

# **INTERLANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND COLLOCATIONAL CLASH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The rationale behind this study was to touch the lexical aspect of IL development to investigate whether learning only one sense of a word may lead to collocational clash and vocabulary misplacement, and if so, is it a major source of errors in second language acquisition or not? In order for the researcher to conduct the required studies, two directional hypotheses were presented: H1: Learning only one sense of a word results in vocabulary misplacement and collocational clash, and consequently, H2: Vocabulary misplacement and collocational clash may be considered as main sources of errors in second language acquisition. Sixty male low-intermediate EFL students were randomly assigned to two groups, experimental and control. Though the two groups covered the same instructional materials, the experimental group was exposed to experiment-specific treatment (EST), whereas the control group received the normal instruction. Finally, an experiment-achievement test (EAT) was administered to both groups. The results indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group in obtained t and F-values. This led the researcher to claim a new process: Lexical misconception, misplacement, and miscolllocation.*

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since the publication of Corder's paper **The Significance of Learner's Errors** and his introduction of 'transitional competence' or 'idiosyncratic dialect' (1967), followed by Nemser's 'approximative systems' (1971), and, finally, Selinker's 'interlanguage' (1972), the field of SLA has been overwhelmed by research concerning second language learner's language system through phonological, morphological, syntactic, and more recently, pragmatic studies. This study intended to contemplate an outstanding part of lexical aspect of IL

development, which has, in different ways, been underplayed by scholars in the field of SLA research (Singleton, 1997; Tarone, 1988; Gass and Selinker, 1994; Sharwood-Smith, 1994, among others).

For the EFL/ESL learner it is the difficulty or impossibility of both internalizing the exact nature of the interrelationships and acquiring the native speaker's awareness of degrees of polysemy and figurative extensions, and at the same time, his/her sensitivity to formal, collocational and idiomatic restrictions on lexical choice. All second language learners probably begin by assuming that for every word in their mother tongue there is a single translation- equivalent in the second language (Blum-Kulka and Levenston, 1983). Learners often create inappropriate nuances in their choice of lexical items because they are unaware of the extra senses that these words 'smell' off, and the further conditions and relations they enter. The present investigator has encountered common lexical errors in Iranian-English learners in different classes. Some examples will clarify the point:

- 1)     **\*The teacher refused me last term.**  
      **for**  
      **The teacher failed me last term.**
- 2)     **\*I adopted 88 on the test.**  
      **for**  
      **I got 88 on the test.**
- 3)     **\*I am eating tea now.**  
      **for**  
      **I am drinking tea now.**
- 4)     **\*I went home with taxi.**  
      **for**  
      **I went home by taxi.**
- 5)     **\*The teacher took an exam today.**  
      **for**  
      **The teacher gave an exam today.**  
      **or**

The students took an exam today.

6) \*I am reading in weak light.

for

I am reading in poor light.

It seems apparent that lack of appropriate knowledge of other senses of words and their collocability with other words has affected acquisition and has consequently resulted in lexical misconception, misplacement, and miscollocation, which will be the topic of another article (Shahheidari, forthcoming). Knowledge of lexicon includes how to combine elements to create novel lexical items, and the problem for the learner is how not to be innovative and to stick to standard combinations. Lexicon has proved to be the most important component of the language, and lexical errors are believed to be the most serious outnumbering grammatical errors by an approximate three to one ratio and are found to be more disruptive (Meara, 1984). Selinker (1992: 127) believes that "once again rethinking of the literature provides an ordered hypothesis, here lexical acquisition, taking primary focus".

