

Verb Collocations in Medical English

Bionote Evelina Miščin

College of Business and Management, Zagreb, Croatia

The aim of this paper was to investigate the most frequent verb collocations which occur in medical texts and to check the competence of the first-year students of medical English in using them. *Merck's Manual of Medical Information* (2004) was used as a corpus to find the most frequent collocations. It was analyzed by several programmes like Simple Concordance, Collocation Extract, TermeX. The corpus analysis established that the nouns “function” and “infection” occur with most verbs (30). They are followed by “pain” (28 verbs), “muscle” (24 verbs). Three hundred and sixty-two verbs occur with nouns and among them the most frequent are “cause”, “have”, “develop”, “treat”, “prevent”, and “produce”. After that, the test was devised to see which collocations students use with the most competence. Two hundred and ninety-seven first-year students of School of Medicine in Zagreb were tested. There were four types of exercises—multiple choice, gap-fill, translation from English into Croatian, and vice versa. The average result in multiple choice was 9.8 with the $s = 2.0$ as a standard deviation, in gap-fill 5.0 with $s = 2.17$, in translation into Croatian 6.7 with $s = 2.10$, and in translation into English 5.2 with $s = 2.53$. Then, glossary was made which should help future users of medical English.

Keywords: collocations, collocational competence, corpus, collocational mistakes, glossary

Introduction

This paper deals with verb collocations in medical English. The term collocation was first used by Firth in the 1950s, but only few linguists researched this phenomenon in the scientific English. Previous researches were mostly focused on collocations in general English (Channel, 1981; Elkhatib, 1984; Ghadessy, 1989; Aghbar, 1990; Aghbar & Tang, 1991; Fayez-Hussein, 1990; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; ZHANG, 1993; Arnaud & Savignon, 1994; Gitsaki, 1999). The scientific English collocations were dealt by Gledhill (2000), and in Croatia by Špiranec (2005—technical English) and by Štefčić, Mravak-Stipetić, and Borić (2010—dental medical English).

Only a brief review of the linguistic theory of collocations will be given. Next, the corpus consisting of over a million words will be described. Nouns will be extracted in order to obtain their verb collocations. The glossary will be made consisting of 500 most frequent nouns and their collocations. Here, instead of the glossary the list of most frequent nouns with their verb collocations is given. The next step will see to what extent medical students recognise these collocations and what are the most frequent mistakes they make. The conclusion will help in eliminating such mistakes in future.

Theory of Collocations

A collocation refers to a multi-word combination. It can consist of two or more words. The interest for such combinations started in the last two decades under different names e.g., phrasemes, idioms, fixed expressions, formulaic language, co-selection of words, and phrasal lexemes (Omazić, 2003, p. 13). The term collocation was introduced by Firth in the 1950s. The name derives from Latin (*com* together + *locare* locate). The definition of a collocation is that it is a multi-word construct which occurs in a procedure of locating, i.e., co-occurrence or combination of words on the syntagmatic level. Thus, Firth tried to explain collocations by syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation between lexical units which can be shown by two axes—horizontal and vertical. Paradigmatic axis is vertical and includes words which belong to the same class and can be inter-changed. Horizontal axis is syntagmatic and refers to the ability of words to be connected with the others. For instance, in a sentence “Mary drank beer”, *beer* is in a paradigmatic relation to *wine, juice, Coke* and in syntagmatic with *drank* and *Mary*. There are different theories of collocations since the topic of this paper is not the linguistic one, but its application in practice, it will not be further dealt with. This paper will deal with lexical collocations, i.e., word combinations consisting of a verb and a noun and so-called upward collocations (Sinclair, 1991, pp. 115-116) where *a* is a collocater and *b* node.

Collocations and Non-native Speakers

Collocations usually represent a huge problem to non-native speakers due to interference with their mother tongue. That is why Hill (1999) suggested the creation of a term “collocational competence” and insisted on acquiring not just the total meaning of a word, but also its collocational span. Collocational competence was also emphasised by some other researchers (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Lewis, 1993; Woolard, 2000). They think it contributes to better understanding of difficulties encountered by language learners. The importance of acquiring collocations in language teaching has been particularly emphasised in the last two decades. Researches have also shown that mistakes in collocations are the most frequent mistakes made by non-native speakers (James, 1998). James also quoted McCretton and Rider, and gave their hierarchical order of mistakes (James, 1998, p. 229).

