



## Learning and Comprehension of English Grammatical Collocations with Prepositions by Jordanian EFL Learners at Mutah University

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### APA Citation:

Wa'el Mohammad Alfaqara (2021). Learning and Comprehension of English Grammatical Collocations with Prepositions by Jordanian EFL Learners at Mutah University. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 1748-1762

Submission Date:26/05/2021

Acceptance Date:31/08/2021

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### Abstract

The current research employed a sample of Jordanian English language and literature university students at Mutah University, in an attempt to examine and analyse the capacity they have got to comprehend and learn English grammatical collocations with prepositions. It also aimed at determining how the students' L1 (Arabic) affects the acquisition of knowledge of these collocations. For this purpose, the SPSS 22.0 was used in order to analyse data pertaining to grammatical collocations with prepositions, where the data were collected via a collocation test. The findings revealed that the extent of learning and comprehension of grammatical collocations with prepositions among Jordanian EFL students was found to be relatively inadequate and the most challenging form of collocation was found to be verb + preposition. In addition, a negative effect of the students' native tongue (Arabic) on the learning and use of English grammatical collocations with prepositions was found to be present among the studied sample, as the majority of identified errors arising from L1 interference.

*Keywords:* learning, comprehension, grammatical collocations with prepositions, EFL learners.

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### Introduction

Sociolinguists have classified the prominent role of the English language worldwide into three main domains: the internal circle domain, outer circle domain, and expanded circle domain. According to Kachru (1992), the inner circle domain refers to nations where English is a native language, while

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the outside circle includes nations where English is a prominent second language, and the outermost circle contains countries where English is treated as a wholly foreign language.

Relating to Jordan, English is taught as a foreign language in all Jordanian higher education institutions. Curricula developers and EFL practitioners have, however, come to identify that collocation errors are very common among EFL students at Jordanian universities. Specifically, Collocations are a majorly challenging feature of English for EFL students, as EFL students lack the natural capacity that native speakers have to use collocations correctly. Despite the prevalence of this problem, many researchers have focused on word combination errors in terms of vocabulary.

Benson, et al's. (1986) categorisation reflected researchers' concerns about English collocations, while McCarthy (1990) stated that "in vocabulary teaching there is a high importance of collocation, the relationship of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary, and collocation is an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language". Collocations are thus incorporated into the English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabus under several different labels, including noun phrases, adjective phrases, phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases, and idioms, causing Koprowski (2005) to declare that collocations "have been selected in EFL contexts on an ad hoc basis though the importance of phraseology as an integral element of L2 lexical competence which is undeniable".

Perfect knowledge of collocations, however, significantly helps EFL learners improve their overall skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. With the help of collocations, learners can more easily express themselves and retrieve thoughts from text more effectively. In addition, better knowledge of collocations can allow learners to be more creative and enhance their overall proficiency.

Several researchers have thus explored the significance of collocations especially for non-native speakers. Brown (1974), for example, stated that collocations effectively improve an EFL learner's overall language skills. More specifically, extensive collocation knowledge can enhance listening skills and thus more effectively fulfil the requirements of communication, which in turn reinforces reading and writing abilities. Cowie (1992) added that established items of vocabulary such as collocations and phrases can easily upgrade communication competency and that learners thus become more capable of reprocessing and making items with their help. Furthermore, Howarth (1998) reported that L1 speakers tend to adopt suitable elements of phraseology, whereas L2 learners face greater difficulties in attaining native-like fluency in using appropriate combinations of words. (Dan Xua, et al, 2020).

Overall, although collocations are recognised as an important aspect of learning vocabulary, they are a central area of challenge for EFL students. However, both awareness of and research into learning collocations in Jordan are restricted and insufficient currently. Therefore, this research tries to examine the learning and use of grammatical collocations with prepositions by Jordanian EFL students at Mutah University.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **What is collocation?**

