*A Study of the Learning of English Lexical and Grammatical Collocations By Iranian EFL Learners**

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Abstract

The importance of collocation in the learning of a foreign language and the problems that L₂ learners face with in using collocations have been underscored by researchers. There have been, however, few studies to take all types of collocations, particularly the grammatical type, into consideration. As a result, this study has devoted special attention to lexical and grammatical collocations. A sample of 80 Iranian EFL learners at Shiraz University served as participants. A multiple-choice test of collocations consisting of forty items was adopted in the study. The data were examined and results showed that:

i) There is a significant relationship between the performance of the learners on lexical and grammatical collocations.

ii) There is a significant difference between the performance of the learners on different subcategories of collocations.

Key words: lexical collection, grammatical collection, acquisition

Introduction

One of the most important aspects of learning a language is learning the vocabulary of that language and its appropriate use. It is not possible to learn a language without learning its vocabulary. In other words, vocabulary learning lies at the center of language learning, and, therefore, great attention should be paid to the issues related to vocabulary learning/teaching.

Since traditional techniques of learning vocabulary - the learning of individual words or memorizing bilingual vocabulary list - appeared to be no longer tenable, researchers suggested ways for learning multiword phrases and chunks. In other words, they underlined the importance of focusing on the association between lexical items in order to develop vocabulary learning.

It is obvious that words do not have independent meanings. Every word gets some layers of its meaning from "the set of other words in the same phrase or sentence." (Yule 1985: 98)

By the same token, Abu-Ssaydeh (1995: 16) states that:

> *The Lexis of a given language is not a random listing of words; rather, it is a grouping of interacting networks. Lexical items are complex entities, which enter into grammatical, stylistic and lexical relations with other members of he Lexis. Therefore, the effective use of a word will depend on a thorough understanding of the entire network of relations peculiar to the word.*

Definition and types of word combinations:

According to Aisenstadt (1981) all word associations in the language can be divided into two parts:

1. Idiomatic Combinations: These are known as frozen expressions or fixed combinations. The meanings of idioms do not reflect the meanings of their individual parts. They have fixed patterning. For example, the idiom "red tape" means excessive bureaucracy, which has no relation to the meanings of the words "red" or "tape".

2. Non-idiomatic Combinations: Non-idiomatic combinations are subdivided into free and restricted combinations. "Free collocations are combinations of two or more words with free commutability within the grammatical and semantic framework of the language. They are the vast majority of collocations in the language." (Aisenstadt, 1981: 59).

Free collocations are known as "the least cohesive type of word combinations. The noun 'murder', for example, can be used with many verbs. To analyze, condemn, discuss (etc.) a murder." (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993: 102).

The second type of non-idiomatic combinations is called restricted collocations. These are expressions whose meanings reflect the meanings of their constituent parts as opposed to idiomatic combinations. "They are used frequently, spring to mind readily, and are psychologically salient (as opposed to free combinations)." (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993: 102).

Restricted collocation is defined by (Aisenstadt, 1981: 54) in this way:

A type of word combination consisting of two or more words, unidiomatic in meaning, following certain structural patterns, restricted in commutability not only by semantics, but also by usage.

Benson et al. (1986: x) classify restricted collocation into two categories:

1- Grammatical Collocation: Grammatical collocation is a phrase, which is composed of a preposition and a main word (noun, adjective, and verb) or a structural pattern such as a clause or two-word verbs. Benson et al. (1986) believe that there are eight major types of grammatical collocations in English:

Noun + Preposition → ability in / at
Noun + to + Infinitive → a problem to do
Noun + That Clause → We reached an agreement that…
Preposition + Noun → On purpose
Adjective + Preposition → Tired of
Adjective + to + infinitive → easy to learn
Adjective + That Clause → She was delighted that…
Verb + Preposition → Believe in…

2- Lexical Collocation: Benson et al. (1986: xxiv) believe that "typical lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs." Lexical collocations, in contrast to grammatical collocations, do not contain prepositions, infinitives, or clauses. With such a distinction in mind, Benson et al. (1986: xxv), list the following types of lexical collocations in English:

