An Error Analysis of Collocation Translation from Thai into English of Thai EFL University Students

Witsanu Chaiyaphat[1]* ID, Jarurat Thammawong[2] ID

[1]Udon Thani Rajabhat University, Udon Thani, Thailand
[2]Udon Thani Rajabhat University, Udon Thani, Thailand

_____

Abstract

The researchers reported that Thai EFL students typically struggled with accurately combining words. Previous research revealed that Thai EFL university students had poor productive collocation abilities and lacked collocation understanding. Relatively few studies on collocation acquisition through instruction have been conducted in Thailand. Thus, the current study was conducted to investigate the use of English collocations by second-year English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University when translating a Thai news article from Thai into English. The participants were 36 English major students enrolled in the Translation II course in the academic year 2023. The students were tasked with translating a Thai news article into English within a three-hour period. The researchers analyzed the students' translations to examine the use of English collocations when translating a Thai news article from the students' first language into the target language. A quantitative analysis was conducted to investigate the collocation translation errors made by English major students. The study employed Benson et al.'s (2009) framework of six collocation types: verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun + noun, adverb + adjective, and verb + adverb. The findings revealed that the most common error made by the students was in translating "verb + noun" collocations from Thai into English. Conversely, students were successful in producing "adjective + noun" and "verb + adverb" collocations. Additionally, this study discusses collocations in translation and provides recommendations for pedagogy and future research in this area.

Keywords: collocation translation, error analysis, Thai to English translation, Thai EFL university students

_____

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: witsanu.ch@udru.ac.th

Introduction

Translation is the process of conveying a message from the source language to the target language. In other words, it is the process of replacing text written in one language with text written in another language (Chantrakhet, 1985). Furthermore, it can be said that translation is an integration of both theory and art. It requires knowledge, experience, and language skills, including grammatical structures and vocabulary, as well as cultural knowledge of the target language that the translators should consider to achieve an accurate and complete translation with the proper essence.

An important issue and one of the problems in translating Thai into English is collocations. Pinmanee (2012) defined collocation as "word pairs that appear together regularly and naturally, such as *cattle+ graze + in a herd*. If words are not used in their proper pairs, the meaning might be understood, but it is not a standard language, for example, *cattle + dine + in a pack. (Non-collocation)* If learners use collocations incorrectly or choose words that do not pair well, the target language translation may sound awkward and unnatural in that language. Examples of collocations that appear with other words and have different meanings are given in the translation teaching manual by Wimonchalao (1994, p. 57), which provides examples of words with multiple meanings, such as
- to *draw* a picture
- to *draw* money from the bank
- to *draw* conclusions
- to *draw* lots
- to *draw* a pistol

By relying only on a Thai-English or English-Thai dictionary and selecting the initial word, translators run the risk of producing a translation that does not accurately reflect the original text, resulting in mistranslation. Hence, translators should meticulously peruse the source material and depend on the words within their respective contexts to grasp their authentic significance. Another valuable resource is a dictionary specifically designed for English language learners, such as the Oxford Dictionary or Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (McIntosh et al., 2009). These resources facilitate learners in observing collocations in different situations, thereby allowing them to select translations that closely resemble natural usage in the target language.

According to Benson et al. (2009), there were two categorization approaches of collocations: grammatical and lexical collocations. A grammatical collocation was composed of a lexical word and a preposition or a grammatical construction such as an infinitive or clause. Eight categories of grammatical collocations included adjective + preposition, preposition + noun, noun + preposition, noun + that clause, noun + to-infinitive, adjective + that clause, adjective + to-infinitive, and verb + preposition.

