The Difficulties Faced by EFL Learners in Collocation

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ABSTRACT

The subject of collocation covers a wide range of linguistic peculiarity and mental intuition. Hence, it is urged that language teaching has much to gain from collocation studies, and mastery of collocation ranges constitutes a great deal to the mastery of foreign languages.

The study hypothesized that collocation, whether grammatical or lexical, poses a real problem to the Iraqi EFL learners .The reasons behind the problem are multifarious , the most important of which are: 1) Lack of transnational equivalence between the mother tongue and the foreign language, a cause for literal translation 2) Overgeneralization, which leads to a great deal of incorrect collocation.3) Negligence by both the teacher and learner.4) Lack of experience in the target which results from the inadequate exposure to T.V. programmers ,newspaper ,magazines , etc.

The study presents a comprehensive review of the literature of collocation followed by a full description of the test and an analysis of results. The results shows that the students' performance of the recognition level is far more better than their performance.

The study sums up some conclusions drawn from both the theatrical and empirical parts of the study, and provides some important pedagogical suggestion for further areas of research.

1.Introduction:

Etymologically speaking, collocation is derived from the Latin word "collocare" (call = together + locare = to place) which means putting or placing together.

The idea of collocation is important to many areas of linguistics. Khelmer (1991:62) argues that our mental lexicon is made up not only of single words, but also of larger phrases- logical units both fixed and more variable.

Sinclair (1991:82) claims that the notion of a linguistic item can be extended, at least for English, so that units of meaning are expected to be largely phrasal. This is the so-called phraseological tendency in language, where words go together and make meaning by their combinations. Information about collocation is exceedingly imperative for dictionary writing, natural language processing and language teaching. However, it is not easy to determine which co-occurrences are significant collocations, especially if one is not a native speaker of a language or language variety.

Recently, there is a trend to investigate collocation in a pedagogical – orientated manner due to their crucial effects in achieving mastery and improving learner's

competence in the target language. Among those who show such interest are Michael Lewis (1993) and Hoey (1994).

However, J.R.Firth is the first British linguist who studied the notion of collocation in detailed in his attempt to study meaning in context. And so he is responsible for bringing the notion of collocation into usage in linguistic studies (Firth, 1957:196).

Other studies have been conducted by Greenbaum (1970,1974),Backlund (1973) and Aisenstadt (1979).Further, linguists like Roggle (1973) have studied collocation in computer- guided ways.Lexicologists and lexicographers , likewise, have paid a great attention to the significance of this phrase- meaning among whom are Benson(1985) Crese (1986) and Ccaster (1987)

The present study is a methodological quasi-experimental research. It aims at investigating the difficulties faced by EFL learners in collocation and seek to proved appropriate remedies.

2.Priliminaries

2.1. Objectives:

EFL learners at the University of Al-Qadissiya produce incorrect use of collocations in speech and writing which seems odd, unnatural, or even ridiculous to native speakers. Hence, the study aims at:

(a)Diagnosing the reasons behind such difficulties ,and ,
(b)Decide upon, methodologically speaking, the remedies, strategies and procedures, which tackle these difficulties.

2.2 Hypotheses:

It is hypothesized that EFL learners' difficulties in collocation may be attributed to the following reasons:

(One)   Lack of translational equivalence between the first and the target language.
(Two)   Inadequate learning experience.
(Three)   Interference from the mother tongue.
(Four)   Overemphasis on grammar with little or no attention to how lexicon collocations.
(Five)   Insufficient exposure to the authorities media such as T.U. programmes , magazines ,etc.
(f) Concentration on knowing the meaning of separate linguistic items without making proper associations when the need for such association arises.

2.3. Procedures:

One.   A comprehensive theoretical account of the literature available on collocation is presented with an overview of the advantages the notion of collocation can offer for language teaching.

Two.   A test is constructed in the light of the literature available and the jury's judgments, a try out of the test is made then.

Three.   Analysis of the students' errors in collocations words is carried out in order to arrive at the necessary concluding remarks and pedagogical recommendations.

2.4.The Value of the study:

The study is hoped to be valuable in enlightening the role of collocation, in achieving mastery and improving learners' competence in English as a foreign language.

It is also hoped to be valuable in measuring learners' ability in recognizing appropriate collocation relationships.

