

# Corpus-Based Evidence for Teaching English Synonyms in EFL Contexts: Implications from Quick, Rapid, and Speedy

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## Abstract

*The appropriate use of near-synonymous adjectives is crucial for effective communication in English, as these words can differ subtly in meaning, collocation, and distribution in a sentence. Although quick, rapid, and speedy share meanings related to short duration or high rates, their usage differs across different contexts and genres. This corpus-based study investigates the similarities and differences among three target synonyms: quick, rapid, and speedy, based on their distribution across genres and collocational patterns. Data were collected from two primary sources: (1) online learner dictionaries, namely the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), to examine definitions and semantic distinctions, and (2) the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and their top noun collocates were identified using Mutual Information (MI scores  $\geq 3$ ). The findings indicate that rapid is predominantly used in formal and academic contexts (21,977 tokens), whereas quick appears more frequently in less formal genres (82,113 tokens). In contrast, speedy has a limited range of use and is normally found in fixed or semi-fixed expressions (3,710 tokens). The three adjectives cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts. In terms of collocational patterns, 20 noun collocates for quick, 30 for rapid, and 12 for speedy were identified and categorised into themes based on their semantic preferences. In conclusion, such adjectives cannot be used interchangeably because they represent different preferences. Consequently, corpus-based evidence plays a crucial role in ensuring the appropriateness of vocabulary use in EFL and ESL learning contexts.*

**Keywords:** Corpus Linguistics, EFL Teaching, Near Synonyms, Semantic Preference, Collocation, Noun Collocates, COCA

## Introduction

Vocabulary is the most essential element for second-language learners, as a limited English vocabulary impedes successful communication. [Wilkins \(1972\)](#) emphasised that “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed,” underscoring the significance of vocabulary knowledge in English language teaching, as inadequate vocabulary prevents learners from understanding others or expressing their ideas. However, it is the primary source of difficulty, especially for EFL learners. At many Thai universities, undergraduate students have a limited vocabulary, especially in synonym clusters. Synonyms, which are words that share similar meanings, are among the major aspects that EFL learners find difficult to differentiate in terms of their similarities and differences in meaning and usage ([Laufer, 1990](#)). In other words, learners may get confused while consulting English dictionaries because the information on synonyms provided

in dictionaries will have some senses that largely overlap and are interchangeable with those of other words, for example, semantic differences, collocations, styles, or degrees of formality, and connotations ([Jackson & Amvela, 2000](#); [Palmer, 1987](#)).

According to [Cruse \(1986\)](#), true or absolute synonyms are generally accepted as rare, and most so-called synonyms differ in meaning or usage from one another. In this regard, it has been explained that a word with an exact synonymous meaning is unnatural in a language, since it would create a new meaning difference when substituted for the other in any context ([Edmonds & Hirst, 2002](#)). These definitions emphasise the need to study the concept of synonyms, especially through empirical methods such as corpus linguistics, which provides authentic language usage.

Owing to advances in computer technology and its ubiquity, the corpus-based approach to language analysis has become more prevalent. This technology has spurred research by scholars across various linguistic fields, especially in the area of vocabulary learning. Nation points out that computer-assisted vocabulary learning is an effective way to put the principles of effective vocabulary learning into practice. This idea is the starting point of my recent research, which highlights the growing use of corpora to facilitate a clearer understanding of English synonyms.

Recent corpus-based research reinforces the importance of examining near-synonyms using authentic data. For instance, Thammasat University-based studies have extended this line of enquiry by analysing a set of synonyms, such as clear, obvious, apparent, and evident, using the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which has shown that, although these words share core meanings, they differ greatly in terms of collocation patterns, semantic prosody, and levels of formality. Similarly, a study of the synonyms grasp, capture, seize, snatch, and take using COCA demonstrated that near-synonyms can differ significantly in terms of genre distribution, collocation patterns, and semantic preferences. In addition, a recent study examined the adjectives “effective” and “efficient”. In this regard, the study showed that these seemingly synonymous items

exhibit distinct collocational patterns, grammatical behaviours, and levels of formality. These findings strengthen the view that synonyms cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts. Corpus studies have also emphasised that large-scale corpora enable the identification of meaningful lexical patterns, which are crucial for improving learners’ collocational competence and vocabulary accuracy.

Although several previous studies have investigated collocation patterns in English, at least one study has explored the similarities and differences between the synonyms quick and fast ([Aroonmanakun, 2015](#)). However, studies exploring a broader set of near-synonymous adjectives are relatively limited. This study attempts to address this gap by examining the terms quick, rapid, and speedy, which share similar meanings related to speed but are not completely interchangeable and often cause confusion for EFL learners and teachers. This corpus-based study aims to clarify the usage and collocational differences between these two adjectives.

