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The Impact of Information-Gap and Opinion-Gap Tasks on EFL learners' Lexical Collocation Achievement

Hamid Marashi[1]*, Somayeh Amirabadi[2]

1. Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University at Central Tehran.
2. MA in TEFL, Islamic Azad University at Central Tehran.
* Corresponding Email: ahmuya@yahoo.com

Abstract – This study was an attempt to investigate the comparative impact of information-gap and opinion-gap tasks on EFL learners' collocation achievement. To fulfill the purpose of this study, 60 male and female intermediate EFL learners were selected from among a total number of 90 through their performance on a sample piloted PET. Based on the results, the students were randomly assigned to two experimental groups with 30 participants in each and a collocation test was administered to all the students in both groups to make sure that they were not familiar with the collocations to be taught during the upcoming treatment. Both groups underwent the same amount of teaching time by the same teacher which included using information-gap tasks for the first group and opinion-gap tasks for the second. The same collocation test was administered at the end of the treatment to both groups and their mean scores on this posttest were compared through an independent samples t-test. The results demonstrated that the learners in the information-gap group benefited significantly more than those in the opinion-gap group in terms of their collocation achievement. It is thus recommended that information-gap tasks be more actively employed for the goal of improving learners' lexical collocation achievement.

***Keywords*:** information-gap tasks, opinion-gap tasks, lexical collocations

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most arduous tasks many people undertake in a lifetime is arguably learning a foreign language. Accordingly, many researchers assert that learning the vocabulary in this process is perhaps the most challenging aspect of becoming proficient in the target language (Milton, 2009; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). To this end, the major question remains as to how words can be learned in the most effective way which lead to native-like or near-native accuracy and competency.

Furthermore, L2 learners cannot communicate successfully, or at least, with adequate appropriacy if they only focus on individual words without being aware of which words can be combined with them (Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005) and these frequent combinations of words are referred to as collocations (Lewis, 1993) which are crucial organizing principles in the vocabulary of any language (Nesselhauf, 2003).

1.1. Collocations

There is a multiplicity of definitions of collocations in the ELT literature (e.g. Carter, 1998; Hill, 1999; Jones & Sinclair, 1974; Sinclair, 1991). Most – if not all – of these definitions,

however, circle around what Firth (1968, p.181) proposed: "Collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word". He also stated that, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps" (p. 179).

Collocations are perhaps predominantly considered as being arbitrary (e.g. Beson, 1990; McKeown & Radev, 2006) meaning that substituting a synonym for one of the words in a lexical chunk may lead to inappropriate combination. For example, Native speakers of English say *tall people* not *high people* although tall and high are synonyms. Furthermore, collocations are referred to as fixed lexical units by SLA researchers through employing terms such as *speech formulate* (Peters, 1983), *lexical phrases* (Nattinger & Decario, 1992) and *prefabricated chunks* (Lewis, 1997).

Alongside the diversity of definitions, there are also different classifications of collocations, each of which has been made based on certain features such as the collocational range of the items comprising collocations, parts of speech of the items, or the meaning conveyed by collocations. Baker (1992) classifies collocations as open and restricted collocations where the former are nodes that can go with a wide range of other words (e.g. *big house, beautiful house, small house*) while the latter are similar to idioms or fixed phrases (e.g. *get away with* or *dogs eat dogs*). Another classification is presented by Lewis (2000): strong collocations which have a very limited number of collocate (for example, *rancid butter* or *rancid oil*) and weak collocations which refer to collocations that have a wide variety of collocate (for example, many things can be long or short, cheap or expensive, good or bad, etc.).

A widespread classification of collocations has been offered by Benson, Benson and Illson (1986) in which collocations are dichotomized into grammatical and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations consist of content words: a noun, an adjective, or a verb plus a preposition or infinitive such as *lack of*, *with respect*, etc. On the other hand, lexical collocations consist of neither prepositions nor infinitives; rather, they comprise of two or more content words, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Examples of this type of collocation are *sour milk*, *conduct research*, *police officer*, *mentally disabled*, *move freely*, and *proudly present*.

Lexical collocations of course play an important part in both first language acquisition and any second or foreign language learning (Moudraia, 2001). Knowing a word is in fact knowing how and where to employ it (Phythian-Sence & Wagner, 2007) and learning only word lists without appropriately and accurately using their companions will not result in communicative competence effectively (Canale & Swain, 1980). Accordingly, it seems that developing collocational competence in EFL contexts is essential for the abovementioned reasons and teachers could introduce new words with their frequent co-occurrences or collocations while they are teaching new items (Lewis, 2000). To this end, they need to be equipped with efficient teaching techniques.