Another type of collocation defined by Benson et al. (2009) was lexical collocations as follows:

Type	Form	Example
L1	verb + noun	take medicine
L2	adjective + noun	fast food
L3	noun + verb	tulips bloom
L4	noun of noun	a herd of cows
L5	adverb + adjective	extremely expensive
L6	verb + adverb	drive slowly

The researchers therefore chose Thai news articles to analyze collocation translation errors from Thai to English made by English major students, using the six types of lexical collocations as defined by Benson et al. (2009). For the following reasons, the theoretical framework in this study was based on lexical collocations rather than grammatical collocations. Firstly, according to Bahardoust and Moeini (2012), lexical collocation errors had the potential to disrupt communication more than grammatical collocation errors. Second, since Lewis (2000) proposed that learners must acquire a specific number of lexical collocations in order to communicate "precisely" and "concisely" in L2, this study's concentration on lexical collocations would assist learners in articulating ideas more successfully.

Literature Review

1. Collocations

Linguists have provided several, yet largely similar, definitions of the term "collocation." McCarty and O'Dell (2005) describe collocation as a combination of words that commonly occur together, such as "too much" or "tall building." Lewis (2000) defines collocation as the natural and unexpected co-occurrence of lexical terms within a specific context. The Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (McIntosh, Francis, & Poole, 2009) offers a clear-cut definition, stating that collocation refers to the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. For instance, native speakers would say "strong wind" and "heavy rain," rather than "strong rain" and "heavy wind."

Collocations are classified into various categories depending on theories. Benson et al. (2009) broadly categorized collocations into two primary groups: grammatical and lexical patterns. For the grammatical patterns, there are eight types of grammatical collocations. Grammatical collocations are phrases defined as combinations of a dominating word, such as a noun, verb, or adjective, with a preposition or grammatical structure. Examples of collocations are noun + preposition, noun + to infinitive, adjective + preposition, and so on. For the lexical patterns, on the other hand, there are six types of lexical collocations including verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun of noun or noun + noun, adverb + adjective, and verb + adverb.

Understanding and using collocations and idiomatic expressions is crucial for language learners to communicate effectively. A lack of collocation knowledge can hinder communication. Collocations also serve as a link between grammar and vocabulary. These word combinations are remarkably common in English, making up over 70% of language use across all skills. However, collocations often follow arbitrary rules that can confuse learners. For example,

while "make the bed" is correct, "do the bed" is not. Similarly, we say "turn on the light" rather than "open the light." This arbitrary nature makes collocations challenging for EFL students to master, especially given their limited exposure to these expressions in typical classroom settings.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that learners must memorize both lexical and grammatical collocations as single units, rather than being able to construct them based on rules. This unpredictability adds another layer of complexity to the acquisition process for second language learners.

In summary, understanding collocations is a key component of language proficiency. These word combinations are characterized by their arbitrary nature, frequent use in everyday communication, and unpredictable meanings.

Given these challenges, it is important for EFL educators to adopt specific teaching strategies. Educators should present new vocabulary in chunks and focus on commonly used collocations. By explicitly teaching these word combinations in the classroom, teachers can help students in two key ways: reducing the mental effort required to process language and improving both comprehension and production of the target language. This approach can significantly enhance students' overall language competence.

2. Translation

Scholars have often categorized translations into two primary approaches. The first approach prioritizes the preservation of the structure and form of the original text as closely as possible. In contrast, the second approach prioritizes readers' comprehension and reactions in the target language. The latter method allows translators more freedom to modify the original form, enhancing the clarity of the target text. While this may result in differences in word choice or sentence structure between the source and target texts, the core meaning and emotional impact remain intact.

Nida and Taber (1982) identify two main translation types: formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence. Formal correspondence aims to find the closest target language equivalent for each source language word or phrase. However, they noted that exact one-to-one matches between languages are not always possible. Formal equivalents are preferred when the goal is formal rather than dynamic equivalence, but this approach often distorts the grammar and style of the target language, potentially leading to misunderstanding.

In contrast, dynamic equivalence focuses on recreating the original text's impact on readers. This method allows for changes in form while preserving the meaning of the message. Translators using this approach aim to evoke the same response in target-language readers as the original text in source-language readers. Although the original form may be altered, the core message remains intact.

Newmark (1988) classifies translation into two types based on whether it favors the author or the reader, and the source or target language. Semantic translation strives to stay as close to the original text as the target language's semantic and syntactic structures allow, prioritizing the source text's author and contextual meaning.

