



Malaysian Journal Of ELT Research

ISSN: 1511-8002

Vol. 7 (1), 2011

**Collocational Competence among Malaysian Undergraduate
Law Students**

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate collocational competence among undergraduate law students at University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, formerly known as University Darul Iman Malaysia (UDM) through accurate and inaccurate production of collocations of prepositions in the learners' production of the colligations in the Problem Question essays focusing on Law of Contract genre, and to explore their use of the functions relational to the content of law. The findings showed that the learners still produced colligation errors despite their competence in observing the communicative and

discoursal functions of legal discourse. This study recommends an explicit teaching of collocations of prepositions to increase their awareness to these patterns besides the establishment of English for Academic Legal Purposes (EALP) courses at every institution.

KEY WORDS: collocation, prepositions, colligations, collocational competence, functions

Introduction

Law students in tertiary education have to fulfil challenging tasks in their academic life which include, for example, writing problem question essays, taking part in legal discussions, and debating like a lawyer in mock trials (Ahmad, 2007). These tasks which represent the real life tasks of legal professionals demand “unusually high linguistic skills” (Howe, 1990, p. 216). This includes possessing an adequate collocational competence, particularly collocations of preposition (Bhatia, 1993), in order to be successful both academically and professionally in their future life. This is because to law students, collocations are “a system of preferred expressions of knowledge” in an academic discourse community and are argued to be “very essential in developing learners’ generic knowledge and communicative competence” (Stuart & Trelis, 2006, p. 239). Lexico-grammatical items (vocabulary and grammar) are “the lawyer’s tools of trade” (Lord Denning, 1979, p. 5) and mastery over the communicative functions played by formulaic phrases in legal discourse are essential. Language competence is not confined to linguistic competence; that is, the knowledge of lexis and grammar, but it

requires the learners to have adequate communicative competence or language fluency, the ability to perform the linguistic knowledge appropriately in the context of the legal discourse community (extra-linguistic). This communicative competence is known as collocational competence (Hill, 2000).

Literature review

What is collocation? In recent years, one of the fields that have attracted increasing attention is phraseology, the study of word combinations or collocations. To phraseologists, language consists of conventionalised or pre-packaged lexical phrases (multi-word items) rather than single lexical items and the native speaker of a language stores lots of meaningful chunks and strings of words rather than discrete word lists in his or her mental lexicon. Originally introduced by Firth (1951) in the study of lexical semantics, he defines collocation as “the company a word keeps” (Firth, 1957, p. 13) to mean that the meaning and function of a word could be determined by a habitual occurrence of the word with other words in its environment at syntagmatic, as opposed to paradigmatic level. This theory which is known as the ‘contextual theory of meaning’ claims that the meaning of a word, for example, *dark* can be determined by the neighbouring word *light* in the phrase *dark light*.

Collocation has been defined differently by those who study it but many have come to an agreement that collocation is “the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text” (Sinclair, 1991, p. 170) or the co-occurrence of two or more lexical items as realizations of structural elements within a syntactic pattern (Cowie, 1978). Meanwhile, Bahns and Eldaw (1993, p. 3) mention that the major characteristics of collocations are that “their meanings reflect the meaning of their counterparts and that they are used frequently, spring to mind readily, and are psychologically salient”. Collocation ranges in a continuum from very fixed expressions, i.e. idioms, particles, and complex collocations of prepositions to less restricted collocations (allow limited combinability with other words).

There are also several approaches to studying collocation: the lexical, semanticist, and structural approaches. The structuralists such as Benson et al (1997); Schmitt (2000); Hoey (2004a) have further categorised collocations into two: lexical and grammatical collocations (also called as colligations), for example, collocations of prepositions. Lexical collocation is defined as those typical collocations consisting of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, while grammatical collocation is defined by Benson et al. (1997: xv) as “...a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun, adjective, and verb) and a preposition”.

Why are collocations important? Collocations have been claimed to be dominant in academic texts especially in the texts of specialised disciplines (e.g.. law, medicine, biology, etc.) where they become the basic building blocks of specialised language and constitute the expressions of knowledge, concepts, and ideas in these discourses (Halliday, 1992). They also perform specific functions and are the organising thoughts in those texts (Fuentes, 2001). Students who are competent in collocation (have collocational competence) are regarded as those who have attained an advanced or higher level of English fluency or communicative competence (Hill, 2000). Collocation knowledge becomes the determinant factor for students' success in their academic and professional careers (Howarth 1998). In addition, learning vocabulary in chunks may expedite the second language acquisition process. Since our short term memory (STM) can only remember a few words at a time, storing word phrases which are meaningful rather than discrete single word items may facilitate and ease the retrieval of the phrases from our mental lexicon. In this way, it resembles the acquisition of one's first language (Wray, 2002).

Collocational competence

The term collocational competence was coined by Hill (2000); Lewis (2000) and means the ability to produce fluent, accurate, and stylistically appropriate language. This involves having both the knowledge of formulaic language and the knowledge of the structures. Meanwhile, Partington (1996) has also defined collocational competence as

“the knowledge of what is normal collocation in a particular environment” (p. 18). He adopted the concept of collocational competence from the concept of communicative competence introduced by Hymes (1972) who was dissatisfied with Chomsky’s (1965) binary division of competence and performance to describe language use. To Hymes (1972), competence covers a much wider range of skills and knowledge than the internalisation of the grammatical system as claimed by Chomsky. Hymes (1972) then divides competence into four: (1) the knowledge of what is *formally feasible* (the language system), (2) of what is *feasible*, (3) of what is *appropriate*, and (4) of what is actually *performed*. The first kind of competence is similar to Chomsky’s concept of language competence (internalisation of the grammatical system in our brain) whereas the other three types of competence are context-related or extra-linguistic. These four types of competence can be seen as an ordered set of refining mechanisms (Partington, 1996) and collocation choices are made at the latter stages of the refining process.

