In the Name of God the Compassionate the Merciful

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A Study of English Collocations and Their Relation on Writing Proficiency among English Students of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman.

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To whom I think of in moments of strife

To whom I shall love throughout my life

To dearest Samane my loving wife

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Abstract

The present study investigates the knowledge of English collocations and their relation to the writing proficiency of Iranian EFL university students. Data for the study were collected from 50 junior students majoring in English literature and translation studies at Bahonar University of Kerman. In order to obtain the required data on the variables collocational competence and writing proficiency, two multiple-choice exams were conducted. The first exam was fifty item multiple-choice collocation test (Chen, 2008) consisting of both lexical and grammatical collocations which was used to assess the participants' performance of collocational knowledge. The second exam was a thirty item multiple-choice writing proficiency test (Appendix B), adapted from (Sharpe, 2004), which was used to measure the participants' performance on standard written English. After collecting the necessary raw data from collocational competence and writing proficiency, descriptive statistics and t-test were employed in the data analysis. According to the results, Iranian English majors are weak in collocations, answering just more than 50% of the questions (mean=28.58). The findings of this study also revealed that first, there was a significant positive relationship between collocational competence and writing proficiency (r = 0.67). Second, grammatical collocations proved to be more difficult than lexical ones. Finally, there were no significant differences between two groups of males and females regarding collocational competence and writing proficiency.

Key words: collocational competence, grammatical collocation, lexical collocation, writing proficiency

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Adj…………………………….………..Adjective

EFL…………………………………….English as a foreign Language

ELT………………………….………...English Language Teaching

ESL………………………………….English as a Second Language

L1………………………………,,,,,,,,,,.….First Language

L2…………………………….………Second Language

TOEFL…………………………...……….Test of English as a Foreign Language

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter describes overview, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, limitations of the study and definitions of key terms.

ELT has faced a revolutionary shift in its approaches since the lexis is given more priority over the grammar. For many years the lexical component of the language has been a neglected aspect in the field of Applied Linguistics (Zimmerman, 1997) but in the last 20 years there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies devoted to this issue (Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Carter, 1987; Lewis, 1993; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 2001). It seems no longer necessary to emphasize the essential role played by vocabulary in the acquisition of a second language (L2). Chomsky, the father of contemporary studies in syntax has recently adopted a "lexicon-is-prime" position in his Minimalist Linguistic theory (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 132). Michael Lewis (1993) in Lexical Approach aimed to mark a clear departure from structural grammar-based syllabuses and shift the focus to

lexis, a component which, unlike the traditional 'vocabulary', gave pride of place to multi-word prefabricated chunks.

It's widely accepted that vocabulary learning is one of the essential elements both of acquisition of one's native language and of learning a foreign language (Morra & Camba, 2009). Learning vocabulary is seen as a key element to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language by a large number of theoreticians (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Also researchers, teachers and others involved in foreign language learning are paying special attention to foreign language vocabulary acquisition (Zu, 2009). It is believed that having a large and varied vocabulary is the indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning (McCrostie, 2007).

The term Lexical Approach, coined by Michael Lewis, concentrates on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations (Lewis, 1993). Within the Lexical Approach, special attention is directed to collocations and expressions that include institutionalized utterances and sentence frames and heads. As Lewis maintains, language users deliberatively try to think of collocations, and to present these collocations in their expressions instead of individual words. That is, rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, they have a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways (Lewis, 1997).

Lewis (1997) suggested the following taxonomy of lexical items: I. Words (e.g., book, pen) II. Polywords (e.g., by the way, upside down) III. Collocations, or word partnerships (e.g., community service, absolutely convinced) IV. Institutionalized utterances (e.g., I'll get it; We'll see; That'll do; If I were you . . .; Would you like a cup of coffee?) V. Sentence frames and heads (e.g., That is not as . . . as you think; The fact/suggestion/problem/danger was . . .) and even text frames (e.g., In this paper we explore . . .; Firstly . . .; Secondly . . .; Finally . . .)

Collocation is one of the lexical items which has recently received a lot of attention (Bonk, 2001; Farghal&Obiedat, 1995; Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007; Lewis, 2000). First brought up by Palmer (1933) and later introduced to the field of theoretical linguistics by Firth (1957) 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 (Aghbar, 1990; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Gitsaki, 1999; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003).

According to Palmer (1981, p. 76), in the year of 1957 Firth argued that "*You shall know a word by the company it keeps.*" For Firth this keeping company, which he calls '*collocation*', is part of the meaning of a word. Also he gave the example of English word as which occurs in a limited set of contexts (*you silly ……….; don't be such an ……….*) and with a limited set of adjectives (*silly, obstinate, stupid, and awful*). Collocations can be defined in many ways (Moon,

1997), and some of these definitions are as follows: "the restrictions on how words can be used together, for example, which prepositions and verbs are used together, or which nouns appear with particular verbs" (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992). According to Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986, p.9) "In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called recurrent *fixed combinations* or *collocations"*.

