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The Effect of Collocational knowledge on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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By
Hamed Abdullahzadeh Kalantari

Supervisor
Dr. Mohammad Mohammadi

Bahman 1387

بررسی تاثیر دانش همنشینی واژگانی بر روی خواندن و درک مطلب زبان آموزان ایرانی

ارائه

حامد عبد اله زاده کلانتری

استاد راهنما

دکتر محمد محمدی

بهمن 1387

Reference No: ....

Graduation Date: ....

To the Graduate Council of Urmia University:

Hereby we are submitting a thesis written by Hamed Abdullahzadeh Kalantari entitled *"The effect of collocational knowledge on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension"*. We have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

Dr. M. Mohammadi

....

Thesis Supervisor

As examining body, we have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. K. Sadeghi

....

External Examiner

Dr. J. Gholami

....

Internal Examiner

Dr. M. Bayat

....

Representative from
Post-graduate Council of Urmia University

Dedicated to the memory of my father,

*To my family for their persistent support
and unceasing encouragement,*

&

*To God Almighty, for whom all
things are possible*

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Abstract

The importance of vocabulary collocations has not been clearly defined yet. As Moon (1999) states, collocations have always presented as a problem in teaching and learning a foreign language. The present study was an attempt to investigate the possible effects of knowledge of collocations on Iranian EFL reading comprehension achievement. Therefore, a null hypothesis as the instruction on collocations doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL reading comprehension has been presented. The samples of this study were randomly selected among 79 male and female students in Mazandaran University. After that, the subjects were divided into two groups i.e. experimental and control. The main treatment was based on instruction on collocations. During this period the experimental group received a treatment based on collocations, while the control group didn't receive any treatment. Results showed that the instruction on vocabulary collocations had not any significant effect on subjects reading comprehension achievement. In other words, subject in experimental group did not outperform than the subjects in control group. As regards to the relationship between subjects' scores on collocations and their scores on reading comprehension tests, a significant correlation has been observed.

The results of the present study also corroborate previous works in a way that teaching and emphasizing on vocabulary collocations must be well regarded in future works. Some suggestions are also made for further research.

Key Terms: Collocations, Reading Comprehension, EFL learners

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

We, as human beings, need to communicate with each other and make meaningful utterances in order to make ourselves understood. We also communicate about the world, in which we live, about ourselves, our thoughts, feelings, events, etc. In other words, we use language and beyond the language we use words in order to express ourselves. As Schmitt and McCarthy (1999) state, "it is not surprising that words have a privileged status in the popular understanding of what language is, after all, they are vital to linguistic communication" (p.9). Therefore, learning vocabulary can be viewed as an essential factor in language learning process. In fact, vocabulary is one of the most important elements that make up any language. No matter how language learners learn grammar, no matter how learners master L2 sounds, communication in an L2 cannot occur without using words (McCarthy, 1990).

The study of words has received a great deal of interest for on point of view of specialists of different disciplines. Linguists, for example, are interested in finding out what and how words are formed and what kind of characteristics enable them to be used in one place or another. On the other hand, psychologists are interested in the study of learning process by the brain. They believe that learning vocabulary can be used as a means for learners' success in intellectual life. Only by means of such knowledge of words, one is able to communicate effectively.

During recent years, teaching and learning vocabulary have been receiving a great deal of attention. As regards language teaching, there is a common assumption that the more words a learner knows, the larger is his/her vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, the more the learner's vocabulary knowledge is, the larger his/her reading comprehension ability is. As Segler (2001) points out, "lexical acquisition is of paramount importance in the educational domain since lexical development and reading comprehension are strongly related" (p.1). Thus, in order to communicate, words must be used, and in order to use words one must learn how to put them together. In other words, we need to know the possible combinations or associations of words. This aspect of vocabulary knowledge can be defined as the knowledge of collocations.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Vocabulary plays an important role in the process of learning any language. It is one element that links four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing all together. It is reasonable to suggest that many EFL learners encounter problems in communicating in their target language due to their limited vocabulary. Since simply knowing the words and how to spell them is not sufficient for communication. Hence, in order to communicate well in a foreign language, students should acquire an adequate knowledge of words and should learn how to use them accurately. This knowledge of words refers to collocations which sound natural to native speakers, but difficult to guess for non-native speakers (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005). Accordingly, non-native speakers have to make a lot of effort to learn them. As Schmitt & McCarthy (1999) claim, "an important index of native competence is that learners use idioms frequently. Thus, language learning involves learning sequences of words as well as sequences within words" (p.130). They also mentioned that in order to speak idiomatically,

learners should learn how to use these sequences. For example, in English, *tall* collocates with woman/man, and *high* collocates with mountains. It means that a woman/man can only be tall never high and a mountain can only be high not tall. Hill (1999), accordingly states that we can make a *big mistake*, but we cannot make a *large mistake*.

