

A Corpus-based Study of the Near-synonyms: *Purpose, Goal and Objective*

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 13 Sep 2021 Accepted: 16 Apr 2022 Available online: 22 Apr 2022</p> <p>Keywords: Corpus-based study Synonym Near-synonym Degree of formality Semantic preference</p>	<p><i>Synonyms can be problematic for EFL learners since each synonym has distinct meanings to be used in different context. The purposes of this corpus-based study are to investigate distinctions of the synonymous nouns purpose, goal and objective based on the distribution across genres in which the degree of formality is determined and to examine their verb and adjective collocates in relation to semantic preference. The three target synonyms were analyzed by using data drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The results from the frequency of distribution across genres suggests that the three target synonyms most frequently occur in formal contexts, e.g., academic texts, and they tend to have similar occurrences across genres. In terms of the common verb and adjective collocates, the top-thirty verb and adjective collocates of the target synonyms with the highest frequency and the significant MI score level of ≥ 3 were presented and the collocates with similar meanings were categorized into themes based on their semantic preference. It was found that the three synonymous nouns are near-synonyms with the more closely related status of objective and goal because they share more overlapping semantically-related themes and collocations. However, these synonyms also co-occur with particular verbs or adjectives. This differentiation of collocational patterns of the near-synonyms indicates that they cannot be substitutable in all contexts and the precise usage of each synonym should be taken into consideration.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge of lexical semantics, especially synonyms, is considered to be essential yet problematic for non-native speakers of English given that each synonym has a distinct meaning, which is not completely interchangeable (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002, p. 107). Moreover, these words also differ in terms of added connotation based on interpretations of the context (Liu, 2013). This is the reason why true or absolute synonyms are nonexistent and impossible to find (Cruse, 1986; Quine, 1951). Regarding the academic context, Bailey (2007) states that

synonyms indicate the appropriate level of formality; however, they do not imply interchangeability. This is why there are various lists of academic words to be used for writing appropriate academic papers.

This paper aims to examine differences among the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective* across genres and to identify verb and adjective collocations in relation to semantic preference of the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*. According to Stubbs (2001), semantic preference is a regular co-occurrence of words which is restricted to share a related semantic feature. The collocates that follow the verb *undergo*, for example, reflect a variety of semantic preference, including medical terms (treatment, operation, surgery), testing (examination, training), and change (changes, transformations) (Stubbs, 2001). The selection of these synonyms is based on their frequent use in the academic context. While *goal* and *objective* are included in Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000), *purpose* is in the Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) developed by Gardner and Davies (2014). The examination of the synonyms of these academic words can be useful for learners and teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) and can serve as a piece of evidence of corpus-assisted approach in analyzing and distinguishing the synonyms.

The three target synonymous nouns share the same fundamental meaning according to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014) as follows:

purpose	1. the purpose of something is what it is intended to achieve 2. a plan or aim	(p. 1332)
goal	1. something that you hope to achieve in the future	(p. 694)
objective	1. something that you are trying hard to achieve, especially in business or politics	(p. 1128)

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that these three target words are near-synonyms as they share similar core meaning of achieving something. However, as suggested by Cambridge Dictionary (online version), *purpose* is at B1 level according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) while *goal* and *objective* are at B2 level. Therefore, it is speculated that *goal* and *objective* are possibly more closely related than *purpose*. In terms of collocational information provided by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (online version), it is evident that some of the verb and adjective collocations of these three synonyms overlap with each other, which indicates the near-synonym status of the target words. As a result, it is beneficial to examine the differences in terms of their usage and the common collocations in order for learners to use them correctly and appropriately.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Synonymy

Lexical synonymy is an essential facet of knowledge in second language acquisition; however, learners are often confused with the use of synonyms (Norris, 2014). According to Laufer (1990), the confusion or misuse of synonyms results from interlexical factors in which the learners make mistakes by substituting synonyms in some inappropriate contexts. Bailey (2007) and Webb (2007) also suggest that some synonyms with similar meaning do not occur in the same context and also do not always share the same collocations. For example, the adjectives *high* and *tall* have similar meanings, but they cannot be used interchangeably, i.e., *high* temperature not *tall* temperature. These words are considered to be synonymous to a lesser degree. However, some words such as *nearly* and *almost* are regarded as more synonymous than others. Thus, this leads to the two prevalent characteristics of synonyms, namely absolute synonyms and near-synonyms.

Absolute synonyms, also known as perfect synonyms, refer to the words with identical meaning which can be used interchangeably in all contexts without affecting meaning, connotation or style (Cruse, 1986; Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). However, this type of synonym is very rare because it can cause redundancy in language (Phoocharoensil, 2020a). This redundancy can be explained based on the linguistic economy principle proposed by Martinet (1955; cited in Vicentini, 2003) who states that two words with the same meaning cannot co-exist for long in one language. Specifically, this lexical adaptation happens because communication requires precision and clarification with simplicity. Moreover, Clark (1992) also posits that if there exists two words with identical meaning, either one will be eradicated or take a new meaning. However, Edmonds and Hirst (2002) indicate that absolute synonyms are limited to be found in “dialectal variation and technical terms (e.g., underwear (American English): pants (British English); groundhog: woodchuck; distichous: two-ranked), but these words would change the style of an utterance when intersubstituted” (p. 107).

On the other hand, near-synonyms refer to words which are close in meaning but not identical and cannot be substituted in every context. Examples of near-synonyms given by Phoocharoensil (2020b, p.3) are the word *repair* and *mend* which can be used interchangeably as in (1); however, if the context is about clothes, *mend* is more natural as in (2).

- (1) I will *mend/repair* that broken bicycle.
- (2) My father used to *mend/*repair* my shoes.

In summary, it can be concluded that near-synonyms are more prevalent than absolute synonyms. Using the synonyms in the wrong context may affect the meaning, style and attitude of the text. Thus, it is important to be able to use the near-synonyms in an appropriate context by considering the criteria for distinguishing near-synonyms, namely dialect, formality, connotation and collocational pattern as well as semantic preference which will be presented in the following section.

