

Iranian University English Majors' Knowledge of Lexical Collocations: Its Relationship With Speaking and Writing Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to comprehensively investigate into the knowledge of lexical collocations of Iranian EFL learners, and to find out whether there was any relationship between this knowledge and the students' writing and speaking abilities. A total of 43 students of Chabahar Maritime University English Department participated in this study. They took three tests during this study. First, they took a 50-item fill in the blank test of collocation at the beginning of the term to measure their knowledge of lexical collocations. One week later, they took the speaking test which consisted of an interview with the examiner, lasting about 12 minutes. Finally, they were asked to write three essays on different topics in three consecutive weeks. The three writing topics were taken from the Book TOEFL Test Strategies. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Co-efficient results revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between the writing of the students and their scores on the lexical collocation test. However, no significant correlation was found between the students' scores on the speaking test and their scores on the collocation test. The study also indicated that Iranian university students are weak in lexical collocations; they could answer just more than half of the questions related to lexical collocations. The study concludes with some suggestions for teachers and material designers about how to teach and incorporate the necessary lexical collocations in their classes and course books.

KEY WORDS: Knowledge of Lexical Collocation, Speaking Proficiency, Writing Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The role of vocabulary has been downplayed in the ESL/EFL education. Under the influence of Communicative Approach, vocabulary has been neglected, or omitted in classroom teaching procedures. Scholars such as Brown (1974) and Smith (1983) warned our ESL/EFL field about the danger of ignoring vocabulary instruction, but it was not until the 1990s that people started to notice the importance of vocabulary in the education of English as a second or foreign language. Farghal and Obiedat (1995) and Lewis (1993) pointed out that the knowledge of collocations is of great importance and recognized it as vital in knowing a word. It is said that the use of collocations in speaking, or writing can help learners "think more quickly and communicate more efficiently" as well as sound more like native speakers (Hill, 2000, p. 54). Most of EFL learners often encounter difficulties whenever they meet multi-word units, including fixed expressions, idioms and especially collocations, in the comprehension and production of English.

Many scholars consider collocation acquisition as one of the keys for EFL/ESL learners to achieve fluency in language production in (Nattinger, 1980). In addition, collocations are quite typical of English language (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000) and could comprise as much as 80% of a written text (Hill, 2000); thus, they account for an essential part of native speakers' competence.

Most EFL learners believe that one of the major problems of learning a language is to use appropriate word chunks while writing or speaking. In addition, many EFL teachers have recognized that their students do have problems with producing a native-like utterance or piece of writing (Bahns, 1993). Some EFL learners cannot express their thought because they are lacking the important collocations of a key word which is quite central to their writing (Hill, 2000). As a result, they produce writing which is awkward and full of miscollocations partially due to the effect of their mother tongue, and lack of training in this regard. Most of these students know a large number of single item vocabularies, but they do not know how to combine them properly in writing or speaking. A review of literature suggests that there is a lack of empirical research on the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations of Iranian students, and the possible relationship between this knowledge and the writing and speaking abilities of the students.

Correspondently, this study sought to comprehensively investigate the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations of the Iranian university students and its relationship with their speaking, and writing. The results of the study will shed light in this regard, and will show if collocations are a worth teaching aspect of language. The finding can be useful for teachers to devote a part of their class for teaching collocations. It can also guide material designers to consider collocations while preparing EFL/ESL books. The study undertaken aimed at answering the following research questions.

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1. How proficient are Iranian university students in producing appropriate English lexical collocations?
2. Is there any relationship between the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations (KLC) of Iranian EFL learners and their General Speaking Proficiency (GSP)?
3. Is there any relationship between the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations (KLC) of Iranian EFL learners and their General Writing Proficiency (GWP)?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Zhang (1993) investigated the relationship between the correct use of collocations and the knowledge of collocations by 60 freshmen (30 native, 30 non-native speakers of English) at Indiana University. The relationship between these two factors was not significant, but the number of collocational errors in writing significantly correlated with the knowledge of collocations. She contended that "Knowledge of Lexical Collocations is a source of fluency in written communication among college freshmen" (p. 162), and that "quantity, and more importantly, quality of collocational use distinguishes between Good and Poor college freshmen writing as well as between Native and Non-native college freshmen writing" (p. 165). Thus, writing teachers "need to incorporate collocations in their syllabuses" (p. 170). Al-Zahrani (1998) studied the relationship between the knowledge of lexical collocations and Saudi EFL students' general language proficiency. Al-Zahrani found that there were significant differences in students' knowledge of collocations at different academic levels. In addition, there was a strong correlation between the participants' knowledge of collocations and their overall language proficiency. She also pointed out that the writing test was a good predictor of students' knowledge of collocations.

