

# The Use of Verb Noun Collocations in Writing Stories among Iranian EFL Learners

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## Abstract

An important aspect of native speakers' communicative competence is collocational competence which involves knowing which words usually come together and which do not. This paper investigates the possible relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in writing stories because collocational knowledge distinguishes native speakers and foreign language learners and is a significant factor in productive skills especially writing. This study examined the correlation between knowledge of verb noun collocations and their use in written essays. The participants in the study were 27 PhD Iranian students in a Malaysian university. A specially constructed C-test measured the subjects' collocational knowledge and the use of collocations was measured by the number of collocations used in essays written by the subjects. For this purpose, participants wrote six different stories in six weeks based on a writing task designed to illicit verb noun collations. The statistical results demonstrate that there exists a strong positive relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in the writing stories.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, Collocation, Writing, Iran

## 1. Introduction

Collocations are a part of communicative competence and can be defined as a group of words that "fit together" intuitively at syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels and are examined widely in many areas of linguistics, such as semantics, systemic linguistics, morpho-syntax, phraseology, corpus linguistics, and lexicography. Linguists investigating collocations at the lexical level view collocations as the linear and syntagmatic co-occurrence of lexical items (Firth, 1957; Halliday, 1966, Sinclair, 1966). For example, putrid and rancid are synonymous, but putrid collocates with fish and rancid with butter. Collocations at the syntactic level are argued as structural word phrases involving grammatical patterns and are syntactically restricted (Greenbaum, 1996; G Kjellmer, 1984; Mitchell, 1971; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2005). For instance, phrasal verbs like make a mistake cannot be replaced with \*commit a mistake. On the semantic level, collocations are language chunks with semantic restrictions to some degree, such as Good morning as a greeting which cannot be substituted by \*nice morning (Cowie, Mackin, & MaCaig, 1983; Howarth, 1998; Lewis, 1997; Nation, 2001). Collocational knowledge is viewed as a very important issue in writing as it is seen to discriminate native speakers from foreign language learners. The aim of this paper is to study the relationship between knowledge of collocations among doctoral level non native speakers of the English language and their use of verb noun collocations in writing stories.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 What are collocations?

Collocational competence is a central component of native speakers' communicative competence (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Fontenelle, 1994; Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007; Lennon, 1998; Moon, 1998). Wray (2000; 2002a, 2002b) argues that every society creates a group of idiomatic expressions to state their thoughts by favouring, merely through

repeated use, some whole phrases and a great deal of incomplete ones. This formulaic language can be very challenging for second or foreign language learners, more so for those who possess a low level of communicative competence. Numerous investigators have acknowledged that collocational knowledge is a very important factor that helps distinguish between native speakers and foreign language learners (Aston, 1995; Fillmore, 1979; G. Kjellmer, 1991; Pawley & Syder, 1983). McArthur (1992) and McCarthy (1990) even consider that the lack of collocational knowledge is the most important sign of foreignness among foreign language learners. The most robust declaration of the importance of collocation, however, is that collocational competence is a vital element in the development of second/foreign language learning (Lewis, 1997; 2000; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Collocations can be categorised into different types according to various perspectives. The compilers of *The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, Cowie, Mackin, and MaCaig (1983), use idiomaticity to classify collocations and idioms into four groups from most to least fixed: pure idioms, figurative idioms, restricted collocations, and open collocations. Pure idioms, such as *blow the gaff*, are the most fixed with semantic opacity. Figurative idioms, such as *catch fire* and *a close shave*, are more transparent and not quite fixed. 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 *mad dog*. Howarth (1998) also regards free combination like *nice day* as collocations and categorises collocations into free collocations and restricted collocations according to their degree of restrictedness.

In *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations*, Benson, Benson, & Illson (1997) illustrate two kinds of collocations by their syntactic nature. They argue that there are two categories of collocations: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. A grammatical collocation is a phrase which consists of a content word (a noun, a verb, or an adjective) plus a grammatical word like a preposition or grammatical structure, e.g. a clause or an infinitive. Examples include *account for*, *by accident*, and *argument about*. Lexical collocations, on the other hand, exclude prepositions, infinitives or clauses and contain various combinations of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, such as *affect deeply* and *bees buzz*. In the *BBI Dictionary of English Word Combination*, there are eight main types of grammatical collocations and seven types of lexical collocations. Nevertheless, the authors do not include "free combinations" in their dictionary which are, in effect, limitless.

In addition to the categorisation of different types of collocations as discussed above, Lewis (1997) indicates that collocations may be strong, weak, frequent or infrequent. Lewis divides collocations into strong and weak ones according to their fixedness and restrictedness, and distinguishes collocations from frequent and infrequent ones due to their frequency of co-occurrence in a corpus. Strong collocations are recognised as tightly linked phrases which almost function like single words like *Good night*. In contrast, weak collocations, such as *a beautiful girl* and *bad luck*, are combinations of two common words, and each of which can combine with many other words. Collocations can also be any combination of strong and frequent, strong and infrequent, weak and frequent, or weak and infrequent.

