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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLLOCATIONAL COMPETENCE OF EFL MAJORS IN NAJRAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The current study investigates competence of EFL majors in Najran University, Saudi Arabia to translate into Arabic simple English collocations. The study assumes the learners are not fully aware of how to translate collocations into Arabic. For this purpose, a sample of fourth level EFL learners were asked to translate some sentences, each of which contained an English collocation. The sentences were carefully designed to meet the average level and the few numbers of students in the rural Province of Sharorah. The responses were thoroughly analyzed for receptive and translational errors as well as for the causes behind them. The overall findings are not entirely satisfactory since they demonstrate a striking challenge in translating collocations due to collocational weakness at both the receptive and production levels, displaying numerous examples of L1 negative transfer. The test has revealed four types of translation errors: 1. Wrong Translation 2. Violation of Arabic collocation 3. Inaccuracy 4. Excessive wording. In light of the evaluation of the participants' collocational skills, the study also makes recommendations for ways to improve the current situation.

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Introduction:-

A collocation in simple words is the habitual association between words. (Lewis, 1997, p. 44) defines it as "combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency". Regarding the interrelation of collocations with native speakers, (Aghbar, 1990) states that: "A collocation, in its simplest definition, consists of two words which are linked together in the memory of native speakers and occur together with some frequency in both written and oral discourse." For example, (foot the bill) and (catch a cold) are two commonly used collocations. One of the prominent features of collocations is the consistency and coherence of their components; i.e., the combinations (fast food) and (quick meal) are considered collocations because the adjectives (fast and quick), although similar in meaning, they cannot be used interchangeably. Collocations, according to many linguists and researchers, are stored in the minds or memories of native speakers. (Lewis, 2000; Nation, 2001) believed that knowing a word includes knowing its collocations, therefore, many of those scholars think that only by using collocations, one can distinguish between native speakers and foreign language learners, see (Aston, 1995; Fillmore, 1979; Kjellmer, 1991; Pawley & Syder, 1983) Failure to use accurately collocations for EFL learners is a major indicator of foreignness (McArthur, 1992; McCarthy, 1990; Nattinger, 1980; Wu, 1996, cited in Jeng-yih Tim Hsu, Chu-yao Chiu, 2008). In this regard, (Newmark 1981/1988) states: He [the translator] will be 'caught' every time, not by his grammar, which is probably suspiciously 'better' than an educated native's, not by his vocabulary, which may well be wider, but by his unacceptable or improbable collocations. There is a general consensus among scholars that

collocational competence is a key element to acquire fluency. (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Sung, 2003) state that a good control of collocations can help language learners to speak more fluently. (Lewis, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001) asserts that collocational competence is an indispensable component in the process of second/foreign language acquisition, and that's true, as collocations make the speech natural and colorful because of their frequent occurrence in discourse. Cited in (El-Dakhs, 2015), Hill estimated their occurrence at 70% of what native speakers say, hear, read or write. We strongly believe that knowledge of collocations, among knowledge of other multi-word expressions, can significantly enhance the four skills altogether of EFL/ESL learners.

Translating English collocations into Arabic:-

Collocational awareness is one of the problematic areas for EFL learners, both at the receptive and translational levels. Translating collocations is not an easy task as it evolves around the idea of finding the exact TL equivalence. It's a well-known fact that every language has its own inventory of different types of fixed expressions, among which are collocations. From Arabic, we may come across collocations such as:

مرض عضال، سيل عارم، جمع غفير، صديق حميم، فشل ذريع، أذان صاغية، جبال شاهقة، ردمفحم، جيش عرمرم، حرب ضروس، عدو لدود، أحمر قان، اصفر فاقع، أبيض ناصع، أخضر يانع.

