Teaching English Collocation to Iranian EFL Learners through Games

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Abstract

Collocations are one of the most current issues and crucial constituent in second or foreign language acquisition. So, second language learners, need to put effort to learn collocation in order to make their speech and writing sound natural native-like. To achieve this aim, 60 pre-intermediate EFL learners studying in a language institute in the city of Shahrekord participated in this study. They were randomly assigned to group A as the experimental group and group B as the control group. A pretest was first administered to see their level of collocational knowledge. In treatment sessions, collocation was taught through games such as Collocation Pelmanism, Flyswatters Board Rush game, Find your Partner, Guess the missing word, Collocation Domino game, and Collocation order to the experimental group. Control group was taught based on traditional method such as translation, definition, synonyms, and check the meaning on the dictionary. Finally, a posttest was administered to determine the impact of specific treatments the participants received. It was different from the pretest.The result of data analyze using paried-samples and independent-samples t-test revealed that experimental group outperformed control group and teaching collocation through games had positive effect on vocabulary learning.

Key Words: Collocation Games; Learning Vocabulary; English as a foreign language.

Introduction

Vocabulary is an inseparable part of any language learning process and it is impossible to learn a language without vocabulary. Laufer (1997) pointed that vocabulary learning is at the center of language learning and language use. Without vocabularies, speakers cannot convey meaning and communicate with each other in any particular language. Vocabulary learning is one of the

essential elements both of acquisition of one's native language and of learning a foreign language (Mora & Camba, 2009). The important point is that learning words in isolation does not help L2 learners become successful communicators, since many parts of language consist of prefabricated chunks so that learners have to learn not only the new words but also their collocation.

With the recognition of the importance of vocabulary, many approaches and techniques to teaching and learning vocabulary have emerged, and one of those techniques is collocation. It is accepted idea that collocations are very important component of the knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English in order to write or speak accurately and fluently (Jae, 2007). One of the criteria for knowing a word is being aware of other words with which it keeps company (Skrzpek, 2009). Shin & Nation (2008) discuss one of the reasons as to why learners and teachers should be interested in collocations being that collocations improve learners' language fluency and ensure native-like selection.

The term Lexical approach, coined by Michael Lewis (1993), focuses on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations. In this approach, special attention is directed to collocations and expressions that include institutionalized utterances and sentence frames and heads. Lewis (1997) maintains that we deliberately try to think of collocations, and to present these collocations in our expressions instead of individual words. Rather than trying to break things in to smaller pieces, we have a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways (Lewis, 1997). Hill (1999) maintains that teachers should raise their students' awareness of collocation because acquiring competence in collocation is a long process. He explains that most learners with good vocabulary have problem with fluency because their collocational competence is very limited.

Review of Literature

During the last two decades, the value and importance of collocations have been emphasized by a number of linguists who identified the benefits of learning collocations. Many researchers have studied the importance of collocations from different perspectives, including the development of L2 vocabulary (Laufer, 1988; Aghbar, 1990), improving language performance (Brown, 1974; Nattinger, 1980; 1988), enhancing fluency towards the level of a native speaker (Fillmore, 1979; Howarth, 1998; Nation, 2001), and improving communicative competence (Yorio, 1980;

Channel, 1981; Cowie, 1988; Lewis, 2000). These factors all relate to the importance of collocations to second/foreign language learning and teaching.

Brown (1974), who is one of the first advocates to emphasize the importance of collocations in L2 learning, states that increasing students' knowledge of collocation helps improve listening comprehension, oral proficiency, and reading speed. She argues that learning collocation enables learners to observe language chunks in the speech and writing of native speakers and use these word combinations in their own speech. Nattinger (1988) points out that collocations are helpful in improving comprehension for the word combinations that help learners in committing words to memory, also allowing learners to predict what kind of lexical items could occur together. Laufer (1988) noted that collocations represent a crucial aspect in the vocabulary knowledge of learners.

