

Lexical Verbs in Verb-Noun Collocations: Empirical Evidence from a Malay ESL Learner Corpus

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that verbs are indeed one of the essential lexical items that seem to dominate a text. At tertiary levels, learners are often presented with a list of verbs that are essential for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses such as academic writing. However, it is believed that the learning and teaching of these verbs goes far beyond the lists of EAP verbs. This is because knowledge of lexical verbs entails not only the knowledge of grammatical structures, but also the knowledge of semantic and syntactic structures. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how commonly used lexical verbs are used in learner writing in the perspectives of grammatical, semantic and syntactic features of verb-noun collocations. To achieve this, a corpus-based study using WordSmith Tools was employed on a learner corpus of Malay ESL learners to identify most-commonly used lexical verbs. These verbs were further given a linguistic analysis using a phraseological-based approach. The findings revealed that the use of transitive verbs led to several occurrences of verb-noun collocations and that the phraseological patterns of these verbs are bound by both lexical and grammatical patterns. This leads to the conclusion that the teaching of lexical verbs, specifically Verb-Noun collocations in academic writing should not only include the semantic elements, but also the syntactical elements of the verbs. It is then recommended that a lesson on lexical verbs should incorporate the teaching and learning of both lexis and grammar.

Keywords: English for Academic Purpose; lexical verbs; phraseological-based approach; verb-noun collocations; learner corpus research

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary teaching, despite its importance, has been regarded as peripheral to language acquisition and has often taken the back seat to grammar, which is regarded as ‘the heart of a language’ (Afroogh, 2019). It is generally assumed that mastery of grammatical structure is very important for successful language learning, and learners need to master the grammatical structures of a language to use the language well. Hence, it is not surprising that the emphasis on grammar has influenced the overall scenario of language teaching and learning, resulting in inadequate attention invested in vocabulary instruction in the language classrooms (Sibold, 2011).

Nonetheless, in recent years language teaching and learning community has shifted their views on the role of grammar, placing instead the importance of lexis in ensuring learners’ success in a target language (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015; Nation, 2011; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Studies have shown it is lexical and not grammatical knowledge that can ensure learners’ great

proficiency in the target language and lexis is regarded as the foundation of accurate and fluent communication (Rudzka & Ostyn, 2003). McCarthy comments that, “[n]o matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way” (1990, p. viii).

Previous studies have shown that verbs are indeed one of the essential lexical items that seem to dominate a text (Granger & Paquot, 2009; 2015; Ordem & Bada, 2016). Lexical verbs or full verbs, function only as main verbs and are typically used to express action, state emotion and predicate meaning in a sentence (Biber et al., 1999). They have been reported to contribute serious difficulties to L2 learners, as learners are not only required to possess a wide range of vocabulary (Granger & Paquot, 2009; 2015), but also should be able to navigate them through voice, mood, aspect and tense (Hinkel, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2004), which to many L2 learners is not an easy feat. Tense, aspects and voice are often inconsistently used by L2 learners; using progressive aspect with non-progressive verbs, past tense when present tense is required, passive instead of active voice (Hinkel, 2004), overusing one tense over the other as a result of either L1 interference, generation or as an avoidance strategy (Guo, 2006; Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Kanestion et al., 2016). Hence, it is to no surprise that academic prose produced by L2 writers have been found to be overwhelmed with the use of lexical verbs in non-standard phraseological patterns (Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Granger & Paquot, 2009; 2015; Durrant & Schmitt, 2009; Kamarudin, 2013).

Lexical verbs as attested by past studies are no doubt challenging for L2 learners and made even more so by the teaching approach employed in teaching these verbs. At tertiary levels, learners are often presented with a list of verbs that are essential for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Granger and Paquot (2009;2015) believe that the learning and teaching of these verbs goes far beyond the lists of EAP verbs. This is because knowledge of lexical verbs entails not only the knowledge of grammatical structures, but also the knowledge of semantic and syntactic structures. The higher emphasis on the grammatical aspects of the language was also reported to result in teachers facing difficulties in the teaching of multi-word units like phrasal verbs and verb-noun collocations, as common reference materials including English language textbooks and the learner dictionaries used in Malaysian classrooms do not address this type of verbs in depth (Kamarudin, 2013; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014).

