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# The Effect of Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Knowledge of Collocation on Their Writing Ability

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**Abstract**—It is widely acknowledged that collocations are one of the most important concerns in EFL classes and materials. The significance of second language learners possessing some knowledge of collocations is now widely recognized. Also, collocations play significant role in second language learning, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels. The present study intended to investigate the influence of knowledge of collocation on writing ability of advanced EFL learners. Eighty Iranian advanced students participated in this study and their writing ability was analyzed to determine the collocations they produced. The participants' productive collocational knowledge was measured by free-writing tests: three topics were given to them to choose one of topics and write a composition. Their receptive collocational knowledge was measured by a multiple-choice test. Results of the study indicated that knowledge of collocation has not positive effect on production of collocation in free writing by EFL learners but it has positive effect on comprehension of collocation by EFL learners and there is a significant relationship between the receptive knowledge and productive knowledge of collocations.

**Index Terms**—collocation, writing ability, knowledge

## I. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is the result of learning a second language and learning the second language includes the use of four main skills including speaking, writing, listening and reading (Rahimi, 2011). One important case in this regard is how many vocabulary one acquires vocabulary constitutes the greatest unit of the meaning in any language (McCarthy, 1988). Currently, learning vocabulary is the most focus in second language pedagogy and research also, how learners learn vocabulary completely and how one can best be learnt are important issues in applied linguistics (Lewis, 2006).

Vocabulary learning includes knowing a word in the language and this involves knowing many facets about words such as word use, word meaning and word form (Nation, 2001). Word form is one aspect of language, either spoken or written. If words are difficult to pronunciation, they will usually learn difficult but *if* words pronounce easily they will stored easily in the long memory of in learners (Nation, 2001). Word meaning includes knowing a word and it involves understanding its form and meaning, its concept and referents and also all forms of combination with the word. When words are analyzed into parts such as prefixes and suffixes understanding of word meaning can be achieved, it can help the learning of the words. Knowing the grammatical functions of words and word combinations such as collocations as well as the restraints on use such as word frequency and appropriateness is word use (Nation, 2001).

Vocabulary plays a significant role in learning a foreign language and there is a dimension to vocabulary knowledge that should be considered, which is how far a learner knows the possible combinations of words. In other words, apart from grammar and lexical meaning, a right sentence must have the agreement between words; otherwise, it sounds unnatural or even makes no sense (Phuong, 2012).

The main aspect of knowing a word refers to the word usage by learner and how learners learn a new word to use it in different contexts correctly. With regard to use word correctly, it is important to note that words are used as chunk not in such as pre-constructed clauses and phrases (Hong, 2011). He also added language learners memorize these chunks of language and in using the language they draw on the chunks. When language users want to express their ideas more efficiently they use active chunks and they depend on larger units of language such as collocations. It reveals that important purpose of acquiring vocabulary is closely related to the proper use of collocations.

So, this paper intended to investigate the effect of Iranian advanced EFL learners' knowledge of collocation on their writing ability. In addition, this study investigated learners' use of collocations by analyzing the learners' written works and comprehension. Two or more words which intend to co-occur in a language as combination of two or more words in particular context constitute collocations (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1968).

According to Namvar (2012) during any EFL course in Iran, grammar is the most focus not vocabulary and students and the teachers themselves may not be familiar with word combination correctly. When students learn the words, they learn them in isolation and memorize them individually by translating them to their mother tongue. So, they memorize new vocabulary not as a chunk but words individually (Namvar, 2012). So, students can not pronounce collocation when they use them.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) believed that when EFL learners want to produce oral and written collocations most of them face problems.

It is difficult to learn collocation knowledge simply because there are many collocations. Native speakers have many—possibly millions—of lexical chunks in their heads, they draw them to produce fluent, accurate and meaningful language (Lewis, 1997). This leads to a conflict for language learners.

