

The Use of Grammatical Collocations with Prepositions and Attitude towards Collocations Learning of Thai EFL Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to (1) investigate the use of grammatical collocations, which emphasizes on the combination of preposition patterns, among EFL undergraduate students, (2) compare the use of grammatical collocations among EFL undergraduate students, and (3) find out the attitudes towards collocations learning of EFL undergraduate students at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Phitsanulok. The participants of the study were 300 students (N = 1,069) from three faculties, Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology (SAT), Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), as well as Faculty of Engineering (EN). The cloze test with 3 multiple choices and questionnaire were applied as a tool of the study. Descriptive statistics, with mean and percentage in interpreting data, were applied in the study. The results were revealed that although students from BALA gained the highest means score (12.12 out of 30); it was in the low level, followed by SAT students (11.21), and EN students (10.42). When compared to the number of students who were able to use the three patterns of grammatical collocations, it was found that BALA students can apply pattern 1 (Noun + Preposition) in the first rank at 41.66%, 42.57% for pattern 2 (Preposition + Noun), and 38.90% for pattern 3 (Adjective + Preposition). After doing the test, students were required to do the questionnaire to investigate their attitude towards collocations learning. Consequently, it was found that most students responded in the "Agree" level and the top three opinions were: 1. Students agreed (4.27) that English collocations should be introduced and learned at university level, 2. Students agreed (4.17) that English collocations should be more focused in the classroom and finally, 3. Students agreed (4.17) that people with good collocations were more successful in English language learning.

Keywords: *Collocations, Grammatical collocations, Attitudes towards collocations learning, Thai EFL undergraduate students*

1. Introduction

Collocations have been extensively acknowledged as one of the problematic issues for non-native English speakers in both English as a Second Language (L2) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners since they require the natural sense of native speakers to excel in this area. For example, it is correct to say *turn on the light* but not to *open the light* as well as what is different between using *do* and *make* in *doing the dishes*, *making bed*, or *doing homework*. Likewise, in the communication level, Salkauskiene (2002) stated that if non-native English speakers would like to help someone, they will say 'Can I help you?' while a native English speaker might say 'Can I give you a hand?' Accordingly, it is difficult for EFL students to deal with collocations successfully.

Huang (2011) astonishingly reported that in contradiction of other Asian countries, such as China, Korea, Japan or Taiwan in which collocations are widespread in research theme, Thailand seemed to overlook both vocabulary learning and teaching. The majority of Thai teachers were unsuccessful in raising the awareness of the importance of collocations.

Similarly, Boonyasaquan (2009) described in her article that most Thai teachers were more familiar with the grammar-translation method and teaching collocations as a part of lexical approach, and it should be introduced at the earliest phase of learning and should be highlighted when teaching English in every skill. In the same way, Hill (2000) indicated that collocations should play a crucial role in teaching from Lesson one.

In conclusion, learning collocations increases the nature of communication and they are challenging to comprehend English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although collocations are remarked as the essential elements of vocabulary learning, it indicates the competence level of native English speakers. Obviously, the number of research and the awareness in collocations learning in Thailand are limited and inadequate. In view of that, the current study intends to explore the use of grammatical collocations of Thai EFL students in the undergraduate level as well as their attitude towards collocations learning.

1.1 The Notion and Classification of Collocations: Grammar VS Lexis

The term ‘Collocations’ was originally defined by Firth (1957) as a combination of words accompanying one other. Halliday (1966) gave an explanation that collocations were the samples of words combination and they ‘cut across grammar boundaries’ and he also emphasized collocations in the study of lexical study, while Sinclair (1966) stated that grammar and lexis, by the use of collocations, are two dissimilar views which grammar can be defined by structures and systems, while lexical items established with one another occurrences and sets correspondingly.

In fact, collocations can be defined in many ways. Halliday and Hasan (1976) defined collocations from the aspects of discourse, while many researchers defined collocations as the co-occurrence of words in both spoken or written text. (James, 1998; Lewis, 2000; Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1986). Celce-Murcia (1991) explained that collocation was a co-occurrence of lexical items in arrangements, which could vary in occurrence or acceptability. In the same way, Lewis (1994) outlined collocations as a sub-category of multi-word items, where separable words regularly co-occur and are contained by the free-fixed collocational non-interruption. Nevertheless, Gitsaki (1996) gave an interesting point emphasizing that in both lexis and grammar cannot be separated from each other. It is two distinctive, but related aspects as one occurrence.