Criteria for distinguishing near-synonyms

Near-synonyms can be differentiated by specific criteria, which include dialect, formality, connotation, collocational pattern and semantic preference (Cruse, 1986; Palmer, 1981; Jackson & Amvela, 2000; Phoocharoensil, 2010). First, Cruse (1986) and Palmer (1981) indicate that near-synonyms can be distinguished based on the stylistic variation of different geographical use which can be further divided into intranational (e.g., dialects within the same country but different regions) and international (e.g., English spoken in different countries) (Kachru, 1995; Widdowson, 1997). As for the international differences, British and American English provide a good example of the different usage of synonyms, such as *anticlockwise* (British English) and *counterclockwise* (American English), *biscuit* (British English) and *cookies* (American English), and *chemist* (British English) and *drugstore* (American English) (Cambridge Dictionary, online version).

Second, another stylistic variation that can also be used to identify the differences between the near-synonyms is the degree of formality of the context (Cruse, 1986; Jackson & Amvela, 2000). That is, one word normally appears in a formal context, while another synonym occurs in an informal context. For example, the synonymous nouns *error*, *fault* and *mistake* occur in different contexts. While *error* is commonly found in formal contexts, *fault* and *mistake* appear to be more common in informal ones (Phoocharoensil, 2020a). More examples can be found from Cambridge Dictionary (online version), which includes *inform* (formal) and *tell* (informal), *commence* (formal) and *start* (informal), and *require* (formal) and *need* (informal).

In addition, connotation or expressive variation (Cruse, 1986), which refers to the manner or attitude in conveying the words, can be one criterion for distinguishing the near-synonyms. Jackson and Amvela (2007) suggest that associative or expressive meanings of the synonyms indicate their differences. For example, the word *skinny* might be used to describe a person if the speaker would like to imply a negative attitude, while *slim* or *slender* express a more positive one. Alternatively, the word *thin* can be used if the speaker would like to be more neutral (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002, p. 110).

Furthermore, collocational patterns within structural variation can be another indicator for distinguishing the near-synonyms (Cruse, 1986; Phoocharoensil, 2010). A collocation is defined as a co-occurrence of certain words (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2008; Lewis, 2000). The concept of collocation is considered to be primary in lexicology and vocabulary teaching and learning, so sufficient collocational knowledge is essential for English learners in order to be able to produce natural and standard English (Szudarski, 2018). In terms of collocational preference, the near-synonymous words may co-occur with different collocations from each other according to collocational restrictions (Palmer, 1981). Edmonds and Hirst (2002) provide examples of the differences in collocational patterns of the synonym *task* and *job* in which one can *face a daunting task* but not *a daunting job*. This concept of collocational patterns is related to other criterion used to differentiate the near-synonyms, namely semantic preference. While collocational patterns concern lexical restriction, the words' occurrence is defined within the semantic environment (Flowerdew, 2012). For example, Edmonds and Hirst (2002) mention that the synonymous verbs *die* and *pass away* have different semantic preference in which

pass away is only used with people not with animals or plants. In more recent study, Selmistraitis (2020) examined semantic preference among three pairs of synonymous adjectives, namely *succinct* and *concise*, *coherent* and *cohesive*, and *precise* and *accurate* in the academic texts of Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2020) and found that *succinct* and *concise* are more similar in semantic preference than other two pairs of synonyms.

As a result, since the near-synonyms cannot be used interchangeably in every context, criteria for distinguishing them should be considered in order to be able to use correct words in appropriate context. The criteria proposed by a number of researchers consist of dialect, formality, connotation, collocational pattern and semantic preference. In this study, the differences among the three target synonyms are examined based on the degree of formality, collocational patterns and semantic preference.

Previous studies on synonyms

There are a number of past studies on synonym differentiation based on data drawn from language corpora, e.g., the British National Corpus (BNC) or the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This corpus-informed data provides evidence of a word in addition to its dictionary meaning, e.g., degree of formality, connotations, collocational patterns, thus being able to understand these subtle differences is beneficial for both learners and ELT practitioners in choosing the right word the appropriate context.

First, Cai (2012) examined the synonyms *awesome*, *excellent*, *fabulous*, *fantastic*, *great*, *terrific*, and *wonderful* based on the data drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The results of the study revealed that the most frequently occurring word is *great* which was also reported to be more general. Moreover, regarding the frequency distribution across genres, it was found that *fabulous*, *fantastic*, *great*, *terrific*, and *wonderful* occur more in the spoken genre, while *awesome* and *excellent* are prevailing in magazines. In addition, the adverb collocates of these target synonyms vary considerably in number; however, they share some overlapping noun collocates.

Another study conducted by Petchrat and Phoocharoensil (2017) examined three synonymous adjectives *appropriate*, *proper* and *suitable* based on their meaning, collocations, formality and grammatical patterns. The data were collected from three dictionaries, namely Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th edition (2014), Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013), and Macmillan Collocations Dictionary (2010) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). It was found that even though *appropriate*, *proper* and *suitable* shared the same core meaning, they differed in detailed meanings in which *suitable* tends to be used more with person. In addition, *appropriate* occurred more in formal context than *suitable* and *proper*. Moreover, by examining collocations and grammatical patterns, it was found that they shared only a small number of collocations and grammatical patterns in which they occur. This indicated that the three synonymous adjectives are not absolute synonyms as they cannot be used interchangeably in the same context.

In addition, Jirananthiporn (2018) investigated the two synonyms *problem* and *trouble* with

the data drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The two target words were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively based on frequency, distribution across genres and their common verb and adjective collocations. The results suggested that, regarding frequency, *problem* occurred more often than *trouble*. Moreover, the two target synonyms occurred in different genres. Specifically, *problem* seemed to occur the most in spoken and academic texts while *trouble* was mostly often used in fiction and least used in the academic context. For their collocations, *trouble* collocated with verbs which are prevalent in the context of fiction and it also collocates with less variation of adjectives than *problem*. Thus, it can be concluded that despite their similar core meaning, the target synonyms are used in different contexts, and with different collocations.

