



# Difficulties face third semester students in translating English collocations into Arabic and vice versa at the faculty of languages, Benghazi University

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to have some insights about the difficulties students of English may face when translating different types of collocations from English to Arabic and vice versa. It figures out the causes of such difficulties and solutions which help overcoming them. The study is carried out through a test in order to explore the difficulties and problems that face such students. The test is composed of some questions and 32 items, (English to Arabic / Arabic to English) are used for data collection then the researcher analyzes the data quantitatively in order to get the results in numbers and by discussing these results to enhance the validity through the survey by focusing on the practical part. A test has been carried out involving thirty students of third semester / translation department, Benghazi University. The results of the study ensured that third semester translation students encounter difficulties in translating collocations in both languages. The reasons behind these difficulties were mainly attributed to the fact that collocations are both a linguistic and a cultural issue and are not just a matter of substituting words by their equivalents in the other language. Therefore, there should be a separation between Arabic collocations and English collocations in teaching the language because every language has its own collocation which is completely different from other languages.

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## INTRODUCTION

No one can deny the important role of languages in the communication process, since it is a primary function. Furthermore, no one can ignore or dismiss the vital role of translation in allowing individuals who do not speak the same language or do not belong to the same speech community to communicate effectively. That is to say that one may speak and master his / her mother tongue language; however, may not understand others' languages. He/she might not be able to communicate with people out his/her own speech community; that is why translation is considered as a remedy for such communicational problems throughout the past years and up till now (Salih and Kharmoash, 2019).

Translation is "a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which a translator provides on the strength of an interpretation" (Venuti, 1995). Translation difficulties are often the reflection of cultural differences materialized by the differences between two linguistic

systems. Culture-specific lexicon reflects and expresses the interests and needs of societies. So, the availability of certain lexical items or linguistic expressions in one culture and their absence in another may present a serious difficulty in the general process of translation. This is due to the fact that languages are not copies of a universal reality, but each corresponds to a particular organization of the human experience. Translators should be well acquainted with at least the basic cultural features of the source and target language in order to avoid serious pitfalls in their translations. "Translating involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one culture to another". Cultural problems often pose a greater difficulty for a translator than do linguistic problems (Aziz, 1982). In the process of translation, collocation plays an important role. Collocation is defined as a combination of two or more words that always occur together consistently in different contexts in language. In other words, it is a pair or group of words that are often used together. These combinations sound natural to native speakers, but students of English have to make a special effort to

learn them because they are often difficult to guess. Collocations are mainly words that go with each other and have a certain meaning. When it comes to translating these collocations, second or foreign language learners might face a problem finding a suitable equivalent of collocations in the target language (TL). These problems can be syntactical, cultural, or semantic. Learning collocations is an important part of learning the vocabulary of a language. Some collocations are fixed, or very difficult, for example (take a photo), where no word other than (take) collocates with (photo) to give the same meaning. Some collocations are more open, where several different words may be used to provide a similar meaning, for example (keep to/ stick to the rules) (Faris et al., 2013).

## ■ METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the test as a procedure to collect data from third-semester students at the Libyan University, Faculty of Languages, University of Benghazi. As well as the challenges they faced in translating syndromes from English to Arabic and vice versa, to verify these common errors, and how to overcome such problems as follow:

### a) Participants

The participants of the study were thirty male and female ESL undergraduate students at the Department of English, Faculty of languages at Benghazi University, Benghazi, Libya. They were between 22-25 years old. They were at their third semester majoring in translation department. Students studied English language in the primary and secondary levels, It would therefore be assumed that these students possess a reasonably average knowledge between premeditate to intermediate level of English and that they should have enough understanding of how to translate collocations from English to Arabic and vice versa. All participants were native Arabic speakers, with English being learned as a second language.

### b) Instruments

The instruments used to collect data was an English / Arabic collocation test (multiple choice, fill in questions, and translation). The test contained 32 sentences and phrases. It was made up of four sections. The first question (Table 1) was about translation from English to Arabic and the last question Arabic to English. Section one asked the respondents to choose the most suitable translation for five collocations. This type of collocations belonged to the adjective plus noun pattern which is

considered one of the most common collocation patterns (Newmark, 1988).

The second question section 2, (Table 2) asked the respondents to fill in five blanks with an Arabic suitable version of an underlined word which was an adjective. The difference between the first and second section was that in the first section, the respondent had to choose from two existing Arabic phrases, whereas in the second section, the respondent was left to find out on his/her the best collocation that goes with the Arabic word. Again, the pattern used for the second section was adjective plus noun. The third question section 3, (Table 3) asked the respondents to circle or choose the Arabic verb that is more acceptable and appropriate to use when translating ten English collocations. The type of collocations used in this section belonged to the verb plus object pattern which again is considered among the most common collocation patterns (Newmark, 1988).