To sum up, there are several characterizations of collocations which have been suggested by different academics and researchers but almost all of them simplified collocations based on the co-occurrence of words appeared in Cambridge Learner’s

Dictionary which modestly defined collocations as a word or phrase that sounds natural and flawless when it is used with another word or phrase. It is explicitly the combination of words formed when two or more words are frequently used together in the way that sound natural.

1.2 Three Patterns of Grammatical Collocations with Prepositions

Benson, Benson and Ilson (1986a) indicated in their outline to the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English grammatical collocations by presenting combinations as follows; noun+preposition, noun+to-infinitive, noun+that-clause, preposition + noun, adjective+preposition, predicate adjective+ to-infinitive, adjective+ that-clause, and the English 19 verb forms. However, this study focused on the combination of preposition of grammatical collocations as follows;

Table 1: Patterns of Grammatical Collocations with Prepositions

Patterns	Example
Noun + Preposition	Blockade against, apathy towards
Preposition + Noun	By accident, in advance
Adjective + Preposition	Be angry at, be fond of

Pattern 1: Noun + preposition combinations

Not all noun + preposition combinations can be produced as collocations due to the highly probable meaning of some prepositions, such as of and by. Therefore, noun + of / by combinations are considered as free combinations. The following phrases are examples of noun + preposition collocations: *blockade against, apathy towards*.

Pattern 2: Preposition + noun combinations

Any combinations of preposition and noun can fall into this category; however, the choice of preposition with certain noun is not at random such as *by accident, in advance, in agony*

Pattern 3: Adjective + preposition combinations

Some adjectives are followed by a prepositional phrase. The adjective+ preposition combination that is considered collocational is the one that occurs in the predicate (verb-less clause). However past participial adjective followed by preposition *by* is not considered collocational because this structure is regular and foreseeable. For example: *They are angry at the children, they are hungry for news, and the ship was abandoned (by its crew)* is not considered as collocations.

C. Related Studies on Collocations VS EFL Learners

Although collocations are arbitrary and unpredictable and they are problematic for non-native English speaker to handle with them, it is suggested by many researchers that teachers should encourage their students to learn collocations. (Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1986b)

Moehkardi (2002) claimed that each type of collocation may apply difficulty or inaccuracy on learners of English. This is attributable to the fact that there is not much the precise instruction for non-native learners to decide on which combinations are correctly acceptable and whose co-occurrence are highly predictable; or which ones are probably acceptable for creative purposes, or which one are simply unacceptable. Similarly, Jabbour-Lagocski (1990) considered that English prepositions, also word combinations as collocations, are particularly problematic for ESL/EFL students because of the interference of their mother-tongue languages.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) carried out the research with the question ‘Should we teach collocations to EFL students?’ The participants of the study were German EFL students at an advanced level. Their study focused on the use of verbs and nouns in translation tasks and cloze tasks. The results of the study showed that many students successfully paraphrased in translation task while some of them were hardly productive in paraphrasing.

Liu (1999) analyzed both lexical and grammatical collocations in EFL writings. The six sources of errors were found: negative interlingua transfer, ignorance of rule restrictions, false concepts, overgeneralizations, use of synonyms and word coinage and approximation.

Ying and Hendricks (2004) indicated in their research in the writing process of EFL learners that there were two reasons that EFL learners could not master collocations learning. The first reason was generally collocations do not cause a problem in understanding and tus learners can guess the meaning of the words read. The second reason was in the uniqueness and idiomatic expression may certainly cause confusing to learners.

Davoudi and Behshad (2015) investigated learners’use of collocation by analyzing their written performance. The study conducted with 102 Iranian EFL learners. The results of the study found that most students’ mistakes were from the incapability relating to the combination of language elements. Additionally, the study revealed that transfer strategy was used mostly in overcoming their problematic in collocations.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to investigate of grammatical collocations usage and the attitudes of EFL undergraduate students as follows;

2.1 To investigate the use of grammatical collocations, which focus on the combination of preposition patterns.

2.2 To compare the use of grammatical collocations among Thai EFL undergraduate students.

2.3 To find out the attitudes towards collocations learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The sample of the study was calculated by applying Taro Yamane (Yamane, 1973) sample size calculation which was undergraduate students from Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Phitsanulok and the total number of students was 1,069.