Conversely, communicative translation aims to convey the original's meaning in a way that is both understandable and acceptable to target language readers. This approach seeks to create a similar effect on target-language readers as the original text has on source-language readers.

In essence, semantic translation prioritizes accuracy but may sacrifice clarity, whereas communicative translation emphasizes effective communication but may not precisely match the original text.

Larson (1998) categorizes translation into two main types based on the focus: form-based (literal) and meaning-based (idiomatic) translation. Form-based translation attempts to closely follow the structure and linguistic features of the source language. However, this approach often fails to effectively communicate the intended message because the resulting text can sound unnatural or strange in the target language. To address this issue, many translators have employed a modified literal translation method. This involves adjusting word order and grammar to create more acceptable sentence structures in the target language, thereby improving comprehension and reducing the risk of nonsensical translations. Despite these modifications, the results may still lack naturalness.

Meaning-based or idiomatic translation, on the other hand, aims to convey the source text's message using the natural grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language. This approach prioritizes effective communication of meaning over strict adherence to the original form. The goal is to produce text that reads fluently in the target language while preserving the essence of the source message.

In summary, translation approaches can be broadly categorized into two distinct types. The first approach prioritizes fidelity to the structure and linguistic features of the source text. This method aims to preserve as much of the original form as possible, often resulting in translations that closely mirror the syntax and word choice of the source language.

In contrast, the second approach places greater emphasis on the target audience's comprehension and experience. Translators employing this method strive to recreate the impact of the original text on their readers, focusing on how the translation will be received and understood by those reading it in the target language. This approach allows for more flexibility in adjusting the original form to suit the conventions and expectations of the target language.

While this second type of translation may deviate from the exact structure of the source text, it aims to maintain the core meaning and emotional resonance of the original text. The goal is to evoke similar responses and convey the same essential message to readers of the translated text as experienced by those reading the original text. This balance between form and function

enables translators to produce texts that are faithful to the original content and accessible to the target audience.

3. Problems in Translation: External and Internal Factors

Producing high-quality translations requires translators to anticipate and address the various challenges that arise during the translation process. Although opinions on what constitutes an adequate-quality translation may vary, Hatim and Munday (2004, p. 10) suggest that it generally involves "the literal rendering of meaning, adherence to form, and emphasis on general accuracy."
According to Ajunwa (2015), translation problems can be broadly categorized into two types: external and internal (self-inflicted).

3.1 External Problems

External challenges in translation often stem from the inherent nature of source-language texts. These challenges can include the complexity, scientific or technical nature, and length of the text. Additionally, ambiguity in the meanings of polysemantic terms and a lack of corresponding terminology in the target language can pose significant difficulties. Dukate (2007, p. 27) highlights the hybrid nature of translation, which involves navigating between the source and target culture. This hybridity can complicate text comprehension, a crucial prerequisite for producing accurate and comprehensible translations. To manage this situation, translators often employ strategies such as domestication and foreignization.

3.1.1 Terminology Issues

The primary terminology-related challenges were as follows:
3.1.1.1 Ambiguity and synonymy in the meanings of polysemantic terms.
3.1.1.2 Multiple concepts being referred to by a single term.
3.1.1.3 Several terms referring to a single concept.
3.1.1.4 Inconsistency in term creation.
3.1.1.5 The absence of an appropriate term in the target language (Pūtele, 2013).

These issues affect both experienced and novice translators, particularly in scientific and technical texts, where terminology can be confusing and difficult to translate accurately.

3.1.2 Polysemic Terms Issues

Students frequently report difficulties with polysemantic terms that have multiple meanings. For example, the term "efficiency" appears in both economic and technical contexts, presenting challenges for novice translators who may lack sufficient vocabulary or terminology to accurately convey its meaning in different contexts.

3.2 Internal or Self-inflicted Problems

Internal problems are primarily related to the translator's skills and knowledge. Common issues include limited vocabulary or terminology, lack of background knowledge, inadequate grammar knowledge, spelling mistakes, stylistic errors, and the pressure of tight deadlines.

