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Collocational Competence of B2 Level EFL Students: A Case Study

Collocational competence, the ability to use grammatical and lexical collocations accurately, is a crucial aspect of language proficiency, closely linked to natural and fluent language use. Despite its importance, non-native speakers often struggle with collocations, particularly in productive tasks such as writing. This study examines the frequency, types, and errors of collocations among B2-level English language students at the University of Zenica, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (2001). A corpus of 150 student essays (76,319 words) was compiled. Collocations were extracted, classified, and analysed based on Benson et al. (2010). The results indicate that lexical collocations (3.3%) were more frequent than grammatical collocations (2.68%), confirming the first hypothesis. However, grammatical collocations exhibited a higher error rate (6.53%) compared to lexical collocations (5.15%), supporting the second hypothesis. Error analysis revealed that negative L1 transfer was the main cause of grammatical collocation errors, while synonymy and analogy contributed significantly to lexical errors. The findings also indicated that students tend to rely on familiar collocations, showing limited experimentation with less common structures. The study has pedagogical implications, suggesting that contrastive analysis, exposure to authentic materials, and creative writing activities could enhance students' collocational competence. Addressing L1 interference and verb-preposition collocations through targeted instruction could further improve accuracy. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of collo-

cational competence in EFL learning, offering practical strategies for improving teaching methods and student writing skills.

Keywords: collocational competence, grammatical and lexical collocations, corpus linguistics, L1 interference, academic writing

1. Introduction

Collocational competence, the ability to use grammatical and lexical collocations accurately, plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA) and fluency (Ariffin & Abdi 2020; Begagić 2014; Dervić & Bećirović 2020; Dervić & Bećirović 2019; Hong et al. 2022; Pawley & Syder 2014; Rizvić-Eminović et al. 2018). Collocations contribute to natural and idiomatic language use, enhancing both spoken and written proficiency (Dervić & Bećirović 2020; Dervić & Bećirović 2019; Hill 1999; McCarthy & O'Dell 2005). Despite their importance, non-native learners often struggle with collocations, making them a persistent challenge in foreign language learning.

Collocations are particularly significant in academic writing, where precise and conventional word combinations contribute to clarity and coherence. Research suggests that learners frequently make collocational errors due to negative L1 transfer, collocational fixedness, limited vocabulary, and the tendency to rely on literal translations (Henriksen 2013; Min et al. 2023; Pham 2022). These challenges indicate that collocational competence is not simply a matter of vocabulary acquisition (Dervić & Spahić 2018) but requires a deeper understanding of word associations and grammatical constraints.

Numerous studies have examined collocational competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, highlighting the difficulties non-native speakers face, particularly in production (Ariffin & Abdi 2020; Boonraksa & Naisena 2022; Jeensuk & Sukying 2021; Rizvić-Eminović & Arnaut-Karović 2015; Trang et al. 2021; Zhang & Li 2023). Even advanced learners, such as university students, frequently struggle with native-like collocational use (Dervić & Bećirović 2020; Durrant & Schmitt 2009; Gablasova et al. 2017; Nasselhauf 2003; Pham 2023; Sipayung & Saragih 2023). However, much of the existing research relies on controlled testing methods rather than analysing authentic student writing, leaving a gap in understanding how learners use collocations in real-world contexts.

Additionally, while previous studies (Begagić 2014; Garner 2022; Rizvić-Eminović & Arnaut-Karović 2015) have explored collocational competence across different proficiency levels, limited research has specifically examined B2-level students within structured academic settings. Given that B2 learners are on the threshold of advanced proficiency, their ability to use collocations correctly in writing is crucial for academic success.

This study investigates collocational competence among B2-level English learners at the University of Zenica through a corpus-based analysis of 150 student essays. Specifically, it aims to determine the frequency of grammatical and lexical collocations in the corpus, identify common collocation errors and their distribution across collocation types, and analyse the role of L1 interference and other linguistic factors (synonym and analogy) in collocational misuse. By addressing these objectives, the study provides insights into the challenges B2 learners face in collocational use and contributes to more effective instructional strategies for improving students' academic writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Collocations

The concept of collocation has been extensively discussed in linguistic research (Begagić 2014; Hill 1999; Hong et al. 2022; Rizvić-Eminović & Arnaut-Karović 2015), with various definitions highlighting different aspects of its structure and usage. As cited in Evert (2009), Firth (1957: 179) famously stated, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps", emphasizing the associative nature of collocations. This definition was foundational for later studies, which categorized collocations based on their frequency, idiomaticity, and syntactic structure (Chen 2019; Evert 2009; Hong et al. 2022; Huang & Tsao 2021; Nasselhauf 2003).