The last question section 4, (Table 4) asked the respondents to translate 12 Arabic phrases into English. The phrases ranged from nominal (starts with a noun) to verbal (starts with a verb) to idiomatic expressions. These Arabic phrases are also collocations within the Arabic language in the sense that the two Arabic words should go together to make the meaning sound and more native like. The total sum of the sections combined were 32 collocations all in all. Students were asked to translate the thirty two items of the test in a two hours timeframe.

**Table 1.** Question One - Section 1: Choose the most suitable translation for the following collocations (by students).

Item No	Translation collocations from English to Arabic	Suitable Translation	
		(A)	(B)
1	Hard labour	أشغال شاقة	اعمال مضنية
2	Raging storm	عاصفة هوجاء	عاصفة هانجة
3	Black market	سوق سوداء	سوق داكنة
4	Fast sleep	نوم سريع	سيات عميق
5	Warm reception	استقبال فاتر	استقبال حار

**Table 2.** Question Two - Section 2: Fill in the blanks with an Arabic suitable version of the underlined words (by students).

Item Number	Filling in the blank Arabic suitable version words by each student
1	Addled eggs ----- بيض
2	Bad milk ----- حليب
3	Spoiled meat ----- لحم
4	Rancid butter ----- زبدة
5	Rotten fruit ----- فاكهة

**Table 4.** Question Four - Section 4. Translating the following Arabic collocations phrases into English collocations (by students) .

Item No	Arabic collocations	English collocations	Item No	Arabic collocations	English collocations
1	امطار غزيرة	.....	7	يقوم بزيارة	.....
2	سبب وجيه	.....	8	قلبا وقالبا	.....
3	يكسب ثقتهم	.....	9	بصحة وعافية	.....
4	وجبة سريعة	.....	10	مهمة شاقة	.....
5	ياخذ صورة	.....	11	موت هادئ	.....
6	اشغال شاقة	.....	12	شهر عسل	.....

**Table 5.** Results of the participants’ responses and their percentage of question one.

Item No	Students who answered the item correctly	%	Students who answered the item wrongly	%	Students who gave no answer for the item	%	Total	%
1	1	3.3	29	96.7	0	0	30	100
2	28	93.4	1	3.3	1	3.3	30	100
3	12	40	17	56.7	1	3.3	30	100
4	11	36.7	19	63.3	0	0	30	100
5	29	96.7	1	3.3	0	0	30	100

**Table 6.** Results of the participants’ responses and their percentage of question two.

Item Number	Students who answered the item correctly	%	Students who answered the item wrongly	%	Students who gave no answer for the item	%	Total	%
1	11	36.7	10	33.3	9	30	30	100
2	17	56.7	11	36.7	2	6.6	30	100
3	13	43.4	7	23.3	10	33.3	30	100
4	9	30	9	30	12	40	30	100
5	15	50	7	23.3	8	26.7	30	100

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thirty male and female Libyan ESL students from the faculty of languages/ Benghazi University were randomly selected to participate in the study. Prior to the commencement of the test, the researcher read the test instructions loudly and clearly to ensure all participants were aware of the nature and intention of the testing. Students were asked to translate the questions as mentioned above in the study (questions 1 - 4) of the test to the best of their abilities. Students were asked to provide their answers on the same question sheet. The use of reference dictionaries was strictly forbidden. Responses were collected by the researcher in preparation for analysis. Responses were analyzed statistically in two days and results and conclusions were made. Results of the collocation translation examination that the Libyan participants of the study took in order to determine their competence level when it comes to translating the collocations from English to Arabic and vice versa. The study is proceeded as such, the questions of the

exam are posted to be followed by a table that shows the results of the participants’ responses and their percentage of the questions. Beneath each table, a discussion of the results is delineated and an interpretation of the findings is explained.

The results as shown in (Table, 5), concluded that it is clear that the **adjective plus noun** collocation pattern represented a problem to some students. It is obvious that not a single item within question one was answered correctly by most of the respondents. Item number 5 ‘warm reception’ seems to be the easiest one since only one student missed it. The Arabic equivalent for such an expression is استقبال حار. There is no other equivalent for such an expression in Arabic. That seems to explain the idea that almost all the respondents got it correct except one. The most difficult item within question one, however, was item number 1, namely ‘hard labour’ since only one respondent got it correctly and the rest missed it. The reason seems to be with the expression ‘hard labor’ since in Arabic the word ‘hard’ is usually translated into صعب أو مضنى whereas the word ‘labor’ is given the meaning ‘عمل’. The respondents seem to