Collocations can aid in many levels of vocabulary development. Also, collocations can aid the development of self-learning strategies, such as guessing. Yorio (1980) underscored the important role of collocations in development of EFL learners' communicative competence. Yorio claims that "collocations make communication more orderly because they are regulatory in nature " (p. 438). Fillmore (1979) maintains that one main constituent of fluency is the knowledge of fixed expressions of which collocations are part. Howarth (1998) claims that collocations play an essential role in the learning of L2 and assist EFL/ESL students toward speaking more like native speakers. Nation (2001) asserts that collocational knowledge is significant in enhancing fluency. "All appropriate and fluent language use requires collocational knowledge " (p. 318). Without knowledge of collocations, EFL/ESL learners' expressions can be seen as unnatural, or unidiomatic. These unidiomatic interactions can cause misunderstanding.

Statement of the Problem

One problematic question that remains unresolved connects with whether or not having a large store of vocabulary and a basic knowledge of grammar are enough for successful and fluent communication (Rudzka, Channell, Ostyn, and Pntsey, 1985). Many EFL learners, even advanced ones, have problems in their oral or written productions. Although they may have enough lexical or grammatical knowledge, they are unable to put this knowledge in to use (Moon, 1997; Rudezka, 1985). Their problems arise partly from the lack of knowledge about the companies that words keep, i.e., collocation. Collocations are important aspect of an L2 and L2 learners should learn them. It is better to investigate the problem of colocations in L2 learning.

Howarth (1998) has listed five categories the learners adopted while using collocations. So, one should pay attention to these categories while investigating the use of collocations by the learners. These categories are "repetition, transfer, avoidance, analogy, and experimentation". The learners may fall back on the repeated use of a limited number of known collocations if they do not have enough confidence or inclination to extend collocations by analogy. The learners can simply transfer a L1 collocation to L2 if they cannot find a suitable one. Avoidance can be adopted when the learners cannot produce the target collocation, they can simply avoid using it. Analogy refers to the substituting one element for another known lexical item. Lastly, experimentation can be adopted when the learners do not known an English collocation, they can try to find a synonymous one (p.41).

L2 learners, lacking collocational knowledge, may make errors when producing utterances. A number of L2 researchers have found that L2 learners make many mistakes in producing L2 collocations (Hussein, 1990; Zarei & Koosha, 2002). In order to gain fluency and competence in an L2, they should know collocations and should be able to comprehend and produce them. Because it takes years of exposure to the language for its non-native speakers to get the competence sufficient to acquire acceptable collocational knowledge and that competence of collocational knowledge belongs to native speaker's intuition (McCarthy, 1990, p.15), it may be natural for L2 learners to have this area remain unmanageable and tricky for a long time.

As a teacher and learner of English in an EFL environment (Iran), the researchers, have come to this view that the collocational context of the text book is not sufficient or satisfying. As EFL learners and teachers, we have frequently observed students' collocation errors after leaving high school and even institutes. The researchers believe that it is very important to find a suitable way to solve the learners' problems with collocations because collocation proficiency is very crucial for a person who is learning a second language, as it increases native likeness and decreases foreignness. So, collocation learning and teaching are very important and they occupy an important part of language learning and proficiency. In sum, collocations are important and not only help learners' approach native fluency but also improve their language competence (both production and perception). The present study aimed to fill this gap by investigating how collocations are learned through the games. In order to help learners learn collocation as much as possible, we need to first teach them about collocation and then teach them to notice collocation when they deal with language that contain collocation.

Purpose of the Study

Collocations are an important part of L2 lexical development. If one were to look at the most frequently used words in the English language, particularly in spoken language, you would find that most of our active language is made up of relatively few words. What differentiates the intermediate learner from the native speaker is not knowledge of words but the knowledge of how to combine them. The most important way to bring up learners to native speaker level is not by teaching them individual words but by teaching them to combine words they already know.

Firstly, awareness of different types of collocation will encourage students to notice them. Secondly, collocational awareness should lead students to analyze a collocation when they encounter it and that cognitive process should aid acquisition. Finally, understanding the nature of a collocation may lead students to think about how they are going to use them productively. This study is concerned with identifying the effect of teaching collocation on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and identifying the effect of teaching collocation through games on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary. The purpose of this study was to find out the effect of a new teaching technique; teaching collocation through the games. Collocation games are proposed to solve the problem. Games create the motivation for learners of English because of the competition between students. Egenfeldt & Nielsen (2011) concludes that "foreign language teachers believe that there is a larger potential for pupils to learn more from games in their subject compared to teachers of other subjects ".

