Collocation errors

Collocations are typical word combinations – words that usually go together in normal use – such as the following.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phrase Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb + Noun</td>
<td>inflict a wound, withdraw an offer, make a lot of money, make a lot of friends, ease tension, override a veto</td>
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<td>Adjective + Noun</td>
<td>a crushing defeat, a rough estimate</td>
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<td>Noun + Verb</td>
<td>a bee buzzes, a bomb explodes</td>
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<td>Noun 1 + Noun 2</td>
<td>a flock of sheep, a pack of dogs</td>
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<td>Adverb + Adjective</td>
<td>deeply absorbed, closely acquainted, hopelessly addicted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verb + Adverb</td>
<td>appreciate sincerely, apologize humbly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noun + Prep.</td>
<td>apathy toward, influence on</td>
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<tr>
<td>X + Comp.</td>
<td>an agreement that, recommend that</td>
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‘Comp.’ = complement clause (e.g., a *that*-clause). Particular collocation difficulties for ESL include the following:

1. **Light verbs**
   - Light verbs are common, high-frequency verbs that have rather general meanings, e.g.: *be, have, come, go, get, take, set, do, make*. They are often used in a number of idioms and set expressions, e.g.,
     - take a chance, take liberties with the results, run aground, do/run an experiment, go bungee jumping, take notice, set an example, make an effort, have a go at it, get over it

2. **Prepositions and phrasal verbs, which are often metaphorical**
   - working (in) → working at the university / at IBM [*in’ is possible in certain contexts, but ‘at’ is generally preferred for work place locations; ‘work in’ is for more specific locations, such as ‘working in a tent’ or ‘working in a rock band’]*
   - The environment has cut down diminished our motivation, especially when team members have been split apart up. [incorrect phrasal verbs]

   - is different than → different from
   - influence to X → an influence on X
   - apply X into Y → apply X to Y
   - ask to X → ask X

Parts adapted from handouts on www.english-learners.com.

- X has an influence on Y  cf.  X influences on Y
- a discussion about X  cf.  to discuss about X

Verb + Preposition

The following is a partial and incomplete list of common collocation errors that Asian ESL students tend to make in English. The expressions with asterisks [*] are awkward or incorrect terms used by ESL learners.

1. Absorbed in (=very much interested) [*at]
   - The professor was so absorbed in his work that he neglected his social life.

2. Accused of [*for]
   cf. charge with
   - She accused the man of stealing.
   - The man was charged with murder.

3. Accustomed to [*with]
   cf. used to
   - I’m accustomed to hot weather.
   - He is used to the heat.

4. Afraid of [*from]
   - Laura is afraid of the dog.

5. Aim at [*on / against]²
   - She aimed at the target.

6. All of X (generic noun) [all *of X, all X, all of the X];
   ‘all of the X’ has a more specific nuance – the speaker has particular items in mind
   - All of computers must be turned off when you leave the office. (generic statement)
   - All of the computers must be turned off when you leave the office.

7. Anxious (troubled) about [*for]
   Anxious for = wishing very much
   - They are anxious about his health.
   - Parents are anxious for their children’s success.

8. Angry with / at [*against]
   For persons, with is somewhat more common. We get angry with/at a person but angry at a thing.
   Also annoyed with, vexed with, indignant with.
   - The teacher was angry with / at him.
   - He was angry at the weather.

9. Arrived at [*to]
   Use arrive in with countries and large cities.
   - We arrived at the village at night.
   - Mr. Smith arrived in London.

² At denotes direction toward; because at indicates direction or movement toward something, it means the object is not directly or fully affected, e.g.: throw at, shout at, fire at, shoot at; shoot at. When the verb can take a direct object or at, the object in the Verb + DO construction is fully affected by the action, while Verb + at indicates an object that is not fully affected, e.g., shot a goose cf. shot at a goose.
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<th>10. Ashamed of [*from]</th>
<th>He is now ashamed of his conduct</th>
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<td>‘ashamed of’ ≠ ‘shy’</td>
<td>‘I’m ashamed of / shamed of my teacher → I’m shy toward my teacher.</td>
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<td>‘ashamed’ = feeling shame or guilt</td>
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<td>‘shy’ = feeling nervous with someone</td>
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<th>11. Believe in [*to]</th>
<th>We believe in God.</th>
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<td>‘to believe in’ = to have faith in.</td>
<td>I believe everything he says.</td>
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<td>‘to believe’ (without in) = to regard something as true</td>
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| 12. Besides / In addition to / [*Except] | We have many more publications besides / in addition to these. (‘besides’ is colloquial) |