In the Malaysian context, investigation on learner use of verbs has often fallen under the error analysis tradition (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2019; Maros et al., 2007; Stapa & Mohd, 2010; Wee et al, 2010), but more recently in tandem with the advancement of computer technology and the growing influence of corpus linguistics in Malaysia, has seen corpus methodology being employed to investigate verbs. Several areas of investigation employing corpus methodology include phrasal verbs, verb-noun collocations, inflectional, derivational and word form errors for verbs and the patterns of use of lexical verbs in the context of EAP (see e.g., Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Ang et al., 2011; Kamarudin, 2013; Kanestion et al., 2016; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014; 2019). These studies indicate the importance of using appropriate forms of verbs, be it on their own or with their collocates as in verb-noun collocations, or in multi-word units involving lexical verbs, and at the same time highlight how ESL learners in Malaysia particularly are still lacking the lexical repertoire required of them to function effectively in an academic setting.

The findings from past studies have provided important insights on the patterns of use, underuse or overuse of lexical verbs among ESL learners in Malaysia, but more empirical data are needed for any generalisation to be made with regard to the use of lexical verbs among the learners. The limited number of prior research on lexical verbs among ESL learners in Malaysia in general and studies involving Malay learners at the advanced stage of language learning

specifically are major sources of motivation for the current study. It intends to provide further insight on the use of lexical verbs among Malay ESL learners in Malaysia based on empirical evidence. In short, the study aims to fulfill the following research objective:

1. to investigate how commonly used lexical verbs are used in learner writing in the perspectives of grammatical, semantic and syntactic features of verb-noun collocations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

VERBS IN LEARNER CORPUS RESEARCH

Learners' understanding and use of lexical verbs is one of the areas which has received most attention in the context of learner corpus research (LCR). The research conducted on verbs in the LCR varies in focus to include among others investigations on phrasal verbs (Akbari, 2009; Kamarudin, 2013; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014; 2019), copula *BE* (Aziz & Don, 2013; 2014; Ang et al., 2020), verb-noun collocations (Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Ang et al., 2011; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003; 2005), inflectional, derivational and word form errors for verbs (Can, 2017), and the patterns of use of lexical verbs in the context of EAP (Granger & Paquot, 2009; Kanestion et al., 2016).

In general, most studies contend that verbs present a major challenge to ESL learners and attributed the inappropriate use of verbs by ESL or EFL learners to negative interlingual transfer (Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Ang et al., 2011; Kamarudin, 2013; Nesselhauf, 2003; 2005; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014; 2019). Nesselhauf (2003) stressed that collocations involving verbs are challenging to master even by advanced learners and that learners' L1 has an incredibly significant effect on the incorrect use of collocations. Echoing on a similar note, Kamarudin (2013) concluded that ill-forms of common phrasal verbs (e.g., pick up, wake up, get up) has a strong association with learners' lexical knowledge, their awareness of common collocates, familiarity with the context of use and most importantly, with their mother tongue. Whilst Abdullah and Noor (2013) and Zarifi and Mukundan (2014; 2019) noted that even though L2 learners may be producing verbal collocations or phrasal verbs sparingly or in the pattern similar to the native learners', they tend to be used differently and are often unnatural.

LCR has also identified several common verb errors in the ESL learner production, including subject-verb-agreement (Ang et al., 2020), omission, overgeneration (Aziz & Don, 2013; 2014), tense, verb choice and verb form (Can, 2017). Ang et al. (2020) in their investigation of SVA and copula *be* errors in ESL learner writings reported that among the most common error types include mis-selection, omission, overinclusion, and blend errors, with mis-selection being the most prevalent. Can (2017), who examined interlanguage errors by Turkish EFL learners across six distinct proficiency levels, A1-A2; B1-B2; C1-C2, as defined by Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the most common verb error categories are incorrect tense of verb (TV), wrong verb choice (RV), wrong verb form (FV), missing verb (MV), and verb agreement (AGV) errors, while Aziz and Don (2013; 2014) reported overgeneration and omission instances of *be* in the writings of ESL Malay learners in Malaysia.