Existing research literature shows that no sole definition has been fixed upon as to the full definition of the term collocation (Fan, 2009; Gyllstad & Wolter, 2016). Two central methods of assessing this phenomenon, frequency-based and phraseological, have, however, emerged from L2 collocation exploration (Barfield & Gyllstad, 2009; Gyllstad & Wolter, 2016), while numerous definitions of the term collocation are offered in existing works. The concept of English collocation was initially presented by Firth (1957) as “the company that words keep”. McCarthy (1990, p. 12) more specifically defined the notion of English collocation as “a marriage contract between words, where some words are more firmly married to each other than others”. Similarly, Woolard (2000, p. 29) defined the notion English collocations as “the co-occurrence of words which are statistically much more likely to appear collected than random chance suggests”, while Robins (2000, p.64) defined collocation as the “common correlation between two specific words in a sentence”. In addition, Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.317) later offered a more detailed definition, concentrating on cohesion and consistency: “the co- occurrence of lexical terms combined together in a repeated way and similar atmosphere”. (Duan & Qin, 2012, p. 1). Finally, the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) uses the term collocation in reference to English as "two words or phrases used together in an appropriate way to the native speaker, that may have different meaning which is not expected”.

Benson et.al (1986) divided collocations into two groups, the first being grammatical and the second lexical. Where, grammatical collocations contain combinations of nouns, a verb, or an adjective, alongside a preposition, an infinitive, or a clause. Benson et al (1986) further separated these into eight categories of grammatical collocations in English: noun + preposition, noun + to + infinitive, noun + that-clause, preposition + noun, verb + preposition, adjective + preposition, predicate adjective + to + infinitive, and adjective + that-clause. The current study, however, investigated only the noun + preposition , adjective + preposition, and verb + preposition categories.

### **Critical Challenges in Learning Collocations**

English as a Foreign Language students encounter numerous issues when learning collocations. According to several research, collocations in English can be seriously confusing and difficult for non-native English speakers due to the random character of such collocations. English collocations do not necessarily follow any rules, and in many cases, there is no logical reason underlying their existence. According to Baker (1992: 47) "Collocation is a systematically arbitrary restriction which does not follow logically from the prepositional meaning of a word". Collocations

also differ from grammatical rules in that they are not absolutely fixed, instead existing in the realm of probability (Mearthy, 2018). In addition, Rabeih (2009) emphasised that “the difficulty of generalization” adds further challenge to the learning of collocations by EFL learners due to the “variability” of collocations. In particular, various collocations can often be employed to convey a similar meaning in English where only a single collocation would be employed to refer to express a similar meaning in Arabic, and vice versa.

Other scholars relate EFL students' inadequate knowledge and usage of collocations to factors such as the absence of experience in using them and negative transfers from their native tongue (Hussein, 1990). L1 transfer has a negative influence on the process of collocation knowledge development according to multiple studies (Nesselhauf, 2003; Zughoul & Abdul-Fattah, 2003). When learners do not recognise a valid collocation used in English, they may rely on their mother tongue to compensate for this linguistic insufficiency; however, the outcomes of this are often unacceptable due to the random nature of collocations. Arab EFL learners are further handicapped by lack of exposure and a lack of opportunities for using collocations in daily input. They may thus rely even more heavily on their first language (Arabic) as they lack English collocation competence (Hussein, 1990; Alzahrani, 1998).

Another critical cause of inadequate and improper use of collocations by EFL learners is the fact that they are not aware of the presence of chunking in a language. As Wray (2002) stated, language learners are accustomed to seeing single words, separated by spaces, and they thus tend to learn words individually rather than as groups of multiple words. Lewis (2000) highlighted that EFL learners thus do not store words as collocations based on their consideration of words as single units. This has a negative influence on their process of language production and comprehension, as they then cannot recall these structures as collocations. According to Jamsaid (2018), several studies have shown that insufficient knowledge and understanding of collocations is a common source of collocation errors among EFL learners. This lack of collocation knowledge is also compounded by teaching techniques that ignore collocations when teaching vocabulary.

## **Previous Studies**

Collocations and their importance have been the subject matter of numerous academic studies. In this sub-section, the focus is placed on former studies, which have pertained to the issues and difficulties that EFL students encounter in understanding and using collocations. Moehkardi (2002) highlighted the fact that collocations come in many forms, and that most of these may cause difficulty or imprecision among English learners. This is, in part, due to the fact that learners are infrequently given full instruction in ways to determine the correct type of collocation even from among those which are highly predictable. Moreover, learners clearly cannot decide which collocations may be correct for innovative purposes, as they are not aware which choices are inherently improper. Jabbour-

Lagocski (1990) further suggested that English prepositions, along with word groupings such as collocations, are more difficult for ESL/EFL learners because of various interventions deriving from the learners' mother tongues (MT).