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<td>(‘of’ is more literary or older style)</td>
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<th>14. Buy for / at</th>
<th>We bought a new server for $4000.</th>
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<td>For exact amounts and sums, ‘for’ is used; ‘at’ is used for weights or measures.</td>
<td>The material can be synthesized for/at $10 per square meter. The non-synthetic form sells at $18 per square meter on the market.</td>
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<th>15. Careful of / with / about [*for]</th>
<th>Elle is very careful about her health.</th>
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<td>cf. ‘take care of’</td>
<td>You should be more careful with your money.</td>
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<td>He takes care of his money.</td>
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| 16. Close to [*from] | The new apartment is quite close to the station. |

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<th>17. Complain about [*for]</th>
<th>Annette complained about the weather.</th>
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<td>For illnesses: ‘complain of’</td>
<td>She complained of a sore throat.</td>
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| 18. Composed of [*from] | Our class is composed of thirty students. |

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<th>19. Congratulate on / for</th>
<th>I congratulate you on the New Year. I congratulate you for your successful project.</th>
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| 20. Consist of [*from] | Different proposals for calendars for the Martian year include suggestions for a year consisting of 24 months. |

| 21. Contact [*contact to] | Please contact your insurance agent rather than the police. |

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<th>22. Covered with [*by]</th>
<th>The mountains are covered with snow.</th>
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<td>‘covered with’ is for descriptions; ‘covered by’ refers to an act or result of covering</td>
<td>The child was covered in snow. [i.e., was fully covered or enveloped in snow]</td>
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<td>The car was covered by the debris, but the accident was covered by our insurance.</td>
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23. **Cure of [from]**
The noun ‘cure’ takes ‘for’.
- The man was cured of his illness.
- There’s no cure for that disease.

24. **Deprive of [from]**
- Nelson Mandela was deprived of his freedom for years.

25. **Die of an illness > die from an illness**
The phrase *die of* is more common than *die from X* in contemporary English; the phrase *die from X* may put slightly more emphasis on X as an active cause.
- Many people have died of malaria.
- People die of illness, of hunger, of thirst, of or from wounds; from overwork, by violence, by the sword, by pestilence, in battle, for their country, for a cause, through neglect, on the scaffold, at the stake.

26. **Different from [than]**
- My book is really different from yours.

27. **Disappointed by, about or at from**
   - by/at/about
   - with/in
   - Before a person we use *with* or *in*, before a thing we use *at*, *about*, *by*; and before a gerund we use *at*
   - Phillipa was disappointed by the low mark she got on the test.
   - Jane was disappointed with/in her son.
   - Keith is very disappointed at not winning the prize.

28. **Divide into parts [in]**
   - I divided the cake into four pieces.
   - Paul divided the apple in half (or in two).

29. **Doubt: no doubt about / in [for]**
   - Doubtful of
   - ‘Doubt about’ may be more common that ‘doubt in’; the latter makes more of a contrast with ‘believe in.’
   - I have no doubt in/about his ability.
   - I’m doubtful of his ability to pass.

30. **Dressed in [with]**
- The woman was dressed in black.
- The woman was in black.

31. **Exception to [of]**
   - With the exception of
   - Except for
   - This is an exception to the rules.
   - She like all her subjects with the exception of physics.
   - All the new students are smart except for George.

32. **Exchange for [by]**
   - In exchange for
   - He exchanged his collection of match boxes for some foreign stamps.
   - He gave them his old car in exchange for a new one.

