AN ANALYSIS OF THE FREQUENCY OF ACCEPTABLE AND UNACCEPTABLE COLLOCATIONS AMONG IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Although it is broadly recognized that collocations are vital features of second language acquisition, some of previous studies have reported Iranian EFL learners like other EFL students having difficulties to learn and use the English language collocations. This study is carried out to analyze the frequency of acceptable and unacceptable collocations among Iranian EFL learners. 107 students majoring in English and literature in Qazvin, Iran were selected as participants for this study. Their age ranged from 19 to 25 years both male and female, selected through convenience sampling. In this study, a questionnaire that involves 30 multiple-choice items, which was made up according to Benson's collocational approach (lexical and grammatical collocation), was used. All the collocations were selected from Oxford collocation dictionary. The data was analyzed by SPSS. The results showed that the most unacceptable lexical collocations are produced by Iranian EFL learners is in Noun + Verb 73.6% and the most acceptable lexical collocations which they can produce is in Verb + Noun 84.9%. In addition, the most unacceptable grammatical collocations used is in Noun + preposition 56.6% and the most acceptable grammatical collocations which they used is in Noun + To-Infinitive 79.6%. The result of the study suggest that learners are most likely to face difficulties producing acceptable collocations comprising of Noun + To-Infinitive and Verb + Noun respectively.

KEYWORDS: collocation, lexical collocation, grammatical collocation, unacceptable/acceptable collocation

1. INTRODUCTION

Collocation is two or more words that are used typically together (McCarten, 2007). Benson (2010) discusses "there are certain words that always come with certain other words or grammatical structures. 'Unacceptable collocations' means the combinations are not existing collocations and used in wrong contexts (Chang, 2018). Collocations have always been a matter of concern for learning and teaching a foreign language. In recent years, many types of research have focused on

collocations. Although research on collocations seems growing up, there has not been much work to be studied about collocations in other languages than English and there has not been much work contrasting the collocations in different languages, too. (Xiao and McEnery, 2006).

Collocations have played a very important role in language fluency and language pedagogy (Lundell & Lewis, 2016). They are the source of a language's attraction and interest which makes it more beautiful, powerful, and more natural. People use collocations to be able to talk about any subject effectively. Learning collocations increases learners' communicative competence and leads toward native-like fluency (Namavar, 2012). Therefore, EFL learners should learn collocations and their instructions.

Collocations also have a vital role in translation and unacceptable collocations frequently are used in translated texts by even experienced translators (Munday, 2009) because collocations also are based on the culture of one language and translators should know the meaning of individual words and their relationship between them according to the culture of that language (Sarikas, 2006).

According to Benson (1986), there are two types of collocations: lexical and grammatical collocation. Grammar collocation includes vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure, and pronunciation. Lexical collocation refers to a combination of certain words in a language. If EFL learners learn more vocabularies, not only they know some new words, but also they become familiar with collocations and combinations of them and learn how and where to use them (Woolards, 2000; Wagner & Phythian-Sence, 2007). That means word knowledge is important for EFL learners but they often have lot of challenges with appropriate lexical choice (Ahmadian & Darabi, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to distinguish the most frequent types of acceptable and unacceptable collocations in Iranian EFL learners' performance to determine which English patterns are leading to unacceptable collocations in their performance. 107 Iranian Students majoring in English and literature answered to the one questionnaire includes different lexical and grammatical collocations which chosen from Oxford Collocation Dictionary (OCD) then their unacceptable collocations were found out and analyzed by SPSS. Most of these unacceptable collocations are based on finding the proper equivalent collocation in Persian.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The collocation issue is concerned because there is no part of natural spoken or written English without collocations (McCarthy 2005). According to the previous studies, there are three main approaches about collocations. Boers, 2006 claimed the importance of collocations was recognized first by Plamer (1925) but the first approach was claimed by Firth, who some researchers believe, is the father of the term collocation. Firth (1960) defines lexical collocations as statements of habitual or customary places of words in collocational order but not in any other contextual order. Later Firth, the second approach is called the semantic approach, investigated the framework of collocations and answered why some words go with certain other words, and why these new combinations have different meaning from the words (Katz & Fodor, 1963). The third one is the structure of collocations which this approach determines collocation by its structural patterns. According to this approach, lexis cannot be separated from grammar (Gitsaki, 1996). In this case, Nation (2011) has reported acquisition of vocabulary is

necessary for using other languages successfully and has an important role to make correct spoken and written texts.