## *2.2 Theory and research in studies on collocations.*

Sinclair (1991) studied the notion of collocation and suggested that both the spoken and written mode of human discourse is governed by two major principles: the Open Principle (OP) and the Idiom Principle (IP), which noticeably contrast in their orientation. The OP relates to the Chomskyan School of linguistics and the theory of Universal Grammar which involves the ability to grammaticalise meaning in natural language in agreement with sub-categorisation and selectional limits rules, while permitting for parametric dissimilarities between every language. The IP, on the other hand, is associated with phraseologies which do not initiate from free grammaticalisation as in the OP, but from a grouping of socio-lexical conventions in any given language. For example, the English greeting *Good morning* obtains its adequacy from the IP rather than the OP; thus the unavailability of *Excellent morning* or *Wonderful morning* as greetings in English. The lexeme *morning* freely collocates with adjectives such as *excellent*, *wonderful*, *nice*, *terrible*, and *humid* according to the OP, however, extensively collocates with the adjective *good* in the greeting, hence producing the frozen collocation *Good morning* through the IP rather than the OP (Farghal & Al-Hamly, 2007).

The literature review illustrates that there exists a need for experimental research on the relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in stories written by non-native speakers of English. There is a lot of research on oral production of narrative (such as Birjandi & Ahangari, 2008; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Iwashita, McNamara, & Elder, 2000; Skehan & Foster, 1999), but there are few on the use of verb noun collocations in written narratives. Ghadessy (1998) compared the use of collocations in written narratives among

two groups of primary school children in Singapore and found that learners used more collocations at more advanced levels. Zhang (1993) conducted a study measuring the correlation between the EFL learners' use of lexical collocations and their writing fluency. He observed the quality of using collocations rather than the quantity differentiates between native and non-native college freshman writing and also between good and bad college freshman writing. In a similar way, Hsu (2007) found that the quality of lexical collocations in terms of variety showed the quality of the online writing of Taiwanese EFL college students who were both English and non-English majors. Fan (2009) used two corpora of the writing of Hong Kong ESL and native-speaker British students. The results of the study indicate that the Hong Kong students' performance in collocational use could be negatively affected by their L1, L2 and also by their inadequacy in the lexis and grammar of the target language. These studies show that there is a need to do research on the use of collocations that are naturally produced in the writing stories among Iranian PhD learners in Malaysia.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research question

The present study adds to and expands those previous studies and has used a c-test and stories written by the respondents in order to measure the relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in writing stories. The C-test has been proposed by Klein-Braley and Raatz (C. Klein-Braley, 1985). The beneficial aspects the C-test, which is similar to the classic cloze test and is based on the principle of reduced redundancy testing, is that it has an easy to administer test format, is fast as it involves objective scoring, and is highly reliable (Eckes, 2006; Klein-Braley, 1985; 1997). Numerous empirical evidences support a positive overall evaluation of C-tests as tests of general language proficiency because it requires the combination of both skills and knowledge: a core competence in all types of language use. Furthermore, lexical competence is needed in the processing of cloze tasks (including c-tests) with both knowledge of individual words and the ability to use contextual clues to find out which word fits a blank are required (Read, 2000, p. 113). The written stories of the respondents measure the use of collocations in the productive skill of writing. Hence, the current study tries to examine the relationship between collocational competence and the use of verb noun collocations in their written narratives. The study raises the following research question:

What is the relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocations in writing stories among Iranian EFL learners in Malaysia?

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 27 PhD Iranian students in the Department of Educational Studies at a Malaysian university. They were between 30 and 45 at the time of the study and are all native speakers of Persian. The PhD students signed up for this study voluntarily because they had problems in writing and wanted to practice different kinds of writing. It was decided that they would practice each genre for six weeks. The first genre was writing stories which were more interesting for them because they could write their own stories based on their personal experiences.

#### 3.3 Instrument

The instruments of this study were six writing tasks and a c-test. For the writing task, participants were given six different stories to write in six weeks. The topic of stories was selected by learners themselves before the first session. The topics were: A Picnic, An Accident, A Traffic Jam, Football, At the Restaurant, and Camping. Another instrument used in the study was a c-test which is similar to a cloze test. The c-test has been proposed by Klein-Braley and Raatz (Klein-Braley, 1985; Klein-Braley & Raatz, 1984) and in a traditional c-test; the second half of every key word in a phrase is crossed out leaving the first and last sentence of the passage intact. With the c-test, a clue (half the word) serves as a stimulus for respondents to find the other half. In this version of the c-test, only the first letter/phoneme of every deleted word was provided, for instance, "m\_\_\_\_\_ a mistake," "s\_\_\_\_\_ coffee," or "ch \_\_\_\_\_ his mind" in order to elicit the specific collocations intended for this research and to lessen the chance of guessing by subjects. In this study, the modified version of Al-Zahrani's (1998) c-test was used for collecting data.