"Collocations are typically presented as a problem in teaching and learning a foreign language. Their non-compositionality, whether syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic in nature, means that they must be recognized, learned, decoded, and encoded as holistic units" (Moon, 1999, p.46). Therefore inappropriate use of collocations may lead to communicative errors, while appropriate use of them may be considered a sign of language proficiency. This knowledge of vocabulary can also be helpful to increase learners' word power.

It is generally believed that limited vocabulary prevents students from comprehending a text. Poor readers often read less, because reading is difficult for them. In other words, lack of enough reading hinders them to improve their vocabulary. Consequently, as students continue through primary to academic educations, the gap between good and poor readers grow wider. So, knowledge of collocations can be used as a systematic means in order to improve vocabulary which may consequently affect comprehension. Therefore, students must be aware of the existence of such patterns and EFL teachers also try to explain them more in their teaching career.

The purpose of the present study is to determine the possible effect of knowledge of collocations on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. This study also tries to

identify learners' problems in vocabulary learning especially collocations and to provide some suggestions for teaching these patterns in EFL contexts.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Collocations are both indispensable and problematic for language learners. The majority of EFL Learners despite having a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary have serious problems with the interpretation and production of collocational patterns. These problems, to some extent, arise from the lack of collocational knowledge among EFL learners, and to the large extent, the inadequate emphasis given to collocational patterns in their textbooks. Furthermore, the type of instruction which learners receive can be considered as an important element. As Gough (1996) argues, students need to know which words go with which, how words go together and how they can manipulate these arrangements to make new meanings. An increase of the students' knowledge of collocations will also result in an improvement of their oral skills, their listening comprehension and reading ability (Gitaski, 1999). Moreover, writing fluently in a second language requires knowledge of conventional contexts and collocations (Mc Alpine &Myles, 2003).

Reading is probably the most important skill learners will need to succeed in language learning. Recent research and studies about reading process proved that many learners experience a great deal of difficulty in reading and understanding a foreign language. In other words, poor knowledge of vocabulary especially, collocations prevent them to be able to comprehend. Consequently, in order to compensate their weaknesses, they may resort to strategies like synonymy, paraphrasing, avoidance, and transfer (Farghal & Obiedat, 1998). Thus, learning collocations is an essential part of learning vocabulary

and neglecting this aspect of language may cause many problems for learners in their language interpretation and production.

It is hopefully expected that findings of the present study will affect the process of language learning and teaching vocabulary, especially collocations and reading comprehension.

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the discussion made above, the following research questions seem to arise:

Q1: Does instruction on vocabulary; especially, collocations have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?

Q2: Is there any positive relationship between subjects' scores on collocations and their scores on reading comprehension tests?

To obtain logical answers to the research questions posed above, the following null hypotheses are proposed:

HO_1: Instruction on vocabulary especially collocations doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension.

HO_2: There is no significant correlation between subjects' scores on collocations and their scores on reading comprehension.

1.5. Delimitations of the Study

During the conduct of the present study, the researcher encountered a certain set of limitations. These limitations may affect the internal and external validity as well as the construct validity of the study:

1) This study is limited to students majoring English at Mazandaran University. Hence, the findings of this study may not apply to other populations and cannot be representative of all students in Iran.

2) This study is limited to intermediate level students; therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other levels.

3) The probable effect of other variables related to the learners such as age, sex, motivation, socio-cultural background, ethnographic origin and social class are not taken into account.

4) Most important limitation concerns the task and tests used in this study. Because the lack of adequate research in this area, it was unclear how the use of different tests would influence the results of this study.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

There are some key terms used in this study that are necessary to be defined precisely. These terms are defined as follows:

Collocations

Collocations refer to the restriction on how words can be used together. For example, prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together (Richards & Schmitt, 2002).

Reading Comprehension

"Reading comprehension is a process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interactions and involvement with the written language" (Snow, 2002, p.11).

EFL learners

In this context, EFL learners refer to the second language learners who are at the intermediate level. They are randomly selected among English majors at Mazandaran University.