Therefore, it stands to logic, that a good translator should be well-informed of the collocational inventory of both SL and TL languages, while being able of correctly choosing identical or equivalent collocations from the target language that match those in the source language. In Arabic, there is a considerable number of calqued collocations. The following examples are provided by (Aldeibani, 2014):

take a photo يلتقط (يأخذ) صورة
a white lie كذبة بيضاء
the finishing touches اللمسات الأخيرة
a promising start بداية واعدة
attach hopes on يعلق آمالاً على
on everyone's lips على كل لسان
necessary evil شر لابد منه
half the battle نصف المعركة

Many scholars acknowledged the challenge of translating prefabricated chunks such as collocations and idioms. The problem has a twofold character:

The first lies in the difficulty of understanding these combinations due to their arbitrary metaphorical nature. The second one is in rendering them properly, choosing the optimal equivalent from the target language. A good illustration of the twofold problem can be noticed in the way, how one word collocates with different words to yield unpredictable meaning(s). A good example was mentioned by (Aldaibani, 2006) about the collocations of the verb (hold):

hold his tongue يمسك لسانه
hold a meeting يعقد اجتماعاً
hold an election يجري انتخابات
the room holds 100 persons. تتسع الغرفة لمئة شخص.
hold one's ground. يتشبث بموقفه.
hold something under control. يضعه تحت المراقبة.
hold somebody in high esteem. يكن له تقديراً عالياً.
hold strange opinions. يحمل أفكاراً غريبة.
hold the line. يبقيها في الانتظار على الهاتف.
hold a firm/ a tight grip on يحكم قبضته على
hold an inquiry into an accident. يفتح تحقيقاً في الحادث.
hold the position of يشغل منصباً

This variability of collocations adds to the difficulty of learning and translating collocations by EFL learners, (Rabeh, 2009). The huge number of collocations—that estimates at 70% of what native speakers say, hear, read or write—create a real obstacle for EFL learners to comprehend and translate them into their languages. Nevertheless, translating collocation into Arabic can be an easy and enjoyable task, provided the translator is well-versed with the collocations in both languages as well as being highly cautious about the notion of equivalency. On the other

hand, translating collocations becomes particularly difficult if equivalents or semi equivalents do not exist in the target language.

In this case, the translator may have either to paraphrase the function of the collocation in the most acceptable way, or, if possible, resort to direct or literal translation, such as:

1. Borrowing 2. Calque 3. Literal translation.

Despite the fact that direct translation requires the highest level of caution, as the translated phrase ought to be clearly understood and acceptable in the target language from the linguistic and cultural points of view, however, this method pays off when new colorful collocations are added to the repertoire of the language. For many years, this method used to have been unfairly disapproved of by the conservatives, thus, creating a state of stagnation. Nowadays, direct translations can be observed more often, thus, breaking the ice of monotony that has prevailed for many years.

Arabic seems now more tolerant and more dynamic, keeping pace with the rapid technological developments and intercultural exchanges. Apparently, the tolerance might be due to some kind of nostalgia for the past, when Arabic used to have been open to other languages during its golden age, when translators were actively encouraged and generously paid. Some calqued collocations have already been mentioned above and, here are some more:

Behind closed doors خلف الأبواب المغلقة

to play a role يلعب دوراً في

to cover the news الأخبار يغطي

conspiracy theory نظرية المؤامرة

brainstorming عصف ذهني

Purpose and questions of the Study:-

The purpose of this study is to explore knowledge of English collocations among EFL majors, studying in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Najran University, Sharorah, K.S.A. The study makes use of a questionnaire, containing 12 sentences, each contains one collocation. The responses then were analyzed for receptive and translational errors. This study will also attempt to find out the causes behind students' errors while translating collocations.

Therefore, it will attempt to answer the questions about:

1. The EFL competence in comprehending English collocations?
2. The EFL competence in translating English collocations into Arabic, and the reasons behind their common errors, if there are any?

Significance of the Study:-

Although there is a considerable number of studies concerning collocational competence of EFL learners, none of them has been conducted in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah since its establishment 17 years ago. Therefore, the current study will explore and describe the collocational competence of EFL learners, especially that collocational weakness has been noticed at both the receptive and production levels. The outcome of this study will provide an assessment of the participants' collocational competence and suggest solutions to straighten out the situation.