Research Questions

To realize the research objectives, the research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Does teaching collocation have any effect on learning vocabulary of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Does teaching collocation through the games have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary?
3. Is there any difference between teaching collocation through game and teaching collocation through the traditional method?

Methodology

Design

This study was constructed based on an experimental design, seeks to determine if a specific treatment (games) influenced on outcome. Collocation games were identified as independent variable and vocabulary learning was identified as dependent variable. Experimental design involved two groups: one experimental and one control group, a pre-test, a post-test and a treatment with experimental group. Experimental and control group were taught the same materials with different methods. To the participants of experimental group, collocation was taught through games. To the participants of control group, collocation was taught through traditional method. Data collected by multiple choice tests and analyzed using SPSS software.

Participants

The researcher divided the participants in to two separate groups through cluster random sampling. According to Borg, (1981) and Best and Kahn, (2006) cluster sampling is used when it is more feasible or convenient to select groups of individuals than it is to select individuals from a defined population. Group 1 as experimental and group 2 as control group (each included 30 participants), the rational of which had homogenous learners in each group. After that, to homogenize the participants in two groups, their final scores from previous term were compared. The participants were consisting of 60 pre-intermediate female learners at an institute in the city of Shahrekord, aged 14-18. They were Persian speaking EFL students and they have studied English for three years.

Instruments

The pretest was first administered to all the participants at the beginning of the study. The pretest was included lexical and grammatical collocations (30 items) in the form of multiple choice tests.The pretest was administered to all the participants of the study to find out their level of collocational knowledge. This test was taken from *English collocations in use* (Fecility O'Dell and Michael McCarthy, 2005) and *Natural English collocations* (Jon Marks and Alison Wooder, 2007).

   Experimental and control groups were taught the same collocations with different methods. New collocations were taught through traditional method such as translation, synonyms,

definition, and check the meaning in the dictionary to the participants of control group. The same collocations were taught through games to the participants of experimental group. These treatments (games) were including: Collocation Pelmanism, Flyswatters Board Rush Game, Find your partner, Guess the meaning word, Collocation Domino Game, and collocation order.

Finally the posttest was administered to all the participants at the end of the term. After collocation instruction, another collocation test as the posttest, in the form of multiple choice test examined the participants achievement related to the collocations that they faced with in their course of instruction. The posttest was included lexical and grammatical collocation (including 30 items). It was taken from *English collocations in use* (Fecility O'Dell and Michael McCarthy, 2005) and *Natural English collocations* (Jon Marks and Alison Wooder, 2007). Just like the pretest, the posttest was given without any previous announcement. The posttest was different from the pretest and it was administered to both groups two days after the last instruction session. The aim of this test was to determine the impact of specific treatments the participants received.

Procedure

First of all participants were selected randomly and they were classified in to two groups by comparing their final scores from previous term. Group 1 as experimental and group 2 as the control group. Second, the pretest was taken by all the participants at the beginning of the term before going through the instruction; contain the lexical and grammatical collocations in the form of multiple choice tests (30 items). In treatment sessions, new grammatical and lexical collocation was taught about 45 minutes. Experimental and control group received the same materials but in different method of teaching. The new collocation was taught to the participants in control group by using traditional method includes synonyms, translation, definition, and check the meaning in dictionary but experimental group was taught through games includes Collocation Pelmanism, Collocation Domino game, Flyswatter Board Rush game, Find your partner, collocation order and guessing the missing word. The treatment sessions were lasted twelve weeks, two days per week. Every session was lasted 45 minutes. Finally, after collocation instruction, another collocation test as post-test (30 grammatical and lexical items) was conducted on both experimental and control group to compare their mean scores. Fun games to teach English collocation were includes:

- Collocation Pelmanism

The procedure of this game is that at first students are divided in to 3-4 groups. Then they are given a set of cut-up cards and instruct them to place all the cards face-down and spread them out on the table. The first student turns over cards. If the two cards from a collocation, she keeps the pair and has another ago. If the cards do not collocate, she turns them over again, leaving them in the same position on the table, and the next student has a turn. The winner is the person who has most pairs at the end. In order to collect pairs, learners need to remember the position of the cards as well as the collocation, so it's important that they do not move the cards around too much.