3.2.1 Vocabulary and Knowledge Deficiencies

The limited range of vocabulary among novice translators is closely linked to their lack of background knowledge and insufficient exposure to different topics. A deep understanding of the source text is essential for accurate translation. This requires not only linguistic proficiency, but also familiarity with the subject matter and cultural context of the source text. At the university level, learners with limited vocabulary tend to struggle academically in various language-related fields. These include courses focusing on language skills, linguistics, literature, and translation. Their poor vocabulary knowledge correlates with subpar performance across these disciplines (Win et al., 2021).

3.2.2 Other Internal Issues

Students also reported grammatical knowledge deficiencies, spelling errors, and stylistic mistakes as common internal challenges. Tight deadlines further exacerbate these issues, highlighting the need for continuous practice and experience to improve translation skills and efficiency.

4. Translation Problems of Collocations

Linguistic differences between Thai and English play a significant role in translation difficulties, particularly in collocational translations. Collocations or fixed word combinations that sound natural to native speakers often do not have direct equivalents across languages. This issue is particularly problematic for Thai students translating into English, as observed in recent studies.

Similarly, Al Ghazali (2015) recommended that EFL students receive systematic instruction to help them consistently recognize and become aware of collocations in practice. Consequently, teachers play a crucial role in guiding students to observe collocations during real English usage.

This is also supported by Lewis (2000), who mentioned the use of a collocation dictionary. EFL students should be encouraged to use collocation dictionaries to enhance their understanding of collocations. A collocation dictionary can aid students in effectively using collocations and is especially useful for certain classroom activities, particularly with intermediate and advanced learners.

Research Objective

To conduct an error analysis of English collocation translation from Thai into English of English major students

Methodology

1. Research Design

The current study was conducted to investigate students' collocational competence in translating a Thai news article into English. A quantitative research method was used to obtain and analyze the data.

2. Population and Samples

The population and samples of this research were 36 second-year English major students registered for Translation II as a required course in the second semester of the academic year 2023 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Udon Thani Rajabhat University, Thailand. The students had to take the Translation I course in the first semester of the academic year 2023. The students learned basic translation theories and sentence translation during the Translation I course. As for the Translation II course, the students learned English - Thai and Thai - English informative text translation, including different types of news, online and offline articles, and documentaries using the appropriate strategies and word selections for accurate and complete translation. The second semester of the academic year 2023 lasted for 16 weeks, and the students learned Thai English translation for eight weeks before taking the final examination.

3. Instrument and Procedures

The instrument in the study was a final examination of three pieces of Thai news adopted from Thai newspapers. Three different types of news were provided: disaster news, health news, and crime news. Each news item consisted of 15 lines. The students had to choose only one piece of Thai news to translate based on their preference, with a time limit of three hours. After completing the given task, the researchers checked the students' writing in terms of their collocation translation ability. Inter-rater reliability was conducted using native speakers of English. The Oxford Collocations Dictionary was consulted for validity. The students had been drilled with Thai-English collocation translation for eight weeks before taking the examination.

4. Data Collection

The students took a test translating Thai news into English, with a time limit of three hours for the translation. The researchers allowed the students to use dictionaries and grammar books as references. This data collection was part of the final examination, and the students had already completed the studies on collocation translation.

5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed and calculated as percentages. Collocation translation errors were counted and categorized. Data from the news translation test were analyzed for errors by categorizing the frequency of errors and comparing the percentage of errors found according to the issues in translating from Thai into English. This analysis employed the six types of collocations defined by Benson et al. (2009): verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun + noun, adverb + adjective, and verb + adverb.