Definitions of collocations often emphasise two key aspects:

Frequency: The tendency of words to co-occur in natural language (Evert 2009; Huang & Tsao 2021).

Fixedness: The limited substitutability of collocational elements, which distinguishes collocations from free combinations (Chen 2019; Hong et al. 2022).

Some scholars define collocations as frequently occurring lexical combinations (Evert 2009; Huang & Tsao 2021; Stubbs 1995), while others highlight their semantic and syntactic fixedness (Chen 2019; Hong et al. 2022; Huang & Tsao 2021; Nasselhauf 2003). The Oxford Collocation Dictionary considers a phrase a collocation if its words co-occur frequently enough to be recognized as conventional combinations (Deuter et al. 2002).

Collocations are distinct from idioms and free word combinations. Unlike idioms, whose meanings are often non-compositional (e.g., *kick the bucket*), collocations retain a transparent relationship between their components (e.g., *strong coffee* rather than *powerful coffee*). Free word combinations, on the other hand, allow unrestricted substitution, whereas collocations exhibit a degree of fixedness and preference (Alujević et al. 2020; Bahns & Eldaw 1993; Begagić 2014; McEnery & Hardie

2011; Stubbs 1995; Yamashita & Jiang 2010). Thus, collocations play a critical role in language use, reflecting natural and contextually appropriate expressions.

2.2. Grammatical and Lexical Collocations

Grammatical collocations involve "a dominant word (noun, adjective, verb) and a preposition or grammatical structure, such as infinitive or clause" (Benson et al. 2010: XIX). They are categorised into eight types (G1–G8) as exemplified in Table 1:

Table 1. The types of grammatical collocations

Type	Description	Example
G1	noun + presposition	*blockade against*
G2	noun + *to* – infinitive	*they felt a compulsion (an impulse, a need) to do it*
G3	noun + *that* clause	*he took an oath that he would do his duty*
G4	preposition + noun	*at anchor*
G5	adjective + preposition	*angry at everyone*
G6	predicate adjective + *to* – infinitive	*it was necessary to work*
G7	adjective + *that* clause	*it was imperative that I be there at three o'clock*
G8	various verb patterns; e.g. verbs that use prepositional phrases as complements	*adhere to the plan*

Lexical collocations combine lexical words, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Benson et al. 2010). These are divided into seven types (L1–L7) as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. The types of lexical collocations

Type	Description	Example
L1	verb (transitive) + noun/noun phrase; denotes activation or creation	*impose an embargo*
L2	verb (transitive) + noun/noun phrase; denotes eradication	*exterminate vermin*
L3	adjective/noun + noun	*a pitched battle, house arrest*
L4	noun + verb (typical of that noun)	*adjectives modify*
L5	a larger/smaller unit related to a noun	*an act of violence*
L6	adverb + adjective	*keenly aware*
L7	verb + adverb	*affect deeply*

Both grammatical and lexical collocations are integral to natural language use, requiring knowledge of word associations, semantic properties, and grammatical structures.

2.3. The Role of Collocational Competence in Language Learning

Collocational competence, the ability to use lexical and grammatical collocations correctly, is closely tied to fluency in a foreign language. It encompasses:

Receptive Competence: Recognising and understanding collocations in listening and reading.

Productive Competence: Using collocations effectively in speaking and writing (Begagić 2014).

Research indicates that productive competence is more challenging for non-native speakers, particularly in writing (Ariffin & Abdi 2020; Huang & Tsao 2021; Ringborn 1992). However, several studies suggest that even advanced learners struggle to acquire native-like collocational use (Dervić & Bećirović 2020; Jaén 2007; Nasselhauf 2003; Pham 2023; Sipayung & Saragih 2023; Szudarski & Carter 2016). According to Durrant and Schmitt (2009), non-native speakers tend to rely on high-frequency collocations but underuse less frequent, strongly associated ones.

