjective seem to be easier for the participant to master than other collocation types because there were only two deviant collocations involving adjective found in her translating and writing performance, as in (10) and (11).

(10) The potato in my dish is still *live*!

(11) Although there was a *big rain*, we decided to go to the beach.

Both of these errors presumably occurred as a result of the literal translation of Vietnamese speech into English. In (10), the problem arose because the English adjectives “live” and “raw” convey different meanings and therefore cannot be used interchangeably in different contexts. These words are only used in the fixed structures such as “live music”, “live broadcast” and “raw potatoes”. However, these adjectives share the same Vietnamese counterpart “sống” that can flexibly collocate with different nouns of things, animal or food. It appears that the participant has been influenced by her mother tongue knowledge in translating this sentence.

As regards (11), the problem seems to be less serious when the erroneous collocation may be understandable to English native speaker although it is totally different from what they actually use. Although the adjective “heavy” is a common modification of weather in English, things are different in Vietnamese because Vietnamese people never use the word “nặng” – “heavy” to refer to weather in general or to rain in particular. Indeed, the unnatural collocation “big rain” in (11) is completely a reflection of the common phrase “mưa to” in Vietnamese.

### 4. Other findings

Beside the evidence of the influence of the participant’s mother tongue on her

acquisition of English collocation, the data also provided other referential information for an insight into this issue. In terms of the error frequency in different types of tasks, it is noteworthy that two thirds of the collocational errors were found in the translation task although the participant was required to perform more in the writing task. A reasonable explanation for this phenomenon can be achieved based on her answer to the interview question “which task is easier to you?” “why?”:

*“I think the writing task is easier”  
“Because I am free to choose what to write, I don’t need to write difficult phrases.”*

Obviously, when the participant was exposed in spontaneous environment, she was likely to avoid making new word combinations that she was unsure about their accuracy. This finding therefore offers an evidence of avoidance phenomena in second language acquisition. It is also consistent with previous studies explaining why students with high English proficiency produce more erroneous collocations than lower level students (Koya, 2003; Laufer and Waldmen, 2011).

With regard to the participant’s awareness of negative transfer, it was discovered that the participant do know about the negative effect of L1 transfer because her errors resulting from literal translation has been corrected by her teachers several times. In response to the question why she keeps using this strategy, the participant said that: “...*Because I.*

*am not sure in which case I can or cannot directly translate the words in to English, so ... I just try using that way when I don’t have any other solution, sometimes it is useful”.* As clearly shown in her response, the participant maintains literal translation strategy despite her teachers’ warning of negative transfer. In other words, she relies entirely upon chance in the hope that positive transfer will occur.

Another noteworthy point relating to the learner’s learning strategy was also revealed in the interview. Specifically, “*writing a list of English words with their Vietnamese meanings, sometimes with their part of speech, beside*” is how she learns vocabulary. Evidently, this way of learning has limited the chances to recognize collocations and resulted in a discrete set of vocabulary. That is possibly the reason why the participant cannot do anything other than consciously or unconsciously apply the cognitive models in L1 to combine the vocabulary, even though she has developed general recognition that English and her mother tongue expressions do not always coincide.

## V. Conclusion

Taken together, the investigation of the participant’s English performance discussed in this paper has shown that the student’s mother tongue has a definite effect on her acquisition of English collocations. This influence tends to be more obvious in the sentence translation task in which the participant is restricted from flexibly expressing ideas. These findings support previous research



confirming the important role of learners' native language in the L2 collocation acquisition (Nesselhauf, 2003; Phoocharoensil, 2013; Sadeghi, 2009) and the avoidance phenomena's effect on error frequency (Koya, 2003; Laufer & Waldmen, 2011). Another interesting finding is that raising learner's awareness of negative transfer seems to be insufficient to change the habit of depending on mother tongue in producing target language. Therefore, Phoocharoensil's (2013, p.8) suggestion of equipping students with "a list of common, frequent English collocations that are incongruent with L1 counterparts" would be helpful in this case. The EFL teachers, who speak the same L1 as their students, have certain advantages to effectively perform this task. Although it is impossible to predict all errors, it can at least have some pedagogical benefits by demonstrating how L1 transfer leads to so many collocational problems. In addition, it is essential to provide EFL students with effective strategies to learn vocabulary so that they can get familiar with English collocations and gradually break the habit of relying on their mother tongue.

The analysis in this paper is limited by the lack of information about Vietnamese positive transfer's influence on English collocations acquisition whereas the facilitating effect of L1 on L2 acquisition has been confirmed by researchers and scholars (Ellis, 2008; Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Indeed, the participant has reported that she sometimes successfully produces accurate English collocations by

relying on her native language features. The generalizability of the results is also subject to certain limitations. Since the study was limited to data from only one participant, it was not possible to generalize these findings to other individuals or situations. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct comprehensive quantitative research with large sample size to validate these findings across contexts. Further study could assess the effects of several influential factors such as the participants' actual exposure to English, motivation and learning strategies on their dependence to mother tongue. In addition, it would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study to examine how the influence of native language on L2 collocation acquisition changes over time.

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## APPENDIX

### I. English performance tasks

#### Task 1: Translate the following sentences into English:

1. Họ thường xuyên gây ồn ào vào lúc nửa đêm.
2. Cô ấy chỉ cho tôi xem một bức tranh rất đẹp.
3. Gọi cho tôi khi bạn về đến nhà!
4. Có một cơn mưa lớn tối hôm qua.
5. Cô ấy luôn muốn giảm cân.
6. Chúng tôi có một mối quan hệ gần gũi với gia đình họ trong nhiều năm.
7. Công việc hiện nay của tôi là phục vụ ở một nhà hàng lớn.
8. Tôi thường dắt chó của tôi đi dạo trong công viên.
9. Họ đi taxi về nhà sau buổi hòa nhạc.
10. Anh ta sống ở ký túc xá từ năm ngoái.
11. Sinh viên thường ăn bữa trưa tại căng tin trường.
12. Cô ấy có mái tóc vàng.
13. Anh ta luôn lái xe với tốc độ cao.
14. Tôi cần kiếm đủ tiền để đi du lịch.
15. Tôi có nhiều kỷ niệm với ngôi trường này.

#### Task 2: Write a short paragraph (approximately 200 words) about one of your memorable days.

### II. Questions for interview (English version)

1. Between the translation task and the writing task, which one is easier for you? Why?
2. Which methods do you usually use to learn new vocabulary?
3. Do you know the concept "collocation", if yes, how do you know about it?
4. Do you think direct translation from Vietnamese to English is a good way to express yourself in speaking and writing? Why?
5. Has this strategy ever caused you to make mistake? If yes, have you got any advice or comment from your English teachers about this problem?
6. Will you continue to rely on direct translation strategy in speaking and writing English? Why?