Lexicon, though an important component of the language and SLA, i.e. the driving force in sentence production, language production mediator leading to comprehensible input, and helping to determine syntactic relationships, has been considered a passive component in the creative aspect of language knowledge (Adjemian, 1983). Learners and native speakers of a language recognize the importance of getting the word right. They need good lexical skills to produce sentences and to understand them. Knowing which words go together is an important part of understanding meaning (Mollanazar, 1997). Larson (1984: 127) has suggested, "The translator must constantly be alert to the potential pitfalls of collocational clashes in the translation. To avoid this, he will suspect any word not used in its primary sense", and so will the foreign/second language learner. Within the cognitive framework of foreign language learning and teaching, according to Faerch and Kasper (1983), it seems reasonable that learners should be made aware of communication problems they might face, and of devices they can use in order to solve them; thus a process of 'consciousness-raising' should be a part of foreign

language teaching. It is, therefore, necessary to highlight and establish essential background for different senses of a word and its collocations, and to provide students with systematic procedures for word derivations and contextual inferences than to teach long lists of vocabulary items.

The 1970s saw the decline of behavioral mode of thinking and structural linguistics with the upsurge of cognitive mode of thinking and generative linguistics in which the learner was seen as an autonomous creator of language systems. According to Selinker (1992), currently there are three different theoretical approaches to the nature of SLA, each of which makes significantly different claims and predictions about IL development. First and perhaps the most significant claim of 'transitional competence' hypothesis strongly believes in the transitional nature of learner's language, i.e. "a dynamic, goal-oriented system of increasing complexity" (Corder, 1981: 90). The second approach, 'approximative system' hypothesis, claims that the learner's language evolves in directional stages towards target language norms and these stages are 'discrete' (Nemser, 1971). Finally, the third approach, IL hypothesis, denies approximate nature of IL and introduces the phenomenon of 'fossilization' from the very early IL development (Tarone, Cohen, & Dumas, 1976).

Interlanguage is a continuum between L1 and L2 along which learners traverse. At any point along this continuum, the learner's language is systematic. i.e. rule-governed, and common to all learners, any difference being explicable by differences in their learning experiences, which do not suggest a steady growth in the mastery of IL (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). Selinker (1972) has proposed that five central processes existed in a latent psychological structure could be activated for the purpose of learning another language after the close of the critical period for language acquisition, i.e. native language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning, strategies of L2 communication, and finally overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

Within the area of language learning, the emergence of analyses of learner input and of the interaction learners participate in has led to better understanding of the general principles which govern learning process. Learning L2 refers to the

processes whereby the learner discovers the rules (pragmatic, semantic, syntactic and phonological) of L2 and gradually comes to master them, thereby developing a continuum of IL systems. Faerch and Kasper (1983: XX) have stated, "It might be more feasible to analyze how learners can make the best use of whatever specific knowledge they have of L2, in addition to their L1, in cases where L2 knowledge is insufficient for the attainment of a particular communication goal". L2 learners systematically try to express meaning in the TL, in situations where the appropriate systematic target rules have not been formed (Tarone et al., 1976).

Learners seem to have differing degree of knowledge of their L2 lexicon. Gass and Selinker (1994: 272) have suggested that, "The major task of second language lexical research is to discover what second language learners know about the lexicon of the second language, how they learn it, and why this particular path of development is followed". L2 learners need a massive amount of information to copy the lexical knowledge of competent native speakers. Mere distinguishing is not adequate; full semantic description of function and form is necessary. It is not sufficient only to know the meanings of individual words; they need to be consciously made aware of differences, and the different skills that language learners and users employ in sentence-production processes, word perception, word formation and word combinations, collocations, and phraseology. In the vexed area of idiomatic and lexical items which apparently consist of more than one word, no reliable method has yet been found to encompass these and to isolate them from their context, which is the first pre-requisite for conventional linguistic description. The challenge to speculation and abstract inventiveness is growing as our ability to recognize the data becomes more secure, and the role of grammatical choices as indicating meaning is becoming more and more suspect. The acquisition of lexical rules will in fact simplify the task of acquiring a native command of the lexicon since it will express a generalization thereby reducing the need for memorization and deciphering from the contextual rules each time a new item occurs.