Collocational competence as used in this paper is more technical and textual in the sense that it refers to colligational (collocations of prepositional) competence within the sentence level (sentence writing); it concerns the ability of law students to express themselves in legal written discourse using accurate, fluent, appropriate, and stylistic collocations of prepositions in conformity with the academic and professional discourse community. A further operational definition for collocations of prepositions as employed in this paper is as follows:

- a. prep + noun + preposition, e.g. *in contrast to, as opposed to, by virtue of*, etc.
- b. prep + noun, e.g. *in a nutshell, in agreement, in contract*, etc.
- c. noun + preposition, e.g. *approval of, discussion about*, etc.
- d. adjective / participle + preposition, e.g. *contrary to, binding on, based on* etc.
- e. verb + preposition (particles) e.g. *come to, enter into, discussion with*, etc.

The collocations of prepositions as above represent the immediate collocations of prepositions. However, in the context of this study, collocational competence does not only include the knowledge of the immediate collocations of prepositions but rather it involves the ability to psychologically perceive the relationship or associations between the immediate collocations and their ‘extended collocations’ (Sinclair, 1991) forming a series of interconnected links or chains of semantic sequences within a sentence (Hunston, 2008). This happens since the immediate collocations of prepositions are not normally free or function independently in texts but rather they are largely determined by “the set structure of the texts and by the legal usage” (Vedralova, 2008:34). Therefore, the pattern *contrary to* will likely be extended by the *be-verbs*, i.e. *was* to form *was contrary to* and this pattern again generates another pattern, i.e. **The law on slavery passed 30 years ago;** that is, the subject to the pattern *was contrary to*. Then another pattern will be activated after the preposition *to* to complement the sentence, i.e., *the law which was passed 10 years ago*. These chain sequences help develop a full sentence: ***The law on slavery passed 30 years ago was contrary to the law passed 10 years ago.*** This process is also

called by Hoey (2005) 'lexical priming' or "a psychological association between words" (p. 5). The ability of a learner to perceive these series of sequences is regarded as having reached an advanced level state or having collocational competence.

Collocation in legal discourse

Perhaps there is no other specialised discipline which is so intricately mingled with a language than law (Tiersma, 1999). Language is an essential vehicle for conveying the contents of law (ibid), and is known as the language of law (legalese). In all human societies, law is formulated, interpreted, and enforced by language; and the greater part of these different legal processes is also realised primarily through language (Cotterill, 2003; Gibbons, 1994). However, legalese has been claimed by many as the most complicated language (Ahmad, 2007; Alcaraz and Hughes, 2002; Bhatia, 1993; Tiersma, 1999). And this complication is due the formulaic nature of legalese itself - the pervasiveness of fixed expressions (e.g. foreign terms), formulae (e.g. binomials or multinomials), sentence builders, prefabs, routines, and restricted word combinations, all of which are classified as and termed collocations.

Before we discuss collocation in legal discourse, it is necessary to explain briefly the nature of legal vocabulary and syntax. According to Alcaraz and Hughes (2002), Gibbons (1994), Melinkoff (1963), Tiersma (1999), and Vedralova (2008) legal vocabulary consists mainly of (1) technical words comprising common words (i.e. *consideration*,

case, approval, etc.) which have become specialised in legal texts, (2) academic words (the words which appear frequently in academic texts, i.e. *relate, evidence, fees, persistent, etc.*), foreign terms (i.e. *means rea, habeous corpus, ratio decidendi, etc.*). However, these words and terminology do not come alone in legal texts. They frequently co-occur or combine with other words to form collocations. These collocations which are also defined as ‘procedural or enabling vocabulary’ enable speakers and writers to combine legal words and terminology into meaningful association. According to Kjaer (2007, p. 4), “... collocations with a specialised legal sense are the types of word combinations that are most frequently found in legal texts of all genres.” This actually refers to the combinations of technical words with other dominant words, i.e. the combinations of Adjective + Noun (i.e. *legal advice, grand jury, valid contract, etc.*) and grammatical words, i.e. prepositions (i.e. *in consideration of, subject to the approval of, etc.*). In other words, what makes legal language special is its width of association and conceptual density (Harris, 1997).

Meanwhile, legal syntax is always characterised as stereotypical and complicated. This is due to the function of legal texts itself, that is, to convey information to the readers as clearly and precisely as possible. Thus, legal sentence structures are usually lengthy and highly nominalised, featuring noun phrases and complex prepositional phrases (Bhatia, 1993; Tiersma, 1999; Vedralova, 2008). Other characteristics of legal syntax are a heavy use of the passive voice, usually expressed in prepositional phrases (i.e. *by the majority, by the FIC, etc.*) and the repetitiveness of pronouns and nouns, used as a means of

Yunus, K & Su'ad Awab. (2011). Malaysian Journal of ELT Research, Vol. 7 (1), p. 151-202. www.melta.org.my

avoiding ambiguous sentences. To conclude, both legal vocabulary and syntax are characterised by a heavy use of nominal phrases.

The description above has clearly shown that a very essential aspect of the language of law is its heavy use of multi-word phrases or collocations. Like collocations in general English, legal collocations are also divided into two types: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations (colligations). Following Benson et al's (1997) description of collocations, lexical collocations can be further subcategorised into six types (i.e. Noun + Verb, Adjective + Noun, Noun + Noun, etc.). Meanwhile, grammatical collocations can be further categorised into eight types. The most typical ones are the combinations of technical and semi-technical words (typically verbs, nouns, adjectives) with prepositions (grammatical words). The focus of this paper is on grammatical collocations, that is, collocations of prepositions.