Bonk (2000) examined the relationship between Knowledge of Lexical Collocations and language proficiency from both receptive and productive aspects. The results showed that the subjects' receptive knowledge, using the multiple-choice test, and productive knowledge, using the fill-in-the-blank test, of verb-noun and verb-preposition collocations strongly correlated with overall language proficiency ($r = .73$). Liu (2000) led the field in investigating the effects of collocation instruction on students' writing performance. Having given her students a series of twenty-minute mini-lessons on collocations, she found that the students in the second composition generated a greater number and variety of acceptable lexical collocations, although they did not improve much in their writing of the second composition. The major findings of Tseng (2002) study included: (1) students did not exhibit obvious improvement in their performance on the composition after receiving the collocation instruction, but it improved their vocabulary development; (2) Knowledge of Lexical Collocations was associated with reading comprehension; (3) the subjects also reported positive attitudes toward the direct teaching of collocations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research design of the present study is quasi-experimental, since intact classes are used, not randomly chosen students. It obtains volunteer participants from Chabahar Maritime University (CMU). Forty-three students (25 female, and 18 male) from the English Department of Chabahar Maritime University were involved in this study. They were at different classes, eleven of them were doing their first year (freshmen), seventeen students were in their second year (sophomore), and fifteen students were in the third year (junior). Their ages ranged from 18 to 23. Their first language is Farsi, also called Persian, which is the official language of Islamic Republic of Iran. They were all doing their B.A. in Translation Studies. Before entering the university, they had studied English course for 6 years, 4 hours each week, but mostly reading and grammar.

To gather the necessary data, three different instruments were used in this study. The first instrument employed in this research was a 50-item fill-in-the-blank test of collocations. It included 5 different types of collocations: Verb+ Noun (earn money), Adjective+ Noun (good shape), Noun+ Verb (heart beats), Adverb+ Adjective (highly successful), and Verb+ Adverb (agree completely). For each type, there were 10 fill-in-the-blank questions. The questions consisted of some sentences in which one of the words was deleted, and the first letter of the missing word was given to help the students guess the target word. It was used to measure the participants' knowledge of lexical collocations. The test was adopted from an M.A. thesis written by Chiu (2006) in National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology in Taiwan. It was originally a 70-item test, but after piloting and validating reduced to a 50-item fill-in-the-blank test.

The second instrument used was a writing test. In order to measure their writing ability, students wrote three essays. The topics for the three essays were taken from the book "*TOEFL test strategies*". They were given 1 hour to write an essay of around 250 words. The scoring procedures of TOEFL were the criteria against which the papers were scored. The writing scores ranged from 1 to 6. The researchers themselves marked the papers. The final mark for each student was the average of the scores given by the two raters. To ensure inter-

rater reliability, a practice session was held regarding the TOEFL scoring system, so that the two raters could fully understand the rating scale. But in order to ensure the consistency of the raters in scoring, they corrected the writings of 54 students and their inter-rater reliability was calculated. The inter-rater reliability of 0.85 was obtained which is quite high and statistically significant.

The researchers needed to assess the speaking abilities of the students. The speaking test lasted for about 12 minutes for each student. It consisted of two parts. The first part contained questions related to hometown, family, university, education, dormitories and daily life activities. The second part which was more difficult for the students was like the third part of the speaking test of IELTS. It contained open-ended questions about a specific topic demanding detailed answers giving reasons and justifications, and mostly contained “why” and “how” questions. The students were asked to explain, discuss, give reasons, describe, or sometimes put themselves in imaginary situations such as *what would you do if you.....?* The two researchers assigned scores to the students’ speaking according to the IELTS speaking test section. The speaking scores ranged from 1 to 6. And lastly, Pearson Correlation Co-efficient was used to see if there were any significant relationship between their writing, speaking scores and their Collocational Knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research question 1 was about the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations of Iranian university students majoring English translation at different academic levels. The descriptive statistics of the performances of students on the 50-item fill-in-the-blank test of lexical collocations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the Iranian university students’ performance on the test of collocation