Literature Review:-

The term 'collocation' was firstly introduced by Palmer (1938) in his dictionary:

"A Grammar of English Words". Later, Firth's (1957) as cited in El-Dakhs (2015), defines it as "the company that words keep", Cruse's (1986) "sequences of lexical items, which habitually co-occur," (p. 40), McCarthy's (1990) "a marriage contract between words," (p. 12) and Woolard's (2000) "the co-occurrence of words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggests," (p. 29). The issue of collocation has attracted the attention of many researchers from the Arab world, such as, El-Dakhs (2015), Farrokh (2012), (Miqdad, 2012), (Yunus & Awab, 2011), Alsakran (2011) Noor & Adubaib (2011), Abdul Ridha & Al-Riyahi (2011), Brashi (2009), Shehata (2008) and many others. Arab researchers investigated the collocational competence of EFL Majors from the productive and receptive prospects. There have also been some contrastive studies between the collocations of English and Arabic, as well as some studies in translation of collocations between the two languages.

One of the recent studies on the strategies adopted by EFL majors in translating collocations was conducted by (Habtoor, Al-Swaidan, 2019).Forty female EFL learners from the English Department in Najran University were asked to translate English collocations into Arabic. Ther results show that the participants' knowledge of collocations was unsatisfactory and below the expected. In Majmaah University, K.S.A (Sana Abdelhai, Ghada Ahmed, 2017) also researched the problem of translating English collocations into Arabic. Twenty Saudi EFL students participated in the study. All of them were in their fourth year. The outcome of the study showed that the students were incompetent as their translation of English collocations into Arabic was poor and unnatural. The researchers suggested raising students' awareness of collocations by acquainting them with the strategies of translating them into Arabic. (Ali Abdul Hameed Faris, Rasha Ali Sahu, 2013) attempted to explore translation competence of Iraqi EFL students in the College of Education at the University of Basrah. The study revealed that 70% of the participants face difficulties in translating English collocations into Arabic. The study also attempted to find out the causes behind the students' errors, suggesting some solutions.

classification of collocations:-

Regarding the classification of collocations, the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English, cited in Begagić (2014), classifies them into 8 types of grammatical and 7 types of lexical collocations:

Grammatical collocations:-

Grammatical collocations consist of an open class word in addition to a preposition, an infinitive or a clause (e.g., noun + preposition, noun + to infinitive & adjective + that clause). The following examples illustrate this point:

1. noun + preposition e.g. blockade against, apathy towards
2. noun + to-infinitive e.g. He was a fool to do it.
3. noun + that-clause e.g. We reached an agreement that she would join our team.
4. preposition + noun e.g. by accident, in agony
5. adjective + preposition e.g. fond of children, hungry for news
6. adjective + to-infinitive e.g. it was necessary to work, it's nice to be here
7. adjective + that-clause e.g. she was afraid that she would fail
8. different patterns in English:
verb + to-infinitive e.g. they began to speak
verb + bare infinitive e.g. we must work.

Lexical collocations:-

Lexical collocations consist of open class words (e.g., verb + noun, adverb + adjective and adverb + verb). The following examples illustrate this point:

1. verb (which means creation/action) + noun/pronoun/prepositional phrase e.g. come to an agreement, launch a missile
2. verb (which means eradication/cancellation) + noun e.g. reject an appeal, crush resistance
3. (adjective + noun) or (noun used in an attributive way + noun) e.g. strong tea, a crushing defeat, house arrest, land reform
4. noun + verb naming the activity which is performed by a designate of this noun e.g. bombs explode, bees sting
5. quantifier + noun e.g. a swarm of bees, a piece of advice
6. adverb + adjective e.g. hopelessly addicted, sound asleep
7. verb + adverb e.g. argue heatedly, apologize humbly

Methodology:-

Instruments and procedure:-

The research adopted an analytical descriptive approach as it's suitable for this type of study. For achieving the purpose of the research, the participants were asked to translate 12 sentences into Arabic, each contained one English lexical collocation. The sentences in the test were easy enough to suit the average level of the students in the rural Province of Sharorah. However, these sentences are carefully chosen to direct the participants' focus solely toward translating the collocations. It's worth mentioning that using dictionaries while conducting the test was strictly forbidden.

