

# Collocational Competence of English as a Foreign Language of Economics Students

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to collocational competence and ascertaining the difficulties associated with its mastery by students of economic specialties. It deserves the attention of teachers of English as a foreign language. The purpose of the work is the analysis of theoretical positions in the field of research of collocations and collocational competence, as well as the difficulties of mastering collocational competence. A related task was to determine the style preferences for the selection and presentation of collocations as educational material. Also, the proposed reasons for the lack of a high level collocational competence of students were listed. To achieve the above-mentioned goals and objectives, we used the methods of comparative analysis of existing theoretical and empirical provisions on the subject of research in synchrony and continuous sampling to present examples of text material as a source of collocations. It was found that repeated exposure of collocations in various contexts and texts is a prerequisite for the development of colloquial competence of economics students. The study revealed that analysis of the existing academic literature on the presence of "proper" collocation, supplement of educational material exercise on the acquirement of formula expressions, elaboration of effective exercise are essential to acquire and improve collocational competence of the students.

## 1. Introduction

Collocations were chosen as special objects for study in this article for a number of reasons. First, as linguists have shown (e.g. Hill, 2000), collocations are very common in English. They are probably the most widespread and representative English word expressions [16]. Collocations are between vocabulary and syntax, which corresponds to the established view that language competence should be described as an interactive process between vocabulary and syntax. Word combinations are found in languages with varying spread degrees, they appear in most types of texts [3]. Collocational competence is perhaps one of the highest levels of language knowledge that students can achieve. Collocational competence of economics students is a little-studied area, in addition, its relevance is justified by the prevalence of this specialty in the global educational space.

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## 2. Methods

To achieve the above mentioned goals and objectives, we used the methods of comparative analysis of existing theoretical and empirical provisions on the subject of research in synchrony and continuous sampling to present examples of text material as a source of collocations.

### 3. Review of Literature on Collocation and Collocational Competence

The school of British contextualism - starting with Firth – is considered the founder of the collocation study. It places statistical significance at the centre of the study. An important criterion is the statistical expectation of the joint occurrence of phrases in a corpus. Sinclair describes 'collocation' as „the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text [19, 170]. In our study, we rely on the following definition of collocations: “chunks of language-sequences of words that are used repeatedly by speakers and writers” [2, 377].

Various approaches to the implementation of the complex concept of formality and classification of collocations were noted in the literature [17, 122–133]. The two most distinctive approaches are the “phraseological approach”, which focuses on establishing semantic relations between two (or more) words and the degree of non-compositional meaning and the “distributive” or “frequency” approach based on quantitative data on word combinations in corpora (Granger & Paquot, 2008; Nesselhauf, 2005; Paquot & Granger, 2012). Knowledge of collocations is not a linguistic luxury, but an elementary necessity, they have a linguistic originality [11, 9]. This can be easily confirmed by the example of bilingual communication: phraseological units were-in contrast to collocations-a problem of multilingual communication, as the second language speaker is forced in most cases to use a dictionary to understand their meaning. This led to an exaggeration of the importance of phraseological units in multilingual communication. On the contrary, collocations were assigned a very modest role. However, despite the significant role of phraseological units, a student of a foreign language may well be understood in English without mastering the phraseological base. He can simply “avoid” it. As a rule, a foreign phraseological competence is not expected of a foreigner, since the possibility of violation of the stylistic norm or communicative misunderstanding is not excluded. With collocations everything is different: without them, producing a text in a foreign language is unlikely to be able to do. With the perception of a foreign text, it is not difficult for the speaker to understand an expression like *to do an attempt (einen Versuch machen)*. When translating a German expression into English, he can probably say “to make an attempt”. The *make-attempt* combination, although understandable, is not typical of an English-speaking environment. Collocations allow us to clearly identify the degree of foreign language proficiency.

High-frequency collocations of common nouns can be an important part of academic English, including academic research, and are worthy of further study. Several attempts have been made to study collocations in a scientific style, so Groom believes that disciplines can be distinguished by preferred terminology, and that this concept should be considered on a wider scale. The frequency of collocations of nouns in scientific articles, their disciplinary variations are a little-studied area, which is important because of the increasing number of non-native researchers around the world [10].

Corpus studies show that sometimes even fairly frequent word matches appear only in a very specific language context or are reproduced by a very small number of speakers/writers. In BNC, risk issues and moral issues have a very similar absolute frequency (54 and 51, respectively). However, all 54 copies of the first expression are used in one text sample, the latter was presented in 41 texts. This pattern of distribution changes the probability of occurrence of a collocation in a language and the probability of the experience of activating it by the speaker. To get a complete picture of the role of frequency in collocative knowledge and use, you should also consider the dispersion of collocations in the corpus (Brezina et al., 2015; Gries, 2010, 2013). The dispersion of a language trait expresses how evenly this function occurs throughout the corpus and whether it can be used as a proxy measure of the regularity of occurrence. Thus, dispersion is an important predictor in language learning because collocations that are more general (i.e., occur in a variety of contexts) are more likely to be encountered by language users regardless of the context of use.

