

## Collocations and EFL Learners' Writing Performance

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### Abstract

Research on teaching/learning collocations has recently increased due to their reportedly significant role in enhancing EFL learners' communicative competence. In line with this trend, the present paper employs a quasi-experimental research methodology aimed at investigating the effect of explicit teaching of verb collocations on students' writing performance. To do so, two intact classes (control and experimental), including sixty 12<sup>th</sup>-grade female high school students, were chosen to act as the participants of the study. They went through eight sessions of treatment, which included teaching 40 verb collocations through flash cards, a monolingual dictionary, and a vocabulary notebook. The verb collocations were culled from the students' textbook, VISION 3. A One-way ANCOVA was run to determine statistically the effect of teaching verb collocations on enhancing EFL students' writing performance. The obtained results indicated that the explicit teaching of verb collocations had a significant effect on EFL students' writing performance after controlling for their pre-test scores,  $F(1, 77) = 80/212$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The pedagogical implications of the study have been presented throughout the paper. The findings of the study have some pedagogical and practical implications for EFL students, teachers, and curriculum designers. Considering the fact that most of the EFL learners, particularly at the initial stages of their language learning, are not well aware of these collocations, it seems that raising an awareness of collocations would improve their language skills.

**Key words:** Communicative Competence, EFL Teaching, Vocabulary Learning, Verb Collocations, Writing Skill.

### Introduction

Regarding English as the most highly used and frequently spoken language for many consecutive years, the demand of learning it has considerably been increased. In a universal view, English acts as a means of conveying, comprehending, communicating, and sharing any kind of knowledge. The remarkable improvement for learning any language initiates with

vocabulary. Specifically, English vocabulary is considered as a prerequisite for EFL/ESL mastery, to properly understand and communicate in English (Wahyudin et al.,2021)

Taking learning vocabulary's pivotal role in the success of their study, vocabulary learning has been regarded as one of the fundamental issues both in language pedagogy and research (Lewis 2006). In the same vein, English learning equates learning English vocabulary, as it facilitates using the language fluently, expressing the ideas successfully (Wahyudin et al.,2021). However, this factor has not been paid due attention in the EFL context. For Hedge (2000, p. 110), "in the literature of English language teaching and learning, a recurring theme has been the neglect of vocabulary". In the same vein, asserting that due to the of lack of vocabulary storage, EFL learners face lots of problems in their speaking and listening, Nowzan and Baryaji (2013) pointed out that little attention was given for teaching vocabulary in EFL context supporting Wilkin's (1972) old claim that "linguistic had remarkably little to say about vocabulary"(p.109).

Nunan (2003) asserts that "vocabulary learning can't be left to itself. It needs to be strengthened by careful planning and well- directed teaching|" (P.150). Thus, it is of importance to explore ways of providing vocabulary instruction meeting the needs of the EFL learners. One of the suggested guidelines for the communicative treatment of vocabulary instruction is to learn vocabulary in context. This idea is reflected in Brown (2015) that internalization of vocabulary items would be possible within the context of surrounding discourse. As another suggestion for treating vocabulary, Scrivener (2011) points out that challenging students to upgrade language can be achieved mostly by collocations.

Collocations are primarily defined as two or more words with various combinations, while, more elaborately, they are "associations between two words which occur together more frequently than expected by chance" (Biber & Conrad, as cited in Pavičić Takač & Lukač, 2013, p. 387). used together have an important beneficial role in language skills as they add a flavor of accuracy and fluency to the discourse (Adhami & O' Brian, 2014). Fundamentally, they are a widespread and critical feature for any language which cannot be learned easily. However, a quick glance at the literature indicates that EFL learners lack collocational competence and thus encounter difficulties in learning and using collocations (Kamarudin, Abdullah, & Aziz ,2020). In fact, collocational knowledge is of further importance to non-native speakers as they lack the same exposure to the language as do native speakers (Jaen, 2007). Consequently, EFL learners face many problems in putting words together; they have serious problems in using collocations accurately during speech or writing, and in most cases, they deviate from the norms of the native speakers (Abdullah & Noor,2013). Shirato and Stapleton (2007) report similar findings on the rate of using collocations claiming that learners overuse highly frequent collocations as common ones.

