

## Investigating Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Collocations in Undergraduate EFL Classrooms in Libyan Context

**Mohamed Milad Adriosh**

Department of English Language, Faculty of Arts, Alasmarya Islamic University (AIU) –  
Libya

adriosh@asmarya.edu.ly

### Abstract

Collocational competence is an indispensable aspect of language learning which was the topic of much research during the last three decades. The present study attempts to investigate the teachers' perspectives on the status quo of teaching collocations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in undergraduate classrooms in Libyan universities. The main aim of the study is to highlight the most common techniques and practices used by teachers along with challenges they encounter in teaching collocations to the EFL learners. The qualitative approach was adopted to collect and analyze the data. Eight university lectures affiliated to four different Libyan universities were interviewed. The results revealed that teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms in Libya still needs more pedagogic foundations. It was also found that by providing learners with opportunities to practice and use collocations in meaningful contexts, their collocational competence can be effectively improved.

**Keywords:** Collocations; Collocational competence; teachers' perspectives; undergraduate classrooms; Libya.

### Introduction

Many linguists and language practitioners argue for the importance of teaching collocations in the language classroom. They claim that collocational competence accounts for native-like proficiency for which most of the language learners strive. For EFL learners, such task is likely more challenging due to the lack of the realistic environment where learners have the chance to practice the language they learned. The classroom, thus, is the only place where students find enough space to practice language skills. Accordingly, the teacher plays a substantial role in enhancing the learners' proficiency of language skills and competence including collocational competence (Rahimi & Momeni, 2012).

According to Aston (1995), the speed of language processing is positively affected by the use of a big amount of word combinations, such as collocations, leading to create native-like fluency. This entails much more efforts and time to be devoted by the teachers to focus on collocations when teaching the different language skills. It is argued that having language knowledge is supposed to include managing collocational competence (Nation, 2001).

In view of the stressed importance of the term “collocation”, as one of the most concerns in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), many researchers conducted studies to investigate different aspects of the term: proper acquisition of collocations, collocation errors of L2 speakers, raising the awareness of students towards collocation

(Basal, 2019; Farrokh, 2012; Laufer and Waldman, 2011; Ordem and Paker, 2016; Ucar and Yukselir, 2015). Other studies on collocations and collocational competence revealed that learning collocations assessed language learners to develop their lexicon and accuracy (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003).

In the Libyan context, there are many published studies that tackled the issue of collocational competence from different aspects (Ahmed,2012; Dukali, 2016). Yet, there was no much focus on investigating the teachers' attitudes towards the actual scene in the classroom in respect of teaching collocations and challenges they encounter in this concern. The present study, accordingly, attempts to bridge this gap in research by investigating the teachers' perceptions on the status quo of teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms in Libyan universities.

Certainly, uncovering the teachers' perceptions on the practice and challenges of teaching collocations in the classroom helps in formulating any potential pedagogic reforms to improve the process of language teaching. Consequently, the findings of the study can be exploited for curriculum improvement and teacher development.

To this end, the present study was devoted to answer the following research questions:

- 1 How do Libyan EFL teachers view collocations and differentiate them from other kinds of word combinations?
- 2 What approaches and techniques do Libyan EFL teachers adopt to teach collocations in EFL undergraduate classrooms in Libyan context?
- 3 What are the potential challenges that teachers encounter when teaching collocations in EFL undergraduate classroom in Libyan context?

## **Review of The Literature**

There is a significant body of research suggesting that collocational competence plays a critical role in second language acquisition. According to the literature, learners who possess strong collocational competence are better able to understand and produce natural-sounding language. They are also less likely to make errors in their language use and more likely to be perceived as fluent by native speakers (Nation, 2001).

### **Definitions and Classifications of Collocations**

Firth (1957) was the first who introduced the term "Collocation" within his "Theory of Meaning". He states that "you know a word by the company it keeps"(p.11). Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) define collocations as the "the combination of words with word" (p. 7). The combinations of words to form new phrases or grammatical patterns, to form clauses and sentences, are the requirements of using the human language. Simply put, collocations are the words that are used together. In other words, collocation refers to a particular language phenomenon in which two or more words come together.