Collocations of prepositions are, in fact, of two types. The first type is the combinations of single-word prepositions (i.e. *by, of, in*, etc.) with dominant words (technical and semi-technical words) to form the patterns, i.e. *approval of, in consideration of, relate to*, etc. These are restricted collocations since the dominant words may allow only a limited combinability with prepositions. The semantic functions (meanings) of these words are dependent on the prepositions. The second type of collocation of prepositions is complex prepositional phrases known also as two-word, three-word, or four-word prepositions (i.e.

in *pursuance of, in accordance with, on the basis of, etc.*). Though consisting of many words, they have only a single meaning. These two types of colligations are worth mentioning as they are indeed the most essential in legal texts functioning as the construction of knowledge (Halliday, Angus, & Strevens, 1964; Halliday, 1994) and “...the articulation of conceptual relations in legal discourse...” (Jones & McCracken, 2006: 17).

Despite the fact that legal discourse is “The highly institutionalised and sometimes ritualised discourse of the law (which) often follows regular patterns...” (Gibbons, 2003: 286) many have claimed that law phraseology is a branch of study which is under-researched (Gozdz-Roskowski, 2004; Kjaer, 2007). There are a few studies focusing on binomials (i.e. Danet, 1980; Gustaffson, 1975; Melinkoff, 1963) and only a few researchers who concentrate on the study of legal colligations (Gozdz-Roskowski, 2003; 2004; Vedralova, 2008) - collocations of prepositions. Gozdz-Roskowski (2003) refers to collocations of prepositions as lexical bundles.

The functions of legal collocations

Collocations are very essential elements in legal discourse since there is always a “relationship between language function and language form (Leckie-Tarry in Ghadessy, 1993, p. 28). Akmajian (1995, p. 229) also claims that “one important property of a (legal) sentence is its communicative potential and sentences with different structures often have

different communicative functions”. According to Halliday (1970; 1994), specialised discourse structures (lexico-grammatical items, i.e. collocations of prepositions) represent the construction of knowledge, concepts, and conceptual relations in legal discourse. They are also the organizing thoughts in the discourse, and they perform various pragmatic functions (Bhatia, 1993, 1998; Gozdz- Roskowski, 2003; 2004). In other words, the language function expressed in legal discourse is the communication of a systematic representation of carefully defined aspects of the world as seen through the lens of the law.

Beginning with Firth (1951; 1957) who claimed that a specialised language has a system of its own, the Neo-Firthians, e.g. Halliday (1994) further elaborate that any individual unit of language, i.e. prepositional items performs various functions, i.e. to express location (i.e. *at, in, on*), extent (i.e. *for*), manner (i.e. *by, through, with*, etc), agent (*by*), etc. And these functions of the prepositions may differ when used in different contexts. For example, the preposition *by* in the pattern underlined in the following sentence *If it is a mere term of the contract, the non-approval by the Foreign Investment Committee (FIC) of the deal certainly defeats the sale.*, signals the function of **authority** in legal discourse instead of **agent** in cancer research discourse (cf. Gledhill, 2000).

Thorne (1997) states that there are a main and two subordinate functions of legal collocations: the main function is **referential** (to convey information), whereas the

subordinate functions are *conative (persuasive)*, and *metalinguistic* (discussing language itself). Furthermore, in the analysis of complex collocations of prepositions of a corpus of contracts of 300,000 tokens, Gozd- Roskowski (2003) found that complex collocations of prepositions¹ performed many *textual* (text organisers) and *referential* functions. The examples of text organisers include *an appealing to an authority* (i.e. *in accordance with, subject to the provision, pursuant to section X*, etc.) and examples of *referential* functions include *in the presence of, for the benefit of, on the part of*, etc.

Moreover, Gozd- Roskowski (2004), in his analysis of a legal contract corpus reported that complex collocations of prepositions containing the word *consideration* and prepositions (i.e. *in consideration of, for valuable consideration, total failure of considerations*, etc.) are the constructions found to be dominant in all legal contract genres: statutes, contracts acts, cases, and academic textbooks. Both the patterns *in consideration of* and *for good and valuable consideration*, for example, were found to be at precisely the same point in contracts and their function is to introduce the most essential part of any contract.

Bhatia (1998) also noticed four major kinds of intertextual devices employing prepositional sequences in a corpus of legislative discourse based on the British housing

¹ Gozd- Roskowski (2003) called them lexical bundles instead of collocations of prepositions.

Act 1980. These devices serve the following functions: (1) signalling textual authority, i.e. *in accordance with, in pursuance of, by virtue of*, etc., (2) providing terminological explanation, i.e. *within the meaning of*, (3) defining legal scope, i.e. *subject to paragraph 11 (2) of Schedule 2 to this Act*, and (4) facilitating textual mapping, i.e. *specified in section, referred to in subsection, from falling within the meaning of*, etc.

Meanwhile, Vedralova (2008) in the analysis of the EU (European Union) legislation corpus of 160, 000 words reports that complex collocations of prepositions did play several roles: **addition** (i.e. *in addition to*), **exception** (i.e. *with the exception of*), **manner** (i.e. *by means of, on the basis of*, etc.), **identification** (i.e. *on behalf of*), **condition** (*as regards*), **purpose** (i.e. *for the purpose of, with a view to*) and **reference** (i.e. *in conformity with, in line with, in accordance with*, etc). She also claims that many of the listed collocations of prepositions in the corpus express **reference**. In the same vein, Durrant (2009) in his doctoral study on academic collocations revealed that the first 40 out of 100 academic collocations extracted from the corpus were collocations of prepositions. These collocations function as *textual organisers* and *reference* in all types of academic texts including legal academic texts. To conclude, prepositional sequences play two major functions in legal discourse: (1) communicative or pragmatic functions and (2) discoursal functions.

