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Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in TEFL

**On the Relationship between the Knowledge of Collocations
and Writing Proficiency**

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Dedication

Affectionately dedicated to my family

who have always provided me with their warm support.

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ABSTRACT

This study has a threefold purpose and explores: a) the relationship between the collocational knowledge and writing proficiency; b) the most and the least difficult subtypes of lexical collocations; and c) the collocational knowledge and writing proficiency in Iranian male and female EFL learners. The data for the study are collected from 33 junior English majors at Sabzevar Tarbiat Moallem University. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is used and it is shown that collocational knowledge correlates significantly and positively with writing proficiency. *Adj + Noun* and *Noun + Noun* subtypes, respectively, appear to be the easiest and the most difficult subtypes of English lexical collocations. The *t* test is also used to compare males and females in their collocational knowledge and writing proficiency. There is no statistically significant difference between the collocational knowledge and the writing proficiency of the males and the females of the study.

Key terms:

collocational knowledge, subtypes of collocations, EFL learner, writing proficiency

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

While the importance of vocabulary acquisition has been recognized for a long time, vocabulary learning has often been limited to memorizing lists of words in isolation. As a result, it is not uncommon that even at higher levels of proficiency, students seem, in their writing and/or speaking, to be bereft of conciseness and precision in their expression.

In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called *recurrent combinations*, *fixed combinations*, or *collocations*.

When coming across the vocabularies in the original text, EFL learners seem to be successful in getting the meaning out of a set of contextualized word. But, the problem surfaces when the learners try to make use of the so called mastered vocabularies. The case in such problems is somehow related to the issue of the difference between learners' knowledge of use and usage of language items. In fact, they have not learned the precise details of using language items. Put another way, they lack what is called collocational knowledge or collocational competence. As “students tend to create longer utterances, lack of collocational competence leads to grammatical mistakes, because they do not know collocations which express precisely what they want to say” (Hill 2000, p. 17).

It has frequently been reported in the literature that EFL learners often encounter difficulty in expressing their thoughts, precisely due to lacking of awareness of collocations in writing or in utterances. So, what is clear here is the importance that collocations bear in teaching and learning any foreign language like English. By developing noticeable proficiency in collocations of EFL, learners will help increase the

range of English vocabulary use. They can, by gaining mastery over collocations, come close to a level wherein they no longer use general words to refer to or describe things, issues, or events. For example, they will find it easier to avoid the overuse of such words as *very, nice, and beautiful* or *get* by choosing a word that fits the intended context best, and better describes the situation or thing. Having gained a good knowledge of collocations, students can, and let us say should, create output (whether written or spoken) that is free of any symptom of unnaturalness or unwanted ambiguities.

McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) offer a good example: 'My uncle is a very high man'. It is not clear what exactly was meant by the speaker/writer of this sentence. Whether he meant that his uncle is a very tall man or he has a high position in government or business is the subject to be clarified. Such kinds of ambiguities take source from the speaker's lack of enough knowledge of English collocations.

Benson, Benson, and Illson (1986), contend that collocations in every language fall into two major groups: *grammatical collocations* and *lexical collocations*. Examples of grammatical collocations include *account for, advantage over, adjacent to, by accident, to be afraid that, etc.* They consist of a noun, an adjective, or a verb, plus a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause. Lexical collocations, on the other hand, do not contain prepositions, infinitives, or clauses, but consist of various combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Benson, Benson, and Ilson distinguish several structural types of lexical collocations: verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun1 + noun2, adverb + adjective, and last but not least verb + adverb. In the present study, however, grammatical collocations with their particular problems and specifications will be skipped over, and lexical collocations, instead, will be concentrated on.

The learners who possess good knowledge of collocations, in addition to not making the mistakes of forming such unnatural and ambiguous sentences, will have the chance to make quite an impression on their addressee that is more native-like. Put in a nutshell, they will be able to do so mostly by using more collocations, expressions, and idioms.

Moreover, Ying and Hendricks (2000) stated that the lack of specific collocations leads the EFL writers to heavily rely on simple and general expressions. For example, using “good” for all positive things, and overusing common verbs such as “do”, “have”, and “get”, thus resulting in a simple and *flat style* of writing [italics added] (p. 57).

