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The usage of colligations of prepositions among Malaysian law undergraduates: A needs analysis

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Abstract

Needs analyses carried out among Malaysian law undergraduates, particularly those investigating the students' lack of competence in legal English, are rare. This paper aimed to investigate Malaysian law undergraduates' perceptions and usage of colligations of prepositions, one of the most essential lexico-grammatical components in legalese. 40 third semester Malay law undergraduates from one public university participated in the study. Two types of data were collected for this purpose - an interview and essay writing test. Eight out of the 40 students participated in the interview, while all respondents took the essay test conducted a week later. The interview responses were analysed manually, and Dulay et al.'s (1982) *Surface Strategy Taxonomy* was employed in the analysis of the subjects' production of prepositional patterns in the Problem Question essays (of legal contract genre). The results from the interviews and essays demonstrate that the subjects lack knowledge of prepositions and their patterns, resulting mainly from interlingual (L1 negative transfer, i.e. Malay) and intralingual (difficulty with the L2 itself, i.e. legalese) interference, as well as the drilling methods applied in both primary and secondary schools. More needs analyses should be carried out in a specialised field like law in future for the short-term and long-term benefits of the students. While both English and law lecturers may gain feedback on their students' current lexico-grammatical competence, whereby some actions can be taken to improve performance, the results from the analysis may help in developing materials for ELAP (English for Legal Academic Purposes) courses, or in establishing an ELAP course, especially if the course has not yet been established in the institutions offering law programmes.

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Keywords: *Needs analysis; legalese; lexico-grammatical competence; colligations of prepositions*

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1. Introduction

The students who major in specialised disciplines such as law, engineering, and medicine need to possess adequate communicative language competence as a vehicle for their success in the academic and professional worlds. In situations in which English has become the primary medium of instruction in professional courses, e.g. law, possessing adequate English communication skills is deemed important. Since the Malaysian judicial system is derived from the British judicial system, English has become the main vehicle for law-making processes, judicial proceedings, court proceedings, and legal services (Noraini, 1997), though the usage of Bahasa Melayu (the national language of Malaysia) has been encouraged. Furthermore, English has become the main medium of instruction in law courses, legal discussions, and seminars. Most legal texts and references are written in English due to the influence of English Law (Nur Muhammad Insan Jalil & Mohd Fauzi Kamarudin, 2009). But what are the linguistic aspects to which law students need to pay greater attention?

Adult English as Second Language (ESL) law students in tertiary education need to possess collocational competence (an ability to combine words correctly with their partners) (Hill, 2000) for their survival in the academic and professional worlds. They have to write well-crafted problem / question essays in legal courses, carry out competent legal research, and defend themselves, with sound arguments and reasoning, in mock trials, etc. Gaining mastery over collocations (the words that combine frequently with other words), especially colligations of prepositions (the frequent combinations between two or more grammatical words forming the patterns, e.g. *enter into an agreement, seek the approval of the FIC, under the agreement of*, etc.) is essential as it is a measure of the law students' linguistic competence. This ideal, however, is seldom achieved. Even advanced ESL law students, including the subjects in this study (undergraduate law students in the Faculty of Law and International Relations (FLAIR), Sultan Zainal Abidin University, Malaysia, lacked collocational competence (the ability to colligate words accurately and perceive the semantic functions of the patterns and usage in relation to other patterns in context), particularly colligation of prepositional competence. They may be capable of producing well-formed sentences, but their sentences lack naturalness, are non native-like, and show a deviation from the spoken and written convention produced by the legal discourse community (Gozdz-Roszkowski, 2004).

According to Halliday (1967), a sentence contains many phrases and word groups called structural units which are sequenced horizontally. This sequence of units is ordered in the form of constituents (ranks) based on the stylistic convention, genre, and register of a particular discourse that simulates the discourse community or the society that speaks the language. The sequence of legal events is constructed through the chaining of colligations of prepositional patterns. This is construed, for example in the following clause taken from article 38 of Canada's 1982 Constitutional Charter:

An amendment to the Constitution / of Canada / may be made by proclamation/ issued by the Governor General / under the Great Seal / of Canada where so authorised [...]

(Williams, 2004: 115)

Such legal constructions, that is, the construction and conceptualisation of legal knowledge via the chaining of colligations of prepositional patterns (see the underlined patterns above), should be taught to law students in order for them to have complete mastery of law and to ensure their survival during their legal education and professional life. However, to what extent do our law students have competence in perceiving these chains of sequences? And what methods should be used to investigate whether law students have sufficient colligational competence to study and practice law effectively?

This study aimed to fulfil two main objectives. Firstly, it purported to investigate Malaysian law undergraduates' perceptions on colligations of prepositions. Secondly, it aimed to examine the usage of colligations of prepositions - one of the most essential lexico-grammatical components in legalese - among the students. Based on the two research objectives, the two research questions formulated were as follows:

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