The relation between collocation and legal content knowledge

Beginning with Halliday et al (1964) who claim that specialised registers are related closely to the concept or content knowledge of specialised subjects, much research has been conducted to prove that collocations are the essential properties of specialised texts (Cortes, 2004; Fuentes, 2001; Gledhill, 2000; Marco, 2000; etc.). Howarth (1998) carried out a large-scale study on collocations with native speakers of English and non-native postgraduate students from a wide range of subject areas at British universities aiming at looking at the non-native postgraduate phraseological performance in their academic writing in comparison to native speakers' performance. One fact addressed by Howarth (1998) is that the native-speakers were all advanced learners of English. Based on their essay writing, the finding revealed that the native speakers employed about 50 per cent more restricted collocations and idioms than the non-native postgraduates did. The non-natives were found to lack awareness of manipulating the standard collocations specific to a particular genre. As commented by Howarth (1998, p. 186), "Adherence to the conventional allows message content to be clearly perceived.", and the failure to do so may impede the message content from being expressed accurately, clearly, and precisely.

Similarly, Zhang (1991) carried out a study with 30 native speakers of English and 30 international non-native speakers of English at Pennsylvania University, USA to investigate the relationship between their collocational competence and writing fluency. It was found that the native speakers performed better in their writing than their non-native counterparts and he claims that this was due to their collocational competence. The natives were found to produce not only more collocations (the total number of

collocations per 250- word essay) but they also made use of various types of collocations (the six types of lexical collocations plus grammatical collocations). This finding is also supported by Hsu (2002) who investigated the relationship between collocational competence and speaking and writing fluency of Taiwanese university students at a university college in Taiwan. The 14 students who were involved in the case study were found to perform better in the speaking and writing of Business tasks due to their increased collocational competence gained from a 3-month workshop. Similarly, those who performed significantly better than the others were found to produce a larger number and variety of collocations than the rest did.

However, in specialised disciplines, there have been only a few studies conducted to investigate the relation between ESP learners' performance of collocations and content performance. Cortes (2004), for example, compiled two types of corpora (the corpus of Biology and History published writing written by professional authors and the corpus of Biology and History students' writing) in a study carried out at Northern Arizona University to investigate the use of the 'target functions' of prepositional sequences ('lexical bundles') in these academic prose. The target functions of prepositional sequences extracted from the Biology and History published writing were compared with those in the students' writing. It was found that the students "...rarely use the 'target functions' as employed in published writing in their essay writing" (ibid, p. 397) and even though they used them, their use did not correspond to the uses of these sequences employed by professional authors. Cortes (2004) suggested that students be explicitly

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taught these prepositional sequences since they perform essential functions and constitute the expressions of content knowledge in the fields of Biology and History.

Unfortunately, in an area specific like law, it can be claimed that there have been no specific studies carried out to determine the relationship between law students' phraseological performance with content performance except for the study by Howe (1990). The study comes closest to this study in the sense that it involves legal students in first year study to research their use of functions in the Problem Question essays. The majority of studies, deal with the description or analysis of legal phraseology (cf. Bhatia, 1993; Cotterill, 2002; Gibbons, 1994; Gozdz-Roskowski, 2003; 2004; Kjaer, 2007; Melinkoff, 1963; Mkhathshwa, 2007; Tiersma, 1999; Vedralova, 2008) and Needs Analysis studies - to understand ESL law students' problems with the language of the law and the study of law (cf. Ahmad, 2007; Beasley, 1993).

Based on the arguments presented previously, it clearly shows that collocational competence should be achieved by law students because legal collocations allude to concepts, communicative functions, and developments of legal content knowledge. Thus, if a law student makes use of the collocation of preposition **in case of** which indicates *probability* instead of **in the case of** signifying *reference* in their writing, for example in the sentence ***In case of Meritt vs Meritt, the wife may claim inheritance from the husband,*** the student has actually used collocations incorrectly and failed to perform the

communicative functions played by the pattern within the context of the law. Gozd-Roskowski (2004, p. 402) states that the failure to conform to the convention of legal discourse (to conform to the correct forms, the semantic functions, and discursive devices) could result in the entire text being invalidated or being rejected by a particular legal discourse community for failure to preserve 'the generic integrity'. Since to know one's field means to know the phraseology of the field (Francis, 1993), a mastery over the content of the law also means a mastery over the phraseology of the law. And this mastery (collocational competence) is shown in the adequacy of legal collocation knowledge and the appropriate use of collocations in legal contexts.

The study

In order to provide in-depth knowledge about the phraseological competence of law undergraduates in Malaysia, this qualitative study explores the phraseological competence of Malaysian law undergraduates at the University of Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, known formerly as University Darul Iman Malaysia (UDM). The following research questions help to focus the investigation:

1. What are the collocations of prepositions produced by the law undergraduates in their writing?
2. Are there patterns of different functions found in the use of the prepositional sequences?

3. How do these functions relate to the content of the law?

Methodology

Problem Question (PQ) sample essays

Problem Question (PQ) essays are very essential essays required to be mastered by law students studying law (Howe, 1990). They resemble the legal advice prepared by legal professionals for their clients especially prior to any court proceedings. The students were supposed to follow the *IPCAC* legal reasoning sequence in answering Problem Question essays (Williams, 1982). This includes: (1) identifying the relevant *issues*, (2) identifying relevant *principles* and *cases*, (3) *applying* the pertinent principles, and (4) drawing their tentative *conclusions*. The Problem Question essays are the main writing task in legal academic settings.

