

AN INVESTIGATION INTO IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' PRODUCTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS AND THE STRATEGIES APPLIED

Seyed Ali Mirsalari

*Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Islamic Azad University of Ramhormoz, Ramhormoz, Iran
Email: Gh.mirsalari@gmail.com*

Alireza Khoram

*Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.
Email: arkhoram2017@gmail.com*

Abstract

Collocations are one of the areas that create problems for EFL learners. Iranian EFL learners like other EFL learners encounter serious problems in producing collocations. The current study is an attempt to examine the Iranian EFL learners' ability to produce English collocations. It also attempts to identify the strategies that they usually adopt when they are not familiar with acceptable collocations in English. To this end, a sample of 60 Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level was given a 50- item test of collocations in the filling-the-blank format. They were asked to fill in each blank with the most appropriate *adjective* or *verb* that could produce an acceptable collocation with the bold *noun* in the sentence. The findings have revealed that Iranian university students had unsatisfactory performance in the production of English collocations. Of the total number of collocations produced, only 38.1 % were rendered correctly. With respect to use of various strategies, negative transfer with 28.4% ranked first, followed by synonymy 21.8% and avoidance 11.7 % respectively.

Keywords: collocation, productive knowledge, strategy use

INTRODUCTION

The term 'collocation', etymologically speaking, is derived from the Latin word 'collocare' (call= together + locare= to place) which implies putting or placing together. Firth (1957) was the scholar who made the term collocation widely known linguistically. Firth essentially perceived collocation as a means to get to a word's meaning. It was this view that made him majestically proclaim: "You shall know a word by the company it keeps!" (Firth, 1957, p. 179), thus giving collocation a central position in the theories of word meaning. He claimed that part of the

meaning of a word could be established by collocation, and he considered collocation as an abstraction at the syntagmatic level, "not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words" (Firth, 1957, p. 196).

It is commonly acknowledged that collocational competence plays a key role in successful language use. However, enhancing L2 collocational knowledge is a gradual process that poses serious obstacles for language learners. Recent empirical studies have identified several factors that may influence EFL learners' performance in

producing collocations. Some of these factors are semantic fields, meaning boundaries, and collocational restrictions. The semantic field of a lexical item is determined by its conceptual field. *Color*, *kinship* and *marital relations* are some examples of conceptual fields (Wood, 2015). Biskup (1992) examined Polish and German EFL learners' production of English collocations. He came to conclusion that the wider the semantic field of a given lexical item, the more L1 interference errors it might trigger. For instance, a several of subjects provided **lead a bookshop* for the target collocation *run a bookshop*, which was clearly an instance of L1 interference. Similarly, the more synonyms an item had, the more difficulties learners encountered in producing a restricted collocation. Boers, Lindstromberg, and Eyckmans (2014) also pointed out the reasons justifying learners' erroneous use of high frequency verbs such as *take*, *go*, and *put*. According to them, the main reason lies in these verbs' rich polysemy and syntactic complexity. As they formed phrases with prepositions, these verbs created collocational restrictions that required special attention to their collocational environments. These lexical properties surely created different degrees of difficulty for learners.

Learners' native language influence is the second factor affecting learners' ability to collocate words in L2. Due to the commonality of some human situations, different languages have parallel fixed expressions that are syntactically and semantically similar (Moon, 1992; Teliya, Bragina, Oparina, & Sandomirskaya, 1998; Wolter & Gyllstad, 2011). Because of cultural specificity, however, certain elements embedded in these expressions differ across languages. For example, English and Russian have a restricted collocation to express the process of forming a person's character. The English collocation is to mold someone's character, whereas the Russian expression *vuikovivat' kharakte* means literally, to forge someone's character.

This Russian collocation is associated with a blacksmith hammering at a metal object to give it firmness and hardness. Though the English expression is also connected with a firm object, it emphasizes the idea of giving shape to an originally shapeless mass (Teliya et al., 1998). These similar but distinct expressions may cause a negative transfer from learners' L1 (Wang & Shaw, 2008). L1 influence is most prevalent when learners perform translation tasks. Lacking collocational knowledge, learners rely heavily on the L1 as the only resource and thus do better in those collocations that have L1 equivalents than those that do not (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Huang, 2013; Levitzky-Aviad & Laufer, 2013; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010).

