

## The Effect of Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction on Iranian EFL Learners' Use of Collocations in L2 Writing

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### Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to measure up the effects of two methods of teaching collocations (i.e., explicit and implicit) on Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing. The participants in this study were selected from three intact classes consisting of forty five adult Iranian advanced EFL learners. Two intact classes were selected as the experimental groups (EG/IG) and one other class as the control group (CG). A pretest was administered to determine learners' use of collocations in writing. It consisted of 20 selected words from "Anecdotes in American English" (Hill, 1980). At the end of the study the participants were given 20 selected words to make a complete sentence. The groups were found to perform with considerable differences on the posttest. The results revealed that the group receiving explicit method of teaching collocations outperformed the other two groups in using collocations in sentence writing.

**Keywords:** explicit instruction, implicit instruction, collocation, L2 writing

### INTRODUCTION

The early trend in the field of second language teaching (SLA) has witnessed the dominance of methods that neglected the importance of vocabulary teaching and learning, but recent evidence suggests that language learners need to improve their vocabulary knowledge (Allen, 1983; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Shand, 1999). Many researchers have argued that vocabulary learning is a must for second language learning (Knight, 1994) and it is "an essential part of mastering a second language" (Schmitt, 2008; p.329). In fact, there is now a general consensus among EFL researchers that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence, the ability to communicate successfully and effectively (Decarrico, 2001).

Along the same line of research, one of the most important findings of SLA studies was the introduction of a concept emphasizing the centrality of prefabricated chunks in language learning. These chunks can help learners to identify patterns of language and are demonstrated in Lewis's (1993) 'lexical approach' and Sinclair's (1991) 'idiom principle'. These theories have attempted to explain the fact that a learner's lexis is dependent on the word groups. They have also argued for the fact that prefabricated chunks exert the most amount of influence on a learner's text. Therefore, collocations play a crucial role in foreign language learning.

Collocation by definition is "a group of words which occur repeatedly in a language" (Center, 1992, p.47). Schmitt (2000, p.76) refers to collocation as "tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse". Also, McCarten (2007) points out that the way in which two or more words are used together can be called collocation.

According to Benson and Ilson (1986), collocations can be discussed under two major categories, grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. The former refers to a phrase that consisting of a content word and a grammatical word (e.g. concern about, by accident) and the latter refers to a phrase that consists of only content words (e.g. wind a clock, affect deeply).

The use and knowledge of collocations can be considered as a necessary component of every language which can be used in order to discriminate native speakers from non-native speakers. Furthermore, the importance of collocations can be recognized when noticing the speech and writing of foreign language learners who repeatedly fail to produce the correct order of collocations. Brown (1974) claims that collocational instruction helps language learners to perceive multi-word items used in the speech and writing of native speakers. Nattinger and DeCarrio (1992) argue that collocations are at the very center of language learning and teaching and they can also help the teaching of speech, listening comprehension, reading and writing. As such, this study also aims at investigating the effects of explicit and implicit collocational instruction on the Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Vocabulary is an integral part of effective communication (Widdowson, 1989). In the last fifty years, the central role of vocabulary in second language acquisition has been repeatedly addressed in various studies. Accordingly, Hunt and Beglar (2005) indicate that "the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon", a notion proposed by Lewis (2000) who declares that "the single most important task facing language learners is acquiring a sufficient large vocabulary." One should not overlook the fact that learning words in isolation does not fundamentally improve language learners' communication. It suggests that language consists of prefabricated sequences; therefore, language learners need to learn not only the new words but also their collocations.

Haswell (1991) declared that employing repetitive fixed expressions indicates a particular maturity in writing while the absence of these expressions is a characteristic of novice writers. Moreover, it has been shown that collocation knowledge can influence students' general language proficiency (Nesselhauf, 2003). Also, previous research have found that collocation knowledge improves EFL learners' writing skill and reading comprehension ability (Liu, 2000; Lin, 2002; Hsu & Chiu, 2008). In fact, it can be claimed that EFL students need to use collocations appropriately in order to be able to speak and write fluently and accurately (Jaen, 2007).