Fortunately, a review of the literature on collocation reveals that recently there is a trend in research focusing on exploring the role of collocational knowledge in enhancing EFL

teaching. For example, Wolter and Gyllstad (2012) propose ‘the important conclusion’ being a collocation using the statistical approach. Accordingly, Webb, Newton, and Chang (2013) compared collocations used in more figurative way as their target items (e.g. cut corners). In line with this trend, some researchers investigated the effect of teaching collocations on EFL students' writing skill, including Bahardoust and Moeini (2012); Kazemi, Katiraei and Eslami (2014); Adelian, Nemati and Falahati (2015); Mousavi and Heidari (2018) and also Wang (2017) who claimed learners’ highly frequent collocations overuse. For example, the result of a study carried out by Asgari and Mustapha (2011) reveals that learning a word by reading and using dictionary, and applying words in the conversation are effective strategies implemented by learners. In the meantime, some studies allocate more detailed examining on the specific characteristics in terms of usage, comprehension and processing of collocations used by native and non-native students. For instance, Ozaki (2011) believed that “despite the fact that collocation comprehension is usually not particularly difficult for the NNSs, their production proves to be a greater challenge” (p. 38). Also, Shooshtari and Karami (2013) investigated the effect of collocation instruction on Iranian EFL students’ speaking proficiency. However, Gyllstad and Wolter (2015) propose that the slower process of collocation learning may brought about by the figurative nature of them, which highlights the lack of knowledge on collocation in general. In other words, it is apparent that collocations can pose problems for language learners (Wolter & Gyllstad, 2012). Therefore, most studies focused on the statistical approach on collocation learning which tends not to consider attributed functions, to indicate literal meanings of which are used more frequently. The result of this trend would be little research on learner knowledge of the figurative meanings of collocations (Macis & Schmitt, 2017).

The effect of implicit/explicit teaching of collocations on students' vocabulary retention and reading was also explored by Pakdaman and Pourhosein, (2019), Gheisari and Yousofi (2016), Sanchez (2017), Adhami and O’Brien (2012), and Benigno and Kraif (2014). Furthermore, the role of negative transfer from L1 to EFL in learning collocations was studied by Sadeghi and Panahifar (2013). More specifically, LuLač and Pavičić (2013) indicate that while examining non-native corpora, some features are apparently consistent in using adjective-noun collocations. However, other characteristics are reported as specific for a group of learners due to L1 transfer. Additionally, the results of the study were in line with previous findings which concern general adjectives the overuse. Also, the use of multi-word units was reported as a communication strategy in this study. Later, the use of concordance as a tool in teaching collocations was examined by Kheirzadeh and Marandi (2014); and Ashouri and Mashhadi (2015).

All in all, the findings of these studies indicated that focusing on collocations had a significant positive effect on enhancing EFL learners' language skills. They all strongly advocated the fact that collocations deserved to be the central part of vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. However, the type of collocation has not been considered as a contributing factor in

these studies. Thus, to fill the gap, the present study investigated the effect of teaching *verb collocations* on enhancing Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the effect of teaching collocations on enhancing EFL students' writing performance. Thus, the following research question has been formulated:

RQ: Does teaching verb collocations have any significant effect on Iranian EFL students' writing performance?

Based on the above-mentioned research question, the following null-hypothesis has been raised:

H<sub>0</sub>: Teaching verb collocations has no significant effect on Iranian EFL students' writing performance.

## Method

### Research Design

A quasi-experimental research methodology has been employed to carry out the research. To this end, the study used a *pre-test, treatment, post-test* design method, taking *teaching verb collocations* as the independent variable and *EFL students' writing performance* as the dependent one.

