



# The knowledge and Use of collocations and their Relation with English Speaking Proficiency among Upper- intermediate to Advanced Iranian EFL Learners

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The main purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations and their relation to the speaking proficiency among upper- intermediate to advanced Iranian EFL learner students at Sadr Institute of higher Education. It is worth mentioning that all of the students had already passed placement test and were preparing themselves for IELTS exam. Data for the study were collected from 20 students. The participants were asked to take 2 tests .The first one was a lexical collocational test for estimating the knowledge of lexical collocation. Another one was an IELTS speaking test, to collect the participants 'use of lexical collocation and understanding their speaking fluency. Data analysis for correlations between the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency showed that there was a significantly positive correlation between students 'knowledge of lexical collocation and their speaking proficiency in IELTS success. Current study concluded that knowledge of lexical collocation play a significant role in develop speaking proficiency particularly in IELTS exam.

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**Introduction**

Collocation has become one of the central concerns in EFL teaching and learning for years. Many researchers have understood the influence and importance of collocation and the need for collocation teaching in EFL courses (Brown 1974, Natinger 1980, Bahns and Eldaw.1983, Howarth 1988).

**Statement of the Problem**

One of the obscurities for EFL learners comes from the fact that some collocations are acceptable and some not or "collocational competence" (Hill, 1990). When we are dealing with collocation, some problems like negative transfer from L1 may happen; so learners may try to use overgeneralization for collocations. There is a wrong habit that students learn words by paying attentions to their definitions without taking a look at the appropriate collocations about that word. They are prone to learn them individually.

Sometimes they even don't care about pronunciation. That's why they will have a lot of mistakes while using collocation. As a result, when they read a passage, they won't notice collocations as meaningful phrases, which would stop them to understand the text. This study tries to the better understanding about collocation which is the principal step to deal with the above problems. EFL learners usually focus on the individual words and disregard other important information. EFL learners learn collocations as separate words rather than in a collocational context. Thus, it seems that native speakers use a top-down strategy whereas EFL learners adopt a bottom-up strategy, native speakers proceed from whole to parts and non-native speakers proceed from parts to wholes (Shokuhi 2010).

Collocations are main part of language use and the only factor which separate native and non-native speakers is mastery over collocation .(Ellis,2001).The most challenging view pointed out so far is that collocation competence is a vital element in the process of second/foreign language acquisition

(Lewis, 1997, 2000, Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Richards & Rogers, 2001). The importance of using collocation made researchers carry out some studies. Many studies investigated learners' knowledge of collocation (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Biskup, 1992) or analyzed some collocation errors and collocation teaching. Collocation is considered in all languages. Bright ideas can be developed easily and simply by the use of collocation (Lewis, 2000).

When learners facing collocational problems, they use shorter collocational expressions and utilizing grammar is one of the strategies. Therefore, lack of collocational knowledge forces foreign language learner to get help from grammar to express his /her opinion which consequently result in grammatical errors. Hence, cause of many grammatical errors is lexical deficiency (Lewis, 2000). Finally it's so clear that unusual word combinations will be created.

Collocations are the most essential yet tricky part of language. Recently many researchers have pointed out the significance of teaching and learning collocation in developing language fluency, increasing language and communicative competence (Bans&Eldaw.1993, channel, 1981, Howarth, 1998, Nattinger, 1988). collocational knowledge is a necessary tool in the language teaching and learning. Lack of collocational knowledge forces language learners to produce wrong collocation in their writing

**Purpose and Scope of the Study**

University students in Iran are currently required to pass an English proficiency test for studying abroad. Among various English proficiency tests available, IELTS&TOEFL are the most well-known among students. In fact speaking can noticeably change score of the examinees. Based on some studies that have been done, mastery over collocations can help language learners speak more fluently (Brown, 1974; Ellis &

Schmidt, 1997; Nation, 2001; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Schmitt, 2000; Sung, 2003).

### Research Questions

With regard to what was said above, this study tried to seek answer to the following question:

To what extent students' knowledge of using collocations is related to their speaking proficiency?

