

# The Effect of Collocations on Iranian Male and Female Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

The present study tried to address the probable impact of teaching English collocations on Iranian EFL learners to increase their level of vocabulary knowledge. To this purpose, 55 learners studying at the intermediate level of English language institute were selected to participate in the study. TOEFL test was employed to homogenize 22 male and 23 female participants. As the treatment, the two groups had three kinds of collocations; matching collocations with their partners, collocations with adjectives, and appropriate usage of prepositions. After the administration of the posttests, the statistical analysis revealed that teaching collocation increased learners' vocabulary knowledge in both gender but females outperformed their male counterparts on the posttest. It was concluded that integration of collocations with teaching materials and increasing the students' awareness of the significance of collocations expand their knowledge.

**Keywords:** Collocation, Vocabulary Knowledge, Gender

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning collocation is regarded as an important and crucial item and has much to do with other lexical items that are combined with it. As McCarthy [12] argues collocation is an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language. Moreover, learners' failure in using collocations in speech or writing, is representation of its importance. While collocational knowledge is a part of native speakers' linguistic competence, and can make problems for second language learners in communication. Webb and Kagimoto [21] are in agreement with McCarthy and they maintain that native speakers acquire language through constant contact with their language, but L2 learners are deprived of this privilege. Ellis [3] holds that collocational knowledge is the essence of language learning.

Vocabulary plays an important 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. The term collocation was first introduced by Firth [4]. 'Collocation' has been derived from the verb meaning 'to

go together' and it refers to the way words occur together, i.e. 'which words may occur (Larson [10], p.141). Learning collocation is regarded as an important and crucial item and has much to do with other lexical items that are combined with it. Ellis [3] (2000, cited in Nation, [14]) also takes a strong position on the importance of collocational knowledge by stating that it is the essence of language learning.

The present study aims to examine the effect of collocational knowledge on Iranian male and female vocabulary knowledge. For this purpose, the following research questions were posed :

Q1. Does collocational knowledge have any effect on Iranian male EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?

Q2. Does collocational knowledge have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?

## II. METHODS AND MATERIAL

### 2.1 Theoretical Background

Wray [18] states that collocations are important in striving learners to promote second language

competence, also they are important for learners with less ambitious aspirations, as they not only enhance accuracy but also fluency. Ghonsooli, Pishghadam, and Mahjoobi (2008) declared that Iranian learners may have a store of good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary but serious problems with acquiring and using collocations. Acquiring a huge number of vocabulary does not guarantee the knowledge of collocation, because most of students know a large number of single item vocabulary, but they do not know how to combine them properly in writing or speaking. The problem is due to the effect of their mother tongue, or lack of training in this regard.

The emergence of the lexical approach to second language teaching after grammar-based approach was a kind of emphasis on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations (Moudraia, [13]). Words are not isolated components of any given language, but are parts of many joint system. Nation [14] classifies word knowledge into three main categories: knowledge of form, knowledge of meaning, and knowledge of use. Knowledge of form involves the spoken and written form as well as word parts. Knowing of meaning refers to concepts, referent and association. Knowledge of use includes grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. Some of these aspects have been considered in pedagogy, while collocation are rarely studied (Hodene, [7]).

Nowadays, L2 researchers as in Nesselhauf [16] and Howarth [8] have a consensus over the idea of including collocation teaching in educational curriculum.

## 2.2 Gender

Definitions of gender involve social, psychological, and cultural dimensions linked to males and females in different social contexts. A person's gender is often distinguished from sex, as sex is related to the biological aspects of a person such as the chromosomal, anatomical, reproductive, hormonal, and other physiological characteristics that differentiate males and females. (Sunderland, [20] ). Gender differences have been found in many areas of human social and cognitive development. Studies indicated that females show more interest in social activities than males, females are less competitive and more cooperative than males (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; cited in Sunderland, [20]).

