

**CHINESE TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS'
RECEPTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH
VERB+NOUN COLLOCATION**

GU MIN

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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RECEPTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH
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by

GU MIN

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBI	BBI Combinatory Dictionary
CAH	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
EA	Error Analysis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
FLA	Foreign Language Acquisition
IL	Interlanguage
L1	First Language
L1 LMM	L1 Lemma Mediation Model
L2	Second Language
LNU	Leshan Normal University
NL	Native language
NS	Native Speakers
NNS	Non-native Speakers
MCD	Modern Chinese Dictionary
OAED	Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary
OCDSE	Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English
OPVD	Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary
RHM	Revised Hierarchical Model
SL	Source Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TCFL	Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language
TL	Target Language
USM	University Sains Malaysia
UVLT	The Updated Vocabulary Level Test
VLT	Vocabulary Levels Test
WAT	Word Association Test

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Appendix A	A sample of the Updated Vocabulary Level Test
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**PENGETAHUAN PENERIMAAN KOLOKASI KATA KERJA+KATA NAMA
BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH PELAJAR PENGAJIAN TINGGI CINA YANG
BELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING**

ABSTRAK

Pengetahuan kolokasi adalah bahagian penting dalam perbendaharaan kata bahasa kedua (L2). Walaupun kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal+ kata nama dan kolokasi kata kerja leksikal + kata nama sukar bagi pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) terdapat kekurangan penyelidikan tentang tahap penerimaan pengetahuan kolokasi pelajar EFL di China. Di samping itu, kajian yang membandingkan pengetahuan kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal+ kata nama dan kolokasi kata kerja leksikal + kata nama sangat terhad. Jurang penyelidikan ini mendorong kajian tentang pengetahuan penerimaan pelajar EFL China terhadap kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal dan leksikal + kata nama bahasa Inggeris. Bagi mencapai objektif kajian, kajian kaedah campuran ini menggunakan ujian kolokasi COLLEX 5 untuk mengukur pengetahuan kolokasi 90 pelajar EFL China dari Fakulti Pengajaran Bahasa Cina sebagai Bahasa Asing (TCFL) Leshan Normal University. Analisis deskriptif pengetahuan kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal + kata nama dan kolokasi kata kerja leksikal + kata nama pelajar menunjukkan bahawa mereka memperoleh markah yang lebih tinggi untuk kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal + kata berbanding yang leksikal. Analisis inferensial corak kesilapan pelajar mendedahkan bahawa lebih daripada 75% kesilapan dalam pengetahuan kolokasi kata kerja leksikal + kata nama mereka adalah selaras dengan struktur bahasa Mandarin L1. Ini menunjukkan tahap pengaruh L1 pelajar EFL China dalam memahami kolokasi L2. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa kedua-dua faktor antarabahasa dan dalam-bahasa

mempunyai kesan yang signifikan terhadap kesilapan pengetahuan kolokasi pelajar pengajian tinggi EFL. Faktor antarabahasa didapati lebih mempengaruhi pengetahuan kolokasi kata kerja deleksikal + kata nama mereka berbandingkan pengetahuan kolokasi kata kerja leksikal + kata mereka kerana ada beberapa kata kerja deleksikal bahasa Inggeris yang kerap digunakan mempunyai makna yang serupa dalam bahasa Mandarin China. Kesilapan kolokasi leksikal juga dipengaruhi oleh faktor dalam-bahasa, terutamanya penyalahgunaan sinonim dan kekurangan pengetahuan kolokasi. Konsep palsu yang dihipotesiskan menyumbang pada tahap yang lebih rendah. Penemuan kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa pendidik-pendidik harus mengutamakan kolokasi yang sukar dalam pengajaran mereka, terutamanya yang melibatkan kata kerja deleksikal dan ketidakselarasan antara L1-L2. Penggunaan pelbagai kaedah pengajaran yang disesuaikan dengan setiap jenis kolokasi, termasuk analisis perbandingan L1 dan L2, dan memberi tumpuan kepada gabungan kata kerja+kata nama yang paling kerap digunakan akan membantu pelajar menjadi lebih mahir dalam penggunaan praktikal bahasa

CHINESE TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS' RECEPTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH VERB+NOUN COLLOCATION

ABSTRACT

Collocational knowledge is a crucial part of L2 vocabulary. While studies have shown that both delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations are difficult for EFL learners, to date, there has been a lack of research investigating the receptive level of collocational knowledge of Chinese tertiary EFL Learners. Furthermore, studies that compare delexical and lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge are limited. This research gap motivated the current study on Chinese EFL learners' receptive knowledge of English delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations. To achieve the objectives of the study, this mixed methods study employed the COLLEX 5 collocation test to measure the collocational knowledge of 90 Chinese tertiary EFL learners from the Faculty of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) at Leshan Normal University. Descriptive analyses of the learners' knowledge of delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations show that they scored higher for delexical verb+noun collocations compared to lexical ones. Inferential analyses of the learners' error patterns reveal that more than 75% of the errors in their lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge were congruent with L1 Mandarin language structure, indicating the level of influence of their L1 in understanding L2 collocations. Both interlingual and intralingual factors were found to have effects on Chinese tertiary EFL learners' collocational knowledge errors. Interlingual factor found to affect their delexical verb+noun collocation knowledge more than their lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge as certain English frequently used delexical verbs have similar meanings in Mandarin Chinese. Lexical collocation errors are also influenced by

