

Effect of Intermediate Iranian L2 Learners' Collocational Competence on Reading Comprehension

Mahmood Hashemian^{1*}, Aliakbar Jafarpour², Fereshteh Gharazi³

1. Shahrekord University, Shahrekord, Iran, Email: m72h@hotmail.com

2. Shahrekord University, Shahrekord, Iran, Email: aliakbar_jafarpour@yahoo.com

3. Shahrekord University, Shahrekord, Iran, Email: fereshteh.gharazi@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: Mahmood Hashemian

Abstract – This study examined the effect of collocation instruction on enhancing L2 learners' reading comprehension. For this purpose, a convenient sample of 75 intermediate Iranian university students from Sheikhbahaee University participated in this study. One of the classes was selected as the experimental group and the other as the control group. All of the participants were given a reading test as a pretest to check their reading comprehension and collocational competency. Then, 30 lexical collocations extracted from the test were taught to the participants and, finally, the same test, used as the posttest, was administered to assess all the participants' reading comprehension to explore the probable effect of the treatment. Results of paired samples *t* test indicated that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group in reading comprehension. In fact, teaching collocations could play a significant role in enhancing L2 learners' reading comprehension.

Keywords: collocation, collocational competency, reading comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

The term *collocation* is generally understood to mean the way in which some words are often used together or in a particular combination of words used in this way. Collocations are thought to give us important information about their semantics and they are very essential for L2 learners to speak more fluently, in that the accurate use of collocations plays a vital role in L2 competency. There is a close relationship between vocabulary knowledge such as collocations and English reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental in reading comprehension because it functions as identical as background knowledge in reading comprehension (Qian, 2002).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Collocation

For the first time, the term *collocation* was introduced by Firth in 1957, who is known as the father of collocations. He discussed that a word is known by other words which accompany it, and he considered collocation as an essential part to determining about the word's meaning.

When words are put together in predictable patterns in both speech and writing, collocations are born. Collocation also can be defined as the tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse (Schmitt, 2000). In the process of L2 learning, prefabricated chunks (collocations) are very important and should be considered seriously by both teachers and learners (Lewis, 2000; Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2002).

Collocation is very essential for L2 learners to speak more fluently, in that the accurate use of collocations plays a vital role in L2 competency. Native speakers know how to combine words appropriately, and this collocational knowledge could be associated with their fluency (Shin, 2007; Sung, 2003). Thus, collocation helps L2 learners sound more native-like in their speech or writing (Wray, 2002). Many scholars (Ellis, 2001; Nation, 2001) hold the view that one factor to distinguish between native and nonnative speakers is the use of collocations in everyday language.

Native and nonnative speakers' use of collocations is different from each other. Most L2 learners are not aware of collocations and they do not work on them. Nonnative speakers often have difficulties to master collocations, especially in L2 settings simply because they do not hear, read, and use English on a daily basis. In L2 settings, collocations are not stored in L2 learners' memories (Sung, 2003). Lack of correct collocational knowledge causes malformed L2 collocation usage. Collocations convey semantic information, so incorrect use of collocations may lead to misunderstanding, and the failure to appropriate use of collocations may signal that there is a lack of expertise and knowledge.

On the other hand, when L2 learners combine a word mistakenly with an inappropriate word, they produce unnatural utterances which may hinder the understanding of meaning, or even these unnatural utterances may result in misleading meanings. The abovementioned consequence are real obstacles to successful communication.

Native speakers own the knowledge of high frequency collocations, and this knowledge makes collocations good targets for learning. Within the last three decades, learning collocations has been viewed as an essential element in achieving native-like production (Pawley & Syder, 1983). As a result, collocations are gaining an increasingly prominent position in present-day teaching and entire teaching approaches (e.g., lexical approach) have been based around the learning of collocations (Lewis, 2001; Nattinger, 1980).

In the last two decades, there has been considerable discussion among L2 teaching researchers on collocations, and they have shed light on the importance of lexical collocations for L2 learning (Hill, 1999; Lewis, 2000; Lewis, 2001). Collocation, or the combination of words that have a tendency to come together, is thought to be an essential part of L2 learning "because the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to all language use" (Hill, 2000, p. 53). There is a need to develop L2 learners' collocational competence that enables them to produce language that is "fluent, accurate, and stylistically appropriate" (Lewis, 2000, p. 177). Collocational competence is one of the important characteristics of an advanced L2 user. Most findings (e.g., Lien, 2003; Ying & Hendricks, 2004) have shown that general collocational knowledge among L2 learners is inadequate. Moreover, L2 learners can gain advantages of collocational knowledge by greatly facilitating their language learning, comprehension, and production.

1.2. Collocation and Reading

Lewis (2001) believed that paying attention to collocations may lead to learning them, and L2 teachers should help L2 learners to pay more attentions to words and their combinations in reading texts to enhance their awareness of collocations.