The distinction between word-meaning and phrase-meaning is of considerable importance in language study, and it is believed that word-meaning is

independent while phrase-meaning is dependent. Between these two points the collocations are located, where we can witness the tendency for words to co-occur, though they remain largely independent choices. Presently, many L2 learners avoid the common words as much as possible, and particularly where they make up the idiomatic phrases. Instead of using them, they may rely on larger, rarer, and clumsier words which make their language sound stilted and awkward; not certainly being their fault, nor that of their teachers who can only work within available linguistic descriptions.

Words differ in connotations, in collocability, in degree of formality, in other register restrictions, and in their abilities to combine into idioms. A word may be given not only a greater range of referential meanings, it may be used with inappropriate connotations, deviant collocations, too (in)formally, in the wrong register, un-idiomatically (Blum-Kulka and Levenston, 1983). The combinations which form a semantically correct and meaningful whole in one language may not do so in another, leading to different collocational ranges. This means that lexical acquisition involves more than establishing the meaning of the individual items.

## **2. Method**

The following methodology was employed to test the stated hypotheses.

### **2.1. Population and Sampling**

Sixty low-intermediate male EFL students, aged 17-25, at Iran Language Institute in Kerman, were screened out from among 286 level 5 students through administering the Oxford Placement Test. Every possible measure was taken to make sure of the homogeneity of the subjects in terms of language proficiency. The selected subjects were randomly assigned to the groups: experimental and control.

### **2.2. Materials**

The materials used in this study consisted of instructional materials and measurement tools as follows:

### **2.2.1. Instructional Materials**

**The instructional materials were 150 collocations and words chosen from A Course in English: Books 3, 4, and 5 used at Iran Language Institute (ILI). More than 50% collocational and sense related lexical items were selected and designed to be explicitly taught to the experimental group (EG) and were implicitly taught to the control group (CG) by the researcher himself throughout an eleven-week long-term with two one-hundred and twenty-minute sessions each week for both groups.**

### **2.2.2. Measurement Tools**

**Oxford Placement Test was used as a pre-test measure to ensure the linguistic-proficiency homogeneity of the participants.**

**An experiment-achievement test (EAT), comprising four multiple-choice modules, namely, sense, cloze, reading comprehension, and translation-equivalent, was administered at the end of the instruction program. The sense module consisted of 20 items using different senses of the lexical items: adopted, fail, field, get, and make to infer how the two groups react to different sense of a word when the distracters are meanings of the same word used in different contexts. The cloze module comprised a passage, followed by 20 multiple-choice items selected through 'variable-ratio' method to assess possible collocations in the performance of the subjects to observe how the subjects perform on more integrative tests of linguistic knowledge. The reading comprehension module was composed of a passage followed by 10 multiple-choice items intended to assess the subjects' comprehension in order to decide whether their comprehension would be hampered due to misconception, misplacement, and miscollocation of lexical items or not. The translation-equivalent (Persian-English) module comprised of 20 sense and collocational multiple-choice items with a missing word-blank in the English version of the stem to check the cognitive role of the mother tongue in the second language learning process and whether it has a positive or negative role in the subjects' performance on a collocational and sense related test.**

### 2.3. Procedures

The Oxford Placement Test was administered at the beginning of the program to choose the participants, based on their proficiency at the desired level (low-intermediate).

The control group received normal eclectic method of teaching, mostly audio lingual-based instruction of every subject of instruction, while the experimental group received the normal instruction for the course and the experiment-specific treatment (EST) on collocation and sense of the selected lexical items; i.e., collocational relations and different senses were exemplified, elaborated on, and highlighted through the course and the subjects were made consciously aware.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

A t-test was run to make sure that the two groups were homogeneous at the entry point. Another t-test was run to find out the differences between the means of the two groups at the end of the program. A factorial analysis of variance was run to determine the probable significant differences in the performance of the subjects on EAT and its different modules.