- Flyswatters Board Rush Game

At first half of some collocations are written on the board, maybe ones that students often mix up. Then the students are divided in to teams and get them to stand in their teams, one behind the others facing the board- give the first person in each team a flyswatter. The teacher says a noun that commonly goes with one of the verbs on the board. Students with the flyswatters rush to the board and swat the verb that goes with the noun. Award a point for the first team to swat the correct word.

- Find your partner

At first some common collocations are written on squares of cards- only one word on each square so that all collocation is split up. Then the word cards are distributed to students so that they all have one card each. Students mingle around the class and try and find the person with the word that collocates with their own word.

- Guess the Missing word

This game provides students with sections of concordance sheets where the key word has been removed. They are required to examine the other words near the missing key word to try to guess what the missing word is. For lower students, you can list the possible key words on the board and include a few distracters to make it more challenging.

- Collocation Domino Game

This game played in groups of 3-4 students. This is a Domino game of 8-16 cards, verb on the right side of the card and a noun on the left side of the card. The object is to connect the verb from one card to the appropriate noun on the left side of another card.

- Collocation order

This game is played before starting the lesson in every session. A collocation written on a paper (e.g. to make a promise) but don't show this to the students. Then cut the chunk to leave each word alone in the sentence (to / make / a / promise). Pin each word / piece to a student's sweater casually and these (e.g. four students for to/make/a/promise) students are to find their right place in the order of the idiom hidden. Then the rest of the students try to guess the meaning of the collocation.

Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores obtained in pre-test in both control and experimental groups. The obtained results show that there was no significant difference between the two groups indicating similar proficiency level. Ex pre (M= 4.06, SD= 0.38) con pre (M= 3.90, SD= 0.35), t (58) = 0.32, sig (2-tailed) = 0.79, eta squared being 0.01 showing a small effect size.

Independent Samples Test

		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
Pre test	Equal variances assumed	.419	.520	-.321	58	.749	-.16667	.51925	-1.20605	.87272
	Equal variances not assumed			-.321	57.691	.749	-.16667	.51925	-1.20617	.87284

A paired samples t-test was conducted in order to evaluate the effect of teaching collocation on vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners in experimental group. There was a statistically significant improvement in learners' scores concerning the obtained vocabulary from Pre-test

(M= 4.066, SD= 0.38) to post-test (M= 27.26, SD= 0.33), t (29) = 56.47, p≤0.0005. The eta squared statistic is (0.91) showing a large effect size.

Paired Samples Test

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | | |
| | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | Sig. (2-tailed) |
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1 pretest – posttest	-23.20000	2.24990	.41077	-24.04013	-22.35987	-56.479	29	.000

A paired samples t-test was conducted in order to evaluate the effect of teaching collocation on vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners in control group. There was a statistically significant improvement in learners' scores concerning the obtained vocabulary from Pre-test (M= 3.90, SD= 0.35) to post-test (M= 25.03, SD= 0.59), t (29) = 56.09, p≤0.0005. The eta squared statistic is (0.87) showing a large effect size.

Paired Samples Test

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | | |
| | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | Sig. (2-tailed) |
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1 pretest - posttest	-21.13333	2.06336	.37672	-21.90381	-20.36286	-56.099	29	.000

In order to compare the post scores obtained from both groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The obtained results show that there was a significant difference between the two groups. In fact, the participants in experimental group outperformed the ones in control group.

Ex post (M= 25.03, SD= 0.59) con post (M= 27.26, SD= 0.33), t (58) = 3.29, sig (2-tailed) = 0.002 eta squared being 0.15 showing a large effect size.