There seems to exist two opposite views regarding teaching collocation. Some researchers have attempted to explain that collocation learning can be incidental through implicit instruction such as extensive reading (Nation, 2001). Other researchers suggest that collocations need to be learned explicitly with the help of direct instruction (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Nesselhaut, 2003; Seesiok, 2007). Explicit processes that are conscious and deliberate lead to the creation of explicit knowledge. They may be developed by a language teacher, teaching target components and rules to the language learners or they may be developed by language learners themselves while making an effort to learn target components and rules on their own. By contrast, instruction is implicit when its actual purpose is not involved in the instruction. In this case, the learners understand the need to realize the implicit information in order to be able to learn target components as a by-product of reading a text for meaning. (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Celce-Marcia, 2001).

While a variety of definitions of the term "explicit instruction" have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first suggested by Berliner and Rosenshine (1987, p.34) who saw it as "a systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students." By the same token, Implicit instruction aims "to attract learner's attention and to avoid metalinguistic discussion, always minimizing any interruption to the communication of meaning" (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 232).

One of the first empirical studies of collocation was reported by Zhang in 1993. In his doctoral dissertation Zhang examined 60 native and non-native speakers of English (30 natives and 30 non-natives) at Indiana university of Pennsylvania by administering one blank filling collocation test and one paper-based writing test. The collocation test was planned to assess the students' knowledge of collocations and the writing test was planned to determine students' use of collocations and writing fluency. In his study, Zhang revealed that (I) native speakers out-performed non-native speakers on the collocation test and (II) native speakers out-performed non-native speakers on the writing test. Zhang claimed that collocational knowledge is a source of fluency in written communication among college freshmen, and quality of collocations in terms of variety and accuracy is indicative of the quality of college freshmen writing.

A review of literature in Iran reveals that a considerable amount of literature has not been published on the relationship between collocational knowledge and writing. Akbari (1995) states that the main cause of errors in Iranian EFL learners' written production is long specific collocations. He concluded that over 50% of Iranian language learners have numerous problems in the production of English collocations.

Ghonsooli, Pishghadam, and Mahjobi (2008) used qualitative as well as quantitative methods in two phases (product phase and process phase) in order to examine the relationship between collocational instruction and Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. 30 language learners from the English Department of Ferdowsi University participated in their study. During 21 teaching sessions, they were exposed to their course materials involving audio, video, and textual input. The subjects in the experimental group (N=17) were made aware of word combinations, particularly, collocations by means of different techniques such as textual analysis, dictionary use, storing collocations, and translation activity. While in the control group (N=13), the conventional slot and filler approach was used. The results revealed that at the product phase, experimental group out-performed control group in the collocation test as well as writing test. Furthermore, at the process phase, the graphic comparisons of participants' mean score showed a significant development in their vocabulary and fluency.

## **THIS STUDY**

Although, there is a large volume of published studies describing the role of grammar, lexis and collocation, far too little attention has been paid to the relationship between collocation instruction and EFL learners' writing ability (Ghonsooli et al., 2008; Mounya, 2010). Hoping to fill this gap, the present study is an attempt to examine the impact of explicit and implicit collocation instruction on improving Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Does explicit teaching of English collocations improve Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in L2 writing?
2. Does implicit teaching of English collocations improve Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in L2 writing?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between explicit and implicit instructions regarding their influence on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were selected from three intact advanced classes in Bou-Ali-Sina language institute in Yazd, Iran. They were all female learners whose age ranged between 20 to 35 years old. The three classes served as the three groups in this study (two experimental groups and one control group) with 15 students each.

## Materials

To determine students' level of language proficiency, a Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Fowler & Coe, 1967) was used. The collocations in focus were taught through "Anecdotes in American English" (Hill, 1980) as a collection of thirty short American anecdotes assigned to advanced level students. Furthermore, two productive tests were administered, one as a pretest and the other as a posttest. The purpose of the pretest was to assess the learners' ability in using collocations in their writing prior to any treatment, and the purpose of the posttest was to determine the impact of collocation teaching methods on the learners' writing skill.