Gender-based differences were found to be factors that may affect students' academic achievements and their performance as well. Of the major topics in sociolinguistics is to find out how men and women use language in different ways.

From around the 1970s there has been an increasing interest, in several countries, in gender, context and language use in educational settings. The idea that women and men use language differently has a long history within 'folk linguistics', a term used by some researchers to refer to sets of popular beliefs about language which most of them have been refuted, for example there is a belief that women are like chatterboxes speaking more than men, but some studies have shown that in mixed-sex context men speak twice women (Pica et al., [17] ; Shehade, [19]). However, traditionally females and males are assumed to have different abilities regarding language, language learning and different analytical and mathematical skills, but recent research studies have begun to refute this kind of thinking.

In the study of females' and males' attitudes toward second language learning, Gardner and Lambert [5] observed that not only females had more positive attitudes toward the speakers of a second language but also they were more motivated toward learning a second language than males were. In relation to girls' and boys' self-conceptualization, Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson [11] demonstrated that girls had a high self-concept of verbal skills and high achievement in terms of verbal skills, while boys had only a high self -concept of mathematical skills but low achievement. Green and Oxford [6] investigated the effects of gender and proficiency level on strategy use of EFL students. They found that learner strategies were used more by women than men, and more among successful language learners. Brantmeier [2] investigated gender differences by text topic with native Spanish speakers studying intermediate level English as a Foreign Language (EFL). She utilized the same reading passages and comprehension assessment tasks as Brantmeier [2]. Results showed no significant relationship between gender and topic familiarity; however, females scored higher on recall than males for the "female" passage on a housewife. That is, there was a significant relationship between gender and passage topic on the recall assessment task (Brantmeier, [2]).

In language learning strategy research, many studies across different cultures show more frequent strategy use by females than males, especially the social-based strategies (Oxford, [6], cited in Zeynali, [23]. Bacon [1] investigated strategies that learners used when listening to authentic second language texts of two levels of difficulty. She reported that women used a significantly higher proportion of metacognitive strategies than men. They were more likely to plan for the listening, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their strategy use than men. On the other hand, men reported to use more bottom-up strategies than women. Men also reported a significantly greater use of translation strategies than women. They appeared to be in more favour of cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies. Similarly, Zare [22] tried to examine the probable differences among Iranian male and female language learners in terms of using language learning strategies. The findings of this study showed that the use of language learning strategies is different among male and female EFL learners in terms of gender since it was found that females EFL learners performed far better compared to males in terms of using learning strategies.

Due to different social norms and educational system in Iran, children are brought up in segregated schools. It is assumed that gender discrimination issues influence their learning process. Therefore, gender is the other category examined in this study.

### III. METHOD

#### 3.1. Participants

The study was conducted with 55 EFL learners selected from two English language institutes in Ardabil. They took part in the TOEFL test of language proficiency. The students with the score of one standard deviation (4.62) above and below the mean of 28.98 were selected as homogeneous intermediate level of learners. As regards the gender, 22 of them were male with the age range of 16 to 19 and 23 females with the age ranged from 15 to 20.

#### 3.2. Procedure

At the beginning of the study, TOEFL PBT test was run with 40 items to measure students' ability in English. The reliability of the test was estimated 0.90 through KR-21 in a pilot study with 15 students with the same characteristics from another institute. As the pre-test,

they had a vocabulary test including three gap-filling measuring three types of collocations: verb-noun, adjective-noun and verb-preposition collocations.

Both groups received the collocational training for about fifteen minutes during ten sessions. To teach verb-noun collocations, some collocations of this type were explained and matched with their partners; then, 8 of them were written on the right shown by numbers (1-8) and their partners written on the left shown by (a, b, c...h) in a mixed pattern. Participants were supposed to match them together in a way that the collocations can be used in a sentence. The next type of collocations, i.e. adjective-noun, should be matched with their easiest definitions taken from dictionaries. In order to teach verb-preposition collocations, the concerned prepositions were given in a box at the top in mixed patterns and students were asked to fill in the gaps in the given sentences by using them from the box. To make it more effective and give them a chance to test themselves, they did not write the prepositions in the sentence but defined it by the letter of the sentence. Then, they had post-test exactly as same as pretest to observe the effect of the treatment.