Davoudi and Behshad (2015) analysed the use of collocations among a sample of Iranian EFL students, through focusing on their performance in writing. The study included 102 Iranian EFL students. The findings showed that majority of the learners' errors were due to an inability to relate various elements in combination in the language. Moreover, interference from the learners' mother tongue was clear, being particularly notable as learners attempted to overcome their problems in using collocations.

Alsulayyi (2015) employed writing assignments in his study to investigate the key sources of collocational errors made by advanced Saudi EFL students in the United Kingdom and in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to the findings, three major sources affecting the collocation proficiency of Saudi EFL students: L1 interference, inadequate knowledge of collocation frequency and avoidance strategies. Saudi EFL students in the United Kingdom do fewer grammatical collocation errors than those learning English in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the grammatical collocations patterns of noun + preposition and adjective + preposition were shown to have the highest number of errors in both groups.

In another Arab EFL context, Alotaibi, A and Alotaibi, M (2015) carried out a study to assess the comprehension of English grammatical collocations among Kuwaiti EFL students. The first language transfer, improper knowledge of grammatical collocations, and literal translations from Arabic were the key sources of the collocational errors made by them. Moreover, the noun + preposition and adjective + preposition forms found to be the most challenging forms of collocation.

The ability of 84 Tunisian EFL learners at the Higher Institute of Applied Languages and Computer Sciences in Béja, majoring in English language and Literature, with respect of comprehending and producing English grammatical collocations was assessed by Almakhtary (2017) utilizing three quantitative and qualitative instruments: a collocation test, a focus-group discussion, and document analysis. Most informants showed fair ability in using collocations. Moreover, the sources of errors of collocational linguistic behavior varied. Additionally, collocational competence was found to be positively associated with both the oral and written skills of the study's sample.

## **Study Significance**

No former studies have focused on grammatical collocations with prepositions learning, and comprehension among Jordanian EFL students at Mutah University. This study was thus intended as a first step in this process. This study's contributions could assist instructors how to become more familiar with the issues with English collocations experienced by EFL students, enabling them to

assist students in being more cognizant of these obstacles and specifying ways to address such issues in order to improve the learning and comprehension of grammatical collocations with prepositions.

## Study Questions

According to the majority of former studies, most of Arab EFL students encounter issues in understanding and using English grammatical collocations with prepositions. Therefore, this study tries to answer the following questions:

**Study Question 1:** To what extent are Jordanian EFL students at Mutah university able to comprehend and learn grammatical collocations with prepositions in English?

**Study Question 2:** What are the major causes of the various errors evident in Jordanian EFL students' collocation usage?

**Study Question 3:** What role does the L1 play in the process of learning and comprehension of English grammatical collocations with prepositions by Jordanian EFL students?

## Methodology

### Participants

The subjects were 120 Jordanian male and female university students from the Department of English Language and Literature at Mutah University. All of them were Arabic native speakers, from different social background. The subjects were sampled randomly to enhance the potential to generalise the results of the study.

### Instrument

A multiple-choice test on collocation was used in order to assess the ability of the students to understand, and use grammatical collocations with prepositions in English. These grammatical collocations were taken from The Oxford Collocations Dictionary. This source was chosen, because it is a credible academic source, as well as many former studies have used it. Therefore, the results of this study may be able to be compared, and contrasted with the findings of the previous studies. The test was validated by four professors from Mutah University to ensure that the items are obvious and suitable for the study objectives and for the participants' level of language competency. The test was modified to be in harmony with professors' suggestions. The final draft of test sought to explore students' proficiency across three forms of grammatical collocations with prepositions, including the verb + preposition, noun + preposition, and adjective + preposition.

## Data Analysis

Data for the current study were collected using the collocation test, which was self-administered to the subjects. The data were analysed by using the SPSS software. They were initially grouped, coded, categorised, tabulated, and input into the software. The data were thereafter, placed into separate sheets for SPSS analysis.

## Results

The data were analysed in accordance with the research question sequence. This analysis was thus supported by reference to existing literature, being done in a way that allowed comparison of the Jordanian EFL setting to a broader context.

### Q1 : To what extent are Jordanian EFL students at Mutah university able to comprehend and learn grammatical collocations with prepositions in English?