Participants:-

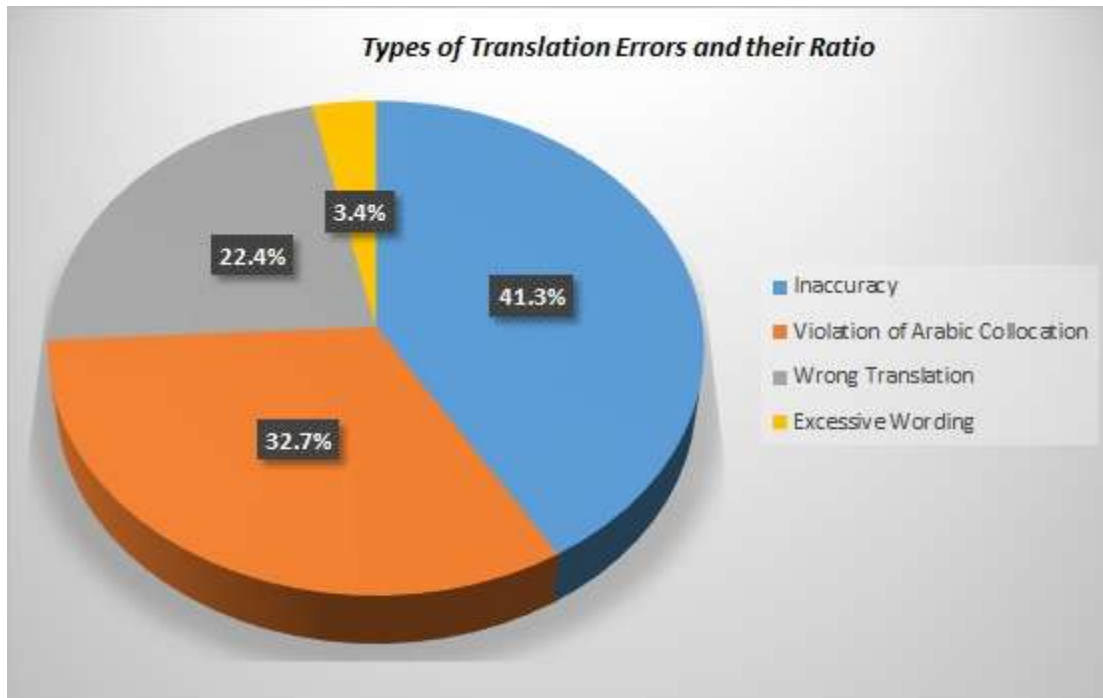
The study took place during the first semester of 2024. The participants in this study were 12 Saudi undergraduate male EFL majors aged between 20-24, studying in their final year at the English Department of Sharorah College of Science and Arts in Najran University, Saudi Arabia. The participants have studied translation 1 and translation 2 among many other subjects. All the participants were Arabic native speakers, who had previously learned English at school for six years.

Data Analysis and Results:-

The results of the current study have shown that the participants' general understanding of collocations was unsatisfactory as many of them experienced vivid difficulty translating them into Arabic.

The results have shown two major classes of errors:

one that is purely related to students' incompetence in Arabic language. Although this class was not within the focus of our research, there were some crucial mistakes, such as, wrong order of Arabic VSO sentence by initiating them with the subject instead of the verb, which is alien and not acceptable to the Arabic. This L2 negative transfer was very common among the responses. The other type of error was in the translation of English collocations into Arabic, which is the focal point of this study. The findings of the test have revealed diverse mistakes in translation, some of which were repeated by many respondents. These mistakes were classified into four classes as follows (see figure 1):

**Wrong Translation:-**

This class constitutes 22.4% of the four categories and is characterized by the participants' failure to provide correct translation of the collocations. This is due to negligence of the metaphoric aspect of collocations, as in:

sentence 5: The doctor took the temperature of the students.

This sentence was wrongly translated as:

* The doctor took the students' instrument for measuring temperature (thermometer).

The doctor took the students' thermometer. أخذ الطبيب مقياس الحرارة الخاص بالطلاب.

sentence 6. The children returned home because they had run out of money.