## 3. Results

t-value results demonstrated that both groups were homogeneous at the initial point after the administration of the Oxford Placement Test ( $t(56) = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.89$ ). Whereas the second t-test after EST revealed that the difference between the means of the two groups was highly significant and the experimental group outperformed the control group ( $t(57) = 5.29$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) (see Table 1 below)

Table 1 T-test Results before and after EST

Variable	t-value	df	p
Pre-test	0.14	56	0.89
EAT	5.29	57	0.000



Table 2 presents the results of the factorial analysis of variance which was to investigate the reported differences between the experimental group and the control group concerning their performance on EAT and its different modules, and group and module interaction. The results indicated significant differences due to group ( $F(1, 232) = 52.96, p=0.000$ ) and due to test modules ( $F(3, 232) = 83.36, p=0.000$ ). However the results demonstrated that the interaction between groups and modules did not reach the desired significance at  $p<0.05$  ( $F(3, 232) = 2.18, p = 0.092$ ).

**Table 2 Factorial Analysis of Variance**

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Group	1	9437.6	9437.6	52.96	0.000
Module	3	44566.1	14855.4	83.36	0.000
Group* Module	3	1163.6	387.9	2.18	0.092
Error	232	41344.2	178.2		
Total	239	96511.5			

Table 3 (below) is included to illustrate the performance of the two groups through descriptive statistics for further clarification.

**Table 3 Basic Descriptive Statistics on EAT**

Variable	No. of Subjects		Mean		SD	
	CG	EG	CG	EG	CG	EG
EAT	30	30	63.07	76.5	9.68	10
Cloze	30	30	66.83	80.17	14.63	16.95
Sense	30	30	53.83	61.67	9.53	7.58
Reading Comp.	30	30	35	54.17	14.08	17.42
Trans. Equi.	30	30	74	84.5	10.78	12.35

#### 4. Discussion

As it seems apparent from the results of the study, the subjects in the experimental group, who were dominantly exposed to EST, highly significantly outperformed the control group who were exposed to normal instruction on EAT and its different modules. The above-mentioned results seem to confirm the hypotheses of the study, and they reveal that special attention to collocational relations and different senses of the words will lead to better performance of the subjects; thus, reducing their misconception of the senses and relations. Seal (1991) has argued that, "part of what a second language learner needs to know, then, in order to combine individual lexical items is whether they collocate and with what degree of frequency". He further adds that, "such knowledge would clearly facilitate the learner's ability to encode language, since when selecting items to co-occur with other items, the learner would be aware of the restricted range of possibilities". It would be easier for the learner to encode or decode a message when he/she possesses the useful knowledge of collocational ranges and senses of words. The researcher, following the views of scholars in the field believing that this knowledge can be imparted to the learner, tried to make the subjects in the study aware of the relations and senses, and that seems to be the reason the experimental group outperformed the control group, i.e. on EAT and its four modules.

From cloze module results, it seems apparent that sense and collocational relation teaching does make a difference, especially in more integrative tests of linguistic knowledge (EGmean=80.17, CGmean=66.83). It may be inferred from the statistical results that second language learners face a vast amount of problems concerning the different senses of a word. Though the experimental group outperformed the control group ((EGmean=61.67, CGmean=53.85), the burden of an L2 teacher and learner in native-like knowledge seems challenging and calls for more controlled research. As for the reading comprehension module, the results suggest that L2 learners' comprehension would be highly hampered due to misconception, misplacement and miscollocation of lexical items and challenges more research. EG had a better performance over that of CG (EGmean=54.17,

CGmean=35). The results, pertaining to translation-equivalent module, were surprising. Though the two groups performed satisfactorily on this module, the experimental group outperformed the control group (EGmean=84.5, CGmean=74). It reintroduces the long-debated question of whether mother-tongue equivalents will ease or hamper the second language learning process. The results indicate that there is a cognitive role for mother-tongue which its where's and when's must be carefully studied with more detailed experimental research. The results of this study suggest that we are to consider a positive role for mother-tongue in the IL development.

The results of this study seem to be highly in favor of the stated hypotheses that learning only one sense of a word results in vocabulary misplacement and collocational clashes and thus, considered as main sources of errors in SLA.