In dealing with synonym analysis, the sources of data used in this study are 1) three dictionaries, that is, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE), Merriam-Webster, and Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online (OALD), and 2) the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Finally, the data from the two sources were analysed to assess their meaning and collocations. The findings of this study are intended to help teachers and educators support learners in selecting appropriate synonyms based on their meaning, collocation, and genre-specific usage. The following research questions were addressed to achieve the aim of this study:

- What are the differences in frequency and genre distribution among the near-synonymous adjectives quick, rapid, and speedy across different text types?
- What are the common noun collocations of the three synonymous adjectives quick, rapid, and speedy?

## Literature Review

### Synonymy

The term “synonymy” comes from a Greek word (sunonumon) that means “having the same name” ([Jackson & Amvela 2000](#)). According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 9th edition, a synonym is defined as “a word or expression that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another in the same language”, so we say for a set of words having the same or a similar kind of meaning. Examples of synonyms in English include great, excellent, awesome, fabulous, fantastic, terrific, wonderful, and marvellous, which indicate that something or someone is extremely good or of a very high quality. Synonyms are interchangeable, at least in some cases; for example, [Phoocharoensil \(2020a\)](#) discusses the distinction between repair and mend, showing that repair cannot substitute for mend in the sentence My father used to repair my shoes when it comes to the context of clothes. In addition, synonymous forms may differ in terms of formality. For example, the sentence “My father purchased a large automobile” seems much more serious than “My dad bought a big car” ([Yule 1996](#)).

Synonyms are typically categorised into two types: absolute and loose or near-synonyms. First, absolute synonyms refer to pairs (or sets) of words that are completely interchangeable in all their possible contexts of use ([Cruse 1986](#); [Jackson & Amvela 2000](#)). [Edmonds and Hirst \(2002\)](#) state that “absolute synonymy is limited mostly to dialectal variation and technical terms, such as underwear (American English): pants (British English); groundhog: woodchuck; distichous: two-ranked), but even these words would change the style of an utterance when intersubstituted.” On the other hand, loose or near-synonyms refer to sets of words that significantly identify the overlapping meanings between two words and contexts in which they cannot substitute for each other ([Dvorak & Dawson 2011](#); [Edmonds & Hirst 2002](#)). However, loose or near-synonyms are pervasive in English, while absolute synonyms are rare and uneconomical because they can cause redundancy ([Edmonds & Hirst 2002](#); [Phoocharoensil 2020b](#)). Examples of near-synonyms given by [Edmonds and Hirst \(2002\)](#) include error and mistake, which can be used interchangeably in

most contexts. Error refers to straying from a proper course and suggests guilt, as may lie in failure to take proper advantage of a guide, while mistake implies misconception, misunderstanding, a wrong but not always blameworthy judgment, or inadvertence; it expresses less severe criticism than error.

This study aims to distinguish between three synonyms, quick, rapid, and speedy, with a particular focus on their distribution across genres and collocations. The three synonymous adjectives are defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (online version) as follows:

#### **Quick**

- Short time: lasting for or taking only a short time (e.g., We stopped to have a quick look at the church)
- Fast: moving or doing something fast (e.g., She walked with short, quick steps.)
- No delay: happening very soon, without any delay (e.g., I had to make a quick decision.)

#### **Rapid**

- Happening or done very quickly and in a very short time (e.g., The patient made a rapid recovery.)

#### **Speedy**

- Happening or done quickly or without delay (e.g., Everyone would like to see a speedy resolution to the conflict)
- A speedy car, boat, etc., goes fast

Overall, quick, rapid, and speedy are near-synonyms denoting the speed or rate at which an action, process, or event occurs.

### Degrees of Formality

The first criterion for distinguishing synonyms is the style or formality of the context. Generally, one word in English has synonyms that are appropriate for use in formal contexts, while other words appear to be more common in informal contexts. [Leech and Svartvick \(2003\)](#) pointed out that there are many differences in vocabulary between formal and informal language. Many formal words originate from French, Latin, and Greek languages. However, these formal words were replaced with informal Anglo-Saxon words. To illustrate, they compared the words continue with keep (up), as shown in (1) & (2).

- (1) The government is *continuing* its struggle against inflation. (formal)
- (2) The government is *keeping up* its fight against inflation. (informal)

The following list illustrates pairs of synonyms distinguished by their degree of formality.

| Formal English | Informal English |
|----------------|------------------|
| commence       | start            |
| terminate      | end              |
| endeavor       | try              |

(Cambridge Dictionary, online version)

### Collocation

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE) defines collocation as “the way in which some words are often used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way”. For example, commit a crime is a typical collocation in English. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online (OALD) defines collocation as

- A combination of words in a language that occurs very often and more frequently than would happen by chance.
- The fact that two or more words are often used together in a way that happens more frequently than would happen by chance.