The Most Serious	The Least Serious
Lexis > spelling > negation > word order > prepositions > verb forms > concord	

Figure 1. Hierarchy of mistakes according to McCretton and Rider. Source: Adapted from James (1998, p. 229).

From Figure 1, it can be seen that lexical mistakes are the most serious ones. A speaker can be understood if he/she makes a grammatical mistake. However, if he/she makes a lexical mistake there could be misunderstanding and the same problem occurs with mistakes in collocations. That is why it is important to teach collocations.

Method

In order to analyze collocations, it was necessary to have a corpus. The corpus for this research was based on the online version of *Merck's Manual of Medical Information* (2004). The files contained 1,065,181 items and included all organ systems. Then, the most frequent words, i.e., salient words were established. Next, it was important to establish a criterion for determining collocations and follow their frequency. Common words, i.e.,

function/structure words were eliminated leaving content/lexical words, in this case medical words. The corpus was processed by three programmes: Simple Concordance, Collocation Extract, and TermeX. After that, the glossary which included most frequent collocations was made with the Croatian translation. It was followed by testing of collocational competence. The test was devised which included different frequency collocations. The results were analyzed and the conclusion was made.

Results and Discussion

Corpus analysis established that the first content/lexical word appeared in the 17th place. The most frequent word is a noun “blood”. The glossary with 500 most frequent nouns was made. It was also analyzed how many times each noun occurred with some collocations. Some nouns like “anus”, “apnoea”, and “aspirin” occur with only one verb while nouns like “function” and “infection” occur with even 30 verbs. Regarding verbs, some like “abort”, “absorb”, and “allow” occur only once in the corpus as a collocate and the most frequent ones are “cause”, “have”, “develop”, “treat (with)”, “prevent”, and “produce”. Verbs are also classified into three groups: verbs which diagnose illnesses (conditions) (e.g., “assess”, “check”, “evaluate”, and “diagnose”), verbs which increase the negativity (e.g., “cause”, “provoke”, and “inflict”) and verbs which decrease the negativity (e.g., “alleviate”, “decrease”, “reduce”, and “relieve”). It was thought that such a classification would make the use of collocations easier and show which synonyms could be used.

The next step was to determine the competence of verb collocations of the first-year students of medical English. The idea was to get insight into the problems that collocations cause, either in understanding or in the use and based on the results, suggest possible ideas for making the glossary of most frequent verb collocations.

Two hundred and ninety-seven subjects participated in the research. The sex distribution of subjects can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Sex Distribution of Subjects

	N	%
M	109	36.7
F	187	63.0
No answer	1	0.3
Total	297	100.0

English is obligatory at the School of Medicine, but the number of years students had studied it differs and can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

The Number of Years of Studying English

Years of studying	N	%
0-4	22	7.5
5-10	145	48.8
11-15	116	39.1
16	1	0.3
No answer	13	4.4
Total	297	100.0

It was the first year of medical English for those students. Their level of knowledge of English after the secondary school was B2, so they had competence of general English language. In this way, the problems at the beginning of studying English medical language could have been diagnosed. It should have helped in making a glossary and in deciding which collocations should be introduced in class. The test was written after 18 lessons. It consisted of four groups of tasks. Each task had fifteen questions which makes the total of 60 questions (see Appendix). The first group tested the receptive level of collocation competence and included multiple choice questions. Two groups of questions tested productive level and included gap-fill and translation from Croatian into English. The last group of questions refers to productive-receptive level since the subjects had to recognise the meaning of the collocation in English and offer its translation. Collocations used for the test were chosen based on two criteria: (1) corpus frequency; and (2) semantic field. Also, collocations of various frequency spans were chosen and they appear in the corpus from one to 48 times.

Students were tested during regular classes at the School of Medicine in Zagreb. They were given instructions in Croatian and they had 60 minutes for answers.