Teachers face great challenges in helping their students develop collocational competence. Classroom time is inadequate even for learning the basic vocabulary. In practice, collocation teaching is neglected (Farghal and Obeidat 1995).

As a matter of fact most native speakers, try to write accurately and effectively even on what they are well aware of, but it is clear that writing skill is the most difficult skill for most second and foreign language learners. It is hard for a non-native speaker to do something that an average native speaker usually finds a daunting job to do. So, lexical chunks and collocations have always a difficult task for second and foreign language in writing.

Perhaps Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners have a good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary but they have problems in English language use in a collective way. Students may have acquired a huge of vocabulary, they still lack collocational knowledge. Also, students who do not have collocational knowledge may have good vocabulary storage in their mind, but produces unnatural language. Wray (2002) stated that learners need collocation in order to acquire high level of competence in a second language, because they improve both accuracy and fluency.

The purpose of this research is advanced students who fear to be got them a writing task.

#### **Literature Review;**

The significance of collocations in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) have been considered in many researchers (Namvar 2012, McCarty 2008, Sadoughvanini 2012, Marton 1977). But each researcher has considered collocations from a different dimension Empirical studies about the knowledge of collocations among different groups of ESL or EFL learners showed that when learners try to produce appropriate word combinations they face difficulty because they have not enough collocational knowledge (Howarth, 1998). So, many researchers have considered translating collocations difficulties in linguistic dimension. Others have been researched about error analysis while other one has considered use of collocation and in another case its relation to proficiency in speaking and/or writing.

The word collocation itself can be traced as far back as the 17th century, when it was used by Francis Bacon in his *Natural History* from 1627. Supposedly, the first time it was used as a linguistic term was more than a century later, in 1750, by Harris, who use it to refer to the linear constellation words (Palmer 1993, as cited in Gyllstad, 2007). Robins (1967) stated that collocations studies started 2300 years ago in Greece. The Greek Stoics associated collocations to meaning and used the notion of collocation to study the meaning relationships between words. Based on these ancient scholars, words "do not exist in isolation, and they may differ according to the collocation in which they are used" (Robins 1967, as cited in Namvar, 2012, p. 43),

In 1991, Aghbar and Tang used cloze-test for EFL students, which consisted of 30 verb-noun collocations. The result showed that collocations including 'take and find' are early-acquired verbs and low proficiency student comprehended them easily.

Zhang (1993) measured the correlation between the EFL learners' use of lexical collocation and their writing fluency. He used 60 freshmen and divided them into two groups. They consisted of 30 native and 30 non-native English speakers. He assigned two tasks consisted of one fill-in-the-blank collocation test in order to measure knowledge of collocation and use one writing task to recognize the collocation use and writing proficiency. He realized that native English writers were better than non-native writers on the collocation test, and native writers did better than **11011**-native writers in writing. So, he found that among college freshmen, collocational knowledge showed proficiency in their writing.

Translation and a cloze task were administered by Bahns and Eldaw (1993) in order to measure German knowledge of English verb-noun collocations. Participants consisted of two groups. They included 58 German university EFL students.

A cloze test containing 10 sentences were given to one group: each had a *verb+noun* collocation with the verb missing and German-English translation test consisting of 15 sentences were given to another group. The findings revealed that because of lack of collocational knowledge all the learners couldn't answer well. So, they found collocation is a problem not only for learners and advanced students but also teachers have difficult in this regard.

Al-Zahrani (1998) realized that among the different academic years there was difference subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations. The knowledge of lexical collocations improved with the subjects' academic years. Also, he investigated that there was a positive relationship between collocational knowledge and language proficiency.

Hsu (2002) studied the relationship between use of English lexical collocations and online writing among Taiwanese college English majors and non-English majors. The results showed that there were a positive relationship between EFL learners' frequency of lexical collocations and their writing.