Non-native learners often fail to recognize collocational fixedness, leading to errors in both comprehension and production (Begagić 2014; Henriksen 2013; Zhang & Li 2023). They often rely on literal translations or overuse familiar collocations, leading to unidiomatic expressions (Zhang & Li 2023). Besides, errors in collocation use frequently stem from negative L1 transfer, synonymy, analogy, and limited exposure to authentic input (Begagić 2014; Leśniewska 2006; Ünver 2018). For example, *strong rain* is a direct translation from Bosnian but is unnatural in English, where *heavy rain* is used instead. This highlights the importance of explicit collocation instruction in foreign language education, as suggested by Hill (1999), who advocates for increased exposure to natural language input in this context.

2.4. Collocations in Corpus Linguistics and Academic Writing

Corpus-based research has played a vital role in identifying collocational patterns. Flowerdew (1998) notes that a significant portion of applied corpus research focuses on collocability, highlighting how words naturally co-occur. Brookes and McEnery (2020) define corpora as bodies of data that provide authentic linguistic evidence, making them essential for studying collocational competence.

The correct use of collocations is especially critical in academic writing, where precise and fluent expression is valued. Scholars have observed that native English writers use collocations more frequently and accurately than non-native writers, indicating a strong correlation between collocational competence and writing proficiency (Demir 2017). Studies also show that students with higher collocational awareness produce better academic texts (Hinkel 2003; Laufer & Nation 1995).

Thus, the ability to use collocations appropriately contributes to clarity, cohesion, and formal register (McCarthy & O'Dell 2005), making collocational competence a key factor in academic success.

2.5. Previous Research on Collocational Competence at the University Level

Several studies have examined collocational competence among university students. For instance, Jaén (2007) found that Spanish EFL students at the University of Granada scored only 38.3% on collocational tests, with better results in receptive knowledge than production. Similarly, research at the University of Zenica (Begagić 2014) revealed that fourth-year students outperformed freshmen in collocation use, suggesting that prolonged exposure to English improves collocational competence.

Furthermore, Pham (2023) investigated Vietnamese English majors and found that congruent collocations (those with direct L1 equivalents) caused more errors than incongruent ones, challenging the assumption that learners struggle more with unfamiliar patterns. Nasselhauf (2003) reported that German learners made more errors with collocations that allowed moderate flexibility, indicating that students memorize rigid patterns but struggle with semi-fixed expressions, which was also identified in Sipayung and Saragih (2023) study.

More specifically, previous research shows that learners particularly face difficulties in distinguishing between grammatical and lexical collocations (Demir 2017; Sadeghi 2009; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil 2013). For example, Rizvić-Eminović and Arnaut-Karović (2015) found that English language students at the University of Zenica used lexical collocations correctly 60% of the time and grammatical collocations only 50% of the time.

These findings collectively suggest that collocational competence develops gradually and varies across learners, reinforcing the need for further research to identify problematic areas and effective teaching strategies.

2.6. Common Errors in Collocation Use

Collocational errors are common among EFL learners and can be attributed to several factors. The most frequent causes include:

Negative L1 Transfer: Learners apply native language structures to English, resulting in unnatural collocations (e.g., *reaction on the news* instead of *reaction to the news*) (Ringborn 1992).

Synonymy Errors: Learners assume that synonyms can be interchanged within collocations (e.g., *make a friend* vs. *establish a friend*), leading to unnatural word combinations (Murphy 2006; Murphy 2003).

Analogy Errors: Learners overextend existing patterns (e.g., *cut a tree* instead of *cut down a tree*), failing to recognize collocational restrictions (Hong et al. 2011).

Overgeneralization of Common Patterns: Learners rely on frequently encountered structures while avoiding less common but correct collocations (Durrant 2008).

Vocabulary Limitations: Overreliance on familiar or high-frequency collocations (Durrant & Schmitt 2009).

These errors highlight the complexity of collocational learning and suggest that explicit instruction, frequent exposure, and contrastive analysis can help improve collocational competence among EFL learners.

2.7. Linking Literature to Research Hypotheses

The previous literature highlights key challenges with collocational competence, forming the basis for the study's hypotheses:
H1: Lexical collocations are expected to be more frequent in students' essays than grammatical collocations.
H2: Grammatical collocations are expected to have a higher error rate.
H2.1: Grammatical errors are primarily caused by negative L1 transfer.
H2.2: Lexical errors are largely due to synonymy and analogy.