[Sinclair \(1991\)](#) defines collocations as “the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text”. [Jackson and Amvela \(2000\)](#) state that “collocation refers to a structural or syntagmatic relation, to meaning relations that a word contracts with other words occurring in the same sentence or text”. [Schmitt \(2000\)](#) identifies the collocation as “the tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse”. He suggested two elements to the notion of collocation, including words that co-occur together and the varying degrees of exclusivity. Then, he raised some examples of the word blonde which can co-occur with the word hair, but not with the words paint or wallpaper.

### Previous Studies

Several researchers have conducted corpus-linguistic research using corpora such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British National Corpus (BNC). The most common

criteria used by researchers to distinguish synonyms included senses of meaning, dialects, styles, degrees of formality, connotations, collocations, and grammatical patterns.

To begin with, a famous study cited by many researchers is [Taylor’s \(2002\)](#) study of the near-synonyms, high and tall. The observations are based on the one-million-word LOB (Lancaster-Oslo) corpus, and the frequencies and collocations of the two adjectives are also analysed. The results showed that “high” is far more frequent in the language than “tall”. Specifically, high is almost ten times as frequent as tall. In particular, high is widely used in non-spatial domains conceptualized in terms of verticality, e.g., high number, high temperature, high pitch (of a sound), etc., whereas tall is used preferentially with human nominals and vertical extent only.

This study directly extends [Aroonmanakun \(2015\)](#), who employed a corpus-based study of English synonyms, quick and fast, and explored the differences between the two adjectives in COCA. The top 100 collocates of the two synonyms with MI values of at least three were extracted and ranked by frequency. The results indicated that quick mostly appears with nouns derived from verbs (e.g. answer, calculation, call, drink), indicating the quality or property of an action. In contrast, fast conveys the manner of movement rather than a short period of time, for example, acceleration, attack, connection, draw, and ride. Sometimes the same noun can co-occur with both quick and fast, for example, learners. For example, a quick learner is someone who learns something easily, whereas a fast learner is someone who acquires multiple skills quickly.

Interestingly, [Phoocharoensil and Kanokpermpoom \(2021\)](#) analysed the genres and collocations of two synonymous verbs, increase and rise. The data for this study were drawn from COCA. It was revealed that both synonyms are common in formal written genres, with increase and rise being the most frequent in academic texts and popular magazines, respectively. Although the target synonyms share many adverb collocates, they differ significantly in terms of the nouns with which they collocate. The term rise, meaning to go upward, is combined with nouns that describe the direction

of natural entities, such as the moon, sun, or sea, distinguishing its usage from increase.

The findings echo [Imsa-ard and Phoocharoensil \(2022\)](#) on whole, entire, and total, where the three adjectives share core meanings yet show partial collocational overlap (e.g. geographic terms for whole and entire) and clear differences in formality (total being the most formal). Similar patterns appear in [Chaokongjakra \(2023\)](#) regarding the adjectives important, significant, and crucial; likewise, she indicated that the synonyms are used principally in academic contexts. The COCA findings illustrate that important, significant, and crucial have different collocates and themes. Significant is often associated with matters of quantity, whereas crucial is primarily associated with the political domain. Important frequently appears with intensity-related adverbs, whereas significant tends to be paired with study-related ones. Hence, the analysis of collocates between nouns and adverbs demonstrates that these synonymous adjectives have both shared and distinct preferences for their use.

Recently, [Liu \(2023\)](#) adopted a corpus-based approach using the BNC to compare three synonyms: improve, promote, and strengthen. The analysis focused on differences in language register, noun collocates, and semantic prosody, which can guide how these verbs differ in formality and contextual preferences and provide practical guidance for English learners and translators. Similarly, [Jarrar et al. \(2024\)](#) conducted a corpus-based analysis of four near-synonymous verbs—investigate, explore, scrutinise, and examine—drawn from both COCA and BNC. Their study examined dialectical variations, frequencies, genre distributions, and colligational (grammatical) patterns. The results demonstrated that the verbs shared some patterns but exhibited subtle distinctions that fully impeded interchangeability, emphasising the role of context and corpus evidence in teaching vocabulary.

Despite the aforementioned studies on English synonyms, many researchers have used various criteria and treated corpora and dictionaries as sources. This line of corpus-based research aimed to distinguish among the synonyms quick, rapid, and speedy by analysing their authentic use across different text genres using the COCA. In this study,

the researcher examined two distinct features: distribution across eight genres and collocations with significant MI scores. The three synonyms are defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online as follows:

## Methodology

### Data Sources and Sampling Rationale

This study employed a purposive sampling approach to select three near-synonymous adjectives: quick, rapid, and speedy. The words were carefully selected based on three main criteria. First, they constitute a set of high-frequency English adjectives that share a common semantic core related to speed or short duration and are thus representative of near-synonymy in general and academic contexts. The second criterion is that these adjectives are commonly cited in the literature as problematic for EFL learners to use correctly, particularly with respect to collocation, register, and contextual appropriateness, all of which are relevant to this study's aims. Finally, previous corpus-based studies (e.g. [Aroonmanakun, 2015](#)) have examined similar lexical items (e.g. quick vs. fast). However, a comparative analysis of all three terms has not been fully explored. This limitation justifies their selection to address the identified gaps in the literature.

