

Advanced EFL Learners' Knowledge of Different Collocation Types

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Abstract

In order to be able to use language efficiently, L2 learners need to improve their knowledge of collocations. Collocational competence can lead to vocabulary knowledge and hence to language proficiency. The present paper intended to investigate whether Iranian advanced EFL learners' knowledge of collocation differed in terms of the type of collocations including verb-noun (VN), verb-preposition (VP) and adjective-noun (AN) collocations or not. In so doing, from among the available MA students of TEFL studying at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, 50 were selected through an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Three tests of collocations including a test of VN collocations, a test of AN collocations, and a test of VP collocations, were derived from the *Oxford Collocation Dictionary* (2002), and the *Cambridge English Collocations in Use* (2005), and they were administered to the participants. The results of one-way ANOVA and a post-hoc Scheffe test revealed that the advanced learners' scores on the VN and VP collocation tests were significantly higher than their scores on the AN collocation test. This finding bears a number of implications, which are elaborated on in the paper.

Keywords: vocabulary knowledge, collocational competence, grammatical collocations, lexical collocations, advanced EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

With the change of focus from teacher-centeredness to learner and learning-centered approaches to language learning and teaching, researchers highlighted the role of EFL vocabulary acquisition and commended vocabulary treatment in classroom practices (Nation, 1990). This Change of direction was also true for a change from grammar to vocabulary. Still, knowledge of collocation which is considered fundamental to vocabulary acquisition seems to be underestimated in EFL syllabus design.

Collocations, which are a type of assembled chunks, are very important for teachers and learners to be taken into account in the process of language learning (Thornbury, 2002).

Collocations are usually described as the words that are located together in predictable patterns in speech and writing. Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) classified collocations into two main types: grammatical collocations (for example, *by chance*) and lexical collocations (for example, *valuable asset*). This classification contains eight main types of grammatical collocations and seven types of lexical collocations. These two classes of collocations represent two distinct but related aspects of collocations as they include both lexis and grammar. According to Benson *et al.*, (1997), a grammatical collocation consists of a grouping of a dominant word (verb, noun, adjective) and a grammatical word (e.g. preposition), like *make up* (verb and preposition), *concerned about* (adjective and preposition), and *a choice between* (noun and preposition). Grammatical collocations include eight types of collocations which are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Grammatical Collocations

Collocation	Example
Noun + preposition	Exception to
Noun + to-infinitive	A decision to do that
Noun+ that clause	He made a promise that he would do his best
Preposition + noun	By chance
Adjective +preposition	Keen on movies
Adjective +to-infinitive	It's essential to type the letter
Adjective +that-clause	It was necessary that all of us attend
Verb+ to infinitive	They started to work

(Adopted from Shamsudin, Sadoughvanini & Hanafi Zaid, 2013)

Contrary to grammatical collocations, lexical collocations do not include function words like prepositions or infinitives, but lexical collocations consist of content words like nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. According to Benson *et al.* (1997), lexical collocations can be classified into six types namely, verb plus noun or adverb, noun plus verb or noun, adverb plus adjective, and adjective plus noun as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Lexical Collocations

Collocation	Example
Verb + noun	<i>kick the ball, make a sandwich</i>
Verb + adverb	<i>Recommend highly, move slowly</i>
Noun + verb	<i>cars crash., Bee stings</i>
Noun +noun	<i>a school of fish</i>
Adverb + adjective	<i>Drastically changed, closely related</i>
Adjective + noun	<i>Thick fog, terrible mistake</i>

(Adopted from Shamsudin, Sadoughvanini & Hanafi Zaid, 2013)

In general, the lexical oriented and grammar oriented traditions about collocations seem to have their benefits, and the issue is not a matter of which traditions is higher. In comparison with grammar oriented tradition, in lexical oriented tradition the need to master many collocations is emphasized. However, being aware of both views about collocations let us know the complexity of the nature of the collocations and also the potential difficulty in learning collocations for EFL learners.

In addition to the classification of collocations by Benson et al. (1997), other researchers classified collocations into different types from various perspectives. Cowie, Mackin and MaCCAig (1983), the compilers of *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, classified collocations into two groups according to idiomaticity namely, restricted collocations, and open collocations. Restricted collocations are collocations that have one element used in a non-literal sense and the other used in its normal meaning, like, *under a shadow*, while open collocations involve elements which are freely combinable and each element has its literal sense such as a *mad dog*.