By addressing these hypotheses, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of collocational competence and inform teaching practices not only in the Bosnian EFL educational context but also on a global scale.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

To examine collocational competence this study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The primary method of data collection involved identifying collocations within a corpus of student essays, followed by classifying these collocations into grammatical and lexical types. The frequency of these collocations, as well as the types of errors they contained, were then analyzed.

To identify patterns in the data, inductive reasoning was applied, while generalization was used to confirm or reject the hypotheses and sub-hypotheses posed in this study. Additionally, a contrastive analysis approach was used to examine collocational errors caused by L1 interference, providing insights into how native Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BCS) linguistic structures influence English collocation use.

3.2. Corpus Selection and Preparation

The corpus for this study consists of 150 essays written by English language and literature students at the University of Zenica, all at the B2 proficiency level, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Accordingly, B2-level students are independent users of the language, capable of producing clear and structured texts on various topics (Council of Europe 2001).

The students were required to write 12 essays as part of their Contemporary English Language (CEL) course in the fourth semester of their university education. Since some students submitted fewer than the required 12 essays, 15 students who submitted at least 10 essays were selected for the study, resulting in a final corpus of 150 essays.

These essays covered 12 different topics, offering a mix of formal and informal writing styles. Some topics required objective and analytical writing (e.g., environmental pollution and its consequences), while others allowed for a more personal and expressive approach (e.g., a photo from your personal album). The range of topics ensured a diverse representation of collocations.

The essays ranged from 500 to 600 words, with a total corpus word count of 76,319 words. The number of words per student varied between 3,204 and 5,905 words, providing a substantial dataset for analysis.

3.3. Collocation Extraction and Classification

Once the corpus was compiled, the next step was manually identifying collocations in the student essays. Collocations were classified into grammatical and lexical types based on the classification provided by Benson et al. (2010). This dictionary defines eight subtypes of grammatical collocations (e.g., *noun + preposition: blockade against*) and seven subtypes of lexical collocations (e.g., *adjective + noun: heavy rain*).

To ensure accuracy in classification, the Oxford Collocations Dictionary was used to verify whether word combinations qualified as true collocations (Deuter et al. 2002). Each collocation was recorded and categorized according to its type and subtype. The extracted collocations were then analyzed for frequency and errors, with a focus on the most misused collocations. Errors were categorized into four major types:

negative L1 transfer - errors resulting from direct translation from BCS,

synonymy-based errors – incorrect substitutions of near-synonyms,

analogy-based errors – incorrect word choices based on overgeneralization, and

spelling errors – mistakes related to incorrect letter sequencing or capitalization.

These errors were further analyzed for frequency and their impact on the overall collocational competence of the students.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate collocational competence.

Quantitative Analysis:
- Collocations were counted, categorized by type, and analyzed for frequency.
- Errors were recorded and analyzed based on their distribution across grammatical and lexical collocations.

Qualitative Analysis:
- Errors were examined in depth to identify patterns of misuse.
- Contrastive analysis was used to determine the influence of L1 structures on collocational errors.

By integrating both quantitative (numerical frequency counts) and qualitative (error classification and interpretation) methods, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of collocational competence in B2-level learners.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overview of Collocations in the Corpus

The corpus consisted of 76,319 words, with 4,574 collocations identified. These were categorized into grammatical collocations (2,051) and lexical collocations (2,523), meaning collocations accounted for approximately 6% of the corpus (Table 3). Lexical collocations were more frequent (3.3% of the corpus) compared to grammatical collocations (2.68%).

These findings confirm H1, as lexical collocations outnumber grammatical collocations by 472 examples (10% more). However, despite their importance for fluency, collocations as a whole comprised a relatively small portion of the corpus, suggesting that students underutilized them in their writing. This aligns with the findings of Begagić (2014), who observed that B2-C1 level students at the University of Zenica relied more on free word combinations than fixed collocations. Similarly, Jaén (2007) noted that students' use of collocations remained limited, particularly in productive tasks. Moreover, Zhang and Li (2023) found that the fluency of both lexical and grammatical collocations—especially among advanced learners—has a significant impact on overall language production quality. This further highlights the role of collocational competence in achieving fluency and accuracy in language use.