For corpus data, this study used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as the primary source of authentic data for the analysis. COCA was chosen based on criterion-based sampling of corpus characteristics, including (1) it is the largest and most balanced corpus of present-day American English, containing over one billion words of text from 1990 to 2019; (2) the data in this corpus cover eight different genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and Movie subtitles, blogs, and other webpages; and (3) it is widely used in previous synonym and collocation studies, which enhances the comparability and reliability of the findings. These criteria ensure that COCA provides users with texts from a variety of sources and in various forms, such as frequency, exact words, phrases, wildcards, lemmas, parts of speech, and keywords in context (KIC). This allows users to see the frequency and distribution of synonyms across genres. Therefore,

they can recognise which words occur more frequently in each genre and identify the collocates of the target words. In terms of collocation, the data were drawn from the list of the top 30 frequencies of three target synonyms that usually co-occurred with each adjective to find common collocations of the three synonyms.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The three synonymous English adjectives quick, rapid, and speedy were investigated to explore their meanings, degrees of formality, and collocations. The data were obtained from two major sources: 1) two online dictionaries, including the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE) (<http://www.ldoceonline.com>) and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) (<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>), as shown in Table 1, and 2) The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Online learner dictionaries were used to extract definitions and information on the three adjectives to observe similarities and differences among the synonyms. Both dictionaries were selected based on reputational and functional criteria, as they are corpus-informed, learner-oriented, and widely recognised as reliable sources for vocabulary studies in EFL and ESL. The definitions from both dictionaries were cross-

referenced and compared to identify the shared meanings and subtle differences among quick, rapid, and speedy.

In carrying out this study, the data collected from the two dictionaries and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were analysed using the following steps:

First, the meanings of the three synonymous adjectives were drawn from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) to compare and contrast the information for each synonym.

Second, the three target synonyms were typed in the WORD(S) search box with MI scores ( $\geq 3$ ) on the COCA website. At this stage, the top 30 frequencies accompanying the three target synonyms were reported. The researcher focused on two criteria for distinguishing synonyms: the frequency and distribution of synonyms across genres and the typical collocates of nouns.

Finally, the frequency and distribution of synonyms across genres and the typical collocations of noun collocates were investigated and analysed using COCA concordance lines and contexts for the three target synonyms. Semantic preference was also analysed to classify noun collocations based on their semantic similarities.

**Table 1 The Comparison of the Definitions of Quick, Rapid, and Speedy from Online Dictionaries LDOCE and OALD**

|        | Definition from LDOCE  | Definitions from OALD  |
|--------|--|--|
| quick  | 1) [short time]: lasting for or taking only a short time, e.g., a quick drink<br>2) [fast]: moving or doing something fast, e.g., quick steps<br>3) [no delay]: happening very soon, without any delay, e.g., a quick decision<br>4) [clever]: able to learn and understand things fast, e.g., a quick learner | 1) done with speed; taking or lasting a short time<br>2) moving or doing something fast<br>3) happening very soon or without delay |
| rapid  | 1) happening or done very quickly and in a very short time   | 1) happening quickly or in a short period of time.   |
| speedy | 1) happening or done quickly or without delay<br>2) a speedy car, boat, etc. goes fast   | 1) happening or done quickly or without delay<br>2) moving or working very quickly   |

### Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings are presented in response to the two research questions established

for the study. To provide a clear framework for the results, the research questions are restated as follows. This study aimed to examine the differences

between the synonyms quick, rapid, and speedy across genres in COCA. It also sought to identify the common noun collocations of the three synonymous adjectives: quick, rapid, and speedy. Accordingly, this section first reports the overall frequency and distribution of the three near-synonyms across the eight COCA genres. The section then presents the findings on the noun collocates that commonly occur with quick, rapid, and speedy in the data. The

results addressing the first research question are presented in the following subheading.

### Frequency and Distribution of the Synonyms across Genres

Table 2 shows the overall frequency and normalized distribution (per million words) of the three adjectives across eight genres in COCA.