> Verb + Noun $\rightarrow$ Make a decision
> Adjective + Noun $\rightarrow$ Weak tea
> Noun + Verb $\rightarrow$ Alarms go off
> $Noun_1$ + of + $Noun_2$ $\rightarrow$ A bunch of keys
> Adverb + Adjective $\rightarrow$ Quite safe
> Verb + Adverb $\rightarrow$ Walk heavily

Different types of word combinations can be shown on a continuum as follows:

Non-idiomatic Combinations		Idiomatic Combinations
Free combinations	Restricted ombinations	fixed combinations
Vast majority of free combinations	Different types of lexical & grammatical collocations	Different types of idioms

Objectives and Significance of the Study

Methods of teaching English in Iran are mainly based on syntactic principles. That is, the grammatical features of the language are overemphasized, and, therefore, learners can produce sentences that are

grammatically correct but contain mistakes because of inappropriate use of word combination.

It is hoped that the findings of the existing study will provide insight useful to language teachers. It is also hoped that by exploring the main areas of problems in using appropriate collocations, one can grade, classify and select the most problematic types of collocations and decide on how to incorporate them into EFL curriculum in Iranian language institutes, high schools and universities. The result of the study may also help learners to be aware of the role and importance of collocation in language learning. This research raised the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between the performance of the learners on lexical and grammatical collocations?

2. Which subcategories in different types of collocations are more problematic for Iranian EFL learners?
3. What are the causes of such problems in the processes of foreign language learning?

Review of Literature

The importance of learning collocations to master L_2 communicatively has recently been under the focus of attention of many researchers. A good number of scholars (Hussein, 1990; Bahns, 1993; Tajalli, 1994; Morshali, 1995; Gitaski, 1996 and Mihankhah, 1999) have studied collocations from different dimensions.Bahns & Eldaw (1993) carried out an experiment to find out whether collocations should be taught explicitly. The result showed that learners' knowledge of collocations lagged far behind their knowledge of vocabulary in general. They concluded from their study that "learners' knowledge of collocations does not develop in parallel with their knowledge of vocabulary and this may be in part due to the fact that collocations are not taught and that learners do not therefore pay attention to learning them." (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993: 109)
Hussein (1990: 130) conducted an experiment to measure the ability of Arab EFL learners to collocate words correctly in English. Results revealed

that FL learners' errors were traceable to "negative transfer." Unfamiliarity with the structure of collocations and "overgeneralization."

The findings of Tajalli's study has been summarized by Morshali (1995: 32) as follows:

> *First and foremost, it was revealed that the prime source of difficulty was unfamiliarity of the subjects with English collocations due to insufficient exposure.*
>
> *Second, ..., non-congruent grammatical structures of English and Persian collocations could hardly be held responsible for possible constraints.*
>
> *Third, ... some problems may be attributed to the inadequate knowledge of the full semantic potential of simple lexical items when combined to form collocations; in short, inability to devise collocational meanings of words.*
>
> *Fourth, the experiment revealed that presence orr absence of direct translational equivalence significantly affects translatability.*
>
> *Finally, it was detected that some problems were ascribable to lack of adequate familiarity with Persian collocations.*

Morshali (1995) has conducted comprehensive research on the learning of English lexical collocations by Iranian EFL learners. The aim of her study was to find out the effect of proficiency level on collocation use, and also to determine if formal instruction played any role in the mastery of collocations. Morshali (1995: iv) came to some conclusions as follows:

1) The Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocations lagged   far behind their knowledge of vocabulary.

2) There exists no significant relationship between the level of language proficiency and that of the knowledge of English collocations.

3) The Iranian learners do not generally acquire collocations without formal teaching.

4) The number of collocational errors committed by the Iranian EFL learners underlines the need for formal teaching of collocations.

