"**Tutoring ESL Students When There are No Rules:**
A Roundtable Discussion led by SUNY Potsdam College Writing Center Tutors"
Presentation at the Northeast Writing Centers Association
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By Abdel-Rahman Salem and Jennifer Mitchell, with Josh Clark, Meredith Hurley, Shaneah Daise, and Brenna Link. Please do not use or copy without permission of authors. Thank you.

[Introductions: Josh Clark and Abid Salem are senior tutors with the most ESL experience. Others are in training to do ESL tutoring. Abid drafted our comments today. He has a strong interest in linguistics as well as first hand experience of learning and teaching English as a foreign language in Jordan. Note: two years later, both Josh and Abid are teaching ESL, in Japan and Saudi Arabia respectively. The other three are all master's students at Potsdam: Meredith Hurley is a high school English teacher, Shaneah Daise is preparing to be an elementary teacher, and Brenna Link is Assistant Director of our College Writing Center. – Dr. Jennifer Mitchell, session chair.]

1. Introduction (Josh Clark)

Many of the problems that ESL students exhibit in their writing are the result of the fact that English is full of conventional usage that is not bound by rules, but is simply established over time. Since ESL students are usually taught English in their countries through grammar and rules, they face great difficulty in mastering new conventional expressions. In handbooks and other resources, conventional expressions are usually seen as a greater problem in conversation than in writing. However, as peer tutors of ESL writers in a college writing center, we find that conventional expressions pose problems for those writers.

There are three types of conventional expressions that pose difficulty: first, some conventional expressions have idiomatic meaning. Words, when used together in an idiomatic expression, have different meanings than the dictionary definitions of the individual words. For example, we say that someone "kicked the bucket" to mean that he/she died even though there is neither bucket nor kicking involved.

A second challenge is that particular combinations of words must be used in conventional sequences; this is called "collocation" [**call**-oh-kay-shun] of words. For example, we say that "someone made dinner" and "a student did the homework," but NOT "someone did dinner" or "a student made the homework." In these examples, particular verbs must collocate with certain nouns. Collocations are not rulebound, but conventional.

Third, words often have different meanings in different contexts. When faced with this difficulty, ESL students rely on direct translation of individual words, which fails for a number of reasons. Without knowing the conventional usage, they choose an awkward word.

Combined together, these factors account for many mistakes in ESL students' writing. The lack of rules and patterns in constructing many English expressions opens the door to what is known as the negative interference of the mother language, including problems of direct translation using dictionaries. Both may result in sentences that are sometimes grammatical, but seem awkward or 'funny' to the native speaker.

Writing center tutors face a special difficulty in helping ESL students to use idiomatic expressions correctly. In our writing center, we never write on the tutee's paper, and we try not to give direct suggestions, but to give options in order to elicit the writer's judgment. We would prefer to teach ESL writers a rule or pattern which we could help them to apply on their own. But there are no such rules to explain the use of conventional expressions -- whether they are conventional because of idiomatic meaning, collocation of words, or word context. We can only encourage the student to memorize the correct form and meaning of EACH conventional expression. Through that method, we can only help an ESL writer 'one expression at a time.' We are not teaching a generalizable skill. We are not encouraging independent self-editing. Rather, we are serving as a walking dictionary.

We have two goals for this roundtable session: first, we want to clarify the difficulties ESL writers have using new conventional expressions correctly. We will further explain the four interrelated problems of mother language interference, idioms, collocation, and word context. We will introduce you to specialized dictionaries which might help ESL writers deal with these problems more independently. After each section, we'll invite your questions and comments before moving on.

Next, we want to facilitate a shared exploration of tutoring strategies that address the difficulty of conventional expressions for ESL writers. We feel that we have only limited answers to these problems, so we hope to create a space for everyone to share ideas.