## Procedure

The experiment lasted 4 weeks through which experimental groups and control group participated in their classes three times a week. Two intact classes were selected as the explicit group and implicit group (EG and IG) and one other class as the control group (CG). Their proficiency in English was advanced (as they had been classified by the authorities of Bou-Ali Sina language institute). The homogeneity of participants was ensured by employing a Nelson English Language Proficiency Test as far as their proficiency was concerned. The pretest was administered prior to the first treatment session. For the pretest, the subjects were asked to write a complete sentence with the 20 selected target words from anecdotes. After the pretest and during the treatment phase, participants in all three groups separately attended ten sessions in which they were all given a set of ten advanced anecdotes in American English. These anecdotes were identical in content; however, they served different purposes during the treatment phase of the study. In all the ten treatment sessions for each of the groups, a specific procedure was followed.

In EG, the explicit collocation instruction was used through which the subjects were aware of teaching and learning collocations. Before the beginning of the treatment, the subjects were given some information about collocations, their importance and the way they would learn them. The subjects in EG focused on English collocations through highlighting, repetition, memorization and translation. Then, while learners' attention was explicitly drawn to collocations they were instructed to read the texts and answer some reading comprehension questions about the texts.

The subjects in IG, who received implicit instruction, focused on English collocations through typographical techniques such as bolding and underlining. After reading the passage with the collocations highlighted, the subjects were instructed to read the texts and answer some reading comprehension questions about the texts. The subjects in CG were asked to read the texts and answer some reading comprehension questions about the texts. After the treatment and as for the posttest, the subjects were asked to write a complete sentence with the 20 selected words from the anecdotes which was covered during the treatment. In order to compare the performances of participants, the number of collocations that were used correctly and relevantly was counted. The final scores of

the three groups were compared and analyzed in order to examine the influence of implicit and explicit instruction of collocations on EFL learners' use of collocation in writing.

### Tests and scoring procedures

As this paper attempted to give an account of the acquisition of English collocations by Iranian advanced EFL learners after particular kinds of methods were adopted, a pretest and posttest were administered in order to examine learners' use of collocation in writing before and after the treatment period. For pretest and posttest, the subjects were asked to write a complete sentence with the 20 selected words which were based on the certain anecdotes covered during the treatment phase. It is also worth mentioning that the two tests were researcher made tests requiring the learners to use 20 selected target forms with their correct collocations in 20 sentences.

The scoring procedure consisted of one point for correct answers and no point for wrong answers. Then, all the correct answers were added up to a total sum. By the way, wrong answers were not given any negative point.

## RESULTS

### Pretest of the study

In order to conduct this study, the researcher needed to guarantee the homogeneity of the three groups, regarding the learners' use of collocations, at the outset of the study. As such, the participants in the three groups were asked to take a pretest in order to examine their use of collocations in writing. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the subjects' mean scores on the pretest.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the pretest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
EG	15	9.4000	3.48056	.89868	7.4725	11.3275	4.00	15.00
IG	15	9.2667	2.93906	.75886	7.6391	10.8943	4.00	14.00
CG	15	9.1333	3.37780	.87214	7.2628	11.0039	4.00	16.00
Total	45	9.2667	3.20085	.47715	8.3050	10.2283	4.00	16.00

As the table 1 indicates there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups (9.4~9.26~9.13). It appears that these results are due to the learners' same level of collocational knowledge at the outset of the study.

## Research Question 1

The first research question asked whether explicit teaching of English collocations improves Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing. In order to examine any considerable change in the performance of the participants in EG who received explicit method of teaching, a paired samples t-test was run. The t-test was used in order to compare the mean scores of the participants in EG on the pretest and posttest to determine the usefulness of the treatment. The descriptive statistics and the results of the t-test for EG, are illustrated in tables 2 and 3, separately.

**Table 2.** Paired-samples descriptive statistics for EG

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	EG pretest	9.4000	15	3.48056	.89868
	EG post test	15.0667	15	2.98727	.77131

**Table 3.** Paired-samples t-test results for EG

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1	-5.666	.81650	.21082	-6.11883	-5.21451	-26.879	14	.000

It can be seen from the data in table 2 that the posttest mean score (15.06) is higher than the pretest mean score (9.40) for the EG. Correspondingly, a paired- samples t-test was conducted to confirm that the observed difference was significant. Table 3 reveals the results of the t-test analysis. As represented in this table, the obtained P value (0.000) is less than 0.05 and; therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the scores obtained from the pre- and posttest. Accordingly, explicit teaching of English collocations seems to exert a significant influence on the use of collocations in writing.