Table 3. Overview of collocations in the corpus

Collocation Type	Frequency	% of Corpus
Lexical collocations	2,523	3.30%
Grammatical collocations	2,051	2.68%
Total	4,574	6.00%

4.2. Analysis of Collocation Types

4.2.1. Grammatical Collocations (G1–G8)

Grammatical collocations were classified into eight subtypes (Table 4). The most frequent subtype was G4 (preposition + noun) with 776 examples (e.g., *in conclusion, at the time*). This was followed by G1 (noun + preposition, 458 examples) (e.g., *impact on, role in*) and G8 (verb patterns 225 examples) (e.g., *deal with something*).

The least frequent subtype was G7 (adjective + that-clause, 34 examples). The dominance of G4 and G1 reflects students' tendency to use collocations commonly found in academic writing, while the lower frequency of G3 and G7 suggests a limited ability to construct more complex grammatical structures. Jaén (2007) and Nasselhauf (2003) similarly found that EFL learners tend to overuse simpler noun-preposition and preposition-noun structures while underusing verb-based collocations, indicating a preference for memorized, high-frequency structures rather than flexible, productive collocation use. Additionally, Estaji and Montazeri (2022) found that G4, G8 and G5 collocations could effectively differentiate between proficiency levels in standardised testing contexts, such as IELTS. Their frequent use in this study aligns with findings that suggest these collocation types play a crucial role in structured academic writing and language development. However, their misuse or underuse may indicate areas where learners require targeted instruction to improve accuracy and fluency in formal writing.

Table 4. Grammatical collocation types in the corpus

Grammatical Collocation Type	Frequency	Example
G4 (preposition + noun)	776	*in conclusion, at the time*
G1 (noun + preposition)	458	*impact on, role in*
G8 (verb patterns)	225	*deal with something*
G6 (predicate adjective + to-infinitive)	196	*important to consider*
G2 (noun + to-infinitive)	184	*ability to perform*
G5 (adjective + preposition)	127	*aware of, similar to*
G3 (noun + that-clause)	51	*assumption that, belief that*
G7 (adjective + that-clause)	34	*obvious that, clear that*

4.2.2. Lexical Collocations (L1–L7)

Lexical collocations were categorized into seven subtypes (Table 5). The most common subtype was L3 (adjective/noun + noun) with 1,758 examples (e.g., *young people, environmental pollution*). The second most frequent was L1 (verb + noun) with 471 examples (e.g*., make a decision, improve a skill*).

These findings are consistent with Begagić (2014) and Phoocharoensil (2011), who reported that adjective-noun and verb-noun collocations tend to be the most frequently used by EFL learners due to their semantic transparency and resemblance to free combinations. However, the underuse of L5 (noun + of + noun) and L2 (trans. verb + noun) suggests that students may struggle with more rigid collocational structures. This is particularly relevant given that previous research (Estaji & Montazeri 2022; Rizvić-Eminović et al. 2024) has identified certain lexical collocation types (e.g., L5 and L6 structures) as having strong discriminating power across proficiency levels. Their infrequent use in this study may indicate that students at this level have not yet fully internalized more complex lexical collocations, which are typically acquired at higher proficiency levels.

Table 5. Lexical collocation types in the corpus

Lexical Collocation Type	Frequency	Example
L3 (adjective/noun + noun)	1,758	*young people, environmental pollution*
L1 (verb + noun)	471	*make a decision, improve a skill*
L7 (verb + adverb)	103	*argue heatedly, affect deeply*
L6 (adverb + adjective)	102	*very important, quite popular*
L4 (noun + verb)	63	*changes occur, future brings*
L5 (noun + of + noun)	13	*a work of art, a piece of paper*
L2 (verb (trans.) + noun)	8	cut down a tree, get rid of the waste

4.3. Error Analysis

In this study 264 errors were identified across grammatical (134 errors) and lexical collocations (130 errors), representing 5.77% of all collocations. Grammatical collocations had a slightly higher error rate (6.53%) compared to lexical collocations (5.15%), confirming the second hypothesis (H2).

The most problematic subtypes were G8 (52 errors) and G1 (41 errors), both involving verb and noun combinations (Table 6).