**Table 2 Distribution of Quick, Rapid, and Speedy across Eight Genres according to Frequency**

| Quick        |               |              | Rapid        |               |              | Speedy       |              |             |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Genre        | Frequency     | Per million  | Genre        | Frequency     | Per million  | Genre        | Frequency    | Per million |
| Fiction      | 13,648        | 115.35       | Academic     | 6,968         | 58.17        | Magazine     | 1,066        | 8.45        |
| TV/Movies    | 12,999        | 101.50       | Magazine     | 4,007         | 31.78        | News         | 634          | 5.21        |
| Magazine     | 11,944        | 94.73        | Webpages     | 2,971         | 23.91        | Blog         | 439          | 3.41        |
| Spoken       | 11,461        | 90.86        | News         | 2,606         | 21.41        | Web-GENL     | 403          | 3.24        |
| Blog         | 10,254        | 79.73        | Blog         | 2,214         | 17.21        | TV/Movies    | 315          | 2.46        |
| Web-GENL     | 9,427         | 75.87        | Fiction      | 1,545         | 13.06        | Fiction      | 287          | 2.43        |
| News         | 8,787         | 72.18        | Spoken       | 1,114         | 8.83         | Spoken       | 285          | 2.26        |
| Academic     | 3,593         | 29.99        | TV/Movies    | 552           | 4.31         | Academic     | 281          | 2.35        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>82,113</b> | <b>82.69</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>21,977</b> | <b>22.13</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>3,710</b> | <b>3.74</b> |

Table 2 demonstrates that of the three synonyms, quick occurs most frequently in the COCA corpus. To clarify, the number of frequencies for quick (82,113 tokens) is higher than that for rapid (21,977 tokens) and speedy (3,710 tokens). The adjective speedy seems to be used the least (3,710)

The data show that quick mostly appears in informal contexts, with fiction (general books and fan fiction) at 13,648 tokens, followed by TV/movies (reality) at 12,999 tokens and magazines at 11,944 tokens. This indicates that quick is usually used to describe actions, dialogues, and spontaneous events in narrative texts, giving a sense of brevity or immediacy in a natural and conversational manner. In contrast, its markedly low frequency in academic texts (3,593 tokens) suggests that quick has a casual connotation that may feel inappropriate in scholarly writing. This reflects its flexibility and broad semantic scope.

In contrast, rapid is most frequent in academic and technical genres, such as medicine and science technology (6,968 tokens), followed by magazines (4,007 tokens) and web pages (2,971 tokens). This

distribution implies that “rapid” functions as a technical or objective descriptor, particularly in discussions of processes, rates of change, or scientific development, where precision and neutrality are essential. The increased prevalence of this style in magazines and webpages further reinforces its association with semi-formal, explanatory, or informative prose.

In contrast, speedy is the least frequent (3,710 tokens) and shows the narrowest distribution across genres, with higher occurrences in magazines (1,066 tokens), followed by news, particularly in sports and service-related contexts (634 tokens). This pattern indicates that “speedy” tends to convey evaluation or describe successful outcomes (e.g., speedy recovery, speedy resolution), and thus it may have a semantic prosody associated with positive expectations or efficiency. Unlike quick and rapid, speedy is pragmatically marked and context dependent.

These genre preferences indicate that the three adjectives are near-synonyms with different register sensitivities. Quick is often used in informal language, narrative writing, and interactive discourse. Rapid is

used in formal or academic language and technical discourse. Speedy is typically used in a limited number of contexts, with a positive evaluation or journalistic connotation. This specialisation may account for the frequent misuse of collocations by EFL learners. For example, substituting quick in academic writing can render texts overly casual, whereas using rapid in casual speech may result in language that sounds rigid or overly formal.

### Noun Collocates and the semantic preference of quick, rapid, and speedy

In this study, the authors used adjectives to examine collocations; thus, the main collocations were noun-based. Although the three words share the same meaning, they differ in terms of noun collocation. Therefore, the list of the top 30 most frequent words of quick, rapid, and speedy with Mutual Information (MI scores at least  $\geq 3$ ) in COCA was chosen, as shown in the following table.