The study is considered as a quantitative research. It is a kind of quasi-experimental consisting pre-test, treatment, and posttest with two experimental groups. The study has to include two groups each for one gender to examine whether the independent variable (collocational training) has any significant effect on promoting both genders' vocabulary knowledge.

### IV. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the participants in pretest. The obtained results show that there is a slight difference between the means of two groups before treatment. The amount of mean scores for the males and females were 13.55 and 14.32 respectively.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE PRE-TEST  
FOR MALE & FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Gender	Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male Female	Pretest	22	13.5598	1.66387
		23	14.3205	1.58449

Table 2 illustrates the mean scores of the participants after the treatment. Male participants obtained the mean score of 15.29 and females got 15.94.

**TABLE 2**  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE POST-TEST FOR MALE & FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Gender	Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	Posttest	22	15.2957	1.55856
Female		23	15.9474	1.66019

According to tables 1 and 2, it is understood that the treatment had positive effect on learners' improvement and this effect was considerable.

Then paired samples test was run to detect significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups in the pretests.

**TABLE 3**  
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS FOR MALE PARTICIPANTS

Male	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig 2-tailed
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% Confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest & posttest	-1.7359	1.13835	.28459	-1.91908	-.70592	-4.612	15	.000

After the treatment the means of the two groups on the posttests were compared through paired samples test. As it is presented in table 3, the collocational training had positive effect on male EFL learners' lexical knowledge and this effect is considerable because the t-value is -4.612 and Sig= .000 which is less than 0.05.

The below table shows the effect of treatment in females group. The paired samples test revealed that the difference between the mean scores of females in pretest and posttest was significant (t=1.123 and Sig=.000 < 0.05).

**TABLE 4**  
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS FOR FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Female	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig 2-tailed
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. error mean	95% Confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest & posttest	-1.6269	1.8728	.18609	-2.38701	-1.61299	1.123	12	.000

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of teaching English collocations on developing students' vocabulary knowledge. By virtue of the mean scores obtained by the two groups on the posttest, it can be concluded that teaching collocations had a positive impact on EFL learners' lexical knowledge. Moreover, it was revealed that the female participants outperformed significantly.

Paired samples results indicated that there was a significant difference between the means of participants before and after the treatment for both male and female participants. The findings of this study are in line with Hsu's [9] research finding. He explored the effect of direct collocation instruction on Taiwanese college English majors; vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. He found that direct collocation instruction developed the learners' vocabulary knowledge and enhanced retention. He recommended that collocation instruction could be valuable to investigate as a teaching choice.

The findings confirm the research of Naveh, Kafipour and Soltani [15] who found that gender was a charismatic variable in the fields of vocabulary learning and final achievement of EFL learners. Furthermore, they asserted that female outperformed males in terms of general proficiency and vocabulary size.

In general, the obtained results have approved the previous researches on collocation such as Hsu [9] whose findings center on the positive effect of teaching collocations on foreign language learning in many features.

Concerning the participants' gender, the results showed that females performed better than males in learning collocations. It follows from the above discussion that

the mean scores in posttest for two groups were different and females' score was higher than the male ones (respectively, 15.92, 15.24).

Regarding pedagogical implications, the current study came to this conclusion that there is a positive relationship between knowledge of collocations and the vocabulary knowledge. The findings seem to imply that being familiar with more collocation could assist EFL learners increase their level of vocabulary knowledge. As some learners of the study asserted, collocations cannot be considered as something that learners could learn without any instruction; then, it is crucial to include collocation instruction into vocabulary teaching.

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