For the purpose of this study, 42 samples of Problem Question essays of the legal contract genre written by 21 semester five students (two essays per student) and 80 samples of problem question essays written by 40 semester three students (two essays per student) were used. Altogether, the essays totalled up to 40,600 words. See Table 1 below for a description of the essays. The same Problem Question questions were given to the two groups except for question number 1. This question which was given to

semester three students contained three sub-questions (See Appendix A). See Table 1 below for a description of the essays

Table 1 Description of students' essays (of legal contract genre)

Semesters	No. of students	Total no. of essays written	No. of words per essay	Total no. of words
3	40	1	400	28,000
		1	300	
5	21	1	300	12,600
		1	300	

The procedure

Many researchers (cf. Howe, 1990; Weber, 2001) made use of law students' writing samples collected previously in their research. Though it seems to be more practical to collect the students' samples from the respective lecturers who teach the course rather than asking the students to sit for a test, as done previously by other researchers, it could not be done in this study because there were not enough students' scripts kept by the Law of Contract lecturer to be used in the study. However, this gave the researcher the opportunity to have an idea of the most recent collocational competence of these students

based on the most recent essays written instead of from the ones written about a year or two years back.

In this study the subjects were asked to sit for a test. To do this, the students were required to sit for a two-hour test and were equipped with the Law of Contract Acts 1950, the same procedure undertaken in taking these tests in their mid-semester exams at the FLAIR. The first reason why these students were chosen in the first place was that they had already completed two Law of Contract courses (Law of Contract I and Law of Contract II) offered in semesters one and two consecutively. Both the two groups took the test at two different times and places². Meanwhile, since I was not the subject matter expert, the essay questions used were obtained from the Law of Contract³ lecturer who teaches the two courses and which had never been used by these students before. A slight modification was made to the essay questions. Only the names of the persons and the dates which were originally stated in the test questions⁴ were changed.

² Both of these two groups of students were the participants in the PhD research. Semester five students were actually the pilot study students whereas the semester three students were the actual subjects in this study.

³ She was the only Law of Contract lecturer teaching the courses during the time. All the questions were originally devised by her and no one else.

⁴ The test questions were the assignments or the progress tests conducted for on-going assessments.

There were a few steps taken in this manual⁵ analysis of the data. First, in order to check for the students' production (both accurate and inaccurate) of collocations of prepositions⁶ in the essays, we referred to Benson et al.'s (1997) *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations*. The dictionary provided good coverage of the collocation types. Besides, we also made use of the *Longman Dictionary* and the *British National Corpus (BNC)* for Law available online at: <http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers>. The collocations which were repeated (written more than once) in the essays were counted only once. Besides, the collocations which were copied directly from the Contract Acts 1950 were not counted. Next, after all of the prepositional sequences were extracted, we arranged them according to their functions. Unlike Howe (1990) who presented the individual student's use of the functions according to the different types of essay genres produced, we presented the functions collectively as the students wrote the same type of essay genre (law of contract genre). Halliday's *Functional Grammar* (1994) and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik's (1972) *A Grammar of Contemporary English* which provide a good description of the functions of prepositions and Gozdz-Rowkowski's (2003) and Vedralova's (2008) description of the functions of complex prepositional

⁵ This study does not attempt to compare the most frequent collocations produced by professional writers of the specialized field and learners' writing (cf. Cortes, 2004). Thus, the analysis was done manually instead of using the corpus.

⁶ Refer to the collocations of prepositions which were operationalised in this study (see Section 2.1).

phrases were used as references for defining the functions of the collocations of prepositions produced by the students in the sample writing. Since the functions in grammar textbooks do not provide enough coverage of the functions of specialised subjects (Fuentes, 2001), we also made use of the *LC (Law of Contract)* corpus compiled based on the reference law textbooks and books of cases used as the students' major references in their class. Finally, in order to show how the functions relate to the law content knowledge, the contexts or the environments where the functions operate will be shown.

Findings

This paper aims to investigate the collocational competence of law undergraduates at UniSZA. Thus this paper attempts to find the answers to the following question:

1. What are the collocations of prepositions produced by the law undergraduates in their writing?

Based on the data analysis, the two groups of students actually produced quite a small number of collocations of prepositions in their writing and there were also many occurrences of faulty production of the collocations. Actually there are two explanations

for this small number. First, this was because the repeated collocations were not counted and secondly the collocations which were copied directly from the Contract Acts 1950 were also not included. It is a common practice for law students to copy directly from the Acts into their essays. See Table 2 below for the accurate and inaccurate production of collocations of prepositions per 40, 600 words.

Table 2 Accurate and Inaccurate production of collocations of prepositions

Semester	Accurate Patterns	Inaccurate Patterns	Total no. of patterns	Total no. of words
3	3000	1000	4000	28,000
5	600	200	800	12,600
Total	3600	1200	4800	40,600

Meanwhile, Table 3 below presents instances of accurate prepositional sequences of prepositions produced by the two groups of students, arranged according to their types.

Table 3 Collocations of prepositions as produced by types

Type 1: Noun + Preposition	
No.	a. N/NP + P + N/NP b. NP + P + N

		<p>c. P + N/NP + P</p> <p>d. VP (particle) + N + P</p> <p>e. N + P + N/NP + P</p>
1	manifestation of assent	N + P + N
2	instantaneous means of communication	NP + P + N
3.	the communication of the acceptance	NP + P + N
4.	on behalf of the offeror	P + N + P + NP
5.	in the middle of his reply	P + NP + P
5	the words of acceptance	NP + P + N
6	take into consideration of	VP + P + N + P
7	the way of acceptance	NP + P + N
8	expression by words or conduct	N + P + N
9	assent to the terms of offer	N + P + NP + P
10	come to the knowledge of the offeror	VP (particle) + NP + P
11	make known of the acceptance	VP + P + NP
12	breach of contract	N + P + N
13	in argument with	P + N + P