The students' proficiency in understanding and using English grammatical collocations with prepositions was the focus of the data collection and analysis to answer this question. The aforementioned test pertaining to English language collocations was administered to the students, and the results are displayed in Table 1. A notable inability to fully understand and accurately use the grammatical collocations with prepositions in English was clearly evident, with a mean of less than 50 questions out of 100 being answered accurately.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Responses to the Collocation Test*

| No. of students | Total score | Mean  | Percentage | StD  |
|-----------------|-------------|-------|------------|------|
| 120             | 104         | 33.57 | 54.15      | 5.42 |

As Table 1 shows, participants' learning and comprehension of grammatical collocations with prepositions was fair (Mean = 33.57; percentage 54.15%). The standard deviation was only 5.42, which also indicates that all participants' ability was relatively consistent across the sample.

**Table 2.** *Error percentages for all types of English grammatical collocations with prepositions among Jordanian EFL students.*

| Type of Grammatical Collocation | Errors percentage |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Verb + preposition              | 48.7%             |
| Adjective + preposition         | 17.6%             |
| Noun + preposition              | 11.74%            |

As shown in Table 2, Jordanian EFL learners' comprehension of grammatical collocations with prepositions vary between categories. In terms of the grammatical collocations with prepositions explored in the present study, the verb + preposition form had the highest rate of errors, at 48.7%, while the adjective + preposition form came in second at 17.6%, and the noun + preposition form having the least errors at 11.74%.

**Q2: What are the major causes of the various errors evident in Jordanian EFL students' collocation usage?**

The analysis of the informants' data on the proper use of collocations confirmed that collocational errors are caused by four factors, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Causes of collocation errors**

|   | <b>Percentage attribution</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <b>Insufficient collocation knowledge</b> | 35                            |
| <b>First language transfer.</b>           | 44                            |
| <b>Avoidance</b>                          | 18                            |
| <b>Over-generalisation</b>                | 20                            |

As shown in Table 3, the data from informants' responses on proper usage of collocation clarified that collocational errors are caused by four factors: Insufficient collocation knowledge, at 35%; First Language Transfer, at 44%; Avoidance strategy, at 18%, and Overgeneralisation at 20%. This suggests that the primary source of collocation errors is the influences of L1 on L2 collocations. These findings thus support the hypothesis that the participants' mother tongue (in this case Arabic) exerts a significant impact on their comprehension of English grammatical collocations with prepositions.

**Q3. What role does the L1 play in the process of learning and comprehension of English grammatical collocations with prepositions by Jordanian EFL students?**

The purpose of this question is to show how the students' L1 (Arabic) affected their understanding of English grammatical collocations with prepositions. Figure 1 displays the results:



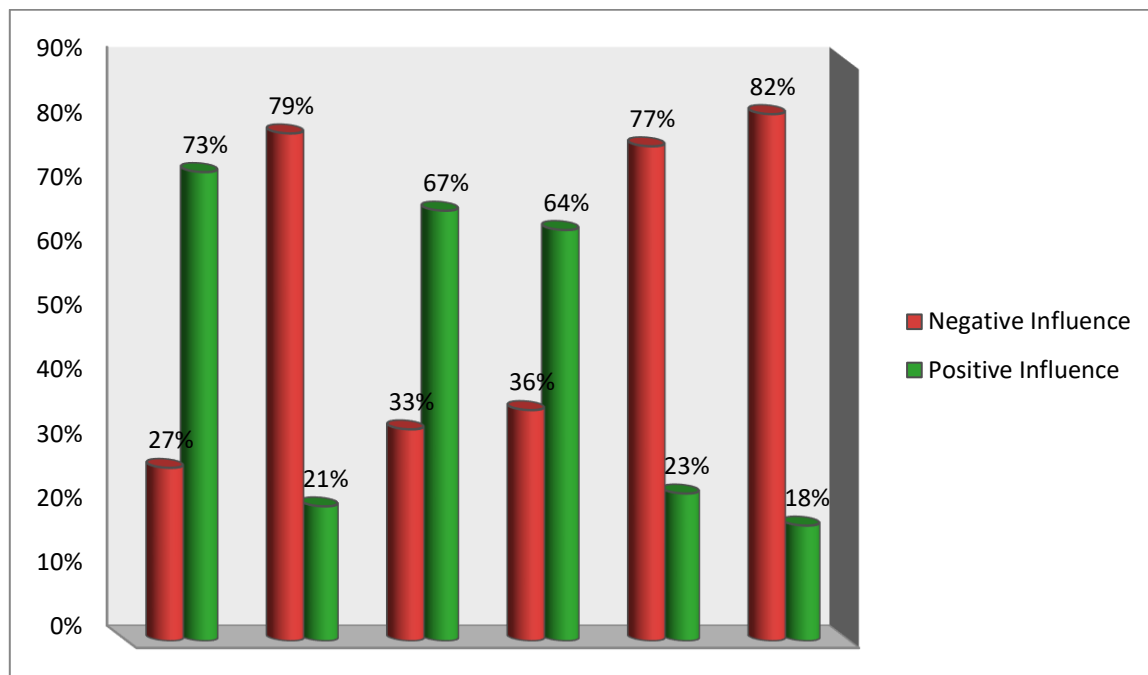
**Figure 1:** L1 Influences on grammatical collocation test results