In order to have a better understanding of what collocations are Benson et al. (1986) distinguished them from Idioms and free combinations. They clearly illustrated the notions as follows: *Idioms* are relatively frozen expressions whose meanings do not reflect the meanings of their component parts (e.g. to kick the bucket= to die) while *Collocations* are arbitrary recurrent word combinations (e.g. to reach a verdict; to launch a missile) and finally *Free combinations* are the least cohesive type of word combinations (e.g. to condemn/decry/denounce/investigate/ recall, etc. a murder). They also classified collocations into two major categories: *Lexical* and *Grammatical*. Grammatical collocation is a phrase, which is composed of a preposition and a main word (noun, adjective, and verb) or a structural pattern such as a clause or two-word verbs. Benson et al. (1986) believed that there are eight major types of grammatical collocations in English:

Noun + Preposition □ ability in / at

Noun + to + Infinitive □ a problem to do

Noun + That Clause □ We reached an agreement that…

Preposition + Noun □ on purpose

Adjective + Preposition □ Tired of

Adjective + to + infinitive □ easy to learn

Adjective + That Clause □ she was delighted that…

Verb + Preposition □ Believe in…

Lexical Collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. In contrast to grammatical collocations, they do not contain prepositions, infinitives, or clauses. With such a distinction in mind, Benson et al. (1986) listed the following types of lexical collocations in English:

Verb + Noun □ Make a decision

Adjective + Noun □ Weak tea

Noun + Verb □ Alarms go off

Noun1 + of + Noun2 □ A bunch of keys

Adverb + Adjective □ Quite safe

Verb + Adverb ☐ Walk heavily

It's a widely accepted idea that collocations are very important part of knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English in order to speak or write fluently and accurately (Jaén, 2007). As a matter of fact, mastery of formulaic sequences, including collocations, is a central aspect of communicative competence, enabling the native speaker to process language both fluently and idiomatically (Pawley & Syder, 1983) and to fulfill basic communicative and social needs (Wray 2002). Collocational competence is, nevertheless, a language phenomenon which is said to be acquired late and which is often not mastered very well by L2 language learners (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Barfield & Gyllstad, 2009; Henriksen & Stenius Stæhr, 2009; Nesselhauf, 2005; Revier & Henriksen, 2006). In fact, Collocational competence is an indispensable component in the process of second/foreign language acquisition (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Lewis, 1997, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001). Several studies have been done to investigate the EFL/ESL learners' knowledge of collocations (Al-Sibai, 2004; Bonk, 2000; Lin kuo, 2009; Martyńska, 2004; Pawly and Syder, 1983; Salimi, Tavakoli, Ketabi, 2011; Vasiljevic, 2008). In all these studies, EFL/ESL learners proved to have a great deal of deficiencies in selecting the appropriate word combinations in all levels of proficiency.

According to recent studies (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Hsu, 2008; Sung, 2003; Zhang, 1993) there is a strong correlation between collocational competence and language proficiency in general and language skills in particular. It seems that knowledge of collocation is a reliable indicator of language proficiency since language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar (Lewis, 1993).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Knowledge of collocation helps learners' language competence, communicative competence and leads them toward native-like fluency (Bahns & Elbow 1993; Brown, 1974; Channel, 1981; Howarth, 1998; Nattinger 1988). Since mastery of a language would probably lead to produce native like sentences, collocation plays an important role which distinguishes native speakers with non-native ones (Salkauskiene, 2002).

Collocational knowledge is viewed as a very important issue in productive skills-writing and speaking (Aghbar, 1990; Gitaski & Taylor, 1997; Hsu, 2004; Lien, 2003; Liu, 1999). Despite considerable emphasis on syntax in EFL contexts, learners' writing-even in advanced levels- sound unnatural and non-native like since students produce correct grammatical sentences but they contain inappropriate word combinations. According to Sonaiya (1988), lexical errors are

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perceived by native speakers as more serious than all other types of errors because "it is in the choice of words that effective communication is hindered most"(p.25). Based on (Taiwo, 2004) pupils who lack collocational competence sometimes make longer sentences because they do not know the collocations, which express precisely their thoughts. For instance, such expressions have been found in ESL pupils' compositions:

- people have the ability to say what they need (freedom of expression)
- the situation whereby people vote for their rulers to rule them (democratic rule)

During any EFL course, great emphasis is on grammar not vocabulary and students and perhaps the teachers themselves are not aware of word combinations. Students learn the word s in isolation and memorize the words individually by translating them to their mother tongue. It means they store new vocabulary words individually and not as a chunk. Therefore, when students want to produce collocations they fail to produce them correctly. People are using grammar to do what it was never meant to do. Grammar enables them to construct language when they are unable to find what they want ready-made in their mental lexicons. But so much of the language of the effective language user is already in prefabricated chunks, stored in their mental lexicons just waiting to be recalled for use. Among these combinations, there are words that "co-occur naturally with greater than

random frequency" (Lewis and Gough 1997, p. 25) and with "mutual expectancy" (Zhang 1993, p. 1). Those words are well linked in a native speaker's memory and retrieved as a chunk (Aghba, 1990). For example *sour milk and rancid meat* are well-established collocations that are remembered in chunks and are used by native speakers as chunks (Oxford Collocations Dictionary 2009). However, *rotten milk* is not stored as a unit in a native speaker's memory and therefore, is not a collocation. ESL/EFL learners can concoct an awkward expression such as *rotten milk* when they have no memory or intuition of the correct or acceptable collocation that native speakers use. These chunks of lexis, which include collocations, do more than just name things, they also have a pragmatic element. They enable learners to talk about things - to 'do' things. This raises the status of collocation to much more than just words which go together. The majority of EFL learners have some knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; however, they seem to have serious problems with the use of collocations (Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007). For instance Iranian learners using the Persian language say "*baran-e-shadid*" 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.*"