Lewis (2000) stated that "the type which names a concept, usually verb + noun (*move house*) or verb + adjective + noun (*take the wrong turn*)" (p. 116) is the most important collocation type. Lewis further believed that the typical lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. As Hill (2003) emphasizes, "It is the noun which carries most content and it is the noun which is at the center of most collocations" (p. 51). Yet, in another classification, Lewis (1997a) used the criteria of fixedness and restrictedness to classify collocations into strong and weak collocations. Strong collocations are known as closely linked phrases that usually act like single words. On the contrary, weak collocations, such as a *nice day* and a *good play*, are groupings of two ordinary words, and each of them may combine with many other words.

The present study intended to investigate three subcategories of grammatical and lexical collocations, namely, verb-noun (VN), adjective-noun (AN), and verb-preposition (VP) among advanced Iranian EFL learners. So far, some other studies of collocation among EFL learners have considered only one of the two types of collocations or even one of the subcategories. For example, Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) investigated knowledge of only prepositional collocations in Iranian EFL learners. Furthermore, Tim Hsu and Chiu (2008) investigated the relation of the knowledge and use of only English lexical collocations of Taiwanese EFL learner spoken discourse. Therefore, it seems that comparing the categories of VN, AN, and VP among advanced EFL have evaded from the eyes of researchers in the Iranian EFL context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, some previous studies on collocations are presented. Mahmoud (2005) investigated the collocation written errors which Arab learners of English committed when practicing collocation use. Descriptive statistics revealed that about 64% of collocations used were wrong and 80% of these were lexical collocations compared with grammatical ones. He also noted that 61% of the incorrect combinations could be attributed to negative transfer from Arabic.

In another study, Hsu (2010) sought to find out if direct collocation instruction influenced EFL learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Based on three academic levels, three groups of Taiwanese college English majors participated in the study. They were exposed to three kinds of treatment: single-item vocabulary instruction, lexical collocation instruction, and no treatment. Afterwards, the participants took a reading comprehension test and 3 vocabulary recall tests. The results, analyzed quantitatively,

revealed that the lexical collocation instruction had a positive effect on the learners' vocabulary gain more than their reading comprehension across all three academic levels.

Bagherzadeh Hosseini and Akbarian (2007) investigated the relationship between collocational competence and general language proficiency and examined the togetherness of quantitative and qualitative characteristics of lexical proficiency. The results indicated that there was a relationship between the collocation test and TOEFL and between the vocabulary section of TOEFL and the collocation test. Moreover, subjects' qualitative proficiency went with their quantitative proficiency. It can be concluded that collocations had to be taught at the right time through explicit teaching to make students aware of collocations.

In another study on collocations, Keshavarz and Salimi (2007) employed open-ended, multiple-choice cloze tests, and TOEFL to measure collocational competence and language proficiency of one hundred Iranian students. A TOEFL test evaluated the subjects' language proficiency and a fifty item test comprising lexical and grammatical collocations examined their collocational proficiency. They found out that there existed a significant relationship between performance on cloze tests and collocational competence. The results also showed that collocational competence was very important to increase language proficiency of Iranian EFL learners in the target language.

In another study, Ghonsooli, Pishghadam, and Mohaghegh Mahjoobi (2008) investigated the effect of teaching collocations on Iranian EFL learners' English writing. They employed quantitative and qualitative methods in two stages, a product phase and a process phase. To this end, thirty subjects from the English Department of the College of Ferdowsi University in Iran were selected. They were taught their course materials in twenty-one sessions. The experimental group learners were seventeen students to whom collocations were taught by different techniques. However, the control group was taught through the conventional slot and filter approach. The results showed that the experimental group had a higher mean score in their collocation test and English Writing Test at the product stage because of collocation teaching. Their mean scores for different writing sections demonstrated that subjects' vocabulary and fluency increased considerably as a result of collocation teaching at the process stage.

Sadeghi (2009) studied the collocational differences between L1 and L2 and its implications for EFL learners and teachers. His study was different from Ghonsooli, Pishghadam, and Mohaghegh Mahjoobi's (2008) study since he compared collocations between Persian and English. There were seventy-six students who participated in a sixty item Persian and English Test of Collocations. The results showed students might have a lot of problems in using collocations where they negatively transferred their linguistic proficiency of Persian to English.

Shokouhi and Mirsalari (2010) also investigated the relationship between collocational proficiency and general linguistic proficiency among EFL learners. There were thirty-five subjects who were chosen by a proficiency test and were administered a 90-item multiple-choice test which had lexical collocations of noun-noun, noun-verb, and

adjective-noun, and grammatical collocations of noun-preposition, and preposition-noun. The results showed no significant correlation between the general linguistic proficiency and collocational proficiency of EFL learners, and lexical collocations were found to be easier than grammatical collocations for the students and from among all subcategories, noun-preposition was the most difficult and noun-verb was the easiest.