To what extent the use of collocation words will help students in IELTS speaking success?

### Significance of the Study

This study is qualitative in nature and examines Iranian EFL learners' knowledge and use of collocations and further explores the relationship between collocations and their speaking proficiency. Since use and knowledge of collocation is an inevitable part of every language which can be reckoned as one of the key points for distinguishing native from non-native, it's a fundamental way for EFL learners to become a native like speaker.

### Definition of Key Term

As far as the term "collocation" is concerned, it is often defined as either "an arbitrary and recurrent word combination" (Benson, 1990). Some defined collocations from the aspect of partnership or co-occurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified collocations from the aspect of discourse or the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other" (Sinclair, 1991). Peter Newmark (1988) defines collocations as two or more words that go happily or naturally with each other, for example, *pay a visit*. Taylor (1997) defines collocations in terms of Saussure's well-known dichotomy between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of lexical items.

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:36) mentioned collocations as "strings of specific lexical items that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance, such as rancid butter and curry favor". They defined collocations like habitual relation of words which come together. Collocations such as "rancid butter", "great probability" and "drug addict" are some words or phrases which are arbitrary; Meanwhile James (1998:152) deemed, collocations as "the other words any particular word normally keeps company with".

In the present study, the definition of collocations focuses on co-occurrence of words, and the classification of collocations is based on the categories of collocations proposed by Benson et al (1986b). They classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations are further divided into seven types, and grammatical collocations are divided into eight types. Lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, such as acquire knowledge, arouse my interest, relieve pressure, high ambitions and follow closely. On the other hand, grammatical collocations are phrases containing a dominant word, such as a noun, an adjective, or a verb and a preposition or grammatical structure like an infinitive or clause, such as feel sorry to, listen to the music, major in, and had to write.

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Collocation has got wider significance in 1980s. Celce-Murcia (2001), Brown (1974), Channell (1981), and Smith (1983) all believed that vocabulary instruction is effective by collocations. From 1990s the need of collocations could be felt on EFL/ESL education because of two reasons: First effective ways to improve vocabulary for learners of foreign languages were needed (Hoey, 1991; Nation, 1990, 2001; Nation & Newton, 1997; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; O'Dell, 1997; Schmitt, 2000; Zimmerman, 1997). Second, Lewis presented

collocation-based syllabus (1993, 1997) as well as the Lexical Approach (1993).

### Theoretical issues on collocation

If we want to define collocation in terms of categories, we have to divide it in two:

Some regard it by the aspect of concurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) who perceived collocation from the side of discourse. From the view of partnership, Mitchell (1971) defined it from the aspect of vocabulary and grammar. Others viewed it from lexicon. Mitchell regarded collocation as a lexico-grammatical unit. Firth as the first pioneer for presenting collocation, defined it as a meaning of the word; He said collocation is an "abstraction at the syntagmatic level" and is not directly connected to the "conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words" (p. 196). Additionally, he mentioned that lexical meaning is taken from adjacency of other words in context. McIntosh (1961) said that "words have only a certain tolerance of compatibility" which is called the recurring lexical patterns "ranges" (p. 33). For instance, the words such as mental, iron, lava, may be matched by the adjective molten. Therefore, "our knowledge of this range and other such as the range of postage and feather enable us to dismiss the molten postage feather scored, weather as unacceptable and uncontextualizable. (p.33)" McIntosh (1961) and Palmer (1976) classified collocations on the basis of the restrictions on words.

### Classification of collocation from different views

Firth (1957) argued that, dog and bark can come together but cat and bark can't. However, the word tea with the adjective strong is called unmotivated collocation, because it's considered illogical. Newmark (1988) believed that we can't consider motivated classifications for collocation. He made a new classification and called it syntagmatic collocations which are in 7 classes:

Verb + verbal noun	make a decision
Determiner + adjective + noun	the dense fog
Adverb + adjective	completely useless
Verb + adverb	criticize severely
Subject + verb	the woman curtsayed
Count noun + of + mass noun	bar of soap
Collective noun + count noun	pride of lions

With regard to lexical collocations, Addison (1983) proposed these 3 definitions:

- 1) A text structure for a unit of discourse is analogous to that existing at the level of sentence.
- 2) A text form can become discordant if large enough samples of generically similar texts are examined.
- 3) An analogous text may be formed by studying the relationship between lexical collocation and topic/comment sequence.

