

The Effect of Teaching Lexical Collocations on Iranian EFL Learners' writing Ability: Focusing on the Appropriate Use of Collocations

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Abstract

The main goal of this study is to investigate the possible effects of explicit instruction of lexical collocations on Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners' comprehension of collocation and the appropriate use of them in their writing. A total number of 66 university level EFL learners were selected and then were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. Pretests of collocation and writing task were initially administered to both groups. Then, the specific treatment including explicit instruction of collocation was given to the experimental group while the control group received placebo. Afterwards, both groups took the post-test which was statistically analyzed through Independent sample t-test. The results showed that the performance of both groups improved in the post-tests of collocation comprehension and writing post-test. Based on the analysis of t-tests, this progression was statistically significant simply for the experimental groups. The experimental group that received explicit instruction on collocations made a noticeably higher progress as compared to the control group in the posttest of collocation and writing task.

Key words: appropriate usage, instructional effect, lexical collocations, L2 writing

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning plays a major role in second language learning, we can't learn language without learning its vocabulary, so it should be the focus of language teaching take more. Vocabulary has always been taught through other skills so we can say that it has some- how been neglected in teaching in contrast to grammar that has been taught as a separate module. Curriculum planners consider grammar as an essential part of the school curriculum with a lot of grammatical rules, as a result of which less attention is pay to vocabulary as if teaching a language was nothing but teaching its grammar. "without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins D. 1972, p. 11). Many researchers, like Michael Lewis, have recently

highlighted the importance of teaching vocabulary. In fact, he believes that grammar and vocabulary are not two separate things by supporting a lexical approach (1993, 1997, 2000) which pays more attention to teaching collocations or "common word combination" (2000, p. 127). According to Widdowson (1989) "Vocabulary is an essential component of successful communication".

Collocations are one of the big problems for learners of English as a foreign language so the attention of numerous researchers was drawn to vocabulary teaching and collocation. Increasing knowledge of collocation not only allows the learner to improve his level of accuracy, but it also raises fluency (Webb & Kagimoto 2011). Supporting Michael Lewis's views, we believe that teaching collocations would affect students' proficiency in learning a language. Furthermore, we concentrate more on the direct effects of teaching collocations in the development of writing skills where the students have a problem of mixing words together. Foreign language learners' writing does not usually sound natural. This may be due to their unfamiliarity with collocations. Most scholars and researchers claim that choosing the correct words in the right situations is more important than choosing grammatical structures. Additionally, using correct structures require enough vocabulary knowledge (Deveci, 2004, p. 1). According to Martynska (2004, p. 11), a speaker will not use a noun in an appropriate context unless he/ she knows which words co-occur with it.

This study tries to investigate the effect of lexical collocation instruction (i.e., noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) on learning lexical collocations and the effects of lexical collocation instruction on the appropriate use of them in Iranian EFL Learners' writing. Thus, in this study we hypothesize that, the students of English as a foreign language should learn collocations to develop their writing since collocation is part and parcel of the vocabulary.

Statement of the Problem

Learners sometimes use inappropriate word combinations when they write; i.e., words that do not combine together. As a result, their writing sounds unnatural. Hill assert that "Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about." (as cited in Michael Lewis, 2000, p. 50). Hill illustrates this problem with the following example in which a student says: "His disability will continue until he dies" rather than "He has a permanent disability." (as cited in Lewis, 2000, p. 50). Therefore, students should become aware of the fact that words have their own collocations.

Consequently, it is recommended that, the learners of English be taught the right combination of words to raise their collocation knowledge. Lewis Michael (2000) claims that, teaching collocations should not be ignored because they constitute the central part of vocabulary. Thus, Michael Lewis could be considered as the father of the lexical approach and collocations. He maintains that, learners acquire a language when they are able to analyze the language into lexical 'chunks'. In other words, acquiring the knowledge of collocations would make the speech and the writing of foreign language

learners sound native-like. McCarthy and O'Dell (2005, p. 6) claim that, "...collocation give you the most natural way to say something: smoking is strictly forbidden is more natural than smoking is strongly forbidden". So, collocations are prefabricated chunks that are already stored in the learners' memory. These chunks are retrieved by the learners when they produce the language, not separate words. In this respect, vocabulary learning plays a major role in language acquisition while grammar is ordered as a second factor that aims at organizing chunks of vocabulary.

After all, collocations should be taught so that the learners would become familiarized with them because they would help them understand the real use of English, which can make their writing seem natural.