intralingual factor, particularly the misuse of synonyms and the lack of collocation knowledge. False concepts hypothesized contribute to a lesser extent. The findings of the study suggest that educators should prioritize difficult collocations in their instruction, particularly those that involve delexical verbs and L1-L2 inconsistencies. Using varied instructional methods tailored to each collocation type, including comparative analysis of L1 and L2, and focusing on the most frequent used verb+noun combinations will help students become more proficient in practical language use.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background of the current study, beginning with a discussion on the acquisition of vocabulary in a second language (hereafter L2), including collocations, types of verbs in verb+noun collocations, two causes of learners' errors, sources of errors, and two cognitive models of bilingual language processing. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the problem statement, research objectives, and research questions. It then proceeds to discuss the significance, scope and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with the definitions of key terms used in the current study.

1.2 Background to the study

Vocabulary acquisition refers to the cognitive process of learning and acquiring unfamiliar words and their meanings, either through explicit instruction or through exposure to language in various contexts (McKeown & Curtis, 2014). An individual who wishes to gain a deep understanding of a word must know its form, its meaning, and its use (Nation, 2001, 2019). Word form refers to the written or spoken form of a word as well as the composition or parts of a word. There is usually a higher difficulty level for learning difficult words than it is for learning easy words (Ellis & Beaton, 1993; Ehri & Rosenthal, 2010; Laufer, 1990; Nagy et al., 1985). Specifically, the meaning of a word can be described as a combination of its form, meaning, concepts, and referents, as well as the associations they have with that word (Carroll, 2012; Michaelis, 2003; Szalay & Deese, 2024). In order to understand the meaning of words,

it is often helpful to analyse them into parts such as prefixes and suffixes (Aslamiah, 2020; Carstairs-McCarthy, 2017; White et al., 1989), and this can help in learning what these parts mean. In the field of word usage, knowing a word means being able to recognise its functions grammatically, its combinations, collocations, and restrictions (Bartsch, 2004; Martyńska, 2004; Schmitt, 1999), which are related to its frequency and appropriateness.

Collocations in the English language, according to Hill (2000), are not simply accidental pairings of words, but the building blocks of language expression, which enable learners to communicate fluently and effectively. When learners immerse themselves in authentic English language use, they gain a greater understanding of collocations as integral components of speech and writing. Furthermore, Ellis (2006) highlights the importance of incorporating colloquial patterns into the learning process by highlighting the proficiency of native English speakers when utilising collocations. Through collocations, learners gain a deeper understanding of English language usage and increase their communicative competence, contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, knowledge of collocation plays a crucial role in the learning of English as a L2 vocabulary. McCarthy (1990, p. 12) describes collocation as “a marriage contract between words, and some words are more closely tied together than others” and argues that “collocation is an important organising principle in any language’s vocabulary” (Ibid.). There are various types of collocations, including verb+noun, verb+adverb, noun+preposition, adjective+noun, adverb+adjective, and verb+preposition combinations (McCarthy, 1990, p. 12).

Collocation, however, presents problems for L2 English learners. Research suggests that verb+noun collocation is the most challenging word combination for non-native speakers (NNS), even at an advanced level (Altenberg & Granger, 2002;

Cao & Badger, 2023; Du et al., 2022; Garner, 2023; Howarth, 1998; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Lee, 2021; Tsai, 2020; Wang & Chen, 2023; Yamagata, 2020). Studies on Chinese EFL learners, for instance, suggest that they face a significant problem in acquiring verb+noun collocation (Cai, 2017; Ding, 2024; Men, 2016; Guo, 2017; Tsai, 2020).

In English verb+noun collocations, “verbs are the primary locus of collocation bias... Practicing collocations must primarily involve practicing verbs” (Nesselhauf, 2005, p. 269). In other words, verbs should receive more attention. It has been shown in previous studies that verbs dominate texts as essential lexical items (Abdullah et al., 2021). The comprehension of verbs in collocation learning poses a greater difficulty for learners compared to nouns (Gentner, 2006; Nesselhauf, 2005; Putra & Suhardijanto, 2019; Sanguannam, 2016). Usually the verbs are transitive (Benson et al., 2010), which include a particular group of verbs called delexical verbs. Delexical verbs are also known as light verbs, empty verbs, and weak verbs semantically. The most common ones are: *give, make, have, take*, etc. In delexical verb+noun collocations, the meaning of the delexical verb does not add to the overall meaning of the collocation, for example, *keep a secret, make progress* and *do homework* (Sanguannam, 2016). According to Howarth (1998), lexical verb+noun combinations such as *polish shoes, commit a crime* and *lose count* are distinct from the delexical verb+noun collocation. Delexical verb+noun collocations pose a challenge for L2 learners due to the difficulty in determining which verb to use. L2 learners, according to Gyllstad (2005), cannot determine which collocation forms in English are correct, such as *pay a visit* vs. *do a visit*. Several studies (e.g., Ariffin & Abdi, 2020; Barghamadi et al., 2023; Du et al., 2022; Howarth, 1998; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021; Men, 2016; Ozan, 2019) also indicate that EFL learners have difficulties identifying

collocations, such as *catch a cold*, because they are confused in the literal meaning with the figurative use of the verb *catch*. Howarth (1998) finds that technical sense also poses some problems for L2 learners (such as *give bill*). His study reveals that language can transfer a greater degree of lexical and restricted technical meaning from first language (L1) to L2 collocation.