2. Mother language Interference/Transfer (Meredith Hurley)

When ESL students write, they employ the rules of English which they have learned. However, if no rules apply, they use the patterns from their native language, a practice which results in sentences that may be grammatically correct, but are semantically awkward. When in doubt about English usage, ESL students often go through a process of literal translation from their native languages into English. In other words, patterns of the native language especially interfere with an ESL writer's production of English expressions which cannot be constructed from learned rules.

This opens the door to what some call the "negative interference" of the mother language, which produces "transfer errors," caused by the writer's transfer of the patterns of the native language onto the second language.

When ESL students try to understand a new idiomatic expression or produce an idiomatic meaning, they frequently consult dictionaries and translate one word at a time. While dictionaries do provide the meaning of words and their synonyms, they cannot provide the appropriate ***contexts*** in which these words must be used, nor the exact sequence in which they comprise an idiomatic expression.

For example, if I look up "bucket" in this dictionary, it does not include the idiomatic expression "kick the bucket"; if I look up "glass" it does not mention the expression "the glass is half full."

Therefore, literal translation usually fails to make up for a fuller knowledge of idioms. The errors that result from literal translation can sometimes be traced back to application of the mother language's patterns to English. The resulting sentences seem awkward and unclear to native speakers.

We have some examples of mother language interference that might occur when ESL students translate directly from five different native languages:

Meredith 1- Here's an example of direct translation gone wrong. A Chinese student wrote this sentence : **"My dry father visited us during the holidays."** After looking into it, the student's teacher discovered that "dry father" was literal translation of the Mandarin term for "godfather."

Josh 2- In Indonesian , there are no conjugations, and one verb form fits all subjects. Subject-verb agreement is not an issue. Thus, Indonesians may say things like, *"He have a book" or *"My boss go to work late every day."

Abid Salem 3- Some English uncountable nouns are countable in other languages, like Italian or Arabic. In English, they occur only in a singular form, but in these languages we find them in both a singular and a plural form. In Italian, for instance, there are plural forms of *furniture* (*mobile - mobili*) and of *information* (*informazione - informazioni*). In Arabic, words like *information*, *tuition*, and *equipment* are countable nouns. Therefore, an Italian student might say something like *"We got all the information(s) we needed" or an Arab student might say *"They bought the equipment(s) to build the house."

Shaneah Daise 4- While the verb "be" is often used in English, other languages do not always have a corresponding verb. "Be" and its various forms are used in many different ways. ["To be" is used as an auxiliary, as a main verb, and as a linking verb. It is used to indicate someone's identity or age, or an item's cost or size. It is used with prepositional phrases, with "to"-infinitive, in questions and negative clauses, in continuous tenses, etc.]

In many languages, however, there seems to be no equivalent usage to encompass all of the above-mentioned functions. For example, Chinese students learning English as a second language are apt to disregard the English verb "be" in speech or in writing. The following excerpts from students' writing reflect this interference:
- **"I full of confidence in myself." instead of "I was full of confidence in myself."**
- **"I born and grow up in Tainan [. . .]." instead of "I was born and grew up in Tainan."**
- **"This year I will in senior high school third year." instead of "this year, I will be in senior high school."**

Brenna Link 5- The English conjunction "although" introduces a subordinate clause in a sentence. A typical error of a Chinese student is to say something like **"Although, I did well in my lessons, and I made the best use of time to study and reviewed what I learned."** Chinese students might confuse the usage of the English conjunction "although" with the Chinese equivalent word, which is usually used as an introductory element followed by a pause. Based on literal translation into Chinese, the use of "although" in the sentence I quoted would be acceptable. So we can guess that these errors result from first language interference.

Josh: Invite questions and comments, brief discussion

Josh: Now let's look at the three interrelated aspects of conventional expressions in English that may baffle ESL writers and invite mother language interference. First, we'll discuss idioms in general; second, collocation or specific sequencing of words; and third, words' contexts. After we define each problem for you, we'll invite your questions and comments before we move on. Then, we'll have time for a longer discussion of how to handle this set of problems when we tutor ESL writers.

