Collocational Use: A Contrastive Analysis of Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—Despite the role of collocations in many aspects of second language learning, its significance has been neglected by the contrastive analysts in ELT. The current study aimed at investigating learners' use of collocations by analyzing their written performance. It was conducted using 102 male and female EFL learners majoring in English Translation and English Language and Literature at Hakim Sabzevari University in Iran. The researchers analyzed the data to determine the sources of collocational errors, and the strategy types utilized by learners in order to overcome their collocational deficiencies. The percentage of errors resulting from lack or inadequate familiarity of the students with collocations was 75%. The results of the study showed that most of the students' errors in writing did not originate from their insufficient knowledge of the grammar but from their inability with regard to the combination of language units. Moreover, the findings revealed that learners made use of four strategy types including transfer, synonym, repetition and paraphrase to overcome their collocational problems, with transfer strategy ranking as the most frequently used strategy followed by the use of synonym. The implications and applications of the study are discussed.

Index Terms—collocation, lexical collocation, grammatical collocations, collocational errors

I. INTRODUCTION

So far, teaching experts have always been engrossed by how to fragment the language into pieces and stipulate what learners really acquire when they learn a new language. Linguists, both pure and applied, often classify language into segmental units as sounds, words, rules of grammar and discourse. However, since 1930s, some pioneer figures in the field have urged those engaged with language teaching to recognize the fact that certain words usually follow other words and that success in language fluency mostly depends on mastery of these word combinations. Palmer in 1933 first adopted the term "collocation' for these recurrent sets of collocational words which come together.

Nowadays, it is widely believed that collocations (e.g. mass destruction, harsh criticism, fast color, bitter disappointment) are significant parts of native speaker competence and must be incorporated into second or foreign language learning syllabus (Hussein, 1990; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Hills, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003); however, it appears to be a neglected essential in most recent research studies in applied linguistics which have focused upon the grammatical and phonological levels and other aspects of language especially lexis and collocations to the rather exclusion of some other aspects of language.

In fact, the real complexity of collocational knowledge and use was largely neglected to a great extent over the past two decades despite the fact that enormous advances in corpus linguistics and the accessibility to wide collections of electronic text has suggested new insights on how words or sets of words are disseminated in a certain language (Webb & Kagimoto, 2011). Smart software for the examination of language corpora has enabled researchers and L2 specialists to study more genuinely the nature of collocations to the extent that Kennedy (2003) believes that it could, "challenge syntax-based approaches to language description and instructional method." (p. 467).Wray (2002) proposed that collocations are of cardinal position for learners to achieve a higher degree of competence in the process of learning a second language, but they are similarly of some importance for learners with less determined goals, as they not only improve accuracy but also fluency. However, while some plans on the teaching of collocations have been proposed recently, it is largely uncertain how and which of the excessive number of collocations should be taught.In order to answer such questions, it is undoubtedlyvital to recognize the area of difficulties that the ESL/EFL learners have in regard withcollocations.

The current study has intended to examine the utilization of English collocations (both lexical and linguistic) in area of EFL composition from a contrastive viewpoint. While some collocational studies have been conducted in the field of connected phonetics by experts in ELT, a contrastive investigation of collocational slips appear to be ignored in the literature. Indeed, learners facing a collocational problem have a tendency to use one of the strategies of lexical simplification including transfer, synonym, repetition, and paraphrasing (Howarth, 1998). Apart from paraphrasing which is regarded as a great technique in second language acquisition, the other categories are likely to result in

collocational mistakes in language learning. The use of transfer is the result of the learners' L1 influence, and appeal to synonyms can be taken as a result of the unawareness of collocational restrictions between lexical items. The use of repetition can be viewed as a direct outcome of the learners' inadequate knowledge of word combinations.