As for verb forms in the learner corpus data, Kanestion et al. (2016) in their investigation on the types and frequency of lexical verbs in argumentative essays in a corpus of 15 essays written by ESL learners in Malaysia found that past tense (VVD), -ing form (VVG), past participle (VVN) and -s form (VVZ) were most common, while the base form (VVO) was the least. Another study involving ESL learners in Malaysia by Abdullah and Noor (2013) reported that both NS and ESL learners utilised verb infinitive (VVI) most frequently

in their argumentative essays, but ESL learners tended to overuse past tense (VVD), whereas NS learners underused past participle (VVN).

The studies reviewed indicate that regardless of proficiency levels, registers and genres verbs in general pose a serious challenge to learners. More importantly in the context of the current study, a body of research on verbs among ESL learners in Malaysia are available for reference (see Abdullah & Noor, 2013; Ang et al., 2011; Ang et al., 2020; Kamarudin, 2013; Kanestion et al., 2016; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014; 2019). Nonetheless, due to the comparatively small number of studies and their varying focus, more studies are required to enable any generalisation to be made regarding the use of lexical verbs among learners in general. There are also very few studies involving more advanced Malay ESL learners, which is the focus on the current study. To date, only several studies have involved ESL Malay learners and they include Abdullah and Noor (2013) and Aziz and Don (2013; 2014), but only the former examined lexical verbs. The present study aims to fill this knowledge gap and would provide further insights on Malay learners' use of verbs, specifically verb-noun collocations based on empirical evidence.

PHRASEOLOGICAL-BASED APPROACH IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

As far as approaches in the teaching of multi word units like verb-noun collocations is concerned, there are two ways of looking at it: the traditional approach (i.e., phraseological approach), and the frequency-based approach (Granger & Paquot, 2008). According to Gries (2008), in the traditional approach, phraseology is a continuum on which there are fixed expressions at one end and the most flexible ones at the other end. The linguistic criteria, such as syntactic and semantic features, play an important role in differentiating the types of phraseological units. Frequency-based approach, on the other hand, is based on the distribution of lexical co-occurrences (Sinclair, 1987) which allows for the generation of a wider range of word combinations. Although not all word combinations would fit the existing linguistic classifications, they may still have the potential of having a syntagmatic relationship (Sinclair, 2004). Nevertheless, it is the fuzziness in the distinction between the types of word combinations that has caused learners to make mistakes in the use of collocations.

Phraseological competence is one of the types of linguistic competence that a learner should possess but is often lacking. Without it, they keep producing a text that lacks the appropriate use of phraseological units which can lead to ineffective writing. As phraseological units may have grammatical and semantic constraints, it is deemed essential to include phraseology in vocabulary teaching, as professed by Ellis (2008) and Granger and Munier (2008) who also assert that language is best learnt when it is in chunks. As a matter of fact, several renowned linguistic scholars, such as, Firth (1957), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Pawley and Snyder (1983) and Wray (2002), have made it clear in their studies that multiword units are indeed a part of language learning.

Since phraseology has not been given the emphasis in most language teaching, it is important to identify useful lexical phrases for learning and effective teaching methods (Coxhead, 2008). The traditional approach in ELT practices would normally focus on learning a part of speech, such as verbs, or individual words without taking advantage of the use of lexical phrases to improve learners' lexical knowledge (Nation, 2001). As such, language instructors should not only be made aware of the importance of incorporating phraseology into teaching but also the commonly used phrases, namely collocations, that can generally enhance learners' linguistic competence, especially in writing. Thus, this study sets to examine the use of commonly used lexical verbs and their noun collocates in learner writing with the hope to identify the appropriate use of these collocations.

