

## **Collocational Competence in English Language Teaching Among SS III Students of Nigerian Turkish International College, Abuja, Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** This paper dealt with the fact that despite its far reaching importance for language proficiency, collocation competence is one of the most neglected studies in L2 pedagogy. The last few decades have witnessed a growing interest in vocabulary items consisting of more than a single word in the field of language pedagogy. The study adopted descriptive survey, and has as its population the senior secondary students (SSS) three of Nigerian Turkish International College (NTIC), Abuja. 60 SS III students (30 males and 30 females) were randomly selected for the study who responded to a 15-item researcher-designed collocation questionnaire (RDCQ). Reliability index of the instrument, having dealt with its validity process, was determined via test re-test statistical device which produced 0.61 reliability index at 0.05 alpha level of significance. The findings of the analysis indicate that majority of the respondents ranging from 91.67% to 100% correctly responded to the RDCQ. For these, it was concluded that the respondents are to a greater extent good in vocabulary which has assisted them in collocation study, and also a good pointer for better performance in their senior school certificate examination (SSCE). Having concluded thus, it was recommended among others that students should be asked to read different types of textbooks, newspapers as well as periodicals.

**Keywords:** Collocation Competence, Unique Collocation, Strong Collocation, Weak Collocation, Medium Collocation and English Language Teaching

### **1. Introduction**

Over the years, the attention in second language (L2) acquisition and language teaching studies was basically on grammar, and very lesser attention on pronunciation and vocabulary study. This is why Decarrico (2001) surmises that it is due to sweeping misconception that vocabulary acquisition can take care of itself. But of recent, greater attention is being placed on vocabulary to make students to see words in context, and to also see how such words are used. Contextually, words can appear as single items which are combined in a sentence such as single item unit as she was asleep, this sentence can also occur in two-or-more item groups (she was half asleep all through dinner, but fast asleep the moment coffee was served), as also surmises by Jeremy (2007). Word combinations also known as chunks of language implies that there is a number of words somehow related and function as single units of language.

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However, Moon (2021) posits that there is no set of items or categories that can be labelled as set of chunks, yet he asserts that there are some multi-word items that have some degree of “institutionalisation, fixedness, and non-compositionality” which distinguish them from “other words of strings”. It is believed that for teaching purposes, idioms, collocations and phrasal verbs are among the most essential chunks of language as is also affirmed by Thornbury (2002). While lending voice to the above, Jeremy (2007) observes that word combination (known as collocations) have become the subject of intense interest in the recent past, in part spurred on by discoveries from language corpora. Collocations are words which co-occur with each other and which language users, through custom and practice, have come to see as normal and acceptable. It is immediately apparent that while some words can live together, some cannot as exemplified, that we can talk of clenched fist, and even clenched teeth, but we cannot talk of clenched eyebrows. These imply that the word clenched can go with, but not all nouns.

In another instance, word knowledge is of special importance to vocabulary acquisition and learning, and as such, it involves knowledge of word form, word meaning and word use. The aspect of word form refers to the spoken and written forms of words as well as their morphological composition. Word meaning entails knowledge of a number of constituents, including reference, sense, collocative meaning and sense relations, while the last aspect which is the knowledge of word use, refers to knowing the grammatical, lexical and stylistic constraints on the use of words in the linguistic context. This assertion is correct to the view of Nation (2017) who agrees that words meaning is about knowledge of a number of constituents, including reference, sense, collocative meaning and sense relations.

## **2. Background Literature on Collocation Competence**

For the term ‘collocation’ and its technical terms as used by Firth (1957), a number of definitions have emerged such as Lewis (1997) who posits that collocations are combination of words which occur naturally greater than random frequency. Collocation describes word combinations that occur consistently together, for example, blonde hair is a collocation, whereas, black hair is not normally categorised as a collocation. In the light of this, Nation (2017) Salawu (2020) and Meara (2020) are of the view that any word combinations that do not exhibit frequent co-existence are not classified as collocations. In another development, El-Dakhs (2015) asserts that an important characteristic of collocations is their arbitrariness. The choice of the constituent words does not only follow any logic but it is only based on linguistic convention. Lewis (2000) also argues that there does not seem to be any logic why good chance, high probability, and strong likelihood are not considered as collocations. It is this arbitrariness that explains why we often say “to break rules”, not break regulations; to hold a funeral, not to hold a burial; to make an attempt, not to have an attempt, among several examples. In another development, Sinclair (2020) also sees this arbitrariness as one that makes acceptable collocations vary across languages, as exemplified by Wray (2019) that in English you run a business, while in Germany, you lead a business; in English, you lie in the sun but in Russia, you lie on the sun, among many examples.