Not many studies have been done dealing with the relationships between L2 learners' collocational competence and a specific language skill. But more recently, some studies have been conducted to explore whether there is a connection between collocations and general language skills (Al-Zahrani, 1998). Some researchers (e.g., Heeyoung & Jungok, 2012; Lee, 2009) also have focused their studies on the relation between L2 learners' knowledge of collocations and their language proficiency. The results indicate that there is a significant correlation between L2 learners' knowledge of collocations and their language proficiency.

A number of EFL studies (Qian, 2002; Zhang & Annual, 2008) have demonstrated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension performance. The evidence of the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension can be clearly seen in the case of a study by Zhang and Annual (2008).

There are even more studies that have shown the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Joshi, 2005; Joshi & Aaron, 2000; Manyak & Bauer, 2009). Small vocabulary size and lack of adequate knowledge of word meanings usually impede L2 learners from comprehending the meanings of texts. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to find an answer to following question:

1. Does lexical collocational competence of Iranian intermediate L2 learners affect their reading comprehension?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants, Instruments, and Procedure

The study used a convenience sample of 75 Iranian L2 learners majoring in TEFL and English translation in Sheikhabaee University, Iran. The participants were all native speakers of Persian, including 12 males and 63 females, within the age range of 22 to 27. The participants were selected among the L2 learners studying at the intermediate level. The intermediate level was selected because, at this level, students might be familiar with collocations but they are not very competent in using them. Lower levels like elementary may not be familiar with the concept of collocation and advanced levels are competent enough in using collocations. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT; Allan, 2004) was administered to the participants to check their homogeneity in terms of L2 proficiency. The participants were not aware of the fact that they were selected to take part in this research. The L2 participants were homogeneous in term of proficiency based on OPT test and there was not any significant difference among the participants, so they were randomly divided into two groups: one group as the control group and one group as the experimental group.

The first test was the OPT. This 100-item test was administered to the participants to make sure they were homogenous in terms of their language proficiency. The reliability estimate of the test through Cronbach's alpha was .81.

In the second place, the test used for both the pretest and posttest was retrieved from the site <http://www.infosquares.com/readingcomprehension>, and it included three different reading sections. In order to identify the collocational competency and reading comprehension of the participants, they were asked to answer some inferential questions and to select the meaning of some collocational statements from the given options. All of the questions were multiple-choice questions.

Thirty collocations were selected from the reading test for instruction. The selected collocations were used in a short context along with their definitions in English and accompanied by an example to fix the meaning in the participants' minds (Soleimani & Mola Esmaeili, 2014).

In the first stage, the OPT was administered to a total of 87 TEFL students, studying in Sheikhabaee University, Iran to check their homogeneity in English. After scoring the test, 12 participants scored lower than 50% of the total score and they were excluded from the study.

Secondly, all groups of participants were asked to answer the pretest, the main goal of which was to see their level of collocational competency and reading comprehension. The pretest showed that most participants did not know the meaning of the selected collocations.

For the instruction and treatment of the collocations, the participants were initially given some idea of what collocation, glossing, and bolding were. Then, the experimental group was exposed to 30 selected collocations of English during 5 weeks. As Soleimani and Mola Esmaeili (2014) believe, L2 learners are able to recall words embedded in the context easier than those single words. So, in order to help the participants to grasp the exact meaning of each collocation, the collocations were taught in short authentic contexts along with their definitions. The participants were to learn three collocations for each session, and in this way, the total number of 30 collocations was covered during the whole program. The reading course met 90 min twice a week, for 8 consecutive weeks.

Finally, after 5 weeks of treatment and instruction, the posttest was administered to assess the participants' collocational competency and reading comprehension.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of descriptive statistics of the pretest and the posttest for both the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for All the Groups for Reading Comprehension

Group	Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Experimental Group	Pretest	49	9.74	2.48
	Posttest	49	13.00	2.33
Control Group	Pretest	26	9.69	1.61
	Posttest	26	11.03	2.97

From the data in Table 2, we can see that, on the pretest, the *p* value is 0.93 which is higher than 0.05, so there was not any significant difference in the mean scores for each of the

groups. Moreover, the p value of the posttest is 0.002 and is less than 0.05, so it can be concluded that there was a significant difference in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups.

Table 2: Independent Samples t Test of Pretest and Posttest of Control and Experimental Groups

Groups	t	Mean Difference	Sig.
Pretest	.088	.047	.930
Posttest	3.143	1.96	.002

* $p \leq .05$

In order to analyze the pretest and posttest in the experimental group, matched t test was conducted. The descriptive analysis in Table 3 shows that the mean of scores of the pretest was 9.72, and the mean of scores of the posttest was 12.32. Moreover, the matched t test revealed $p = 0.00$ which is less than 0.05, so it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest for the experimental group.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Posttest in experimental Group

Group	Variable	N	M	SD
Experimental Group	Pretest	49	9.72	2.21
Experimental Group	Posttest	49	12.32	2.72

The results, as shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3 indicate that collocational competency can affect L2 learners' reading comprehension. The results obtained from the data summarized that teaching collocations in order to improve collocational knowledge of L2 learners can enhance their reading comprehension.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to the aim of assessing the importance of collocational competency in L2 learners' reading comprehension. Prior studies (e.g., Hsu, 2010; Hsu & Hsu, 2007; Lien, 2003; Ying & Hendricks, 2004) have noted the importance of collocational competency and collocation instruction on some aspects of L2 learners' proficiency. The results of the current study determined that teaching collocations to L2 learners can affect their reading comprehension. This result is in agreement with Zhang and Annual's (2008) findings which showed a close relationship between collocations and English reading comprehension.