The calculation formula of Taro Yamane is presented below;

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N * (e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size required

N = number of people in the population

e = allowable error (%)

Substitute numbers in formula:

$$n = \frac{1069}{1 + 1069(0.5)^2} = 291.08$$

In order to achieve reliable data, sample size has increased to 300 students.

Additionally, RMUTL Phitsanulok campus has managed the learning system into 3 faculties which were Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology and Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts. Consequently, the quantity of sample was calculated according to the number of students in each faculty as follows:

Table 2: The Proportion of Sample in the Study

Faculties	Total Population	Percentage	The Number of Sample
Science and Agriculture Technology	566	53%	159
Business Administration and Liberal Arts	270	25%	66
Engineering	233	22%	75
Total	1069	100%	300

Hence, the data were collected from 300 students (N = 1,069) which were 159 students from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology (SAT), 66 students from Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), 75 students from Faculty of Engineering (EN).

3.2 Instruments

1) Test

The test consisted of 30 items from 3 patterns of grammatical collocations. Each pattern contains 10 items. The test is cloze test with 3 multiple choices. The test was examined by 3 experts who are the lecturers in the English department of RMUTL Phitsanulok.

2) Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised 10 questions to ask undergraduates about their attitude in learning grammatical collocations.

4. Data Collection

1.) The participants undertook the multiple-choice test to investigate the use of grammatical collocations.

2.) The participants responded the questionnaire to find out their attitude towards collocations learning in the English classroom.

5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, with mean and percentage, were applied to interpret data in the study Bloom (1986) and Likert (1932) frameworks.

Learning for Mastery Principle (Bloom,1986) was applied to interpret the data of findings 1 and 2 which were divided into 3 levels as follows;

80% - 100%	= High level
60% - 79%	= Medium level
Less than 60 %	= Low level

Scale for the Measurement of Attitudes (Likert, 1932) was applied into the study to interpret the data for finding 3 as follows;

4.50 – 5.00	= Strongly agree
3.50 – 4.29	= Agree
2.50 – 3.49	= Neutral
1.50 – 2.49	= Disagree
1.00 – 1.49	= Strongly disagree

6. Results of the Study

The results of the study were organized according to the three major objectives of the study: (1) to investigate the use of basic grammatical collocations, which focus on the combination of preposition patterns, among EFL undergraduate students (2) to compare the use of basic grammatical collocations among EFL undergraduate students and (3) to find out the attitude towards collocations learning in the English classroom of EFL undergraduate students at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Phitsanulok. The results of the study were as follows;

Finding 1:**Table 3: The Use of Basic Grammatical Collocations among EFL Undergraduate Students**

Faculties	Min	Max	Mean	Percentage	Level
<i>Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology</i>	5	26	11.24	37.52	Low
<i>Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts</i>	5	22	12.12	40.04	Low
<i>Faculty of Engineering</i>	5	17	10.42	35.86	Low

Table 3 shows the minimum score, maximum score, and mean score along with percentage in using the basic grammatical collocations of undergraduate students from 3 faculties at RMUTL Phitsanulok. It reveals that the minimum score of all faculties was 5, the maximum score was 26 from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology students, followed by Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts students (22), and Faculty of Engineering (17) respectively.

The students from Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts gained 12.12 (40.04%) which was in the low level, followed by the students from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology who gained 11.24 (37.52%) which was in the low level, and the students from Faculty of Engineering gained 10.42 (35.86%) which was in the low level respectively.