have resorted to their Arabic repertoire and chose therefore the equivalent *اعمال مضمينة* instead of the right and more suitable translation which is *أشغال شاقة*. Looking through the results shown in the (Table 5) reveals that the vast majority of respondents 93.4% got item number 2 correctly. The Arabic expression *عاصفة هائجة* does not exist in proper standard Arabic since the word *هائجة* does not collocate with *عاصفة* in Arabic, It rather collocates with *بحار أو جياذ*. That explains the fact that the majority of examinees selected the proper word which is *هوجاء* which does collocate in Arabic with the word *عاصفة*. As to items 3 and 4, the number of respondents who got the wrong answers were more than those who got them correctly. This can be attributed to the idea of literal translation that Libyan students tend to resort to instead of relying on their knowledge of how words collocate with other words to give natural and spontaneous meaning. The finding which answered the first question is in conformity with [Mustafa \(2010\)](#) and [Lukac \(2013\)](#), study entitled "How word choice matters: an analysis of adjective-noun collocations in a corpus of learner essays" in their study. It was concluded that some characteristics in the use of adjective noun collocations are consistent across non-native corpora. Others, however, are specific for a particular group of learners which can be attributed to first language (L1) transfer.

Results as described in (Table 6) for question 2 indicate, that the **adjective plus noun** collocation pattern again represents a problem to some students. The difference between the first and second question, as outlined earlier, was that in the first question, the respondent had to choose from two existing Arabic phrases, whereas in the second section, the respondent was left to find out on his / her own the best collocation that goes with the Arabic word. On the whole, the percentage of responses of the examinees who gave wrong answers or did not give any answers at all was far much greater than that of those who correct answers. The percentages of examinees' responses of item 5 and (2) were 56.7% and 50% respectively which reflect a rather very moderate performance. The percentages of the other three items 4, 1 and 3 were 30%, 36.7% and 43.4% respectively which reflect a very poor performance. The reason for this very low performance seems to be attributed to the idea that apart from the difficulty that Libyan students seem to encounter when they are asked to translate the **adjective plus noun** collocation, the fact that they were not given choices to select from, thus rely exclusively on their previous knowledge, made them unable most of the time to give the correct translation. In addition, in Arabic, one word can be

used to describe all the adjectives that are followed by nouns in question 2 which is *فاسد / فاسدة*. Other more suitable Arabic words such as *حامض*, to describe milk, *متنعف / عفن* to describe meat, *مزنخ* to describe butter and so on. Study whose results are aligned with the finding of answering the second inquiry is the study entitled "Language proficiency and knowledge in Adjective-Noun Collocations: A Case Study of Vietnamese Learners of English" by [Pham \(2022\)](#). The results show that the students, even whose at advanced levels, had a very limited knowledge of adjective-noun collocations. It is noteworthy that the students had greater difficulties in identifying erroneous collocations than recognizing the correct combinations.

It is obvious that the **verb plus noun** collocation pattern also represents a problem to Libyan students. Results as shown in Table 7, for question 3 find out of the ten items included in the question, only five were answered correctly with a satisfactory level, the highest being 96.7 % (item 7), the lowest being 56.7% (item 1). All the respondents, however, failed to answer any of the remaining five items correctly. None of them could even guess the correct translation from the answers provided. Although, the last item 10 was answered correctly by a meager percentage of respondents (46.7%), the fact remains that this percentage does not cross the border line of having achieved the accepted standard pass mark which is 50%.

It should be noted, however, that although **the verb plus noun** collocation pattern is very common in Arabic since the central point in this pattern is to match a certain verb with a certain noun in Arabic, the fact remains that Libyan students in the process of translating collocations seem to adopt an analogy strategy referred to as synonymy strategy. This is often used by learners whose foreign/second language proficiency is limited. Synonymy strategy happens when learners substitute a synonym for a word in the target language unaware that this might constitute a collocational violation. The finding which answered the third inquiry is in full harmony with [Ebrahimi-Bazzaz et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Shraideh, and Mahadin \(2015\)](#), whose study which was entitled 'Difficulties and Strategies in Translating Collocations in BBC Political Texts' revealed that many participants used synonymy and literal translation as primary strategies to render collocations followed by paraphrasing and transposition respectively ([Shraideh and Mahadin, 2015](#)).