## **5. Conclusion**

The weaknesses and limitations of this study notwithstanding, it offers a new insight and sheds more light on the nature of collocations and different senses of a word, both for practical and theoretical purposes. Clearly, any lexicon includes a range from simple isolated words to compound and complex words, collocations, formulaic cliché phrases and tightly bound idioms which result in meaning differences (Hatch and Brown, 1995). Thus, a need for the learners' awareness of different relations and combinations seems to be of first priority in learning a second/foreign language; i.e. the study of lexical sequences will help learners to extend their vocabulary and finally their knowledge of speaking and writing rules. The more the subjects in this study were involved in consciousness- and awareness-raising and input enhancing tasks, the better they performed on EAT, and finally the less errors they committed.

## **6. Implications**

### **6.1. Theoretical Implications**

The results and findings of the study lead the researcher to claim an eminent central process to be present in what Selinker (1972) has called 'latent

psychological structure' in addition, or as a modification, to his five central processes; i.e., a new eminent process involved in learners' errors- lexical misconception, misplacement, and miscollocation. This newly suggested process can embody all forms of transfer, overgeneralization and learning strategies concerning lexical items, as illustrated by typical errors in Section 1, whether they are of native or target language origin. The researcher believes that this process seems to be generalizable to other aspects of language but requires further research.

## **6.2. Pedagogical Implications**

Though the relationship between theory and teaching has always been complex, foreign language teaching, because of its own status and responsibility, has the right to tap theories and descriptions whenever they help the teaching/learning process (Nickel, 1998). The problematic evaluation of errors is undoubtedly primarily a pedagogical process. Singleton (1997), reviewing the present state of learning and processing L2 vocabulary, has inferred that, "the teaching of given lexical items needs to address not only individual forms and concepts, but also- at the very least- 'local' syntax and collocational environments" (p. 222), i.e. both formal and semantic aspects of words need to be given attention in teaching/learning process. It seems plausible to the researcher that:

- a) Language teachers would find the information in this study about collocations and senses of a word useful.
- b) Material and syllabus designers may benefit from the findings of this study through designing and preparing suitable instructional materials and course contents in which specific care and salience is given to collocations and word senses.
- c) Teachers can prepare their lesson plans in a way to elaborate more on different properties of a word and its consequent collocations.

## **7. Suggestions for Further Research**

**This project was an attempt to stipulate the collocational and sense-related aspect of lexical items in low-intermediate language learners due to practical limitations and which the researcher thought to be the suitable level. Further research is required to demonstrate:**

- a) Whether vocabulary misplacement and collocational clash will be a main source of errors in high-intermediate and advanced learners.**
- b) Which aspect, collocational clash or sense, will be the main source of errors in L2 learners?**
- c) Whether collocation and sense teaching makes any difference in language learners and what a better course content can be in this relation?**
- d) Which other aspects of lexical items, such as idioms and metaphors, replicate the same results?**
- e) What will the role of translation-equivalents be on higher levels of language comprehension and production such as paragraphs and passages?**

**To sum up, the researcher hopes that this study has provided some motivations for further investigations by envisaging some interesting and provoking research questions in the field of second language acquisition, particularly interlanguage development.**

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*Sample words and collocations used:*

1. address
2. apply for
3. as a rule
4. at a snail's pace
5. bear away
6. deal with
7. deposit
8. eggs hatch
9. exchange glances
10. follow directions
11. fond of
12. fond of
13. fool around/about
14. get rid of
15. in a flash
16. in return for
17. keep an appointment
18. kill appetite
19. look forward to
20. major in
21. make a suggestion
22. make an attempt
23. make progress
24. make sure
25. make up one's mind
26. pay attention to
27. pay attention to
28. poor light
29. refer to
30. snap at
31. such as
32. sweet smile
33. tackle with
34. take charge
35. take offence
36. take piano lessons
37. take pictures
38. track and field
39. wear glasses
40. write poetry

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