Background to the study

Definition of Collocation

Most linguists have similar views on the concept of collocation, including a focus on co-occurrence of words. The term 'collocation' has its origin from Latin verb 'collocate' which mean to 'arrange' (martynska,2004). According to J.R Firth, collocations is "the company words keeps" or "the ways words combine in predictable way" (as cited in Hill,2000, p. 48). Baker (1992) defines collocation as a tendency of certain words to regularly occur in a given language. Also, Hill (2001) states that collocation is a predictable combination of the content words. Woolard (2001, p. 28-46) defines collocation as "the co-occurrence of words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggest." Also, Nation (2001, p. 317) describes collocation as a group of words that come together like 'take a photo' because the whole meaning of the group is not obvious from the meaning of its parts.

Some scholars draw their attention to grammatical factors when explaining collocation. Kjellmer's (1991, p. 133) definition of collocation is "a sequence of words that occurs more than once in an identical form in a corpus which is grammatically well structured." This definition indicates that collocations are lexically defined and grammatically restricted sequences of words. To Kjellmer's stance, only sequences of two or more lexical words (some of them also incorporating function words) or sequences of one lexical word and one or more function words that recur in identical forms can be said to be collocations. In short, the seemingly various definitions of collocation share the same concept. That is, collocation is a pair or group of words that are often used together through common usage.

Previous Studies on Teaching Collocations in the EFL Contexts

In this section, several empirical studies on teaching English collocation in EFL context are reviewed. Fatemeh Eidian, Bahman Gorjian and Farshad Arghavan (2013) conducted a study on pre-intermediate Iranian language learners in order to measure up the impact of lexical collocation instruction on their writing proficiency. Fifty male and female Iranian learners who participated in the study were divided into control and experiment group. The control group was taught based on conventional methods of

writing instruction whereas the experimental group received treatment based on lexical collocation instruction in writing one paragraph essay. The design of the research was based on pre and post- test method. Pre-test was a lexical collocation test including 35 items focusing on collocation and which was administered before the treatment period. Having done the treatment, the researchers administered a post-test on lexical collocation including 35 items of multiple choice, matching and cloze task dealing with lexical collocations taught through the treatment. The result of the study based on t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the scores of the participants in the control and experiment groups. The result also showed that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of control and experiment group in writing.

Bahs and Eldaw (1993) did a research on advanced German EFL students into their knowledge of collocation by administering translation and cloze task. Fifty-eight German students participated this study were divided into two groups. Half of the students were given a cloze test including 10 sentences, each of which had a verb-noun collocation with the verb missing. The other students were given a German-English translation test which consisted of 15 sentences. The results showed that, in both tests, only half of the students responded correctly to English collocation items. As a result, the students produced more errors in translation of verbal collocations as in translation of general lexical words. So, they found that, the advanced German EFL learners face a major problem in producing correct English collocation.

Hsu (2010) did a research to explore the effect of direct collocation instruction on Taiwanese learners reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Participants of the study were divided into 3 groups according to their academic level. Each group received different collocation instructions (i.e. single-item vocabulary instruction, lexical collocation instruction and no instruction), vocabulary test and reading comprehension tests. After nine weeks, the results showed that direct lexical collocation instruction and using first language glosses as a vocabulary-facilitating activity improved the learners' vocabulary learning, promoted the learners' performance on the three recall tests. Furthermore, Taiwanese learners made significant progress in their reading comprehension as long as they received collocation instruction.

The aim of this experiment is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Does lexical collocation instruction (i.e., noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) have any significant effect on learning lexical collocations?
- 2) To what extent does lexical collocation instruction affect their appropriate use of EFL learners' writing?

For the design of the study, we have chosen two groups as a sample population in the experimental study. One group formed the experimental group and the other one the control group. The pretest was administered in this study just before presenting the collocation instruction in order to investigate the collocational comprehension of the learners and after 5 sessions of the instruction, the posttest was administered to

investigate the effects of collocation instruction on learners' comprehension. Finally, the scores of two tests were compared to examine the effects of the instruction.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study consist of two groups of first year students at English Department of Guilan University. One group formed the experimental group and the other one the control group. They were majoring in teaching literature and their age ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Their proficiency level was upper intermediate and their mother tongue was Persian, they were all learners of English as a foreign language. The total number of the whole students was 36 in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. Among 36 students in the experimental group, 20 were female and 16 male, whereas, among 30 students in the control group, 14 were female and 16 male.

Measuring Instruments

Research instruments in this study were instructional treatment, pretest and post-test. Instructional treatment consisted of the presentation of English collocation through 10 lesson plans incorporated, activities and procedures based on theoretical frame work of English Collocation. First of all, to find out students' collocation comprehension, a pre-test was administered. It consisted of two parts: part one evaluated learners' collocation comprehension and part two focused on learners' use of collocation in their writing. The first part included Collocation Exercises extracted from Mc Carthy and O'Dell textbook (2005), The second part consisted of Students' writing. In fact, the students wrote two paragraphs about one special topic: 'Advantages and Dis- advantages of using computer in our daily Life'. The correct collocations that learners used in their writing were highlighted. Instruction treatment at this experiment focused on collocation instruction of the series of lessons taken from McCarthy and O'Dell textbook. These lessons were taught to the students in 5 sessions, where two lessons of the book were covered in each session. The post-test was administered in order to assess the learners' comprehension of collocation and its use in their writing to test their comprehension of collocation. They were given some of the collocation exercises extracted from McCarthy and O'Dell (2005). These exercises were not the same as pre-test and those exercises that they did during the instruction were chosen. They were also asked to write two paragraphs about the previous topic that was 'the advantages and disadvantages of using computer in our daily life', the same as pretest to test their use of collocation and measuring.