In a similar vein, Wray (2000) lays emphasis on chunks of language as various ways as formulaic language, which according to her, is used to encompass the wide range of phenomena. She in fact identifies about fifty terms used in literature to describe “aspects of formulaicity. As well, Cowie (2016) distinguishes between set of phrases and set of sentences, which are obviously both chunks of languages, and to describe the usefulness of these, Nation (2017) uses the term collocation to describe them both.

Nation (2017) describes such “language units” as multi-word units. Nation further identifies other units use to describe more or less the same concept, including pre-formulated language, formulas and lexical phrases.

However, this disagreement among scholars regarding terminologies extends further to what belongs under this category of language. Really, there is no agreement on what exactly formulaic language is, although most linguists accept its presence in language. Studies by scholars such as Wray (2008) Cowie (2016) have seen collocations and idioms” as two ends of the same continuum, seeing collocations on one end, pure idioms on the other end and figurative idioms in between. Wray (2008) describes the two ends as “the contentious and the untentious” with pure idioms existing on the latter end, and collocation on the former, thus, the discrepancy among scholars arises in the area of what constitutes collocations, whereas, many scholars consider idioms to be part of collocations. The idioms, according to Schmitt (2020), are “multi-word lexemes that have frozen collocations”.

A clearer view of collocations are carried out by Benson et al (1986) who divide collocations into two major groups of lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. They argue further that lexical collocations consist of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs while grammatical collocations consists of a noun, verb, or adjective combined with a preposition or another grammatical structure such as infinities or clauses.

### 3. Lexical Collocations and Their Various Uses

- a. Verb + Noun (a verb collocating with a noun) such as:

Verb	Noun
1. express	anger
2. exhibit	fear
3. compose	music
4. revoke	a license
5. give	information, among several other examples

- b. Adjective + Noun (an adjective collocating with a noun) such as:

Adjective	Noun
1. wicked	person
2. collective	efforts
3. endless	joy
4. emotional	distress
5. rough	estimate, among several other examples.

- c. Noun + verb (noun collocating with verb) such as:

Noun	Verb
1. bombs	explode
2. fire	burns
3. birds	sing
4. snakes	hiss,
5. Jesus	saves, among several other examples

#### 4. Grammatical Collocations and Their Various Uses

- a. Preposition + Noun (preposition collocating with noun) such as:

Preposition	Noun
1. in	advance
2. at	the party
3. behind	the scene
4. under	pressure
5. of	all people, among several other examples

- b. Adjective + preposition (adjective collocating with preposition) such as:

Adjective	Preposition
1. afraid	of
2. interested	in
3. preferred	to
4. the love	of
5. cheat	on, among several other examples

- c. Noun + infinitive (noun collocating with infinitive) such as:

1. she was such a fool to do such a thing
2. to have passed the examination worth being commended
3. to see him by this time is purposeful
4. to be alive today after the incident is the glory of God
5. I dedicate my life to the Supreme Being, among several other examples

In addition to the above, Lewis (2000) lists other types of collocations such as:

- a. Adverb + adjective (adverb collocating with adjective) such as:

Adverb	Adjective
1. extremely	inconvenient
2. strictly	exclusive
3. convincingly	clear
4. extremely	prohibited
5. quite	unacceptable, among several other examples

- b. Verb + Adjective + noun (verb collocating with adjective and noun) such as:

Verb	Adjective	noun
1. revise	the original	plan
2. say	the actual	fact
3. play	the game	according to the rules
4. place	the cards	on the table
5. project	a big	idea, among several other examples

Compound noun (compound noun collocates which could be two-words compounding or solid word compounding) such as:

1. fire escape
2. football
3. white house
4. background
5. classroom, among several other examples

Binominal (binominal collocates) such as:

1. forwards
2. backwards
3. however
4. furthermore
5. nevertheless, among several other examples

In another development, Carter (2018), following the continuum-mode of classification, divides collocations into four categories based on the strength of their restriction. Carter contends further that unrestricted collocations such as take a look, take a test, take time, etc. involve words that collocate freely with a number of lexical items whereas semi-restricted collocations such as harbour doubt, harbour grudges, harbour suspicion, etc consist of elements that are not easy to replace. The other two categories include familiar collocations such as unrequired love, lukewarm attitude, etc. whose elements collocate on a regular basis, and restricted collocations such as dead drunk, pretty sure, etc that are fixed and inflexible.