Hassan Abadi (2003) researched on Iranian EFL learners. He studied about learning English lexical and grammatical collocations by them. Hassan Abadi examined learners' collocations types, so he realized that learners showed different performance according to the patterns of collocation "in favour of verb-noun collocations" and they learnt lexical collocations easier than grammatical ones.

Mallikamas and Pongpairroj (2005) studied the university students' receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations in multiple-choice, error recognition and gap-filling tasks. Results indicated that students had difficulty dealing with the collocations in both reception and production tasks.

Koc (2006) investigated to show to what extent explicit instruction of vocabulary in collocations, using different techniques, developed collocational awareness in students, and whether such instruction has any enhancing effect on the retention of vocabulary. The results of the quantitative data showed that vocabulary instruction in collocations had better results in terms of vocabulary retention. Also, findings of this study, explicit instruction of vocabulary in collocations, using different techniques, is highly recommended for developing collocational competence and better retention of vocabulary.

Seesink (2007) studied vocabulary teaching and collocations in order to find how it can help to promote students' writing ability. He realized that focus on collocations had a positive effect on the students' results. Participants included Arab, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Students learnt collocation through an online program. But, in her study she did not reveal what kinds of collocations were used by learners and what types of collocations were difficult for them.

Mongkolchai (2008) also considered the university students' knowledge of English collocations. The Jesuits showed that the students' ability with the *noun + noun* pattern was at the highest level, whereas *adverb + adjective* at the lowest level. The students' errors explained the students' insufficient knowledge of English collocations, negative transfer from Thai, the students' strategy of using synonyms, etc.

#### **Definition of collocation;**

According to McCarten (2007) collocation is two or more words which used together. For example, we use *heavy rain* in a sentence but not *heavy sun*, or we apply *make* or *come to a decision*, but we don't *do a decision*.

So, *heavy rain* and *make a decision* are collocations and we say that *heavy* combines or collocates with *rain*; or *heavy* and *rain* are collocates of each other.

Deveci (2004) said that relationship between words is collocation. They involve structural patterns and combinations of words. So, *take a break* which is an example of idiom, and word combinations like *get on a bus* are collocations.

Lewis (1998) categorized collocations in the following way:

1. Strong: many collocations are strong or very strong. For example, we use *rancid butter*, but that does not mean that other things cannot be rancid.

2. Weak: it consisted of words which co-occur with a greater than random frequency. Many things can be long or short, good or bad. However, some things are more predictable, which could be called collocation; for example, *white wine* or *red wine*.

3. Medium strength: "words that go together with a greater frequency than weak collocations. Some examples are: *hold a meeting*; *carry out a stud*" (Lewis, 1998 as cited in Deveci, 2004).

Research questions:

The following research question will be answered in this study.

**Research question 1:** Does knowledge of collocation have any effect on production of collocation in free writing by EFL learners?

**Research question 2:** Does knowledge of collocation have any effect on the comprehension of collocation by EFL learners?

**Research question 3:** Is there any relationship between comprehension and production of collocation knowledge by EFL learners?

## II. METHODOLOGY

### Participants of study

The participants in this study were 80 Iranian male and female students at Navid institution. Their ages range from fifteen to twenty five. English language is their foreign language while their first language is Persian. The participants were those who had already passed primary and intermediate level courses, based on the placement test administered by the institution, and were studying in advanced level.

### Instrument

The study involved a multiple choice-test and a free writing test. The data collection instruments used in this study consisted of a writing task and multiple-choice test. SPSS (statistical Package for the Social Sciences) V19 analysis was used as quantitative analysis.

### Writing task

Students were asked to choose one topic and write composition base based on these following topics:

- 1- One of the traditional festivals in Iran
- 2- Short history
- 3- I felt so excited when I looked at the ...

Multiple-choice test

In multiple-choice test about 30 items were selected from the work book and student’s book of Master Class items were based on the contents of this book. It is scored base on correct answer.