**Table 7.** Results of the participants' responses and their percentage of question three.

Item No	Students who answered the item correctly	%	Students who answered the item wrongly	%	Students who gave no answer for the item	%	Total	%
1	17	56.7	12	40	1	3.3	30	100
2	0	0	29	96.7	1	3.3	30	100
3	23	76.7	6	20	1	3.3	30	100
4	1	3.3	29	96.7	0	0	30	100
5	2	6.6	28	93.4	0	0	30	100
6	2	6.6	28	93.4	0	0	30	100
7	29	96.7	1	3.3	0	0	30	100
8	28	93.4	2	6.6	0	0	30	100
9	23	76.7	7	23.3	0	0	30	100
10	14	46.7	16	53.3	0	0	30	100

**Table 8.** Results of the participants' responses and their percentage of question four.

Item No	Students who answered the item correctly	%	Students who answered the item wrongly	%	Students who gave no answer for the item	%	Total	%
1	15	50	12	40	3	10	30	100
2	10	33.3	10	33.3	10	33.3	30	100
3	15	50	3	10	12	40	30	100
4	27	90	2	6.7	1	3.3	30	100
5	27	90	1	3.3	2	6.7	30	100
6	20	66.67	1	3.3	9	30	30	100
7	2	6.6	14	46.7	14	46.7	30	100
8	0	0	9	30	21	70	30	100
9	1	3.3	5	16.7	24	80	30	100
10	10	33.3	6	20	14	46.7	30	100
11	5	16.7	14	46.7	11	36.6	30	100
12	21	70	7	23.3	2	6.7	30	100

The results in Table 8 for question 4, reveals that, the overall performance of the respondents when translating Arabic phrases - chosen purposefully to represent Arabic collocations themselves-into English collocations was rather low too. The phrases ranged from nominal (starts with a noun) to verbal (starts with a verb) to idiomatic expressions. Only two items (4 & 5) were answered correctly with a high percentage which happened to be 90%. The fourth item belonged to the **adjective plus noun** collocation pattern *وجبة سريعة*, whereas the fifth item belonged to the **verb plus noun** collocation pattern *يأخذ صورة*. Only other items (6 & 12) could be answered with a reasonable percentage namely 66.6 and 70 respectively.

It should be noted that both items (6 & 12) belong to the category of **adjective plus noun** collocation pattern *اشغال شاقة*. Item number 6, however, occurred in question one in English which required the respondents to choose its Arabic translation from two choices. In question one, the same item was answered correctly by

only one respondent whereas in question 4 due to being introduced in Arabic and needed to be translated to English, twenty respondents could get English translation correctly. This could be attributed to the reason that either some of the respondents benefited from the existence of the item in English in question one or it is easier for them to translate from Arabic to English and not vice versa. As to item number 12 *شهر عسل*, the percentage of those who got it correctly was reasonable (70). It seems that the idiom **honey moon** is well established in the minds of many Libyan students to mean *شهر عسل* although if translated literally it yielded a completely different phrase '**sweet month**'.

Two more items within question 4 were answered correctly by only 50% of the respondents which were items (1 & 3). Although the two items belong to two different collocation patterns i.e., **adjective plus noun** and **verb plus noun** respectively, the percentage of the correct answer does not cross the border line of the accepted standard pass mark which is

50%. The reason for this can be due to the fact that in Arabic, there are more collocations that fit the English expression 'heavy rain' such as *مطر كثيف* and *مطر شديد*, *وابل من المطر* and not just *أمطار غزيرة* whereas the Arabic expression *يكسب* can be translated by either 'win their trust', 'gain their confidence', 'earn their trust / confidence.' Only one translation was accepted which was 'win their trust'.

The remaining five items within question 4 which are numbers 2, 7 – 11 were not answered correctly. The percentage of correct responses of numbers 8 & 9 which are idioms, was very low, number 8 was not answered at all. There are some variations for the idiom "قلب وقلب" in English such as 'whole heartedly', 'inside and out', 'through and through', as well as 'heart and soul'. Libyan students seem to be unaware of these idioms in English that is why none of the respondents got the answer for this item correctly. The other Arabic idiom (number 9) "بصحة وعافية" was translated correctly by only one respondent which means that Libyan students have a problem when running into an Arabic idiom that needs to be translated to an equivalent in English.

On the whole, the research respondents' level when it comes to translating collocations whether from English to Arabic or vice versa has shown to be low (Salih and Dweik, 2021). This indicates that much effort needs to be exerted to upgrade their level and make them aware of the nuances that exist between Arabic and English collocations (Catford, 1965; Henka, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The results concluded that, in the translation works in academic education or official terms, should be a separation between Arabic collocations and English collocations in teaching the language, because every language has its own collocation which is completely different from other.

## DECLARATIONS

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### Data availability

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Authors' contribution

Both contributors are participated equally in the research, data analysis, and writing.

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### Consent to publish

The right of content is fully for publication in journal no other where.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests in this research and publication.

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