In light of the above, researchers (e.g., Ang et al., 2011; Cowie, 1998; Dosh & Al-Mahameed, 2024; Heydari & Bagheri, 2012; Jiang, 2023; Mahmoud, 2005) claim that learners' errors are caused by two factors, namely interlingual and intralingual. With regard to the interlingual factor, researchers (e.g., El-Dakhs, 2015; Lee, 2016; Wu et al., 2010) find that people tend to use their L1 knowledge to create awkward combinations when they are unsure of the collocates for the words they intend to communicate in L2. Others (e.g., Cao & Badger, 2023; Phoocharoensil, 2014; Pulido & Dussias, 2020) claim that errors induced by L1 account for a significant part of erroneous collocations. In other words, learners' L1 influences the mental processing of L2 collocations. Intralingual errors are due to transfer within the target language of the learner. Factors that contribute to these errors include incomplete knowledge of a foreign language (FL), overgeneralisation of the rules of FL, or misuse of synonyms (Do & Le, 2023; Harta et al., 2021; Richards, 1974). For instance, a learner may say, *make an exam* instead of the correct collocation, *take an exam*. In Mandarin Chinese, the verb "make" (做 *zuò*) is commonly used with the noun "exam" (考试 *kǎoshì*). Therefore, they may transfer this usage pattern to English and mistakenly use "make" instead of "take" as they try to express a similar idea in English.

Selinker's (1972) five central processes in the Interlanguage (IL) Hypothesis explain how L2 learners objectively identify and interpret language learning as vital processes, such as language transfer, which integrate to support the learner's

intermediate linguistic knowledge. IL is “a kind of interim grammar gradually progressing towards the target language grammar,” which means that analysis of learners’ errors can help to “predict the linguistic stage that a learner is at” (Gitsaki, 1998, p. 91). Selinker (1972) also emphasises that L1 influences and shapes the process of learning the target language, and L1 is also an essential vocabulary store that shapes learners’ independent language systems. NNS often make errors due to language transfer (also known as cross-linguistic influence or L1 interference). Language structure, language mixing, L1 transfer, and native language avoidance are among the many terms used to describe language transfer (Odlin, 1989). Despite the vast literature on language transfer, there is still a significant amount of uncertainty in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) about when, where, how, and to what level L1 transfer impacts or manifests itself in L2 learners’ independent language system or target language knowledge (Han et al., 2023; Liu, 2023; Meriläinen, 2010). In addition, because language learning is mainly unconscious, researchers can only speculate on the mechanisms at work. Some researchers (e.g., Bahtiyarova, 2020; Khan & Anjum, 2023; McClelland & Rogers, 2003; Seidenberg et al., 1997) argue that the two languages have a common lexicon (mental dictionary), while others argue that they have separate lexicons (e.g., Thavareesan & Mahesan, 2020; Ullman, 2007; Waldendorf et al., 2022). Even though there are many models, such as the concept mediation model and the word association model, “there is an agreement upon the assumption that the bilingual linguistic system has a single space for meanings or concepts and two separate spaces for each language lexicon” (Lim, 2015, p. 362).

L2 researchers suggest that L1 knowledge is necessary for L2 vocabulary development (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). Ringbom (1978) found that L2 learners’ lexical errors are caused by L1-L2 equivalent linguistic structures transferred through word-

for-word translation. This supports Lado's (1957) claims in his Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) that learners' independent language systems are sometimes erroneous due to mother tongue interference. If the features of the L2 language are not similar to those of their native language, learners will find it difficult. Conversely, when two languages share similarities, it will be easier for learners (Hayati, 1998). CAH's underpinning principle is that the mother tongue has a direct influence on L2 learners' errors, which Odlin (1989) suggests can be used to analyse and describe language acquisition.

Beside the approach above used in the field of SLA to understand and analyse learners' errors, Kroll and Stewart's Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM), proposed in 1994, has significantly impacted L2 and bilingual language processing. The RHM accounts for the development of meaning and concepts from the L2 lexical form. In RHM, one of the central assumptions is that the links between the three lexical stores, namely the L1 lexicon, the L2 lexicon, and the concept, vary in their strength according to the translation direction, and therefore the strength of the link between the stores will differ. In other words, it tries to explain the relative "strength of the links between words and concepts in each of the bilingual languages" (Kroll et al., 2010, p. 373). RHM states that words from each language are interconnected at a lexical level, according to the logic of RHM. L1 mediation is applied due to the limited vocabulary in L2. In other words, "the link from the L2 to the L1 is stronger than the link from the L1 to the L2" (Clenton, 2015, p. 120). This phenomenon of linkage illustrates the possible cognitive process in which individuals, while acquiring and utilizing a L2, resort to translating L2 words into their L1 in order to comprehend the intended meaning. Consequently, it is assumed that the connections between L1 words and their corresponding meanings are robust (Clenton, 2015).

