THE TEACHING OF LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE QUALITY OF ESSAYS AND KNOWLEDGE OF COLLOCATIONS AMONG STUDENTS OF PROGRAM PERSEDIAAN IJAZAH SARJANA MUDA PENDIDIKAN OF INSTITUT PERGURUAN BATU LINTANG, KUCHING

SU CHAI SIIK

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

To my beloved husband, Raymond,
and children, Deborah, Laura, Sabrina and Joshua.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Heavenly Father for His provisions and showers of blessings. This project paper was only possible with God's amazing grace and steadfast love.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisors, PM Khairi Izwan bin Abdullah and Prof Madya Dr Noor Abidah bt. Mohd. Omar. I benefited from PM Khairi's rich knowledge in SLA and his commitment to his responsibility as a supervisor. When I felt that that I have lost my directions, his gentleness and uncondescending nature directed me to the right path again. My sincere thanks is also dedicated to PM Dr Abidah,for her enlightening opinions and concern. Her confidence in me has spurred me on in moments of low morale.

I also appreciate the support and cooperation of my colleagues, especially Angie, from IPBL. They were always there for me with their words of encouragement, and Raymond Kho and Toh Poi Seng with their IT skills when I floundered with my laptop. Mr. Lim Teik Leong of KL also deserves my thanks; he willingly stepped in to help me with the recording of two texts. I must not forget my coursemates, Valerie Chan, Euphrasia Lee and Jacqueline Sim for keeping me sane throughout my course of study. I would also like to thank my students who participated in my research. My list would not be complete if I miss out on Dato' Dr. Hj. Adi Badiozaman Tuah, the former Director of IPBL, Encik Abdillah Adam and Puan Hamsiah Masni Bte Abdullah, the Director and Assistant Director of IPBL respectively. Thank you very much for your support and words of encouragement.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband and children. Their understanding and love would always be etched in my memory.

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate the effects of teaching lexical collocations on students' knowledge of collocations as well as the possible relationship between knowledge of collocations and the quality of these students' writing. The participants were 28 first semester students currently pursuing their foundation studies at Institut Perguruan Batu Lintang, Kuching. A lexical collocation test was constructed to assess participants' knowledge of lexical collocations before and after the treatment, and an essay was used to collect naturally occurring data of the participants' use of collocations and subsequently, to measure the quality of the essay. The Control Group was taught vocabulary using the conventional way, focussing on individual words, while the Experimental Group was taught using the Lexical Approach. Descriptive statistics was used to examine the participants' knowledge of lexical collocations and explore possible associations between the teaching of lexical collocations and the quality of participants' essays. The results indicated that there was a positive effect between the teaching of lexical collocations and the quality of the essays, and that the participants' knowledge of collocations improved. Based on the findings, it is concluded that teaching vocabulary using the Lexical Approach contributes to more obvious improvement in participants' collocational knowledge.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini direka untuk mengkaji pengajaran *lexical collocations* terhadap pengetahuan pelajar tentang *collocations* serta kemungkinan hubungan antara pengetahuan tentang *collocations* dengan mutu esei pelajar. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada 28 orang pelajar semester satu yang sedang mengikuti pengajian asas di Institut Perguruan Batu Lintang. Ujian *lexical collocations* dijalankan untuk mengetahui pengetahuan mereka tentang *lexical collocations* sebelum dan selepas *treatment*, dan penulisan esei juga digunakan untuk mengutip data asli tentang penggunaan *collocations*, dan seterusnya, untuk mengukur mutu esei tersebut. Kaedah konvensional yang bertumpu kepada perkatataan digunakan untuk mengajar perbendaharaan kata kepada Kumpulan Kawalan manakala Pendekatan Leksikal digunakan untuk Kumpulan Eksperimental. Statistik diskriptif digunakan untuk menguji pengetahuan peserta kajian tentang *collocations* dan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara pengajaran *lexical collocations* dengan mutu esei. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat kesan yang positif di antara pengajaran *lexical collocations* dan mutu esei peserta kajian, dan pengetahuan tentang *collocations*. Berdasarkan dapatan kajian, dapat disimpulkan bahawa penggunaan Pendekatan Leksikal dalam pengajaran perbendaharaan kata menunjukkan sumbangan yang lebih ketara dari segi penambahbaikan pengetahuan *collocations* peserta kajian.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