METHODOLOGY

The current study employs a corpus linguistics method with a learner corpus as its data. Studies on learner language through investigation of a corpus have provided insightful results that have proven valuable in the areas of language acquisition and second/foreign language learning and teaching. The purpose of a learner corpus is usually for monitoring the process of language acquisition (Nesi, 2008) as analysing the corpus may reveal some developmental features or patterns of language use. Applied linguists may use the findings of such analysis for pedagogical purposes that could improve or assist L2 learners in their acquisition of the second language. Since this is a corpus study on second language learner writing, a learner corpus was specially built to fulfil the objectives of this study. A brief description on the development of the corpus and how it was used in the study is given below. This is followed by the description of data analysis and tool used in this study.

CORPUS DATA

The data for this study were taken from the Written English Corpus of Malaysian English Learners or known as WECMEL, a learner corpus consisting of approximately 472,000 words of argumentative essays written by pre-degree students from the law foundation programme at Universiti Teknologi MARA. The essays were written during the final exam of BEL 260, an Intermediate English course, which is almost similar to the present ELC231 course offered to Semester 3 diploma students that focuses on academic writing. Table 1 below shows the design criteria of WECMEL.

TABLE 1. Design criteria of WECMEL

Design criteria	WECMEL
No of essays	720
Size	472,196 words
Genre	Argumentative essays
Topics	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Careless drivers are the main cause of road accidents in Malaysia2. Student's participation in sports is not as important as his academic achievement
No of words	380 words and above

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

WECMEL underwent a tagging process via the free CLAWS tagging service available on the web. Altogether, 28 files in WECMEL were tagged using CLAWS tagger set at BNC Tagset 5. Although a quantitative analysis of a corpus study is often seen by some as a mere bean counting, many empirical studies have shown that it is much more than that, as rightly pointed out by Biber (2001). These quantitative findings provide a platform for a detailed insight into language use via a qualitative method that could change the underlying theoretical assumptions (Tognini-Bonelli, 2010). The empirical evidence from both quantitative and qualitative approaches would therefore best describe the use of specific language items that have been commonly used. For this reason, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS TOOL

WordSmith Tools was used for data analysis in this study. It is one of the first available corpus software which has been widely employed and is deemed as one of the most powerful corpus tools. Due to its multi-functions that allow for an adequately comprehensive corpus analysis, this tool was chosen for the quantitative analysis of the corpus in this study. Basically, there are two quantitative analyses that are possible via the use of a computer lexical software such as WordSmith Tools (Scott, 1999), i.e., the production of frequency lists and the generation of concordances (Evison, 2010). The generation of the concordances aids in establishing the occurrences of verb-noun collocation, as well as focusing on the linguistic environment of specific words. These procedures are described in the following sub-section.

THE PROCEDURAL METHOD OF GENERATING VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS

The automatic profiling of WECMEL was done using WordSmith Tools. In BNC Tagset 5, the lexical verbs are identified by six different tagsets: VVB, VVD, VVG, VVI, VVN and VVZ. Each tagset represents a verb form respectively: the base form, the past tense, the present progressive, the infinitive form, the past participles and the present singular. The collocates of lexical verbs also may differ according to verb forms, as also implied by Oakey (2005) and Hyland and Tse (2007). The findings on the most frequently used verb forms can provide an insight into the types of lexical verbs that are commonly used in learner writing.

Extracting the verb-noun collocations used in this study involved an advanced analysis of the earlier quantitative findings. It involved a meticulous procedure of the extraction of verb-noun collocations in the data and a manual linguistic analysis which was the final analysis for this study. The latter could only be done upon identifying the common verb-noun collocations in WECMEL. The extraction procedure has been made thorough based on three different parameters which are: the probability of verb-noun combinations; cross-references with the *BBJ Combinatory Dictionary of English*; and the existence of the collocations in *Oxford Collocation Dictionary*. As there appears to be a large number of verb-noun combinations in the corpus, it is therefore necessary to use these parameters to extract the verb-noun collocations.