Further to the advantages above, the research may be helpful to EFL teachers in improving their teaching strategies and stratigms by paying attention to the significant role collocation plays in language learning and processing.

2.5. The Limit of the Study:

The study is restricted to the linguistic phenomenon of collocation in English. Fourth year. Students in the department of English, College of Education .University of Al- Qadissiya will represent the population of the study.

3.The Contribution of the previous literature in Collocation:

There has been a lot of works on collocation .These works , undoubtedly , would have their impact on the achievement of the objectives of the present study. The following are some selected famous ones:

Wales (1986: 76) refers to collocation as a frequently used term in lexicology, derived from the work of Firth (1957) and developed especially by Halliday from the 1960s onward .It refers to the habitual or expected co-occurrence of works, a characteristic feature of lexical behaviuor in language, testifying to its predictability as well as its idiomaticity .

Cruse (1986:40) identifies collocation as sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent such as " fine weather", " run a business", " torrential rain", etc.

Crystal (1988:55) indicates that collocation is the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical terms, e.g., "auspicious" collocates with "occasion", "event", "sight", etc., on the one hand and "postman", " pillar-box", etc., on the other.

Robins (1964:64) defines collocation as " the habitual association of a word in a language with other words in sentences". He also draws a distinction between collocation and syntax by saying that in collocation, one is concerned with each word as an individual lexical item, and not, as in syntax, part of the grammatical level of analysis with words as members of classes in relation to other words as members of classes.

The concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistic (1997:69) defines collocation as the relation within a syntactic unit between individual elements, e.g., "computer" collocates with "hate" in "my computer hates me", used especially where words habitually go together, e.g., "blond" with "hair" in "blond hair", "drunk"; "run" with "riot" in " run riot".

One of the outstanding definitions of collocation is given by Spence (1969: 503): it is an indication of a group of lexical terms which are often adopted together to build up a natural-sounding word accompaniment.

Collocation is defined by Richard (1992:62) as the way in which words are used regularly to refer to the restriction on how words can be used together as when the English verb " perform" is used with "operation", but not with "discussion":

(One)   The doctor performed the operation.
(Two)   The committee performed a discussion .

Trash (1993: 49) equates collocation with selection restrictions, particularly one which is usually idiosyncratic or language –specific : "grill" ," boil" collocates with " meat" but not with " bread", while the reverse is true for "toast" .

Syntagmatic relation between items is worth studying because in every language, there are items which co-occur with high frequency, others whose co-occurrence seems impossible .If we could predict these facts from knowledge of the meanings of the word in isolation, they would present no difficulty, but prediction is frequently difficult and often impossible, where items tend to occur repeatedly a "collocation" is produced (Wilkins, 1985: 126). This is also what Firth (1951: 124) has commented on:

"You shall know a word by the company it keeps".

He gives the word "ass" as an example:

(One) He is an ass.
(Two) You silly ass!
(Three)   Don't be an ass.

One of the meanings of "ass" is its habitual collocation with an immediately preceding " you silly" and with other phrases of address or of personal reference.

Meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the study of meaning. Firth explains:

One of the meaning of "night" is its collocability with "dark" and of "dark", of course collocation with "night"(ibid, 1985:126).

However, this does not exclude word groups like "bright night" and "dark day", but just because of the less usual concomitance of such pairs, they stand out as marked more prominent in an utterance in which they occur than do "dark night" and "bright day". Collocations such as these are manifestly related to the referential, situational meaning of the words concerned, but collocations and situational meaning are different parts of the total statement of the use of words .In some other cases collocations are habitual but less closely connected with extra linguistic reference.

Robins (1967:68) suggests that "white coffee", "white wine", "white race" all have a range of situational reference ,but a part from the collocation of the particular second word in each pairs ,the word "white" would not , in most utterances , be used with reference to the colors of the referents.

Nevertheless, not all words in the language are subject to collocation restrictions. Robins (ibid) maintains this by saying that words like "the", "a", "if", "when" and the like are hardly subject to company in language that the grammar permits .For such words collocation is not a relevant part of the statement of their use, but with others, it is possible to set up collocation ranges of words with which given words will be found associated in their various grammatical constructions.