## Research Question 2

The second research question asked whether implicit teaching of English collocations improves Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations. To answer this question, a paired-samples t-test was run. Tables 4 and 5 show the descriptive statistics and the results of the t-test for EG.

**Table 4.** Paired-samples descriptive statistics for IG

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	IG pretest	9.2667	15	2.93906	.75886
	IG posttest	12.8667	15	2.66905	.68914

**Table 5.** Paired-samples t-test results for IG

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1	-3.600	.98561	.25448	-4.14581	-3.05419	-14.146	14	.000

It is apparent from table 4 that there was an increase in the mean score of the subjects in EG2 after the treatment (from 9.26 to 12.86). To further ensure that the observed difference was significant a paired-samples t-test was conducted. As table 5 illustrates there is a significant difference in the performance of the participants on the pretest and posttest because the probability value is smaller than the specified critical value ( $0.000 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, it can be argued that implicit teaching of English collocations has a positive effect on the Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing.

### Research Question 3

The final research question asked whether there is a significant difference between explicit and implicit collocation teaching regarding their influence on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The table6 below providing descriptive statistics on the posttest illustrates that the members of the experimental groups (EG and IG) outperformed those of control group (CG) in the posttest. We can deduce that the mean score obtained by EG (15.06) is higher than the mean score obtained by IG (12.86) which is, in turn, higher than the mean score of the subjects in CG (9.60).

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics for the posttest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
EG	15	15.0667	2.98727	.77131	13.4124	16.7210	11.00	19.00
IG	15	12.8667	2.66905	.68914	11.3886	14.3447	8.00	17.00
CG	15	9.6000	3.29068	.84965	7.7777	11.4223	4.00	17.00
Total	45	12.5111	3.70272	.55197	11.3987	13.6235	4.00	19.00

However, in order to obtain more concrete results, a one-way between-groups ANOVA was run, to find out whether or not the observed differences were significance at the critical value of  $P < 0.05$ .

**Table 7.** The results of ANOVA on the posttest

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	226.978	2	113.489	12.668	.000
Within Groups	376.267	42	8.959		
Total	603.244	44			



From the data in table 7, it is clear that the three groups are significantly different regarding their mean scores on the posttest because the sig. value (0.000) is substantially less than 0.05. Yet, In order to determine where the differences among the three groups lie a post-hoc test was conducted. Table 8 represents the results of the post-hoc test.

**Table 8.** The results of the Post-hoc test

(I) EG,IG,CG	(J) EG,IG,CG	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
EG	IG	2.20000	1.09293	.122	-.4553	4.8553
	CG	5.46667*	1.09293	.000	2.8114	8.1219
IG	EG	-2.20000	1.09293	.122	-4.8553	.4553
	CG	3.26667*	1.09293	.013	.6114	5.9219
CG	EG	-5.46667*	1.09293	.000	-8.1219	-2.8114
	IG	-3.26667*	1.09293	.013	-5.9219	-.6114

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As can be seen from the above table there is an asterisk (\*) next to some of the values listed. This means that the two groups being compared are significantly different from one another at the  $P < 0.05$  level. The asterisk next to 5.46667 demonstrates that the difference between EG and CG is significant. By the same token, the difference between IG and CG seems to be significant because an asterisk appears next to 3.26667. Accordingly, it can be concluded that CG is significantly different from EG and IG, but it appears that there is no significant difference between EG and IG in their use of collocations in writing. In fact, it can be claimed that there is no significant difference between explicit and implicit instruction regarding their influence on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners.

## DISCUSSION

This paper sought to address the following questions: (1) whether explicit teaching of English collocations improve Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing; (2) whether implicit teaching of English collocations improve Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations in writing; and (3) whether there is any statistically significant difference between explicit and implicit collocation teaching regarding their influence on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The results revealed that both methods of teaching collocations (explicit and implicit) had a positive impact on the use of collocations in EFL learners' writing. Besides, the findings showed that these two approaches were not significantly different concerning the influence they have on the EFL learners' writing ability. In other words, implicit instruction can be as effective as explicit instruction, which requires direct attention to collocations.