Addison concluded that when a lexical set regularly occurs within the topic portion of sentences, the lexical set will be perceived as representing the point of the text, which can act as a whole theme of the text.

### Collocational limitations

Palmer (1981) proposed three kinds of collocational limitations:

- (1) Some restrictions on the meaning of the item such as "green cow".
- (2) Some restrictions are based on range—a word may be used with a whole set of words that have some semantic features in common. This explains the unlikelihood of the "pretty boy", since pretty is used for females.
- (3) Some are collocational in the more limited sense, involving neither meaning nor range, as "addled" with "eggs" and "brains" (p. 79).

Kjellmer (1990), classified words as collocational or non-collocational. He said that articles, prepositions, singular and mass nouns, as well as the base form of verbs are collocational but adjectives, singular proper nouns, and adverbs are not.

Cowie and Mackin (1975) classified idioms and collocations into four categories based on idiomaticity from most to least fixed: pure idioms, figurative idioms, restricted collocations, and open collocations.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) said "collocation is the co-occurrence of two words, independent of grammatical types and likely to take place over sentence boundaries" (p. 18). For example, the adjective strong and powerful belong to the same lexical set, because they all collocate with argument.

Wood (1981, as cited in Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), grouped collocations into idioms, colligations and free combinations, on the basis of a semantic criterion and a syntactic criterion in a continuum. He stated that a true idiom should be "a fully non-compositional, nonproductive collocation and a truly frozen piece of language" (p. 177). Also regarded phrases such as "hell" for leather and "by and large" as true idioms without compositional sense. A collocation, such as "kick the bucket", is less frozen than an idiom. A colligation, such as "off with his head" is compositional and permits only limited lexical variation and is more restricted in the combinations. A free combination, such as "see the river", is a fully compositional and productive collocation and combined meaning of the individual units" (p. 177).

The Continuum of Compositionality for Lexical Phrase presented by wood (1981)

Idioms ----- Collocations ----- Colligations -----  
-- Free combinations

### Motivated and unmotivated collocations

Hunston (2002) said that there is an inclination in connection of two words to each other. She classified them into motivated and unmotivated collocations. And she mentioned that in order to understand whether collocation is motivated or unmotivated, we can get it based on "logicality" among them. She gave some examples like, word toy with children, rather than adults, because it's logical, we call it motivated category. Motivated collocations has been implied by other scholars

### Differentiations between idioms and collocations

Sometimes we become confused to understand which is idiom, which is collocation. Nattinger and Decarrico (1992:32-39) present some definitions.

Idioms: "bits of frozen syntax whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its constituents".

Cliché: they share frozenness with idioms, but the meaning can be understood from the components.

Collocation: "strings of specific lexical items that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance. These strings are not assigned as particular pragmatic functions".

Lexical phrase: Collocations with pragmatic functions.

Polyword: Short lexical phrases that are treated as one word.

- 1) Kick the bucket      Idiom
- 2) Have a nice day      Cliché
- 3) Strong tea      Collocation
- 4) In a nutshell      Polyword
- 5) How do you do?      Lexical phrase

### Strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent collocation

Lewis (1997) adopted different perspectives to categorize collocations into strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent. The distinction between strong collocations and weak collocations is based on their fixedness and restriction, while the distinction between frequent ones and infrequent ones is on the basis of

their frequency of co-occurrence in a corpus. Strong collocations such as "drink beer" and "drug addict" are recognized as tightly linked phrases which function like single words, while weak ones, like a nice day and a good chance are combined with two common words, and each of which may occur with other words.