**Table 3 Noun Collocates of the Synonyms Quick, Rapid, and Speedy**

| Rank | Quick          |           |             | Rapid                 |                    |              | Speedy                |                  |              |      |
|------|----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------|------------------|--------------|------|
|      | Noun collocate | Frequency | MI Value    | Noun collocate        | Frequency          | MI Value     | Noun collocate        | Frequency        | MI Value     |      |
| 1    | fix<br>fixes   | 1506      | 1141<br>365 | 5.21<br>7.29          | growth             | 2355         | 6.93                  | recovery         | 283          | 8.16 |
| 2    | break          | 1244      | 3.69        | change<br>changes     | 1358<br>858<br>500 | 3.89<br>4.48 | trial<br>trails       | 275<br>259<br>16 | 6.90<br>4.73 |      |
| 3    | glance         | 849       | 6.43        | development           | 605                | 4.34         | resolution            | 38               | 5.31         |      |
| 4    | response       | 624       | 3.04        | expansion             | 511                | 6.84         | return                | 34               | 3.10         |      |
| 5.   | search         | 546       | 3.21        | increase<br>increase  | 505                | 391<br>114   | receiver<br>receivers | 33<br>20<br>13   | 5.48<br>6.39 |      |
| 6.   | trip           | 425       | 3.07        | economic              | 497                | 4.03         | outfielder            | 19               | 7.94         |      |
| 7.   | tip<br>tips    | 402       | 226<br>176  | 3.45<br>3.24          | response           | 478          | 4.55                  | delivery         | 19           | 4.60 |
| 8.   | succession     | 386       | 6.56        | pace                  | 477                | 6.62         | victory               | 18               | 3.58         |      |
| 9.   | smile          | 333       | 3.01        | rate                  | 452                | 4.39         | processor             | 16               | 5.95         |      |
| 10.  | hits           | 266       | 3.58        | succession            | 382                | 8.44         | approval              | 15               | 4.18         |      |
| 11.  | buck           | 264       | 4.54        | rise                  | 379                | 4.99         | demand                | 14               | 3.00         |      |
| 12.  | jump           | 230       | 3.03        | transit               | 370                | 7.29         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 13.  | recovery       | 220       | 3.33        | population            | 309                | 3.97         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 14.  | kiss           | 201       | 3.18        | movement<br>movements | 289<br>199<br>90   | 3.56<br>4.46 |                       |                  |              |      |
| 15.  | wit            | 194       | 5.40        | progress              | 278                | 4.72         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 16.  | pace           | 188       | 3.38        | decline               | 276                | 5.60         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 17.  | scan           | 186       | 4.69        | fire                  | 233                | 3.13         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 18.  | turnaround     | 183       | 6.16        | technology            | 221                | 3.24         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 19.  | update         | 165       | 6.16        | deployment            | 176                | 7.33         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 20.  | shower         | 153       | 3.22        | spread                | 174                | 4.04         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 21.  |                |           |             | loss                  | 166                | 3.37         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 22.  |                |           |             | prototyping           | 161                | 10.96        |                       |                  |              |      |
| 23.  |                |           |             | naming                | 151                | 7.03         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 24.  |                |           |             | evolution             | 148                | 4.82         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 25.  |                |           |             | river                 | 145                | 3.19         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 26.  |                |           |             | recovery              | 133                | 4.50         |                       |                  |              |      |
| 27.  |                |           |             | industrialization     | 126                | 8.67         |                       |                  |              |      |

|     |  |  |  |              |     |      |  |  |  |
|-----|--|--|--|--------------|-----|------|--|--|--|
| 28. |  |  |  | reaction     | 117 | 3.86 |  |  |  |
| 29. |  |  |  | urbanization | 111 | 8.64 |  |  |  |
| 30. |  |  |  | breathing    | 111 | 4.66 |  |  |  |

Based on the frequency and MI score ( $\geq 3$ ), noun collocates that are found only with quick, rapid, and speedy in the top 30 list are shown in Table 5. The data show that rapid has the most noun collocates, whereas quick and speedy have fewer, with 20 and 12, respectively. In addition, some noun collocates, such as in response, succession, recovery, and pace, are shared by quick and rapid. There is only one noun collocate that shares the suffix speedy: recovery. This implies that both quick and rapid are more closely related as synonyms than speedy. Interestingly, the nouns that collocate with quick are mostly related to movement or doing something fast, such as glance, response, search, scan, and jump. However, the results presented in Table 3 are only based on observations from the list of the top 30 frequencies; there may be other noun collocates that combine with all three synonymous adjectives.

The following section analyzes and classifies the noun collocates of the three synonyms quick, rapid, and speedy according to their semantic preferences. [Stubbs \(2001\)](#) defines semantic preference as “the relation, not between individual words, but between a lemma or word form and a set of semantically related words”. This means that it can be viewed as a feature of the collocates, and it is also understood as the semantic field of the words to which the collocation predominantly belongs ([Sinclair, 1991](#)).

**Table 4 Semantic Preference of Noun Collocates of Quick**

| Semantic Preferences        | Noun Collocates  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Action / Movement</b> | glance, response, smile, kiss, buck, jump, pace, shower, turnaround, scan, search, break, trip, succession, update, recovery, hits |
| <b>2. Ability</b>           | Wit  |
| <b>3. Solution</b>          | fix(es), tip(s)  |

According to Table 4, four possible themes were identified: action or movement, ability, solution, and miscellaneous. The largest group consists of noun collocates with the theme of Action/Movement,

which is generally marked by speed, readiness, or promptness of physical movements, namely, glance, response, smile, kiss, buck, jump, pace, shower, turnaround, scan, search, break, trip, succession, update, and recovery, as illustrated in (1). Noun collocates in this theme are common in spoken language or TV/movies. The second theme, Ability, refers to ‘the ability to say things that are clever and amusing’, as shown in (2). Likewise, it appears to be the only noun collocates in the third theme Solution, which is fix(es), as in (3)

The last theme is Miscellaneous, as exemplified in (4) and (5).

