The Potential Impact of using prefabricated Patterns (Collocation Expressions) on Improving Writing Proficiency among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT: The fundamental purpose behind the present research is to determine the visible influence of teaching collocations in improving Iranian EFL learners’ foreign language writing proficiency. Collocations are defined as the words that are located or found together in predictable patterns in speech and writing. The current research was executed to investigate the influence of collocation instruction and consideration on enhancing Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill. It was supposed that pre-teaching relevant vocabulary and collocations could be used to enhance the learners’ writing ability. To do so, thirty upper intermediate EFL learners were selected from among the learners in an English language institute. Their level of English proficiency was determined on the basis of a pretest at the outset of the study. Simply speaking, a test of writing ability as a pretest was administered of which the scores were used to assign the subjects into two homogeneous groups. The two groups were treated differently. The control group encountered passages without to work on without being resorted to prefabricated patterns (collocations), but the experimental group resorted to prefabricated patterns and tasks prior to writing texts respectively. The fundamental aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the role collocations play in students’ writing. This study intended to investigate the correlation between Iranian EFL learners’ use of lexical collocations (i.e. frequency and variety) and their writing scores. Test results examined to answer the two major questions for correlation (1) between the subjects’ frequency of lexical collocations and their writing scores and (2) between the subjects’ variety of lexical collocations and their writing scores. After twenty sessions of instruction and many composition tests at regular intervals, the researchers found out that the students in experimental group were more successful than those in the control group who used traditional methods. This came into reality after the posttest It was revealed that implementation of the prefabricated patterns had a great influence upon the subjects experiencing them in comparison to the control group. Experimental subjects outperformed in the post-test, at the significant level of .01. In reality, teaching collocations could play a prominent role in improving EFL learners’ writing skill.

Keywords: lexical collocation, prefabricated patterns, writing proficiency, intermediate.

1. INTRODUCTION

As Baron (2007, p15) notes, learning to write effectively is a ‘lifelong apprenticeship’. Recent research indicates that many children begin drawing, scribbling, and reproducing letters and letter-like forms long before they understand what the letters mean. These activities encourage writing awareness. The widespread use of writing as a means of informal communication via text messaging, email and social networking sites has changed the way we write. In these contexts, speed and spontaneity take priority, and accuracy has lost some of its importance as a result. Writing is a medium of communication that represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols. Writing is an integral part of reading and a critical component of literacy. Writing is an integral part of reading and a critical component of literacy. Writing is a medium of communication that represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols. In most languages, writing is a complement to speech or spoken language. Within a language system, writing relies on many of the same structures as speech, such as vocabulary, grammar and semantics, with the added dependency of a system of signs or symbols, usually in the form of a formal alphabet. It is probably fair to say that the vast majority of university
work revolves around writing. Undergraduate and postgraduate course-work students frequently write essays or reports while for postgraduate research students the thesis is usually the prime writing task.

To write effectively and authoritatively, you need to use accurate grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. Some of the writing benefits can be stated as follows: Writing helps us discover what we know. Writing about a topic stimulates our thinking on that topic and helps us to probe knowledge and experiences we have stored in our subconscious minds. Writing generates new ideas. The very act of writing stimulates our minds to make connections, see relationships and draw analogies that would not have occurred to us if we had not started to write. Writing helps us to organize our ideas and put them in explicit form. Often we can clarify vague or elusive concepts for ourselves by writing about them. This skill makes our thoughts available for us to look at and evaluate; we can distance ourselves from our ideas and see them more objectively when we write them down. Writing about a topic makes us active learners rather than passive receivers of information. (Hailston, 1986, 1981).

Lexical collocations are sometimes used erroneously in the texts. So, in order to encourage learners to overcome these barriers in the current study attempts have been made test such a trend. Collocations are two or more words which have a strong tendency to co-occur in a language as a prefabricated combination of two or more words in a particular context. (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1968) They are one of the difficulties that second language learners, in particular, adult second language learners, have to deal with in the process of learning English. These difficulties depend on a variety of variables such as students’ native language (L1) background, age, and personality. Language teaching over the years has been based on the dichotomy of grammar and vocabulary: master the grammar system, learn lots of words and the speaker will be able to talk about any topic. This view of language has meant that students have learned an extensive vocabulary of predominantly nouns, and then struggled to use grammar to talk about those things. This is the reason for so many grammar mistakes (Lewis and Gough 1997). The term “collocation” is discussed prevalently in many areas of linguistics, such as semantics, systematic linguistics, morpho-syntax, phraseology, corpus linguistics, and lexicography. Collocations are generally defined as words that “fit together” intuitively with great expectation in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels. The syntagmatic relation of lexical words, which is horizontal, refers to the collectability of words. The paradigmatic relation of lexical words, on the other hand, which is vertical, refers to sets of words in the same class. For instance, the word “dog” is in syntagmatic relation with “hairy” and in paradigmatic relation with “cat.” Collocations are predictable patterns and phrases or groups of words that typically co-occur. They include what have traditionally been considered lexical items, as well as structural patterns which may seem closer to grammar and combinations of words that simply “go together.”

