In the Name of Allah

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Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English Language

PhD Thesis

Differential Effects of Attention on Iranian EFL Learners' Acquisition of English Collocations: the Case of Language Proficiency and Complexity of Collocations

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Dedicated to

the passions of my parents and

companionship of my wife and

lovely daughter

&

Those who care

Abstract

This study aims to investigate how the acquisition of a verb's collocational features is influenced by different levels of attention and whether the effect of attention is mediated by collocational complexity and proficiency level. Four levels of attention were studied: (1) *semantic processing:* learners were only asked to understand passages with the target collocations embedded; (2) *memorization for recall:* learners were instructed to memorize the target collocations in the passages for a later recall test; (3) *rule given:* learners were provided with the target collocational rules and studied how the rules applied to the instances in the passages; (4) *rule given plus negative evidence:* learners were provided with the target rules and studied how they applied to the instances in the passages; moreover, they were informed of what were impossible noun collocates for the target verbs.

A number of 100 Persian speakers of non-English majors enrolled in Basic English and General English courses (representing two different proficiency levels) in Mofid University in Iran participated in the research. The target learning items were four partially artificial English verbs, which displayed two degrees of collocational complexity.

Within each proficiency level, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four attentional conditions as specified above and received a three-day treatment. On the fourth day, all the participants were given a test that consisted of three parts: (1) determining the basic meaning of the target verbs; (2) writing down as many

noun collocates as possible for the target verbs; (3) judging whether a sentence containing one of the target verbs was good or not.

The results indicated that, overall, learners in the two rule-oriented conditions excelled in various parts of the test: recall of phrases that appeared in the passages, production of new collocates for the target verbs, and judgment of bad collocations. Learners under the *memorization for recall* condition demonstrated certain advantages in storing old phrases, but not in other areas. The *semantic processing* condition turned out to be the least efficient for learning L2 collocations. Moreover, it was found that negative evidence in L2 collocations could help to reduce overgeneralization errors. This study did not detect an interaction between attention and collocational complexity, but an interaction between attention and proficiency level did emerge. The *memorization for recall* and *rule given plus negative evidence* conditions were less effective with Level 2 learners than with Level 4 learners. And this differential effect of attention was accounted for in terms of learners' processing features and capacity. The findings and results of this study can have several implications for syllabus designers, language teachers, and language test designers.

Key Words: Attention, awareness, collocation acquisition, collocational pattern, complexity, language proficiency, noticing hypothesis

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