Results

The results of the current study revealed collocational errors made by students when translating Thai into English. The percentages of collocational errors are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Collocational Errors

Types of Errors	Percentage
verb + noun	81.75
adjective + noun	51.87
noun + verb	78.56
noun + noun	72.35
adverb + adjective	75.72
verb + adverb	50.92

Table 1 presents the categories of collocational mistakes made by English major students, as identified in the research. The results indicated varying levels of proficiency among English major students in translating different types of collocations. Students made the most errors with verb + noun combinations, achieving a score of 81.75. It was implied that verb + noun collocation was the most challenging type for students to perform. The examples were "I ate medicine, so I felt better." Rather "I took medicine, so I felt better." Or "I did errors." Instead "I made errors." This was followed by noun + verb collocations at 78.56, and adverb + adjective pairings at 75.72. Noun + noun collocations received a score of 72.35. On the other hand, students performed best with adjective + noun (51.87) and verb + adverb (50.92) collocations. It was evident that students exhibited the lowest number of errors in these particular collocations.

Discussion

The current study indicated that English major students exhibited limited proficiency in translating English collocations. This suggested a lack of awareness regarding the appropriate and natural use of collocations. Additionally, the learners seemed to have received insufficient training in vocabulary usage. As Lewis (1993) pointed out, increasing awareness of English collocations can be effectively incorporated into teaching and learning processes, which can help better organize learners' mental lexicons. Therefore, it is essential to integrate collocation instruction into foreign language classrooms to foster more effective language learning.

The research results indicated that the students exhibited the highest frequency of mistakes when using verb + noun combinations, attaining a score of 81.75. This aligns with the findings of Boonyasaquan (2005), who also explored learners' proficiency in using English collocations. However, the results suggested that Thai EFL students' translations were still significantly influenced by the native language, leading the students to interpret the literal meaning of each word individually and then combine the words to form a phrase. This issue should be addressed

in translation teaching, encouraging Thai EFL students to focus on English collocations and develop awareness of using appropriate collocations for more natural translation practices.

Likewise, Boonraksa and Naisena (2022) conducted a study on English collocation errors among Thai EFL students and identified mistakes in both lexical and grammatical collocations. These errors were attributed to negative transfers from the students' native language, confusion with synonyms, and a lack of understanding of collocations, which led to incorrect usage in their writing. The researchers emphasized the importance of collocational awareness for students, as it aids in forming appropriate word combinations and enhances vocabulary, ultimately leading to well-structured compositions. The researchers also suggested that English teachers should focus on teaching collocational knowledge and related structures, rather than just individual words.

In a similar study, a study by Brashi (2006) investigated how well EFL students understood and could use collocations. The researcher employed two types of tests: one where students filled in blanks and another with multiple-choice questions. The findings revealed that students demonstrated stronger abilities in recognizing these collocations (receptive knowledge) than in producing them accurately (productive knowledge).

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the ability of English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University to translate Thai into English collocations and to identify the types of errors made in these translations. The study also provided possible explanations for students' difficulties with English collocations.

In this study, the analysis and findings were based on the six types of collocations defined by Benson et al. (2009). The students' responses were then calculated as percentages and categorized. The primary strategies used to explain the students' errors in translating Thai into English collocations included limited knowledge of culture-specific collocations (Baker, 1992), the strong influence of source text patterning (Baker, 1992), and the use of synonymy as a strategy (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). Additionally, learners' limited understanding of restricted collocations (Howarth, 1998; Nation, 2001) and the strategy of transferring first-language collocations to the target language (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Huang, 2001; James, 2013) were identified as contributing factors.

The results demonstrated a spectrum of proficiency levels among English major students in translating various types of collocations. Achieving a score of 81.75, the students committed the greatest number of errors when using verb + noun combinations. Evidently, the students found the verb + noun collocation to be the most difficult variety to execute. The subsequent data revealed noun + verb collocations at 78.56, and adverb + adjective pairs at 75.72. The score obtained for noun + noun collocations was 72.35. Contrarily, the students achieved the highest scores while using adjective + noun and verb + adverb collocations. Obviously, the students performed the fewest errors in these specific collocations.