PROBLEM ONE: Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (Abid)

As Josh stated, an **idiom** is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words. In these expressions, the individual words no longer correspond to their literal independent meanings, so dictionary translations of each word do not yield the full meaning of an idiomatic expression. This makes idioms hard for ESL students to understand. Examples of idioms are "he kicked the bucket" or "he's pushing up daisies."

A phrasal verb is similar to an idiom. It is simply a verb which must be used in combination with an adverb, a preposition, or both.
A phrasal verb can have a literal meaning that is easy to understand, using standard definitions of the words. However, a phrasal verb can also have an idiomatic meaning which cannot easily be understood by looking at the words themselves. Examples include "run around " and "run down" and "run up".

Native speakers take phrasal verbs and idioms for granted, but for someone who learns it as a second language, English may sometimes seem a 'crazy language.' ESL students struggle with this language, in which your house can *burn up* as it *burns down*, you can *fill in* a form by *filling it out*, and an alarm *goes off* by *going on*.
It is perfectly legitimate for an ESL student to wonder why it is that people *recite at a play* and *play at a recital.* Why is it that when the *stars are out*, they are visible, but when the *lights are out*, they are invisible?
How come we *ship by truck* and *send cargo by a ship*? What sense does it make to have *noses that run* and *feet that smell*? And why is that you can *make amends* but not *make a single amend*?
A *butterfly* is neither a fly nor does it have to do with butter. *Sweetmeats* are candies while *sweetbreads*, which aren't sweet, are meat. We find that *quicksand* can work slowly, *boxing rings* are square, and a

guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor a pig. How can a *slim chance and a fat chance* be the same, while a *wise man* and *a wise guy* are opposites?

ESL students expect us to give them answers on these vexing problems. However, they expect such answers to be in the form of rules, rules that they can follow and apply in different situations. Of course, due to the nature of idioms and phrasal verbs, we cannot give such answers. This is itself usually a frustrating answer for ESL students. We usually explain the idiom or phrasal verb and encourage the ESL student to memorize it for future use.

Recently, we have identified dictionaries of idioms, and we think they should be a standard resource in writing centers. (See resource list at the end.)

Josh: Invite questions and comments, brief discussion

Problem two: Collocation (Shaneah)
3.1. Introduction

One characteristic of idioms that makes them difficult to learn and use correctly is that they have to follow a certain sequence. Linguists call this conventional sequence of words collocation.
In this section, we would like to concentrate on a related problem ESL students may have with English vocabulary use, and that is the appropriate combinations of words, the aspect of language called *collocation*. Collocation can be defined as **the way in which some words are always used together, or a particular sequence of words used in a certain way. That is, certain words occur together repeatedly. Collocation refers to this repeated and conventional sequencing.**

Idioms and phrasal verbs, which we just discussed, require that words be used in particular sequences to communicate meaning. Thus, collocation of words is related to idiomatic expressions, and that makes collocation harder to master. For example, my grandmother would say "I'm going to pay back him" instead of "pay him back." Of course she could be understood in that case, but it's an example of how the sequencing of words is an important element in producing correct English.

There are no rules that determine collocation. The native English speaker collocates words correctly, based on a lifetime's experience of hearing and reading the words in set combinations. The ESL student, on the other hand, has less experience to draw on and may frequently collocate words in a way that sounds odd to the native speaker. It would be easy for tutors to correct the collocation of words in ESL students' writing, but there is no way for them to teach those students any rules which they could apply independently to correct their collocations.

Let's look at how confusing the conventions of collocation can be. We say that a man can be tall but never high (except in the sense of being intoxicated!), whereas a ceiling can only be high, not tall. A window can be both, tall or high, but a tall window is not the same as a high window. We *get* old and tired, but we *go* bald or grey. We *get* sick but we *fall* ill. A big house, a large house and a great house have the same meaning, but a great man is not the same as a big man or a large man. You can make a

big mistake or a great mistake, but you cannot make a large mistake. You can be a little sad but not a little happy, and so on - there are numerous examples of this kind of difficulty!