Both Wall work(1975:94) and Mc Cathy (1999:14) stress the fact that collocation is more than two lexical items in physical juxtaposition like "deleterious toadstools" or "condensed moonlight", but it may also govern longer stretches of language .In the following extract (from a newspaper report), the terms "appeals" ,"rejected", "approved", "succeed" and "application" are a collocation relationship in spite of the intervening phrases :

> The study of planning appeal for similar centers in the past, most of which were rejected, suggests that the future is more hopeful for developers…Now that the secretary of state for the environments said that applications should be approved unless there are good reasons against them, many more should succeed.

Firth collocation approach to the study of meaning has been criticized by a number of linguists. According to Lehser (1974: 147) collocation theory explains nothing more than that some particular items are more frequent than others, but couldn't give any reason for this. Collocations and sets are treated as if the combinational processes of a language were arbitrary. According to Burent(1975: 127) the collocation approach does not seem to have any clearly definable psycholinguistic implications , since nobody, even native speakers of a language , can know in advance of a computational study ,what the lexical items of his language are, nor, how lexical items are related statistically.

However, Halliday (1966: 148) asserts that collocation of lexical statements need not be statistical in nature, nor need they be based upon corpus,. He gives us a clear example to be discussed:

The two lexical items "strong" and " powerful", though both show the same meaning , yet they cannot be used in collocation with same nouns . "powerful" can be used with "car" , while "strong" with "tea" :

(One)   Powerful car.
(Two)   Strong tea.
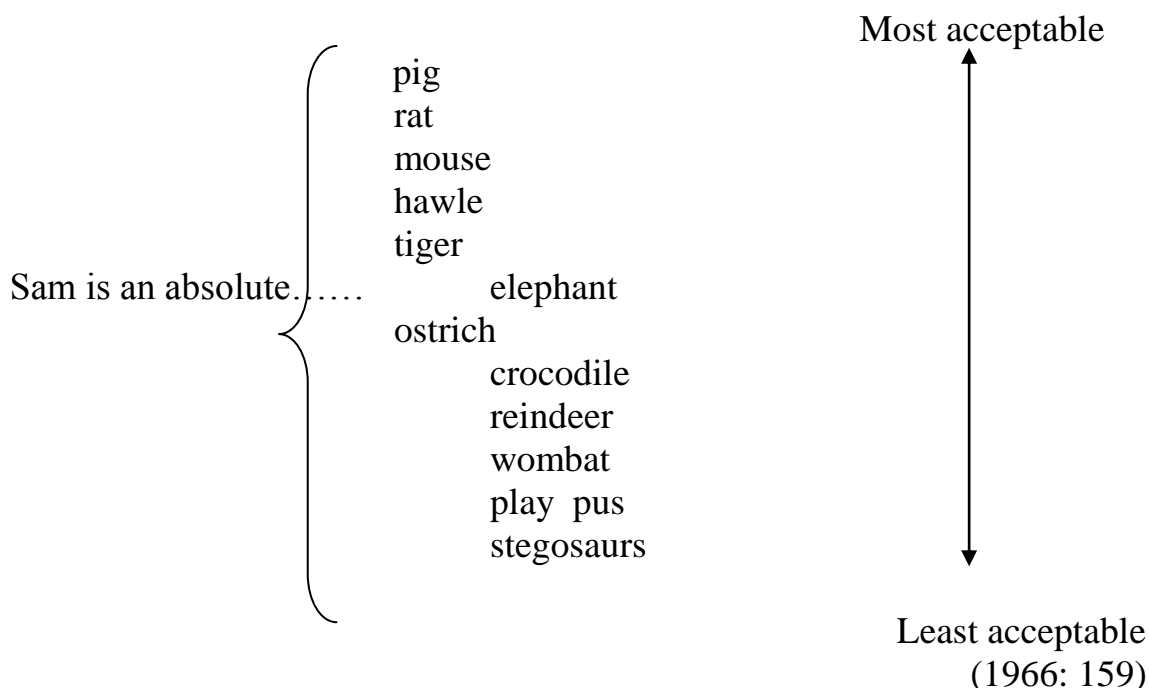 Phrases such as:
(Three)   Strong car.
(Four)   Powerful tea.
Will sound less acceptable.

Similarly, Church and Qale (1999: 84) look at collocations of "strong" and "powerful" in a corpus of press reports. Although these two words have similar meanings, their mutual information across for associations with other words reveal interesting differences. "Strong" collocates with "northerly", "showing", "believer", " neighbor", "symbol", "figure", weapon" and " past" . Such information about the delicate differences in collocation between the two words has a potentially important role, for example, in aiding students who learn EFL.