The probability of verb-noun combinations was computed using MI score in WordSmith tools which measures the collocational strength of both high and low-frequency pairs. A high score of MI implies that the verb and the noun are collocates; the higher the score, the stronger the association between the two lexical items. According to Hunston (2002), word pairs with MI score of more than 3 could already indicate the existence of collocations. Upon obtaining the probable verb-noun collocations through this statistical measure, to testify the existence of the collocations, they were checked against actual occurrences in *BBJ Combinatory Dictionary of English*. Only those that appear in this dictionary were further cross-checked against their existence in the *Oxford Collocation Dictionary*. The verb-noun combinations that had gone through all these procedures were then used as the final verb-noun collocations in this study. This procedural method is considered prevalent in order to produce robust findings that would lead to rationalised conclusions. The verb-noun collocations were then manually analysed to look for salient features that would lead to the findings of syntactic, semantic, or structural relations of the words in the collocations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

First, a quantitative method was applied to extract a profiling of the lemma verbs of WECMEL to provide an account of the linguistic elements of the lexical verbs used by the Malay ESL learners. Next, by adopting the qualitative approach, a linguistic analysis was administered to the most commonly used lexical verbs to determine the phraseology of the lexical verbs and their noun collocates. This section presents findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted on the corpus data.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL VERBS

Table 2 below summarises the most frequently used verb forms in WECMEL. As displayed in the table VVI, which is the infinitive form of the lexical verb, is the most frequently used verb form in the data. The second is VVB, followed by VVG, VVN, VVZ and VVD. Due to the constraint of space, this paper only further discusses the two most frequently used verb forms; VVI and VVB.

TABLE 2. Verb forms of lexical verbs in WECMEL

*Tags of Lexical Verbs	Examples	Frequency in WECMEL	%
VVB (base form)	<i>accept, conclude, propose, attack, choose, throw.</i>	12,167	25.02
VVD (past tense)	<i>asked, gained, offered, faced, manipulated, spent.</i>	2,388	4.91
VVG (present progressive)	<i>eating, hiding, meeting, enjoying, grabbing, robbing.</i>	6,492	13.35
VVI (infinitive form)	<i>hope, inform, pay, reject, play, engage.</i>	19,241	39.57
VVN (past participle)	<i>kept, missed, owned, extracted, grown, hired</i>	5,192	10.67
VVZ (present singular)	<i>teaches, respects, opens, smacks, urges, improves.</i>	3,140	6.45
		48,620	100

It is not surprising that the VVI verb form is more frequently used than other verb forms. In academic writing, such as in argumentative essays, the nature of writing may not be time specific and in fact sometimes requires the use of modal auxiliaries, for examples, *can, could, will, would, may, might, shall, should, must* and *ought to*, followed by infinitives to express possibility, necessity, ability, willingness or suggestions. The higher percentage of VVI lexical verbs in WECMEL suggests that with greater use of modal auxiliaries, Malay ESL learners may have been more cautious or discreet in expressing their opinions. This could reflect the Malay culture which encourages reticence in expressing one's opinion. Nevertheless, the influence of culture on the comparative use of VVI can only be verified through a discourse analysis, which is beyond the scope of the present study.

The finite base form (VVB) is required to form a Simple Present Tense verb which is preceded by a plural noun or pronoun or the first- or second-person singular subject (*I* or *You*). In academic writing, Simple Present Tense is the most used tense, followed by Present Perfect Tense and Simple Past Tense. The fact that Malay ESL learners used a high number of VVB could indicate that they are on the right track of using the most appropriate tense in academic writing.

The high use of VVB verb form by Malay ESL learners could also be due to the fact that the form of this lexical verb does not require any inflections to mark the tense used. They

may have used it in preference to other verb forms to avoid using other tenses such as perfect tenses which require a tense marker as shown in the last sentence. The ubiquitous use of the finite form of lexical verbs (VVB) also indicates that this form of lexical verbs may have been used inappropriately and/or incorrectly as it could have been the result of incorrect use of subject-verb agreement. In Simple Present Tense, VVB lexical verbs are preceded by plural subjects. Studies by Nayan and Jusoff (2009), Stapa and Mohd Mustafa (2010) and Ang et al. (2020) have revealed that one of the major difficulties faced by ESL learners in Malaysia, including English majors at postgraduate levels, is the use of subject-verb agreement.