Finally, the most important approach which the other researchers have worked on it, was claimed by Benson (2010), Benson claimed that collocations are dividable into 2 groups: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. According to Benson's approach in present study lexical collocations are divided to six categories:

1.   Noun + Verb
2.   Adverb + Verb
3.   Adverb + Adjective
4.   Adjective + Noun
5.   Verb + Noun
6.   Adverb + Adjective

In addition, grammatical collocations in this study are divided to five categories:

1.   Adjective + To-infinitive
2.   Preposition + Noun
3.   Noun + To-infinitive
4.   Noun + preposition
5.   Adjective + Preposition

Researchers contrasted collections between different languages such as Bartning & Hammarbeg, 2007 Swidish/French; Nesselhauf, 2003 German/English;Wolter, 2006 Japanese/English; Xiao & McEnery, 2006 etc. They identified different sources that lead to unacceptable collocations but all of them found that the source language interference, which may occur to experienced non-native speakers, could be the main reason for producing very unnatural collocations (Shraideh & Mahadin, 2015). Also, some of the language instructors and researchers have focused on collocations in language learning and teaching to EFL learners more than before. They found that collocations are challenging for this kind of learner because they use to learning new words or grammars without thinking about the importance of collocational properties that each one can have. This problem is the reason for some teachers and researchers to emphasize that EFL learners should know the importance of collocational structure.

Various studies worked on the impact of EFL learners' general knowledge on collocations and investigated that the EFL learners' language proficiency has a positive impact on their collocational knowledge even advanced learners try to use almost equal collocational structures as the native speakers use (Abdullah and Noor, 2013). On the other hand, some studies indicated that EFL learner' overall language proficiency has a negative impact and collocational knowledge.

Lin and Ziyan (2019) studied on Chinese EFL learners. The findings showed that in Verb + Noun collocations their collocational knowledge cannot improve significantly their L2 proficiency also their first language interfered in learning collocations.

El-Dakhs (2015) focused on the relationship between language exposure and collocational knowledge in 90 undergraduate EFL students in Saudi Arabia and the outcomes indicated a positive relationship in this issue. So, the students with more language exposure have better collocational knowledge.

Iranian learners same as other EFL learners have the most difficulties in using English lexical and grammatical collocations in their performance. Sometimes this is so difficult for them to match the proper nouns with the proper verbs, the proper adjectives with the proper nouns, or the proper propositions with the proper verbs, etc. so, this may lead to an unacceptable collocation if the collocation does not give the accurate address to audiences.

Dastmard and Gouhary (2016) studied Iranian performances and found the categories of common unacceptable collocations. One questionnaire was used that involved 60 items about 10 collocations types distributed among 20 advanced and upper- intermediate proficiency level students to complete. Their findings indicated that there were several categories in which Iranian EFL learners used the most unacceptable collocations 'verb + noun', preposition of time, 'verb + adverb' and 'adjective + proposition'. In addition, they found that the main source of their unacceptable collocations is interfering of learners' mother tongue.

In another study, Karimkhanlui (2008) identified Iranian EFL learners' collocational clashes in their written performances especially in their translations. She tried to find in which types of collocations Iranian EFL students make mistakes, how one language affects the collocations in other language, EFL learners are aware of the collocations in L1 and L2. The findings showed that most of the unacceptable collocations were made by mistranslations and the lack of learners' collocational knowledge.

According to these studies, it is obvious that there are some sources for unacceptable collocations such as lack of collocational knowledge, interlingual transfer and the L1 interference and among them; mother tongue interference is the main source of Iranian collocational clashes. In addition, previous studies have approved the vital role of collocations in reading comprehensive, speaking, writing skills of the L2.

Looking at the different studies about the collocations and its difficulties for EFL learners to use, the present study aimed to find out these collocational difficulties, source of the unacceptable collocations and the most difficult type of collocations for Iranian FEL learners they encounter in their performance.

3. METHOD

107 students majoring in English and literature in Qazvin, Iran were selected as participants for this study. They were chosen through convenience sampling. Their age ranged from 19 to 25 years both male and female.

4. MATERIAL AND PROCEDURE

In this study, a questionnaire involves 30 collocational multiple-choice items, which was made up according to Benson's collocational approach, was used. All the collocations were selected from Oxford collocation dictionary. The questionnaire was designed to determine the different collocational categories according to Benson (2010) classification of collocation types.