Knowledge of collocation is knowledge of what words are most likely to occur together. It is, therefore a question of typically and statement about collocation can never be absolute in that the occurrence of an item in a certain collocation environment can be checked in terms of probability and acceptability. It is, therefore, expected to find a scale of acceptability rather than a clear distinguishing line between the most acceptable and the most unacceptable. Holiday points out: The native speaker's knowledge of his language will not take the form of his accepting or rejecting a given collocation, he will react to something as more acceptable or less acceptable on a scale of acceptability.

Most acceptable

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                 pig
                 rat
                 mouse
                 hawle
                 tiger
Sam is an absolute......        elephant
                 ostrich
                        crocodile
                        reindeer
                        wombat
                        play  pus
                        stegosaurs
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Least acceptable
(1966: 159)

The lexicologist Ronald Carter (1987: 38) studies collocation drawing attention to the criteria of words care ness in building collocation relationship. He states the fact that the more care a word is the more partnerships it will contract other lexical items. He takes as an example the three words "'bright", " radiant" and " gaudy". He measures the care ness of collocability for each one of these words .He finds out that " bright" can collocate with a wider range of words than those with which " radiant" can collocate, and " radiant" in return can collocate. Accordingly, it can be said that " bright" is the most productive collocutor among these three vocabulary items, as the following table shows:

(After Cater, 1987: 37)

	sun	light	future	idea	colour	green
Bright	+	+	+	+	+	+
Radiant	+	+				
Gaudy					+	

4.The Test Construction *:

It has been argued previously that collocation poses a real problem for EFL learners at the university level, and here we will trace EFL learner's achievements in the afore field by following certain metical procedures in order to overview their proficiencies in apprehending and using collocations appropriately.

4.1. Selection of the Material:

A tackling survey of the collocations included in the following is carried out:

-Vocabulary (1999) by Michael Mecartly.
-Vocabulary : applied linguistic Perspectives (1987) by Ronald carter.
-The Words you need (1981) by Rutzka, et al.
-Aspects of Language (1975) by Dwiight Bolingu.
-"Applying Semantic Theory to Vocabulary Teaching"by Channel." (1981). EFL Journal, Vol.35 No 2 pp. 115- 121.
-A Grammar of Contemporary English (1985) by Quirk, et al.

Nevertheless, the collocation of materials is rather representative than exhaustive. They are by no means thorough; they only serve as a specimen in most frequent collocation in English.

4.2.Objectives of the Test:

i) Finding out the frequency of errors made by Iraqi EFL learners in collocation words appropriately.

ii) Comparing the frequency of errors between the two types of collocation ; namely grammatical and lexical collocation, on the one hand, and comparing students' achievements at the recognition and production levels.

iii) Identifying the sources of errors that might be felt behind the inappropriate use of collocation.

4.3. Sample.

Fourth year college students in the Dept. of English, college of education, University of Al- Qadissiya , have been chosen as subjects for the test. The total number is 50 boys and girls. In order to avoid the effect of transfer of training as a psychological variable, those students who spent more than four years in the department were exchanged. More importantly, the subjects form a homogeneity referred to by Corder (1973: 204).

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☐   See appendix (1)

4.4 Description of the Test:

The test consists of five questions. Questions one measures students' ability at the production level while the other questions measure students' ability at the recognition level. The test was administrated during the last month of the first half of the academic year 2002-2003.

The validity of the test, in its both types "face" and "content" has been answered according to Verma and Beard(1981: 87) , Heatan (1975:153) , Anastasi (1976:139), and Harris (1981: 21). Face validity has been acieved by exposing the test to a jury of experts. As far as the content validity is concerned, the items of the test incorporated are of frequent usage among the students Fourth year students have been chosen as testees because they are supposed to master maximum amount of the foreign language in general which reflects in some experience in the field of the present study.

☐ The jury members arranged alphabetically are :

Abdul-latif Al-jumaily Ph. D.
Ahmed Mustafa Al-Musawi Ph. D.
Lamya Al-Ani M.A.
Mohammed Jasim Al-Sa'ady Ph. D.
Omran Moosa Mahood Ph. D.
Ra'ad Shakir Al-Nawas Ph.D.
Riyadh Tariq Al-Ameedi Ph. D.