Hence, the objective of this study was to recognize the methods that Iranian EFL learners resort to when they attempt to deal with their deficient knowledge of collocatioal knowledge. To this end, using an interpretive qualitative research, we analyzed the students' errors in essays to identify the number of collocational errors, and then, to find the types of strategies that learners utilize to overcome their inadequate learning of word combination. The researchers, following the guidelines proposed by Howarth (1998), attempted to examine the use of strategies of lexical simplification including synonym, transfer, repetition and paraphrasing by EFL Iranian learners in written English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Historical Background of Collocation Studies

The issue of collocations and their importance was first discussed in the 1980s. However, the early reports were mostly made by practitioners who suggested that collocations should be embedded into language classroom practice (Hsu, 2007). Since 1990s, the vitality of collocations came to the attention of EFL/ESL experts by criticizing that the main foreign language teaching methods such as "grammar translation method" and "communicative approach" restrain the role of vocabulary (Hsu, 2007). The argument further was strengthening by (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986; Herbst, 1996) that L2 learners have actual difficulties with word combinations even at higher levels.

Zhang (1993)'s study was among the very first empirical studies on collocations. He examined the correlations of the L2 learners' knowledge of collocations, application of collocations, and English writing fluency. In the subsequent and rather similar studies, Al-Zahrani (1998) investigated collocations with regard to speaking skill. Zhang (1993) concluded that native speakers performed meaningfully better than non-native speakers on the collocation test (CT) and that native speakers' advantage of word combinations outweighs that of non-natives with regard to the use of accurate collocations in writing. Indeed, Zhang's results showed that knowledge of collocations is an indicator of fluency in written communication, and quality of collocations, in diversity and accuracy terms, indicate the quality of writing. Al-Zahrani (1998) who investigated the collocational knowledge of 81 Saudi EFL students and the correlation between the competency of lexical collocations and the participants' overall language proficiency reported a significant relationship between the students' knowledge of collocations and their general language proficiency, and that writing tests can better illustrate students' proficiency of lexical collocations than that of TOEFL test since the relationship between the writing test and the students' knowledge of lexical collocations was significant.

In Iranian context, the relationship between collocational knowledge and cloze test performance was carefully examined by Keshavarz and Salimi (2007). They found a high association between EFL learners' collocational proficiency and their performance on cloze tests. Koosha and Jafarpoor (2005) suggested the likelihood of developing a new method on teaching collocations, particularly collocations of prepositions, by implementing concordance resources. Parts of their findings were also in line with the findings of Bahns (1993) that EFL/ESL learners mostly transfer collocations from their first language to their L2, and language interference is the cardinal source of learners' errors in L2 production. Koosha and Jafarpoor (2005)'s main focus was on collocational knowledge of prepositions. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been reported on writing skill from contrastive analysis stance in Iran.

B. Collocations: Definitions and Classifications

Various definitions of collocations have been suggested by different scholars (e.g. Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Benson, et al, 1986; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005; Nation, 1990; Sinclair, et al, 2004) and almost all of them defined colocation based on the co-occurrence of words. The concept of *collocation* can be divided as "*col-* (from *com-* meaning "together, with"), *-loc-* (meaning "to place or put"), *-ate* (a verb suffix), and *–ion* (a noun suffix)" (Nation, 1990, p. 32). McCarthy & O'Dell (2005) define collocation as adjacent word grouping with other words that could be constructed semantically and syntactically as chunks that are acceptable and understandable by native speakers such as: *too* collocates with *much* or *late*; the word *tall* appears to collocate with *building* and *high* with *mountain*. Lewis (2000) proposed that collocation can be regarded as the unpredicted natural co-occurrence with lexical items in a context. Researchers have attempted to categorize collocations into different classifications (Benson, et al., 1986; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000). According to one major classification scheme, collocations fall into two main groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations.

1. Lexical Collocations

Lexical collocations consist of two content words or open class words, which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Lewis categorized lexical collocations into six types as:

Adjective + noun *a difficult decision*

Verb + noun *submit a report*

Noun + noun *radio station*

Verb + adverb *examine thoroughly*

Adverb + adjective *extremely inconvenient*

Noun + verb *the fog closed in*

(Lewis, 2000, p. 133)

2. Grammatical Collocations

Grammatical collocations are derived from the combination of one open class word, e.g. noun, verb, adjective, etc., and one closed class, which is mainly a preposition such as:

Adjective + preposition *aware of*

Verb + preposition *step into*

Noun + preposition *emphasis on*

(Lewis, 2000, p. 134)

C. L1 Transfer of Collocational Knowledge?

Language transfer is regarded as an important factor of second language acquisition influencing EFL learners' production of collocations (Nesselhauf, 2003). When EFL learners want to create collocation, they refer to their first language to discover an appropriate word for creating collocation in target language. When such cases happen, it seems that L1 has an impact on L2. This phenomenon is referred to by linguists as *transfer*. Transfer can be positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when the patterns of L1 and L2 are the same whereas negative transfer occurs when the patterns of students' L1 and L2 are different, in which case problems may arise (Ellis, 1994, p.300). For instance, Swedish and Chinese learners in Wang & Shaw (2008)'s study formed L2 collocations such as **do changes,*do a great effort, and *make damage* all of which reflect negative L1 transfer.