Level of Education	Gender of the Participant	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Fresh	Male	29.5000	8.02081	4
	Female	28.0000	9.52190	7
	Total	28.5455	8.61816	11
Sophomore	Male	24.0769	6.83693	13
	Female	14.7500	5.31507	4
	Total	21.8824	7.54886	17
Junior	Male	27.3750	2.50357	8
	Female	28.2857	4.60848	7
	Total	27.8000	3.52947	15
Total	Male	26.0000	6.15765	25
	Female	25.1667	8.79338	18
	Total	25.6512	7.28953	43

In general, Iranian university students could answer just more than 50% of the test. The mean score of Iranian students on the test of lexical collocations was 25.65, indicating that Iranian university students are weak in lexical collocations, since they had studied English before, and are doing their B.A. in English Translation Studies, being chosen from among around one million students. The second point worth mentioning is that male students had a better performance on the collocation test. However, this difference does not seem to be statistically significant. The mean score for boys was 26, while girls mean score was 25.16 out of 50. Boys had a better performance than girls in both first-year and second-year class, but female students could surpass boys only in junior class. As regards the performances of the students at different academic levels, the results were quite surprising. The best performance belonged to the fresh students whose mean score was 28.54, followed by juniors who had a lower mean score (27.80). The last important point in this section is the subgroups that had the best and worst performances in the lexical collocation test. Fresh Male students achieved the highest mean scores among the six subgroups, with the mean score of 29.50. And finally, the students with the lowest mean score were Female Sophomores (14.75).

The second research question sought to explore the possible correlation between the speaking abilities of the students and their Collocational Knowledge. Table 2 presents the results of the Pearson correlation co-efficient between students’ General Speaking Proficiency and their Knowledge of Lexical Collocations. When the correlation reaches a significant level at 0.05, it would be marked by one asterisk; and if significant at 0.01, it would be marked by two asterisks.

Table 2: The correlation between General Speaking Proficiency and Knowledge of Lexical Collocations

	Knowledge of Lexical Collocation	
General Speaking Proficiency	R=0.239	p=0.089 R2= 0.05

The results in Table 2 indicate that the correlation between Knowledge of Lexical Collocations and the speaking scores of students ($r = 0.239$, $p < 0.05$, $r^2 = .05$) was not significant. However, this is just one study with 43 students in a particular situation. This finding corresponded with Hsu's (2002) study in which he found that there was no strong relationship between the subjects' quantity of collocations and their speaking performance. However, it is quite contrary to the finding of the previous researchers who showed positive relation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and other skills such as speaking proficiency (Sung, 2003), language proficiency (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000). This indicates that KLC cannot be a strong indicator of the subjects' general English proficiency. This might be due to the fact that most of the students who are fluent in speaking and got a high score in this test have gone to English classes for years before entering the universities. Unfortunately, all the language institutes in Iran devote all or most of the time of the classes to conversation and nothing else. As a result, it is not surprising to see students who are quite proficient in one skill, but very poor in other skills such as vocabulary, or grammar. Even in universities in Iran, the teachers and material designers do not pay any attention to the teaching of collocations in the classes and course books. Most of the students even do not know what collocation is. The second reason is that Al-Zahrani (1998) and Bonk (2000) compared the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations with overall proficiency, not just speaking. Thus, the scores are more likely to reflect the real level of the students and knowledge. Being skillful in just one skill cannot guarantee a high score in the proficiency test. Furthermore, students learn the collocation through direct instruction or indirect exposure to listening and reading, not in conversation classes which focus one book such as New Interchange, or Headway. To further investigate this question, or to see the possible impact of collocation on language skills, more studies should be carried out in this regard.

The third research question asked: To what extent is the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations (KLC) correlated with the General Writing Proficiency (GWP) among Iranian university students? Their Knowledge of Lexical Collocations was measured through a 50-item fill-in-the-blank test, and their writing ability through writing three essays. They were asked to write three essays in order to give the raters a more comprehensive picture of their ability, because in writing one essay, the students might not be able to show their real ability in English Writing, due to unfamiliarity with the topic, or not being in good mood on that particular day. In other words, the examiners had three opportunities to assess the level of the student in writing. The researchers corrected the papers, assigning marks of 1 to 6 to them. Table 3 displays the results related to the correlation between the final writing scores of the students, and their Collocational Knowledge.