14	acceptance by way of	N + P + N + P
15	the time of delivery	NP + P + NP
16	the consequence from that agreement	NP + P + NP
17	knowledge about the acceptance	N + P + NP
18	(be) in contract with	P + N + P
19	in the leading case of Entores v Miles Far East Corporation	P + NP + P
20	failure on the part of the offeree	N + P + NP + P + NP
21	take action against the offeror	V+ N + P + NP
22	acceptance of a proposal	N + P + NP
23	the conduct of the offeree	NP + P + NP
Type 2: Verb + Prepositions		
Verb + Prepositions + NP		
1.	by looking at the case	
2.	comply with	
3.	claim for damages	
4	the act only provides for	

5	look into the law
6	posted it (the letter) to the offeror
7	sent to the offeror
8	know about the contract
9	succeed in the application
10	give to the plaintiff
11	should wait for the offeree
12	sent a telex to the respondent
13	Negotiate / make the contract via/ by telephone
14	refer to the case of
15	ask the husband to transfer
16	get through the line
17	take action against the offeror
Type 3: Adjective + Prepositions	
	(be) + adjective + prepositions + NP
1	(be) binding on the offeror
2	(be) negotiated by telephone

3	(be) received by the proposer/ offeror
4	as indicated by the offeror
5	(be) accepted by the offeror
6	(be) sent by telex
7	(be) involved in the contract
8	(be) held by the court
9	can be determined as
10	(be) made by normal transmission
11	(be) applicable in the UK
12	(be) made by post/ telegram
13	(be) based on the above situation
14	shall not be bound by
15	(be) derived from the case of Entores v Miles Far East Corporation.
16	(be) approved in the case of YK Fung Securities
17	(be) debated by our lawyer
18	(be) declared as one entity
19	(be) applied to the couple

20	(be) communicated to the proposer
21	(be) stated in the Contracts Act 1950

***N= Noun, NP= Noun Phrase, VP= Verb Phrase**

It can be concluded from the table above that though the students produced quite a small number of collocations, they were able to make use of a large variety of prepositional sequences as shown in the various types of collocations extracted from the essays. The combinations of Noun + Prepositions were found to dominate the students' essays. Meanwhile, the students were also found to produce inaccurate collocations of prepositions and these were found to be caused by the students' negative interference of their first language (Malay), known as interlingual errors and also overgeneralisation of English collocations (cf. Koosha and Jafarpour, 2006; Richards, 1984), called intralingual errors. For example, in Malay, the word *berbincang* (*discuss*) must be followed by the word *tentang* (*about*) whereas in English no preposition is required after *discuss*. It is common for Malay students to make use of the preposition *about* following the word *discuss*, the evidence of the negative interference of students' first language. Besides, the students also tend to over-generalise⁷ English collocations, i.e. *sued him **on** the promise*

⁷ Overgeneralisations occur due to learners' overgeneralising of the new language system learned (which is English in this case) by producing his own rules which are neither English nor his own first language. The error of this type is also coined by Richards (1984) as developmental error.

which should be replaced instead by *sued him **for** the promise*. Refer to Table 4 below for more instances of the two types of errors.

Table 4 Instances of inaccurate collocations of prepositions by types

No.	Collocations of Preposition	Type	Corrections
		Noun + Preposition	
1	(be) supported by (X) case of...		...by the case of ...
2	... contrast in the case of...		...in contrast to the case of...
3	It is (X) contrast in our situation		It is in contrast to our situation
4	...leave her as according to her illness.		...leave her due to her illness.
5	Regarding to the problem		Regarding the problem ...
6	A promise toward his wife		Replaced with to
7	(X) Contrary to the case		In contrary to ...
8	For a normal situation,		Replaced with In
		Verb +	

		Prepositions	
1	While he go for sailing,		Delete for
2	...succeed in her claim to her husband		Replaced with against..
3	Did not pay for the said amount		Delete for
4	stayed in England by reason of doctor's advice.		... on doctor's advice.
5	We should look (X) whether there is an intention on the part of the couple...		...look into...
6	I would like to refer (X) the case of Balfour v Balfour		...refer to...
7	...sued him on the promise...		...sued him for the promise...
8	...should be applied in this case		... applied to...
9	...looked in the case of Balfour v Balfour		...looked at the case...
10	By looking to Richard's situation		Replaced with at
11	...does not cover for the husband and wife.		Delete for
12	refer (X) the existence...		refer to the existence...
13	...will succeed to sue her...		Replaced with in

14	...it also shows to us...		...it also shows us ...
15.	... sued her mother because breach of contract		...sued her mother for ...
16	...discuss about the matter ...		Delete about
17	...the husband promised to his wife...		Delete to
18	...they are no longer living under amity...		Replaced with in
		Adjective + Preposition	
1	...different to the case of...		different from the case of ...
2	The promise between the husband and wife could not be regard as a valid contract.		... could not be regarded as ...
3	...will not be success in her claim...		... successful in...
4	This decision is inconsistent toinconsistent with ...

(2) Are there patterns of different functions found in the use of the prepositional sequences?

(3) How do those functions relate to the law content knowledge?

To answer these two questions, Table 5 shows the different functions of the prepositional sequences found in the essays and the relation of the functions to law content knowledge.

Table 5 The functions of collocations of prepositions

No.	Function	Collocations of Prepositions	The relation between legal collocations and legal content knowledge
1.	Referential (referring to authorities)	in, in the case of, in the leading case of, relate to, in relation to, according to, pertaining to, based on, in accordance with, by virtue of, refer to, by referring to, with regards to, regarding, concerning	- In the case of Ignatius v Bell, ... - According to Section 2 (b) of the Contract Acts 1950, ... - Refer to the case of Adams v Lindsell, ...
2.	Referential (indicating a participant or legal subject)	on behalf of	The acceptance on behalf of the promise concerning the contract is when he received the offer.
3.	Referential (time)	at the time of, in the middle of, by the time	-If the acceptance made was not received by the offeror at the time of the stipulated contract, ... - Mr. Daud passed away by the time the letter reached him.