Collocations, abundant as they are, are generally seen as a problematic area in learning a foreign language in general, and in learning the vocabulary of that language, in particular. They have repeatedly been reported by many researchers to be hard to deal with even at advanced levels. It should not be forgotten, of course, that studying, learning, and teaching collocations of a foreign language is much more difficult and burdensome than the case for second language situations, due, mainly, to the lack of natural exposure that is typical of the former. Very few, if any, foreign language learner can come close enough in competence to a native speaker so as not to be distinguished as a foreign or second language speaker. To help the EFL learner pass along this highly onerous procedure of gaining competence like, if not exactly identical to, a typical native speaker, teachers should assign enough importance to the nature of collocations and their inclusion in the pedagogical materials and syllabuses.

Different experts and researchers in the field of TEFL/TESL have provided the history of the study on the nature of collocations with varying definitions of the word *collocation*. McCarthy (1990), for example, metaphorically refers to collocations as a 'marriage contract between words'. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2006)

defines collocation as 'a combination of words in a language that happens very frequently than would happen by chance.'

As is clear in the aforementioned definition, and is common among the many definitions that abound in the literature, *collocation* refers to the combination of two or more words. The combinations can be of different types, for example a mixture of *adverb + adjective* (e.g. bitterly cold; strikingly different), *noun + noun* (e.g. pass code; company uniform), *adjective + noun* (e.g. heavy rain; strong tea), etc.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Collocations as a part of the vocabulary of a foreign or second language like English play a noticeable role in EFL/ESL learners' competence. If used in the writing and/or speaking of language learners, collocations as well as expressions and idioms will make their speech and writing more native-like. The present study, however, is rather concerned with collocations as the subject and focus of the study.

Iranian English language learners have always had problems with internalizing the collocations, from elementary to even advanced levels of English proficiency. In their writings, they often appear not to have enough competence for appropriate application of collocations. In the first glance at the problem of Iranian EFL learners' lack of sound knowledge on English collocations many variables may come to mind, for example:

- a) the level of language learners' proficiency;
- b) the amount of exposure to the target language and authentic data;
- c) the method through which the learners have been taught.

Each of these has its own degree of vitality in adding to the complication. Nevertheless, there are also internal sources of difficulty in the process of tackling with collocations, if we take the formerly mentioned variables as the external ones.

The inherent problems can or should be surveyed inside the very collocations. That is to say, for example, whether the concerned collocation is an *adverb + adjective* type, *noun1 + noun2* type, *adjective + noun* one, etc. Considering the role that is possibly played by the type of combination in lexical collocations, and also with regard to the importance of the hunch that such a variable may really and meaningfully be in operation, it seems to be an issue which deserves to be explored and studied.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Collocations are both abundant in every language and burdensome for language learners to master even at advanced levels. Despite the increasing recognition of collocational knowledge as an indispensable part of target language proficiency, the bulk of research conducted on collocations indicate that collocations are an inherent problem for L2 learners.

Having studied and reviewed some of the papers and materials that aim at exploring collocations, one finds himself confronted with some questions regarding the relationship that knowledge of collocations can have to writing proficiency. Another question that may come to mind can be about the degree of challenge and burden that different types of collocations may impose on the EFL learners. As has repeatedly been stated by different experts in the field (Hsu 2007; Ying 2009, for example), collocations can be arranged in a continuum with regard to the 'tightness of go-togetherness'. This can help the EFL teachers to teach collocations in a more realistic rather than adventitious way. If it so happens that varying types of combinations proved to play varying roles in the

amount of difficulty that EFL learners experience in tackling with collocations of different type, it can also shed light on way towards the better understanding of the phenomenon of collocation. Therefore, the outcomes of the present study may come in useful for the practice of teaching collocations of a foreign language. This very reason justifies the need for carrying such a research to explore the issue.

This study is more of a quantitative nature and examines Iranian university-level EFL learners' knowledge of English lexical collocations and explores the relationship between their collocational knowledge and writing proficiency, if any. It further seeks to find which types of lexical collocations are harder or somehow problematic for the learners to gain mastery over. Since no study in Iran has so far been conducted to provide an explanation for the existence or nonexistence of such a relationship between collocational knowledge and writing proficiency, it is hoped that this study may contribute directly to our understanding of the issue at hand in an Iranian context of EFL teaching and learning.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

As has been mentioned earlier, when studying the quality of collocational knowledge of learners, we can explore the matter from two different perspectives: *external* and *internal* perspectives. One can view variables such as the methodology by which the collocations are taught and worked on in EFL classes; the texts with which learners usually deal with in the elongated process of absorbing collocations; the kinds of references accessible for the learners to refer to when studying, practicing or using collocations, etc. as *external* factors affecting learners' knowledge of collocations.