Table 3: Pearson correlation between General Writing Proficiency and Knowledge of Lexical Collocations

General Writing Proficiency	Knowledge of Lexical Collocation		
		R=0.675**	R2=0.45

As the results indicate, the correlation between Knowledge of Lexical Collocations and the writing scores of students ($r = 0.675$, $p < 0.05$, $r^2 = .45$) was significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels. In the same manner, the results of previous studies also showed positive relationship between the knowledge of collocations and other certain language skills, such as writing (Zhang, 1993); language proficiency (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000), reading (Lien, 2003) and speaking (Sung, 2003). Thus, it could be concluded that knowledge of collocations is indicative of non-native speakers' language proficiency. One possible explanation might be that productive skills take time to come to fruition, and this seems to be true with collocations understanding too. Collocations are mostly learned after being seen, and used in different contexts, they take more time to be internalized than single-item vocabulary.

Table 4 shows a summary of the results related to the correlations between the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations and the scores of three different essays.

Table 4: Pearson correlation between three essay scores and Knowledge of Lexical Collocations

	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3
Collocational Knowledge	$r = .564^{**}$	$r = .740^{**}$	$r = .338$
	$p = .002$	$p = .000$	$p = .079$
	$r^2 = 0.31$	$r^2 = 0.54$	$r^2 = 0.10$

The results show that the correlation coefficients between the Knowledge of Lexical Collocations and the scores of both topic 1 and 2 are significant. Therefore, it can be safely said that there is a significant correlation between the students' knowledge of collocations and their writing scores in topics 1 and 2. However, the correlation between their writing scores in topic three and their overall Knowledge of Lexical Collocations is not significant. One reason might be that the topics 1 and 2 are more familiar than topic three; this familiarity might create a situation for the students to be able to show their ability to the full. Nevertheless, one point must be restated here; that the overall writing score or final score which is the average of the three scores significantly correlates with the Collocational Knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that Iranian university students were weak in the test of lexical collocations. Taiwanese students could answer almost 67% of the collocations test questions. The researcher thought this situation was bad, but worse was to follow. The students at different academic levels did not perform differently on the test of collocations; it means the last year students could not answer more than the fresh students. Thus, the students who are already weak in collocational knowledge before entering the university do not make a statistically significant progress in their knowledge of collocation after years of studying as English majors. Freshmen had the best performance, in other words, they not only do not learn new collocations in the university, but they also seem to forget some of the vocabulary they knew at the beginning.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated that knowledge of lexical collocations is significantly associated with Iranian university EFL learners' written English. In other words, increasing the students' Knowledge of Lexical Collocations might seem beneficial for their writing proficiency. Accordingly, language teachers could adjust their syllabuses to increase the teaching of collocations and introduce the notion of collocations into their classroom practice. Beyond doubt, sufficient materials for acquiring Knowledge of Lexical Collocations are vitally important for both language teachers and EFL learners. Researchers pinpoint three main sources for teaching and learning collocations; textbooks, collocational dictionaries and corpora. First of all, language teachers could use textbooks to train students to identify collocations and help students to become aware of collocations in the classroom. Furthermore, dictionaries are good instruments for EFL learners to improve their collocational knowledge. Language teachers could introduce some collocational dictionaries to students and train them to make full use of collocational dictionaries, especially in writing classes. It will help learners to master collocations well, and cultivate them to be independent in learning collocations. Lastly, an on-line corpus database would be a convenient source to help EFL learners access rich collocations collected from native English-speaking communities.

Richards and Rogers (2001) recommended that teaching activities in the classroom should "draw students' attention to lexical collocations and seek to enhance their retention and use of collocations" (p. 137). Language teachers, therefore, should increase exposure to collocations in order to train the students to use collocations appropriately and eventually help the students to become independent learners of collocations in their future learning. To put it more precisely, the emphasis on collocations in the classroom could be one feasible and effective technique for teachers to improve their students' language performance.

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