Similarly, Lewis (2019) classifies collocations into four categories as strong, weak, frequent and infrequent. The distinction between strong and weak collocations according to Lewis is based on their fixedness and restriction, whereas frequent and infrequent collocations are determined based on frequency of occurrence. Strong collocations such as drink beer and drug addict, among others are highly connected and function like single words. Weak collocations, however, consist of words that often occur with many other collocates such as nice day, good chance, the light time, etc. Combining strong and frequency results in four different types of collocation, namely:

1. strong and frequent collocations;
2. strong and infrequent collocations;
3. weak and frequent collocations; and
4. weak and infrequent collocations.

In relation to the collocation continuum, Lewis (2000) argues that most collocations are found in the middle of the continuum. Lewis affirms that the largest number collocations can be described as medium strong. Such as magnificent estate, significant difference, importantly relevant, etc., followed by common or regular collocations such as fast train, have breakfast, etc, whereas strong collocations are words like budding author, avid leaders, etc. are quite rare. Furthermore, Hill (2019) also introduces a similar classification that categorises collocations into unique, strong, weak and medium-strong. Unique collocations (UC) are fixed and highly predictable. For example, the word shrug only combines or collocates with shoulders, not any other part of the body. Strong collocations (SC) include words that collocate with few other words. Example of this rancid that collocates with only a few words is oil or butter. Weak collocations (WC) contain words that combine or collocate freely with many other words and have a predictable meaning. Relevant examples of WC include dark green, light green, pale green, bright green, emerald green, lime green, juice green, olive green, dull green, etc; feel happy, feel great, feel hated, feel inferior, feel hungry, feel better, feel disturbed, feel pessimistic, feel guilty, etc; and finally medium-strong collocations (MSC) are similar to weak collocations (WC) but constitute much more difficulty for language learners. Learners may know the singular or individual words in the collocations, but the learners may not be familiar with the collocations as a whole. For instance, the word key is relatively easy for language learners to understand, but they would not normally know the combination of a key person, key note, keyword; also the word foot is equally relatively easy for language learners to understand, but they may not normally know the combination of foot the bill, such as foot the bill, etc.

In another instance, a number of criteria are adopted in order to decide whether a string of words is regarded as a collocation or not. It is affirmed that words frequently co-occur together thus having some degree of semantic opaqueness or as an element of figurativeness. This element of figurativeness draws line between collocations and idioms. All components of idioms have some degree of figurativeness and restrictions, while in a collocation, there is only one item that have a figurative sense. This stand was also agreed to by Cowie (2016) Nation (2017), Schmitt (2020) and Nasselhauf (2020). In furtherance to the above, Schmitt (2020) asserts that besides words co-occurring together, there must also be an element of exclusiveness. He exemplifies with words such as blonde, which is restricted to nouns like lady, woman, hair as opposed to nice, which can only co-occur with nouns associated with pleasantness, and as a result of the above, the former example is said to collocate strongly, while the latter forms weak collocate. To

sum up, Decarrico (2001) is of the claim that collocates are “strings of words that seem to have a certain mutual expectancy, or a greater-than-chance likelihood that they will co-occur in any text”. This definition is assumed as a summing up for the discussions, and as such we see this assertion of Decarrico (2001) as being broad enough to occupy all types of chunks of language, and it, nevertheless, limits such strings to mutual expectancy”

## **5. Relevance of Collocations for Second Language Learning**

Teaching collocations in the language classroom has been a source of arguments in recent past, in that collocational knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact described as “the normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourse”. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with, lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping learners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English. Lewis (2000); Decarrico (2001); Pawley and Syder (2018); Nattinger (2019); Read (2019); Schmitt (2020); and Thornbury (2022) also argue that learners must be helped to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English, and this can only be done if learners are well grounded in the knowledge of collocational expressions among other things. In the same vein, Wray (2000) emphasises that gaining full command of a new language requires the learner to become sensitive to the native speakers’ preferences, and it is these preferences that language teachers look out for when focusing on collocations, as they help learners to sound natural when using the language. The use of collocations according to Nattinger (2019), helps reduce processing time, and hence leads to speed when communicating. This assertion, in particular, has been claimed by Nation (2017) to be the main advantage of chunking. Nattinger goes further that collocations are “pre-packaged building blocks”. This analogy as advanced by Nattinger has shown two broad essential characteristics of collocations:

- a. The ones that are packed up, stored in the mind as single units and ready for the language users to draw on whenever needed.
- b. The ones that are used as building blocks which give sense that they provide the language users with a solid base to stand on when using the language, hence they enhance learners confidence and fluency.