The third factor concerns individual learners' collocational competence. Granger (2015) and Howarth (1998a), by comparing the writing corpora of ESL/EFL learners and native English speakers, both reported that these learners generally demonstrated deficient knowledge of English collocations. Compared with their native-speaker counterparts, the ESL/EFL learners produced a lower percentage of conventional collocations but a higher percentage of deviant combinations. These learners tended to have a weak sense of the salience of collocational patterns. Other researchers such as González-Fernández and Schmitt (2015) and Zhang (2017) reported likewise. They found that L2 learners had a big gap between their receptive and productive knowledge of collocations.

Teliya et al. (1998) identified culture-related knowledge as another dimension embodied in the issue of lexical competence. They argued that the use of some lexical collocations was restricted by certain cultural stereotypes. Metaphorical collocates, for instance, served as clues to the cultural data associated with the meaning of restricted collocations. Lack of cultural competence

might be responsible for learners' failure to acquire such culturally marked collocations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to insufficient knowledge of collocations, English language learners frequently adopt certain strategies to produce collocations and thus create certain types of errors (Henriksen, 2013). The most commonly reported strategy used by language learners is transfer in which learners draw on their L1 equivalents when they fail to find the desired lexical items in the L2. For example, Biskup (1992), in examining Polish and German EFL learners' performance in English collocation use, showed that the learners, based on risk taking, did transfer their L1 knowledge of collocation to their production of collocations in L2, hence obviously resulting in incorrect use of English collocations. For instance, whereas the native-like collocation in English is *to set a record*, the Polish learners had a tendency to use *to state a record*, which is suggestive of an L1 collocational pattern. Similarly, the German learners were found to produce the L1-based deviation *to lend a bookshop* instead of the English native-like version *to run a bookshop*. The transfer strategy may reflect the learners' assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between their L1 and L2. As Farghal and Obiedat (1995) pointed out, positive transfer occurred when the target collocations matched those in the L1, while negative transfer appeared when no corresponding patterns could be found in the L1.

Aside from relying on their L1, EFL learners may use synonymous or paraphrasing. This is frequently used by learners whose proficiency in L2 is limited. They may substitute the target item with a synonymous alternative and use paraphrasing to express the target collocations with which they are not familiar. For instance, in a study by Biskup

(1992), the German learners employed more creative strategies than the Polish learners. Thus, they provided more descriptive answers such as substituting *crack a nut* with *break a nut open*. Furthermore, in a study by Farghal and Obiedat (1995), it was shown that Arabic EFL learners highly relied on the open-choice principle for word selection, replacing a word with its synonym. Such a strategy often led them to deviant, ungrammatical collocations in English. In a similar vein, Howarth (1996, 1998b) showed that L2 learners seemed to draw an analogy between collocates of two synonyms, thus often resulting in errors in the target language. For instance, they produced the unusual combination **adopt ways*, which was presumably caused by analogy with the correct collocation *adopt an approach* (Howarth, 1998b, p. 41).

Another frequently used strategy reported by researchers is avoidance (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Howarth, 1998b). It is a common observation of researchers that testees often avoid carrying out certain tasks because they are perceived as difficult or time-consuming or when they fail to retrieve the appropriate items of which they have passive knowledge. As a consequence, they alter the intended meaning of the collocations (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Lee, 2007).

There are of course other strategies frequently employed by L2 learners. For instance, learners may experiment by creating a collocation that they think is substitutable for the target one (Ebeling & Hasselgård, 2015; Laufer & Waldman (2011). Ebeling and Hasselgård (2015) in their corpus of learner essays found that learner created collocations they considered to be acceptable such as *shapelessly exploited* and *ferociously menacing*. It seems that, these unusual word combinations were results of learners' creative invention. Howarth (1998a) studied the errors in the corpus of non-native writers and identified some other strategies including

repetition and analogies. These writers produced collocations based on a familiar L2 collocation. For example, they draw an analogy between adopt a method and adopt an approach. Nevertheless, this strategy might also lead to the overgeneralization of collocability. An example of this would be *adopting ways*, an idiomatic expression which would likely have minor usage among non-native speakers. The non-native writers in Granger's (2015) study tended to use a limited number of collocations repeatedly such as the combination of very with a variety of adjectives. The strategy of repetition was particularly adopted when learners did not have adequate collocational knowledge.