Data analysis

The main data was gathered through the pre and posttest of collocation and writing tasks that were given to both groups. Next, the data collected from the collocation test and writing test were summarized and the procedures of descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations, etc.) along with inferential statistics, namely, independent and paired samples t-tests were run. The parametric independent samples

t-test was run in order that it would be possible to examine if there was any significant difference between the two groups in terms of their comprehension of collocation and their appropriate use of them in their writing before and after completion of the specific treatment for the two groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To make certain that the participants of the study were more or less homogenous in terms of their collocation comprehension and appropriate use of them in their writing before introducing the specific treatment, a pretest including two parts (collocation task and writing task) were administered to both of the groups. The main purpose to administer the tests was to assess the participants' preliminary knowledge of collocations and their initial ability in using them in their foreign language writing. The results of the pretest for the two groups are available in the following table:

Table 1. Group statistics for the pretest scores

	groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Collocation scores (pretest)	control	30	10.3000	2.74364	.50092
	experimental	36	10.9306	2.33346	.38891
Writing scores (pretest)	control	30	4.4667	1.88887	.34486
	experimental	36	4.6389	1.86934	.31156

For the collocation test administered at the beginning of the study, the mean scores for the control and experimental groups were ($M=10.30$) and ($M= 10.93$), respectively. The degree of the scatteredness of the collocation scores for the control group was slightly higher than that of the experimental group ($SD_{Experimental\ group}=2.33$, $SD_{control\ group}=2.74$).

When it comes to the writing tasks performed by participants of the two groups at the beginning of the study, the mean scores for the control and experimental groups were ($M=4.46$) and ($M= 4.63$), respectively. The degree of the deviation of writing scores around the mean score for the control group was simply (.02) points higher than that of the control group ($SD_{Experimental\ group}=1.86$, $SD_{control\ group}=1.88$).

Table 2. Independent samples test for the pretest scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Collocation scores (pretest)	Equal variances assumed	1.01	.31	-.1009	64	.31	-.63	.62	-1.87	.61
	Equal variances			-.994	57.2	.32	-.63	.63	-1.90	.63

	not assumed									
Writing scores (pretest)	Equal variances assumed	.007	.93	-.371	64	.71	-.17	.46	-1.09	.75
	Equal variances not assumed			-.371	61.6	.71	-.17	.46	-1.10	.75

To see whether these differences between the mean scores of the two groups were statistically significant at the beginning of the study, independent sample t- tests were run on the scores of the collocation comprehension and writing tasks. In fact, the independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the pretest scores for the experimental and control groups. Concerning the comparison between the two groups with respect to their collocation comprehension at the beginning of the study, there was no significant difference in collocation scores between the experimental group ($M = 10.93$, $SD = 2.33$) and the control group ($M = 10.30$, $SD = 2.74$; $t(64) = -1.009$, $p = .31$, two-tailed). The extent of the differences in the collocation mean scores of the two groups (mean difference = .63, 95% CI: -1.87 to .61) was relatively small (Eta squared = .015).

Moreover, no significant difference was found in the writing scores for the experimental group ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.86$) and the control group ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.88$; $t(64) = -.371$, $p = .71$, two-tailed). The extent of the differences in the writing mean scores of the two groups (mean difference = .17, 95% CI: -1.09 to .75) was comparatively small (Eta squared = .002). This meant that the two groups were approximately homogeneous with respect to their collocation knowledge and appropriate use of collocation in their foreign language writing at the beginning of the study.

The results of the analyses for the post-tests of collocation and writing task:

To provide answers to the research questions, independent-samples t-tests were run to compare the mean scores on two continuous variables, namely, " *posttest of collocation comprehension and writing task* " for the two different groups of participants (*experimental and control groups*). There was one categorical, independent variable (i.e. groups of study) and two continuous, dependent variables (i.e., posttest scores of collocation comprehension and writing task).