4.	Referential (subject-bound)	The communication of proposal, the words of acceptance, the message of acceptance, methods of communication, breach of promise, instantaneous means of communication, the Court of Appeal, the readiness of the parties, full knowledge of X, form of agreement, on part of the offeror, the parties of the contract, the principle of Balfour v Balfour, the parties to the contract, the intention of the contracting parties, mode of acceptance	a. The communication of proposal is complete when it comes to the knowledge of the offeror. b. The acceptance did not come to the knowledge of the offeror.
5.	Referential (referring to legal instruments)	accept the offer in writing, make a contract by telephone, made by normal transmission, make a contract by word of mouth, reply by return of the post, complete upon posting, accept the offer in writing, accepted in the prescribed manner, acceptance made by clear law, acceptance made by the conduct of the offeree, revoked by the death of the offeror, negotiated by telephone, the use of the post as a medium of exchange of promise	a. Mr. Daud insisted that Mr. Chen accept the offer in writing. b. His proposal shall be accepted in the prescribed manner.

6.	Text organisers (discourse markers)	as a conclusion, in a nutshell, on the other hand	As a conclusion , the contract is not complete until acceptance is actually received by the proposer.
7.	Text organisers (manner)	on the ground of, on the basis of	The contract is valid on the ground of Mr. Daud's presence.
8.	Text organisers (definitional)	considered as	An agreement between the husband and wife could not be considered as a binding contract.
9.	Text organiser (concession)	as to	-...the rules as to the time of acceptance changes.
10.	Text organisers (specifying the scope)	in the law of contract, under Section 2 (b) of the Contract Acts 1950, under the requirement of the battle of the forms, under rejection, death, or lapse of time	-Under Section 2 (b) of the Contract Acts 1950, ... -This issue falls under the requirement of the battle of the forms.
11.	Agent	received by the offeror, held by the court, enforced by law,	It was held by the court that there was no intention to create a legal relation.
12.	Concerning	Take into consideration about, knowledge about, unaware of	If the offeree is unaware of the death of the offeror, the contract is binding.
13.	Cause	because of	Because of Mr. Daud's death, the contract was not binding on the offeree.

14.	Contrast	in contrary to, differ from	In contrary to the case of Meritt v Meritt, the court held that there was an intention to create a legal relation between them.
15.	Exception	an exception to the rule	There is an exception to the rule.
16.	Purpose	on the purpose of, claim for damages, sue X for, make arrangements for	The wife sued him for breach of contract.
17.	Source / origin	deviates from, sent from	The letter of acceptance was sent from London.
18.	Obligation	binding on / upon, bound by	The contract is binding on the offeree.

From Table 5 shows that the students made use of many functions (18 of them altogether) including referential and textual functions. This finding supports Howe's (1990) finding that the function of **reference to authority** was more prevalent in legal contract essays than in other genre essay types. Other legal linguists are also in support of this finding (cf. Bhatia, 1993; Durrant, 2009; Gozdz-Roskowski, 2003; 2004; Thorne, 1997; Vedralova, 2008).

In order to show the dispersion and occurrences of the functions of **referential**, **textual**, and **manner** among the individual use, these functions as appearing in the essays of 10 semester five students and 10 semester three students are shown in Table 6.

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Table 6 The functions as performed by individual students in Problem Question (PQ) number 1 per 300 words

Student Sem. 5	referential	Textual	Manner
S1	8	2	4
S2	8	1	3
S3	4	3	2
S4	2	1	1
S5	5	2	2
S6	5	2	1
S7	3	2	1
S8	3	2	1
S9	1	1	1
S10	5	4	3
Total	44	20	16
Student			

Sem. 3			
S1	10	6	6
S2	12	4	5
S3	8	5	4
S4	9	4	3
S5	10	5	5
S6	7	5	5
S7	8	7	4
S8	9	3	2
S9	12	4	5
S9	7	5	3
S10	8	5	3
Total	91	52	45

From Table 6, it can be observed that semester three students produced double the functions of the semester five students. It was also found that the referential function played a dominant role in the Problem Question essays. Besides these there were also various particles or idiomatic expressions used (the combinations of Verbs + prepositions)

which actually originate from simple words (i.e. *reach, investigate, exist*) but were made complicated and compacted by the use of nominalised expressions for the purpose of improving precision and clarity and to create a high degree of social distance between lay and legal participants (Jones and McCracken, 2006; Tiersma, 1999). They were found to be used frequently by these students in their essays as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Particles/idiomatic law expressions

No.	Particles	Original words
1	come to the knowledge of the offeror	reach the offeror
2	come into existence	Exist
3	look into the matter	investigate the matter
4	look at Section 2 (b) of the Contract Acts 1950	study Section 2 (b) of the Contract Acts 1950
4	puts (X) to an end	terminate (X)
5	enter into the contract	to contract
6	put in a course of transmission	to transmit
7	(be) out of the power of the acceptor	beyond the acceptor's power

Conclusions, implications, and recommendations

Several conclusions can be made from the findings obtained from the study. First, though only a small number of collocations of prepositions were produced in comparison to the total number of words (40, 600), generally the students were capable of producing a variety of collocations and using the target functions (referential and textual) of collocations of prepositions as mentioned by the law linguists and researchers in their analysis of legal texts (i.e. Bhatia, 1993; Durrant, 2009; Gozdz-Rowkoski, 2003; Howe, 1990; Thorne, 1997; Vedralova, 2008) and various other functions in their essays (18 functions altogether). Thus, even though no claims can be made about their level of communicative competence at this stage (whether they have a low or advanced level of communicative competence), a claim could be made here that the students could function in legal communication and thus conform to the legal academic and professional discourse community. Despite this fact, their production of collocations of prepositions was hampered by many interlingual (first language interference) and intralingual factors (i.e. overgeneralisation) which, in due course, disabled them from producing accurate colligations. This is an indication of the students' failure to conform to the legal discourse community, a serious matter which has to be addressed.