Table 6. Frequency, types and percentage of grammatical collocation errors

Type	Grammatical collocation description	Error frequency	Example	
G1	N + P	41	*a complex composition *from Mozart, my pursuit *for career, ingredient *to, research *for, time *in your hands, guess *on, entrance *for*	
G2	N + *to-infinitive*	6	*the best way to motivate someone and *getting them into the world of fitness,*	
G3	N + *that* clause	1	*the way *how reading books helps improve a person's vocabulary*	
G4	P + N	25	**on the one/other side, *at what city, *on our exams, *by the art (instead of through art)*	
G5	Adj + P	4	*dependent *of, competent *for, informed *on (instead of 'of')*	
G6	predicate Adj + *to* infinitive	4	*too busy *for preparing a meal, determined that he wants to prove them wrong*	
G7	Adj + *that* clause	1	*grateful *that I shared those moments*	
G8	various verb patterns	52	*Art has contributed to *make the world a better place to dwell in, I was mentally recovering *myself, I will write *you about Bihać*	
Total		134	**Percentage in collocations**	6.53%

Among lexical collocations, L3 (62 errors) and L1 (41 errors) were the most prone errors (Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency, types and percentage of lexical collocation errors

Type	Lexical collocation description	Error frequency	Example	
L1	V + NP (activation/creation)	41	**cook a salad, *establish a friend, *encounter a disease, *create an opinion, *influence your mind, *work a job, *create awareness*	
L2	V + NP (eradication)	2	**cut a tree*	
L3	Adj + N	62	**criminal rate, *ethnic village, a *difficult pill to swallow, a *sizeable smile, *fake hope, family *gather, *small shoulders*	
L4	N + V	10	*dreams *become true, the importance *lays in, strength *raises people*	
L5	a larger/smaller unit related to a N	4	*a *swarm of ships, *fragments of imagination*	
L6	Adv + Adj	5	**strongly fixed, *extremely curly*	
L7	V + Adv	6	*solve *easier, found *easier, happen *soon or later*	
Total		130	**Percentage in collocations**	5.15%

These patterns suggest challenges with verb usage and prepositions, as well as influences from students' first language (L1). The findings are in line with Min et al. (2023), who observed that L1-influenced errors accounted for a significant portion of collocational mistakes, highlighting the role of L1 transfer in processing L2 collocations within the mental lexicon. Similarly, Nasselhauf (2003) found that non-na-

tive speakers struggle more with grammatical collocations due to their structural complexity and reliance on function words, while Henriksen (2013) reported that verb-preposition collocations were particularly problematic, mirroring the high error rates in G8 and G1 in this study.

However, a recent study conducted among Indonesian learners by Saudin et al. (2017) found that adjective-noun collocations were more problematic than verb-noun collocation patterns, both receptively and productively. This contrasts with the conclusions of Estaji and Montazeri (2022), Henriksen (2013), and Nesselhauf (2003), who found that verb-based collocations tend to be more difficult for EFL learners.

Moreover, Pham (2022), whose findings revealed that the gap between students' receptive and productive collocational knowledge increases at higher proficiency levels, may explain these discrepancies. This underscores the importance of explicitly teaching collocations, as collocational errors persist and evolve across proficiency levels.

In this study, errors were categorised into four main types based on their frequency:

L1 Interference: The most common cause of errors (e.g., *find job* instead of *find a job*; *a pursuit for career* instead of *a pursuit of a career*). Misuse of articles and literal translation of prepositions were prominent issues.

Synonymy: Errors such as *establish a friend* instead of *make a friend* reflected overgeneralisation of meaning.

Analogy: Students misapplied collocational patterns (e.g., *save up money* instead of *save money*).

Spelling: Minor issues included misspellings (*gaher* instead of *gather*) and incorrect hyphenation (*critical-thinking*).

Overall, the findings suggest that students demonstrate basic collocational competence but tend to rely on high-frequency, semantically transparent collocations. The preference for adjective-noun collocations over verb-based collocations aligns with studies that found EFL learners struggle with collocations requiring grammatical transformations or prepositional use (Durrant & Schmitt 2009; Nasselhauf 2003; Pham 2022; Rizvić-Eminović et al. 2024; Saudin et al. 2017).

5. Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the collocational competence of B2-level English language students at the University of Zenica. The research in-

vestigated the frequency of collocation use, the distribution of collocation types, and the prevalence of errors. The findings confirmed both main hypotheses:

Lexical collocations were more frequent than grammatical collocations (3.3% vs. 2.68%).