Table 3. Group statistics for the posttest scores

	groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Collocation scores (posttest)	control	30	10.6000	2.24914	.41063
	experimental	36	15.4028	2.47796	.41299
Writing scores (posttest)	control	30	4.8667	1.99540	.36431
	experimental	36	6.6944	2.05384	.34231

For the posttest of collocation test that was administered at the end of the study, the mean scores for the “control and experimental groups” were (M= 10.60) and (M= 15.40), respectively. Furthermore, the extent of the deviation of the collocation scores for the “experimental group was somewhat smaller than that of the control group (SD control group = 2.74; SD Experimental =2.47). The following independent-samples t-test explored whether these differences in the mean scores of the posttests were statistically significant for the two groups.

Table 4. Independent samples test for the posttest scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
Collocation scores (posttest)	Equal variances assumed	.61	.43	-8.17	64	.000	-4.80	.58	-5.97	-3.62	
	Equal variances not assumed			-8.24	63.5	.000	-4.80	.58	-5.96	-3.63	
Writing scores (posttest)	Equal variances assumed	.17	.68	-3.64	64	.001	-1.82	.50	-2.82	-.82	
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.65	62.4	.001	-1.82	.49	-2.82	-.82	

The independent samples test output box presented the results of Levene's test for the equality of variances. This tested whether the variance (variation) of scores for the two groups was the same for the collocation comprehension and writing task. Since the significant values for the Levene's test were larger than (.05), the first line in the table, which referred to “*Equal variances assumed*,” was used. For the collocation scores, the significance level for the Levene's test amounted to (.43). Furthermore, for the writing scores, the significance level for the Levene's test came to (.68). These values were both larger than the cut-off of (.05), meaning that the assumption of equal variances had not been violated.

Based on the findings of independent samples t- test represented in Table 4, since the value in the Sig. (2-tailed) column was less than (.05), there was a significant difference in the mean scores on the dependent variable (posttest scores of collocation test) for each of the two groups. In this study, the significant (2-tailed) value was (.00). As this value was lower than the required cut-off of (.05), it could be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference in the means of posttest of collocation for the

experimental and control groups. The mean difference between the two groups was also shown in table 4 along with the 95% confidence interval of the difference showing the lower value and the upper value. Thus, the first null hypothesis was rejected suggesting that explicit lexical collocation instruction (i.e., noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) has statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' lexical collocation learning.

The findings reported in Table 4, showed that there was statistically significant difference in the mean scores on the posttest scores of writing for each of the two groups. The significant (2-tailed) value was (.001). As this value was less than the required cut-off of (.05), it could be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean of posttest scores of writing for the control and experimental groups. Thus, the second null hypothesis was also rejected suggesting that explicit lexical collocation instruction (i.e., noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) has statistically significant effect on the appropriate use of collocations in EFL learners' writing.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to investigate the possible effects of explicit instruction of lexical collocations on Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners' collocation comprehension and their appropriate use of them in their writing. According to the findings of this study, lexical collocations instruction has a powerful influence on raising collocation knowledge. In addition, it could be strongly maintained that lexical collocation instruction can significantly influence EFL upper-intermediate language learners' appropriate use of them in their writing.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and other related studies, the following suggestions might be taken into consideration to improve Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocations.

Explicit instruction of collocation has to form part of English teaching curricula in order to raise learners' awareness of word combinations. The use of dictionaries of collocation must be emphasized. Teachers have to draw learners' attention to collocation and vocabulary. Learning vocabulary and collocation should be taken into account both in class and after class for the benefits of the students. To develop fluency in a second language, is not sufficient to learn singular words and their meaning. Therefore, vocabulary should be taught by means of collocations both inside and outside classroom, so that, learners can become aware of how words associate together. Teachers can motivate students to produce more collocations in their classes.

In order to find out the students' weaknesses of using collocations, collocation tests can be used. When the problems with collocation are recognized, teachers should concentrate more on those areas when teaching collocations. Collocations should be included in the syllabus of writing. They should be taught explicitly through

highlighting, noticing, consciousness-raising. Textbooks and other materials related to collocations should be made accessible to both the teacher and the learner whenever needed. A Lexical Notebook might be so beneficial to store collocations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Research has proved that, EFL learners encounter difficulties with collocations, resulting in producing incorrect collocations. The findings of this study are not conclusive. Thus, more research on lexical collocations is required. Based on the limitations of this study, the researcher offers some recommendations for further studies in teaching and learning collocations in EFL contexts.

The findings of this study indicated that collocation instruction could greatly increase the upper-intermediate EFL learners' collocation knowledge. Therefore, a repeat study could be conducted with other levels with different background knowledge and in different fields of study, or with high school students. Because of the limitation of time and administration, this experiment was conducted over only 5 sessions which lasted 5 weeks. This study could be carried out again allowing time for more practicing collocations. Future research could be performed in terms of grammatical collocations and its effectiveness in achieving native-like fluency. Finally, the focus of the future research could be the effects of collocation instruction to raise students' collocation awareness and the appropriate use of them in their speaking ability.

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