Selmistraitis (2020) examined semantic preference, semantic prosody, and distribution across nine academic genres of the three pairs of synonymous adjectives, namely *succinct* and *concise*, *coherent* and *cohesive*, and *precise* and *accurate* in the academic texts of Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). It was found that these near synonyms have different semantic preference; however, *succinct* and *concise* were more similar in semantic preference than the other two pairs of synonyms. In addition, these three pairs of synonyms also have different distribution across academic genres indicating that they cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts.

More recently, Phoocharoensil (2021) conducted a corpus-based investigation of the near-synonyms *persist* and *persevere* with the data drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) by focusing on genres distribution, their collocations and semantic preference/prosody. It was found that *persist* occurs the most in academic text whereas *persevere* is used with the highest frequency in web pages. Likewise, they also have different collocations and different semantic prosody in which *persist* co-occurs with negative meaning words while *persevere* collocates with words that indicate strong determination and effort in accomplishing a task. Interestingly, the result revealed that *persevere* can also be used as a transitive verb based on the corpus data which is inconsistent with those stated in a learner dictionary; that *persevere* is only used as an intransitive verb. Thus, it can be seen from the study that the near-synonyms *persist* and *persevere* differ in terms of their distribution, collocations and semantic prosody. Corpus data provide more authentic use of a word in terms of collocational and grammatical patterns.

From the previous studies, the near-synonyms can be differentiated based on the degree of formality by examining distribution across genre, collocations, and semantic preference. This kind of linguistic information can be acquired via the use of language corpora (Flowerdew, 2009). This study adopts those criteria in examining the target near-synonymous nouns *purpose*, *goal* and *objective* in order to look into their frequency and differences in more detail by using the data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Thus, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the differences among the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective* across genres in relation to their frequency of occurrence?
2. What are verb and adjective collocations in relation to semantic preference of the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

This study analyzed three near-synonymous nouns, i.e., *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*. The primary meanings of the target words were obtained from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014). The corpus-based data regarding the three target synonyms were collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2020), which is the largest, free-access, genre-balanced corpus of American English. More than 25 million words are collected each year from 1990-2020 which includes more than one billion words from eight different genres, namely spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages.

There were three reasons why COCA was employed as a data source in this study. First, as COCA is regarded as the largest corpus which contains authentic American English, it provides generalizability and reliability of the data to be analyzed. Second, COCA collects the data equally divided in eight different genres which consists of both spoken and written texts. Thus, an investigation of the distribution of the target words across genres in COCA is quite thorough and comprehensive. Lastly, COCA is considered to be a monitor corpus in which new data are regularly added every year so that the corpus is relatively up-to-date. As a result, because of the considerable size, the variety of genres and up-to-date data, in this study COCA was used to analyze the target near-synonyms, namely *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*. The analysis focused on distribution across genres, collocations and semantic preference which can be acquired from COCA in order to differentiate the target words.

Data collection procedure

COCA was consulted for the frequency and distribution across eight genres, i.e., spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, and TV and movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages of the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*. By examining the different distributions in genres, the degree of formality of each word can also be determined. Then, for semantic preference, common collocations of the target synonyms were investigated. Since the target words are nouns, the most frequent verb and adjective collocates were focused on. These collocates were selected based on frequency and the Mutual Information (MI) score or value. According to Gablasova, Brezina and McEnery (2017), the MI value was used to indicate the level of co-occurrence strength between the target word and the collocation. However, the MI score alone cannot provide precise results of collocational strength as it usually gives a high value for low frequency combinations (Cheng, 2012). To put it another way, the collocations with high MI scores could be low in frequency, and thus they could not be used in the analysis as they could not be a representative of strong collocations. It is worth noting that, according to Schmitt (2010), the MI score should be used with caution and it should be examined together with frequency to confirm the co-occurrence strength between the target word and the collocation. Therefore, the top-thirty verb and adjective collocations of the target synonyms with the highest frequency and the significant MI score level (≥ 3) (Cheng, 2012) drawn from COCA were examined. Next, the list of the verb and adjective collocations was categorized

with reference to semantic preference. In other words, semantically related collocations were organized into the same theme. This semantically related categorization gave a clear picture of the differences among the target synonyms in terms of collocational patterns and context of occurrence.

Data analysis

Data analysis for this study followed Phoocharoensil's (2020a) framework. As mentioned in the previous section, the data collected from COCA were divided into two main types according to the research objectives. The data concerning distribution across genres were analyzed by using overall frequency and frequency of each genre. Then, the common verb and adjective collocates of each target word were determined by using frequency and MI score value (≥ 3), so the top-thirty most frequent verb and adjective collocates were illustrated. Finally, the collocates with similar meanings were categorized and grouped together under the same theme according to their semantic preference so that the target near-synonyms can be clearly distinguished.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency and distribution of the synonyms across genres

In response to Research Question One, the degree of formality of the target synonyms can be examined according to the overall frequency and distribution across different genres.

Table 1
Distribution of the target synonyms across genres

Genre	Purpose			Goal			Objective	
	Frequency	Per million		Frequency	Per million		Frequency	Per million
Academic texts	19,683	164.31	Academic texts	19,083	159.30	Academic texts	9,758	81.46
Webpage	13,284	106.91	Blog	14,640	113.83	Webpage	4,365	35.13
Blogs	10,476	81.45	Newspaper	14,801	121.58	Blog	3,992	31.04
Magazine	7,481	59.33	Webpage	12,255	98.63	Magazine	2,481	19.68
Fiction	5,573	47.10	Magazine	11,528	91.43	Spoken	2,341	18.56
Spoken	5,319	42.17	Spoken	6,689	53.03	Newspaper	1,453	11.94
TV/ Movie	4,643	36.25	TV/ Movie	2,746	21.44	TV/ Movie	817	6.38
Newspaper	4,553	37.40	Fiction	2,069	17.49	Fiction	692	5.85
Total	71,012	71.51		83,811	84.40		25,899	26.08

