Teaching Collocations through Task-Based Instruction: The Case of Iranian EFL Students

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Abstract

With regard to the recent importance of vocabulary teaching, this study is going to investigate the effect of task-based instruction on acquiring collocations. Moreover, it seeks to investigate the role of form-focused and collaborative tasks in acquiring collocations. To this end, intermediate learners of English were selected via a placement test. A pretest which attempted to determine their collocational knowledge was taken. Then the collocations were taught along with their regular instruction related to four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. At the end of the term, the posttest was given to examine the participants' achievement. Consequently, paired sample t-test was applied to analyze the collected data, and the significant differences between pre/posttest revealed that task-based instruction is an effective approach that can contribute to learning English collocations by Iranian EFL learners.

Keywords: Collocation, Task-based instruction, Form focused task, Collaborative task

1. Introduction

Collocations are pairs or groups of words that are usually used together. These combinations of words are naturally and frequently used by native speakers, but second or foreign language learners have to make a special effort to learn and use them because they are often difficult to learn. Therefore, learning collocations is an important part of learning the vocabulary of a language because employing collocations is the most natural way of saying something, and is an alternative way of saying something precisely, and also improves one's style of writing to produce more variety in a text and make its reading enjoyable. Moreover, Lewis (2000) asserts that learning words in combination better helps language learners develop communicative competence than learning words in isolation. As a result, EFL teachers should have in mind when teaching new vocabulary items, to introduce new words together with their frequent co-occurrences or collocates (Lewis, 2000). According to Lewis (2001), language teachers should enhance learner's awareness of collocations by helping them pay more attention to words and their combinations in reading.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Definition of Collocation

Collocations can be defined in many ways (Moon, 1957), and some of these definitions are as follows: collocations are words that occur together with high frequency and refer to the combination of words that have a certain mutual expectancy. "*The combination is not a fixed expression but there is a greater than chance likelihood that the words will co-occur*" (Jackson, 1988, p.96). Also McCarten (2007, p.5) shows the way in which two or more words are typically called collocation. Stubbs (2002, p.215) defines collocation as the habitual co-occurrence of two unordered content words, or of a content word and a lexical set.

According to Hyland (2007, p. 271), in the year of 1957 Firth argues that '*You shall know a word by the company it keeps.*' For Firth this keeping company, which he calls '*collocation*', is part of the meaning of a word. Also he gave the example of English word as which occurs in a limited set of contexts (*you silly ....; don't be such an ....*) and with a limited set of adjectives (*silly, obstinate, stupid, and awful*).

In addition, Sinclair (1991) defines collocations as a frequent combination between some words, which happens more often than other words that cannot keep company with each other. Lewis (2000) elaborates a collocation as a subgroup of multi-word items, consisting of individual words which co-occur on a regular basis. In the same vein, Hill (2000) defines collocation as predictable companionship of the context words (e.g., take the other). Woolard (2000) gives further depth to the above-mentioned definitions by stating that collocations are "co-occurrence of words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggest" (p.29). Nation (2001) uses the term collocation to define the words that co-occur for two reasons: because they are commonly used together by language users, (e.g., take a shower), or because the meaning of the groups is not obvious from the meaning of the parts like "how do you do".

For this study, collocation will be defined as a frequency of co-occurrence of two lexical

items within a given span. The definition has been widely accepted by corpus linguists. Another aspect of theoretical foundation is classification of collocations which is presented in the following section.

1.1.2 Classification of Collocations

Collocations can be classified in many ways. Each of these classifications has been made based on certain features of collocations such as collocational range of the items comprising collocations, parts of speech of the items or the meaning conveyed by collocations. The most commonly accepted classifications of collocations are as following:

Baker (1992) classifies collocations as open and restricted collocations:

- Open collocations are nodes that can go with a wide range of other words (e.g., big house, beautiful house, small house, and the like).
- Restricted collocations which are similar to idioms or fixed phrases (e.g. get away with or dogs eat dogs).