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In literature, there are many taxonomies that are used to evaluate and classify collocations. Benson et al. (1986), for instance, distinguished between two different groups of collocations: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. While Grammatical Collocations are comprised mainly of a dominant word (noun, adjective/participle, verb) and a preposition or a grammatical construction, Lexical collocations do not contain a dominant word. In contrast, they have structures such as: (verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun + noun, adverb + adjective, adverb + verb).

Another classification by Cruse (1986) categorized two different groups of collocations: 'syntagmatically simple' and 'semantically simple'. The term 'syntagmatically simple' describes the expression in which a word in its normal sense is connected to another restricted word (e.g. save time). In contrast, the term 'semantically simple' refers to "a single choice of meaning with an unpredictable or non-compositional sequence of words (e.g. let the cat out of a bag, spill the beans).

### **Collocational Competence Among Arabic Learners**

In Arabic context, where Arabic language is the mother tongue of the learners, much research was interested in examining the collocational knowledge of Arabic-speaking learners of English. The main focus was to assess receptive and productive aspects of the learners' collocational knowledge. El-Dakhs (2015), for instance, examined the EFL undergraduate students' collocational knowledge in Saudi Arabia. The results revealed that the overall learners' collocational knowledge was insufficient. However, the results showed higher level of participants' receptive knowledge than their productive knowledge. The results also indicated the mother tongue influence on the level of the learners' collocational competence.

Along with investigating the advanced learners' receptive and productive collocational competence, Shehata (2008) and Alsakran (2011) focused also on the influence of the language environment. The two studies attempted to compare learning English as a second language (ESL) versus learning English as a foreign language (EFL) on the acquisition of different types of collocations. The results showed limited collocational knowledge of EFL Arab learners compared to ESL learners. It was also found that learning English in ESL environment better promotes the collocational competence than learning English in EFL environment. Additionally, the students' level of receptive collocational competence is more compared to their level in productive collocational competence. The findings revealed that learners show various levels of collocational competence for different kinds of collocations. For example, students master "verb + noun" collocations easier than "adjective + noun and / or "verb + preposition" collocations.

Remarkably, the low level of Arabic-speaking EFL learners' collocational competence was also evidenced among graduate EFL students. Abu Naba'h (2012) and Shammas (2013) conducted two different studies to investigate the collocational competence of graduate EFL students majoring in English language. The participants, who came from Jordan, Algeria,

Syria and Lebanon, were characterized as advanced English language learners. The results, however, revealed that the participants have insufficient level of collocational competence. The findings concluded that the learners' collocational competence is quite low compared to their general lexical competence. It was also found that the learner's ability to understand the second language, L2, collocations does not imply efficient production of collocations in language output.

### **Teachers' perceptions of collocations**

In spite of the fact that there are many studies that focused on the issue of collocational competence in the field of English language learning, perception-based studies on teaching collocations in the EFL classrooms are still limited. However, such aspect of research is central for preparing teachers to adopt suitable professional knowledge and attitudes to support the students' learning efforts (Gao & Ma, 2011). According to Mutlu and Kaslioglu, 2016, investigating teachers' perspectives is worthy of attention since it can manipulate their attitudes towards teaching style they adopt. Understanding the teachers' attitudes towards the suitable way to implement and improve the learners' collocational competence results in the development of the students' language knowledge and mastery in general.

Globally, the studies on teachers' perceptions on teaching collocations in EFL classrooms revealed positive teachers' attitudes (e.g.: Phuong, (2012) in Vietnam; Mutlu and Kaslioglu (2016) in Turkey). EFL practitioners believe that teaching collocations play a substantial role in developing learners' language proficiency. The results revealed that teachers focus mainly on collocations that are commonly used and try to reduce learners' collocational errors that rooted in the negative L1 transfer and the wrong habit of learning words in isolation. It was also found that teachers place great emphasis on collocational knowledge in language teaching and they believe that collocations can be taught either explicitly or implicitly through specific activities (e.g. Bui, 2021; Ünver, 2018).