The phrasal verb was contracted into the verb (run) and translated as:

(... because they were running لأنهم كانوا يركضون ...)

sentence 9: The students finished the test in a record time.

This collocation was randomly translated as follows:

- a) in the appointed time في الوقت المحدد
- b) in a suitable time في وقت مناسب
- c) in a certain time في وقت معين

sentence 12: I don't like desk jobs.

This collocation was translated according to the order of Arabic:
(job desks طاولات العمل)

Violation of Arabic collocation:-

This type constitutes 32.7% of the four categories. In this class, although the respondents show vivid understanding of the meaning, the rendering yielded distorted Arabic collocation, where at least one of its components is synonymous, as in:

sentence 1: Ali made a lot of friends in Sharorah.

This collocation was translated:
كُونِ صداقات instead of عمل صداقات

sentence 2. The students took the bus to the university.

This collocation was translated:
استقلوا الحافلة instead of أخذوا الباص

sentence 3. The driver made an accident.

This collocation was translated:
وقع له حادث instead of فعل حادثاً

sentence 8. It rained heavily last night.

This collocation was translated:
مطرت بغزارة instead of أمطرت بشدة

Within this class we came across some translations, where colloquial words were used, which is not acceptable in written Arabic, as in:

sentence 1. Ali made a lot of friends in Sharorah.

كُونِ صداقات instead of سوي صداقات

sentence 4. The mechanic had a look at the bus.

ألقى نظرة instead of أخذ نظرة

sentence 5. The doctor took the temperature of the students.

قاس الحرارة instead of أخذ الحرارة

sentence 6. The children returned home because they had run out of money.

نفدت النقود instead of خلصت النقود

Inaccuracy:-

This class is the highest in number as it constitutes 41.3% of the four categories. It's characterized by obvious inaccurate translation of the collocations, making it unreliable, as in:

sentence 1. Ali made a lot of friends in Sharorah.

كُونِ صداقات instead of لدي علي الكثير من الأصدقاء

sentence 3. The driver made an accident.

وقع للسائق حادث instead of السائق صدم

sentence 6. The children returned home because they had run out of money.

نفذ مالهم instead of أفلسوا
لنفاذ المال instead of لفقدانهم المال
نفذ المال instead of أهدروا المال

sentence 7. Please, keep quite when I'm studying.

كن هادئاً instead of أبق صامتاً
Within this class there have been some spontaneous translations, as in:

sentence 4. The mechanic had a look at the bus.

ألقي نظرة حرص على معاينة
ألقي نظرة فحص الميكانيكي
ألقي نظرة توجب على الميكانيكي

sentence 11. Hasan is experienced in mathematics.

لديه خبرة عبقري
لديه خبرة خبير

Excessive wording:-

This class is the lowest in number. It constitutes 3.4% among the other 3 classes. In this type, the participants added some unnecessary words to the translation, as in:

sentence 9: The students finished the test in a record time.

أنهى الطلاب بالإنهاء من ...
قام الطلاب بالإنهاء من ...

Conclusions, Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications:-

The data analysis of this study has revealed four classes of translation errors. This is ample to conclude that EFL majors in Najran University do experience difficulty, both in comprehending and in translating collocations into Arabic. This seems a little odd, given that the learners are in their final year and, having studied the subjects (translation 1 and Translation 2) along with vocabulary building and other subjects, let alone that the collocations used in this test were easy. In light of the results, we highly recommend checking the efficiency of the syllabus specifications, textbooks and the methods used in teaching translation and vocabulary building. We also recommend adopting up-to-date textbooks in vocabulary building that attach special importance to teaching collocations and prefabricated chunks. Also, students are to be encouraged to extensively read in English, for reading is an essential input tool for boosting their vocabulary arsenal.

With regard to translation, the participants demonstrated unequivocal difficulty, showing instances of L1 negative transfer that often ends up with distorted Arabic collocations, or at least demonstrating noticeable weakness in Arabic, thus, raising a daring question about their real efficiency in Arabic. Finally, students should be regularly exposed to translating metaphorical expressions such as collocations, idioms and prefabricated chunks.

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