Material

The materials to be used in this study were student’s book and work book of Master Class book (Haris and Stewart. 2007) which was taught for advanced students in Navid institution.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data analysis

In this research both inferential and descriptive statistics will be used. Descriptive statistic consists of tablet and bar graph. Inferential statistic is used to check the effect of knowledge of collocation on writing ability of EFL learners.

1. Descriptive Statistics:

The sample consisted of 80 students.

TABLE 1.  
STATISTICS FOR MC TEST AND FREE WRITING

Variable	MC test	free writing
N	SO	80
Mean	21.21	2.49
Std Deviation	5.291	1.293
Skewness	-0.074	0.641
Kurtosis	-0.714	3.000
Minimum	10	0
Maximum	30	8

Table 1 presents statistics for variables MC test and free writing. Results indicated that the MC test mean was 21.21 with standard deviation 5.291, ranged between 10 and 30. The Skewness and Kurtosis were -0.074 and -0.714, respectively, in the accepted range (between -1 and 1).

The free writing mean was 2.49 with standard deviation 1.293 ranged between 0 and 8. The Skewness was 0.641 in the accepted range (between -1 and 1). The Kurtosis was 3 to be a little high, so it may be deviated the normal distribution.

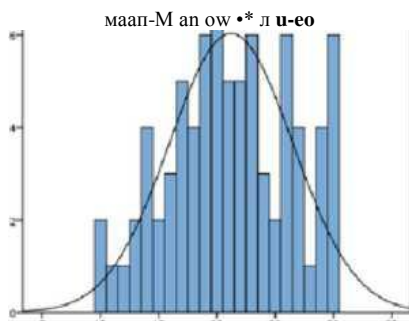


Figure 1. MC test Histogram with the normal curve

Figure 1 shows the distribution of MC test with the normal curve. It showed that the distribution was close to the normal distribution.

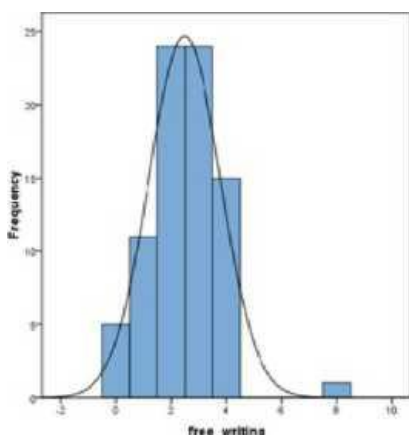


Figure 1. Free writing Histogram with the normal curve

Figure 1 shows the distribution of free writing with the normal curve. It showed that the distribution was close to the normal distribution. However there was an extreme data at 8.

**2. Inferential Statistics:**

In this section we intended to study research hypotheses by either parametric or non- parametric tests. Since the former requires the normal distribution for variables, firstly, we investigate the normality of the variables distributions by Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test.

TABLE2.  
KOLMOGOROV-SMIRNOV TEST OF NORMALITY FOR MC TEST AND FREE WRITING

Variables	Z	P(Sig.)
MC test	0.713	0.689
free writing	1.379	0.045

The above table shows results for Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Since p -value was greater than 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ) for MC test, the statistics was not significant which means that the distribution of MC test was normal For free writing variable the p-value in the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was lower than 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ) which means the test was not significant and the free writing distribution was not normal.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Research question 1:

To investigate effect of know ledge of collocation on the comprehension of collocation by EFL learners, regarding MC test scores which were between 10 and 30, we compared the scores with the expected value of 20. According to table 1 the mean of MC test (M 21.21) was greater than 20. The statistically significance of the difference was tested by the one-sample t-test as presented in the following table

TABLE 3.  
THE ONE-SAMPLE T-TEST FOR THE MC TEST

statistics Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Test value = 20			
					Mean Difference	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Overall effect	80	21.21	5.291	0.592	1.212	2.05	79	0.044

As shown in table 3, the t-test was significant at the level of 0.05 ( $t=2.05$ ,  $df=79$ ,  $p=0.044 < 0.05$ ). Thus the difference between the MC mean and the expected value (20) was significant. In other words, the MC test mean was significantly above the expected average. So, knowledge of collocation has positive effect on comprehension of collocation by EFL learners.