Jiang's (2002, 2004) L1 Lemma Mediation Model (L1 LMM) is a psycholinguistic model of L2 lexical learning. L1 LMM, based on Levelt's (1989) lexical representation model, is consistent with RHM's core idea, which is that "less proficient L2 speakers get access to semantic information of an L2 lexical form through translating it into L1 meaning or concept" (Alshehri, 2021). According to the L1 LMM, the majority of L2 words undergo a two-stage process of lexical development. During the initial phase, L2 words are initially associated with translations in L1, rather than being directly linked to their respective meanings. Whenever an L2 word is encountered, its translation in L1 is activated in order to access lemma information, which includes the word's syntax and meaning. The data pertaining to the lexeme, including its pronunciation, morphology, and orthography, is progressively rendered ineffective as it fails to facilitate the utilisation of L2 vocabulary. As proficiency in L2 grows, the association between L2 words and their translations in L1 diminishes, giving way to a more direct connection between L2 words and their respective meanings in L1. According to Levelt's lexical representation model, the L1 lemma information can be observed as having been transferred into the L2 lexical entry from its corresponding L1 translation. The aforementioned information has been incorporated into the lexical knowledge that is manifested in L2 entries. Lemma information plays a mediating role in L2 word usage. Jiang (2002) refers to the distinctive mechanism of associating meaning and form in the acquisition of L2 vocabulary as "L1 lemma copying," while the subsequent utilisation of these lexical items is termed "L1 lemma mediation." Jiang (2002) emphasises the imprinting of L1 lemma information in the lexical entry of L2 words, rendering it challenging for advanced EFL learners to replace this information with the new meaning or concept associated with the L2 word. One observation that provides

support for Jiang's model is that certain proficient Chinese EFL learners struggle to differentiate between two sets of English word pairs due to the absence of lexical distinction in their native language (Jiang, 2002).

Given this, the current study investigates the learning of receptive knowledge of English verb+noun collocation for Chinese EFL learners in China, focusing on delexical and lexical verb+noun collocation. This study uses a standardised collocation test to identify delexical and lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge for Chinese EFL learners and analyses error patterns based on Kroll and Stewart's (1994) RHM. Given the challenge Chinese EFL learners face with receptive knowledge of delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations, it is necessary to look at the causes of collocation errors, referring to interlingual and intralingual factors (Do & Le, 2023; Harta et al., 2021; Richards, 1974). The L1 LMM, developed by Jiang (2002, 2004), is used in order to explain the cause of collocational errors.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The growth of a learner's lexical repertoire is greatly influenced by the development of their receptive vocabulary. It has been reported by Webb (2008) that those with a greater receptive vocabulary possess a greater productive vocabulary than those with a smaller one. In spite of the fact that many studies have been conducted on receptive vocabulary, most of them tend to focus on the extent or range of this knowledge rather than its depth or level of understanding (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Schmitt et al., 2001; Stæhr, 2008; Uchihara & Clenton, 2020). The concept of vocabulary extends beyond mere word count and encompasses a broader understanding. Individuals vary in their level of vocabulary knowledge as well as the extent and accuracy of the information they possess about specific words. According

to Kieseier et al. (2022), Nagy (2007), and Proctor et al. (2012), the understanding of vocabulary depth can be considered as a form of metalinguistic awareness. An individual's vocabulary consists of a number of words that affect his or her ability to comprehend the terminology that is being used. This includes knowledge about the syntax, semantics, and morphology of each word. Therefore, it is imperative to allocate more focus and comprehension to the significance of vocabulary depth in the process of literacy development.

According to Li and Kirby (2015), the depth of vocabulary encompasses three key dimensions, namely elaborated meaning, morphology, and collocational utilisation of words. According to Vu and Peters (2023), collocations and phrases, among the three aspects considered, have been identified as a significant obstacle. Collocations have been the primary focus of L2 vocabulary learning research for an extended period of time. There is agreement among Boonyarattanasoontorn et al. (2020), Estaji and Montazeri (2022), and Tungyai and Rakpa (2022) that there are various levels of collocational competence that can be used to facilitate learning and teaching. A number of levels are included here, such as the ability to recognise the meaning and form of an oral or written language input, such as identifying necessary collocations. The ability to understand the semantic, distributional, morphosyntactic, and stylistic restrictions that govern the word choice in collocations and the ability to effectively use collocations in writing and speech. Three characteristics characterise this usage: fluency, accuracy, and context/style appropriateness.

L2 learners commonly lack collocational knowledge (Akhter & Nordin, 2022; Bui, 2021; Hill, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003). And the majority of language errors are caused by faulty collocations, not grammar or sentence structure (Mehmonova, 2022; Kurniawan & Abdurrahim, 2023). Although teachers tend to focus on correcting

sentence structure or grammar, it is faulty collocations that are responsible for causing most of the language errors. There have been a variety of approaches developed by researchers and educators to teaching and testing collocations throughout the decades, ranging from implicit noticing, recall, and acceptance judgement-based instruction described in recent studies by Ferguson et al., (2024) and Naderi and Barani (2020) to explicit lexical analysis-based instruction described in studies by Halim (2021), Nguyen et al. (2023), and Zheng (2023). Focusing on the L2 learners is crucial due to the difficulties they face in acquiring collocational knowledge. In contrast, research conducted by Boone et al. (2023), Du et al. (2022), and Nesselhauf (2003, 2005) suggests that even advanced L2 learners, who have received formal and immersion-based instruction, still encounter difficulties in producing and recognising collocations.