Howarth (1998) applied criteria such as restricted collocability, semantic specialization and idiomaticity to classifying collocations and idioms into four groups: free combinations (free collocations), restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms. The significance of composites is "their degree of restrictedness related to mental storage and processing" (p.28).

### Pedagogical Significance of collocation

The importance of collocation In EFL learning was emphasized by many researchers. Brown (1974) who was reckoned as the first researcher, accentuated the importance of collocation in EFL classes, and claimed that learning collocation can significantly improve speaking, listening and reading, also increase awareness of learners for understanding speaking and writing chunks which were used by native people.

Nattinger (1980) asserted that "language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for particular situations, and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations" (p.341), and said that learner by the help of collocation can bear such words in their mind and anticipate togetherness of words with each other. He also showed the significance of teaching collocation pragmatically which causes fluency in speaking and writing. Since let one to draw attention from words to discourse. According to Fillmore (1979), the knowledge of fixed expressions, like collocations, is very important for fluency.

Yorio (1980) and Aghbar (1990) underscored the importance of collocation and pointed out that knowing formulaic language i.e. idiom, proverbs and collocations are necessary for non-native speakers. Bahns and Eldaw's (1993) in their studies came to know that knowing collocation is critical for English proficiency. Howarth (1998) proposed that collocations is significant for ESL/ EFL learners in becoming more native-like. Nation (2001) also said that collocation is important in developing fluency and "all fluent and appropriate language requires collocational knowledge" (p. 318).

So we understand that collocation is absolutely important for 12 learning and has a double purpose, in this way that from one side improves language competence and from the other side let you closer to native like fluency.

### Unsatisfactory collocation

The main reason of unsatisfactory collocational knowledge in EFL learners is that attention was not given fully to EFL classrooms. So learners ignored learning collocations. Hence, researchers all stated that collocations which are kind of prefabricated speech should be noticed in EFL classrooms. Teachers should present collocations with every new word, and bring collocations which are different based on L1 culture.

### Strategies in facing collocations

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) discovered that EFL learners tried to utilize four strategies while facing collocations. They were: synonyms, paraphrasing, avoidance, and transfer. For instance, the errors such as top of the summer, middle of the summer instead of height of the summer. Or due to L1 negative transfers they made mistakes such as heavy tea, and fast color but not strong tea, and firm color.

### Error analysis

Al- Zahrani's (1998) also came to know that EFL students made positive transfers, which helped them in collocations, Howarth (1998) stated that most of the EFL errors are

“overlapping collocations” which means specification collocations being predicted by analogy but arbitrarily blocked by usage, such as reach a conclusion but not reach findings (p.37). Hill (2000) studied essay writing of some students and understood that they had difficulty in collocation especially verbs such as, get, put, make, do, bring, and take. For instance, learners wrote “I make exercise every morning in the gym.” Nesselhauf (2004) in his exploratory study investigated verb-noun collocations of German-speaking learners in advanced free written production. Errors were mostly the wrong verbs, like make one’s homework, give a solution to, and take one’s task.

He found that of all the collocational error types, the most frequent was related to the wrong choice of the verb.

Liu (1999b) studied collocational errors in students’ writings. He got his material from 127 final exam papers, and 94 compositions. He finally found Sixty-three collocational errors, which they were, verb + noun pattern and verb + preposition + noun pattern. They were noticeable errors and there were five sources of learners’ error. The most noticeable source of collocational errors in these five sources of errors was negative transfer.

Types of errors according to Liu(1999)

Types of Errors Examples

Negative transfer

\*eat vitamins for take vitamins

Ignorance of rules restrictions

\*make Joyce surprise for make Joyce surprised

Overgeneralization

\*am used to take for am used to taking

Use of synonym

\* \*receive other people’s opinions for accept other people’s opinions

Approximation

\*middle exam for midterm exam

Huang (2001) in his experimental study focused on Iranian EFL students’ knowledge of English collocations and collocational errors. He used a fill in the blank test and hired 60 college students for weighing four types of lexical collocations, designed by Cowie and Mackin (1975).