Research question2

To investigate effect of knowledge of collocation on production of collocation in free writing by EFL learners, regarding free writing scores which deviated the normal distribution and were between 0 and 8, we divided data into three intervals: 1) low scores for 0 or 1 scores, 2) moderate scores for 2 or 3 scores, and 3) high scores for 4 or above 4. Then the chi-squared test was used in which frequency differences between low, moderate and high intervals were tested as presented in the following table.

TABLE4.  
THE CHI-SQUARED TEST FOR THE FREE WRITING

Interval \ Statistics	Observed N	Expected N	Chi-Square	df	p (Sig.)
Low (0 - 1)	16	26.7			
Moderate (2 - 3)	48	26.7			
High (4 and higher)	16	26.7	25.6	2	0.001

As shown in table 4, the chi-squared test was significant at the level of 0.01 ( $X^2=25.6$ ,  $df= 2$ ,  $p=0.001 < 0.01$ ). Thus the difference between the observed frequencies for free writing was significant. In other words, the number of students with moderate free writing was significantly higher than the others. Thus we infer that the free writing of students was moderate. This rejects the research hypothesis.

Research question 3

Since the free writing variable had no normal distribution, effect of knowledge of collocation on the comprehension of collocation can be tested by the non-parametric Spearman correlation test.

TABLE 5.  
SPEARMAN CORRELATION BETWEEN MC TEST AND FREE WRITING

Statistics	Spearman Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Van able s			
MC test and free writing	0.231	0.039	80

As presented in the above table, the correlation between MC test and free writing was significant at the level of 0, 05 ( $r=0.231$   $N=80$ ,  $p=0,039<0.05$ ). Thus there was a significant relationship between MC test and free writing. The Spearman correlation was 0,231 which is an average correlation. Two variables were directly correlated since the correlation was positive. It means that the free writing is increased with increasing the MC test. This approves hypothesis 3.

#### Conclusion:

The study showed that Iranian advanced students were weak in the test of free writing collocations. The researcher thought this situation was bad. The students at this level did not perform well on the test of production of collocations. Thus, the students who are already weak in collocational knowledge do not make a statistically significant progress in their knowledge of collocation after graduation in an institution. It seems that they not only do not learn collocations in the writing, but they also seem to forget some of the vocabulary they knew at the beginning. So, increasing the students' knowledge of lexical collocations might seem beneficial for their writing proficiency. Accordingly, language teachers could enter collocation to their syllabuses to increase the teaching of collocations and introduce the notion of collocations into their classroom practice. Beyond doubt, sufficient materials for acquiring knowledge of lexical collocations are very important for both language teachers and EFL learners. Researcher suggested three main sources for teaching and learning collocations; textbooks, collocational dictionaries and corpora, First of all, language teachers could use textbooks to train students to familiar with collocations and help students to become aware of collocations in the classroom. Furthermore, dictionaries are good instruments for EFL learners to improve their collocational knowledge. Language teachers could introduce some collocational dictionaries to students and train them to make full use of collocational dictionaries especially in writing classes. It will help learners to master collocations well, and learn how to be independent in learning collocations, lastly, an on-line corpus database would be a useful source to help EFL learners access rich collocations collected from native English-speaking communities.

Richards and Rogers (2001) recommended that teaching activities in the classroom should "draw students' attention to lexical collocations and try to enhance their retention and use of collocations" (p. 137). Language teachers, therefore, should increase exposure to collocations in order to train the students to use collocations appropriately and eventually help the students to become independent learners of collocations in their future learning. So, the emphasis on collocations in the classroom could be one feasible and effective technique for teachers to improve their students' language performance.

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