### Participants

In this study, sixty 12<sup>th</sup>-grade Iranian female high school EFL students in two intact classes participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 18-19; they all spoke Turkish (Azeri) as their first language. They were divided into two groups, namely the experimental group, which was taught verb collocations as treatment, and the control group, which did not receive any treatment. The learners studied their English textbook, VISION 3 (English for Schools), in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade of high school, two sessions per week (90 minutes).

### Materials and Instruments

In this study, students' English textbook (VISION 3) was used as the material, and flash cards, a writing test as well and a notebook were considered as the instruments.

### *EFL Learners' Textbook (VISION 3)*

Participants in both experimental and control groups used the same course book named Vision 3. The book is divided into 3 lessons. Each lesson is composed of different sections (Get Ready, Conversation, New Words, Reading, Listening-Speaking, and Writing). The vocabulary development part of lesson one (verb collocations) was chosen to be focused on. To do so, 40

verb collocations were culled from the conversation and reading section of lesson 1 to be mastered by the learners.

### ***Flash Cards***

A flash card is a card with a word or picture on it that teachers use during teaching. In this study, flash cards were used to illustrate the meaning of the newly studied vocabulary (verb collocations).

### ***Vocabulary Notebook***

The participants were also asked to keep a vocabulary notebook that contained three columns. The first column was related to the word itself and its pronunciation, the second column was related to the definitions, synonyms, and the third column was related to the Persian equivalent; the learners were asked to write the verb collocations in their notebook. They were encouraged and monitored to study and review the assigned collocations constantly.

### ***Writing Test***

After eight sessions of treatment, students were required to write two single paragraphs about the teacher-assigned topics. For scoring the students' writing performance, a rubric has been developed and used by the researcher.

### **Procedure**

First of all, the learners were taught the basics of paragraph writing, which took three sessions. Afterwards, the students (the two groups) were asked to write two single paragraphs about the assigned topics as a pre-test. Then, the experimental group received the treatment on verb collocation taken from the conversation and reading sections of lesson one. These verbs were taught during five sessions through the use of flash cards, a bilingual dictionary, and a vocabulary notebook as well. After the treatment, all the participants were asked to write two single paragraphs about the assigned topics (Health, Future Job). As for data analysis, ANCOVA inferential statistics were run to address the research question of the study.

### **Results**

After checking the assumptions of the statistics, namely *Normality of the Data* and *Equality of Variances*, ANCOVA statistics were run to test the hypothesis of the study: Teaching verb collocations does NOT have any effect on writing performance of EFL high school

students. As indicated before, the students' pre-test scores have been taken as a control variable. Table 1. presents the result of the analysis of covariance.

Table 1  
*ANOVA Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: score						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	668.114 <sup>a</sup>	2	334.057	447.287	.000	.921
Intercept	26.319	1	26.319	35.240	.000	.314
corv	431.786	1	431.786	578.141	.000	.882
grp	59.907	1	59.907	80.212	.000	.510
Error	57.508	77	.747			
Total	16113.000	80				
Corrected Total	725.622	79				

a. R Squared = .921 ( Adjusted R Squared = .919)

The F-statistic for measuring the significant difference between the variables is 80.212 with a significant value of 0.0, indicating the existence of a significant difference between the groups. That is, there is a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. The effect size is 0.51 which is larger than the average, indicating that about 51% of the change in scores was due to differences between groups. For the control variable, which is the students' pre-test scores, the value of the F statistic is 578.141, and its significance value is 0.0, indicating that it has a significant effect. Also, its effect size is 0.882, which is considerably high. It can be concluded that the students' pre-test scores had a much higher impact on the results. In general, the analysis of variance indicates the F-value as  $F = 287/447$  with a significance value of 0.00 and the effect size as 0.921. Thus, it can be claimed that about 92% of the differences between scores can be predicted by considering this model. To get a better understanding of how the covariate has adjusted the original means, we can consult the Estimates table, as presented below:

Table 2  
*Estimated Marginal Means*

Estimates	
Dependent Variable	95% Confidence Interval

group	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	12.953 <sup>a</sup>	.141	12.673	13.233
Experimental	14.784 <sup>a</sup>	.141	14.504	15.064

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: covariate = 13.1000.

