

**UNIVERSITI TENOLOGI MARA**

**A DATA-DRIVEN CONTRASTIVE STUDY ON  
MALAY ESL LEARNERS' USE OF LEXICAL  
VERBS AND VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS IN  
ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING**

**SHAZILA ABDULLAH**

Thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**


**Academy of Language Studies**

June 2015

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Teknologi MARA. It is original and is the result of my own work, unless otherwise indicated or acknowledged as referenced work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any degree or qualification.

I, hereby, acknowledge that I have been supplied with the Academic Rules and Regulations for Post Graduates, Universiti Teknologi MARA, regularating the conduct of my study and research.

Name of Student	:	Shazila Abdullah
Student I.D. No.	:	2009525519
Programme	:	Doctor of Philosophy (Applied Linguistics)
Faculty	:	Academy of Language Studies
Thesis Title	:	A Data-Driven Contrastive Study on Malay ESL Learners' Use of Lexical Verbs and Verb- Noun Collocations in Argumentative Writing
Signature of Student	:	 .....
Date	:	June 2015

## ABSTRACT

Learner writing is often characterized by linguistic errors, especially in lexical verbs, which can contribute to communicative incompetence. It is also generally known that verb-noun collocations are a characteristic of native writing. The main objective of this thesis is to investigate the linguistic errors made by non-native learners and to suggest ways how they can improve their level of proficiency. Previous studies have looked into the occurrences of either lexical verbs or verb-noun collocations with little emphasis on the phraseology of verb-noun collocations formed from commonly used lexical verbs. Based on these premises, the thesis explores the use of lexical verbs and verb-noun collocations in two learner corpora, one of which is a native learner corpus and the other a specific group of non-native learners, i.e. Malay ESL learners. The data-driven analysis specifically adopted for this study allows for a focus on the most commonly used lexical verbs and verb-noun collocations. Furthermore, an in-depth contrastive interlingual analysis between the corpora of native and non-native learners enables the researcher to uncover the difficulties that learners face in using these lexical items. The meticulous processes involved in compiling the non-native learner corpus and the extraction of verb-noun collocations add to the uniqueness of the thesis. The thesis addresses three main questions through a linguistic analysis using both quantitative and qualitative methods with the assistance of WordSmith Tools. First, it seeks to examine linguistic elements of the lexical verbs; second, to ascertain the phraseological patterns of verb-noun collocations; and third, to identify the non-native elements found in the use of lexical verbs and verb-noun collocations. The results reveal some similarities and differences that help in understanding how lexical verbs and verb-noun collocations are actually used by both native and non-native learners in writing. What is most obvious is the Malay ESL learners' lack of vocabulary repertoire, which indicates a lack of vocabulary acquisition. The analysis of verb-noun collocations reveals an array of phraseological deviations that stem from a lack of knowledge in syntagmatic relationships between the two lexical elements in the collocations. It is, thus, essential for learners to learn how to use a variety of lexical verbs, including the lexical patterns and grammatical patterns of verb-noun collocations in order to use them appropriately, especially when these patterns differ from their L1. A framework on learning and teaching of the lexical verbs and verb-noun collocations has been proposed based on the findings. This framework can contribute to the improvement of an English syllabus, material design and teaching methodology. It is hoped that the most important contribution of this thesis is to increase awareness of the importance of phraseology in ELT so that various measures can be taken to enhance learners' communicative competence, which should be the aim of every English course.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>AUTHOR'S DECLARATION</b>	ii
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	iii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>	iv
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	v
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	xii
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	xv
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	xvii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.1.1 Collocations	3
1.1.1.1 Collocational Competence in Writing	5
1.1.1.2 Collocations in Second Language Learning	5
1.1.1.3 Lexical Collocations: Verb-Noun Collocations	8
1.1.2 Lexical Verbs	9
1.1.2.1 Lexical Verbs in Academic Writing	10
1.1.2.2 The Learning and Teaching of Lexical Verbs	10
1.1.3 Corpus Linguistics	12
1.1.3.1 Corpus Linguistics and Contrastive Analysis	13
1.1.3.2 Corpus-Based vs. Corpus-Driven: A Data-Driven Study	14
1.1.4 The English Language Situation In Malaysia	15
1.2 Statement of the Problem	16
1.3 Purpose of the Study	17
1.4 Objectives of the Study	18
1.5 Research Questions	18
1.6 Significance of the Study	20
1.7 Scope, Limitations and Delimitations of the Study	23
1.8 Organization of Thesis	24
1.9 Definition of Terms	25
1.9.1 Data-Driven Approach	25
1.9.2 Corpus-Based Contrastive Analysis	26

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The study of second language learning (SLL) has come into focus over the past few decades in order to understand the learning process and help learners improve on their ability to learn and use all the language skills effectively. Among all the language skills, second language learners seem to have most problems with writing, as it is often perceived to be a very difficult skill (Gupta, 1998). Self-expression, flow of ideas and readers' expectation are some of the elements that writers will have to consider in order to write effectively, and these are also the aspects of writing that second language learners find most complicated to deal with (Basturkmen and Lewis, 2002). Since writing ability is often associated with intellectual and social development of a person (Bruning and Horn, 2000), it is therefore an important skill that should be given much attention by the learners.

In general, writing is a process that requires careful thought as it involves cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Due to this, writing has always been regarded as a difficult task. Writing in a second language is even more challenging as there can be differences in the cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic aspects of L1 and L2. There is no doubt that ESL learners who aim to be proficient in the language will have to acquire the writing skills as well (Kroll, 2003). In acquiring the skills, the focus of an elementary writing class would normally be on the grammatical elements of the language since they will form the basis of language structure used in writing. At an intermediate level, the focus will shift to the organization of the writing piece. Here, ESL learners are taught how to write a unified and coherent essay. With good use of language structures and an effective organization of the essay, one would expect that at an advanced level, these learners would be able to come up with well-written essays that will not distinguish them far from native users of the language. But more often than not, the lack of a wide range of vocabulary or the ineffective use of vocabulary items sets them apart from native speakers (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996 in Hyland, 2002; Crossley and McNamara, 2009; Kizil and Kilimci, 2014).