

An Evaluation of Collocation Tools for Second Language Writers

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Abstract

Second language (L2) writers have difficulty in producing appropriate collocations. To address this issue, it has been suggested that L2 writers are explicitly taught how to use learner-friendly collocation tools (Laufer, 2011). The current dissertation study examined the effectiveness of three collocation tools (two online and one book dictionary) on collocation correction. Three groups of L2 writers of English ($N = 45$) in the Program in Intensive English (PIE) in the southwestern USA participated in the study. Each group ($N = 15$) received training on how to use a collocation tool. After the training, the participants were asked to use a tool and correct 16 miscollocations in an essay like test. This procedure was repeated three times so that each group used each of the three tools but in a different order; thus, a Latin Square Design was used. After each test, the participants completed a questionnaire and a few participants were interviewed. The data from the essay tests and questionnaires will be analyzed to determine the effect of the tools on collocation correction and the participants' attitudes towards the tools. The study findings have direct implications for collocation instruction in the writing related courses in the PIE.

Keywords: collocation tools, collocation instruction, dictionary skills, L2 writers,

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Background

A collocation, a subset of formulaic sequences, is defined as “frequently recurring two-to-three word syntagmatic units” (Henriksen, 2013, p. 30). Teaching collocations to L2 writers is important at least for three reasons. First, teaching collocations contribute to accuracy and native-like lexical selection in writing (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2005). Although some L2 writers write *pass the law*, *bring examples*, and *stand in front of a problem* which sound awkward in English, native speakers prefer writing *break the law*, *give examples*, and *face a problem* (Laufer & Waldman, 2011, p. 652). Thus, collocations are important for accuracy in writing. Second, teaching collocations can help learners disambiguate meaning of polysemous words. For example, *break* can mean different things in different contexts: “*he broke his leg* [cracks/separates into pieces]; *Who broke the news* [announce]? *He broke his promise* [failed to keep]; *He broke yet another record* [improved]” (Rott, 2013). Third, collocations help learners understand a connotational meaning of words in a context (Sinclair, 2004). For example, *cause* is mostly used with negative words (e.g., cause - trouble/damage/problem) while *provide* with positive words (e.g., provide - service/information/advice).

Although collocations are important for writing, L2 writers are challenged to produce appropriate collocations in their writing (Nesselhauf, 2005). To address the challenge that L2 writers’ face in producing native-like collocations, it has been suggested that L2 writers learn to use collocation tools such as Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English - LDOCE (Lew & Radlowska, 2010), wordandphrase.info - WPI (Nurmukhamedov & Olinger, 2013), and Macmillan Collocation Dictionary - MCD (Rundell, 2010) to avoid miscolllocations in their compositions. The current study examined the effectiveness of the abovementioned learner-

friendly corpus-based collocation tools on collocation correction in L2 writers' compositions.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be investigated:

1. To what extent do three collocation tools affect L2 writers' collocation corrections in written work?
2. What do the ESL writers think of these three tools overall?

Methods

Three sections (5A, 5B, 5C) of the level 5 students ($N = 45$) who took the Writer's Workshop course in the PIE in Spring 2014 semester participated in the study. Each section received explicit collocation training from the teacher (also a researcher). The training lasted for three sessions (about 70 minutes overall per tool) and the participants learned how to use a tool during the training. After training, each section was asked to correct 16 miscolllocations (8 verb + noun; 8 adjective + noun) embedded in an essay-format collocation test. This procedure was repeated three times so that each section used each of the three tools but in a different order. After the tests, the participants completed a questionnaire. The data from the tests will be analyzed to determine the effect of the collocation tools on collocation correction. The questionnaire data will be analyzed to investigate the participants' attitudes towards the tools for collocation correction.

Results

The researcher plans to complete the data analysis by the end of August 2014. However, it is hypothesized that LDOCE might help L2 writers with the collocation correction. In addition, L2 writers might show positive attitude towards LDOCE because of its collocation (textual) enhancement features and a learner-friendly interface.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

There are two major reasons why the study findings have direct implications to the PIE context. First, most level 5 PIE students lack native-like lexical selection in their compositions. To avoid this problem, PIE students should know what collocations are. In addition, they should be given explicit collocation instruction about the effective ways to produce appropriate collocations in their writing. Moreover, the PIE students can use the collocation tools when they become university students. Second, teachers are not aware how to teach collocations to L2 writers. PIE teachers can use instructional materials used in the study to raise the PIE students' awareness about collocations and learner-friendly collocation tools. The PIE students and teachers do not have to pay for these collocation tools because LDOCE and WPI are freely available online tools. MCD copies are also available in the PIE for use because the researcher donated twenty MCD copies to the PIE Resource Room. In addition to the LDOCE, and WPI, the PIE students can take an advantage of the collocation tools to improve their collocation competence and enhance appropriate collocation use in their writing.

Selected References

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