Gitaski (1996) carried out a careful and comprehensive piece of research to determine the learning of English collocations by ESL learners at three

proficiency levels- post beginners, intermediate, and post intermediate. In her study, "three tests measuring the learners' knowledge of collocation were used: essay writing, a translation test and a blank-filling test." Results of her study revealed that:

Collocational knowledge increased steadily as the overall language proficiency increased, and the development of collocational knowledge was found to be influenced by the frequency of the input, the L_1-L_2 difference, the overall language proficiency, and the 'saliency' of the collocation types. Grammatical and lexical collocations that were simple and frequent in everyday use of English were acquired early and more complex grammatical collocations were acquired later.

Lexical collocations that were idiomatic, fixed and/or unpredictable were more difficult than those that were less arbitrary and more rule-bound. Finally, the development of collocational knowledge in terms of three proficiency levels can be described as follows: Post-beginner students have already acquired the simple and frequent grammatical collocations, e.g. SVc, they use few types of collocation and a large number of tokens for some of them, they are more accurate with regard to lexical collocations than complex grammatical collocations, but their overall accuracy is very low. At the intermediate level, students use more collocation types and they use both simple and complex grammatical collocations, but their overall accuracy does not improve. At the post-intermediate level, students become more accurate with respect to grammatical, both simple and complex, and lexical collocations, and their collocational knowledge is significantly advanced. (Gitaski, 1996: 234)

Participants

In this study, a sample of 80 Iranian EFL learners at Shiraz University served as participants. They were freshmen and were chosen from among ninety students. Their selection was based on their scores on a general proficiency test given to the whole population. The Oxford Placement Test 1 B1 (Allen, 1985) was used for this purpose. The test consists of fifty multiple-choice items. Applying KR-21, the Oxford Placement Test achieved a

reliability of 0.66. In order to have an approximately homogeneous sample, those participants whose grades were below twenty or more than forty five were excluded from the study. None of the participants obtained a score above forty-five, but ten participants obtained scores below twenty.

In order to make the participants cooperative, they were told that the purpose of the test would be explained later. The sample included fifteen male and sixty-five female students.

Instruments

A multiple-choice test of collocation consisting of forty items was adopted in the study. The test was meant to evaluate the performance of Iranian EFL learners on both lexical and grammatical collocations. The items were based on the contents of high school English textbooks. The following table summarizes the number of items related to each type of collocation and its subparts:

Table1

Type of Collocation	Subparts	Number of Items	Total Items
Grammatical	Verb + Preposition	5	20
	Participle Adjective +Preposition	5	
	Noun + Preposition	5	
	Preposition + Noun	5	
Lexical	Verb + Noun	12	0
	Noun + Noun	8	

A pilot administration was carried out to determine the characteristics of the items, and weak items were removed or modified. None of the participants obtained a perfect or a zero score on the test, and none of the items was answered either correctly or incorrectly by all participants. The KR-21 formula was applied to estimate the reliability of the test achieved a reliability of 0.61. The test was also validated concurrently against the Oxford Placement Test 1 B1 (Allan, 1985). The correlation coefficient between the two tests is tabulated as follows:

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Coefficient
Between Oxford Placement Test and Collocation Test

Tests	Population	Correlation
Placement & Lexical Collocation	35	0.5608 P = .000

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between
Oxford Placement Test and Grammatical Collocation Items

Tests	Population	Correlation
Placement & Lexical Collocation	35	0.4737 P = .004

Table 4
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between
Oxford Placement Test and Lexical Collocation Items

Tests	Population	Correlation
Placement & Lexical Collocation	35	0.4532 P = .006

Results

The result of the study, presented in Table 5 shows that the learners' grammatical knowledge lags behind their lexical knowledge concerning collocation. Based on the information provided in Tables 6 and 7 the difference between the performance of the learners on different subcategories of grammatical collocation is statistically significant. (i.e. A ratio of 2.62 is needed for a .05 level of probability, whereas the ratio is much greater. F = 12.30). The difference between the performance of the learners on different subcategories of lexical collocation is significant at 0.048 level(i.e. P<0.05). Seetable 8. To sum up, the information presented in table 9 reveals that the participants' knowledge of lexical collocations outstrips their knowledge of grammatical collocations. This table also shows the performance of the participants on different subcategories of lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. According to this data, which is based on the percentage of correct answers, Preposition + Noun subcategory is the most difficult and Participle Adjective + Noun subcategory stands as the least difficult one.