Recommendations

1. Implications

In EFL classrooms, it is essential to systematically teach learners to recognize and pay attention to collocations in use (Al Ghazali, 2015). Teachers play a crucial role in helping students develop the habit of noticing collocations as they appear in natural English. To raise awareness, exercises, and activities should incorporate authentic materials like newspapers or online content. When teaching students to identify collocations, instructors should emphasize the relevant structures, such as verb + noun or noun + verb combinations, to enhance the students' understanding.

2. Further Studies

The following topics are recommended for further studies:

2.1 Investigating learners' collocation skills at different educational levels, such as secondary school or graduate levels.

2.2 Conducting a comparative study between English majors and non-English majors at various levels.

2.3 Assessing EFL learners' ability to use correct English collocations by evaluating the use of productive skills, such as speaking and writing.

References

Ajunwa, E. (2015). Fidelity challenges in translation. *Translation Journal*, January 2015.

Al Ghazali, F. (2015). Reinforcing students' collocational competence in EFL classrooms. *International Journal of Bilingual & Multilingual Teachers of English*, *03*(2), 105–116. https://doi.org/10.12785/IJBMTE/030205

Bahardoust, M., & Moeini, M. R. (2012). Lexical and grammatical collocations in writing production of EFL learners. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *5*(1), 61–86.

Baker, M., & Gabriela, S. (2009). *An international encyclopedia of translation studies*, *2*. Berlin, New York.

Benson, M., Benson, E., & Ilson, R. (2009). *The BBI combinatory dictionary of English philadelphia*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Boonraksa, T., & Naisena, S. (2022). A study on English collocation errors of Thai EFL students. *English Language Teaching*, *15*(1), 164–177. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n1p164

Boonyasaquan, S. (2005). The lexical approach: An emphasis on collocations. *The Journal of Humanities*, *28*, 98–108.

Brashi, A. (2006). Collocability as a problem in L2 production. *Reflection on English Language Teaching*, *8*(1), 21–34.

Chantrakhet, C. (1985). *Translation for communication*. Thai Wattanapanich.

Costeleanu, M. (2009). Difficulties In Translating Specialized Texts. *Editura Eiroplus*.

Dukāte, A. (2007). *Manipulation as a specific phenomenon in translation and interpreting*. Riga.

Farghal, M., & Obiedat, H. (1995). Collocations: A neglected variable in EFL. *IRAL – International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *33*(4), 315–333. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1995.33.4.315

Hatim, B., & Munday, J. (2004). *Translation: An advanced resource book*. Routledge.

Howarth, P. (1998). Phraseology and second language proficiency. *Applied Linguistics*, *19*(1), 24–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/19.1.24

Huang, L. S. (2001). Knowledge of English collocations: An analysis of Taiwanese EFL learners. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, *6*(1), 113–132.

James, C. (2013). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842912

Larson, M. (1998). *Meaning-based translation: A guide to cross-language equivalence*. University Press of America, Inc.

Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a Way Forward*. Language Teaching Publications.

Lewis, M. (2000). Learning in the lexical approach. In M. Lewis (Ed.), *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach* (pp. 155–185). Language Teaching Publications.

McCarthy, M., & O'Dell, F. (2005). *English collocation in use, advanced*. Cambridge University Press.

McIntosh, C., Francis, B., & Poole, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Oxford collocation dictionary for students of English*. Oxford University Press.

Nation, I. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.

Newmark, P. (1988). *Approaches to translation*. Prentice Hall.

Nida, E., & Taber, C. R. (1982). *The theory and practice of translation*. E. J. Brill.

Pinmanee, S. (2012). *Advanced translation*. Chulalongkorn University Press.

Pūtele, I. (Ed.). (2013). *Aktuālas tendencies terminoloģijas teorijā un praksē. Rakstu krājums. Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Latviešu valodas institūts*.

Wimonchalao, W. (1994). *A guide for teaching translation*. Chulalongkorn University Press.

Win, T., Mar, A. A., & Phiewma, W. (2021). Vocabulary-learning problems encountered by B. A. English specialization at the university level of education. *English Language and Linguistics*, *2*(2), 147–166.