

# A Corpus-based Study of Chinese EFL Learners' Verb+Noun Collocational Errors in English Writing

Dongqing Huang\*

School of Foreign Studies, Soochow University, Soochow, Jiangsu Province 215031, China

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**Abstract:** Statistics in Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) show that verb+noun collocation is always a difficult point for Chinese EFL learners in English writings. This descriptive study tries to find out the characteristics of these collocational errors made by Chinese EFL learners, make an analysis of them, and finally provide some implications for teachers, EFL learners and the related department.

**Keywords:** Verb+noun collocational errors; Error analysis; Chinese EFL learners; CLEC

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## 1. Introduction

In the research field of vocabulary in SLA, it has been recognized that collocational knowledge is an important aspect of word knowledge. However, Chinese EFL learners always find it difficult to produce English collocations, which makes them commit various types of collocational errors. These collocational errors are collected and classified in Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC), the first learner corpus in mainland China, consisting of a total number of 1,207,952 tokens. As is shown in CLEC, there are altogether six types of collocational errors, among which verb+noun (V+N) collocational errors rank the highest. Therefore, it is of great significance to investigate Chinese EFL learners' production of V+N collocational errors in the hope to find out their characteristics, to explore the possible causes of these errors, and finally to provide some pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of V+N collocations.

## 2. The classification of V+N collocational errors

V+N collocational errors made by Chinese EFL learners can be classified into three major types: wrong choice of synonyms, wrong collocation of grammatical structures, and wrong use of delexical verbs<sup>[1]</sup>.

### 2.1 Wrong choice of synonyms

Synonym refers to a word or expression that has the same or almost the same meaning as another word in the same language. Chinese EFL learners always find it difficult to distinguish English synonyms, and thus choose wrong verbs or nouns when producing V+N collocations. Wrong choice of synonyms can be divided into two types: wrong choice of verb synonyms and wrong choice of noun synonyms.

There are so many English verbs that have the same or nearly the same Chinese meaning but still have some minor differences. "Look at" and "see" are a pair of verb synonym and can be both translated into "看" in Chinese. Therefore, while translating "看黑板" into English, some English beginners may write "see the blackboard\*" instead of "look at the blackboard" due to their wrong choice of verb. In fact, the minor distinctions lie in that "look at" emphasizes the action, while "see" emphasizes the consequence.

EFL learners also find it hard to choose the right noun while facing a pair of noun synonyms. For example, although "field" and "domain" can be both translated into "领域" in Chinese, "domain" mainly refers to a particular area of arts, activity, or interest, while "field" mainly refers to a particular subject of study.

### 2.2 Wrong collocation of grammatical structures

Wrong collocation of grammatical structures made by Chinese EFL learners takes a large proportion among all types of collocational errors, attributing to Chinese EFL learners' being accustomed to producing English collocations with Chinese grammar

in heart <sup>[2]</sup>. There are generally two types of wrong collocation of grammatical structures: the misuse of articles and the misuse of prepositions.

Chinese EFL learners always feel confused about when to add which article before the noun. For example, “the” should be added before names of musical instruments, while zero article (“”) should be added before names of sports balls. But for some English beginners, they may create wrong sentences like “She likes playing violin.\*” or “He likes playing the football\*”.

Preposition errors always occur when the combination of preposition and noun/verb does not express the intended meaning. Take the error-prone verb “remember” as an example. If you want to express “keep in mind something that you need to do in the future”, you should use the phrase “remember to do something”. If you want to express “recall something that you have already done”, you should use “remember doing something”. If you confuse them, you cannot express your intended meaning very well.

### 2.3 Wrong use of delexical verbs

Delexical verbs refer to the verbs that have very little meaning of their own when used with particular nouns, like “do”, “have”, “take”, “make” or “give”. Since delexical verbs have no specific meanings and can express different meanings when combined with different words or phrases, some English beginners regard them as omnipotence and use them freely and arbitrarily. For example, the verb “do” in “do discussion\*” does not have its inherent meaning and is wrongly combined with the noun “discussion”.

## 3. Error analysis of V+N collocational errors

According to the general classification of V+N collocational errors made by Chinese EFL learners, there are two major causes for their committing V+N collocational errors: negative transfer of mother tongue and overgeneralization.

### 3.1 Negative transfer of mother tongue

Negative transfer of mother tongue refers to the interference of the first language, which takes up the largest number of Chinese EFL learners’ V+N collocational errors, accounting for 60.1% <sup>[2]</sup>. It occurs when differences between the two languages’ structures lead to systematic errors in the learning of the second language or to fossilization. Although the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue may decrease slightly with the improvement of Chinese EFL learners’ English level, this trend is not obvious, which means that all levels of Chinese EFL learners are, to some extent, dependent on their mother language.