1.7. Outline and Organization of the Study

This study is composed of five chapters. In chapter one, introduction, the problem of this study was introduced. Besides, the significance of the study and research questions was presented. Chapter two is concerned with reviewing critically the related literature. It begins with presenting the views as regards the importance of collocations, properties of collocations and other aspects of collocations. Then, empirical studies related to the relationship between collocations and language skills are discussed.

Chapter three explains in detail the method of the study. It begins with introducing the subjects of the study as well as the instrument of the study. Data collection procedure and analyses of the results also are explained.

Chapter four deals with analyzing, reporting and discussing the results of the study. It describes and discusses in detail the findings achieved through administrating the research instruments in relation to collocation and reading comprehension.

Chapter five begins with the restatement of the problem as well as the summary of the findings. It proceeds to discuss pedagogical implications of the study. Finally, suggestions for further research complete this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

During recent years, research findings in reading have shown that the extent of learners' vocabulary knowledge and their reading ability and language proficiency are strongly related to each other (Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 2000). This relationship seems logical when students need a great deal of vocabulary while they encounter reading passages. Students with poor stock of vocabulary often have difficulties when they encounter reading texts. Since they don't have sufficient word knowledge to understand what they read, they typically avoid reading.

The importance of reading has been emphasized to introduce other elements of language such as different style of writing, and cultural aspect of the speakers of other languages. As Raims (1983, cited in Mirhassani & Khosravi, 2002) contends, "the more our students read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idiom, sentence pattern, organization flow, and cultural assumption of native speakers of the language" (p.50). Therefore, second language learners need to learn how to communicate appropriately and read great quantities of authentic materials. This, according to Chastain (1988), will facilitate communicative fluency in each of the other language skills. Reading and learning to read can also be considered a social, interactive process as well as a personal and private activity (Wallace, 1992). Since most foreign language learners have little or no contact with foreign native speakers, reading can serve to fill this gap. Moreover, improvement in reading can lead to improvement in language

usage and areas of language knowledge (Nation, 1997). Thus, success in reading and its associated skills make learners enjoy language learning and value their study of English.

The selected review of literature begins with an emphasis on the importance of reading skill and then defining collocations and also tries to find a kind of relationship between knowledge of words, especially vocabulary collocations and reading comprehension achievement. As regards the importance of vocabulary knowledge specifically knowledge of collocations, the researcher will try to find some missing links between the knowledge of words and success in reading comprehension tests.

2.2. Different Viewpoints Concerning Reading

It is generally believed that reading is the most important skill. The importance of reading is considerable in academic, professional and personal purposes. Most of us think of reading as a simple and passive process. That is, because the reader doesn't produce message in the same manner as a speaker or writer, sometimes erroneously reading is referred to as a passive skill. For many reading specialists, reading is not a skill but a process composed of many different skills. Kennedy (1974) describes reading as "the ability of an individual to recognize a visual form, associate the form with the sound or meaning he has learned in the past, and on the basis of past experience, understand and interpret its meaning" (p.3).

It is quite obvious that students can learn reading more easily than other skills, and therefore can use reading materials as a primary source of information (Chastain, 1988). Nonetheless, reading is actually a very complex process that requires a great

deal of active participation on the part of the reader. Furthermore, Harris (2000) defines reading as interaction between writers and readers as participants in a particular communicative situation. Rivers (1981) also defines reading as a "source of information, a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge and the most important activity in any language class" (p.259).

Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) define reading as perceiving a written text and its content. Celce-Murcia (2001) proposes multiple reasons for reading: (a) to find information through scanning and searching; (b) for general comprehension: understanding main ideas and subsequent supporting ideas; (c) to learn new information: it requires reading for meaning or learning new vocabulary; and (d) to synthesize and evaluate information: reflection and elaborate connection with prior knowledge. Gibson (1971) also classifies reading into two main types: (a) in oral reading deals with connecting grapheme to phoneme; and (b) comprehension which refers to the process of inferring the ideas from ones knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary for language teachers to understand the processes involved in reading and help their students develop the habit of reading that will lead them to read for comprehension.

2.2.1. Models of Reading

According to Asher and Simpson (1994) models of reading are categorized into two types. Sequential model attempts to chart the time course of reading, that is, what actually happens from the moment the reader first sets eyes on the line of print in a text. In componential approaches, on the other hand, attempts will be made to analyze reading into its component processes and to examine what type of knowledge the reader