The complexity of acquiring second language collocations has been extensively demonstrated in various studies (e.g., Conklin & Thul, 2023; Ding, Reynolds & Ha, 2022; Lee & Shin, 2021; Long, 2023; Saito, 2020). Multiple factors contribute to this complexity (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Pellicer-Sánchez et al., 2022; Sonbul et al., 2023; Spolsky, 1989). Richards and Sampson's comprehensive framework (1974) effectively explains the intricacies of collocation acquisition, encompassing seven key factors that influence learners' interlanguage (IL) ability. These factors include language transfer, intralingual interference, sociolinguistic context, exposure to the target language, production mode, learner's age, linguistic system instability, and difficulties associated with the linguistic items to be acquired. An understanding of collocation learning in a L2 context can be gained through this framework. It illustrates how EFL learners negotiate differences in English collocational patterns between their native language and English by focusing on the impact of language transfer. Learners' proficiency with collocation patterns is also

influenced by intralingual factors, such as differences in language register and vocabulary usage. Further, the framework also takes sociolinguistic context, exposure to the target language, and modes of language production into account, emphasising the social factors that influence EFL learners' errors in delexical and lexical collocations.

According to Richards and Sampson's comprehensive framework (1974), the fourth research question analyses how interlingual and intralingual factors influence delexical and lexical collocation errors among Chinese EFL learners. The findings of this study emphasise how language transfer and intralingual interference shape learners' ability to comprehend collocational patterns. These factors interact to shape errors, and researchers gain insight into the challenges encountered by Chinese EFL learners in learning collocations. The interplay among these factors allows a deeper understanding of the challenges involved and a more effective approach to address and mitigate them.

It is evident from the analysis above that the complexity of the subject matter that is being acquired is an important determinant, in addition to a variety of individual and contextual factors. Some researchers (e.g., Fang & Zhang, 2021; Riches et al., 2022; Wolter & Gyllstad, 2011, 2013; Wolter & Yamashita, 2015; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010) examine similarities and/or differences between L1 and L2 that may influence collocational knowledge. In some other studies, researchers compare the collocational knowledge of L1 and L2 speakers and focus on extralinguistic factors, such as a lack of intuition (e.g., Aldukhayel, 2023; Cangır, 2021; Siyanova, 2010; Tabak & Takač, 2023) and the age of onset and cutoff of learning (Glass, 2022; Lundell et al., 2023; Schmid & Karayayla, 2020). There is another approach that suggests that inadequate teaching and learning strategies, often tailored to the needs of young and teenage

learners rather than adult L2 learners, are to blame for the fact that they do not address holistically the processing of vocabulary units and offer insufficient language input (Macis & Schmitt, 2017; Naserpour & Esfandiari, 2020; Szudarski & Carter, 2016; Van Vu, 2022; Wray, 2008). Even though the studies mentioned above focused on collocation knowledge, a few studies have examined the types of collocations that might cause difficulties for L2 learners in relation to delexical verb+noun constructions (Boers et al., 2014; Nesselhauf, 2005) in order to determine whether or not such collocations might cause difficulties for L2 learners. These constructions pose difficulties as the delexical verb undergoes a loss of its typical semantic content, while the noun assumes the primary role of conveying meaning. Moreover, EFL learners encounter difficulties when attempting to transfer words that possess figurative or technical connotations (Barfield, 2006; Harjo & Ayuningtias, 2024; Macis & Schmitt, 2017; Poulsen, 2005; Saporbayevich & Mamaraimovna, 2023). Some studies (e.g., Liao, 2010; Tsai, 2020; Nesselhauf, 2005) have examined the extent of learners' knowledge regarding verb+noun collocations. Further investigation is warranted to explore the extent of EFL learners' knowledge regarding verb+noun collocations, as opposed to conducting separate enquiries into delexical and lexical verb collocations.

As mentioned above, one factor that can influence language learning is the extent to which the learner's L1 is similar to or different from their L2. Numerous studies pertaining to the collocation of verb and noun in the context of EFL have extensively investigated the influence of the L1 (e.g., Altuğ & Ahmet, 2022; Elkhadiri, 2023; Lee, 2021; Suleiman, 2022; Zhang & Sukying, 2021). Martelli (2006) conducts a study on learner corpora and indicates that individuals learning EFL commonly exhibit errors in collocation usage, with a significant number of these errors being influenced by their L1. Studies conducted by Laufer and Waldman (2011), Nesselhauf

(2003), and Wolter and Gyllstad (2013) have identified two distinct types of collocation that pose a specific difficulty for EFL learners. These types include incongruent collocations, which lack a direct translation equivalent in the learner's L1, and verb+noun collocations. Nevertheless, the majority of studies (e.g., Alderehim, 2023; Boonraks & Naisena, 2022; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Wang & Shaw, 2008) primarily concentrate on investigating the origins of learners' collocation errors by attributing them to the disparities between their L1 and L2. There has been limited research done on the impact of L1-L2 congruence/incongruence on EFL learners' receptive collocation knowledge, specifically in relation to both positive and negative transfer.