TABLE 3. The 10 most commonly used lemma verbs in WECMEL

Lexical verbs in WECMEL	*Type	**%
<i>get</i>	trans	3.17
<i>make</i>	trans	3.16
<i>take</i>	trans	2.10
<i>give</i>	trans	1.82
<i>know</i>	intrans/trans	1.75
<i>help</i>	intrans/trans	1.61
<i>lead</i>	intrans/trans	1.59
<i>happen</i>	intrans	1.58
<i>cause</i>	trans	1.35
<i>think</i>	intrans	1.33

* trans: transitive verbs; intrans: intransitive verbs; intrans/trans: intransitive and transitive verbs

**The percentage is based on the total number of lexical verb forms in WECMEL, which is 48,620.

Table 3 above shows the 10 most commonly used lexical verbs employed by Malay ESL learners. It seems that these learners used more transitive verbs in their writing than other types of verbs, i.e., 5 out of the 10 most used lexical verbs were solely transitive. The rest of the verbs are either intransitive or both intransitive and transitive verbs. The first four most commonly used lexical verbs are *get*, *make*, *take* and *give*, which are all transitive verbs. Qualitative analysis of the lexical verbs is, therefore, based on these most commonly used lexical verbs.

Transitive verbs take direct objects, while intransitive verbs do not. Some lexical verbs can be used both transitively and intransitively. Some intransitive verbs, however, can still be preceded by an object if they are used as phrasal verbs, such as, *think of an example*; or used with a preposition, such as, *live in the den*. Therefore, a further analysis was carried out on these verbs to discover their potential of forming verb-noun combinations. Table 4 below lists the frequencies of verb-noun combinations of the commonly used lemma verbs in WECMEL.

The analysis of lexical verbs and their noun combinations is based on the findings found in the above analysis of most commonly used shared lemma verbs.

TABLE 4. Frequency of verb-noun combinations of commonly used lemma verbs

No	WECMEL commonly used lexical verbs in lemma forms	Verb type*	Frequency of lemma lexical verbs in WECMEL	Frequency of verb-noun combinations in WECMEL
1	<i>get</i>	Trans.	1560	666 42.69%
2	<i>make</i>	Trans.	1545	798 51.6%
3	<i>take</i>	Trans.	1022	646 63.2%
4	<i>give</i>	Trans.	889	529 59.5%

*Trans: transitive verbs; Intrans: intransitive verbs; Int/Tran: intransitive and transitive verbs.

The finding in Table 4 above reveals that generally, the most commonly used lemma verbs form a high percentage of verb-noun combinations, which may also have a high possibility of verb-noun collocations which can only be verified through further analysis. Further analysis on the lexical verbs with a high frequency of verb-noun combinations was carried out in order to explore the possibility of using verb-noun collocations from these verb-noun combinations. It appears that only three of the lemma verbs (i.e., *make*, *take*, and *give*) have a percentage of more than 49.99% of verb-noun combinations. This suggests that a high usage of lemma verbs does not necessarily point to a high usage of verb-noun combinations. *Make*, *take* and *give* underwent a further in-depth linguistic analysis of verb-noun collocations as Biber et al. (1999) discovered that these verbs are most commonly used in any written text including academic writing.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS

The verb-noun combinations underwent several different analyses before they were finally shortlisted to be taken in as collocations. Three different parameters were used in the selection of verb-noun collocations in this study which are based on the probability, actual occurrences of the verb-noun combinations in mass media texts and the existence of the verb-noun combinations in a collocation dictionary. Table 5 below displays the verb-noun collocations of *make*, *take* and *give* which were obtained based on the mentioned parameters.