Although much has been said about the acquisition of English collocations by EFL learners who come from various cultural backgrounds in various countries (Gitsaki, 1999), very few studies have examined the Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocations. Furthermore, among the small number of the studies reported, no study, to the best of our knowledge, has reported on the use of strategies by Iranian EFL learners. The current study, hence, is an attempt to fill this gap by exploring the Iranian EFL learners' ability to produce English collocations and identifying the strategies that they usually adopt when they are not familiar with acceptable collocations in English.

METHOD

Participants

The study was carried out with 60 intermediate EFL learners selected from among 136 undergraduate university students. Their selection was based on their scores on a general proficiency test given to the whole population. A 100-item BPT TOEFL test was used to measure the proficiency level of the participants. Then, those whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the purpose of the study. The participants' native language is

Persian and aged between 20 and 27. They have learnt English as a foreign language for a minimum of 7 years.

Instruments

For the purpose of the study, a blank-filling test was designed by consulting the following resources: the *English Collocation in Use* by McCarthy & O'Dell (2005), *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2002), *Dictionary of Selected Collocations* (1997), *the Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (1995), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2005), and *the BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations* (1997). It consisted of a 50-item adjective + noun and verb + noun collocation in a blank filling format which was an attempt to elicit learners' production of a set of particular English collocations. In addition, it elicited learners' use of strategies. In this test, each item was composed of an English sentence with a *blank + a noun* collocation. The participants were required to fill in each blank with the most appropriate *adjective* or *verb* that could produce an acceptable collocation with the bold *noun* in the sentence.

Reliability and Validity of the Test

The test reliability was obtained through a test-retest method, which was applied on a pilot group of 10 different students majoring in English language. The test was repeated on the same group to check its reliability three weeks later. Using Pearson correlation formula, the reliability correlation coefficient of the test-retest was computed. It was found to be (0.92), which is considered to be appropriate statistically.

The test content was *validated by three experts* in the field of EFL teaching. They were asked to validate the content of the test with regard to its appropriateness to the research goals and objectives, test instructions, the appropriateness of the time allocated to the test, and the number and

arrangement of questions. The comments of the validating team, their notes and suggestions were taken into account, and the necessary modifications were made before administering the test.

Data Collection Procedures

In order to accomplish this study, as said before, 60 students majoring in English language and literature or English translation, regarded as being at the intermediate level based on a TOEFL test administered as part of the study, were given a 50-item collocation test.

Having administered the collocation test, the researchers started analyzing and categorizing the participants' responses, which fell in one of three categories of strategies such as transfer, synonymy or avoidance. Therefore, in a sentence like: I a bad **dream** last night and woke up sweating. If the blank was filled in with the word *saw* by a participant as the correct answer, then this incorrect response was attributed to transfer from learners' LI since this is the form used in Persian. However, if the participant provided *got*, then he was believed to rely on synonymy because *got* and *had* are somewhat synonymous. On the other hand, if the participant left the item blank, he or she was believed to rely on the avoidance strategy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the findings clearly reveals, the participants' overall performance on test of English collocations is far from being satisfactory. These learners' poor performance in collocations led credence to the viewpoints of Bahns and Eldaw (1993), who assume that L2 learners' collocational knowledge seems not to parallel their competence in vocabulary. It is also in line with Sadeghi (2009) and Phoocharoensil (2011), who showed that collocational errors

make up a high percentage of all errors committed by EFL learners.

Out of a total of 2000 correct target collocations expected to be produced by participants, only 762 (38.1%) were rendered correctly. 1004 (52.2%) items were answered incorrectly of which 568 (28.4%) of incorrect collocations were due to transfer from LI and 372 (21.8%) due to the use of synonymy as a strategy. Moreover, 234 (11.7 %) items were left blank, i.e., the participant avoided giving answer some items. This might implies the participants' reluctance at risk-taking and a lack of knowledge.