Due to the importance of collocational competency of L2 learners in the process of L2 learning, both L2 learners and teachers should give more attention to collocations (Lewis, 2000; Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2002). Also, collocations play a crucial role in the production of acceptable, natural, and native-like language. Regarding the fact that the Iranian L2 learners do not have many exposures to native-like English and they cannot find plenty of opportunities to have direct contact with native speakers of English, they should find some other ways to

improve their language competency. Thus, this study may give L2 learners and teachers the insight of the importance of collocation in achieving a good mastery of language skills such as reading. Accordingly, the research findings of the current study revealed that collocational competency has effects on L2 learners' reading comprehension. The result of this study seems to be consistent with the findings of other researchers (e.g., Hsu, 2010; Hsu & Hsu, 2007; Lien, 2003; Ying & Hendricks, 2004) which displayed that instruction of collocations has positive effects on improving of L2 learners' reading comprehension.

The findings of the study revealed that collocational knowledge of L2 learners has several effects on their reading comprehension. Therefore, inadequate collocational knowledge usually impedes L2 learners from comprehending the meaning of the text.

The finding of the current study would have some practical implications for both L2 learners and teachers. This study may attract L2 learners and teachers' attention to the significance of collocations in improving language skills such as reading. Moreover, it may help both L2 teachers and learners to find out how knowledge of collocations can help them in different aspects of language skills like reading.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Al-Zahrani, M. S. (1998). *Knowledge of English lexical collocations among male Saudi college students majoring in English at a Saudi university*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania.
- Ellis, N. (2001). Memory for language. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction* (pp. 33-68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Firth, J. R. (1957). Modes of meaning. In J. R. Firth (Ed.), *Papers in linguistics 1934-1951* (pp. 190-215). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heeyoung, K., & Jungok, B. (2012). The relationship of collocation competence with reading and writing skills. *English Teaching*, 67(3), 95-119.
- Hill, J. (1999). Collocational competence. *English Teaching Professional*, 2, 51-62.
- Hill, J. (2000). Revising priorities: From grammatical failure to collocational success. In M. Lewis (Ed.), *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach* (pp. 47-69). London: Language Teaching Publications.
- Hsu, J. Y. (2010). The effects of collocation instruction on the reading comprehension and vocabulary learning of Taiwanese college English majors. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 12(1), 47-87.
- Hsu, J. Y., & Hsu, L. C. (2007). Teaching lexical collocations to enhance listening comprehension of English majors in a technological university of Taiwan. *Soochow Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, 24, 1-32.
- Joshi, M. R. (2005). Vocabulary: A critical component of comprehension. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 21, 209-219.
- Joshi, M. R., & Aaron, P. G. (2000). The component model of reading: Simple view of reading made a little more complex. *Reading Psychology*, 21, 85-97.

- Lee, J. H. (2009). *The effects of collocation based vocabulary instruction on EFL learners' receptive and productive skills*. Unpublished master's thesis, Seoul National University.
- Lewis, M. (Ed.). (2000). *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.
- Lewis, M. (2000). Language in the lexical approach. In Lewis, M. (Eds.), *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach* (pp. 126-154). Language Teaching Publications.
- Lewis, M. (2001). *Third conditional again! Isn't there anything else?* Retrieved December 25, 2015, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.disal.com.br/nroutes/nr12/indice.html>
- Lien, H. Y. (2003). *The effects of collocation instruction on the reading comprehension of Taiwanese college students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania.
- Manyak, P. C., & Bauer, E.B. (2009). English vocabulary instruction for English learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(2), 174-176.
- Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nattinger, J. (1980). A lexical phrase grammar for ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14, 337-344.
- Pawley, A., & Syder, F.H., (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Native like selection and native like fluency. In J.C. Richards, Schmidt, R.W. (Eds.). *Language and communication* (pp. 191-225). Longman: London.
- Qian, D. (2002). Investigating the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance: An assessment perspective. *Language Learning*, 52, 513-536.
- Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Shin, D. K. (2007). What collocations would be unpredictable for Korean EFL learners? *Korean Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23(2), 83-98.
- Soleimani, S., & Mola Esmaeili, M. (2014). Explicit instruction of context embedded hyperlinked thematic words and vocabulary recall. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1794-1801
- Sung, J. (2003). *English lexical collocations and their relation to spoken fluency of adult nonnative speakers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, PA.
- Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Harlow: Longman.
- Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ying, Y., & Hendricks, A. (2004). CA in the writing process. *Reflections of English Language Teaching*, 3, 51-78.
- Zhang, L. J., Annual, S. B. (2008). The role of vocabulary in reading comprehension: The case of secondary school students learning English in Singapore. *RELC Journal*, 39(1), 51-76.