Again, native speakers pick up on collocations over a lifetime. ESL students, understandably, learn them slowly and imperfectly.

Collocation – the conventional sequencing of words -- is both so unpredictable and so important that most dictionaries include a few common phrases in the definition of a word, showing particular collocations of which that word is a part. Oxford University Press has gone further and produced a complete dictionary of all kinds of English collocations [show Oxford dictionary of collocations]. One can look up a word and find all of its common collocations. And, one can find an apparently plagiarized version of this dictionary online. For example, I can look up … [Shaneah fill in example] …

3.2. Types of Collocation

Prepositions, of course, are essential in most sentences. ESL students often do not know that prepositions collocate with verbs in order to make particular meanings. The student needs to know not only the verb, but also the correct preposition to use in the context. For example, to agree *on* something is very different than to agree *with* someone.

Here are two examples of verb-preposition collocation that caused trouble for Korean students. One wrote: **"They were supposed to think Ø the reason."** The student did not know that the verb (think) collocates with the preposition (of) in this context. When the student was asked about how she would say this sentence in Korean, it turned out that the Korean equivalent of the verb (think) does not collocate with a preposition; rather, it takes a direct object, hence the mistake *"to think the reason."** Another example is a Korean student saying *"She phoned (with) the landlord to talk about the rent." I**n English, the verb (to phone) does not collocate with a preposition. When the tutor asked the student how this sentence is said in Korean, it turned out that the equivalent of the verb (to phone) collocates with the equivalent of the preposition (with). The student had translated the sentence literally from Korean into English, which, of course, did not capture the correct English collocation.

English speakers also collocate nouns and verbs in particular ways to make meaningful phrases. An example of a problem with such collocation is a Korean student writing the sentence, "Teachers like students to (have) attention." Conventional English collocation would require the student to write "pay attention" or "give their attention to the teacher." But, to the Korean student, "pay" only refers to an exchange of money. The idiomatic meaning of "pay attention" cannot be gained through direct translation of the individual words. The words only have this meaning when they are arranged in a standard sequence, or collocation – not separately, as they are generally found in the regular dictionary.

Another ESL student had trouble collocating an adjective and a noun when describing a lesson plan in a local school. She wrote that **"The students talked about the idea that sugar made (normal) Coke heavier."** The student was referring to "regular Coke," as opposed to "diet Coke." But the correct collocation eluded the student. She did not know that, in English, the proper noun "Coke" typically

collocates with the adjectives "regular" or "diet", and not the adjective "normal." To express the idea, the student turned to literal translation, which resulted in the incorrect collocation, "**normal coke**."

Since collocation is purely conventional and usually does not follow rules, ESL students often resort to literal translation when they find no rules that apply.

Josh: Invite questions and comments, brief discussion

5. Words' Context (Brenna)

While dictionaries offer the meanings of words and their synonyms, they cannot possibly offer all the appropriate contexts for each word. Therefore, literal translation usually fails to capture the context of words, resulting in awkward sentences. This problem is aggravated by the fact that there are no rules for words' meanings in context. The only thing that can be said about this problem is that we agree by mere convention that words are used in certain ways in certain contexts. Needless to say, this is often a frustrating answer to ESL students.

An ESL student described a trip he went on, saying **"It was raining in the city which (discouraged) us because we had (expected) the trip for a long time."** When the student was asked to rephrase what he wanted to say, it turned out that he wanted to say that they were (disappointed) because of the rain since they had (waited for) the trip for a long time. In this sentence, the student relied on translation to express his thought. However, the student did not realize that in the context of his sentence, (discouraged) should have been replaced by (disappointed) and (expected) by (waited). And a dictionary might not help him choose between (discourage) and (disappoint).

Josh: Invite questions and comments, brief discussion

6. Tutoring Strategies (Josh): One way to learn collocations and idioms, if not the only way, is to familiarize oneself with prepositions and prepositional phrases through practice and memorization. Language competence is attained through a long accumulative process of exposure and interaction until an ESL speaker develops some sort of a native-like instinct to language that enables them to get a 'feel' for the usage of a particular word or a combination of words in a particular context.