Reliability provides consistency which makes validity possible and indicates how much confidence we can place in our results(Gronlund,1976:105)."Test-retest" method has been used to determine the reliability of the test. The test has been administrated twice to the sample of (50) students with a period of two weeks between the first and second tests .The reliability coefficient is obtained by comparing the scores of the administration to those gained from the second one.

Peason correlation coefficient formula has been used to find out the correlation coefficient, which is (0.83) and this is considered high correlation.

5.Pilot Test and :Test Administration :

　　　The test has been tried out, before being administrated in its final format, on a group of (25) students chosen randomly from fourth year students. The answers have been analyzed and taken into account in preparing the test as final format.

　　　A pilot test is important to be tried out on a group similar to that for whom the test is designed (Harris, 1981: 25).The purpose of such a test is to specify the required time for the test and check appropriate , validity , difficulty and discrimination index of its items.

　　　Now that the results of the pilot test have satisfied the purposes above, test administration is now to be conducted. The aims of this test is two-fold: to recognize collocation and its different types in order to test the validity of the hypotheses, and to measure the degree of the subjects' knowledge of collocation and its types ,i.e. ,how much information they have internalized about these combinations.

6.Results: Analysis:

　　　The students' errors traced in this study belong to the following sources: transfer, overgeneralization, simplification, guessing and avoidance. However, it is demonstrated that in account for particular errors made by the learner, there is a large area of uncertainty, in many cases these appear to be several simultaneous processes going on (Corder, 1973:209).

　　It should be noted in the testees' answers to the whole questions, three types of responses are stated. They are classified into: correct, erroneous and avoided. The total number rate of testees' actual responses for each question are displayed in the following tables:

7.Discussion:

　　　Investigating the results of the test in general, it has been found that students' knowledge of the collocational concept is very limited. Their abilities to use and exploit collocational combinations are disappointing and unsatisfactory.

　　　The results of the test reveals the fact that students' performance of the recognition level is better than their performance at the production level. Their better performance at the recognition level asserts the point stated by Corder(1973:262) that "there is a general belief amongst teachers that a learner's receptive abilities normally exceed his productive abilities and that recognition of an item is easier than its retrieval in production".

　　　It has been demonstrated also that students' efforts to cope with grammatical collocation yield better results than their efforts to cope with lexical collocation , this goes in correspondence with Gitsakias(1996:92)conclusions that students experience

more difficulty in acquiring lexical collocation than grammatical collocation ; a matter which is partly attributed to the fixedness of grammatical collocation and the variability of lexical collocation.

An interesting finding is revealed throughout checking the test results. There is a considerable amount of variability among students' responses. This variability is standing behind students' acquaintance with some combinations due to their frequent usage in their academic courses; a matter which leads them to answer them correctly and students' unfamiliarity with some combinations; a matter which leads them to produce incorrect collocation. This is reflected in students' abilities to recognize wrong collocation like "handsome woman" and "pretty man" and their unabilities to recognize a considerable number of wrong collocations like "strong likelihood" and "begin my car".

The strategy of overgeneralization plays a major rule in students' responses. Students' ignorance of the subtle differences between apparently similar lexemes make them use them interchangeably.

The test also shows that in many cases mother tongue interference affects negatively students' achievements .The strategy of negative transfer has encouraged students to answer the questions by literary translating from their mother tongue.

Meaning has also among the causes behind some students' erroneous responses, ignorance of the meaning of the individual items has led them to guess incorrectly

8.Conclusions:

The study concludes that EFL learners face difficulties in collocation. Hence, the hypotheses of the study are accepted.

The results of the test have shown that fourth year students encounter great difficulties in the recognition and production in collocation. This is really reflected in the poor performance rates of the students in the main test. The students' poor achievement at the two parts of the test mainly reveals the arbitrary values of collocation. The learner ought to learn a collocations one indivisible unit. Students' failure to pass the test is owing to the following reasons:

1.   Bad learning strategies ,for example, transfer, overgeneralization, avoidance ,etc. have resulted in poor students' achievements the test

2. The study of vocabulary in general and collocation in particular have been neglected, syntax and phonology have been given the lion share in organizing the syllabus of TEFL, whereas the study of collocation was felt to be a marginal aspect ,if not at all .