Table 1 indicates that goal (83,811 tokens) occurs with the highest frequency among the three synonyms according to COCA followed by *purpose* (71,012 tokens) and *objective* (25,899 tokens), respectively. Regarding the genre, all three synonyms most frequently occur in academic texts, i.e., *purpose* (19,683 tokens), *goal* (19,083 tokens) and *objective* (9,758 tokens) and the distribution of these synonyms tend to have similar occurrence across genres. This reveals that the three synonyms apparently have the same degree of formality as they occur with the

highest frequency in formal context, i.e., academic texts. This finding is inconsistent with the previous studies which suggested that some near-synonyms occur in different contexts with different degree of formality, e.g., *error, fault* and *mistake* (Phoocharoensil, 2020a), *awesome, excellent, fabulous, fantastic, great, terrific, and wonderful* (Cai, 2012) and *appropriate, proper* and *suitable* (Petchrat & Phoocharoensil, 2017). The results of the current study indicate that the three target synonyms are common in academic English, which is in line with Academic Word List (AWL) and Academic Vocabulary List (AVL), in which *goal, purpose, and objective* are included

Typical collocations: Analysis of verb and adjective collocates

In order to answer Research Question Two, verb and adjective collocations and semantic preference of *purpose, goal* and *objective* were investigated.

Verb collocates of *purpose, goal* and *objective*

First, the top-thirty verbs collocate with the target synonyms *purpose, goal* and *objective* are illustrated in Table 2. These verbs were chosen according to the frequency of occurrence and MI scores (≥ 3) indicating statistical significance (Cheng, 2012).

Table 2
Verb collocates of *purpose, goal* and *objective*

Rank	<i>Purpose</i>			<i>Goal</i>			<i>Objective</i>		
	Verb collocates	Frequency	MI Value	Verb collocates	Frequency	MI Value	Verb collocates	Frequency	MI Value
1	serve	5,097	4.70	achieve	7,229	6.36	achieve	1,719	6.61
2	suit	381	4.14	set	4,384	3.52	meet	770	3.13
3	accomplish	346	3.40	reach	3,008	3.66	accomplish	469	5.85
4	defeat	291	3.73	accomplish	2,148	5.65	pursue	222	4.42
5	fulfil(1)	369		pursue	1,061	4.32	define	201	3.44
	fulfill	212	4.53						
	fulfil	157	4.05						
6	further	41	3.91	assist	852	4.42	establish	174	3.01
7	effectuate	19	6.19	attain	597	5.73	attain	138	5.93
8	outlive	17	3.32	advance	273	3.05	assess	90	3.26
9	misappropriate	9	5.39	strive	197	3.74	fulfil(1)	125	
							fulfill	81	5.10
							fulfil	44	4.18
10	subserve	6	6.76	fulfil(1)	305		secure	74	3.24
				fulfill	192	4.00			
				fulfil	113	3.19			
11	whet	5	3.12	align	171	3.59	align	74	4.71
12	apportion	5	3.15	outline	153	3.36	evaluate	68	3.03
13	banter	5	3.21	articulate	102	3.01	advance	61	3.20
14				maximize	95	3.04	outline	55	4.20
15				orient	95	3.75	formulate	44	4.65
16				surpass	82	3.43	maximize	33	3.83
17				further	59	4.05	minimize	32	3.22
18				eradicate	41	3.14	articulate	23	3.18
19				notch	29	3.94	mandate	17	3.74
20				reassess	22	3.49	further	16	4.50
21				disallow	14	3.81	reconcile	14	3.07
22				subordinate	10	3.49	optimize	12	3.56
23				individualize	8	3.01	thwart	11	3.44
24				demystify	8	3.63	liberate	10	3.07
25				effectuate	7	4.36	quantify	10	3.10
26				recommit	5	4.12	ascertain	7	3.01
27							restate	4	3.90
28							sequence	4	3.87
29							subordinate	4	4.47
30							centralize	2	3.07

From Table 2, it can be seen that *purpose* has the smallest numbers of verb collocates based on the frequency and MI scores (≥ 3). However, it is obvious that the three synonyms share three verb collocates, which include *accomplish*, *fulfil(l)* and *further*. Moreover, *goal* and *objective* share several verb collocates, such as *achieve*, *pursue*, *attain*, *advance*, *align*, *outline*, *articulate* and *maximize*, while only one verb, *effectuate*, is shared between *purpose* and *goal*. Thus, the conclusion can be made here that *goal* and *objective* are more closely related synonyms than *purpose*.

Regarding the synonyms *goal* and *objective*, they shared the same verb collocate, *pursue*, that indicates the time period which means ‘to continue doing an activity or trying to achieve something over a long period of time.’ Hence, the words *goal* and *objective* tend to be used with time-bound activities as in (3) and (4).

- (3) Both of these cadets should have an opportunity to **pursue** their professional athletic **goals** after serving two years as officers in the Air Force, should they choose.
- (4) Indigenous women **pursued** political and social **objectives** in ways that were consistent with Indigenous women’s lived realities.

In addition, there are verb collocates that express measurement for both *goal* (i.e., *reassess*) and *objective* (i.e., *assess*, *evaluate*, and *quantify*) as exemplified in (5) and (6).

- (5) In contrast, casinos in New Orleans either failed or **reassessed** their financial **goals**.
- (6) The specific **objectives** were to **assess** the quality and accessibility of the data available in the 53 countries.

However, it should be noted that there might be some other verbs that collocate with the three synonyms which are not identified in COCA because of the weak collocations. Those collocations can be disregarded as they are not frequently used and the learners might rarely encounter these words (Hill, 2000). The next section presents the analysis of the semantic preference of the three synonyms by classifying the verbs that express similar meaning related to semantic relations between the words and their collocations.