The maximum number of points for each group of questions was 15, which made the total of 60 points. Each correct answer was given one point. In translations only the underlined collocations were evaluated. It was not important whether students would translate other sentence parts. Also, grammatical competence and spelling were not evaluated. Results of testing were analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) programme and can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of Testing

	N	Min.	Max.	M	Std.
I. Circle the correct answer	297	4	14	9.8	2.00
II. Put the verbs in the gaps	297	0	12	5.0	2.17
III. Translate into Croatian	297	1	12	6.7	2.10
IV. Translate into English	297	0	11	5.2	2.53

As it can be seen from Table 3, the best results were obtained in the first part of the test—multiple choice. The average results was 9.8 points with the standard deviation $s = 2.0$. The translation from English into Croatian was a bit more difficult where the average number of points was 6.7 with $s = 2.1$. Gap fill ($M = 5.0$ with $s = 2.17$) and the translation into English ($M = 5.2$ with $s = 2.5$) were equally difficult for students. It can be concluded that receptive level tasks were easier for students than productive level ones. The difference between the receptive, productive-receptive and productive level was checked with dependent samples t -test and can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Differences Between the Receptive and Productive-Receptive Level and Receptive and Productive Level for Individual Tasks

Differences between task groups	Difference M	Std. v	Standard difference mistake	t	df	p
I i II	4.74	2.48	0.137	32.96	296	0.000
I i III	3.05	2.38	0.138	22.12	296	0.000
I i IV	4.60	2.59	0.150	30.56	296	0.000

As it can be seen from Table 4 that differences among the tasks are statistically significant, and it is again proved that the receptive level tasks are easier for students.

In Table 5, it can be seen which collocations have caused most mistakes.

Table 5

Summary of Testing Results

Collocation	Frequency of occurrence in the corpus (times)	Croatian translation	Most frequent wrong translation of students	Percentage of collocational competence (%)
Respond to treatment	14	Reagirati na liječenje	Answer to treatment	31.6
Receive a kidney	3	Dobiti bubreg	Obtain a kidney	95.3
Aggravate the injury	1	Pogoršati ozljedu	Deteriorate the injury	54.9
Replace the hip	2	Zamijeniti kuk	Exchange the hip	89.6
Gain weight	18	Dobiti na težini	Get weight	72.9
Contract malaria	1	Dobiti malariju	Obtain malaria	43.1
Establish the diagnosis	6	Utvrđiti dijagnozu	Do the diagnosis	81.8
Tolerate pain	2	Podnositi bol	Suffer pain	92.6
Perform physical examination	19	Obaviti/izvršiti fizikalni pregled	Do physical examination	56.2
Maintain physical fitness	3	Održavati tjelesnu spremnost	Sustain physical fitness	73.1
Predict a prognosis	1	Pretpostaviti prognozu	Foresee prognosis	44.4
Feel the pulse	1	Opipati puls	Test the pulse	49.2
Provide relief	48	Pružiti olakšanje	Give relief	79.1
Pose the risk	21	Predstavljati rizik	Represent risk	39.1
Loosen the secretion	5	Razrijediti izlučevinu	Lessen/weaken the secretion	26.3
Refrain from/avoid alcohol consumption	1/1	Izbjegavati uzimanje alkohola	Stop alcohol consumption	0.0/51.8
Change the bandage	1	Promijeniti zavoj	Replace the bandage	20.9
Develop a bedsore	2	Dobiti dekubitus	Appear a bedsore	7.7
Take blood samples	19	Uzeti krvni uzorak	Send blood samples	44.3
Relieve pain	108	Ublažiti bol	Stop pain	24.0
Treat the infection	35	Liječiti infekciju	Stop the infection	6.3
Sustain/experience the injury	2/1	Pretrpjeti ozljedu	Suffer the injury	1.6/3.4
Seek medical attention	13	Tražiti liječničku pomoć	Ask for medical attention	12.8
Undergo/have surgery	33/17	Podvrgnuti se kirurškom zahvatu	Perform surgery	10.4/50.0
Administer/give penicillin	1/4	Dati penicilin	Prescribe penicillin	3.7/54.1
Check/ take temperature	3	Provjeriti temperaturu	Measure temperature	14.4
Carry out/perform check-ups	1	Izvršiti pregled	Do the check up	0.0
Catch/pick up the flu bug	1/1	Pokupiti virus gripe	Get the flu bug	26.0/1.7
Regain consciousness	1	Doći k svijesti/povratiti svijest	Osvijestiti	41.4
Induce vomiting	5	Izazvati/inducirati povraćanje	Potaknuti povraćanje	42.5
Go into shock	6	Pasti u šok	Doživjeti šok	58.9
Extend survival	1	Produžiti život	Produžiti preživljavanje	81.1

(Table 5 continued)