In this regard, Lewis (2000) classifies collocations as follows:

- Strong collocations which have a very limited number of collocate. Most collocates are fixed, for example, rancid butter or rancid oil.
- 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.

The most commonly used classification of collocations has been offered by Benson, Benson, and Illson (1986). They divided collocations into two major categories: grammatical and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations consist of content words: a noun, an adjective or a verb plus a preposition or infinitive.

Pattern Examples:

Noun+ Prepositions   "Shortness of"

Adjective+ Preposition   "Mad at"

Preposition+ noun   "by product"

On the other hand, lexical collocations consist of neither prepositions nor infinitives. They comprise only content words.

Pattern Examples:

Noun+ Noun   "Police officer"
Verb+ Adverb   "work hard"
Verb+ Noun   "do research"

1.2 Collocations and Problems of Persian L2 Learners of English as a Foreign Language

The problem is that collocations are often ignored or paid little attention to in materials employed for teaching English. Therefore, even though learners at intermediate or advanced

levels of language proficiency know numerous vocabulary items and grammatical rules, they make longer sentences to make their intentions understandable, and their sentences may not make sense or do not sound natural in English.

Another problem which Persian learners of English face learning collocations is their lack of awareness of significance of collocations. Methods and strategies used for the instruction of collocations are sometimes inappropriate as well. Most of the traditional approaches have ignored the importance of fixed expressions, lexical collocations, and patterns, which are important for foreign language learners and they have put the emphasis on the meaning of the separate words. Most of the traditional approaches have advocated Presentation-Practice-Production model of vocabulary instruction in classroom settings, however, they do not provide learners with tasks that enhance their capability in applying such elements and their mastery for real communicative situations. In other words, many teachers tend to show lists of words that they have chosen for learners, which are likely to appear in examinations, and encourage learners to memorize them. Based on these grounds, applying task-based approach may help learners to improve their collocational knowledge.

1.3 Task-Based Approach

During the last few years, there has been a broad interest within the ELT profession toward Task-based Instruction (TBI) as a successful and effective approach to second/foreign language teaching, which bases itself on the implementation of a great variety of *tasks* and *procedures* to produce effective results in L2 acquisition (Ellis 2003, Richards 2001).

In current pedagogical discussions, the task-based approach has achieved something of the status of a new orthodoxy: teachers in a wide range of settings are being told how they should teach. Furthermore, most newly published textbooks and papers are being recognized as emphasizing task-based instruction (Ellis 2003, Richards & Rodgers 2001). Clearly, whatever a task-based approach means, it is a *good thing* (Littlewood, 2004). Therefore, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to "an approach/method based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching…as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.223).

As for a precise definition of the notion of *task*, there has been much discussion and debate in the literature. Littlewood (2004, p.320) defines "tasks as a range of learning activities from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making". Moreover, according to Zhang (1999; as cited in Talebinezhad & Esmaeili, 2012), task based instruction is such a complete method that "it treasures both the learning process and learning results, language forms and meaning, and linguistic competence and communicative function" (p. 1700). Task-based teaching helps learners' learner-to-learner interactions to encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication (Harmer, 2007). A task provides opportunities to "exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language" (Ellis, 2001, p.113).

Besides, there are many types of tasks, especially in the communicative instruction such as problem solving, decision making, and information gap (Oxford, 2006).Take all of these into

account, in this study; collaborative tasks which benefit from peer interaction for learning were applied to teach collocations. The advantages of collaborative learning have been introduced since the time of Piaget (1928; cited in Talebinezhad & Esmaeili, 2012) and Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believes that students are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative situations. Moreover, according to Harmer (2007), form-focused tasks which are useful to direct students' conscious attention to some features of language in communicative tasks were employed in this study. One of the common ways of focusing on form is *noticing*, which is defined as the intake of the language features as a result of learners paying attention to the input, where *intake* refers to input which becomes part of learning process.