In reality, collocations include noun phrases like sound investment, wide imagination, and phrasal verbs like make up or other stock phrases like the rich and powerful. Particularly interesting are some subtle and not-easily explainable patterns of usage that native speakers all know: why we say a stiff breeze but not a stiff wind while a strong breeze and a strong wind are acceptable. Collocations can involve a range of different syntactic patterns. The lexicographer, Benson (1985), classifies collocations into two main types: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. A grammatical collocation is a recurrent combination of a dominant word (verb, noun, adjective) and a grammatical word (preposition), such as attach to (verb and preposition), anxious about (adjective and preposition), and a choice between (noun and preposition). Furthermore, Nation (2001) identifies collocations as grammatically connected, grammatically structured, having grammatical uniqueness and grammatical fossilization, and suggests involving syntactic structure in the study of collocations within the lexis level. The majority of Iranian EFL learners have some knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; however, they seem to have serious problems with the use of collocations. For instance Iranian learners using the Persian language say “baran-e- shaded” which literally means “hard rain” and when it comes to English they think in their first language and instead of “heavy rain” they write or say “hard rain.” This example is a semantic expansion, in which learners impose a corresponding word meaning into target-language word, reflecting influence from Persian shaded(heavy) which means “hard” and “heavy”. This inefficiency is most likely due to the lack of knowledge of word combinations among Iranian EFL students, and to a large extent, the inadequate emphasis given to the teaching of collocation patterns in their textbooks, and the type of instruction they receive. Whether you’re a student, teacher, or businessperson, academic writing skills are necessary in today’s world. Essays, reports, presentations and research papers are just some examples of documents written in the academic style. Writing skills are an important part of communication. Good writing skills allow you to communicate your message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversations. Correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are keys in written communications. The reader will form an opinion of you, the author, based on both the content and presentation, and errors are likely to lead them to form a negative impression. Writing is the productive skill in the written mode. It, too, is more complicated than it seems at first, and often seems to be the hardest of the skills, even for native speakers of a language, since it involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way.
Tribble (as cited in Frith, J, 2009: 1) argues that: “It is through the mastery of writing that the individual comes to be fully effective in intellectual organization, not only in the management of everyday affairs, but also in the expression of ideas and arguments”. Thus, foreign language learners are struggling to write correctly since they face many obstacles toward a correct English composition. Writing necessitates, at least, a basic knowledge of grammar, lexis and vocabulary, and the ability to express ideas in an appropriate English language unaffected by the mother tongue. Writing prepares you for school and employment (both of which in most cases require a lot of it). Writing is how much of the world communicates. If you don't write, you cut yourself off from a large community (including this one, incidentally). Writing can be a great tool to help you know more about the way you think... writing can solidify ideas and thoughts, and allow you to reflect on them better than if the ideas remained evolving in your head. Writing is one of the ways that we translate our thoughts for other people.

1.2 Research Purpose

The present research considered the influence of a kind of strategy named as prefabricated patterns or collocations and frequency of lexical collocations and their employing and learners' writing scores which was supposed to affect writing comprehension ability level of intermediate EFL learners positively. Put another way, this study examined the impact of prefabricated patterns and collocations assignment on the enhancement level of writing of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The aim was providing recommendations which could contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning writing.

So, all in all, the aim of the present study is twofold:
1. To investigate the correlation between collocations' use and proficiency in writing; 2. To raise students' writing proficiency by teaching collocations to develop their collocation competence mainly through noticing and consciousness-raising.

1.3 Research Hypotheses

If we teach collocations to foreign language learners, they would use them when they write. Consequently, their proficiency in writing would increase virtually. However, the following hypotheses were made:

a. There is no relationship between the use of prefabricated patterns and improving writing proficiency.
b. There is no relationship between the frequency of lexical collocations and their employing and learners' writing scores.
c. There is a relationship between the learners' variety of lexical collocations and their writing scores.