Data analysis also revealed that eleven collocations had the highest frequency. These collocations were ordered based on the frequencies and percentages of correct answers in Table 1.

Table 1. Acceptable collocations ordered based on frequencies and percentages of correct answers (N=50)

Target collocation	Frequency	Percentage
Have a responsibility	37	75%
Golden opportunities	35	73%
Give advice	33	67%
Do housework	31	61%
Gain experience	31	61%
Heavy traffic	29	59%
Break a heart	29	59%
Take control of	23	47%
Hasty decisions	23	47%
Catch a cold	22	45%
Complex network of roads	21	44%

One way of explaining the relatively high percentage of the correct rendering of such collocations can be attributed to (a) positive transfer from learners' L1. In this regard, Ellis (2008) argues that where there is an exactly identical equivalent between collocations in both languages, transfer from learners' native language can result in positive, satisfactory

production. For example, the combination golden opportunities seem to be possible in both Persian and English. Another way to explain such..... high frequency of such collocations in the textbooks or using them in everyday life i.e., the more learners encounter a certain type of collocation, the more they can comprehend and use it. Tajalli (1994, p. 124) argues that exposure or lack of exposure to a certain type of collocation affects the learning of that kind of collocation.

Moreover, the learners' assumption that these collocations may constitute inseparable entities and are thus learnt as linked pairs where one of the pairs immediately elicits its collocate.

From among the collocations produced 6 collocations had received the lowest of correct answers: leading lights (17%), white lie (15%), Quench thirst (15%), pay tribute (8%) and sick joke (2%).

However, transfer from learners' native language is not always helpful. Discrepancies between L1 and L2 collocations can create some problems for EFL learners. That is, when collocations in the L1 and L2 do not match, unacceptable collocational structures often occur. According to a number of earlier studies, L1 influence is evident in EFL learners' collocations.

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) pointed out that positive transfer occurred when the target collocations matched those in the L1, while negative transfer appeared when no corresponding patterns could be found in the L1. Nesselhauf (2003), consistent with the above-mentioned studies, has shown that L1 influence on the production of English collocations by German speakers is considerably high. She also confirmed the significance of native language impact on L2 collocation learning, suggesting that since L1-L2 collocational incompatibility is a major source of errors in learner language, English teachers should concentrate on such non-congruent collocations in the two

languages in order to prevent learners from committing such transfer errors.

In a similar way, the finding of the current study revealed that discrepancies between English and Persian collocations cause some problems for Iranian EFL learners. Below are some instances of incorrect collocations produced by participants which are due to L1 negative transfer. Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of unacceptable collocations caused by transfer from LI.

Table 2. Acceptable collocations ordered based on frequency and percentage of incorrect answers caused by transfer

Target collocation	Frequency	Percentage
Artificial teeth	35	71%
Closed alley	32	65%
Beautiful arts	31	63%
Oily hair	28	57%
Do the initiative	24	49%
get a profit	24	49%
See a dream	23	47%
Keep an eye	22	46%

The relatively high percentage of unacceptable collocations in Table 2 seems to indicate that differences between L1 and L2 collocational patterns contributed substantially to errors in the production of L2 collocations. In another word, it can be argued that these errors are attributed to transfer from Learners' LI and more particularly to translation from LI. In Persian the term *closed alley* and not *blind alley* is used. Therefore, it is unusual that participants substituted *closed alley* for *blind alley*. Similarly, the collocations, *fine arts*, *have a dream*, *make a profit* and *make a pact* were substituted for beautiful art, see a dream, get a profit, and *tie a pact* respectively.

Based on the collocation data obtained, 21.8% % of the collocations were rendered

incorrectly due to the use of synonymy strategy. It seems that learners, when short of the appropriate collocant, looked for a synonym or near synonym, the result being the production of an incorrect collocation. As argued by Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998), even though synonyms share a similar meaning, they cannot be always used interchangeably in all contexts. For example, Based on the 50-million-word sample of the Bank of English corpus, which is composed of English magazines, even though the synonyms *strong* and *powerful* can be substitutable in some collocations, e.g. *strong/power leader*, *strong/power voice*, or *strong/powerful argument*, etc., they cannot be substituted for each other in some others, e.g. *strong views* (but not **powerful views*), or *powerful computer* (but not **strong computer*) (McCarthy, O’Keeffe, & Walsh, 2010).