According to the results for the means, it is observed that the control group, with an average of 12.953, is slightly lower than the average of the experimental group of 14.784. That is, the treatment used has improved students' writing performance.

In conclusion, a One-way ANCOVA was conducted to determine statistically the effect of teaching verb collocations on enhancing EFL students' writing performance while controlling for their pre-test scores. Teaching verb collocations had a significant effect on EFL students' writing performance after controlling for their pre-test scores,  $F(1, 77) = 80/212$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Comparing the estimated marginal means revealed that the higher score in mean was obtained for the experimental group (mean=14/784) compared to the control group (mean=12/953).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to explore the effectiveness of teaching verb collocations on enhancing EFL students' writing performance. A one-way ANCOVA was run to analyze the obtained data. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. After analyzing the result of the research, it can be concluded that teaching verb collocations explicitly can enhance EFL students' writing performance. The study, in fact, confirms the findings of the previous studies, namely Shooshtari and Karami, (2013); Ashouri and Mashhadi (2015); and Mousavi and Heidari (2018).

In general, vocabulary mastery can be deliberately essential in learning English: "There is a consensus that vocabulary becomes a catalyst to master a second or foreign language. It means that if English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learner lacks the knowledge of vocabulary, it is very difficult for them to communicate in the target language. Learners need to find the key words of the text" (Wahyudin et al, p.102). Being more meticulous, Shooshtari and Karami (2013) believe that instruction of lexical collocations had a positive effect on learners' speaking performance, as well as a moderate impact on their use of lexical collocations. In the same vein, the study by Ashouri and Mashhadi (2015) revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between the participants' use of various lexical collocations and their writing proficiency.

Further support was reported by Mousavi and Heidari, (2018), who indicated that using collocations had a significant positive effect on EFL learners' writing performance and their attitudes toward writing skills. The study of Pakdaman and Pourhosein (2019) showed that collocation activities increased significantly in learners' vocabulary knowledge. On the other

hand, the collocations that the language learners choose and use is basically considered to be “one of the main markers of foreign languages” (Korosadowitz-Struzynska, as cited in Pavičić & Lukač, 2013, p. 358). Moreover, Macis and Schmitt (2017) suggest that figurative meanings of collocations would benefit from explicit attention in the classroom. Thus, educators and students need to be informed of the fact that not all collocations have literal meanings; rather, some are to carry figurative meanings as well. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the findings are also in agreement with other studies conducted overseas, namely Abdaoui, (2010), Ebrahimi and Abdsamad, (2011), Sanchez, (2017), Basal (2019) and Zulfikar, (2019).

The findings of the study have some pedagogical and practical implications for EFL students, teachers, and curriculum designers. Considering the fact that "quite often EFL learners, particularly at the initial stages of their apprenticeship, do not realize that ready-made expressions such as collocations exist in English" (Zaabalawi & Gould, 2017, p 21), it seems that raising awareness of collocations would improve their language skills, so the target collocations cannot be explicitly taught to the students. The students should be reminded that mastering a certain degree of collocations would add a natural-sounding flavor of natural sounding into their English. This would, in turn, enhance their motivation and self-confidence. EFL teachers, on the other hand, have the responsibility for providing their students with different activities targeting practicing and mastering collocations. Furthermore, referring to the fact that the current EFL textbooks in most cases are not that rich in terms of collocations, syllabus designers should try to incorporate collocations in all language skills through designing appropriate tasks.

The findings of the study must, however, be interpreted in light of the limitations of which future research are supposed to overcome. Due to the limitations of the study, a word of caution needs to be stated as to the generalizability of the findings. As a quantitative study, the present paper just tried to shed light on one aspect of collocations, namely verb collocations in writing skills, leaving a vast area to be explored qualitatively. Furthermore, it was limited to only high school female students. Thus, as a suggestion for further studies, the prospective researchers might focus on different language skills and sub-skills, such as speaking, listening, and reading, trying to explore the issue of teaching and learning collocations employing different qualitative research methods.

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