#### 3.4 Procedure

The respondents were asked to individually write a 250 word composition for the mentioned topics for each week and complete each story within 45 minutes. They were not allowed to use any kind of reference books such as dictionaries in the classroom. Each week, the researcher and a research assistant collected the compositions, marked them holistically and gave them back to students. The number of verb noun collocations used was also counted. In the final session, the researcher explained to the participant that she was doing a research on verb noun collocations and asked them to participate in a collocational c-test which would be used to measure the collocational competence

of the subjects. Finally, the Pearson product moment correlation between the numbers of verb noun collocations used in the essays and the students' score on the collocational C-test was computed.

#### 4. Results

After the scatter plot had shown a linear relationship between students' collocational knowledge and their use of collocations in writing stories, the researcher used Pearson moment correlation to quantify the strength of such a relationship. The coefficient of determination was then calculated at 27 which showed students' overall proficiency helps to explain 34 per cent of the variance in respondent scores on the collocational knowledge. Introductory analyses were performed to make sure there were no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. According to Cohen's (1988) guideline, ( $r=.10$  to  $.29$  small,  $r=.30$  to  $.49$  or medium, and  $r=.50$  to  $1.0$  large), there was a strong, positive correlation between the two variables [ $r=.532$ ,  $n=27$ ,  $p<.0005$ ] with high levels of collocational knowledge associated with high levels of use of collocations when writing stories. Therefore, the results show there is a high correlation between the collocational knowledge of students and use of collocations in writing stories.

#### 5. Discussion

Regarding the research question, the results of the statistical analyses of the present study showed that there was a strong positive correlation between students' verb noun collocational knowledge as measured by the c-test and the use of collocations as used in the six writing tasks. The results of Pearson correlation supported the claim that the development of collocational knowledge was in line with the use of collocations in writing stories. It means that students at this level have learned and are willing to use collocations in writing stories. The implications of the findings of this study include the effectiveness of using the c-test as a measure of the use of collocations, and to a lesser extent, the possibility of using collocational competence as an indicator of language ability. The latter is especially interesting as collocations are seldom included in the English language curricula of most education systems. However, other variables, such as length of exposure to the target language, may affect the relationship between the two major variables in this study. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are in line with Zhang (1993), who observed that the quantity, yet more significantly, the quality of using collocations differentiate between native and non-native college freshman writing and also between good and bad college freshman writing; and Ghadessy (1998), who compared the use of collocations in writing stories among two groups of primary school children in Singapore and found that learners in more advanced levels used more collocations. Other studies also support the findings of this study, such as Hsu (2007), which found that the quality of lexical collocations in terms of variety showed the quality of the online writing of Taiwanese EFL college students, and Fan (2009), which indicate that the Hong Kong students' performance in collocational use could be negatively affected by their inadequacy in the lexis and grammar of the target language.

#### 6. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

The findings of the study show that there is a statistically significant relationship between collocational knowledge of students and their use of collocations in writing stories. It indicates that in vocabulary learning and teaching, the major role of collocations should be highlighted because collocational knowledge may be more beneficial to the students than knowledge of individual words. Students have to become aware of lexical collocations because such awareness has been considered an essential aspect of language learning (Brown, 1974; Coznet, 2000; Lewis, 2000). The current paper empirically supports this opinion and also Sinclair's (1991) idea about the vital role of the idiom principle. This leads to the basic rule of language use which is pedagogically at the heart of teaching and testing of language competence.

Based on the findings of this study, knowledge of collocations can contribute to the learners' comprehension and production. It means that a word can be best learned with which it associates because learners can remember the word with its associations or collocations. By memorising the collocations, students become aware of lexical restrictions that help them to use them as pre-packaged building blocks. Moreover in vocabulary learning and teaching, the significant role of collocations should be emphasised as Seal (1991) regards collocations as a vital characteristic of vocabulary knowledge and states that what should be offered to students is collocational knowledge not individual words. EFL/ESL teachers should make students aware of lexical collocations since the basic rule of language use is pedagogically at the heart of teaching and testing of language competence and should be used for the design of appropriate teaching resources and for the methodology of classroom instruction.

The study shows that there exists a relationship between the collocational knowledge and the use of collocations in writing stories by Iranian PhD students in a university in Malaysia, yet future larger scale studies involving both undergraduate and postgraduate students may be necessary in order to confirm the results of this study. In this study, the c-test was used to measure the verb noun collocations, but other studies should be designed to measure not only lexical collocations but also grammatical collocations. Furthermore, in this study, narrative writing was used to

measure the use of collocations, but further research is needed using other kinds of writing like expository to see whether students can use collocations correctly in other writing genre. Yet, much has to be done on the role of collocations in second or foreign language acquisitions, especially on the relationships with other language skills in EFL/ESL conditions.

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