On the basis of the above-mentioned claims and suggestions, there has been a great interest in Instructed Second Language Acquisition research to explore aspects of acquisition of collocations within the framework of TBLT (Ellis, 2003). Current views of Task-based language teaching hold that "if learners are to acquire language through participating in tasks, they need to attend to or notice critical features of the language they use and hear" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.236).

Following the same line of research and interest, the present research aims to specifically investigate learners' acquisition of English collocations in a task-based language teaching environment by Persian EFL learners.

2. Research Questions

Most Iranian EFL learners seem to have good knowledge of English grammar, but they have many problems with production of collocations. They need to be aware of the existence of collocations. And they are also supposed to know how words co-occur and use them in the actual communication. As a result, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. To what extent does task-based Instruction enhance Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of English collocations?

2. What are the effects of different types of tasks namely form -focused and collaborative tasks on EFL learners' acquisition of collocations?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants who took part in this study were 25 students of a private language school in Isfahan, Iran. They all shared Persian as their mother tongue. All the participants were female, and their age ranged from 17 to 30. The study was conducted during the summer English courses of the language institute. Before starting the course, all the participants were informed that they were going to receive instruction concerning a number of collocations incorporated into their regular program and they all voluntarily agreed to take part in this study. In regard with starting the program, a placement test was conducted to ensure participants' homogeneity in terms of language proficiency. Based on the results of the

placement test which was Longman Pearson Placement Test, LPPT, 25 intermediate students were selected.

3.2 Materials

First of all, as it was pointed out in the previous section, a LPPT was administered for choosing the learners who were supposed to take part in this study.

Second, the pretest, taken by all the participants at the beginning of the term before going through the instruction, contained the collocations which were dealing with the instructed collocations in the form of cloze tests. The pretests examined the participants' collocational knowledge.

Finally, at the end of eight weeks of instructional term, the post test, in the form of multiple choice and error correction, examined the participants' achievement related to the collocations that they faced with in their course of instruction.

3.3 Procedure

After putting students at the appropriate level through placement test, learners at the intermediate level were assigned to two classes, each with thirteen and twelve participants, because the institute's policy let have restricted number of students in each class. Then they were given a pretest to test their collocational knowledge. Then, the course was held according to the principles set out by the institute, which is 3 one-and-half-an-hour classes a week for eight weeks, and their chosen material and textbook. Indeed, the number of sessions and the amount of practice was kept equal among all the participants.

As for the instructional procedure of collaborative and form-focused tasks, all the participants, along with their regular instruction, were asked to make the two or three groups in order to work together and to focus on the form of different collocations that they dealt with, and they were asked to discover different collocations in the context of instruction. After the term was over, the posttest was administered, and based on the subjects' scores, which indicated their achievement and progress during the courses, the results were compared and contrasted with those of the pretest given at the beginning of the course, and data were fed to SPSS to analyze.

4. Results and Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data from our tests, the SPSS software was run and paired sample t-test was employed to compare two intermediate classes who took the pre/posttest.

4.1 Investigating the First Question

Regarding the first research question which investigates whether task-based instruction effects acquiring collocations or not, the students were taught by task-based approach and along with their regular instruction, their awareness was raised. Accordingly, knowledge of the students on the pretest, which was measured at the beginning of the term, was compared with that of the posttest after receiving the instruction for each group which is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Two groups' Pre/Post test

	Pre group 1	Post group1	Pre group2	Post group 2
N Valid	13	13	12	12
Mean	10.9231	16.5385	0.9375	22.9167
Std. Deviation	2.39658	2.6506	2.83470	2.35327
Minimum	7.00	10.00	6.00	19.00
Maximum	15.00	19.00	15.25	26.00

By referring to Table 1. the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores of each group were shown. The results of this table help to figure out how applying different tasks could raise students' awareness of collocations to acquire more.

4.2 Investigating the Second Research Question

Considering the second research question which is concerning if applying different tasks enhances the learners' acquisition of collocations, the results of the students' performance on the posttest were compared and depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired Sample Statistics of the first group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre	10.9231	13	2.39658	.66469
	Post	16.5385	13	2.66506	.73916

It can be seen in Table 2 that the scores on pre/posttest were different. The means and standard deviations of scores of pre/posttest were estimated which revealed the difference between pre/posttest of the first group. To find out if this difference is significant, a paired sampled t-test was applied. Table 3 indicates the results of t-test for the first group.