### **Methodology**

The qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the Libyan teachers' perspectives on teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms in Libyan context. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), qualitative research localizes the observer in the world to make it more visible. Qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural environments to interpret them in terms of the meanings people bring to them. To achieve the objectives of the study, eight EFL instructors from 4 different Libyan universities were interviewed. The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions of the study.

#### **Participants**

The participants of the study are eight EFL teachers affiliated to four different Libyan universities: Alasmarya Islamic University, Azzaytuna University, University of Tripoli, and Gulf of Sidra University. "Convenience Sampling" approach (Zoltán, 2007) was adopted to select the participants. In other words, the participants were chosen from the neighbouring universities due to their accessibility required to conduct the interviews. The interviewees

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were male and female EFL university lecturers with various experience backgrounds in teaching English as a foreign language in Libyan universities.

### **Data Collection**

According to Talmy and Richards (2010), interviews are suitable data collection instruments to gain comprehensive view of different phenomena within the fields of qualitative investigation traditions, including Applied Linguistics. Due to its “participant investigation” nature, interviews are dominantly used in applied linguistics studies. The present study adopted interviews to extract the teachers' attitudes towards the situation of teaching collocations and the challenges that they encounter in this concern. The semi-structured interviews were adopted where both the interviewer and the interviewee have the space to elaborate different aspects on the investigated topic while they are guided by particular questions (Gillham, 2005).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed to elicit information on the most common features and collective phenomena. Guided by the research questions, the data were analysed and coded. Thematic analysis approach was followed to analyse the data to identify the trends, features and the challenges of teaching collocations in EFL classrooms in Libyan universities.

### **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of the interview data revealed four different categorized themes. The first theme focused on the teachers' awareness of the notion of collocations and their taxonomy. The second theme, however, dealt with the teachers' attitudes towards the importance of teaching collocations in the classroom. The third topic attempted to discuss the interrelationship between collocational competence and language competence in general. The fourth category, lastly, touched the potential challenges that might be encountered by teachers when teaching collocations.

### **Teachers' Recognition of Collocations**

The analysis of the interview data demonstrate a sufficient deal of teachers' understanding of the nature of collocations. Most of the interviewed teachers indicated a good recognition of the common types of collocations and their interrelation to other word combinations.

The teachers' definition and classification of the collocations were found allied with the reference to the framework of Benson et al (1986), which clearly distinguishes collocations with other combinations of words. In general, most of the participant teachers offered accurate understanding of collocations and how they differ from other word combinations such as idioms and phrasal verbs. The following extracts from the participants answers to the interview questions about their recognition to collocations in English language clearly show their common knowledge of collocations.

T2: .....Idioms are special to a particular language and they cannot be easily understood by speakers of other languages. While collocations are those combination of words those sound right for native speakers like "do your homework", "a golden chance".

T4: - A collocation consists of two or more words that often cement together.

T7: -The fundamental difference between a collocation and an idiom lies in the interpretation of their meanings. The meaning of collocation is expressed in the same context while the meaning of idiom is beyond our common sense.

T6: - The major difference between a collocation and a compound word is that a collocation generates associative or habitual relationship between words whereas a compound word develops fixed relationship.

The content of participants' responses reflects their profound recognition to the nature of the collocations in English language and their taxonomy. This imply the teachers' awareness of their importance as a form of word combination which positively influence introducing collocations as one of the most substantial aspect of learning English as a foreign language.

### **Teachers' perspectives on teaching collocations**

Generally, the participants' responses to the questions about the importance of teaching collocations indicate the high appreciation that teachers hold to the importance of teaching collocation to EFL undergraduate students. The majority of the participant teachers believe that teaching collocation would help students to approach the native-speakers` language fluency and accuracy. The below extracts clearly show how teachers perceive the significance of teaching collocations to undergraduate EFL students.

