Reading collocations in an L2: do non-native speakers behave native-like?

Laura Vilkaite

University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Collocations have been defined in corpus linguistics as words co-occurring together more frequently than expected by chance (Biber et al, 1999). So far a number of studies have investigated the psychological reality of collocations and showed that they have certain processing advantages when compared to novel language, both for native speakers and for language learners (e.g. Durrant & Doherty, 2010; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008; Wolter & Gyllstad, 2011, 2013). However, these studies mostly looked at processing of adjacent collocations only (e.g., spend time), while collocations are very frequently used non-adjacently (e.g., spend a lot of time). Research that looked at processing of non-adjacent collocations by native speakers (Vilkait279;, 2016) seems to suggest that non-adjacent collocations also facilitate processing, but the facilitative effect is smaller. This paper addresses the question whether the same facilitative effect holds when processing non-adjacent collocations in an L2.

Forty advanced non-native speakers of English read a list of sentences (N = 40) for comprehension and their eye-movements were recorded. The sentences contained phrases in one of the four conditions: adjacent collocations (receive treatment), controls (arrange treatment), non-adjacent collocations (receive any form of treatment) and non-adjacent controls (arrange any form of treatment). A number of eye-tracking measures were analysed using mixed effects modelling to investigate the effect of collocational status and adjacency as well as speaker’s proficiency on collocation processing speed.

The results of the study suggest that for non-native speakers there is a clear processing advantage for adjacent collocations, even if it is moderated by language proficiency. However, there seems to be no processing advantage for non-adjacent collocations. This finding suggests that even advanced non-native speakers process non-adjacent collocations differently than native speakers.

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