D. Learners' Strategies in L2 Collocation Learning

In addition to L1 transfer, previous studies have illustrated the use of learning strategies in the process of L2 collocation acquisition including the consideration of aspects such as synonym, repetition and paraphrases well as other related constructs. One of the most common strategies used by learners is the use of synonyms for the purpose of enhancing their communicative effectiveness. As indicated by Farghal & Obiedat (1995), Arabic EFL students displaced an English word with its equivalent word possibly on the assumption that they can be utilized reciprocally, which by and large results in deviations in the target language. Likewise, Howarth (1996, 1998) showed English learner problems' emanating from a false analogy between collocates of two synonymous words. For instance, the erroneous combination **adopt ways* was believed to be caused by analogy with *adopt an approach*.

EFL learner, in other words, may take the view that a word can be replaced by its synonyms in every context, which is not always that case. Such a strategy often leads to improper collocations in the target language (Phoocharoensil, 2010). Some examples of deviant combinations influenced by synonymy are **peaceable home* for *peaceful home* and **authentically believe* for *truly believe*.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

102 EFL students of both sexes majoring in English translation and English language and literature of Hakim Sabzevari University participated in this study. They were studying an advanced writing course. Nearly all of the students were between 4rd and 6th semesters. The students participated in this study quiet voluntarily.

B. Instrumentation

To analyze the learners' collocational use, the researchers used the students' written assignments in their advanced writing and essay writing courses. To this end, students were asked to write about an unforgettable experience they have had which was assumed to be motivating and thought-provoking. This test was a 35- minute writing task.

C. Data Collection Procedure

In order to compare the use of collocations in the writing of native and nonnative English speakers, the study used a contrastive analysis as the main analytical method. To achieve this, the students were asked to participate in a specific writing task quite voluntarily, and the problematic collocations drawn from the students' writings were identified and analyzed by the researchers. After that, to see whether a lexical or grammatical collocation is appropriate, *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Learners of English* (Lea, 2002), and the online American National Corpus (http://americannationalcorpus.org) were used as criteria, and one native speaker of English language helped the researchers in analyzing the data.

D. Data Analysis

The students' collocational errors were first detected and then examined with reference to the strategies of lexical simplification including synonym, transfer, repetition and paraphrasing and finally the problematic collocations or combinations of words were tabulated alongside their correct collocations according to the strategy types employed by the learners to cope with their lack of or incomplete knowledge of collocational problems. The researchers preferred to focus on hypothesis-generating trends so that they could provide indicators for more extensive or in-depth research in this regard.

Research Questions

1. What are the sources of Iranian EFL learners' collocational errors in writing?

2. What types of strategies are utilized by Iranian EFL learners in order to overcome their collocational deficiencies in writing tasks?

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the first research question, findings showed that the number of errors resulting from deficient knowledge of collocations was 253 out of 337 errors. Therefore, it was concluded that 75% of the students' errors were attributable to their absence of or imperfect knowledge of collocations. Results of this study revealed the considerable impact of EFL learners' implementation of lexical and grammatical collocations on their writing accuracy and fluency.