Grammatical collocations had a higher error rate (6.53% vs. 5.15% for lexical collocations).

The sub-hypotheses were also confirmed: negative L1 transfer was the main cause of grammatical errors, while synonymy and analogy were prevalent in lexical errors. These findings align with previous research (Begagić 2014; Jaén 2007; Min et al. 2023; Nasselhauf 2003) that highlighted L1 interference and overgeneralization as key factors in collocational errors.

The study highlighted students' tendency to rely on high-frequency collocations, favouring familiar and semantically transparent word combinations. While their collocational use was largely accurate, they showed limited experimentation with less common or more complex structures. This pattern suggests that students possess foundational collocational competence but may benefit from instruction that expands their range of collocation use. Additionally, students' error patterns indicate that they struggle particularly with verb-preposition structures and grammatical collocations requiring function words, supporting findings from previous studies (Henriksen 2013; Durrant & Schmitt 2009; Pham 2022; Saudin et al. 2017).

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The corpus size (150 essays) was relatively small, and the students came from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, because essays were written as part of coursework, students may have consulted dictionaries or external resources, potentially affecting the natural use of collocations. For future research, a larger, more diverse student sample could improve the representativeness of findings. Additionally, testing collocational competence in controlled settings could provide deeper insights into students' spontaneous collocational use.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest a need for contrastive analysis to address L1 interference, particularly in prepositions and articles. Additionally, explicit instruction on verb-preposition collocations could help students overcome grammatical collocation challenges. To enhance lexical diversity, students could benefit from exposure to authentic materials, such as academic texts and native-speaker writing samples. Encouraging creative writing tasks that require students to experiment with collocations could also promote more flexible and natural use of language. By implementing these strategies, educators can support students in developing greater collocational competence, ultimately improving their overall fluency and academic writing skills.

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KOLOKACIJSKA KOMPETENCIJA STUDENATA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA NA RAZINI B2: STUDIJA SLUČAJA

Kolokacijska kompetencija, sposobnost točne uporabe gramatičkih i leksičkih kolokacija, ključni je aspekt jezične kompetencije koji je usko povezan s prirodnom i tečnom uporabom jezika. Unatoč njezinu značaju, govornici kojima engleski nije materinski jezik često imaju poteškoća s kolokacijama, naročito u produktivnim zadacima kao što je pisanje. Ova studija ispituje učestalost, vrste i greške u uporabi kolokacija kod studenata engleskog jezika na razini B2 na Univerzitetu u Zenici, pri čemu je razina B2 opisana u Zajedničkom europskom referentnom okviru za jezike (2001). Prikupljen je korpus od 150 studentskih eseja (76 319 riječi). Kolokacije su izdvojene, klasificirane i analizirane prema vrstama koje su opisali Benson i dr. (2010). Rezultati pokazuju da su leksičke kolokacije (3,3 %) bile češće od gramatičkih kolokacija (2,68 %), što potvrđuje prvu hipotezu. Međutim, veća stopa grešaka (6,53 %) zabilježena je kod uporabe gramatičkih kolokacija u odnosu na leksičke kolokacije (5,15 %), što potvrđuje drugu hipotezu. Analiza grešaka pokazala je da je negativni transfer iz materinskog jezika glavni uzrok grešaka u slučaju gramatičkih kolokacija, dok su sinonimija i analogija značajno doprinijele greškama u slučaju leksičkih kolokacija. Također je uočeno da studenti preferiraju uporabu već poznatih kolokacija, uz ograničeno eksperimentiranje s manje uobičajenim strukturama. Studija ima pedagoške implikacije, sugerirajući da kontrastivna analiza, izloženost autentičnim materijalima i aktivnosti kreativnog pisanja mogu unaprijediti kolokacijsku kompetenciju studenata. Ciljano poučavanje o interferenciji materinskog jezika i kolokacijama glagol – prijedlog moglo bi dodatno poboljšati točnost. Ovi rezultati doprinose boljem razumijevanju kolokacijske kompetencije u kontekstu učenja engleskog kao stranog jezika, nudeći praktične strategije za unaprjeđenje nastavnih metoda i vještina pisanja u studenata.

Ključne riječi: kolokacijska kompetencija, gramatičke i leksičke kolokacije, korpusna lingvistika, interferencija materinskog jezika, akademsko pisanje

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