In another study, Bazzaz and Samad (2011) discussed the relationship between collocational proficiency and the use of verb-noun collocations in writing stories since collocational proficiency differentiates native speakers and foreign or second language learners and is a major issue in productive skills especially writing. To this end, twenty-seven Iranian PhD students in a Malaysian university were selected. The students' proficiency was measured by a specially constructed C-Test and the use of collocations was calculated by the number of collocations that was used by the students in their essays. To reach this end, students wrote six different stories in six weeks based on a written task in which verb-noun collocations were elicited. The results indicated that there was a large positive relationship between proficiency of collocations and the use of verb-noun collocations in the stories.

Bahardoust (2012) investigated the rate of lexical collocations in Iranian EFL learners' writing production between L1 and L2, and the influence of L1 on L2 collocational use. To reach this aim, two-hundred subjects were chosen. The results showed that the rates of verb-noun and adjective-noun were the highest, and the rate of noun-verb was the lowest. The rate and the frequency of collocations were compared in L1 and L2 paragraphs. The results revealed that L1 collocations had a higher rate and frequency than L2 collocations, and L1 produced both positive and negative influence on collocations.

As mentioned earlier, various studies have been conducted with regards to knowledge of collocations. Yet, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has so far compared different types of collocations among Iranian advanced EFL learners. Accordingly, in order to fill this gap, the present paper intended to investigate if there is a significant difference between the Persian-speaking advanced EFL learners' performance on the verb-noun, adjective-noun, and verb-preposition collocation tests. In fact, the following research question was intended to be answered in the present paper: Is there a significant difference between the Persian-speaking advanced EFL learners' performance on the verb-noun, adjective-noun, and verb-preposition collocation tests?

METHOD

Participants

This investigation was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch. From among 100 available MA students, 50 were selected according to their performance

on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). These participants included both male and female EFL learners, and ranged in age from 22 to 41. Convenience sampling procedure was used to choose the participants of this study.

Instruments

An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and three tests of collocations were employed in the present study. The three tests of collocations included a test of verb-noun collocations ($n = 50$), a test of adjective-noun collocations ($n = 50$), and a test of verb-preposition collocations ($n = 50$). The tests were comprised of multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank items. The test items were derived from the *Oxford Collocation Dictionary* (2002), and the *Cambridge English Collocation in Use* (2005). For the sake of validity, these tests were proofread by three TEFL experts and some minor changes were made accordingly. Furthermore, in order to test the reliability of these tests, they were piloted on 15 non-participant advanced EFL learners. The alpha Cronbach indices for the three tests were found to be .84, .89, and .81 respectively.

Procedures

At the onset of the study, out of 100 MA students of English studying at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, 50 who were found to be homogeneous advanced EFL learners were chosen through an Oxford Placement test (OPT). The participants were informed about the procedures and then three tests of collocation were run at three consequent sessions each lasting for 40 minutes. Finally, the results were compared using the one-way ANOVA in SPSS. The following section present the obtained results.

RESULTS

The gained results of the three tests were compared via one-way repeated-measures ANOVA. The results are presented in the following tables.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Results

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Verb-noun	50	42.76	5.12	1.57
Verb-preposition	50	43.00	6.05	1.42
Adjective-noun	50	37.66	4.52	1.62
Total	150	41.14	5.23	.95

According to the results presented in Table 3, the mean scores of the participants in verb-noun (VN) test of collocation was 42.76, their mean score in verb-preposition (VP) test was 43.00, and the mean score in adjective-noun (AN) test was 37.66. Figure 1 compares the results graphically:

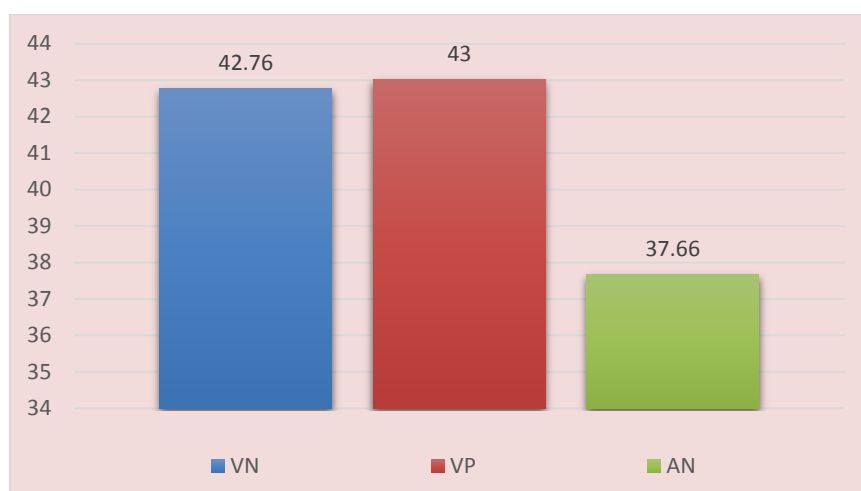


Figure 1. Comparison of VN, VP and AN Collocation Test Scores

As is shown above, the mean difference among the three collocation tests is evident with the participants' mean score in the test of VP being higher than the tests of VN and AN; however, in order to be more objective, one can consult the *Sig.* column in Table 4 (one-way repeated-measures ANOVA table):