To answer the second research question regarding the most dominant strategy used by the students, the researchers organized a table based on the problematic collocations, correct collocations and the appropriate strategy used by the students. Some samples of tabulated data are sorted out in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
PROBLEMATIC COLLOCATIONS, CORRECT COLLOCATIONS, AND STRATEGIES APPLIED

Problematic Collocations	Correct Collocations	Str. Applied
bring some reasons	state some reasons	**transfer**
learn knowledge	gain knowledge	transfer
he was satisfied from his progress	he was satisfied with his progress	transfer
the suitable income	the sufficient income	transfer
interest causes me to be active	interest motivates me to be active	Transfer
pour the corns into the pan and put the door	pour the corns into the pan and cover the pan	transfer
arrange your suitcase	pack your suitcase	transfer
separate eggs' and potatoes' shell	peel the eggs and the potatoes	transfer
in an off day	on an off day	transfer
They are just regular people	they are just ordinary people	transfer
sharing of benzene	Allocating quotas for benzene	transfer
group sports and private sports	team sports and individual sports	transfer
Language shows our personalities	language reflects our personalities	transfer
Amir would fall into problems	Amir would run into problems	transfer
It's a topic of girls	It's a girl thing	transfer
intensive coffee	Strong coffee'.	transfer
depend with	depend on	transfer
skillful in	skillful at	transfer
look formoney	earn money	transfer
buildimpression	make an impression	transfer
In time	On time	transfer
The air was fresh	Nice day	**synonym**
the rate of population received to 29%	the rate of population reached 29%	synonym
I have a little tendency to learn English	I have a slight tendency to learn English	synonym
the method of living	the way/ style of living	synonym
spread a blanket to sit on	throw off a blanket to sit on	synonym
Prepare facility (building a table)	prepare the tools	synonym
Heavy traffic	Huge traffic jam	synonym
the first step is to provide ingredients	the first step is to prepare ingredients	synonym
Full breakfast	Balanced breakfast	synonym
to destroy poverty	to eradicate poverty	synonym
a lot of efficient actions	a lot of effective actions	synonym
I went to college to improve my personality	I went to college to develop my personality	synonym
air pollution is harmful specially in big cities	air pollution is harmful especially in big cities	synonym
causes me to be active	motivates me to be active	Synonym
poverty causes crime	poverty breeds crime	synonym
Responds/replies the telephone.	answer the telephone	synonym
we should fight many problems	we should combat many problems	synonym
Take food which you don't usually eat	take foods which are not staple	paraphrase
let it to be free of water	drain it	paraphrase
The color of her hair was a special one, between white and black. I think it was like a chocolate	her hair was milky	paraphrase
Exactly/ pretty/ too quiet.	unusually/abnormally quiet	Paraphrase
I want to marry a boy who is very rich	I want to marry money	paraphrase
I like it very much	I like it enormously/ a lot	repetition
It was a very bad film	It was an awful film	repetition
There are several things that I decided to study	There are several reasons that I decided to study	repetition
English translation major	English translation major	

The types of strategies applied by students to overcome their lack or imperfect knowledge of collocations from the most frequent to the least were as follows: Transfer (47.4%), Synonym (35.1%), Paraphrase (8.9%), and Repetition (8.6%) as they are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2:
TYPES OF STRATEGY APPLIED BY THE STUDENTS

Strategy	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
transfer	120	47.4	47.4	47.4
synonym	89	35.1	35.1	82.5
repetition	21	8.6	8.6	91.1
paraphrase	22	8.9	8.9	100
Total	253	100.0	100.0	

As it can be seen, results of obtained data show that the most frequently used strategy by students in order to cope with their collocational problems was transfer.

The results of this study showed that *transfer* seems to be the most widely employed strategy that the students applied to overcome their collocational problems, emerging from their negative transfer of Persian collocations, or as it is called, from interlingual errors. This is in line with findings of Bahns (1993) who claim that EFL/ESL learners occasionally transfer collocations from their first language improperly to the second language, and that language interference is the main source of learners' errors in L2 production. Some other interesting findings in relation to the types of strategies of lexical simplification are discussed below:

First, with reference to *transfer*, the students' collocational errors are both grammatical and lexical, but lexical errors outnumber the grammatical ones. The grammatical errors were mainly due to the students' lack of knowledge to use the correct prepositions, perhaps because of the fact that while learning vocabulary items, they fail to notice the certain prepositions that accompany them. Teachers are partly responsible for students' errors regarding the use of right prepositions. They should repeatedly inform the learners to learn the vocabulary items with the prepositions that accompany them. Recently, there is a trend in language teaching methodology in favor of consciousness rising to teaching grammar. Teachers are advised to raise the learner awareness to prepositions. In reflective teaching, the teachers who are viewed as the researchers are asked to reflect on the extent to which they focus on prepositions.