Figure 1 displays the ways in which the processes of understanding and using grammatical collocations with prepositions are affected by the participants' first language. It also reveals that the English prepositions used by participants were generally negatively influenced, at 67%, with positive influences representing only 33%. There seem to be mainly two reasons for the occurrence of transfer errors in the understanding of grammatical collocations with prepositions. The first is the absence of proficiency in English language. It may be assumed that, due to the absence of required knowledge in the L2, Jordanian EFL students were likely to transfer existing native language knowledge to their L2. Moreover, due to intrinsic discrepancies between how prepositions are used in English and Arabic, Jordanian EFL students may misuse prepositions. Igaab and Tarrad (2009, 53) suggested that "there are some points of similarity and difference between the two languages, but the differences outweigh the similarities". This research has sought to pay attention to the negative influence of Arabic usage on EFL students' acquisition of English, so it is vital to clarify these differences in the proceeding discussion using examples from this study.

## Discussion

The importance of acquiring a new language by focusing on grammatical collocation has long been noted in language teaching and learning contexts. Howatt (1984) claims that in the ancient Roman empire, languages were acquired solely via communication. By advocating for the "natural approach," Krashen and Terrell (1983) created a dynamic conceptual underpinning for learning a foreign language outside of the class, that stresses practical learning approaches to promote dramatic

learning and deeper understanding. Prabhu's (1987) 'procedural approach' is opposed to this, placing the focus on problem-solving via language exercises. Collocations receive the most supervised practice or correction in both strategies, while learners are otherwise free to "learn and grasp" the foreign language in a naturalistic manner.

Research findings suggest that the sample's learning and understanding of grammatical collocations with prepositions was adequate, but not at the level anticipated. Jordanian EFL students clearly face difficulties in learning and comprehending grammatical collocations with prepositions. The verb + preposition collocation in particular was found to be problematic for these Jordanian EFL students to comprehend, generating far worse results than other types of grammatical collocations. This finding is consistent with Moehkardi (2002), who reported that collocations of various forms cause difficulty or inaccuracy among English learners.

Moreover, 44 per cent of collocational errors made by Jordanian EFL students were associated with the impact of L1 on L2 collocations. These errors in using collocations arise due to peculiarities of the mother tongue of the learners, in this case, Arabic. It can be assumed that subjects were inexperienced with the proper use of various grammatical collocations and relied on their native language knowledge to bridge the gap in language. Krashen (1983, cited in Odlin, 1989, p. 26) coined the term "padding" to describe the process of filling gaps: 'Transfer can still be regarded as padding, or the result of falling back on old knowledge, the L1 rule, when new knowledge is lacking. Its cause may simply be having to talk before ready, before the necessary rule has been acquired'.

A general lack of knowledge of English collocations was exposed by repetition of many of these examples in the collocation test. Likewise, analysis of the collocation test completed by these learners showed some common errors, such as "skilful in", rather than "skilful at" and "build from" rather than "build of". These errors mirror gaps in the students' second or foreign language knowledge related to the target language's grammatical collocations. Remarkably, such errors appeared both methodical and predictable based on the structure of English collocation modelling not drawn from second or foreign language knowledge. Such students' errors can be ascribed exclusively to their native tongue. This indicates that Jordanian EFL students resort to their L1 (Arabic) when their understanding of the English language is inadequate.