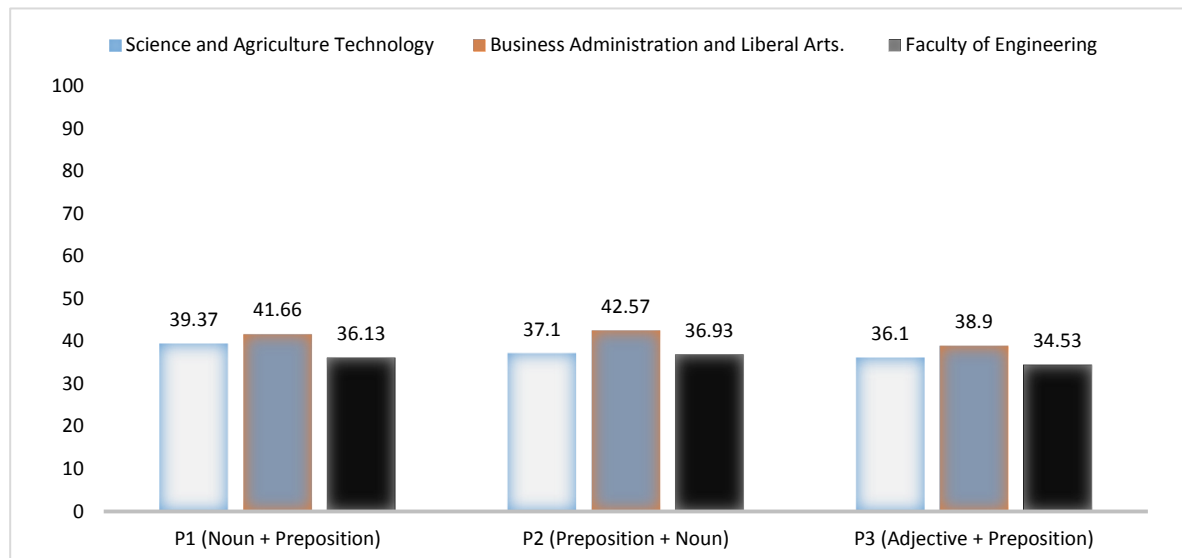
Finding 2:**Figure 1:** The comparison number of students who correctly answer the questions of 3 grammatical collocations with prepositions.

Figure 1 shows the number of students from 3 faculties who could correctly answer the questions based on 3 basic grammatical collocations, which were; (1) Noun + Preposition, (2) Preposition + Noun, and (3) Adjective + Preposition in percentage.

Pattern 1: Noun + Preposition

Figure 1 revealed that the number of students from Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts were able to answer this pattern correctly (41.66), which was at the low level, followed by the number of students from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology who were able to answer correctly (39.37%), which was in the low level, and the number of students from Faculty of Engineering who could answer correctly (36.13%), which was in the low level.

Pattern 2: Prepositions + Noun

Figure 1 compares the number of students who could answer correctly from 3 faculties. It reveals that the number of students from Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts were able to answer this pattern correctly at 42.57% which was in the low level, followed by students from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology, who were able to answer correctly at 37.10% which was in the low level, and students from Faculty of Engineering could answer correctly at 36.93%, which was in the low level.

Pattern 3: Adjective + Prepositions

Figure 1 compares the number of students who can answer correctly from 3 faculties. It reveals that the number of students from Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts were able to answer this pattern correctly at 38.90% which was in the low level, followed by the number of students from Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology, who were able to answer correctly at 36.10% which was in the low level, and 34.53% students from Faculty of Engineering could answer correctly, which was in the low level.

Finding 3:

After doing the test, students were required to do the questionnaire to investigate their attitude towards collocations learning. Consequently, the results were revealed as follows;

Table 4: Attitude towards Collocations Learning

No.	In your opinion...	SAT		BALA		EN	
		Mean	Level	Mean	Level	Mean	Level
1	English collocations should be introduced and learned at primary level (Young learners).	4.05	Agree	4.12	Agree	3.96	Agree
2	English collocations should be introduced and learned at high school level (Adolescent learners).	4.03	Agree	4.13	Agree	4.16	Agree
3	English collocations should be introduced and learned at university level (Adult learners).	4.13	Agree	4.28	Agree	4.40	Agree
4	It is very important for development of English language learning that everyone should be able to know and able to use English collocations.	3.93	Agree	4.19	Agree	4.21	Agree
5	English collocations should be more focused in the classroom.	4.13	Agree	4.27	Agree	4.12	Agree
6	Knowing collocations enriches our English language learning.	4.05	Agree	4.27	Agree	4.05	Agree
7	English collocations help improve communication ability to be more natural.	4.10	Agree	4.21	Agree	4.14	Agree
8	English collocations help improve English language skills and understanding.	4.06	Agree	4.18	Agree	4.21	Agree
9	For Thai students, the mother tongue affects their learning and using English collocations.	4.05	Agree	4.36	Agree	4.06	Agree
10	People with good collocations are more successful in English language learning.	4.12	Agree	4.27	Agree	4.12	Agree

Table 4 shows the level of agreement of students from 3 Faculties: Faculty of Science and Agriculture Technology (SAT), Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), and Faculty of Engineering (EN) toward collocations learning.