Table 3
Semantic preference of verb Collocates of *purpose*

1. ACCOMPLISH	<i>accomplish, fulfil(l), serve, suit</i>
2. PROCEED	<i>effectuate, further, subserve</i>
3. MISCELLANEOUS	<i>apportion, defeat, outlive, misappropriate, whet, banter</i>

Table 3 indicates that *purpose* mostly occurs with verbs which are often used in a formal context, such as, *accomplish*, *effectuate*, and *apportion*. The verb collocates can be divided into three themes. The first theme ACCOMPLISH indicates that the word *purpose* often co-occurs with verbs that convey the meaning ‘to succeed in doing something,’ or ‘achieve the thing that you hoped for or wished for,’ namely *accomplish* and *fulfill* (American English) or *fulfil* (British English), *serve* and *suit* as in (7). The second theme PROCEED indicates the act of ‘doing something that needs to be organized as planned,’ or ‘carrying out,’ i.e., *effectuate*,

further, and *subserve* as exemplified in (8). The other verbs are categorized as MISCELLANEOUS i.e., *apportion, defeat, outlive, misappropriate, whet, and banter* as in (9).

- (7) The following research questions served as a guide to **accomplish** the study’s **purpose**
- (8) The regulations **furthered** the **purpose** of the Act.201.
- (9) The disclosure of these records may **defeat** the lawful **purpose** of the executive session.

Table 4
Semantic preference of verb collocates of *goal*

1. ACCOMPLISH	achieve, accomplish, fulfil(l), reach, attain
2. PROCEED	set, pursue, strive, further, effectuate
3. EVALUATE	reassess
4. ARRANGE	align, orient
5. MAKE A MINOR DEGREE	subordinate, assist, eradicate, notch
6. MAKE A GREATER DEGREE	advance, maximize, surpass
7. DO SOMETHING WITH	disallow, individualize
8. DESCRIBE	outline, demystify, articulate

From Table 4, the semantic preference of the verb collocates of *goal* is quite similar to that of *purpose*, namely ACCOMPLISH, and PROCEED. However, five different themes emerge, which are EVALUATE, ARRANGE, MAKE A MINOR DEGREE, MAKE A GREATER DEGREE and DESCRIBE. Only one verb collocate is found in the MEASURE theme which is *reassess* as in (10). The verb collocates found in the ACCOMPLISH theme include *achieve, accomplish, fulfil(l), reach, and attain*, as shown in (11), while the verbs *set, pursue, strive, further* and *effectuate* are found in PROCEED theme, as in (12). In terms of the ARRANGE theme, two verbs, *align* and *orient*, are found as in (13). In addition, the verbs *subordinate, assist, eradicate* and *notch* are categorized into the MAKE A MINOR DEGREE theme as in (14). For the MAKE A GREATER DEGREE theme, *advance, maximize, and surpass* are grouped in as in (15). In the DO SOMETHING WITH theme, two verbs which express the meaning of “taking some sort of action or to change (something) in some way” were related, i.e., *disallow, individualize*, and as exemplified in (16) while the other verbs are classified in the DESCRIBE theme which includes *outline, demystify, and articulate* as in (17).

It can be seen that, in the first theme, the verb collocates shared between *purpose* and *goal* include *accomplish*, and *fulfil(l)* while in the PROCEED theme, the verbs *effectuate* and *further* are shared. The overlapping verb collocates indicates that these two synonyms are near-synonyms (Stubbs, 1995); however, they have different verb collocates in the same theme, e.g., *accomplish* the purpose and *reach* the goal, which can be used to differentiate the near-synonyms (Phoocharoensil, 2010).

- (10) ... that we have chosen wrongly and should **reassess** our **goals**, and ...
- (11) ...the state is unlikely to **reach** even that first **goal**.
- (12) Aim to set yourself a minimum **goal** and then raise the bar when you’ve successfully met that goal for a period

- (13) That is not **aligned** with the **goal** of universal coverage that's good and affordable.
 (14) ..., in that he **subordinated** his larger social **goals** to his private gratification.
 (15) The District has improved access to HIV testing, **surpassing** the national **goal** by over a third, and is slightly ahead of the rest of the nation
 (16) ..., special educators must **individualize goals**, relate them to outcomes ...
 (17) Our **goal** is to **demystify** the permit process and help residents ...

Interestingly, the noun *goal* seems to have more than one primary meaning. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014), another meaning of the word *goal* is 'the action of making a ball go into a goal, or the score gained by doing this.' This sport-related meaning of *goal* is also evident in the verb collocates drawn from COCA, i.e., *score*, *net* and *tally*, as in (18). However, this type of meaning is irrelevant to the present study, so it was excluded from the analysis (Phoocharoensil, 2010).

- (18) Morgan and Rapinoe each **netted** six **goals** as they helped Team USA defend ...

Table 5
Semantic preference of verb collocates of *objective*

1. ACCOMPLISH	achieve, meet, accomplish, fulfil(l), attain
2. PROCEED	pursue, further
3. EVALUATE	assess, evaluate, quantify
4. ARRANGE	align, reconcile, sequence, centralize
5. GO AGAINST	thwart, conflict
6. MAKE A MINOR DEGREE	minimize, subordinate
7. MAKE A GREATER DEGREE	advance, maximize, optimize
8. DO SOMETHING WITH	establish, formulate, ascertain, secure, mandate, liberate
9. DESCRIBE	define, outline, articulate

Finally, the noun *objective* co-occurs with verbs classified into nine themes. The first theme ACCOMPLISH includes the verbs *achieve*, *meet*, *accomplish*, *fulfil(l)*, and *attain*, as shown in (19). For the theme PROCEED, the verb collocates are *pursue*, and *further*, as in (20). Moreover, there are also verbs classified in the theme EVALUATE which means 'to judge how good, useful, or successful something is,' i.e., *assess*, *evaluate*, and *quantify*, as in (21). The fourth theme ARRANGE includes *align*, *reconcile*, *sequence* and *centralize*, as shown in (22). The fifth theme is GO AGAINST which covers the verbs *thwart* and *conflict*, as exemplified in (23) whereas the verbs *minimize* and *subordinate* fall into the theme of MAKE A MINOR DEGREE as in (24). Another theme is MAKE A GREATER DEGREE which includes *advance*, *maximize*, and *optimize* as in (25). The last two themes include DO SOMETHING WITH which consists of the verbs *establish*, *formulate*, *ascertain*, *secure*, *mandate* and *liberate* as exemplified in (26) and DESCRIBE which includes *define*, *outline*, and *articulate*, as shown in (27).