- (1) With a quick scan of the market, I noticed more pubs, a restaurant or two, small groceries, and a couple of shops.
- (2) She has a wicked sense of humour, with a quick wit, and often sits in the lunch area and drops in on conversations with her colleagues.
- (3) They also tend to prefer quick fixes rather than taking the steps needed to achieve greater rewards.
- (4) Well, right now our SHOWBIZ quick hits, this is where we take on the day’s buzziest stories:
- (5) All rights reserved. So, please give us one quick tip that everyone should know if they are stuck in the wild.

**Table 5 Semantic Preference of Noun Collocates of Rapid**

| Semantic Preferences            | Noun Collocates  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Action/ Movement</b>      | response, pace, rate, transit, deployment, succession, movement(s), recovery, reaction, breathing, urbanization, industrialization |
| <b>2. Progress/ Development</b> | change(s), development, progress, evolution,   |
| <b>3. Extent</b>                | growth, expansion, spread, increase(s), rise   |
| <b>4. Unpleasant Experience</b> | loss, decline, fire  |
| <b>5. Miscellaneous</b>         | prototyping, naming, river, population, technology   |

Based on the results shown in Table 5, the classification of noun collocations reflects the high frequency of rapid in the academic genre. Interestingly, most of the discovered collocates occur in technical contexts focused on medicine, science, business, and social sciences, such as medicine and science-tech contexts (e.g. growth). The first theme, Action or Movement, shows a degree that is marked by a fast rate of motion, activity, succession, or occurrence, as exemplified in (6) below. The noun collocates in the second theme, Progress/Development, and the third theme, Extent, are familiar with each other, as shown in the information from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE), for example, rapid growth, expansion, development, and increase, as in (7) and (8). The next theme, HARM, includes nouns meaning ‘damage, trouble, and disadvantage caused by someone’s actions or by an event’, as illustrated in (9). The last theme is classified as Miscellaneous, as shown in (10).

- (6) Healthcare reform is occurring at a rapid pace, and some medical specialties have already seen a great deal of reform-related activity.
- (7) On the other hand, today’s rapid development of networking technology.  
This demands the timely development of standards.
- (8) The early seventies were a time of rapid growth in a health services system that had been turbocharged by Medicare.
- (9) One is the rapid decline of advertising, especially print advertising, and the inability of news organizations.
- (10) Computer three-dimensional image processing and rapid prototyping were used to generate an accurate physical model of a pan-facial fracture.

**Table 6 Semantic Preference of Noun Collocates of Speedy**

| Semantic Preferences     | Noun Collocates  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Action/Process</b> | recovery, trial, return<br>delivery, approval, demand,<br>resolution |
| <b>2. Agent</b>          | receiver(s), outfielder,<br>processor                                |
| <b>3. Achievement</b>    | victory  |

Finally, speedy contained the smallest number

of noun collocations, as shown in Table 6. The first group consists of noun collocations with Action/Process that mean ‘happening or done without delay’: recovery, trial, return, delivery, approval, demand, and resolution. In depth, the highest frequency of noun collocation is related to ‘the action of something done quickly or without delay’, which refers to injury or illness (e.g. recovery), as illustrated in (11). The second theme of Agent includes some nouns related to a sports player in American football, such as receiver(s), as in (12). The last noun is categorised into Achievement, for example, victory, as shown in (13).

- (11) I wish you all the best and a speedy recovery.
- (12) Daymond Patterson was a speedy receiver from Mesquite, Texas.
- (13) The Union expected a speedy victory and a return to a unified government.

Consequently, from the analysis of noun collocates and the semantic preference of the synonyms quick, rapid, and speedy, their status as near-synonyms is confirmed, since they share several strong noun collocates, for example, recovery, response, pace, and succession. Moreover, the categorisation of semantic preferences for target words overlapped. In addition, the analysis confirms a near-synonym status for quick and rapid, as they share several noun collocates (e.g. recovery, response, pace, and succession) and more semantically related themes than does speedy.

From the analysis of the noun collocates and semantic preference, the distinctions in meaning of the three target words can be made. The noun collocates of quick express only the meanings categorised into Action/Movement and Solution themes, and the noun collocates tend to indicate more about dynamic everyday activities (e.g. glance, search, tip, fix, and trip) which can lead to the assumption that quick means happening in a short time or with no delay, often in informal or casual contexts. However, the noun collocates of rapid express more about processes and changes than those of fast. In addition, noun collocates can be categorised by progress or development (e.g. growth, increase, development) and extent (e.g. change, decline, loss). Thus, it can be assumed that “rapid” is used to emphasise the quick occurrence