TABLE 5. List of verb-noun collocations used in this study

Lexical Verbs	WECMEL
<i>Make</i>	<i>make a call; make a change; make a choice; make a decision; make a difference; make an effort; make friends; make the journey; make a living; make a mistake; make money; make sense; make a statement; make turns</i>
<i>Take</i>	<i>take action; take advantage; take a break; take care; take a chance; take drugs; take an example; take the initiative; take measures; take medicine; take note; take a nap; take this opportunity; take part; take precautions; take the responsibility; take a rest; take a risk; take steps; take time; take into account; take into consideration</i>
<i>Give</i>	<i>give advantage; give attention; give advice; give a chance; give a commitment; give effects; give an example; give excuses; give ideas; give instructions; give money; give an opportunity; give oxygen; give priority; give a reason; give rewards; give satisfaction; give scholarships; give a signal; give support; give time; give a warning</i>

These verb-noun collocations were further examined to uncover their linguistic elements that include the syntactic and semantic features of the patterns of verb-noun collocations. Table 6 below summarises the grammatical patterns of the six most commonly used lexical verb and noun collocations.

TABLE 6. Grammatical patterns of verb-noun collocations

Grammatical Patterns	<i>make</i> + N	<i>take</i> + N	<i>give</i> + N
<i>verb</i> + NP (N/ det + N/ adj. + N)	√	√	√
<i>verb</i> +NP (N + prep. + N)	-	-	-
<i>verb</i> + prep. + N	-	√	-
<i>verb</i> + N + PP (prep. + N)	-	√	-
<i>verb</i> + N + to + inf.	-	√	-
<i>verb</i> + sb. + N	-	-	√
<i>be</i> + <i>verb</i> + N	-	-	√
<i>verb</i> + NP (N + adj.)	-	-	-

As far as syntactic patterns of verb-noun collocations are concerned, the above grammatical patterns are further categorised into the syntactic patterns used in Nesselhauf's (2005) study. There are six syntactic patterns altogether:

VO (Verb + Object)
VPO (Verb + Preposition+ Object)
VA (Verb + Adverb phrase (adverb + noun))
VOC (Verb + Object=complement)
VOPO (Verb + Object + Preposition + Object)
VO + to + inf. (Verb + Object + to + infinitive)

Four out of eight grammatical patterns of verb-noun collocations used by Malay ESL learners have been categorised into VO. Of the six possible syntactic patterns of verb-noun collocations listed by Nesselhauf (2003), five were found in the present learner corpus, i.e., VO, VPO, VOPO and VO + to + inf. However, not all verb-noun collocations were used in these syntactic patterns. As expected, the most commonly used syntactic pattern is VO with four grammatical patterns. The syntactic patterns VPO and VOPO were used only in *take + noun* collocations, as in *taken into consideration (d15.s27.m12)* and *take notice of its own indiscretions (alevels7)*. But notably, the VOPO pattern in *take notice of its own indiscretions (alevels7)* and some other similar samples do not actually have the same grammatical pattern as *take sth. into account* or *take sth. into consideration*, where ‘take’ and the nouns ‘account’ and ‘consideration’ are not only separated by a preposition but also by another noun following the verb ‘take’, such as, *take the issue into consideration*.

The analysis shows the lexical verbs *make*, *take* and *give* occur in other grammatical patterns as well. Syntactically, the majority of the grammatical patterns that underlie the verb-noun collocations used in this study form the most basic syntactic pattern that is Verb-Object (VO). This is similar to the findings reported by Nesselhauf (2005) who also found that four-fifth of the verb-noun collocations in her study are also in VO syntactic pattern.

Since not all the lexical verbs can occur in any grammatical pattern, it is also essential for learners to know that certain lexical verbs can occur in a variety of grammatical patterns while others may not. The use of appropriate grammatical patterns is, thus, vital for the development of phraseological patterns of verb-noun collocations as incorrect use may result in inappropriacy and inaccuracy that may hinder communicative competence.

As to unveil the semantic features of the lexical verbs in the verb-noun collocations, it is necessary to look closely at how the lexical verbs in the verb-noun collocations are used semantically. Therefore, the verb-noun collocations were assigned to the meaning of lexical verbs as used with the noun collocates. The meanings of the verbs would indicate whether the nouns are directly ‘done’ by the verbs, as in, *make a timetable (d21.s5.m10)*, or the verbs are used just to show a meaningful syntagmatic relationship between the verb and the noun, as in *make a choice (d18.s27.m10)* or *take the challenge (d6.s5.m12)*. This syntagmatic relationship may have been caused by the nature of the lexical verbs itself which are delexical verbs. Since the meaning of delexical verbs depends on the accompanying noun, the most common syntactic structure of the delexical verbs is obviously ‘delexical verb + noun’ or in Nesselhauf’s (2005) classification of syntactic structures of verb-noun combinations, it is VO, i.e., verb followed by an object which is a noun.