Following Birgit Henriksen, we believe that “Moreover, memory and the ability to chunk language into units play an importance role in language use and learning”. Possessing collocative competence, the student must be able to 1) recognize collocations, i.e. pay attention and highlight them in the input data; 2) understand the meaning and function of collocations, i.e. create

comparisons of the form and function of the form; 3) understand the limitations in the use of collocations, i.e. expand knowledge about their use; 4) choose between different collocative options, i.e. distinguish collocations in the lexical network; 5) develop collocative fluency in order to have quick access to collocations. In relation to all these aspects, collocative competence should be developed both receptively and productively. So, the development of collocative competence, as well as the memorization of individual words, is a very complex and cumulative process, requiring a huge amount of diverse linguistic influence and rich conditions for consolidation through repetition and linguistic use.

#### **4. Reasons for Low Collocational Competence**

Various reasons have been put forward for why even rather “advanced” economics students cannot develop sufficient collocational competence. Firstly, the conditions provided for the development of a second language, especially for mastering a second foreign language, may not be beneficial for the successful development of collocational skills, primarily because students do not receive sufficient impact in various contexts and co-texts to be able to recognize and treat collocations as duplicate lexical units [6].

Secondly, many literal phrases may not cause problems with understanding if students know the meaning of individual components of the phrase [25]. However, collocations are distinguished by their semantic transparency and therefore can be more or less comprehensible to the student. Finally, due to the fact that many collocations primarily have a reference function, students are not so motivated to notice and assimilate collocations as compared to phraseological units with clearer pragmatic and, therefore, social and interpersonal functions. Ward reveals one of the most influential problems - foreign language teachers lack a technical vocabulary and hence arises the impossibility to teach [24].

From the point of view of formal teaching, some of the problems that students face may be caused by learning. Many teachers tend to focus on individual words (for example, in glosses and assignments) and often lack useful materials for raising students' awareness of collocations. Koya compared collocations included in textbooks with collocations in English corpora and found that target combinations of use are underrepresented in textbooks and those included in the training material are relatively low-frequency [14]. Moreover, if collocations are included in the curriculum, they are often presented in isolation because of the decontextualized approaches used. Laufer and Waldman suggest that the problems that even advanced students face are explained by the use of a communicative approach to learning, arguing that a more formalized approach should be taken to teaching [15].

In addition, many of the studies are descriptive and focused on the learning product, rather than on the learning process. Most research on the development of colloquial skills is cross-sectional, and only a very small number of longitudinal studies have been conducted with the same trainees (Barfield, 2009; Bell, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Li & Schmitt, 2010). Finally, a small amount of research on educational effectiveness has been conducted (Chan & Liou, 2005; Laufer & Girsai, 2008; Stengers et al., 2010; Webb & Kagimoto, 2011).

Repeated exposures create and strengthen the associative links between the collocation components in the memory, the student recognizes and uses the collocations as integral units. Repeated exposure of collocations in various contexts and texts is a prerequisite for the development of colloquial competence of economics students.

The nature of English language learners' contact with the target language will influence the lexical units the learner encounters. For students, the choice of lexical subjects is most often under the control of the teacher and depending on the materials presented in the classroom limited time allotted for language learning. Additional, self-generated language contact often depends on the students' personal interests and the special context in which students choose to participate. We all have stories

of students who are interested in, for example, role-playing games on the Internet or computer games and therefore have a well-developed vocabulary in these specialized areas.

Studies show us that learning and ability to use depend on a number of factors related specifically to the types of collocations chosen, their frequency, degree of semantic transparency, and context of learning.

In addition, students' awareness of collocations, their motivation and the learning conditions provided are extremely different, indicating the need to combine the macro-level, quantitative studies of large corpora of the native and foreign languages with the micro-level, i.e. qualitative research of collocational competence and models of learning of individual students. Are there specific obstacles related to the study of collocations, for example, factors such as transparency, significance or function, which make them more difficult to remember or is it simply a question of their frequency, which interferes with acquisition? Does the fact that students often already know about the individual words that make up a collocation impede or facilitate learning? Can we transfer our knowledge about the use and development of individual words and FS to the study of collocations or should other models and approaches be adopted? Such questions are put by a teacher teaching students of economics in the English language.

### 5. Choice of Style for the Study of Collocation

Using the language in a normal, familiar environment, the members of the speaking team do not engage in language-creation, but rather repeat the combinations that they heard in certain situations and which are naturally (for a given society) used in contrast to those who learn a foreign language. The mastery of the native language largely depends on the environment: the more cultured and educated the environment, the easier and better the children learn the language, the faster they develop not only in terms of language, but also mentally [21, 26]. Therefore, one of the tasks of the University teachers is to provide a cultural language environment conducive to the professional growth of students.