Table 3. Paired Samples Correlations of the first group

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pre& post	13	.542	.056

The difference between means of pretest and posttest in Table 3 was shown, and correlation was carried out to see whether there is a positive correlation between the first group's scores that can easily reveal that knowledge of students after course of instruction was improved.

Table 4. Paired Sample Test of first group

| | Paired Differences | | | | | T | df | Sig.(2-tailed) |
| | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pre-post	-5.61538	2.43374	.67500	-7.0868	-4.14469	-8.319	12	.000

The difference between means of pre/posttest was indicated in Table 4 and their standard deviations are statistically different. Then t is compared with *df* which is degree of freedom that is n-1. Significance, that is .000, is compared with α 5% that one can see that the difference between means of the pretest and the posttest of the first group was significant,

Table 5, 6 and 7 indicate similar results of t-test in the second group.

Table 5. Paired Samples Statistics of the second group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 pre	10.9375	12	2.83470	.81831
Post	22.9167	12	2.35327	.67933

It can be seen in Table V. the scores on pre/posttest were different. To find out if this difference is significant, a paired t-test was applied to scores.

Table 6. Paired Samples Correlations of the second group

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 pre &post	12	.398	.200

Paired samples correlations of pre/ posttest of the second group are shown the positive correlation between the means of the pre/posttest which means knowledge of students after the course of instruction was improved.

Table 7. Paired Samples Test of the second group

| | Paired Differences | | | | | | |
				95% Confidence interval of the Difference			

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 pre-post	11.97917	2.87516	.82999	13.80596	10.15237	14.433	11	.000

Significance, that is .000, is compared with α 5% that one can easily see that the difference between means of pre/posttest of the second group was significant. The results depict the effectiveness of task-based approach for acquisition of collocations. This speculation is discussed and elaborated in details in the next section.

5. Discussion

The results obtained from data analysis procedure provide a vivid answer to the first posed question of the study: that task-based approach to teaching collocations can indeed enhance the participants' awareness of collocations. This in line with previous research for example: Devici, (2004), Jiang (2009), Rezvani (2007), Ying and Hendricks (2004). The fact that participants exhibited a better performance after receiving collaborative and form-focused tasks to raise their collocational awareness may refer to what Ellis (2003) put forth that task-based instruction is a successful and effective approach to second/foreign language teaching which bases itself on the implementation of a great variety of *tasks* and procedures to produce effective results in L2 acquisition. Task-based approach holds that tasks can be the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Referring to the second research question that addresses the effectiveness of collaborative and form-focused tasks on learners' acquisition of collocations, the findings of the study indicate successful use of collocations in communication by the participants at intermediate level.

In sum, the results of this study shed light on applicability of collaborative and form-focused tasks in teaching collocations. Most of the previous studies did not use these tasks, and they often taught collocations by using tasks such as 'fill in the blanks', translation, writing, and etc, but collaborative tasks which could facilitate learning in group instead of individually were ignored. In fact, form-focused tasks could help students notice different words which come together in order to raise their awareness.

6. Conclusion

Collocation is an important feature of language for second and foreign language learners, however, it is extremely problematic in this area since there are a large number of them, and there is no special rule to learn them.

In order to teach collocations through tasks, this study attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of different tasks, that is, form-focused and collaborative. Furthermore, the effect of task-based instruction was investigated in this study. Two intermediate groups were

chosen to take pretest. Then they were instructed along with their regular instruction through different tasks. Finally, an immediate posttest was administered. After analyzing data and using paired sample t-test, it was generally revealed that students' acquisition of collocations tended to improve through exposure to task-based input.

Consequently, incorporating tasks and task-based activities in EFL classrooms enhance acquisition of collocations and task-based teaching is a suitable and effective alternative for traditional methods of collocations.

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