Boonyasaquan (2006), in her study of how Thai EFL learners translated business news articles from Thai to English reported on their collocational deviations arising from the use of synonymy, which accounted for 8.62% of all the collocational errors. A clear example given in the study was **a qualified hotel* instead of *a quality hotel*, which may reflect the learners’ confusion over the use of the synonyms *qualified* and *quality* (Boonyasaquan, 2006, p. 83). Table 3 shows several of the unacceptable collocations caused by adopting synonym strategy.

Table 3. Examples of unacceptable collocations due to the use of synonymy and their percentage

Target collocation	Participants’ rendering	Percentage of
Blank tape	Empty tape	61
Rotten eggs	decayed eggs	51
Heated argument	Hot argument	45
Profound effect	deep effect	43

Lethal weapon	deadly weapon	43
Fast lane	quick lane	35
Plastic surgery	Cosmetic	42
Unwholesome food	Unhealthy food	33

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of collocational knowledge in L2 competence is uncontroversial. It not only helps the learners to speak more fluently, makes their speech more understandable but also enables them write and sound more native like (Bestgen & Granger, 2014; Ellis & Wulff, 2015). However, this importance is often ignored in L2 instruction, consequently the learners use inappropriate word combinations when they speak or write. Therefore, their speech and writing is full of ‘miscollocations’ that make them unnatural.

This is evident by the findings of the current study, which obviously indicate that EFL learners have problems with English collocations. Only 38.1% of the collocations under investigation were rendered correctly by the participants. It is pitiable to know that the participants were all at intermediate level of proficiency and had received at least 8 years of English instruction. The findings clearly point to the deteriorating situation which according to Leńko-Szymańska(2014) can only be remedied through constant awareness of the gravity of the problem, and subsequently taking a set of measures aiming primarily at introducing and systematically teaching collocations in the classroom.

Another remedy for the problem is suggested by Tsai (2015). He proposes shifting the emphasis from individual words to the collocations in which these words normally occur. He advocates that a collocational approach to word learning is advantageous at every stage of learning, even at fairly elementary levels of vocabulary

learning. He adds, “pupils and students who have acquired ‘collocational learning habits’ at an early stage can be expected with some confidence to pursue their further studies of lexis in a more fruitful way than would otherwise have been the case”.

Another proposal for dealing with this problem lies in enhancing learners’ reading experience. It is very important that learners do a lot of reading of English newspapers, extensive reading of numerous literature written in English, and modern novels on their own; this type of reading not only expand their vocabulary repertoire, but will also greatly increase their ability to collocate words. According to Pellicer-Sánchez, (2017) chances that EFL learners cannot combine words correctly without having previously read them are very high.

Further suggestion to tackle the problem is that the areas of differences in the collocational patterns of L1 and L2 be stressed by teachers. Studies of collocational errors show that collocations in the L1 are frequently translated directly into English. When teaching collocations, we cannot ignore reading and listening skills, which enable learners to notice collocations. Writing and speaking skills, on the other hand, give them the opportunity to practice collocations. Unless L2 learners are taught in context-based classes, collocations will not make sense to them, and meaningful learning will not probably take place.

The last but not the least suggestion is that EFL learners be encouraged to make effective use of English dictionaries, especially the ones written with learners in focus. The dictionary is a trusted and respected repository of facts about the lexicon of a language. Dictionaries such as the, BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English (BBICDE), Collin COUBUILD English Dictionary (CCED), and Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD), which are based on extensive naturally occurring data are particularly suitable for the

acquisition of the collocational properties of English lexical items.

The major thrust of these suggestions is to make the teachers create the consciousness of collocations in learners. According to Schmidt (2010), what language learners become conscious of and what they pay attention to influence in some ways the outcome of their learning.

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