This study focuses on L2 learners, particularly Chinese EFL learners, and the L2 under examination is English. Research on Chinese EFL students in both public and private institutions in China reveals a deficiency in the requisite level of receptive vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Fan, 2022; Jiang & Phusawisot, 2023; Men, 2018; Peng, 2016; Wang, 2016). While there has been some scholarly discourse on verb+noun collocations in China (Li et al., 2023; Men, 2016; Min, 2024; Peng, 2016; Wang, 2016; Wu & Tissari, 2021), the body of research pertaining to the learning and instruction of English receptive verb+noun collocations is limited, especially empirical studies on collocations among EFL learners. To date, there has been a lack of research investigating the receptive level of collocational knowledge of Chinese university EFL students. Furthermore, there are few studies that compare delexical and lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge.

In order to fill the gap in the literature, this study examines Chinese EFL learners' receptive knowledge of delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations, analyses the error patterns in their receptive collocation knowledge, and identifies the

causes of errors through inferential analysis. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese EFL learners' collocational knowledge. An analysis of the quantitative data involves structured assessments measuring the learners' receptive knowledge of delexical and lexical collocations, which allows for statistical evaluation. By contrast, qualitative analyses explore their receptive knowledge and identify and analyse error patterns, along with inferential analysis of the underlying causes of these errors. As a result of this dual approach, learners' collocation knowledge is both quantified and explored, offering a deeper understanding of the causes of their errors.

Through the quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform pedagogical strategies, improving Chinese EFL learners' understanding of collocations. However, a limitation of this study is the small data set; only 90 out of 300 students who participated in the vocabulary test qualified for the subsequent collocation test. This reduced sample size may restrict the generalisability of the findings to the broader Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) student population, thereby necessitating caution in interpreting the results. Despite this limitation, the study provides valuable insights into the collocation knowledge of non-English major undergraduates.

1.4 Research objectives

The objectives of the current study on the receptive knowledge of verb+noun collocation of Chinese tertiary EFL learners are as follows:

1. To investigate the level of receptive delexical verb+noun collocations' knowledge of Chinese EFL learners.

2. To investigate the level of receptive lexical verb+noun collocations' knowledge of Chinese EFL learners.

3. To examine the difference in error patterns of Chinese EFL learners' receptive knowledge of delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations.

4. To analyse how interlingual and intralingual factors influence the delexical and lexical collocation errors made by Chinese EFL learners.

1.5 Research questions

Given the above objectives, the current research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of receptive delexical verb+noun collocations' knowledge of Chinese EFL learners?

2. What is the level of receptive lexical verb+noun collocations' knowledge of Chinese EFL learners?

3. How do error patterns in Chinese EFL learners' receptive knowledge of English delexical and lexical verb+noun collocations differ?

4. How do interlingual and intralingual factors influence the delexical and lexical collocation errors made by Chinese EFL learners?

1.6 Significance of the study

The current study provides insights into Chinese EFL learners' receptive knowledge of verb+noun collocations, contributing to a deeper understanding of collocation knowledge in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Researchers and educators can use the findings of this study to address gaps in learners' collocation

knowledge in the Chinese EFL context (Ding et al., 2024; Siyanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015).

McCarthy (1990) argues that vocabulary examination requires understanding collocational relationships at their core. "Collocation" is described by McCarthy as a "marriage contract between words," emphasising the necessity for students to not only memorise vocabulary items, but also learn the ability to combine them in natural ways, known as collocation (Hill, 2000). This study provides critical insights into the practical implications of verb+noun collocations for Chinese EFL learners. Learners must understand collocations, especially when considering language variations, as exemplified by Mandarin Chinese speakers' term for heavy rain, "big rain" (Huang et al., 2021). EFL learners face difficulties in using collocations due to their limited comprehension of how NSs skilfully combine words (Gabala & AlKhayri, 2014; Kang, 2020; Teng, 2020; Ying, 2009; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013).

Furthermore, the study's results shed light on how Mandarin Chinese language and culture affect English collocation knowledge. It provides broader implications for understanding the impact of linguistic and cultural backgrounds on collocational competence beyond the specific context of Chinese EFL learners.

Additionally, due to a scarcity of research on the knowledge of verb+noun collocations among EFL learners, the study's results contribute to the existing body of research and provide valuable insights into how EFL learners acquire collocations. Having a general understanding of how learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds navigate and acquire collocational knowledge in a second language environment would contribute to a better understanding of how learners acquire collocational knowledge in a foreign language.

1.7 Scope and limitation of the study

The study was conducted at Leshan Normal University. It is a public university located in Sichuan Province in southwestern China. The participants in this study are all undergraduate students majoring in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). Demographic data for these participants include an average age of 18-21, with a gender distribution of 28% for male and 72% female students. This selection is intentional and based on qualifications relevant to the research objectives. First, the study required students to pass the first round of the vocabulary level test (UVLT) and reach a specific score threshold in order to proceed to the second round of the collocation test, COLLEX 5. This requirement ensures that the participants have a basic level of English vocabulary proficiency. In addition, students majoring in TCFL demonstrate better Mandarin Chinese language skills and a relatively solid English foundation compared to other non-English majors, as reflected in university entrance requirements. The qualitative inferential analysis of this study mainly focuses on the influence of Mandarin Chinese on English collocation proficiency. Therefore, TCFL undergraduates are the group with the most relevant research objectives. For these reasons, this study purposefully selected undergraduates majoring in TCFL as the research subjects.