Table 5

Paired t-test for Lexical and Grammatical Collocation

Variables	Mean	SD	SE of Mean	t-value	df	2-tail sig.
Grammatical Collocation	11.86	2.84	0.318	-2.37	79	0.0200
Lexical Collocation	12.52	2.79	0.312			

Table 6

Analysis of variance for subcategories of grammatical collocation

Sources	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Scores	Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	3	42.5125	14.1708		
Within Groups	16	363.9750	1.1518	12.3030	.000
Total	319	406.4875	15.3226		

Table 7

Scheffe test for subcategories of grammatical collocation

Subcategories of Grammatical collocation	Mean	1	2	3
Verb + Preposition (1)	3.3000			
Preposition + Noun (2)	2.6375	Sig		
Participle Adjective + Preposition (3)	3.5375	Non-sig	sig	
Noun + Preposition (4)	2.8000	Sig	Non-sig	sig

Table 8

Paired t-test for subcategories of lexical collocation

Variables	Mean	SD	SE of Mean	t-value	df	2-tail sig.
Verb + Noun	63.33	14.47	1.62	2.01	79	0.048
Noun + Noun	58.32	21.9	2.44			

Table 9
The percentage of correct answers per category

Type of Collocation	Type of Category	Correct Answers (%)	Total Correct (%)
Grammatical Collocation	Verb + Preposition	64.4	59.5
	Preposition + Noun	50.4	
	Participial Adjective + Preposition	68.2	
	Noun + Preposition	55	
Lexical Collocation	Verb + Noun	63	62
	Noun + Noun	61	

Conclusions

Having analyzed the data, the following conclusions can be drawn:
i)   Lexical collocations are easier to acquire than grammatical collocations.
ii)   There is statistically significant difference between the performance of the participants on different subcategories of lexical collocations. This difference is slightly in favor of Verb + Noun collocations.
iii)   Among different subcategories of grammatical collocations which were under the focus of attention in this study, Participle Adjective Preposition is the easiest to acquire and Preposition Noun is the most difficult

iv)   one (i.e., the order is participle Adjective Preposition, Verb Preposition, Noun Preposition, Preposition Noun).

v)   The degree of L_1-L_2 difference or similarity influences the learning of certain types of collocations. For example, in item 19, "There is a great difference <u>between</u> grammar and vocabulary", 90% of the participants selected the correct preposition. This is due to similarities between two languages. In item 5, "The Policeman accused him <u>of</u> stealing a car", 51% chose <u>for</u> instead of <u>of</u>. This error is due to negative transfer. These examples illustrate that in teaching collocations particular attention should be paid to those collocations for which there is no direct translational equivalence.

vi)   Exposure or lack of exposure to a certain type of collocation influences the learning of that kind of collocation, e.g., in item 39, "Do you want a single or a <u>return</u> ticket?" about 80% of the participants selected the correct word because this collocation is used in the learners' textbooks and they are exposed to it. However, in item 15, "When she heard that she had passed the test, she was surprised <u>at</u> the news", just 19% of the participants selected the correct preposition. It is due to lack of exposure to this type of collocation, as it is not used in their textbooks.

vii)   Those collocations, which are more frequent in everyday speech, are easier to acquire than others. For example, in item 37, "Have a <u>seat</u> please", 80% of the participants selected the correct   collocation.

Following are suggestions based on the findings of the study:

i)   Particular attention should be paid to the teaching of grammatical collocations because of the learners' general weakness in producing this kind of collocations.

ii)   Early acquired types of collocations, such as those with high frequency of occurrence or those which are used in daily communication, should be taught before late acquired ones.

iii)   Teachers should devise exercises, which underscore the involvement of learners in the process of recognition and production of collocations.

iv)   Those collocations with no direct translational equivalence should be emphasized in drills and classroom activities.

v)   Teaching collocations should start from the early stages of language teaching.

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