Verb+Noun collocational errors always reflect the fixed native language thinking habits of different nationalities, which indicates that Chinese EFL learners will, more or less, use Chinese ways of thinking to produce English V+N collocations <sup>[3]</sup>. Take the most typical V+N collocational error “learn knowledge\*” as an example. According to the statistics in CELC, the most popular choice to collocate with “knowledge” is the verb “learn”. It is because the translation of “learn knowledge\*” back into Chinese conforms to the Chinese semantics “学习知识” word-by-word. That is to say, it is their Chinese ways of thinking that makes them commit some high-frequent V+N collocational errors.

There are some typical V+N collocational errors made in Chinese EFL learner’ compositions <sup>[1]</sup>:

Students’ high-frequent translations	Chinese expressions	Standard translations
drive a bookshop*	开书店	run a bookshop
learn knowledge*	学习知识	acquire knowledge
change one’s idea*	改变主意	change one’s mind
receive the telephone*	接电话	answer the telephone
pay an effort*	付出努力	make an effort
listen to a lecture*	听讲座	attend a lecture
grow the standard of living*	提高生活水平	upgrade standards of living

From these examples, it is obvious to find how much interference mother tongue has made to Chinese EFL learners, and thus leads them to commit V+N collocational errors.

### 3.2 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization refers to the process of extending the application of a rule to items that are excluded from it in the language norm. It occurs when EFL learners have learned some rules of the target language but has not learned the restrictions of their application.

In terms of V+N collocational errors, errors caused by overgeneralization arise when the learners create a deviant V+N collocation on the basis of other English V+N collocation they have already acquired.

For example, after acquiring the rule of using definite article before a noun, EFL learners tend to apply it to all the nouns, and thus create wrong collocations like “have the lunch\*”, “play the football\*”, etc. Moreover, Chinese EFL learners may also over-generate a newly-learned phrase. For instance, they may generate the wrong collocation “make a good master of\*” after acquiring “make a good use of”.

## 4. Pedagogical implications

Based on the analysis of Verb+Noun collocational errors made by Chinese EFL learners, some pedagogical implications are provided for the teaching and learning of V+N collocations.

### 4.1 Implications for teachers

Teachers need to pay more attention to the teaching of V+N collocations in class.

Before class, teachers need to know in advance some possible V+N collocational errors students may make, so as to make some targeted preparations beforehand. For example, they can revise their teaching plans and allocate more time to the teaching of V+N collocations; they can also design some targeted exercises or activities to help students master and flexibly apply their newly-learned V+N collocations in class.

During the class, teachers should emphasize the high-frequent V+N collocational errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue or overgeneralization, so as to raise students' consciousness of conforming to the English syntax. Moreover, teachers also need to know how to effectively analyze students' errors, so that they can provide enough effective error corrections in classroom teaching.

After class, teachers need to conclude the common V+N collocational errors made by students by means of making self-revision, correcting students' homework, etc.

### 4.2 Implications for Chinese EFL learners

Chinese EFL learners' awareness of V+N collocational errors should also be raised. They need to be aware that there are many differences in word collocation and language order due to the differences between Chinese and Western culture, so that they should try their best to avoid Chinese ways of thinking whilst producing English V+N collocations.

Moreover, they also need to be emphasized with the idiom-principle. To be specific, they should be aware that the co-occurrence of certain verbs and noun is a natural trend in a language and they should be encouraged to learn a word with its habitual companies.

Besides, they also need to enlarge their vocabulary and become proficient in grammar, so as to lay a solid foundation for their overall English writing, which is, in the long term, the most effective method to avoid making V+N collocational errors.

### 4.3 Other aspects

Aside from some implications for teachers and students, the quality of Chinese EFL learners' language input as well as the syllabus design should also be improved and a large amount of authentic material containing V+N collocations should be provided.

To be specific, while designing syllabus and compiling textbooks, the collocational aspect of word knowledge should be emphasized. Also, some authoritative corpora and concordances can be used to provide idiomatic collocations for EFL learners. Besides, Chinese EFL learners should be encouraged and guided to refer to collocation dictionaries like OXFORD Collocations Dictionary for Students of English and consult corpus of native speakers if possible to get some authentic materials.

## 5. Conclusion

According to Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC), Verb+Noun collocation is a difficult point for Chinese EFL learners, and thus makes them produce various types of V+N collocational errors in English writing, like wrong choice of synonyms, wrong collocation of grammatical structures, and wrong use of delexical verbs. Based on the analysis of these errors, the negative transfer of mother tongue accounts for the largest proportion. Besides, overgeneralization is also an important cause for them committing these errors. In order to reduce the occurrence of these errors, teachers should pay much attention to the teaching of V+N collocations before, while and after class; learners themselves should avoid Chinese ways of thinking, follow the idiom principle and take actions to improve their overall English ability; last but not least, the overall syllabus design should be improved and a large amount of authentic material should be provided to Chinese EFL learners.

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