9.Pedogagical Recommendations:

The following points are recommended for developing learners' knowledge of collocation:

Teachers should encourage their learners to establish the habit of wide extensive reading in the target language. Mc Carthy(1999:13)points out that collocations usually a

product of long years of experience of masses of data and their regular co-occurrence. listening attentively to T.V. programmes ,tape recorders , authentic communications are also beneficial sources for widening learners' experience in collocation .

Translation can be adopted as a technique for exploring the foreign corpus since they provide students with the opportunity to engage in discovery activities. Through these activities, teachers raise students' awareness for the similarities and differences that exist between L1 and L2 so that they canrealizethe fact that collocation ranges of lexical items in various situation are not identical in different languages (Tohns, 1994:64).

Working with dictionaries and other reference tools can considerably enlarge learners' knowledge with vocabulary in general and collations in particular. Shei and Pain (2000:167-182) introduced an easy way of processing collocation errors. Since collocation errors are often made by replacing one of the collocates with a word of similar meaning, it is possible to consult a dictionary for synonyms and find correct collocates for particular combinations .Beyoint(1981:207) puts it rightly:

> A dictionary can have two roles: it can have a portrait of the vocabulary of language or it can be a tool for more effective communication.

Gradation may play a role in teaching collocation. Hence, language teachers may start teaching those that can be easily learned because they are frequently used, then a shift is made to those which are less often used.

Collocation learning means a change in the strategies of the FL vocabulary learning .It is not only desirable and beneficial, but also indispensable for the learner's correct collocation represents one important aspect towards perfect foreign language use.

10.Suggestions for Further Research:

1.   A contrastive study can be carried out to find out areas of similarities and differences between collocation in English and its counterpart in Arabic. This will minimize the difficulties that learners encounter in this area.

2.   An analysis in a novel, play, etc.can be done to look for collocational devices preferred to be used by a certain novelist or a playwright in that text.

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ملخص البحث
الصعوبات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية
(لغة أجنبية) في الملازمة اللغوية.

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لإظهار الصعوبات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية(لغة أجنبية) لضبط التقديم الصحيح لعملية المصاحبة اللغوية.

تعد الملازمة اللغوية موضوعا واسعا خصبا في الخصوصية اللغوية. فإتقان ظاهرة الملازمة تمثل مرحلة متقدمة من الكفاءة في استخدام اللغة الأجنبية سواء على مستوى الطلاقة أم الدقة.

وفي دراستنا للصعوبات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية (لغة أجنبية) في الملازمة استندنا إلى مرحلتين أساسيتين :

أولهما أن الملازمة اللغوية سواء كانت لفظية أم نحوية كل حسب أنماطها وأشكالها تشكل عقبة حقيقية للمتعلمين .والأخرى أن الأسباب التي تقف وراء هذه المشكلة متعددة وهي: غياب المقابلة أو المناظرة الترجمية بين اللغة ألام و اللغة الإنكليزية مما يحفز المتعلمين على الترجمة الحرفية,الأمر الذي يؤثر تأثيرا سلبيا في استخدام المتعلمين للغة.

أضف ألى ذلك عملية التعليم غير الكفوءة من خلال التقديم غير الصحيح لعملية الملازمة ,وتجاهل فكرة الملازمة من المعلم والمتعلم معا, ونقص الخبرة باللغة الأجنبية الناتجة عن التعرض المحدود للوسائل الفعالة مثل برامج التلفزيون و الراديو والصحف والمجلات ...الخ كل ذلك من شانه أن يؤثر في تفاقم هذه المشكلة.

وستحصل الدراسة بتحديد المشكلة واهداف البحث وفرضياته وإجراءاته وأهمية ومغزى البحث .وهناك وضع كامل للاختبار وتحليل النتائج للكشف عن الصعوبات التي يواجهها المتعلمون في هذا المجال.وقد أوضحت النتائج الإحصائية أن إنجاز الطلبة في مجال التمييز هو افضل من إنجازهم في مجال التقديم .وفي ضوء هذه النتائج يقدم البحث توصيات طرائقية ويوصي بدراسات إضافية استكمالا للفوائد اللغوية التي يؤمل أن يقدمها هذا الحقل اللغوي الخصب.