As a tutor, we explain this learning process to ESL writers. We tell them, "We know it is frustrating to meet and learn unfamiliar conventional expressions. It is even more frustrating that no rules apply to help you use them correctly the first time. The only way to master them is to memorize them and practice using them." ESL writers have long recognized this problem in learning English. As native-speaking tutors, we may not recognize it! But we must be able to acknowledge it and discuss it with our clients. And we have to find the best approaches to deal with this problem.

Dictionaries of idioms and collocations may be useful resources for ESL students. They should be able to use these dictionaries to enhance their comprehension of idiomatic expressions. They may also be able to research idiomatic usage and confirm the correct collocation or phrasing to communicate their intended meaning. However, to use such a dictionary when writing, you need to have a pretty good idea

of what you want to write before consulting one of these resources. They function as a way to check for accuracy in one's existing knowledge, not to learn how to use a complete phrase. The writer needs to know either the conventional expression or the word she wishes to use: one of these must be known before using the dictionary.

Now let's move to broad discussion of tutoring strategies for conventional English expressions. We can discuss the examples on our handout if it useful.

6. Sample Examples for Discussion
The following are some examples that we have collected through our work with ESL students in our writing center:

1- * "**My friend had to pay more for this apartment (from) his previous one**"

2- An ESL student, describing her efforts to improve her speaking skill said * **"I tried to avoid (getting along) with my Korean classmates and have more conversation with native speakers."** *The students wanted to say that she tried to avoid spending much time with her Korean classmates, instead of the out-of-context (**getting along**).*

3- * **"She talked me about the trip."**

4- * **"I told them that they had to (do) their beds before going out"**

5- An ESL student talking about an idea she read in her textbook, said *** "Although I couldn't find a connection with this idea, I really liked it."** *When asked, the student explained that she wanted to say (I couldn't relate to this idea), instead of the out-of-context (find a connection to).*

6- * **"I explained it more detail."**

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Collocation Resources: Collocation can be defined as the way in which some words are always used together, or a particular combination of words used in a certain way.

- *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. New York: Oxford U. P., 2002.

- Benson, Morten, Evelyn Benson, and Robert Ilson, eds. *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations*. Revised Edition. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997.

Idioms: An idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words. They are expressions where the individual words have ceased to have independent meanings.

Collis, Harry, ed. *101 American English Idioms: Understanding and Speaking English like an American*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2007.

Dixson, Robert J., ed. *Essential Idioms in English: Phrasal Verbs and Collocations*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2004.

Gulland, Daphne M., and David Hinds-Howell, eds. *Dictionary of English Idioms*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986-1994.

Terban, Marvin, ed. *Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms: More than 600 Phrases, Sayings & Expressions*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1996.

Internet Resources: -General discussions: http://www.linguarama.com/ps/295-6.htm, http://www.idiomconnection.com/whatis.html#A2

-Online dictionaries of idioms:
www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/theteacher/ with videos.
http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms/
http://www.learn-english-today.com/idioms/idioms_proverbs.html
http://www.englishdaily626.com/idioms.php, and http://www.speakenglish.biz/idioms.html

Note: The SUNY Potsdam library now has several dictionaries of idioms and collocations available as electronic resources. Please see the BearCat catalog (2012).

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A Sample list of Collocations of Prepositions with Verbs, Nouns, and Adjectives

Verb-preposition	Noun-preposition
agree on (something)	give a reason for
agree with (someone)	express satisfaction with (someone/something)
apologize to (someone)	explain difference between (two items)
apologize for (something)	get help with (something)
apply for	develop familiarity with (someone/something)
approve of	have passion for (someone/something)
argue with (someone)	

Adjective-preposition

Verb-preposition	Adjective-preposition
provide for (someone)	angry with/at (someone)
provide (someone/something) with	interested in
	preoccupied with, liable to, familiar with

Verbs, Nouns, Adjectives Collocation

Noun-Verb	Verb-Noun	Adjective-Noun
make trouble	pay attention	strong tea- weak tea
get into trouble	pay a visit	strong cigarettes-mild/light cigarettes
look for trouble	pay a price	strong wind/mild wind
send a message	pass an exam	strong smell/ faint smell
leave a message	pass the ball	a heavy smoker
give a message	pass the time	dry wine
make a test		wide awake
take a test		sound asleep

This email recently circulated on the Internet:

You think English is easy?