Collocation	Frequency of occurrence in the corpus (times)	Croatian translation	Most frequent wrong translation of students	Percentage of collocational competence (%)
Produce pain	3	Izazvati/prouzrokovati bol	Proizvesti bol	93.0
Strain the back	1	Istegnuti leđa	Ozlijediti leđa	68.4
Eradicate infections	1	Iskorijeniti/ istrijebiti infekcije	Protiv infekcija	6.1
Suppress inflammation	3	Suzbijati/potiskivati upalu	Sprječavati upalu	19.6
Undergo dialysis	2	Podvrgnuti se dijalizi/ići na dijalizu	Podliježu dijalizi	56.2
Develop kidney stone	1	Dobiti bubrežne kamence/oboljeti od bubrežnih kamenaca	Razviti bubrežne kamence	23.3
Detect a lump	1	Otkriti/detekirati kvržicu	Osjetiti kvržicu	54.2
Impair memory	2	Pogoršati pamćenje/štetno utjecati na pamćenje	Oštetiti memoriju	19.1
Abort migraine headaches	3	Zaustaviti migrenske glavobolje	Prekinuti migrenske bolove	23.0
Relieve nausea	4	Ublažiti/olakšati mučninu	Smanjiti mučninu	21.6
Speed the onset	1	Ubrzati pojavu/početak/ javljanje	Ubrzati	21.8
Tolerate a drug	1	Podnositi lijek	Respond well to medicine	10.1
Catch a cold	1	Prehladiti se	Get cold	39.6
Detect a cancer	10	Otkriti rak	Discover a cancer	15.7
Cleanse/clean the wound	2/1	Očistiti ranu	Disinfect the wound	73/0
Transmit a disease	17	Prenositi bolest	Transfer a disease	21.3
Get/develop symptoms	11/47	Dobiti simptome	Gain symptoms	63.6/4.7
Identify antibodies	1	Utvrđiti antitijela	Determine antibodies	0.0
Ease/relieve anxiety	1/5	Ublažiti tjeskobu	Suppress anxiety	0.0/19.3
Enhance/increase the appetite	1	Povećati apetit	Improve the appetite	1.0/38.5
Precipitate the attack	1	Pospješiti napad	Induce the attack	0.0
Suppress a cough	4	Suzbiti kašalj	Prevent cough	25.0
Produce/cause discomfort	1/16	Izazvati nelagodu	Cause unease	0.0/1.7
Trigger diseases	1	Potaknuti bolesti	Induce diseases	2.4
Admit to hospital	17	Primiti u bolnicu	Take in the hospital	16.2/3.7
Produce/cause improvement	1/1	Izazvati poboljšanje	Make improvement	1.3/18.9

From Table 5, it can be seen that the students most frequently made mistakes in collocations “produce discomfort”, “identify antibodies”, “sustain/experience the injury”, and “precipitate attack”. Most mistakes were made in collocations which belong to the semantic field of increasing negative effects, then in collocations from the semantic field of decreased negativity and the least in collocations for diagnosing illnesses. Sometimes, students do not know collocations in their own mother tongue, so this paper suggests the importance of teaching not just collocations in English, but also in the Croatian language for special purposes.

Conclusions

This paper dealt with verb collocations in medical English. Their significance is emphasised since they represent the connection between words on one side and the text on the other. The aim of the research was to establish the most frequent verb collocations in medical English, most frequent mistakes that students make and to make a glossary with most frequent verb collocations. It was established that nouns “function” and “infection” occur with most verbs (30), followed by “pain” (28 verbs) and “muscle” (24 verbs). It was also established that 362 verbs occur forming the collocation with nouns. The most frequent ones are “cause” (130 times), “have” (113 times), “develop” (93 times), “treat” (79 times alone and 16 times as a phrasal verb “treat with”), “prevent” (77 times), and “produce” (57 times). Verbs were also classified according to semantic fields in order to try to explain why certain verbs occur with a certain noun in a collocation. Then, the test was devised based on the glossary. The collocational competence of 297 first-year medical students was tested in the year 2009/2010. Four types of tasks were used: multiple choice, gap-fill, translation from English into Croatian, and vice versa. The final aim of this research was to indicate the need for acquiring collocations which are the important aspect of L2 (second language) performance. If it is known which types of collocations cause problems at a certain level, teachers can gradually introduce such collocations in order to develop collocational competence. Since there are no good dictionaries of collocations, the glossary was made based on the corpus and analyzed mistakes. It should help medical students, doctors, nurses, translators, and anybody using medical English.