1.2. Information-Gap Tasks

Recent SLA studies approve of classroom activities which foster simultaneously both interaction and attention to form (Ellis, 2005; Long, as cited in Ganji & Ketabi, 2015). In the

words of Skehan (1996), the best approach in this regard is task-based language teaching or the strong version of communicative language teaching which claims that "Language is acquired via communication" (Howatt, 1984, p. 279).

Among the varieties of tasks, information gap is an important aspect of communication because obtaining information is the main reason why people communicate in the first place (Richards, 2006). Richards further continues that real communication can take place in the classroom if students use their linguistic and communicative resources for obtaining information in order to complete a task.

"An information-gap task is an activity in which students are missing information to complete a task and must communicate with their classmates to fill in the gaps" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 148). Examples include a spot-the-difference activity or one where a student is given a picture to describe it to another who then creates a drawing. Information-gap tasks which were introduced by Long (1989) can be traced to classroom activities such as asking learners to find differences between individually held pictures, order sentences into stories, restore portions of incomplete maps and charts thus enabling them to engage in functional, meaning-focused L2 use and gain access to input for learning.

The popularity of these tasks as classroom activities "has been well established by their long-standing presence in the SLA research" (Pica, Kang & Sauro, 2006, p. 329) and their pedagogical origins make them especially favorable to classroom research (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

1.3. Opinion-Gap Tasks

An opinion-gap task involves "identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling or attitude in response to the given situation" (Prabhu. 1987, p. 47). Examples are story completion and taking part in a discussion. Fallahi, Aziz Malayeri, and Bayat (2015) argued that an opinion-gap activity requires learners to express their feelings and opinions on a given subject. In fact in these tasks, all information is given at the beginning of the activity and learners give their views on the given information, whereas in information-gap activities, as mentioned above, parts of information are missing at the start and participants negotiate until they complete the task.

Opinion-gap tasks as stated by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) are open-ended and can have divergent outcomes because different ideas and points of views are possible. Examples of opinion exchange tasks include giving advice to a student on, for instance, whether they should get the first job opportunity they get or wait for better chances, or sharing their personal experiences about the given topic to their partners or the whole class.

In line with what has been discussed so far, the present study sought to compare the impact of two types of tasks – information-gap and opinion-gap tasks – on the lexical collocation achievement of EFL learners. Hence, the following research question was formulated:

Q: Is there any significant difference between the impact of information-gap and opinion-gap tasks on EFL learners' lexical collocation achievement?

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

In order to homogenize and choose the participants, first the researchers piloted a sample PET among 30 intermediate students. Once modified through item analysis in which 11 items were found faulty and removed), the piloted PET was administered among 90 intermediate students who were chosen non-randomly. A total of 60 students whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were thus chosen. These participants were both male and female and aged above 16. Subsequently, they were divided into two equal experimental groups.

2.2. Instrumentation and Materials

In order to obtain measurable data with which the result of the present study could be statistically analyzed, the following instruments were utilized.

2.2.1. Preliminary English Test (PET)

A sample PET was administered for the participant selection process as described above. The speaking section of the PET was not administered and both researchers who inter-rater reliability had been established in the piloting phase ($r = 0.706$, $p = 0.0001 < 0.01$) scored the writing papers.

2.2.2. Test of Lexical Collocation at the Outset and Posttest

To ascertain whether the participants had prior knowledge of the target collocations at the outset of the study, the researchers administered a teacher-made test comprising 30 multiple-choice items from the book *Collocation in Use* (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005). The purpose of this 20-minute test was to identify the collocations which were known by a considerable amount of the participants at the outset so that those items would be taken out from the treatment. The test was administered to the two groups and once modified through further item analysis (five items were taken out), it was administered as the collocation posttest to both groups at the end of the treatment.

2.2.3. Course book

The second edition of *American English File 3* (Latham-Koeing & Oxendon, 2014) was used as the course book for all the participants. It consists of 12 units, four of which were covered for this study. Each unit has two parts: A and B and includes all the skills and sub skills. The book also has a DVD, a workbook, and a supplementary book. In addition, eight units of the book *Collocation in Use* (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005) were used in both groups for teaching collocation.