T

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IPBL	Institut Perguruan Batu Lintang
B.Ed (TESL) Link	Bachelor of Education (Teaching English as a Second Language) Link
PPISMP	Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan
PC Mat	Pendidikan Cina Matematik
PC	Pendidikan Cina

LIST OF APPENDICES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

A language teacher cannot run away from teaching the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In a school environment, generally, English teachers dread to take up more than two classes of English. Their contention is not the teaching of the language itself but it is the marking of essays. Life would be rosier for language teachers if the students do not have problems in writing. More often than not, English teachers would comment at the atrocities committed by students in their written work.

In a written task given to a particular group of students in the researcher's institute, the following pairs of words were among the students' productive vocabulary: *fine dishes; make homework*; *behave correctly* and *bring hassle*. It is very frequent for English teachers to come across incorrectly paired words. In another writing task, the following sentence was produced: *Just by the look of the delicacy, he could feel his saliva dripping from his mouth slowly*. In yet another writing task assigned to a batch of in-service Chinese primary school teachers, the following sentences were produced: *Blue mountains, green forest, valleys, rivers and fresh air made the environment so crazy to stay* and *Suddenly, there was a high pitch scream of Jonas in horror, because he saw a snake gliding toward him*. Grammatically, the sentences are correct but they sound very awkward. At a loss on

how to help these learners, some teachers simply shun away from asking them to write.

Learners of English may be able to recognize a word and know its meaning but their productive use of vocabulary is normally limited unless they are very proficient in the language. Choice of appropriate words is important in both spoken and written communication. This is endorsed by Wilkin's (cited in Farghal Mohammed; Obiedat, Hussein, 1995) dictum "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without lexis nothing can be conveyed".

Many linguists are of the opinion that the significance of vocabulary learning was down-played in comparison to grammar learning. Besides, vocabulary instruction and learning were confined to individual words until 1994 when Lewis introduced the notion of vocabulary as phrasal. His approach to vocabulary teaching was dubbed the *Lexical Approach*. In the Malaysian context, a student would have gone through 11 years of learning English by the time the student leaves the secondary school. However, the students' productive knowledge of vocabulary as revealed in the trainee teachers' written work leaves much to be desired. If this is the general predicament that the students are in by the time they finish secondary education, the researcher strongly feels that vocabulary development for learners of English as a Second Language should not be left to chance.

1.2   Background of the Study

The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) has undergone dramatic changes in terms of methodologies and approaches. Learning English was considered an academic experience during the Grammar Translation Method of the 1920s-30s, then followed the situational and structurally Audiolingual Method

(1940s-50s) through to approaches under the functional and notional syllabuses. Central to the above is the acquisition of grammatical competence.

Hymes (1971) viewed Chomsky's notion of competence, which simply means the mental representation of grammatical rules, too narrow and introduced the idea of communicative competence. According to Hymes, communicative competence entails not only accuracy but also appropriacy in a given social situation. Canale and Swain (1980) pursued the notion further and developed four subcategories of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence.

Traditionally, under the structural and functional approaches to language teaching, the teaching of vocabulary has been relegated to a secondary status. More often that not, it happens "incidentally" and is "limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts" (Solange Mora, 2001). In this kind of situation, teaching vocabulary is equivalent to teaching individual lexis. However, language is now seen as occurring in 'chunks' and lexical phrases in general, and collocations in particular (Hill, 1999) are part and parcel of such 'chunks'.