of events or transformations in formal or technical contexts. The word *speedy*, which has a more closely related status with the word *rapid*, has one more emerging theme of ACHIEVEMENT (e.g. victory, resolution, delivery) of the noun collocates, which means “prompt positive outcomes”, and the noun collocates that express the state, such as recovery, process, and service. Hence, it can be concluded that the meaning of the word *speedy* tends to indicate the desired promptness or efficiency, often in goal-oriented or wishful situations.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the main aims of the present corpus-based study were to investigate the distinctions among three synonymous adjectives, namely *quick*, *rapid*, and *speedy*, in terms of frequency and distribution across genres and noun collocations. The three synonyms may share the same core meaning, but they are not interchangeable in all contexts. In addition, *quick* covers a wider range of meanings than *rapid* and *speedy*, which only mean taking a short time or happening or being done very quickly. *Quick* seems to be the most common in informal contexts, including fiction, TV/movies and magazines. In contrast, *rapid* is mostly used in formal contexts, such as academic texts (e.g. medicine and science technology). *Speedy* occurs most frequently in science and technology magazines and sports news. This indicates that *speedy* contains information in both formal and informal contexts. In terms of noun collocation, *rapid* has the greatest number of strongly collocating nouns. In addition, *quick* and *rapid* are more closely related as synonyms of each other than *speedy* because of the four noun collocations that are shared by *quick* and *rapid*. Finally, some information is not available in the selected online dictionaries. Therefore, the additional information provided in the corpus can serve as useful authentic context for English language teaching.

### Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE) defines collocation as “the way in which some words are often used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way”. For example, *commit a crime* is a typical collocation

in English. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online (OALD) defines collocation as “the way in which some words are often used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way”. This study suggests that English language teaching, especially for EFL learners, should go beyond treating synonyms as interchangeable and also emphasise teaching vocabulary in context. Although *quick*, *rapid*, and *speedy* share a core meaning related to speed, there are significant differences in their usage. Therefore, teachers should guide learners to recognise these distinctions by illustrating how *rapid* is more appropriate in formal or academic contexts (e.g. *rapid development*), while *quick* is often used in informal contexts or even conversational settings (e.g. *quick look*), and *speedy* often appears in fixed expressions or evaluations (e.g. *speedy recovery*). This can help prevent learners from overgeneralising and making mistakes.

In addition, incorporating corpus-based resources into classroom instruction is strongly recommended to promote data-driven learning (DDL). When learners work with authentic language data from corpora such as COCA, they can observe how words are actually used, explore concordance lines, and identify frequent collocations across genres. This practical approach encourages learners to develop deeper lexical awareness and enables them to make better choices regarding language use. Moreover, exposure to authentic examples helps them learn near-synonyms in context.

Furthermore, it is recommended that materials and activities include collocation-based exercises to reinforce learners’ collocation ability. For example, exercises such as matching adjectives to suitable noun collocations, analysing concordance lines, and practising context-based tasks. Focusing on collocations helps learners speak more fluently and naturally, which is important for effective communications.

Finally, teacher education programs should focus on developing teachers’ corpus literacy skills. Teachers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to understand and apply corpus findings in their lessons. This will help guide learners in understanding differences in word meanings and using language appropriately.

- A combination of words in a language that occurs very often and more frequently than would happen by chance.

- The fact that two or more words are often used together in a way that happens more frequently than would happen by chance.

[Sinclair \(1991\)](#) defines collocations as “the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text”. [Jackson and Amvela \(2000\)](#) state that “collocation refers to a structural or syntagmatic relation, to meaning relations that a word contracts with other words occurring in the same sentence or text”. [Schmitt \(2000\)](#) identifies the collocation as “the tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse”. He suggested two elements to the notion of collocation, including words that co-occur together and the varying degrees of exclusivity. Then, he raised some examples of the word blonde which can co-occur with the word hair, but not with the words paint or wallpaper.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the use of near-synonymous adjectives, its limitations suggest directions for future research. One limitation of the present study is that it examined only three criteria: frequency, genre distribution, and noun collocations. Future studies should incorporate the full range of synonym differentiation criteria, including meaning, dialects, styles/formalities, collocations, connotations, and grammatical forms, to provide a more comprehensive view of the research topic. Another limitation is that since this study is based on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), further studies are encouraged to extend the scope by investigating the target synonyms in different varieties of English corpora, such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Australian Corpus of English (ACE), and the NICT Japanese Learner English (JLE) Corpus, to explore cross-dialectal variation. Future studies should investigate how EFL learners use these synonyms in their writing or speaking. A corpus-based approach could help identify common errors, overgeneralizations (e.g., overuse of “quick” in formal writing), and learners’ progress in vocabulary acquisition. Ultimately, experimental or classroom-based research should be conducted to examine the effectiveness of corpus-based instructional interventions in improving learners’ understanding

and use of near-synonyms. Such studies would provide empirical evidence of the pedagogical value of corpus linguistics in language education.

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