T3: *I think teaching collections can increase learners competence and improve their fluency. I think if learners property use collocations, they can highly master both of the productive and receptive language skills.*

T7: - *Collocations help us to express language in an interesting manner. However, sometimes , they are difficult to teach in the classroom.*

T2: - *Yes! Teaching collocations is crucial, but no specific lesson is designed for this purpose.*

Although most of the interviewed teachers agree on the profound importance of teaching collocations, they do not adopt similar teaching methods and techniques . In other words, collocations are not taught as a specific subject and there are no common methodologies and techniques followed by the teachers. Some teachers teach collocations explicitly while others attempt to highlight them implicitly. The below extracts reflect the diverse ways teachers adopt in teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms.

T8: *Mostly through the context, for example, if I have a speaking class I push my students to use different collocations related to the given topic.*

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T2: *I use collocations in my speech while explaining the lessons, but I am not teaching them.*

T5: *I make lists of nouns, verbs, and prepositions, then I request my students to collocate these words to form word combinations, if possible, or combing the words that can make logical meaning.*

The above responses show that it is a matter of personal decision by the teacher when it comes to teaching collocations. Every teacher elects what he/she thinks it is workable for the students to get and master the new collocations. These responses are compatible with Phuong (2012) and Mutlu and Kaslioglu (2016) findings which concluded that collocations can be taught either explicitly or implicitly.

### **Collocational Competence & Language Competence**

The interviewees' responses to the questions related to the influence of teaching collocations on the students' language competence reveal that teaching collocations positively affect the students' language competence. The majority of the interviewed teachers agree that teaching collocations have a significant impact on language competences, including vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and native-like language production. It enables learners to use language more effectively and proficiently in various contexts.

For example, T3 states that *"Collocations play an important role in sharpening the learners' language skills. They help learners avoid mistakes in joining "unrelated combination of words"*.

T7 also says: *Teaching students how to use collocations can improve the students' natural use of English. It can also help them become aware of what are the possible combinations that they can produce.*

T1 also argues: *" It is very integral part of vocabulary learning to introduce word collocations".*

Obviously, collocational competence constitutes an integral part of language competence. All responses prove the substantial role of teaching collocations on enhancing the learners' language proficiency including both productive and receptive language skills. Either explicit or implicit teaching of collocations help the learners to master the language and achieve native-like language production. When learners use collocations accurately, their language sounds more natural and idiomatic, leading to improved communication and interaction with their interlocutors.

The outcomes of the present study support the findings of previous studies conducted in other different geographic and educational contexts (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Nesselhauf,

2003). They all proved the positive impact of learning collocations on the learners' language proficiency and competence.

### **Practical Challenges**

Most of the respondents acknowledged that the practical aspect of teaching collocations in the EFL undergraduate classrooms in Libyan context is pedagogically challenging. The most common declared issues were the lack of related syllabi, and the absence of specific teaching methods and techniques. Textbooks do not include enough emphasis on the teaching techniques and activities that focus mainly on collocations. Additionally, teachers admit their personal eclectic approaches and techniques on teaching collocations due to the lack of verified teaching methods and techniques. The following extracts show the common challenges that teachers encounter when teaching collocations in EFL undergraduate classrooms in Libya.

*T5: As to my knowledge and experience, textbooks generally disregard the importance and usage of collocations.*

*T1: I normally don't focus upon teaching collocations in a particular manner in the classroom as it is not separately mentioned in the syllabi of teaching assignments.*

*T4: I think there are some challenges because it is not easy to select what kind of collocations that should be taught for each stage.*

The above responses expose the deficiency the planned curricula and syllabi as pedagogic tools for teachers to teach collocations effectively. Teachers need to use a variety of instructional techniques, such as authentic materials, interactive activities, and providing ample opportunities for learners to practice and apply collocations in meaningful contexts. Additionally, ongoing professional development and collaboration with other language professionals can help teachers enhance their expertise in teaching collocations.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In conclusion, the findings of the present study show that teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms in Libya still needs more pedagogic reforms. Although teachers perceive the process of teaching collocations positively, they do not follow straight forward methods to introduce collocations in ELF classrooms. Instead, they rely on their personal experience and ideas to implement either explicit or implicit teaching techniques.