1) The bandage was **wound** around the **wound.**

2) The farm was used to **produce produce**.

3) The dump was so full that it had to **refuse** more **refuse**.

4) We must **polish** the **Polish** furniture.

5) He could **lead** if he would get the **lead** out.

6) The soldier decided to **desert** his dessert in the **desert.**

7) Since there is no time like the **present**, he thought it was time to **present** the **present.**

8) A **bass** was painted on the head of the **bass** drum.

9) When shot at, the **dove dove** into the bushes.

10) I did not **object** to the **object.**

11) The insurance was **invalid** for the **invalid.**

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12) There was a **row** among the oarsmen about how to **row**.

13) They were too **close** to the door to **close** it.

14) The buck **does** funny things when the **does** are present.

15) A seamstress and a **sewer** fell down into a **sewer** line.

16) To help with planting, the farmer taught his **sow** to **sow.**

17) The **wind** was too strong to **wind** the sail.

18) Upon seeing the **tear** in the painting I shed a **tear.**

19) I had to **subject** the **subject** to a series of tests.

20) How can I **intimate** this to my most **intimate** friend?

Let's face it - English is a crazy language. There is no egg in eggplant, nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England or French fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat. We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig.

And why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham? If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth, beeth? One goose, 2 geese. So one moose, 2 meese? One index, 2 indices? Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends but not one amend? If you have a bunch of odds and ends and get rid of all but one of them, what do you call it?

If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat? Sometimes I think all the English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what language do people recite at a play and play at a recital? Ship by truck and send cargo by ship? Have noses that run and feet that smell?

How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites? You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down, in which you fill in a form by filling it out and in which, an alarm goes off by going on.

English was invented by people, not computers, and it reflects the creativity of the human race, which, of course, is not a race at all. That is why, when the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible.

PS. - Why doesn't 'Buick' rhyme with 'quick'?

You lovers of the English language might enjoy this ..

There is a two-letter word that perhaps has more meanings than any other two-letter word, and that is
'UP.'

It's easy to understand UP, meaning toward the sky or at the top of the list, but when we awaken in the morning, why do we wake UP ?

At a meeting, why does a topic come UP?

Why do we speak UP and why are the officers UP for election and why is it UP to the secretary to write UP a report?

We call UP our friends.

And we use it to brighten UP a room, polish UP the silver; we warm UP the leftovers and clean UP the kitchen.

We lock UP the house and some guys fix UP the old car.

At other times the little word has real special meaning.

People stir UP trouble, line UP for tickets, work UP an appetite, and think UP excuses.

To be dressed is one thing, but to be dressed UP is special.

A drain must be opened UP because it is stopped UP.

We open UP a store in the morning but we close it UP at night.

We seem to be pretty mixed UP about UP!

To be knowledgeable about the proper uses of UP, look the word UP in the dictionary.

In a desk-sized dictionary, it takes UP almost 1/4th of the page and can add UP to about thirty definitions.

If you are UP to it, you might try building UP a list of the many ways UP is used.

It will take UP a lot of your time, but if you don't give UP, you may wind UP with a hundred or more.

When it threatens to rain, we say it is clouding UP.

When the sun comes out we say it is clearing UP.

When it rains, it wets the earth and often messes things UP.

When it doesn't rain for awhile, things dry UP.

One could go on and on, but I'll wrap it UP,

for now my time is UP,

so........it is time to shut UP!

Now it's UP to you what you do with this email.