The collected data were statistically analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics, frequencies) in order to evaluate student's language use to see if that is pragmatically accurate and appropriate or not.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The acceptable and unacceptable collocations congregated from questionnaire were grouped and classified according to Benson's classification theory. Data analysis were performed using SPSS software, for descriptive data analysis, including frequency, and the percentage of occurrence of each type were achieved. As a final step, the most common types were acknowledged and the result were tabulated in tables and charts.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' lexical collocation performance is displayed in table 1. They were asked to choose the acceptable lexical collocations. regarding the collocation types, the most common unacceptable lexical collocations found in the current study, as shown in Table 1, were as follows: Noun + Verb (6) 73.6% then Adjective + Noun (23) 54.7%. On the other hand, the most common acceptable lexical collocations found in Verb + Noun (22) 84.9% then Adverb + Verb (26) 79.2%. This means that the Iranian EFL learners had difficulty to use Noun + Verb and Adjective + Noun English lexical collocations and they did not have any difficulties to produce and use Verb + Noun and Adverb + Noun English lexical collocations.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Lexical Collocations in EFL Learners' Performance

Collocation Types		Lexical Collocation Usage			
		Unacceptable Collocations		Acceptable Collocations	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Verb	**Q1**	18	17	88	83
+	**Q2**	31	29.2	75	70.8
Noun	**Q22**	16	15.1	90	84.9
Noun	**Q5**	35	33	71	67
+	**Q6**	78	73.6	28	26.4
Verb	**Q24**	25	23.6	81	76.4
Noun					
+	**Q7**	28	26.4	78	73.6
Noun					
Adjective	**Q3**	55	51.9	51	48.1
+	**Q4**	40	37.7	66	62.3
Noun	**Q23**	58	54.7	48	45.3
Adverb	**Q8**	34	32.1	72	67.9
+	**Q9**	41	38.7	65	61.3
Adjective	**Q25**	45	42.5	61	57.5
Adverb	**Q10**	25	23.6	81	76.4
+	**Q11**	37	34.9	69	65.1
Verb	**Q26**	22	20.8	84	79.2

In addition, the participants' grammatical collocation performance is displayed in table 2. They were asked to choose the grammatical acceptable collocations. regarding the collocation types, the most common unacceptable grammatical collocations found in the current study, as shown in Table 2, were as follows: Noun + Preposition (30) 56.6 % then Adjective + To-Infinitive (20) 52.8%. On the other hand, the most common acceptable grammatical collocations found in Noun +

To-Infinitive (14, 15) 79.2%, 73.6% then Adjective + preposition (18) 72.6%. %. This means that the Iranian EFL learners had difficulty to produce Noun + Preposition and Adjective + To-Infinitive

among English grammatical collocations and they did not have any difficulties to produce and use Noun+To-Infinitive and Adjective + Preposition English lexical collocations.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Grammatical Collocations in EFL Learners' Performance

Collocation Types		Grammatical Collocation Usage			
		Unacceptable Collocations		Acceptable Collocations	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Noun + Preposition	Q12	70	66	36	34
	Q13	54	50.9	52	49.1
	Q28	34	32.1	72	67.9
	Q30	60	56.6	46	43.4
Noun + To-Infinitive	Q14	22	20.8	84	79.2
	Q15	28	26.4	78	73.6
Preposition + Noun	Q16	30	28.3	76	71.7
	Q17	35	33	71	67
	Q27	40	37.7	66	62.3
Adjective + Preposition	Q18	29	27.4	77	72.6
	Q19	50	47.2	56	52.8
	Q29	39	36.8	67	63.2
Adjective + to-Infinitive	Q20	56	52.8	50	47.2
	Q21	51	48.1	55	51.9

7. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data in this study reveals that according to Benson's theory (2010), among different types of lexical collocations, Verb + Noun collocations are the easiest and Noun + verb collocations are the most difficult for Iranian EFL learners to use. In addition, among grammatical collocations, Noun + To-Infinitive collocations are the easiest and Noun + preposition collocations are the most difficult for them. Also, this study showed that Iranian EFL learners have a better performance in using acceptable lexical collocations than grammatical collocations.

To conclude this research, Iranian EFL learners produce unacceptable collocations in their performance because of their mother tongue, their shortage of the collocational knowledge and lack of the collocational concept. Among these reasons, the interference of their mother tongue can be the main reason that Iranian EFL learners make unacceptable collocations in their performance.

The possible solution to decrease producing unacceptable collocations is improving learners' knowledge of collocations effectively and efficiently. In this issue, EFL teachers should recommend collocation dictionaries to their students and should prepare appropriate input available to the students.

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