With the emergence of the Communicative Syllabus, the emphasis of learning the language has shifted from a focus on form to focus on meaning, and it is non other than vocabulary or lexis that carries meaning. Studies conducted by Meera (in Yong, 1999) have shown teaching of vocabulary has a bearing in developing ESL students' academic writing ability and there is even an indication that vocabulary needs more attention than grammar (Laufa, 1986; Meera 1984, ibid). However, just by having a large store of vocabulary or lexis is not enough; size does not matter. A student may supposedly have a store of 'good vocabulary' but still produces 'unnatural' language because he lacks collocational competence.

In suggesting the Lexical Approach, Lewis did not deviate from the very essence of the communicative syllabus (that language has a communicative purpose).

While upholding the tenets of a communicative approach, he has this to add: "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items, which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity" (19975:15).

In vocabulary instruction, a distinction is made between receptive and productive vocabulary skills (Nation, 1990). In his definition of productive knowledge of vocabulary, Nation commented that it extends beyond the receptive knowledge to pronunciation, spelling, structures and collocation. Yong (1999) takes the teaching of vocabulary a step further by echoing her concern that teachers need to teach collocations and students need to learn them :

> One important, but undervalued, aspect of productive vocabulary is collocation, i.e. the ways in which words are combined with each other
> To move from productive vocabulary, students need to learn a wide variety of ways that words collocate with each other.

Firth (1957, in Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992) could not be more correct when he pointed out that "You shall know a word by the company it keeps" (20).

1.3   Statement of the Problem

The teacher-training institutes in Malaysia accept teacher-trainees of at least SPM qualifications and some of them are even post-graduates. These teacher-trainees would have spent a minimum of nine years learning the English Language. However, their command of the English Language still leaves much to be desired. An aspect which needs serious attention is knowledge of collocations; very often the trainees' spoken and written productions are peppered with mismatched words. In addition, they produce awkward sounding sentences because they just do not have the correct and appropriate words to phrase their intentions. Therefore, it is important that practising teachers need to look for an alternative and more effective approach to vocabulary teaching.

1.4   Need for the Study

Linguists have arrived at different estimates of a native learners' store of vocabulary. But they agreed that it surpassed that of a non-native speaker's. In a study conducted by Yoshida (in Nation, 1990), a young learner had acquired 260-300 words in his productive vocabulary after being exposed to the language for seven months. The learner's parents did not communicate with him in English and he only had two to three hours a day of nursery school. In contrast, another study by Bernard (1961) and Quinn (1968) (ibid) revealed that learners in India and Indonesia have only a 1000-2000 word vocabulary after attending four or five classes of English per week for five years.

Besides the difference in the number of lexical items learnt over the same period of time, native speakers have another plus over non-native speakers. They have a knack to pair words correctly. However, a learner's interlanguage is characterised by words and expressions used incorrectly or inappropriately. Even if they are linguistically and pragmatically correct, they may still sound 'unnatural' or 'strange' (Abdulmoneim Mahmoud, 2005). Lennon (1991) was of the opinion that, given a similar context, a competent native speaker would not produce such words or expressions. As learners lack collocational knowledge, they resort to longer expressions which feature more grammar to communicate meaning while a native speaker would resort to lexical phrases with minimal grammar (Morgan Lewis, 2001; Hill, 2001). In the following sentence which was mentioned in the introduction of the research: *Just by the look of the delicacy, he could feel his saliva dripping out of his mouth slowly*, in the context of what the student was writing, she actually wanted to say something to the effect: *It looked delicious and his mouth watered.*

The traditional methods of teaching grammar and the communicative syllabus have down-played the role of vocabulary learning. In the communicative syllabus formally adopted by schools, grammar and vocabulary are supposed to be 'caught' and not taught overtly. While the role of vocabulary has been recognized by many linguists, the focus of grammar in the teaching of the English Language has not lost

its firm grip. This is reflected in Shama Hasib's research on "Multi-word units and Lexical Phrases in ESL Texts: A Content Analysis", revealed that in the 12 textbooks that were analysed, "vocabulary acquisition is implicit, not explicit" (69).