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Appendix: Text

Sex: _____ Town you come from: _____

Years of learning English: _____

I Circle the correct answer:

- (1) She is _____ well to treatment.
 (a) responding (b) answering (c) recovering
- (2) He _____ a new kidney from his brother.
 (a) had (b) received (c) obtained
- (3) Playing football only _____ his knee injury.
 (a) impaired (b) deteriorated (c) aggravated
- (4) The doctors _____ the patient's hip.

(a) changed (b) replaced (c) exchanged

(5) Some people want and need to _____ weight.

(a) get (b) gain (c) grow

(6) My uncle _____ malaria when he was working in Africa.

(a) contracted (b) obtained (c) received

(7) The doctor _____ the diagnosis of heart failure.

(a) performed (b) did (c) established

(8) The ability to _____ pain may change with age.

(a) suffer (b) tolerate (c) experience

(9) Each doctor will _____ physical examination in different orders.

(a) do (b) make (c) perform

(10) The authors recommend a wide range of foods to _____ physical fitness.

(a) maintain (b) hold (c) sustain

(11) Similar procedures may be used to _____ a person's prognosis after a heart attack.

(a) predict (b) foresee (c) determine

(12) The doctor _____ the pulse in arteries in the neck, beneath the arms...

(a) feels (b) touches (c) tests

(13) Antacids _____ relief more quickly than H2 blockers.

(a) give (b) offer (c) provide

(14) Respirators can _____ some risk for people with heart or lung ailments.

(a) represent (b) show (b) pose

(15) Steam inhalation can effectively _____ secretion.

(a) weaken (b) loosen (c) lessen

II Put the verbs in the gaps:

(1) When you are pregnant you should _____ alcohol consumption.

(2) The bandage should be _____ regularly.

(3) A bedsore can _____ in hours and may take months to heal.

(4) Each time you give blood a doctor _____ blood samples for safety tests in the labs.

(5) The ECG (electrocardiogram) is an important and sometimes central tool used to _____ the diagnosis of myocardial ischemia.

(6) NSAIDs are often used to _____ headache pain.

(7) The patient was _____ to hospital due to terrible injury.

(8) Antibiotics are used to _____ infection.

(9) He has _____ severe head injury.

(10) If you experience a severe allergic reaction e.g. with breathing difficulty _____ medical attention urgently.

(11) Tony Snow will _____ surgery on Monday to remove a small growth.

(12) The doctor will _____ penicillin or other antibiotics by pill or by injection.

(13) The task of a nurse is also to _____ a patient's temperature.

(14) Health visitors visit families to _____ check-ups on young children.

(15) I think I've _____ the flu bug that's going round.

III Translate into Croatian. Pay special attention to underlined words:

(1) The victim regained consciousness after 2 months of coma.

(2) You should induce vomiting.

(3) A person can quickly go into shock and die because of internal bleeding.

(4) Chemotherapy can sometimes extend survival to 8 months.

(5) Deep breathing may produce pain.

(6) He strained his back lifting the table.

(7) Treatment is directed against eradicating infections.

(8) Glucocorticoids suppress inflammation in the human placenta.

(9) Over two hundred thousand Americans undergo kidney dialysis.

(10) There is a higher percentage for men to develop kidney stone than women.

(11) She detected a lump in her left breast.

(12) Smoking in midlife may impair memory.

(13) Some medications can abort migraine headaches.

(14) Vomiting relieves nausea right away.

(15) Alcohol can speed the onset of hypothermia.

IV Translate into English. Pay special attention to underlined words:

(1) Dobro podnosi lijek.

(2) Noge su mi bile mokre, pa sam se prehladila.

(3) Mamografija se koristi za otkrivanje raka dojke.

(4) Ranu treba dobro očistiti.

(5) Komarci mogu prenositi bolesti.

(6) Neki ljudi dobiju simptome kao djeca.

(7) Krvni testovi utvrđuju određena antitijela.

(8) Obično se daje sedativ za ublažavanje tjeskobe.

(9) Lijekovi mogu povećati apetit.

(10) Emocionalni stress često pospješuje napad.

(11) Antitusici suzbijaju kašalj.

(12) Dim može izazvati nelagodu respiratornog sustava.

(13) Stres može potaknuti različite bolesti.

(14) Primljen je u bolnicu zbog ozbiljne ozljede.

(15) Ovi lijekovi mogu izazvati poboljšanje za nekoliko mjeseci.