Independent Samples Test

		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
Post test	Equal variances assumed	12.488	.001	-3.290	58	.002	-2.23333	.67877	-3.59204	-.87463
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.290	45.965	.002	-2.23333	.67877	-3.59965	-.86701
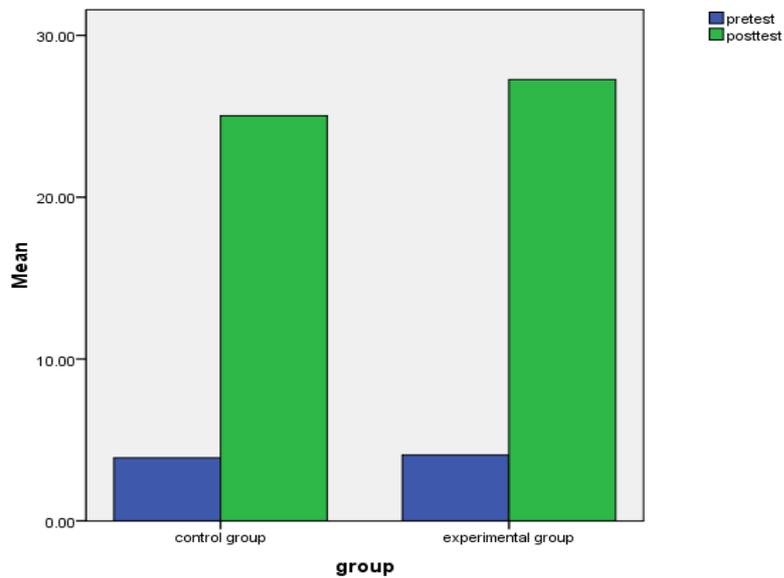
Conclusion

The major goal of the present study was to determine that teaching collocation through games can effect on Iranian EFL learners vocabulary. The findings of this study revealed the learners in the experimental group significantly outperformed the learners in the control group. Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that the devised treatment, i.e. teaching lexical and grammatical collocation through the games has helped the participants to perform better than those being taught in the traditional method. Hence, we can conclude that if students are exposed to collocation games, they can have better general vocabulary knowledge. Fun games in this paper will help teachers plan lessons with a greater collocation focus. One reason why games could work well as a teaching method is because of the change that has occurred in teaching, where students have been becoming much more active in the whole learning process. The findings of this study may be of benefit to EFL teachers and EFL teaching in general. Teachers can make use of collocation games as a teaching device in their classes. Teachers can utilize a proper type of input to improve the learners' vocabulary knowledge. Exposing the students to collocations will enhance learners' use of vocabularies. It is clear that games help create diversity and that can be very helpful in sustaining interest among students in the school. Collocation games also create a comfortable and friendly atmosphere inside the classroom where shy students might feel more comfortable in expressing themselves in the target language. In conclusion learning collocation through games is one effective and interesting way that can be applied in any classes. Moreover, future studies in this regard and also conducting similar researches on collocation would attract both the English teachers and learners move to the importance and function of this significant part of language learning.

Implications

The following are some pedagogical implications of this research study:

- According to the achieved results, this study has some points for English teachers who might pay attention to teaching collocations.
- As games have positive impacts on learners' collocation learning, this implies that games open up a way for teachers to engage their learners in language learning in a more fun and interesting way compared to the traditional teaching method like give definition,

synonyms, antonyms and check the meaning on the dictionary that often makes language learning a daunting experience to most learners.

- Ministry of education can consider providing detailed criteria for collocations for new editions of high school English textbooks that publisher/writers can follow.

- The study helps us develop insights in the new approaches to teaching collocations. A direct and simple way to do so is to teach them explicitly, according to Nesselhauf (2005) the conscious-raising activities about the word combinations, chunks, collocations, or idioms is important in EFL process.

Limitations of the study

Like every research project, this research is encountered by some limitations and shortcomings. The first limitation was the number of students. As this was a small experimental study, the number of the students was quite limited. The second limitation was due to the lack of money and time. Time for collocation teaching was restricted in our curriculum, because extended exposure to the collocation is an important factor and this requires a longer time period. On the other hand analyzing a larger population or conducting research in different settings was difficult. The third limitation was that the project was done on female students; the results would be more generalizable if the male students were taken in to consideration, too. As the focus of the study was on two groups of participants it was difficult to generalize the results to great populations.

The researcher hopes that this research can be helpful to those who interested in language teaching. The present study can be considered as a step forward since it can open up new windows for doing extra research about language teaching methodologies.

Suggestions for further research

The present study aimed at studying the effect of teaching collocation through games on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary. Some suggestions for further research are as follow.

- As games are effective tools to teach vocabulary, it is suggest that further studies on the use of games to teach the language materials.

- A suggestion to other researchers in the field is to study with a wider group of students in a larger time period because extended exposure to the collocations is an important factor.

Longer time period will help a lot to have a better result especially for the younger and smaller learners.

- Further studies are needed to be conducted on the other learners' level- lower and higher levels to make the findings generalizable to a larger population.

- Categorizing collocations according to learners' difficulty level and teaching them based on this category can also be carried out as a new research.

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