Meehan reported that Japanese findings based on the experiences of 1,000 students in Kyoto and Osaka revealed that even though their language programmes recognized the importance of vocabulary learning for Second Language (L2) acquisition, the learning process was rather haphazard. L2 learners need more effective ways to improve their vocabulary to be at par if not better than their native-speakers. In a study conducted by Engber (1995) on lexical choices made by ESL writers on a timed essay task to the quality scores, the results suggested that the diversity of lexical choice and the correctness of lexical form significantly affect reader judgments of the quality of an essay. Grobe's research (1981 cited in Engber) also revealed that "good" writing and vocabulary diversity is very closely associated. Therefore, language teachers need to hunt for the most effective way(s) to help their students increase their store of vocabulary and to make it available for productive use. If there is the latest approach to the teaching of vocabulary advocated by linguists, then language teachers should capitalize on it.

Research in the area of vocabulary has mainly looked into acquisition and production of individual lexical items. A study by Bahns and Eldaw (in Huang, 2001) revealed that while students' may have acquired a huge of vocabulary, they still lack collocational knowledge. According to Farghal Mohammed and Obiedat Hussien (1995), learners cannot cope with collocations because of the very nature of how vocabulary is taught – by focusing on individual lexical items. Now that language teaching is no longer considered a grammar-vocabulary dichotomy, there is a need for a paradigm shift from teaching individual lexical units to lexical phrases.

1.5   Objectives of the Study

        The purpose of the study is to determine the effects of teaching lexical collocations on student's general writing ability and knowledge of lexical collocations.

1.5.1   Research Questions

The research questions are:

(a)   What is the effect of teaching lexical collocations on the quality of students' essays?

(b)   Is the effect of teaching lexical collocations reflected in the students' knowledge of collocations?

1.5.2   Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between the teaching of collocations and the quality of students' essays.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between the teaching of collocations and the students' knowledge of collocations.

1.6   Scope of Study

        The study is carried out on students undergoing their foundation years under the programme known as *Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan*

(PPISMP) at Institut Perguruan Batu Lintang in Kuching, Sarawak. The researcher is only interested in investigating the possible relationship between the teaching of lexical collocations and the quality of essays as well as the participants' knowledge of lexical collocations.

1.7   Significance of the Study

The study is significant in the following ways. Firstly, the focus of the study is not on the teaching and learning of individual vocabulary items, but a pairing of lexis. Research on the former is very extensive but studies in collocations are still very much lacking.

Secondly, the study would show the relationship between teaching lexical collocations and the quality of students' written work. Since, according to linguists, the teaching of vocabulary has not been accorded its rightful status, vocabulary errors would also be treated as trivial. On the contrary, Taiwo (2004) regarded lexical errors as equally important as grammatical errors while Lewis (1997:152) is of the opinion that "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items". If the current study shows that there is a positive relationship between teaching lexical collocations and the quality of the students' written work, then this would have some pedagogical implications.

Finally, the findings will offer valuable insight into ways to help learners acquire their vocabulary. As the researcher is directly involved in teacher training, this findings would have a bearing on classroom pedagogy.

There is a plethora of research done on the teaching and learning of vocabulary. However, collocation, an aspect of learners' knowledge of vocabulary is still much uncharted. In addition, the available studies on collocations are set in a

foreign environment. This study serves to add on to the list of research on collocations already carried out, and it is set locally.

1.8   Definitions of Terms

a)   lexical collocations - This term is used in the context of the predictable ways in which a word from any of the following word class: a noun, verb, adjective or adverb is combined with a word from another word classes.

b)   relation - It refers to whether something has a bearing on another.

c)   quality - It refers to the scores obtained by the participants in their essays. A higher score is taken to mean the quality has improved and vice versa.

d)   collocational knowledge – Collocational knowledge is measured by the participants' scores on a collocation test.

1.9   Conclusion

Despite spending many years learning the English Language in schools, the majority of the learners lack behind native-speakers in terms of collocational knowledge. Non-native learners do not have inert ability to match words correctly. Consequently, they produce mismatched phrases and awkward sentence structures. This problem needs to be addressed early and therefore, there is a great need to research for ways to improve learners' collocational sense.