With the use of collocations, students will not have to go about reconstructing the language each time they want to utter anything, because being stored in the mind as single items allows for “more efficient retrieval”. In addition, collocations, being large units of “discourse”, enable the interlocutors to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse. Wray (2015) contends that learners need collocations and idiomatic expressions for effective and rich communication, as lack of them can impede communication. These building blocks can bridge the gap between grammar and vocabulary, just as Scrivener (2020) argues that collocations and chunks “occupy an immediate zone between vocabulary and grammar”.

In lending credence to the above assertion, McCarthy (2018) views collocations as “a marriage contract between words” symbolising the strong relationship words hold between each other and stressing the fact that it definitely is “an important organising principle in the vocabulary of any language. McCarthy contends that it is not enough for learners to know the meaning, parts of speech, usage and spellings of words alone, but to know how to use the parts of speech and words properly, accordingly and



appropriately; learners should be familiar with the company such words do keep. This implies that to gain good command of the language learners must be versed with collocation knowledge, which is in fact one important aspect of vocabulary knowledge.

## **6. Challenges of Collocation Pedagogy**

Collocations, according to Schmitt (2020), is an advanced vocabulary knowledge that is difficult to know how to teach to learners. In the light of this, two basic challenges teachers of language have to address are the vast number of collocations existing in the language, and the fact that there is no best way to teach collocations. Hence, one basic question to be asked having realised that the language is full of collocations, is which ones should language teachers supposed to focus and teach? By way of answering this obvious question, scholars such as Nation (2017) and Nasselhauf (2020) and Moon (2021) are of the opinion that language teachers should base their instruction in the language class on selection. Selection of instruction should include “frequency”, “congruence” and “restriction”, Schmitt (2020) emphasises the importance of congruence by suggesting the necessity of addressing only the collocations with no direct translation equivalents.

Studies by Wray (2000) and Nasselhauf (2020) contend that one factor to be considered in this aspect is that native speakers tend to internalise chunks of language without even being aware of it due to the fact that they (native speakers) have frequent exposure to the words that do collocate with other words. Whereas, on the contrary, Lewis (2019) and Thornbury (2022) argue that L2 learners, even at advanced levels have a lot of difficulty using and monitoring collocations easily, which is largely due to insufficient exposure to the target language. This implies that L2 learners should be aided with “conscious-raising” as well as “frequent exposure” to the rubrics of the target language. In the light of this, when teaching learners about receptive skills i.e. listening and reading, the instructors, as a matter of must, should focus on “the predictability of the meaning of collocations”. This entails the focus on two main aspects of “semantic opaqueness and uniqueness of meaning”. These two aspects are what constitute second language learning burden and should be taken into consideration in receptive courses. However, when duelling on productive skills i.e. speaking and writing, the attention should depend on “the predictability of form”. This according to Nation (2017), means that focus on speaking and writing classes should, to some extent shift to the “co-occurrence” of its members.

Similarly, vocabulary teaching can as well be of help in collocation studies, and as a result, language instructors can provide basic training on the use of concordances as an aid to teach collocations in the vocabulary courses. It is in the light of this that Harrison (2019) suggest that students could be asked to jot down vocabularies in their notebooks and also memorise them which will eventually lead to solid foundation for collocations are stored and retrieved when necessary.

## **7. Methodology**

This study is a descriptive survey type. The population for this study is senior secondary school three (SSS III) students. This population is purposeful owing to the act that they are preparing to write their SS III final year examination which hitherto often contains some elements such as collocations, idiomatic expressions as well as concord and agreement, among other things. 30 male and 30 female students were



randomly selected for the study making a total of 60 SS III students (Arts, Commercial and Science) since they all compulsorily registered for English language in their final examination. A 15–researcher-designed collocation questionnaire (RDCQ) is used as the instrument for the study. The experts in the English Studies department of the Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja were consulted for content validity of the instrument, upon whose advice and corrections the final draft of the questionnaire was done. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, the instrument was subjected to test re-test statistic using Pearson r statistical analysis which yielded a reliability index of 0.51 at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

## 8. Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using frequency counts and percentage distribution as shown below:

Table 1: Frequency Counts and Percentage Distribution of Students' Responses to RDCQ