The lexical errors resulting from the students' lack or inadequate knowledge of collocations reveal that the students tend to transfer collocations used in their native language to English language. They must be aware that different languages have their specific collocations. The student who says *hit the first gear* for *select the first gear*, or *lady movement* for *flamboyant movement*, *correct the mirror* for *adjust the mirror* has not built such awareness. It is unfortunate that many ESL/EFL teachers seem to underrate the importance of collocations and they disregard the fundamental role of lexicon in language education. It is seen that students majoring in English Translation use wrong collocations in their English to Persian translations for they have not recognized the significance of collocations in translation.

Second, as for the *synonym* strategy, the students employed synonym as the second most frequently used strategy of lexical simplification to compensate for their collocational problems. It seems that they are of the view that any words collocate freely with other lexical items. This is partly true. Indeed, some lexical items collocate freely, like *take a look/ a rest/ notice/ time*, which are called free or unrestricted collocations. However, this is not true in case of two other categories of collocations including *semi-restricted* and restricted collocations. In semi-restricted collocation, the number of substitutes which can replace the elements of collocations is more restricted, e.g. *harbor doubt/ grudges/ uncertainty/ suspicion* and in restricted collocations, the elements of collocations are fixed like *dead drunk*. The basic point is that the students should not generalize unrestricted collocations' rules to semi-restricted and restricted collocations. The phrase *under the poverty level* instead of *below the poverty level* used by one of the students, or *fighting sports are dangerous* for *combat sports are dangerous* show their lack of knowledge about semi-restricted and restricted collocations.

Third, as for the *paraphrase* strategy, it seems that the students did not know the most appropriate lexical items to convey their messages. For this reason, they tried to paraphrase what they want to express, say, time *passes very hard* instead of *time drags*. Although paraphrasing does not always lead to ill-formed sentences, it shows inadequate knowledge of vocabulary on the part of the students. Indeed, this is a compensatory strategy that the students use to compensate for missing knowledge of collocations. Brown (2000) also refers to circumlocution strategy by which the learners describe or exemplify the target object of action whenever they do not know the right word, for example *the thing you open bottles* for *corkscrew*. Or, the sentence used by a student *I was not able to pass study skills last term* for *I failed to pass study skills last term* is another example of circumlocution.

Fourth, with reference to *repetition* strategy, the researchers came to the conclusion that the students used a limited number of known collocations like *very, good, bad*, *very much*, and *thing* repeatedly and they actually tend to overuse them. In this case, the students may convey a general meaning, but certainly, they fail to convey their meanings clearly and precisely. For example: *we can talk about many things* for *we have so much to talk about,* or *Whirlpool is a good movie* for *Whirlpool is a great/ wonderful movie,* or *communication is one of the most important things* for *communication is an important factor.*

As indicated by Hsu (2007), four noteworthy reasons add to the vitality of collocations in SL studies. First, practitioners in ELT believe that major foreign language teaching methods or approaches like GTM and Communicative Approaches downplay the role of vocabulary (Nation, 2000; Schmitt, 2000). Second, Lewis (1997) suggested designing a collocation-based syllabus and implementing the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993).Third, online

corpora, for example, English National Corpus and American National Corpus, give access to a plentiful resource for valid English writings. Previously, resources such as Oxford Collocations Lexicon for Understudies of English (Lea, 2002) provide EFL/ESL specialists and learners with broad reference and access to English collocations.

V. CONCLUSION

Since collocations account for a great deal of language use (Ellis, 1996; Wray, 2002), the current research illustrates that in Iranian educational system, textbook writers, syllabus designers, and teachers disregard the collocation learning of Iranian learners of English. For example, The English textbooks of four years of high school do not cover collocational learning and teaching. Therefore, teachers are obliged to build on their own in teaching collocations to help learners to build up collocational knowledge.

Based on the study conducted and the results obtained, it can be suggested that the issue of collocational errors requires further investigations and advancement in other language skills including listening, speaking and other large-scale studies into writing skill in the Iranian context to detect the number of errors in relation to collocations and then to identify the types of strategy that EFL learners apply to overcome their collocational problems in spoken and written English. In the domain of computer-assisted language learning, the need for more research on collocations is clear, especially on EFL learners' online writing fluency.

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