2.3. Procedure

Following the piloting and administration of the sample PET and the collocation test as described above, the treatment began. The participants in the first experimental group

received the treatment of information-gap tasks while the second group underwent opinion-gap tasks. The amount of the instruction by the same teacher (one of the researchers) was equal in both groups: a total of 18 sessions with each session lasting for 90 minutes and 30 minutes of the beginning of eight sessions being dedicated to teaching collocations.

In the first session, the teacher in both groups described the importance of collocational knowledge to raise the students' awareness. In the following sessions, after the teacher taught one pre-selected unit of the book *Collocation in Use*, the participants in the first experimental group were asked to do information-gap tasks. Before the students began doing the tasks, clear and adequate instruction was given by the teacher as to how they had to complete them. Typical types of information-gap activities include: finding differences and similarities, following and giving direction, and finding and giving information.

To illustrate more specifically how the instruction was actually conducted, the teacher needed to describe one procedure here: the students were divided into A-B pairs. The teacher had copied two sets of pictures which were related to the topic of the collocation that was to be taught that session. One set was for the A students and the other for the B ones. The pictures were slightly different and the students had to work in pairs and share their information in order to find out how many differences there were between the two pictures. The students also practiced a role play in pairs. One student was given the information s/he needed to play the part of a – for example – salesperson while the other needed to obtain information on prices. As the students were doing pair work, the teacher would walk through the class and monitor them to see if they used collocations correctly or not and in case she noticed any collocational errors, she would correct them.

The same units of the book *Collocation in Use* were taught to the participants of the second group undergoing the opinion-gap tasks instruction. In this group after the teacher taught the unit, the students were asked to express their opinions about the topic or the questions which were asked by the teacher; for instance, if the topic of the collocation was about money, they might have asked to say if they liked saving money or spending it or share an experience with the class in which they had donated money to a charity. They could do it in pairs, groups, and also in the whole class. The teacher would again correct their collocational mistakes.

As the final step after the treatment was over, the same posttest was administered to both groups.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Participant Selection

Following the piloting of the test, in which the reliability of the test scores (estimated through the KR-21 procedure) gained by the participants was 0.89, the researchers administered the test to the 90 students for participant selection. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of this administration with the mean being 44.79 and the standard deviation 4.88.

Table 1. ***Descriptive Statistics of the PET Administration***

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PET Administration	90	33.0	53.0	44.794	4.8823
Valid N (listwise)	90				

3.2. Posttest

Table 2 below displays the descriptive statistics of this administration. As shown, the mean and standard deviation of the information-gap group were 20.23 and 1.91, respectively, while those of the opinion-gap group were 19.24 and 1.79, respectively.

Table 2. ***Descriptive Statistics for the Posttest in Both Groups***

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Information-gap group posttest	31	16	24	20.23	1.910	-.100	.421
Opinion-gap group posttest	29	16	23	19.24	1.786	.053	.434
Valid N (listwise)	29						

Furthermore, the reliability of the test scores (estimated through the KR-21 procedure) gained by the participants on the posttest was also 0.91.

3.3. Answering the Research Question

The researchers conducted an independent samples *t*-test. As seen in Table 2, the skewness ratios of both groups fell within the acceptable range of ±1.96 (-0.23 and 0.12) thus signifying that the score distributions in both groups represented normality. Therefore, running a *t*-rest was legitimized.

Table 3. ***Independent Samples t-Test on the Mean Scores of Both Experimental Groups***

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t*-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	*t*	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.131	.719	2.059	58	.034	.984	.478	.027	1.94
Equal variances not assumed			2.063	58	.034	.984	.477	.029	1.93

As Table 3 above indicates, with the *F* value of 0.131 at the significance level of 0.719 being larger than 0.05, the variances between the two groups were not significantly different. Therefore, the results of the *t*-test with the assumption of homogeneity of the variances were reported here. The results ($t = 2.059$, $p = 0.034 < 0.05$) indicate that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the posttest. It can thus be concluded that the information-gap group who gained a higher mean score on the posttest outperformed the opinion-gap group in this study.

Next, the researchers were interested to know how much of the obtained difference could be explained by the variation in the two levels of the independent variable. To determine the strength of the findings of the research, that is, to evaluate the stability of the research findings across samples, effect size was also estimated to be 0.71. According to Cohen (1988, p. 22), this is a moderate effect size. Therefore, the findings of the study could be moderately generalized.