33. **Fail in [from]**
- He failed in math last year.
- He failed chemistry this year.
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| 34. Full of [*with / from] Fill with | • The jar was full of oil.  
|   | • Jane filled the glass with water.  
| 35. Get rid of [*from] | • I'll be glad to get rid of him.  
| 36. Glad about [*from/with] Or with an infinitive: glad to | • I was glad about receiving your letter.  
|   | • I was glad to receive your letter.  
| 37. Good at (in)  
|   | Also: 'bad at, clever at, quick at, slow at,’ etc.; but ‘weak in’  
|   | Note: “He is good in class” means that his conduct is good. | • My sister is good (in math) / at math.  
|   | • He is weak in grammar.  
|   | • He is quite clever at physics, but not so clever when it comes to engineering.  
| 38. Guard against [*from] | • You must guard against bad habits.  
| 39. Guilty of [*for] | • He was found guilty of embezzling two million dollars of company funds.  
| 40. Independent of [*from]  
|   | Dependent on | • Clare is independent of her parents.  
|   | • The student is overly dependent on his parents.  
| 41. Indifferent to [*for] | • They are indifferent to politics.  
| 42. Influence on [*to]  
|   | The verb takes a direct object with no preposition. | • This has had a great influence on our thinking.  
|   | • This has greatly influenced our thinking.  
| 43. Insist on [*to] | • He always insisted on his opinion.  
| 44. Interested in [*for]  
|   | Also: take an interest in | • She is not interested for in her work.  
|   | • She takes a great interest in music.  
| 45. Jealous of [*from] | • He is very jealous of his brother.  
| 46. Leave for (a place) [*to] | • They are leaving to for England soon.  
| 47. Live on / off of [*from]  
|   | Feed on | • He lives on his brother’s money. He lives off of his brother’s money.  
|   | • Some birds feed on insects.  
| 48. Look at [?to]³ | • Look at his beautiful picture.  

³ ‘Look to’ is more literary, meaning ‘behold, behold as an example, turn to.’  
*Also: gaze at, stare at, etc., but look after (= take care of), look for (= try to find), look over (= examine), look into (= examine closely), look on or upon (= consider), look down on (= have a low opinion of), look up to (= respect), look out for (= expect), look forward to (= expect with pleasure), look to (= rely on).
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<td>49. In my opinion [<em>according to]</em></td>
<td>• In my opinion, this experiment should proceed more cautiously.</td>
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<td>50. Panic about [<em>with]</em></td>
<td>• Don’t panic about it.</td>
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<td>51. Persist in</td>
<td>• He persisted in his silly ideas.</td>
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<td>52. Room for [<em>place for]</em></td>
<td>• Is there room in the lab for another computer?</td>
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<td>53. Related to [<em>with]</em></td>
<td>• Their theory is not so novel; it is actually related to an older theory from the 1960s.</td>
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| 54. Spend on / for | • I spend a lot of time on editing.  
• I spend a lot of time on my freelance work.  
• I spent a lot of money for my degree. |
| ‘On’ indicates activity, and is more common; ‘for’ indicates the purpose, goal or object. |
| 55. Tie to [*on]* | • The animal had to be tied to the table. |
| 56. Travel by train [*with the train] (or other vehicle) | • He traveled by train yesterday. |
| 57. Warn (someone) of [*about] (a danger) | • Subjects must be warned of the potential for headaches from the experiment. |

**Easily confused words**

1. To see *vs.* to watch

To see means to be aware of what is around you by using your eyes.

• I can see the smoke from here.

To watch means to look at something for a period of time, especially something that is changing or moving.

• I watched the cricket.

We watch things that move, such as TV, a film, or sports. We look at static things, such as a photograph, a painting, or the stars.

2. Shortage *vs.* shortness

Shortage is a noun meaning when there is not enough of something.

• There is a shortage of skilled workers in the industry.

Shortness is also a noun meaning the condition of being short spatially.

• Shortness in children and young adults nearly always results from below-average growth in childhood.

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4 We travel by train, by boat, by bike; also, by land, by sea, by air, by bus; in a bus or on a bus; by car or in a car, by taxi or in a taxi; on horse-back, on a donkey, on a bicycle; on foot.
3. **So vs. such**

*So* when used as in front of an adjective or an adverb means ‘very.’

- My English teacher is so patient. She teaches us so well.

Such when used as a determiner can be used before a noun to show extremes, you can not use it before adverb.

- She is such a patient teacher.

Remember that without the noun you need to use *so*.

- Such a patient teacher
- So patient as a teacher

4. **Speak, talk, tell, say**

One speaks a language or a statement; one says words, discourse, or something general; one tells a story or information.

5. **Verb + -ing**

The following main verbs take a second verb in the *-ing* gerund form, not the *to* form.

**Have difficulty**

- We had no difficulty in doing it.
- We had no difficulty doing it. (slightly more colloquial; ‘doing...’ = participle phrase)
- ?We had no difficulty to do it. [not so common]

**Look forward to**

- We are looking forward to reading the results.

**Object to**

- We object to being treated like this.

**Prevent from**

- The monsoon prevented us from conducting our survey.

**Practice**

- You need to practice writing formal English.

**Risk**

- We couldn’t risk leaving the computer running during the storm.

**Think of**

- We often think of conducting field research in Las Vegas.