The *internal* factors playing a role in the quality of mastery of EFL learners in collocations should be looked into in the collocations themselves. That is to say, the

place they have in the so called continuum of collocability or the degree of co-occurrence/go-togetherness, or let us say, the kind or type of the mixture (i.e. whether it is made up of *adjective + noun*, *adverb + adjective*, etc.) can be surveyed as internal factors.

This study is planned to quantitatively examine the performance of university-level EFL learners on a test of collocation in order to investigate whether the type of collocations has anything to do with their performance. It would take a rather error-based approach toward the issue of the extent to which the Iranian EFL learners at the university level have developed native-like proficiency in choosing the correct vocabularies to form natural-sounding collocations. The current study has a two-fold aim. It intends to specifically probe if there is any connection or relationship between the knowledge of collocations and writing proficiency, and also to investigate collocational knowledge of Iranian university-level EFL learners on the different subtypes of English lexical collocations.

1.4 Research Questions

In order to conduct the study in a rather well-ordered way, following research questions are formed:

Q1: Is there any relationship between collocational knowledge and the English writing proficiency of Iranian university-level EFL learners?

Q2: In general, which subtypes of English collocations are the most difficult ones for the learners? To put it another way, are some types of lexical collocations generally more difficult than others or they are at the same level of difficulty?

Q3: Is there any difference between males and females in their collocational knowledge of English?

1.5 Research Hypothesis

In light of the research questions posed in the foregoing section, the following null hypotheses are formulated as tentative speculations for the study so that the research questions can statistically be accepted or rejected:

H₀₁: There is no relationship between collocational knowledge and the English writing proficiency of Iranian university-level EFL learners.

H₀₂: Generally, all subtypes of lexical collocations are at the same level of difficulty for the Iranian EFL learners.

H₀₃: There are no differences between males and females in their collocational knowledge of English.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are to be dealt with technically throughout the study. There has been provided some definitions below:

Knowledge of collocations: It refers to how well the learners perform in the test that is designed to measure the degree of learners' expertise in choosing the right words to form natural and standard lexical collocations.

Sub-types of lexical collocations: By the term subtypes of lexical collocations, it is meant to which of the following category a combination refers →

Verb + Noun;

Adjective + Noun;

Noun1+ of + noun2;

Adverb + Adjective;

Verb + Adverb;

Noun + Verb;

Noun + Noun.

EFL Learner (rather than ESL one): As is clear, this term is used to refer to somebody who has not yet achieved native-like communicative competence, and as the word suggests, they are learning English as a *foreign* language, rather than as a *second* language.

Difficulty in collocations: In fact, the criterion for the difficulty of collocations, in this study, is the amount of incorrect answers given by the test takers to test items in the different subparts of the collocation test. The number of wrong choices of collocations represents the difficulty that the participants have in the specific subtype of English collocations.

Writing proficiency: The learners' scores on the final examination of essay writing course were taken to represent their writing proficiency.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The fact that the subjects of the study, *i.e.* the accessible population, were chosen just from one university was perhaps one obvious limitation (the researcher chose the

participants from the same university where he was studying). The subjects were limited to the English-major students at Sabzevar University for Teacher Education. Therefore, while the study reveals some findings about the relationship between the Iranian university-level English learners' knowledge of English lexical collocation and their writing proficiency, the findings are better be generalized with some caution beyond the subjects of the present study.

The reliability of the collocation test designed by the researcher is another possible concern as well. Since the subjects were only tested once on their knowledge of English lexical collocations, the results of their performance might be called into question as to whether they truly indicate their real collocational competence. In order to minimize the degree of performance errors, future researchers may also need to consider enhancing instrument reliability.

Another limitation of this study is related to the scope of collocations investigated. This study examined the lexical collocations and did not include grammatical collocations. As a result, the performance of the subjects on the collocational test only reveals their knowledge of lexical collocations, but does not represent their overall collocational knowledge (lexical as well as grammatical). Sight must not be lost of the fact that there are some differences between *the knowledge* and *use* (Ellis, 1994) of foreign language items. The scope of this study was limited to measuring the subjects' knowledge of English collocations, and did not measure their use of collocations.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE

LITERATURE