Student's Opinion 1: English collocations should be introduced and learned at primary level (Young learners 5-12 years). Students from 3 faculties responded to this item at the "Agree" level (BALA 4.12, SAT 4.05, EN 3.96 respectively).

Student's Opinion 2: English collocations should be introduced and learned at high school level (Adolescent learners 13-19 years). Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (EN 4.16, BALA 4.13, SAT 4.03 respectively).

Student's Opinion 3: English collocations should be introduced and learned at university level (Adult learners 20+ years). Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.28, EN 4.40, SAT 4.13 respectively).

Student's Opinion 4: It is very important for the development of English language learning that everyone should be able to know and able to use English collocations. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (EN 4.21, BALA 4.19, SAT 3.93 respectively).

Student's Opinion 5: English collocations should be more focused in the classroom. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.27, SAT 4.13, EN 4.12 respectively).

Student's Opinion 6: Knowing collocations enriches our English language learning. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.27, SAT 4.05, EN 4.05 respectively).

Student's Opinion 7: English collocations help improve communication ability to be more natural. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.21, EN 4.14, SAT 4.10 respectively).

Student's Opinion 8: English collocations help improve English language skills and understanding. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (EN 4.21, BALA 4.18, SAT 4.06 respectively).

Student's Opinion 9: For Thai students, the mother tongue affects their learning and using English collocations. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.36, EN 4.06, SAT 4.05 respectively).

Student's Opinion 10: People with good collocations are more successful in English language learning. Students from 3 Faculties responded to this item in the "Agree" level (BALA 4.27, SAT 4.12, EN 4.12 respectively).

From the results of the study, it was found that many participants gained low scores, not over 60% of the test. On the other hand, their attitude towards collocations learning was in contrast to the summation of means of the whole participants' opinions shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Summation of Means from All Faculties

No.	In your opinions	Total Average	
		Mean	Level
1	English Collocations should be introduced and learned at primary level (Young learners).	4.04	Agree
2	English Collocations should be introduced and learned at high school level (Adolescent learners).	4.10	Agree
3	English Collocations should be introduced and learned at university level (Adult learners).	4.27	Agree
4	It is very important for the development of English language learning that everyone should be able to know and able to use English collocations.	4.11	Agree
5	English collocations should be more focused in the classroom.	4.17	Agree
6	Knowing collocations enriches our English language learning.	4.12	Agree
7	English collocations help improve communication ability to be more natural.	4.15	Agree
8	English Collocations help improve English language skills and understanding.	4.15	Agree
9	For Thai students, the mother tongue affects their learning and using English collocations.	4.15	Agree
10	People with good collocations are more successful in English language learning.	4.17	Agree

To conclude, most students responded in the "Agree" level. To this, we can assume that students have a good attitude toward collocations learning although most of them got the scores in the low level. In addition, the top 3 opinions were as follows: 1. Students agree (4.27) that English collocations should be introduced and learned at university level. 2. Students agree (4.17) that English collocations should be more focused in the classroom.

Finally, 3. Students agree (4.17) that people with good collocations are more successful in English language learning.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study investigated the use of grammatical collocations, which emphasized the combination of word-with-preposition patterns and the attitude towards collocations learning of Thai EFL undergraduates from RMUTL Phitsanulok. The results of the study revealed that the ability in collocations of the students was in the ‘low’ level in all three patterns of collocations with prepositions. Surprisingly, although their scores were in the ‘low’ level, their attitude in learning collocations was positive. Most responded to the questions in the “Agree” level. From the top opinions, they believed that collocations should be introduced and learned at the university level and should be more focused in the classroom. In addition, they believed that people with good collocations are more successful in English language learning. Even though the significance of this study may not be fully understood by all Thai EFL undergraduate students, it has optimistically raised the awareness of both Thai students and teachers in realizing the dominant role of collocations in the teaching and learning of English. The results of the study indeed reflect that the teaching of collocations in the field of English teaching and learning in Thailand gets little attention as Huang (2011) and Boonyasquan (2009) reported in their articles that many Thai teachers or researchers did not include teaching collocations in the classroom as well as in academic areas.

However, students need to be encouraged to become aware of collocations in the early stage of learning as a part of vocabulary learning as Lewis (1993) emphasized that vocabulary should be the most important aspect in teaching English language. In addition, Moehkardi (2002) suggested that the only way to grow better understanding of English collocations was to build up awareness of it and experience it receptively and excellently.

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