2. Review of Literature

Collocation term was first was introduced by Firth, who considered that meaning by collocation is lexical meaning “at the syntagmatic level” (Firth 1957:196). The syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of lexical items can be schematically represented by two axes: a horizontal and a vertical one. The paradigmatic axis is the vertical axis and comprises sets of words that belong to the same class and can be substituted for one another in a specific grammatical and lexical context. The horizontal axis of language is the syntagmatic axis and refers to a word's ability to combine with other words. Thus, in the sentence ‘John ate the apple’ the word 'apple' stands in paradigmatic relation with ‘orange’, 'sandwich', 'steak', 'chocolate', 'cake', etc., and in syntagmatic relation with the word ‘ate’ and ‘John’. Collocations represent lexical relations along the syntagmatic axis. Collocations can be defined in numerous ways, but the most commonly shared definition of collocations is the tendency of one word to co-occur with one or more other words in a particular domain (Nesselhauf, 2003 & Hsu, 2007). Using collocations is probably the most important part of turning passive words into active ones; therefore, collocation is a central component in the acquisition of a creative language system (Durrant, 2008). Moreover, many researchers have proposed that knowledge of collocations can help language learners speak more fluently and they would be able to process and produce language at a much faster rate (Nation, 2001; Hsu, 2008; Forquera, 2006).

Despite the importance of collocations, researchers have indicated that collocations are an inherent problem for L2 learners and one of the difficult aspects of vocabulary learning for learners of a foreign or second language including advanced learners and professional translators and they continuously stumble over which words go hand in hand with which appropriately (Taiwo, 2004; Walsh, 2005; Millar, 2005). In 2002, Al-Salmuni, A. has focused in his MA thesis on Collocations and idioms in English-Arabic translation. Far from translation, other researchers have investigated other matters related to collocations in Foreign Language Learning. In 2003, Hassan Abadi Siavosh has studied learning English lexical and grammatical collocations by Iranian EFL learners. After examining learners’ collocations types he has found that their performance differs according to the patterns of collocation “in favour of verb-noun collocations” and that acquisition of lexical collocations is easier than grammatical ones. In her research about learning collocations Gitaski, C (cited in Siavosh, 2003: 51) has pointed out that learning collocations is facilitated by the level of ESL learners. The higher is the level, the easier is learning collocations. She has further stated that easiness depends also on the degree of
complexity of the collocation itself. Concerning the problem of collocation errors, some researchers have approached it within their mother tongue. In 1989, Kharma and Hajjaj (cited in Mahmud, Abdelmoneim: 2005: 118) has focused on verb-noun collocations in their analysis of collocational errors made by Arabic learners of English. In 2005, Dr Mahmoud, Abdulmoneim has studied errors made by Arab Learners of English. The results of his empirical study have indicated that collocation constitute a problem for Arabic learners. This problem could be overcome by raising learners’ consciousness about collocation with the help of simple contrastive analysis of English and Arabic.

2.1 Collocations Types
This paper utilized the classification of collocations based on Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) into two categories: Grammatical collocations and Lexical collocations. Following Benson et al (1986), a grammatical collocation generally is a dominant open class word (noun, adjective or verb) and a preposition or particular structural pattern such as an infinitive or a clause. The major types of grammatical collocations are:
- Adjective + Noun (strong tea, major problem, key issue)
- Noun + Preposition/ to infinitive/ that clause (access to, agreement that…)
- Verb + Noun (make an impression, set an alarm)
- Noun + Verb (companies merged, pose a problem).

Collocation samples:
These are some English Collocations and their Persian Equivalents which are supposed to be as a source of threat to Iranian EFL learners.
Albom biroon amadan /album comes out*breaks promise/Ahd shekastan*Do homework/taklif anjam dadan*Blank tape/Film/navar khal*Golden opportunities/Forsat-e talaei*
And here are common collocations which are used inappropriately by Iranian EFL learners.
Do mistake/make mistake* hard rain/heavy rain*Give message/leave message*
Darken hair/dye hair*Watchful neighbor/friendly neighbor*do suicide/
Commit suicide*Difficult illness/serious illness*tall mountain/high mountain

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The current semi-experimental study was conducted because of the evidence of effectiveness of prefabricated activities in L1 and L2 writing and scarcity of research in this area in EFL writing skill. The aim of the study was to reveal whether the writing comprehension of Iranian EFL learners would be improved when they were exposed to the intended prefabricated patterns or collocations.
Put another way, the current study sought to examine the effect of this trend on EFL learners writing comprehension achievement.