Collocations were: free combinations, restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms. The findings showed that free combinations were the easiest to deal with, while pure idioms were the most demanding. And their answers on restricted collocations and figurative idioms were the same. Participants in few studies were high school students.

In Taiwan, Chen (2002) in his study used high school students to get their collocational error in writing. And then errors were classified based on Benson, et al model. Results showed that among errors committed, 147 grammatical collocational errors and 125 lexical collocational errors. Also adjective noun, and verb-noun were the most common lexical collocational error types. Preposition-noun and verb collocations were among grammatical collocational errors. Finally in his study concluded that adjective +noun and verb+ noun were the most frequent types of lexical collocational errors, and preposition+ noun and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocational errors.

#### Main reasons of committing errors

Liu (1999b) in his studies on Taiwanese students’ writings understood that such errors were because of seven main factors:

1) Overgeneralization: in which contrast between two words or phrases are not that much different like I’m worry about instead of I am worried about.

2) Ignorance of rule restrictions: such errors are because of failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures

(Richards, 1973). For instance, \*ask you a favor is a false analogy of the construction of verb+ object+ object.

3) False concepts hypothesized: It is because of lack of distinction in the target language.

Liu (1999b) students assume that words such as make, do, and take are de-lexicalized verbs so they can replace another one freely. Consequently make errors such as \*do something breakthrough instead of achieve a breakthrough, \*made me grown up mind instead of cultivate my mind, \*take more respect instead of pay more respect, and \*have a great grade instead of get a great grade.

(4) The use of synonym: The use of a synonym for a lexical item in a collocation is seen as a “straightforward application of the open choice principle” (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). Like \*broaden your eyesight instead of broaden your vision.

5) Interlingual transfer: that is because of L1. For instance, \*listen some classical music, \*compliment my pictures, and \*arrive school these verbs, listen, compliment, and arrive, are intransitive verbs, these cannot be directly followed by a noun. This rule does not exist in Chinese.

(6)Word coinage: that means creating a completely new word. The example was \*see sun- up Instead of sea the sun rise.

7) Approximation: means using an incorrect vocabulary item or structure, which “shares enough semantic features in common with the desire item to satisfy the speaker” (Tarone, 1981, as cited in Liu, 1999b, p. 491). For instance, the word middle in \*middle exam was used to mean mid-term in midterm exam.

It is discovered that the source of collocational errors are due to analogy, overgeneralization, paraphrase, the L1 interference, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and shortage of collocational knowledge.(Channell, 1981; Bahas, 1993; Bahns & Eldaws, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Liu, 1999a,1999b).

For understanding L1 interference, Bahns (1993) studied Polish and German EFL and concluded that such errors were because of learners first language .Some of the errors committed were \*drive a bookshop, \* make attention at, \* win money, and \*finish a conflict for the target collocation run a bookshop, pay attention to, make money, and resolve a conflict.

#### Interference

Brown (1984) pointed out that the interference between 2 languages can make learning really difficult .Bahns and Eldaw (1993, Farghal and Obiedat (1995), and Al-Zahrani (1998) all of them unanimously believed in L1 interference too.

Ziahosseiny (1999:pp14-15) mentioned degrees of difficulty:

Level 0: transfer

No difficulty is noticed to transfer an item from L1 t L2. This is due to the fact that there is no difference between the two languages in this case. It is called zero level because of absence of difficulty for the learner to transfer, so it is not challenging or problematic for learner. Some phonemes and words such as table, television and house are among the examples. One item in target language is used for two or more ones in the native language. The distinction among items in the native language is disregarded by the learner. The word cousin is a good example in Persian language.

Level 2: Underdifferentiation

An item in the native language is deprived of equivalence in the foreign language. This item must be erased from the learner’s mind.

Level 3: reinterpretation

An item is present in the first and second language, but sometimes they are not equivalent. So this similarity will result in overgeneralization. The sentence we have visited Paris has

also the form of present perfect in Persian language as it is in English. The sentence we are sitting in the class is present continuous in English whereas it has the form of present perfect in Persian and this is the case in which overgeneralization is subject to happen due to the mentioned similarity.

