

# NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF INDONESIAN COLLOCATIONS INTO ENGLISH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

One of the most challenging problems for EFL students is to be able to express themselves not just grammatically but also acceptably and naturally in English in appropriate contexts. The ability to produce acceptable and natural expressions in English is closely related to the EFL students' competence in collocation—which words go together in normal usage. The present study provides an empirical analysis on negative transfer made by Indonesian EFL students in lexical collocation and recommends practical ways to help students improve their competence in collocation. Data for the study was collected from essays written by 40 EFL university students majoring in English in Indonesia whose native language is Indonesian. The students were asked to write a two- to three-page essay on an assigned topic. Of 445 lexical collocation errors found in the English writing, 321 (72%) were negative transfers of Indonesian lexical collocations into English. The findings suggest the necessity of direct teaching of collocations, the use of The Collins WordbanksOnline, and the need to design bilingual collocation dictionaries.

## Keywords

Negative Transfer, Lexical Collocation, Indonesian Collocation, Acceptable Collocation

## Introduction

The importance of identifying errors—e.g. negative transfer errors—made by students of English was pointed out by Corder (1978). He argued that systematically analyzing errors made by language students makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching. However, systematic and in-depth analysis of Indonesian EFL students' collocation errors has not been done yet.

A number of studies on collocation errors from other languages have been done. For example, Nesselhauf (2003) analyzed the use of verb-noun collocations such as 'take a break' or 'shake one's head' by advanced German-speaking learners of English in free written production. The result of his analysis is that the learners' L1 has a much stronger influence than earlier studies had predicted. Taiwo (2003) conducted research into collocation errors made by secondary school students in Nigeria. The findings were that collocation errors with the highest percentage were those that deal with the syntagmatic pairing of incompatible items—i.e. two immediately co-occurring items—while errors with the lowest percentage were those that deal with the

juxtaposition of several items—i.e. more than two items—which do not collocate. Li (2005) conducted research on Taiwanese students and found that the students made both lexical collocation errors, i.e. open-class word with open-class word and grammatical collocation errors, i.e. open-class word with closed-class word, with roughly the same frequency.

However, some studies have found that lexical collocation errors are more frequent than grammatical collocation errors. For example, Wible, et al. (2003) examined error types in the essays submitted through the web-based language learning system, Intelligent Web-based Interactive Language Learning and found that lexical miscollocations are among the most prevalent. Mahmoud (2005), through a systematic and in-depth analyses of EFL learners' lexical errors, reported that of 420 collocations found in 42 essays written by Arabic-speaking university students majoring in English, two thirds of these collocations (64%) were incorrect and 80% of these were lexical collocation errors. Furthermore, he claims that 61% of the lexical miscollocations were negative transfer of students' native language (Arabic). Ying (2009) attempted to identify the



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characteristics of collocations and determine the existence of a relationship between collocations and coherence in writing by Chinese EFL students. The result shows that both Chinese non-English and English majors made more lexical collocation errors, i.e. open-class word with open-class word, than grammatical collocation errors, i.e. open-class word with closed-class word.

Two of the very few studies regarding Indonesian students that have been published were conducted by Kweldju (1999) and Moekardi (2002). The study on collocation conducted by Kweldju was aimed at describing the ability of the English department students of Indonesia in collocations. She used a fill-in the blanks test to obtain her data which revealed that the subjects had a low mastery of collocations. Another study was a non-research-based analysis by Moekardi (2002) who suggested some possible problems with grammatical and lexical collocations that Indonesian students may encounter. She predicted that there are three main problems that Indonesian EFL students may encounter with lexical collocations. One would be Noun + Verb as in 'make a conclusion' because the students directly transfer Indonesian collocation *membuat kesimpulan* (*membuat* = make and *kesimpulan* = conclusion). The second possible problem that Indonesian students may encounter is the collocation Adjective + Noun, such as 'thick coffee' as a direct translation of *kopi kental* in Indonesian (*kental* = thick and *kopi* = coffee) . The third possible problem is that of overusing the English adverb 'very' which is equivalent to Indonesian adverb *sangat*. Many English adverbs that precede adjectives have the same meaning of Indonesian adverb *sangat*. Students may play safe by avoiding using other adverbs. For example, instead of saying 'These companies are fiercely/keenly competitive with each other', the students may say 'These companies are very competitive with each other.'

The present study, however, attempts to analyze Indonesian EFL students' negative transfer of Indonesian into English based on an empirical study of actual writing samples looking at lexical collocation in particular. The purpose of this study was to identify the kinds of negative transfer of lexical collocations into English produced by Indonesian EFL students and to recommend practical ways to improve students' collocation in English.

## Conclusion

The result of this study shows that Indonesian EFL students produce negative transfer errors in expressing themselves in English; they directly translate Indonesian collocations into English. The finding confirms and enriches the findings of earlier studies conducted in the area of collocation of foreign language students in general and Indonesian students in particular. The study provides empirical data verifying the belief that collocations constitute a challenging area in learning English as a foreign language. Indeed, the findings support the claim that EFL students make errors when producing collocations in English, especially the lexical combinations (Wible, et al., 2003; Mahmoud, 2005; Ying, 2009).

The findings imply that direct instruction of collocation is a must. First of all, teachers should make the students aware of the importance of

collocation in communication as people usually do not communicate with single words but with a number of collocates. This might be done through 'noticing' and making use of collocation resources, such as Collins WordBanksOnline English Corpus and Google search engine.

This study, however, involved a very limited number of English department students' essays in Indonesia and, as such, this is a limitation that needs to be acknowledged. Further research should pursue the same issue—both lexical and grammatical collocation errors—with a larger number of samples. Furthermore, it is suggested that a more fine-grained analysis of the types of lexical pairs be conducted for further studies and in different types of texts: narrative, argumentative, and expository in different types of contexts, such as academic, journalism, politics, religion. Such research will help document collocations that need to be taught for Indonesian students in particular.

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