S/N	Collocations	Frequency	%
	a. He skilfully stood up	2	3.33
	b. He skilfully scored the goal	58	96.67
	He was partially examined	59	98.33
	He partially slept off	1	1.67
	a. He drank extensively	57	95
	b. He spoke extensively	3	5
	a. They read their books emotionally	13	21.67
	b. They spoke emotionally	47	78.33
	a. The story was psychologically narrated	1	1.67
	b. The patient was psychologically examined	59	98.33
	a. We all attended the naming ceremony	60	100
	b. We all attended the naming of the street	0	0
	a. Sir, see my biological friend	0	0
	b. Sir, see my biological brother	60	100
	a. I will attend the show	60	100
	b. I will attend the music	0	0
	a. She exhibits sign of guilt	60	100
	b. She exhibits sign to me	0	0
	a. The doctor asked for his medical history	58	96.67
	b. The doctor asked for his medical story	2	3.33
	a. You must pay your school fees	60	100
	b. You must pay your school money	0	0
	a. We are going through cultural born-again	3	5
	b. We are going through cultural re-birth	57	95
	a. He came by domestic air-journey	5	8.33
	b. He came by domestic flight	55	91.67
	a. Let me express my sense	58	96
	b. Let me express my mind	2	3.33
	a. I need some financial assistance	59	98.33
	b. I need some financial cash	1	1.67

## 9. Discussion

Results of analysis from Table 1 indicate that 60 respondents representing 100% correctly responded to RDCQ items number 6a, 7b, 8a, 9a and 11a respectively. This agrees with the findings of Pawley and Syder (2018), Nattinger (2019), Decarrico (2001), Read (2019), Thornbury (2022) and Schmitt (2020), who argue that collocation knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact described as “normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourses. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping learners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English. Next in rank to the above are 59 respondents representing 98.33% who correctly responded to RDCQ item numbers 2a, 5b, and 15a respectively. This is in line with the positions of Pawley and Syder (2018), Nattinger (2019), Decarrico (2001), Read (2019), Thornbury (2022) and Schmitt (2020), who argue that collocation knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact described as “normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourses. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping learners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English. Other high ranking responses by the respondents are 58, 57 and 55 respondents representing 96.77%, 95% and 91.67 respectively correctly responded to RDCQ item numbers 1b, 10a, 12b, 14b and 13b respectively. This also connotes the assertions of Pawley and Syder (2018), Nattinger (2019), Decarrico (2001), Read (2019), Thornbury (2022) and Schmitt (2020), who argue that collocation knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact described as “normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourses. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping learners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English. Close to the above in high rank are 47 respondents who represent 78.33% also tend to affirm the positions of such scholars as Pawley and Syder (2018) and others who argue that collocation knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact described as “normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourses. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping learners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English. However, in spite of the high respondents’ correct responses, we had 13, 5, 3, 2 and 1 respondents representing 21.67%, 8.33%, 5% 3.33% and 1.67% respectively who fell short of the correct RDCQ. This tend to align with the positions of Nasselhauf (2020) and Wary (2000) who contend that one factor to consider in this respect is that native speakers tend to internalise chunks of language without even been aware of it due to the fact that they (native speakers) have frequent exposure to the words that do collocate with other words. Whereas, on the contrary, Lewis (2019) and Thornbury (2022) argue that L2 learners, even at advanced levels have a lot of difficulty using and mastering collocates easily, which is largely due to insufficient exposure to the target language.

## 10. Conclusion

The study has shown that greater number of the respondents, despite the fact that none of them is a native speaker of English responded correctly to the RDCQ. It is therefore concluded that the respondents are to

a greater extent, good in vocabulary which has assisted them in collocation proficiency, good pointer to a good they to come especially during their Senior School Certificate examination.

## 11. Recommendations

Having concluded as indicated above, it is therefore recommended that:

1. Students should be encouraged to read different textbooks, newspapers as well as periodicals paying special attention to word formations especially those ones that reflect collocations and form the habit of using those words as such.
2. Students should always jot down collocations in their notebooks, memorise them and use them as such, as well as in their day to day conversations in English language.
3. Students should be advised to include words, strong collocations and fully fix expressions with L1 equivalents in their notebooks.
4. Students should be advised to always consult their dictionary, and where available, they should have collocation dictionary.
5. Language instructors should encourage exchange of dialogue among students to make them fluent in the use of collocations through the medium of speech.
6. Language instructors should encourage creative writing among learners.
7. Language teachers should specifically teach collocations particularly through reading comprehension and vocabulary development.

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