- (19) UN peacekeepers too often fail to **meet** their most basic **objectives**.
 (20) Dana wanted the freedom to **pursue** her own **objectives**.
 (21) The first step is to identify and **quantify** the **objectives** associated with the problem.
 (22) ..., the motives of stewards are **aligned** with the **objectives** of the collaborators
 (23) ... military commitment necessary to **thwart** its **objectives**, on top of 11 years...

- (24) The goal of optimization is to *minimize* or maximize an *objective*, such as ...
- (25) ... one project among several in the community that aim to *advance* those *objectives*
- (26) If the head does not *establish* the right *objectives*, then all is lost.
- (27) In the past, colleges have *outlined* their educational *objectives*.

In summary, from the verb collocates and semantic preference, it can be seen that these three synonymous nouns are near-synonyms since they share three strong verb collocates, i.e., *accomplish*, *fulfil(l)* and *further*. Also, they share two similar themes of semantic preference which include ACCOMPLISH, and PROCEED. In addition, apart from the similar verb collocates and themes shared among the three synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*, the more closely related status of *objective* and *goal* can be evident by the two major issues. First, *objective* and *goal* share six more themes together which are ARRANGE, EVALUATE, MAKE A MINOR DEGREE, MAKE A GREATER DEGREE, DO SOMETHING WITH, and DESCRIBE. To be specific, *objective* and *goal* share one verb in the theme of ARRANGE (i.e., *align*) and MAKE A MINOR DEGREE (i.e., *subordinate*) while two verbs are shared in MAKE A GREATER DEGREE theme, which are *advance* and *maximize*. Furthermore, in the DESCRIBE theme, the two similar verb collocates, *outline*, and *articulate* are shared. However, they have different verb collocates in the same theme, i.e., *optimize* and *demystify*, which can be used to differentiate the near-synonyms (Phoocharoensil, 2010). Another issue is that they also have a shared verb collocate that indicates the *time period* which is the word *pursue*. Thus, the data from verb collocates and semantic preferences indicate the near-synonyms status of the three target synonyms with the closely related status of *goal* and *objective*.

Adjective collocates of *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*

Since the target synonyms are nouns, the adjectives frequently co-occur with *purpose*, *goal* and *objective* are also explored based on the data drawn from COCA by considered frequency and MI score (≥ 3) in the following table.

Table 6
Adjective collocates of *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*

Rank	<i>Purpose</i>			<i>Goal</i>			<i>Objective</i>		
	Adjective collocate	Frequency	MI Value	Adjective collocate	Frequency	MI Value	Adjective collocate	Frequency	MI Value
1	sole	1,219	6.55	ultimate	2,173	6.00	main	652	4.72
2	primary	1,088	4.37	primary	1,602	4.54	primary	652	5.56
3	practical	903	4.92	main	1,345	3.43	specific	414	4.12
4	main	886	3.22	common	1,330	3.11	clear	330	3.00
5	present	792	3.74	long-term	1,089	4.42	strategic	268	5.45
6	educational	766	4.12	specific	1,039	3.11	educational	236	4.35
7	specific	752	3.03	educational	648	3.50	subjective	229	6.63
8	useful	471	3.38	stated	600	7.27	key	185	3.22
9	informational	460	7.34	ambitious	557	5.20	stated	180	7.84
10	express	342	6.96	overall	485	3.27	ultimate	178	4.73
11	legitimate	337	3.95	realistic	459	4.54	instructional	157	5.60
12	intended	289	6.06	lofty	393	6.66	environmental	151	3.01
13	peaceful	254	3.96	strategic	384	3.66	overall	143	3.82
14	stated	247	6.38	short-term	311	4.40	long-term	138	3.76
15	ultimate	240	3.21	shared	289	3.79	principal	111	4.74
16	medicinal	206	6.55	worthy	274	3.96	broad	106	3.00
17	dual	202	4.71	sustainable	228	3.59	abstract	105	4.99
18	secular	164	3.82	instructional	214	3.74	measurable	94	7.13
19	recreational	157	4.65	achievable	207	6.74	secondary	84	4.11

Rank	<i>Purpose</i>			<i>Goal</i>			<i>Objective</i>		
	Adjective collocates	Frequency	MI Value	Adjective collocates	Frequency	MI Value	Adjective collocates	Frequency	MI Value
20	charitable	132	4.29	modest	196	3.20	consistent	78	3.10
21	noble	119	3.38	desired	195	4.51	fundamental	74	3.29
22	humanitarian	107	3.62	attainable	194	7.23	immediate	67	3.06
23	nefarious	107	6.22	overarching	161	6.29	shared	61	3.87
24	illustrative	104	6.39	elusive	158	4.62	short-term	57	4.28
25	explicit	98	3.17	noble	157	3.39	legitimate	53	3.26
26	lawful	86	4.86	postsecondary	129	5.24	sole	50	3.95
27	diagnostic	82	3.58	unrealistic	126	4.51	cognitive	49	3.26
28	promotional	80	4.49	improving	123	3.70	statutory	46	5.33
29	comparative	77	3.57	organizational	112	3.07	organizational	45	4.06
30	descriptive	75	3.69	laudable	101	6.72	explicit	44	3.95

Table 6 reveals that there are six common adjective collocates shared among the three target synonyms, namely *primary*, *main*, *educational*, *specific*, *stated*, and *ultimate*. However, the data confirm the near-synonymy of *goal* and *objective* because they share several adjective collocates, i.e. *long-term*, *strategic*, *short-term*, *shared*, *instructional*, *measurable* and *organizational* while only one adjective is shared between *purpose* and *goal* (i.e. *noble*) and three for *purpose* and *objective* (i.e. *sole*, *legitimate*, and *explicit*), which indicates that the collocates *purpose* do not strongly co-occur with the other two nouns.

From the data, it can be seen that adjective collocates of the word *purpose* tend to be more technical, such as *medicinal*, *recreational*, *humanitarian*, *secular* and *lawful* as in (28).

- (28) The use of the chemical internally for ***medicinal purposes*** was reportedly first considered in the early 1900s.