Practically, teaching collocations require certain techniques and activities taking in consideration the students' level of language competence. Collocational competence cannot be isolated from the general language competence. Collocational competence and language competence are two interconnected aspects of language proficiency. Collocational

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competence involves understanding which words naturally go together and using them appropriately. Thus, improving collocational competence requires exposure to authentic language use, extensive reading, and listening practice. Learners need to develop a sense of which words commonly occur together and understand the nuances and connotations associated with different collocations. Additionally, learning collocations can also involve understanding the restrictions and preferences of certain words in specific contexts.

When teaching collocations, teachers may encounter several challenges. Students may not be able to recognize the collocations. Identifying and understanding collocations requires a certain level of linguistic knowledge and exposure to authentic language use. Learners with limited vocabulary may struggle to understand and use collocations effectively. Collocations often involve specific words or phrases, and if students lack the necessary vocabulary, they may have difficulty grasping the nuances of collocational relationships.

Exposure to Authentic Language, therefore, is necessary and teachers may need to provide students with opportunities for extensive reading, listening, and interaction in order to encounter and internalize collocations in natural contexts. To overcome these challenges, teachers can employ various instructional strategies such as using collocation dictionaries, providing ample examples, engaging students in communicative activities, and offering explicit instruction and practice focused on collocations. Encouraging extensive reading and listening can also help students encounter collocations in authentic texts and develop a better understanding of their usage.

To sum up, teaching collocations in undergraduate EFL classrooms is crucial for enhancing language proficiency, expanding vocabulary knowledge, improving language fluency, and developing language awareness. It also has implications for teachers, motivating them to improve their own language skills and teaching approaches. Incorporating collocations into the curriculum can greatly benefit both learners and teachers, ultimately leading to more effective language learning experiences.

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## دراسة وجهات نظر المعلمين حول تدريس المتلازمات اللغوية في فصول تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الجامعية في ليبيا

محمد ميلاد ادريوش

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، الجامعة الأسمرية الإسلامية- ليبيا

[adriosh2014@gmail.com](mailto:adriosh2014@gmail.com)

### الملخص

تعد الكفاءة في تركيب المتلازمات اللغوية جانبًا لا غنى عنه في تعلم اللغة والذي كان موضوع الكثير من الأبحاث خلال العقود الثلاثة الماضية. تحاول الدراسة البحث في وجهات نظر المعلمين حول الوضع الراهن لتدريس المتلازمات اللغوية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) بالمرحلة الجامعية في ليبيا. الهدف الرئيسي من الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على التقنيات والممارسات الأكثر شيوعًا التي يستخدمها المعلمون في هذا السياق، إلى جانب التحديات التي يواجهونها في تدريس المتلازمات اللغوية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وقد تم اعتماد المنهج النوعي لجمع وتحليل البيانات، حيث تم إجراء مقابلات مع ثمانية أساتذة جامعيين يعملون في أربع جامعات ليبية مختلفة. أظهرت النتائج أن تدريس المتلازمات اللغوية في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للطلاب الجامعيين في ليبيا لا يزال بحاجة إلى المزيد من الأسس و القواعد المنهجية. كما خلصت الدراسة إلى أنه من خلال توفير الفرص للمتعلمين لممارسة واستخدام المتلازمات اللغوية في سياقات ذات معنى، يمكن تحسين كفاءتهم في تركيب المتلازمات اللغوية بشكل فعال.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المتلازمات اللغوية، الكفاءة في تركيب المتلازمات اللغوية، وجهات نظر المعلمين، المرحلة الجامعية، ليبيا.