However, in some occurrences, these students were able to see the meaningful associations between words through the selection of 'procedural or enabling vocabulary' or collocations to form a series of meaningful chains between words forming nominalised

and ‘compacted’ expressions, i.e. *claim for damages, take into (X)’s consideration, come to the knowledge of the offeror, enter into the contract, puts the contract to an end, come into existence*, etc, which are claimed to be the most difficult aspect of legal discourse (Jones & McCracken, 2006). And most importantly, up to this stage, the students were capable of relating those meanings and functions to legal concepts, ideas, and contents of law, a must-have-skill for those who study the law (Beasley, 1993; Bruce, 2002; Weber, 2001).

There are three main implications of this study. The first is that collocations of preposition should be explicitly taught as these patterns constitute “a system of preferred expressions of knowledge” (Stuart & Trelis (2006, p. 239) in the academic and professional legal field. Collocations of prepositions are indeed the most essential aspects of language in legal discourse and are worthy of being seriously taught. There are indeed many scholars who strongly propose explicit teaching of collocations to students, for example, Bahns and Eldaw (1993); Brown (1974); Carter (1987); Howarth (1998); Huang (2002); Hsu (2002); Lewis (1997; 2000); Nesselhauf (2005); Pawley and Syder (1983); Zhang (1993). They assert that learner awareness of collocational features, especially those patterns that seem to be troublesome could be raised in this way. Meanwhile, law students should not be let alone to acquire the patterns without any guidance. Law students definitely need the ESP experts to increase their awareness of collocations of prepositions, the most essential features in legal texts (Bhatia, 1993; Gozdz-Roskowski, 2004; Jones & McCracken, 2006). Though some may have the

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opinion that law students are advanced learners and could do the study on their own, this perception is definitely wrong. Law students may be able to memorise and learn the patterns and phrases through implicit exposure to them in legal reading materials or lectures but the teaching experts can do more to help them. They may expedite the rate of acquisition of collocations of prepositions of the students through repeated exposure to these features in practice, exercises, etc.

Secondly, an English for Academic Legal Purposes (EALP) course should be conducted at every institution. Effective and systematic teaching of the language of the law and law communication skills could be made possible through formal establishment of EALP courses. Besides, it would make room for more collaboration and integration with legal content lecturers, the subject-matter experts who could advise EALP teachers dealing with law terminology and related concepts needed. At the same time also, a Needs Analysis to identify learners' weaknesses and their wants (i.e. through the conduct of error analyses and interviews in seeking their problems with language) could be carried out to better achieve the objectives prior to the establishment of an EALP course.

Finally, due to the scarcity of teaching materials for the study of legal collocations to ESL students (Bhatia, Chandlin, & Jensen, 2002; Danielson & Mahlberg, 2003; Hinkel, 2005,) this study recommends the use of Corpus Linguistics in English Language Teaching (ELT), making use of corpora for ESP teaching and learning (e.g. Johns, 1991; Hafner

and Chandlin, 2007; Weber, 2001). This Data-Driven Learning (DDL) approach has been the trend in recent years to help improve legal learners' knowledge of collocations of preposition (Hinkel, 2005; Gavioli, 2005) because the patterns, meanings and functions of collocations of prepositions could be traced directly from multiple environments and contexts in legal corpora, and it also gives the opportunity for students to become more independent learners (more responsible for their own learning).

Summary and further directions

The discussion above underlines an important message, that is, there must be a concerted effort by the authorities to impart the knowledge of these colligations to law students as a means of increasing their language proficiency and collocational competence for future academic and professional development. More studies should be carried out in the field of law involving the application of Corpus Linguistics and much bigger corpora to help in the analysis of law students' collocation production or other linguistic evidence in both students' written and spoken texts.

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Appendix A Problem Question (PQ) Questions

Question 1 (Given to Semester Five Students)

Directions: Answer the question in NOT LESS than 300 words in the space provided.

When a contract is negotiated by telephones, telex or other forms of instantaneous means of communication, the contract is not complete until acceptance is actually received by the proposer. Discuss.

Question 1 (Given to Semester Three Students)

Directions: Answer the question in NOT LESS than 400 words in the space provided.

Mr Daud, an XXY executive offered to sell his Ferrari to Mr. Chen in order to buy a fishing boat. He stated that acceptance had to reach his office by 23rd January 2008.

Explain the legal situation in the following circumstances:

- a. Mr. Chen posted a letter of acceptance to Mr. Daud on 21st January but the letter was lost.
- b. Mr. Chen telephoned Mr. Daud on the 22nd accepting the offer but Mr. Daud insisted that Mr. Chen accept the offer in writing.
- c. Mr. Chen faxed a letter of acceptance on 23rd January but Mr Daud had passed away by the time the letter reached him.

Question 2 (Given to Both Groups of Students)

Directions: Answer the question in NOT LESS than 300 words in the space provided.

Richard, a legal British worker has been working in Malaysia for two years. He also has been legally married to a Malaysian Chinese lady (a housewife) for one year. Four months ago he went back to England and could not bring his wife along since she has been gravely ill but promised to send her an allowance every month and would bring her back to England once she regains her health. However, he has been living with a British

lady and has stopped sending her the allowance. His wife sued him for the breach of contract. Explain the legal situation in the above situation.