3.1 Participants of the study
The participants in the present study are 30 Iranian male and female postgraduate students studying English in a language institute. They were aged between 18 to 22 years. English was their foreign language and Kurdish and Persian was their mother tongue. Their English proficiency level was intermediate. The students took a placement test to get a score of writing skill. Our sample was composed of two groups which were chosen randomly. Each group consisted of 15 subjects. A group was to be considered as the experimental group which received the treatment while another group was considered as the control one. As a matter of the fact, the experimental group was allowed to be provided with prefabricated collocations prior to writing the texts. The test of collocation for this study was conducted through a multiple-choice test. This test included 50 items selected from Oxford Collocation Dictionary. This test was divided into four parts. The parts were the following subtasks:
1. Noun verb 2. Verb noun 3. Adjective noun 4. Noun preposition. The test of collocation consisted of 50 sentences or items in a multiple-choice format. The scores on the collocation test were to show the participants' knowledge of collocations. The maximum score for answering 50 questions correctly was 50 points.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis
The data of this study consists of the students’ scores on the test of lexical collocations. There were 50 items in the pretest, thus the scores of the students ranged from 0 to 50. For most of the questions, there was only one answer since the first letter of the word was given and this limited the number of words they could write. The data were then entered into the computer, using SPSS version 17. To compare the performances of the male and female students on the collocation test, independent sample t-test was used. And to compare the performances of the students at three academic levels of freshmen, sophomore, and juniors, One-way ANOVA was used.
4. RESULTS

This study was aimed at rejecting the following null hypothesis:
The is no difference in promoting writing comprehension level of learners resorting to prefabricated patterns in
the form a series of collocations related somehow to the content of the texts and those working in the normal
traditional way. To answer the above questions two male and female upper-intermediate EFL classes of an
institution were selected to take part in a pre-test to be known as homogeneous. Having administered the pre-
test and post-test to the results obtained were collected and registered as follows (see Figure 1 for the results
obtained on pre-test and post-test to see the comparison of both group performance on pre-test and post-test
respectively.

5. INSTRUMENTS

The data gathering instruments were a writing test and a multiple test of collocations. Students were asked to
write 50-120 words about one of their experiences or writings within 35 minutes. They were not permitted to use
any reference books including their dictionaries. To score the writing, two experienced teachers were invited to
evaluate these writings according to the criteria of CET -4. Content and the grades were based on the language
and the total score of the writing test was 100, which was divided into five ranks, A (100 -90), B, C(79-70),
D(69-60) and F(59-0). In order to make sure of the reliability of the (80-89) marks, the final mark of each
composition was based on discrepancies in scores awarded by the two scorers. If there were small
discrepancies, the two scores could be averaged. If there were large discrepancies, the two scorers had to
discuss together, and then gave a fair and valid score finally. In addition, in order to have a detailed analysis of
the results of the tests, the usages of lexical was applied.

6. DISCUSSIONS and CONCLUSION

This study found out that the collocation knowledge of Iranian English majors is somehow weak they could
answer some of the questions. This is quite disappointing since they had studied English for at least 8 to 10
years at junior and senior high schools, and university. This seems to be, to some extent, due to the fact that
teachers do not pay enough attention to collocation teaching, and to a larger extent, to the inadequate
emphasis given to collocation knowledge in their books, and the instructions they receive. Moreover,
colloctions have never been a part of teaching in Iran. However, this is a common problem in English as a
Foreign Language teaching. It is believed that collocation seems to be a difficult aspect of vocabulary
knowledge for Iranian language learners and it is apparently gained at the later stages of language learning. It
might be the case that the learners might not be familiar with the many uses and senses of the most highly
frequent words in terms of differing contexts. It was shocking that students did not know what lexical collocation
means in English, or that there is a dictionary of collocations available. No Iranian student uses collocation
dictionaries in his writing classes, and to make the matter worse, no teacher encourages them to do so.
Translation students pass courses related to the translation of idioms, and phrasal verbs, but no course is
dedicated to collocations. Nonetheless, collocation knowledge has been shown to influence the production and
comprehension of the Language profoundly. Therefore, it is strongly advised that Iranian EFL teachers
incorporate collocations into their lesson plans.

7. INTERPRETATIONS

After comparing the two mean scores through t-test calculations, the null hypothesis was justifiably rejected.
The two groups scored differently on the post-test, and difference was statistically significant. The researcher's
interpretation was that prefabricated collocations have served the intended purpose. It seems justifying to hold the idea that prefabricated patterns have

Figure 1. Scores, Mean (Pretest) Mean (Posttest) by groups

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Figure 2: the histogram diagram (mean scores of pre and posttest)

REFERENCES