Inadequate acquaintance and awareness of grammatical collocations among Jordanian EFL learners also was identified to be a principal cause of collocational errors. This conclusion can be justified by Jordanian EFL students' limited exposure to grammatical collocations, as the notion of collocation is generally ignored within their curriculum content and EFL lessons. Most of them thus do not pay much attention to learning English collocations. As Bahns (1993) showed, ignorance of collocation concepts in syllabuses can lead directly to learners acquiring an insufficient knowledge of collocations.

The proper use of English grammatical collocations with prepositions was found to be dramatically affected by the students' L1 (Arabic). Hussein (1990) reached the same conclusion,

stating that the majority of errors produced by Arab EFL learners in grammatical collocations are due to "negative transfer." Another issue is that Arab Students are not acquainted with English collocations, as a result, they apply their native tongue norms to English ones. The major discrepancies in collocation norms between Arabic and English can be a significant hurdle to accurate collocation learning in English.

EFL students can often improve their capacity to communicate in English by using the rules and norms of their L1 (in this case, Arabic for the Jordanian sample). The ability of expressing thoughts in the target language is always a demanding task (Norris, 1987). Although English and Arabic are syntactically and semantically dissimilar, they still have some parallel expressions in common. However, this can result in a negative transfer from Arabic to English, which may also impact EFL students' academic writing performance. Two major causes can lead to language interference when EFL learners do translation tests, the absence of collocational counterparts in the target language and lack of sufficient knowledge of collocations Huang (2001).

Some examples from the study's respondents' answers could be used to highlight this concept.

The following extracts from the present study serve to evidence and clarify this problem:

1- We finally got rid from your younger daughter, she's so annoying!

This error is a prime exemplar of the verb + preposition pattern failure that can occur when applying L1 rules to the L2. The subject used 'from' instead of 'of' because he/she transferred from L1, improperly using the Arabic preposition 'min'. The respondents tend to consider the English preposition "from" and the preposition "min" in Arabic as being always exactly equivalent, leading to an incorrect selection of preposition.

In addition, The English prepositions "at", and "in" have only one equivalent between them in Arabic, the preposition "fii". This also had a negative influence on their use by study subjects:

2- My young brother is skilful in horse-riding.

The substitution of the grammatical collocation 'skilful in' for 'skilful at' is due to L1 transfer, whereby the participant has had to select one of the meanings of the single (Arabic) preposition 'fii' and has selected the incorrect one. The student in this example translated 'maher fii' literally instead of using the English language rules.

3- That young child always reminds me with her mother.

Here we see the preposition 'with' instead of 'of' indicates that the participants regard the Arabic preposition "bi" and the English preposition "with" as exactly equivalent; however, the Arabic preposition "bi" can be translated using two different English prepositions, depending on context, "with" and "by".

With regard to the participants generally succeeded in learning those grammatical collocations which can be translated directly between Arabic and English, such as "invitation to" and "insist on".

4- Our new manager insists on the highest standards of transparency in the hotel.

5- The invitation to the wedding has been postponed because of the heavy snow.

Participants were thus commonly able to provide the correct prepositions for sentences four and five in the test due to the existence of one-to-one equivalents in both Arabic and English.

English is a foreign language in Jordan, and it is mostly taught in formalized settings such as schools and colleges, in contrast, the Arabic language is used as the students' mother tongue. Further, spoken English is not commonly encountered in the daily lives of Jordanian people (Rababah, 2001). Based on this, L1 transfer is a significant issue among Jordanian EFL learners.

## **Conclusion**

Grammatical collocation is crucial in L2 learning as it actively helps students by making the learning process faster, more efficient, more pleasant, easily adaptable to new contexts, efficacious, and self-directed. Students should be aware of positive methods they might utilize in language acquisition as one strategy to improve the efficacy of their language learning. They can also enhance their learning by learning to understand and retrieve grammatical collocation constraints in a deliberate and pleasant manner.

The present study has shown how the learning and comprehension of grammatical collocations with prepositions among Jordanian EFL learners at Mutah University is at inadequate level, with a mean test score of 33.57 and a percentage score of 54.15 %. Verb + preposition form emerged as the greatest challenge for the students when compared to other forms of collocation. However, the largest category of collocational errors made by Jordanian EFL learners was those due to strategies influenced by applying L1 knowledge to L2 collocations, at 44%. There was a negative effect of the students' L1 (Arabic) on the processes of understanding and using grammatical collocations with prepositions in English, as the majority of errors were caused by learners applying rules from their mother tongue to their L2 production.

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