It can be deduced that these results are in line with the suggestions of Myers and Chang, (2009) and Xu, Mao, and Liu, (2012) about the collocations and the manner of teaching

and learning them as multi-word items. In fact, their findings suggested that EFL learners' awareness plays a vital role in the process of teaching and learning vocabulary and also in the improvement of the learners' productive skills. The findings of the current study are also consistent with the findings of other researchers who have reported the benefits of collocation instruction (Bahardoust, 2012; Bahardoust, 2013; Mounya, 2010). With respect to these findings, knowledge of collocations can lead to fluency in written production in the EFL context. These studies emphasized the fact that the conventional single-item vocabulary instruction needs to be replaced by collocation instruction in order to improve language learners' writing skills.

Furthermore, the results of the present study are in line with the results of the study conducted by Zhang (1993). He observed a correlation between language learners' knowledge of collocations and their writing ability. On the contrary, Sung (2003) observed a low correlation between language learners' collocational knowledge and their writing proficiency.

From the above observations, it can be concluded that more studies need to be conducted in order to confirm the advantages of explicit collocation instruction. That is, there are many other factors that can affect research results. For example, DeKeyser (1996) and Nassaji (2010) stated that learners' individual traits like different language proficiency levels or strength of motivation may also influence second language learning. As Lyster and Mori (2006) suggested, a combination of two different kinds of instruction may affect language learning too.

## CONCLUSION

Explicit teaching of collocations needs to be incorporated into English teaching curricula where the focal point is raising learners' awareness of words' collocates. Besides, the use of collocation dictionaries should be stressed in the language learning classrooms. Additionally, language teachers need to stimulate learners in order to make use of collocations in their writings. Moreover, teachers should encourage language learners in order to write communicatively by making use of collocations. This technique can encourage language learners to learn a wide variety of collocations that can help them approach native level in productive skills. Furthermore, materials developers can make communicative tasks in which the primary goal is to draw learners' attention mainly to collocations. Therefore, they may help EFL learners achieve higher level of language proficiency.

The primary limitation was the size of the study. The current study examined only 45 EFL learners at advanced level. Under ideal condition, this study would have been carried out with a larger sample and at different proficiency levels (e.g. beginner, elementary, intermediate, and pre-intermediate). Another limitation might be related to the length of the experiment. The length of the experiment was limited, and lasted only for 4 weeks. And finally the last limitation deals with the testing instrument. The collocation test made

use of only 20 items for comparing the mean scores of the three groups. The number of items was insufficient for an appropriate comparison between two methods of teaching.

A better study would examine a larger, randomly selected sample of language learners. Moreover, it would be interesting to involve male participants in order to examine the relationship between knowledge of collocations and gender. In addition, further research should be done to investigate the learners' collocational competence at different functional levels (beginner, elementary, intermediate, and pre-intermediate learners) in order to see if there is a relationship between collocational competence and overall language proficiency. It is also worth mentioning that another area for further research would be a study that uses recognition tasks along with production tasks and a study that uses a larger-scaled instrument.

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## APPENDIX

### *APPENDIX A. SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM THE PRETEST/POSTTEST*

Write a complete sentence with the following words.

1. Job
2. Lie
3. Office
4. Arrangement
5. Remark
6. Station

### *APPENDIX B. SAMPLE EXCERPT FROM THE ANECDOTES USED DURING THE TREATMENTS*

(Target forms in focus were bolded for IG but they were in plain form for EG & CG)

Mr. Gray was a biology professor, and he had a big collection of extremely rare bones which he **was very proud of**. Then one year he managed to **get a new and better job at another university**. Because Mr. Gray **was very busy**, his wife **made the arrangements** for all their possessions to be taken in a moving van to their new home while he was away **at work**.

**The following week** three men started taking the things out of Mrs. Gray's house and **loading them into the van**, when one of them brought out a large wooden box. He was just about to **throw it into the van** with all the other things when Mrs. Gray ran out of her house and said, "Please treat that box very gently! That one has all of my husband's bones in it." The man was so surprised that he nearly dropped the box on his feet.

### *APPENDIX C. SAMPLE READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS FROM THE ANECDOTES*

1. What kind of collection did Mr. Gray have?
2. What happened to Mr. Gray one year?
3. Why did some men come to take all of the Gray's possessions away?
4. What did one of the men take out of the house?
5. What was he going to do with the box?
6. What did Mrs. Gray say to the man?
7. What happened to the men when he heard this?