Secondly, this study examines receptive verb+noun knowledge through a written standardised test consisting of 50 multiple-choice questions.

Moreover, this study mainly focuses on the influence of L1 transfer on delexical and lexical verb+noun collocation knowledge, analysing the error patterns and exploring the causes of collocation errors through inferential analysis.

One of the main limitations is that, from the 300 students who participated in the vocabulary test, only 90 achieved a score of 26 or higher to qualify for the subsequent collocation test. This selection criterion, although diminishing the sample size, was crucial to guarantee that participants possessed sufficient vocabulary knowledge, thus improving the validity of the findings. While this smaller cohort may restrict the generalisability of findings to the entire TCFL student population, it facilitates a concentrated and thorough examination of collocation knowledge among individuals who achieved the proficiency benchmark. Moreover, incorporating students from different majors may compromise the significance of the findings, as they might lack the requisite language proficiency for this study.

Since the participants in this study came from only one major, the results do not represent the collocation knowledge level of all non-English major undergraduates. However, they do provide insights into the highest level of collocation knowledge among non-English majors of Normal Universities in the southwest of China.

1.8 Definition of key terms

The words that are commonly used in the present research are explained below.

Collocation: Collocations are words that are acquired together. Collocations come from ‘collocate,’ a Latin word. It means to assemble or place together. Firth initially introduced the term in the 1930s. Collocations refer to language parts memorised as whole units by people to attain language proficiency (Seretan, 2011). Two different words emerge within a compact space that complement each other.

Congruency: Congruency refers to how plausible a word-for-word sequence is in L1. The processing of collocations in L2 with word-for-word translations equivalent in learners’ L1 is quicker and more accurate than that of collocations

without translations (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010). There are word-for-word equivalents in the Chinese language for phrases such as *make trouble*. Consequently, the congruent effect will facilitate the mastery of this collocation quickly.

Delexical verb+noun collocation: Delexical verbs refer to common verbs that have weak or eroded meanings, such as *have, take, make, or give*, which take on a light sense when combined with specific nouns (Sinclair & Fox, 1990; Stein, 1991). Delexical verb+noun collocation contains verb+noun, and the verb has a ‘light’ meaning. For example, the delexical verb’s meaning does not contribute to the overall meaning of the collocation because of the word combination with ‘noun,’ such as *take a break* or *shake someone’s hand* (Nesselhauf, 2003).

EFL learners: “Foreign language” is a term used when referring to a language that is spoken outside the country in which it is spoken. Considering the benefits of learning a foreign language in various areas, including tourism, communicating with NS, and reading international journals, learning a foreign language is worthwhile for a number of reasons (Stern, 1983). There are a number of countries in the world where English is not an official language, and so students who study English are considered to be studying “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL). Taking this study as an example, the EFL learners in this study are Chinese people learning English in China who speak Mandarin.

Incongruent collocations: Collocations that do not have equivalent translations in the learners’ native language and target language (Nesselhauf, 2005).

Interlingual error: Verb+noun collocation errors are primarily caused by L1 interference (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010), in which learners translate literal translations from their native language to the target language. Therefore, interlingual error refers to L1 literal translation and L1 transfer in the current study.

Intralingual error: Apart from interlingual errors, other categorisations of errors in the L2 language are classified as intralingual errors. A major cause of verb+noun collocation errors is the incorrect use of synonyms. According to Kuo (2009), learners are capable of using the appropriate synonyms but fail to match the word's collocability. They, for instance, select *speak/tell a prayer* instead of *say a prayer*. It is also possible to trace verb+noun collocation errors back to other causes, such as false concepts hypothesised (Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011) and the lack of knowledge of collocations (Harta et al., 2021; Shitu, 2015). The false concepts hypothesised may be caused by a misunderstanding of the differences between words in the target language; for instance, learners commonly use the words *make* and *do* interchangeably (ibid.). Apart from the two causes of intralingual errors mentioned above, other causes of intralingual errors are classified as lack of collocation knowledge in this study.

L1 lemma mediation: The concept of L1 lemma mediation refers to the mapping of form to meaning, which occurs when new vocabulary is acquired in L2 in conjunction with the resulting lexical use (Jiang, 2002). As described in Jiang's (2002) lexical representation model, the lexical development of most L2 words takes place in two stages. Initial mapping of L2 words is based on L1 translations, rather than on meaning directly. L2 words are always translated into L1 words to provide lemma information (e.g., meaning and syntax). A lexeme's morphology, pronunciation, and orthography are gradually deactivated since they do not contribute to the understanding of L2 words. After acquiring experience in L2, L2 words no longer correspond directly to L1 translations but rather to the meaning of L1 words. This lemma information is responsible for mediating the use of L2 words.

Language transfer: The term “language transfer” is also used interchangeably with other terms such as “interlingual interference,” “native language interference,” etc. A study by Brown (1994, cited in Erkaya, 2012) demonstrates that learners initially acquire language through their native tongue, which significantly impacts subsequent L2 acquisition, as the native language serves as the primary reference for learners.