Table 4. Results of One-Way ANOVA on the Three Collocation Tests

	Value	<i>F</i>	Hypothesis <i>df</i>	Error <i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.57	32.31	2.00	48.00	.000	.57
Wilks' Lambda	.42	32.31	2.00	48.00	.000	.57
Hotelling's Trace	1.34	32.31	2.00	48.00	.000	.57
Roy's Largest Root	1.34	32.31	2.00	48.00	.000	.57

In Table 4., the *p* value under the *Sig.* column in front of Wilk's Lambda turned out to be smaller than the significance level ($.000 < .05$), which means that the differences among the VN, AN, and NP test of collocations taken by advanced EFL learners were statistically significant. However, to identify the difference between which pairs of scores was of statistical significance, one needs to look down the *Sig.* column in front of pairwise comparisons in the post hoc test table (Table 5):

Table 5. Post Hoc Test Results

Collocations	Mean Difference	Std. Error	<i>Sig.</i>	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
VN	AN	5.10*	.000	1.59	3.04
	VP	-.24	.059	-.02	1.62
AN	VN	-5.10*	.000	-3.04	-1.59
	VP	-5.34*	.000	-2.30	-.73
VP	VN	.24	.059	-1.60	.02
	AN	5.34*	.000	.73	2.30

The difference between VN ($M = 42.76$) and AN ($M = 37.66$) scores reached statistical significance since the *Sig.* value in front of this pairwise comparison was less than the significance level ($.000 < .05$). However, the difference between VN and VP ($M = 43.00$) failed to reach statistical significance. Finally, AN and VP test scores were significantly

different from one another. This leads to the conclusion that for advanced learners, taking VN and VP tests was far easier than taking the AN test, and that there was not a significant difference between the VN and VP tests for them.

DISCUSSION

The present paper intended to investigate if Iranian advanced EFL learners performed similarly or differently on tests of collocations in three different types of verb-preposition (VP), verb-noun (VN) and adjective-noun (AN). The results of the gathered data revealed that the participants significantly performed better on both VN and VP tests compared with AN collocation test.

The findings may be due to the fact that verbs and nouns play a more central position in the sentence than adjectives. In addition, verbs and nouns are the main constituents of sentence. English sentences must have main verbs, but they may not necessarily include adjectives. This is in fact in line with the *frequency hypothesis* which states that the order of development in L2 acquisition is determined by the frequency with which different linguistic items occur in the input. The verb-noun and verb-preposition collocations are more common in the oral and written input which is presented to EFL learners. This finding is in line with some previous research in the field of collocations like the study by El-Dakhs (2015). The results of the present study also lend support to the study by Miqdad (2012) who showed that verb + noun collocations were easier for EFL learners than adjective + noun collocations and verb + preposition collocations.

Another explanation for the findings of the present study may be the fact that as EFL learners improve their general proficiency, their breadth of vocabulary improves more than the depth. To put it differently, the participants in the present study, who were advanced EFL learners, had acquired a great number of English vocabularies that were semantically similar, but they had not learned the lexical limitations on the use of these words. The results may have the implications that teaching individual vocabulary items does not guarantee efficient language use. Learners should learn frequent word combinations as pre-fabricated, ready-made chunks to improve their language use.

CONCLUSION

As it was pointed out above, the motive behind the present study was that researchers, to date, in the EFL context of Iran had not compared advanced EFL learners' knowledge of different types of collocations, and this was why the present study was undertaken. The results obtained through the analysis of the data indicated that the advanced EFL learners' performance did not significantly differ on VN and VP collocation tests, yet their performances on these two tests were significantly superior to their performance on the AN test. This finding could lead to insights in the way through which collocations are acquired by EFL learners. It is certainly correct that, as it went above, adjectives are not as central as nouns and verbs in the structure of a sentence, but acquiring and using them properly make the learners' written/spoken productions more assertive. That is why, it could be recommended to language teachers and materials developers to put special

emphasis on the teaching of AN collocations as they might be a hard nut for (even advanced) EFL learners to crack.

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