For *goal*, the collocates are related to the degree of possibility in achievement, namely *realistic*, *achievable*, *attainable*, *elusive*, and *unrealistic* as in (29).

- (29) Utopian vision of a national “preservation collection” may not be a ***realistic goal*** for many reasons

Also, there are adjective collocates of *goal* that define general intentions and ambition which include *ambitious* and *desired* as in (30) and also adjectives that refer to including or influencing everything, namely *overall* and *overarching* as in (31).

- (30) The Phoenix City Council approved an ***ambitious new goal*** to reduce carbon pollution by 30 percent

- (31) We started with our mission and ***overarching goals***, then listed our responsibilities by category.

Thus, this shows that the noun *goal* mostly used in the broader nature and aims at the end result which can affect the steps taken in achieving the desired result.

In addition, there are adjective collocates shared between *goal* and *objective* which indicate time-bound context, namely *long-term* and *short-term*. This is in accordance with the aforementioned verb collocates *pursue*. This shows that *goal* and *objective* associate with a schedule and time frame.

- (32) **Long-term** development **goals** can hardly be pursued when investment projects are tightly subject to the calendar
- (33) We need to have long-term goals as well as **short-term** objectives.

The following section deals with the analysis and categorization of semantic preference of adjective collocations of the three target synonyms.

Table 7
Semantic preference of adjective collocations of *purpose*

1. IMPORTANCE	sole, primary, main, ultimate, noble
2. TYPE	practical, educational, informational, illustrative, intended, descriptive, legitimate, lawful, peaceful, medicinal, secular, recreational, charitable, humanitarian, nefarious, promotional, comparative, diagnostic
3. CONDITION	dual, specific, express, stated, explicit, useful, present

Table 7 shows that there are three themes of adjectives based on the semantic preference of the adjective collocate. The first theme is IMPORTANCE which includes *sole, primary, main, ultimate, and noble*, as exemplified in (34). It can be seen that some combinations are fixed phrases, such as *main purpose* and *primary purpose*. Another theme is TYPE which expresses the classification of the *purpose*. This theme consists of the majority of the adjective collocates, i.e., *practical, educational, informational, illustrative, intended, descriptive, legitimate, lawful, peaceful, medicinal, secular, recreational, charitable, humanitarian, nefarious, promotional, comparative, and diagnostic*, as in (35). The rest of the adjectives are labeled as CONDITION which means the state of anything in terms of characteristic, quality, or functionality, i.e., *dual, specific, express, stated, explicit, useful, and present* as in (36).

- (34) People forget that the **main purpose** of civil service was to abolish the shakedown for political donations.
- (35) ...how to use most of that information for any **practical** medical **purpose**.
- (36) The term refers to the spreading of a false view of reality for the **explicit purposes** of eroding public opinion and confidence in people’s own perception.

Table 8
Semantic preference of adjective collocates of *goal*

1. IMPORTANCE	ultimate, primary, main, worthy, noble
2. PERIOD OF TIME	long-term, sustainable, short-term
3. FEASIBILITY	achievable, attainable, realistic, unrealistic, ambitious, modest
4. CONDITION	common, shared, specific, missed, elusive, stated, lofty, overall, overarching, desired
5. TYPE	educational, instructional, postsecondary

It can be seen from Table 8 that there are five themes which emerged from the analysis of the semantic preference of adjective collocates of *goal*. Three themes overlap with those of *purpose*, namely IMPORTANCE, CONDITION and TYPE while two new themes emerge from the analysis which include PERIOD OF TIME and FEASIBILITY. For the first theme IMPORTANCE, the adjectives are *ultimate, primary, main, worthy, and noble*, as exemplified in (37). Another theme PERIOD OF TIME includes the adjectives that indicate time-constrained, i.e., *long-term*,

sustainable, and *short-term*, as illustrated in (38) while FEASIBILITY incorporates adjectives indicating ‘the state or degree of being easily or conveniently done’ which are *achievable*, *attainable*, *realistic*, *unrealistic*, *ambitious*, and *modest*, as in (39). The fourth theme is CONDITION which includes *common*, *shared*, *specific*, *missed*, *elusive*, *stated*, *lofty*, *overall*, *overarching*, and *desired*, as shown in (40) and the rest of the adjectives are categorized in TYPE, i.e., *educational*, *instructional*, and *postsecondary*, as in (41).

- (37) the **ultimate** intervention **goal** was to maximize positive youth outcomes
- (38) On **long-term** performance **goals** for the startup, he named generating revenue and lending volume as the primary target
- (39) We honestly assessed where we are and outlined ambitious but **achievable goals** that poise us for growth.
- (40) Sports, Meirson said, allows people to channel their **common goals** and aspirations as they pursue competition and excellence.
- (41) Some have pointed out that different states have different programs, different **educational goals**, different laws.

As previously mentioned, *goal* has more than one primary meaning. Apart from the similar meaning to *purpose* and *objective*, it also has a sport-related meaning. Thus, the adjectives related to this meaning, i.e., *game-winning*, *winning*, *field*, and *missed*, are cut out from the study as it is incomparable with other target synonyms (Phoocharoensil, 2010).

Table 9
Semantic preference of adjective collocates of *objective*

1. IMPORTANCE	<u>main, primary, key, principal, fundamental, sole, ultimate</u>
2. CONDITION	<u>specific, subjective, abstract, cognitive, measurable, secondary, consistent, immediate, shared, statutory, clear, stated, explicit, broad</u>
3. TYPE	<u>strategic, educational, instructional, environmental, legitimate, organizational</u>
4. PERIOD OF TIME	<u>long-term, short-term</u>

Table 9 illustrates that semantic preference of adjective collocates of *objective* are categorized into four themes. All of these themes are shared with both *purpose* and *goal* which indicates the near-synonym status of these words. Specifically, the first theme IMPORTANCE includes *main*, *primary*, *key*, *principal*, *fundamental*, *sole*, and *ultimate*, as exemplified in (42) whereas most of the adjectives are grouped in CONDITION, i.e., *specific*, *subjective*, *abstract*, *cognitive*, *measurable*, *secondary*, *consistent*, *immediate*, *shared*, *statutory*, *clear*, *stated*, *explicit*, and *broad*, as illustrated in (43). Regarding TYPE, the adjective collocates are *strategic*, *educational*, *instructional*, *environmental*, *legitimate*, and *organizational*, as in (44). Finally, the rest of the adjectives fall into PERIOD OF TIME theme, i.e., *long-term*, and *short-term*, as in (45).