4. DISCUSSION

During recent years, there have been numerous studies showing that TBLT is a more effective approach to language teaching and has generally a more positive impact on learning outcomes (e.g., Fallahi et al., 2015; Fannee, 2014; Ganji & Ketabi, 2015; Pica et al., 2006; Raptou, 200; Samuada & Bygate, 2008; Van den Branden, 2006). Accordingly, the researchers set out their work with the above paradigm in mind that TBLT does have significantly positive results; the question, however, was over the effectiveness of information-gap and opinion-gap tasks vis-à-vis one another.

As Prabhu (1987) notes and as reconsolidated in this study, some of the merits of information-gap tasks are that they provide students with the body of information needed to carry out and they are put in the category of closed tasks, i.e. there is one definite outcome and a single correct answer. According to him, participants produce more negotiation while performing information-gap tasks. And this is exactly what happened in the experimental group using information-gap tasks.

On the other hand, the learners in the opinion-gap group focused mostly on finding ideas to produce output and convey their meaning rather than focus on correct forms and appropriate collocations. In fact, they were perhaps too engaged with merely making themselves understood that they were less willing to take the trouble recalling the newly learned collocations.

Learners performed better on information-gap tasks in learning collocations most probably because the procedure was structured in a way that it told the students specifically what to do. In the information-gap group, the classroom activities were designed with the intention of exchanging information; thus the tasks could not be completed unless the learners exchanged the information required to achieve the single outcome. This of course was not the case in the opinion-gap group and perhaps was at the heart of driving the information-gap group to better achievement in terms of learning collocation. In addition, information-gap tasks led to the production of more words recycling and involved sharing the different pieces of information about a particular topic and organizing them in a comprehensible fashion.

5. CONCLUSION

From a pedagogical viewpoint, information-gap tasks can lower the learners' stress and anxiety by making students work in groups or pairs, providing friendlier and less teacher-centered classrooms as they emphasize a more cooperative atmosphere providing sufficient input, and ending in one specific outcome rather than several possible answers compared to opinion-gap tasks. In addition, with information-gap tasks where members of each group are asked to work cooperatively with each other toward one single outcome, the groups would enjoy themselves working with peers in exchanging information and interacting to perform the task.

When it comes to collocations, teachers may encounter certain problems on the part of the learners such as lack of collocation knowledge or not being aware of the importance of collocations in learning language. Many students even at advanced levels have problems in combining words in L2 appropriately since they have not explicitly received collocation instruction and have learned words in isolation.

As is clear from the findings of this study, it is very important for teachers instructing collocation to utilize information-gap types of tasks, provide learners with adequate context, actively involve them in the class procedures, and encourage them to be more cooperative in their learning.

To introduce information-gap tasks to English teachers, teacher training courses and programs obviously play a considerable role in familiarizing teachers with such techniques. This training could be done both for teachers who are being trained to become teachers or those already engaged in the practice of pedagogy in the form of in-service courses.

Syllabus designers and materials developers can provide the content of teaching materials with comprehensible and proper tasks and exercises. They should thus consider tasks as building blocks for classroom teaching and for designing instructional activities. Some books can be designed with their focus on information-gap collocation tasks with their teachers' guide which would help teachers in the application of those books. In this way, teachers are provided with a rich source from which they can pick out some tasks according to the interests of their learners and the immediate context of their teaching. It is also important to pay more attention to learners' interaction and negotiation in performing the information-gap tasks presented in the materials with more emphasis on promoting these attributes among learners.

Finally, in the process of conducting this study, certain suggestions for other studies in line with the one at stake came to the researchers' minds, which are:

1. This study applied two task-based conditions on collocation achievement; the effect of these two conditions on other language components and skills would be a worthy topic to investigate.
2. Information-gap and opinion-gap tasks were compared with one another in this study in terms of their impact on collocation achievement. Another study could be conducted to find out whether a combination of both information-gap task and opinion-gap tasks would benefit learners too or not.

3. The materials used in this study were all taken from pedagogical texts; other types of texts such as story books which are perhaps more challenging than materials planned for pedagogical purposes can be selected in further research studies with the same design.

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The Authors' Biodata:

Hamid Marashi is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University at Central Tehran. He currently teaches graduate and postgraduate courses with his main areas of research interest including learner/teacher variables, cooperative learning, and TBLT. He has published in international academic journals (including *TESOL Journal*) and also presented in international conferences.

Email: ahmuya@yahoo.com

Tel: +98 912 1277323

Somayeh Amirabadi holds an MA in TEFL from Islamic Azad University at Central Tehran. She has been teaching English at different language schools in Tehran. Her main area of research interest is task-based language teaching.

Email: somayehamirabadi@yahoo.com

Tel: +98 912-5434845