The lexical verbs are considered delexical as the verbs do not actually represent their literal meaning, as can be seen from the following examples:

1. ...people start to give attention towards this problem. (d12.s10.m12)
2. ...sport is important to reduce pressure on students...(d19.s10.m12)
3. ...to prevent accidents from occurring. (d5.s19.m17)

The findings reveal that a high use of *make*, *take* and *give* verb-noun collocations come mostly from the delexical verbs which have various meanings on their own. Learners, therefore, need to know the uses of each delexical verb in order to come up with the appropriate

verb-noun collocations. At the same time, the repeated use of delexical verbs is an indication of a limited repertoire of vocabulary. Therefore, learners also need to increase their verb vocabulary in order to use precise verbs in academic writing. Pedagogically speaking, learners also need to be able to identify this class of verb, i.e., delexical verb, and assign proper noun collocates to form appropriate verb-noun collocations.

CONCLUSIONS

Lexical verbs like other word types in English need to be used with grammatical accuracy for the achievement of communicative competence which includes both accuracy and appropriateness. The morphological and the syntactical elements of lexical verbs determine the grammatical structure of the lexical verbs. Therefore, it is not surprising that the grammatical features of lexical verbs are among the most difficult to be grasped by Malay ESL learners in this study as they come in several different forms that represent the tense and aspect system in English.

The empirical finding of this paper shows that in general the Malay ESL learners are able to use the lexical verbs in the verb-noun collocations in their writing but with some non-native features. The deviations found in their use of certain verb-noun collocations are traced to the problems in the phraseological patterns of the verb-noun collocations. The deviations in the phraseological patterns can stem either from the first or second element of the collocation, which in this case is the verb or the noun. The lexical verbs seem to be a more common element for semantic deviations than the nouns, verifying the notion that verbs constitute one of the largest problems in second language learning for Malay ESL learners.

A closer look at the nature of lexical verbs used in the study shows that non-native learners prefer to use unmarked forms of the lexical verbs, leading to an overuse of VVI and VVB and underuse of the other verb forms especially VVN and VVG. It has been disclosed that this may be due to both morphosyntactic and syntactic properties of the verb forms which determine the grammatical properties of the lexical verbs. The use of unmarked forms, which are non-inflected, is an indication that non-native learners may not have a full grasp of the knowledge of grammatical properties of lexical verbs and at the same time may feel 'safe' in using the unmarked forms as these linguistic properties of lexical verbs simply do not exist or differ from those in learners' L1. Although the VVI and VVB forms are said to be commonly used verb forms in academic writing, the appropriate use of other verb forms is still necessary for learners to function as proficient writers and achieve communicative competence.

Second language learners do not only have difficulties with the grammatical aspects of the lexical verbs. A further linguistic analysis on the lexical verbs leads to the discovery of noun collocates that are used with these commonly used delexical verbs, forming verb-noun combinations which were later identified as collocations. The findings later disclose that the phraseological patterns of these collocations are based on the delexical structure of the lexical verbs which are bound by both lexical and grammatical patterns. Lexical patterns are constrained by different levels of semantic restrictions and grammatical patterns are constrained by several syntactic structures.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that lexical verbs do indeed pose problems to Malay ESL learners when it comes to the construction of verb-noun collocations in writing. Apart from knowledge of the grammatical structures and restrictions of the lexical verbs, learners need to know the semantic restrictions of the lexical verb and noun combinations, uses of delexical structure, and semantic meanings of the lexical verbs, all of which contribute to the sound formation of verb-noun collocations. All this entails the knowledge of phraseological patterns of the verbs which further suggests that a pedagogical lesson plan in

lexical verbs should constitute both lexis and grammar that should be learned and taught alongside.

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