- (42) The **main objective** to get to the playoffs, after all, is to win your own division
- (43) The instruments were developed to test the **specific** learning **objectives** of the course.
- (44) They have allowed differences over tactics to obscure potential agreement on **strategic objectives**

- (45) ... the IEP must also contain measurable **short-term objectives** that will be used to measure the child's progress toward reaching his annual goals

Consequently, from the analysis of adjective collocates and semantic preference of the synonyms *purpose*, *goal* and *objective*, their status as near-synonyms is confirmed since they share several strong adjective collocates, i.e. *primary*, *main*, *educational*, *specific*, *stated*, and *ultimate*. Moreover, the categorization of the semantic preference for the target words overlaps with each other. In addition, the analysis also confirms a nearer-synonym status of *goal* and *objective* because they shared several adjective collocates, i.e. *long-term*, *strategic*, *short-term*, *shared*, *instructional*, *measurable* and *organizational* and more semantic related themes than with *purpose*.

From the analysis of the verb and adjective collocates, and semantic preference, the distinction in meaning of the three target words can be made. The verb collocates of the word *purpose* express only the meanings categorized into ACCOMPLISH and PROCEED theme and the adjective collocates tend to indicate more about branch of study or range of activity or interest (e.g., educational, lawful, and recreational) which can lead to the assumption that *purpose* means intention or idea to do or accomplish something. However, the verb collocates of *goal* express more about evaluation, arrangement, degree and description. In addition, the adjective collocates can be categorized in terms of time constraint (i.e., long-term, sustainable, short-term) and feasibility (e.g., achievable, attainable, and realistic). Thus, it can be assumed that *goal* is used to focus more on the outcome or the result that is intended to achieve in a time-bound context. As for the word *objective*, which has the more closely related status with the word *goal*, has one more emerged theme of GO AGAINST (i.e., *thwart* and *conflict*) of the verb collocates which means "to prevent (someone) from achieving something" and the adjective collocates that express the state such as specific, measurable, abstract, secondary, and clear. Hence, it can be concluded that the meaning of the word *objective* tends to indicate explicit and measurable steps or actions required for achieving something.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the three near-synonymous nouns, namely *purpose*, *goal* and *objective* in terms of their degree of formality based on the distribution across genres and their collocational patterns regarding semantic preference. Since the data were retrieved from the corpus-based resource, the findings of this study showed the frequency of occurrence in different genres and the details of adjective and verb collocates of the target words which cannot be found in the dictionary. The result revealed that *goal* occurs with the highest frequency among the three synonyms according to COCA followed by *purpose* and *objective*, respectively. Regarding the genres, all three synonyms most frequently occur in academic texts and the distribution of these synonyms tend to have a similar pattern of occurrence across the other genres. This reveals that the three synonyms have the same degree of formality as they frequently occur in formal context, i.e., academic texts. In terms of the verb and adjective collocates and semantic preference, the three synonymous nouns are near-synonyms since they share some of the strong verb and adjective collocates. Also, they share some similar themes of semantic

preference, e.g., importance, type, and condition. Specifically, *purpose* collocates with the smallest number of verb collocates and the adjective collocates tend to be more technical, e.g., *medicinal* and *lawful* while adjective collocates of *goal* seem to indicate various issues, e.g., degree of possibility in achievement, intention and ambition and time frame. For *objective*, verb collocates tend to express time-bound context and measurement, e.g., *assess* and *evaluate*. More importantly, the more closely related status of *objective* and *goal* can be evident as they share more of semantic-related themes and collocations which indicate *time constraint*. However, even though these synonyms share some overlapping themes and collocations, they also co-occur with particular verbs or adjectives. For example, *goal* commonly collocates with *reach* whereas *objective* normally co-occurs with *meet*. This differentiation of collocational patterns of the near-synonyms indicates that they cannot be substitutable in all contexts (Bailey, 2007; Webb, 2007).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

There are some limitations in this study to be mentioned. First, since the data of the target words were drawn from COCA, it represents American English. Future studies should make a comparison between American English and British English based on the data from British National Corpus (BNC). These two corpora are regarded as 'big-name' corpora (Timmis, 2015, p. 2) as they contain hundreds of millions of words. This comparison may provide interesting and more valid results of genre distribution and collocational patterns which could be generalizable. Second, this study only analyzed three synonymous nouns, thus other near-synonyms are also worth exploring by implementing corpus-based study in order to give a clearer understanding. In addition, this study used only two criteria, namely degree of formality based on distribution across genres and their collocations in relation to semantic preference. In distinguishing the target synonyms, other criteria, e.g., grammatical patterns (Phoocharoensil, 2010) should also be employed to differentiate the near-synonyms. Lastly, this study used frequency and MI score in determining collocational strength of the common collocations. Future studies should employ other statistics to analyze the data such as z-score, t-score, or log-likelihood tests.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this present study offer the following pedagogical implications. Since English synonyms are considered to be problematic for English learners, the analysis and findings of this study can make the differences between synonyms more salient which can raise learners' awareness in using the near-synonyms in appropriate context. Specifically, each synonym has a distinct meaning, which is not completely interchangeable (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002); however, many learners or even the teachers assume that near-synonyms can always be substitutable. Thus, the intrinsic characteristics of each synonym (Szudarski 2018), e.g., degree of formality, common collocation and semantic preference, as presented in this study, should be pointed out to the learners for clearer understanding. Also, the teachers, and also learners, can adopt this study's framework to explore other synonyms which can be used to create ELT materials

for vocabulary lessons or collocation lists along with example sentences which are more practical in the real context (Gilquin, 2020) so that better understanding of the characteristics of each synonym can be promoted.

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