Of course, students should be aware of the best literary works of the language being studied. However, the functional style of fiction is characterized by the presence of absolutely free metasemiotic phrases, saturated with emotional, evaluative and expressive connotations:

*I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame Miss Rebecca Sharp; for though the task of **husband hunting** is generally entrusted by young persons to their mammas, remember that Miss Sharp had no kind parent and that if she did not **get a husband for herself**, there was no one else in the wide world who would **take the trouble off her hands**. She had a vivid imagination: and after she had asked Amelia whether her brother was very rich, she had **built for herself a most magnificent castle** in the air, of which she was mistress, with a husband somewhere in the background. .... Rebecca's first move showed considerable skill. Perhaps, too, Joseph Sedley would overhear the compliment – Rebecca spoke loud enough – and he did hear, and (**thinking in his heart** that he was a very fine man) the **praise thrilled through every fibre of his big body**. He conducted the young lady down to dinner in a **dubious and agitated frame of mind**.<sup>[5]</sup> “Does she really think I am handsome?” thought he, “or is she only **making game of me?**” We have talked of Joseph Sedley being as vain as a girl. Downstairs, then, they went, Joseph very red and blushing [22, 6].*

Some part (sometimes very significant) of words and phrases in works of classical literature is often outdated, obsolete. Thus, the connotative, imaginative, metasemiotic character of the language of fiction prevents it from being used as an educational material for active mastering a foreign language, especially when it comes to teaching students specialties not related to linguistics and philology. For foreign language learners, the impact in verbal communication is an impermissible excess, their goals are more strict and modest, it is the transmission and perception of information, i.e. message, intellectual function. That is why the intellectual style, the style of scientific prose, the style of communication is the most acceptable for educational purposes. From the point of view of syntagmatics, as is known, the main category of this style is a cliché. The lack of connotation is

another feature of the intellectual style, which also makes it particularly appropriate to use it as an educational material for active language acquisition [21, 123].

The functional style of scientific prose by type of phrases is characterized, on the one hand, by the clear predominance of compound terms that strictly perform their task - to give the exact name of special objects or phenomena, and cliché phrases, on the other hand - by the absence of absolutely free metasemiotic word combinations. Business, official and documentary styles also aim to convey information accurately and concisely within the style, without emotional evaluation.

So, the question of choosing the kind of style of a foreign language, which should serve as material for active study, is significantly narrowed, since the two functional styles discussed above are the most important and verbal communication is based on them. Apparently, one of the basic requirements when choosing a language material suitable for educational purposes should be the requirement of the strictest adherence to the rules of lexical compatibility.

As for the materials for the training of economics students, they are not always of a scientific or official business nature. Some authors use articles from thematic newspapers and magazines that are designed not only for professionals, but for the wider public, i.e. are popular in nature. Naturally, they are not free from neutral colloquial (in the positive sense of the word) collocations. For example, the authors of the textbook *Intelligent Business* Tonya Trappe and Graham Tullis use excerpts from *The Economist* articles as text material. When reading the article, the popular science character of the material becomes obvious, which is confirmed by the following passage:

*The reliable workhorse of capitalism – the joint-stock company looks surprisingly durable. But pressure on it is increasing. In 1967, John Kenneth Galbraith's *The New Industrial State* argued that the USA was run by a handful of big companies who planned the economy in the name of stability. These were hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations making long runs of standardized products. They introduced "new and improved" varieties with predictable regularity; they provided their workers with lifetime employment and they enjoyed fairy good industrial relations with the giant trade unions [23, 9].*

The most "ideal" for the selection and study of collocations by students of economic specialties is, of course, the scientific style, without grammatical and stylistic violations and liberties:

*The seminal works by Pawley and Syder (1983), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) and Lewis (1993) have drawn language researchers' and teachers' attention to the frequency and importance of formulaic sequences (FSs), i.e. recurring lexical chunks in language use. A range of different types of FSs have been identified: idioms (if life deals you with lemons make lemonade), figurative expressions (to freeze to the spot), pragmatic formulas (have a nice day), discourse markers (let me see now), lexicalized sentence stems (this means that...), and collocations (rough crossing, remotely clear), which are the focus of this article [12, 32].*

A significant disadvantage of most basic textbooks for economists is the complete absence of exercises on collocation or their presence in insufficient quantities, which does not provide the level of exposure necessary for acquisition. Many authors of textbooks limit themselves to bringing collocations along with single-word lexical items in the form of a list after the text. This list is a vocabulary intended for memorization, i.e. mechanical learning, because the exercises are missing or limited to finding matches and translation from one language to another.

## 6. Conclusion

Collocational competence is perhaps one of the highest levels of language knowledge that students can achieve. The most "ideal" for the choice and study of collocations is, of course, the scientific style, without grammatical and stylistic violations and liberties. Business, official and documentary styles also aim to convey information accurately and concisely within the style, without emotional evaluation. Repeated exposure of collocations in different contexts and co-texts is a prerequisite for the development of the collocational competence of students-economists. In conclusion, it should be noted that the issues raised in this study require further study. Along the way, there is a number of

other tasks: the analysis of existing educational literature for the presence of "correct" collocations, addition of educational material with exercises for the learning of formula expressions, the development of effective exercises. This requires a comprehensive and long-term analysis, but is a necessary condition for the development and acquisition of collocational competence of economics students.

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