Lemma: “The canonical form of a word” (Baker et al., 2006, p. 104), a “set of lexical forms having the same stem and belonging to the same major word class, differing only in inflection and/or spelling” (Francis & Kučera, 1982, p. 1). A verb lemma such as *take*, for example, consists of the words *take*, *takes*, *taken*, *took*, and *taking*.

Lexeme: An abstract linguistic unit (spelt in capitals) with a broad range of variants (Jackson & Amvela, 2000, p. 56).

Lexical verb+noun collocation: Lexical verb+noun collocations refer to meanings containing technical or figurative references (Cowie, 1978). An example of this type of collocation is described as “a term with a technical or long-established figurative connotation that has lost most of its semantic meaning” (Cowie, 1991, p. 102). Associative collocations are called technical meanings, and figurative meanings are words that combine literal meanings with implied meanings for the purpose of conveying a specific message. *Cast*, as in *cast a vote*, signifies largely ‘to vote’. *Catch a cold* carries the figurative meaning of ‘seize an object with one’s hands’, rather than its more literal meaning. This type of collocation is referred to as a lexical verb+noun collocation. The verbs lose their literal meaning and combine with the noun to form a collocation.

Negative transfer: “The use of the first language (or other languages known) in a second language context resulting in a nontarget-like second language form” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 520).

Positive transfer: “The use of the first language (or other languages known) in a second language context when the resulting second language form is correct” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 520).

Receptive vocabulary knowledge: The definition of receptive knowledge given by Nation (1990, p. 5) is “the ability to recognise a word and recall its meaning when encountered”. Nation (1990) defines receptive or passive vocabulary as words that are first encountered, learnt, comprehended, and acquired through reading and listening to a variety of texts and media. In addition to receptive vocabulary, passive vocabulary can also be defined as the manner in which the learner retrieves and comprehends the meaning of a word when exposed to written or oral input (Nation, 2001). It is also known as receptive vocabulary knowledge (Webb, 2009) since learners are capable of identifying the form and usage of words as well as understanding their meaning (Laufer et al., 2004). This study is based on the Nation’s definition.

Semantic transfer: Semantic transfer is a form of lexical transfer that is dependent on the connections formed between words in the L1 or between words in the L1 and concepts mediated by the L1 (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) classify lexical and semantic transfer within the conventional framework of linguistic transfer, while conceptual transfer is placed in a comparable category. The current investigation employs the term “lexical transfer” as a comprehensive concept encompassing various forms of language transfer pertaining to second language (L2) lexical choices and decisions. Additionally, semantic transfer

serves as a distinct mechanism facilitating the interchangeable utilisation of word pairs. An example of cross-linguistic variation can be observed in the interpretation of the English phrase *catch a cold* in Mandarin Chinese, where it is understood as *get a cold*. Chinese speakers learning English may encounter challenges in selecting appropriate words, which can result in errors in lexical choice. The Chinese language, as the L1, holds a crucial significance in guiding Chinese EFL learners in their selection of appropriate vocabulary.

Verb+noun collocation: Collocations of verbs and nouns are made up of arbitrary combinations (Nesselhauf, 2003). According to Lewis (2000, p. 116), “That kind of collocation identifies a subject, generally including verb plus noun (like move home)”. Similarly, Cowie (1998) observes that the prototypical lexical collocations include verbs+nouns, and the noun carries the most meaning, being the centre of the collocations.

1.9 Conclusion

The current study's organisational structure is as follows: the first chapter encompasses background information, research problems, research objectives, research questions, significance, scope and limitations, and definition of terms. The second chapter explores a range of empirical studies in literature, encompassing topics such as vocabulary knowledge, collocation, vocabulary tests, language transfer theories, and conceptual framework. The third chapter elucidates the concepts of research design, data collection, and analysis. In the fourth chapter, the findings are presented. The fifth chapter explores the research findings and presents the conclusions. The subsequent chapter provides a more comprehensive analysis of the debate on verb+noun collocation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature related to vocabulary knowledge, including the concept of “knowing a word,” the distinction between productive and receptive knowledge, and the breadth and depth. The following section reviews two prominent approaches in the field of collocation studies, namely the frequency-based approach and the phraseological approach, in order to define collocations. It then follows to describe the classification of verb+noun collocation and receptive vocabulary tests and discusses the collocation error and error patterns. This chapter also provides a description of interlanguage and transfer theories, the Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM), and the L1 Lemma Mediation Model (L1 LMM). This is followed by a review of interlingual and intralingual factors, causes of verb+noun collocation errors, the significance of collocations and recent studies on collocation. Finally, the chapter concludes with a description of the conceptual framework of this study.

2.2 Vocabulary knowledge

According to Gass (1999), the process of acquiring a second language entails acquiring its vocabulary, implying that possessing knowledge of a lexical item encompasses understanding multiple aspects. Using Schmitt et al.’s (2001) definition, vocabulary knowledge is characterised by a continuous expansion. Individuals continuously expand their lexicon by incorporating new words into their mental repository on a daily basis. There has been a noticeable increase in scholarly interest in the study of vocabulary over the past several years. However, it is important to note