#### Level 4: Overdifferentiation

This is the opposite side of level 2. An item in the target language is deprived of equivalence in the native language. They are the new items to be learned. The sounds [θ] and [ð] are among the examples.

#### Level 5: Split

This is the opposite side of level 1. Presence of two or more items in the foreign language is noticeable for an item in the first language. The words rancid, corrupt, decayed, rotten and faulty have one equivalence in the first language (Persian) as well as the words handcuff and bracelet and also the words monkey and auspicious. If each of these equivalences are used interchangeably, the meaning is distorted and the communication is deviated. As mentioned before, this is the case in which absoluteness is involved. In the other word, interchangeable use of on equivalence for the other is absolutely forbidden.

#### Clarification of different approaches

By the advent of lexical approach by Lewis (1993:95), the consideration was for improving learners' Proficiency through lexis.

Schmitt (2000:32-39) showed vocabulary teaching and its impact on learner. In past, mostly the focus was on words themselves only, or words came together under category of one subject, however nowadays concurrence of words to make collocation is center of the attention. Such chunks make prefabricated words and have some sub-classes which are idioms and lexical phrases.

Collocation in Schmitt's view (2000:76) is "tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse". He mentioned to J.R. Firth works as the first scholar making this significant in 1957. Since then (Sinclair et al. 2004) reckoned collocations as "the co-occurrence of two items in a text within a specified environment.

#### The semantic approach

Halliday (1966) and Sinclair (1991) proposed another approach named, "the semantic approach". In this approach, lexical areas can be identified in which each term helps to delimit its neighbors and is delimited by them (Ullmann, 1962, p. 30).

#### Structural approach

In structural approach which structural patterns show the way, is different from lexical and semantic approaches; its focus is on grammar and lexis (Gitsaki, 1996, p. 17). Lexis cannot be separated from grammar, because the two are distinctive but related aspects of one phenomenon (Bahns, 1993, p. 57).

Dechert and Lennon (1989) found that advanced English major subjects who had studied English for at least ten years with extensive contact with native speakers could not produce the language that conformed to native speaker criteria, and errors made by the subjects are not grammatical, but lexical ones. (p. 103).

#### Empirical studies on collocations

There were a lot of empirical researches on collocation (Channell, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Biskup, 1992; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Bahns, 1993; Faraghal and Obiedat, 1995; Gitsaki, 1997; Al-Zahrani, 1998). Mostly they tried to weigh up learners collocation and it's relation on their language proficiency, showing the places which learners have errors and cause of such

errors and understanding the impact of collocational teaching in learners' competence.

Most of studies (Channell, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Gitsaki, 1997; Liu, 1999a; Yuan & Lin, 2001; Lien, 2003; Hsu, 2004) which were done, unanimously highlighted the EFL learners' weakness in collocation.

Channell (1981) in her study for estimating L2 knowledge of collocations chose eight students in advanced-level English ability who participated in her study to a fill in collocational grid. Finally she understood that learners all could get the meaning words, but were not able to make collocation. Aghbar (1990) in his study had the same result like Channell's study. He used a cloze test to know knowledge of verb-noun collocations among ESL learners. He hired 27 faculty members, 44 native undergraduate and 97 advanced ESL students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The findings showed that ESL learners could provide a few word combinations, and they could comprehend well only on the items where the verb 'get' was most likely predictable, like get knowledge, get independence, and get admission.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) used translation and a cloze task to assess German post-secondary learners' Knowledge of 15 English verb-noun collocations. Subjects were 58 German university EFL students in two groups. One group of 24 students took a cloze test containing 10 sentences; each had a *verb+noun* collocation with the verb missing. Another group took a German-English translation test consisting of 15 sentences, each made up by a *verb+noun* collocation in a sentence to be translated into English. The findings showed that all the learners couldn't answer well, which showed their unsatisfactory knowledge of lexical collocations. Then they concluded that such problems are not just for learners, collocation is a problem, even for advanced students; even teachers have difficulty dealing with this problem (1993, p. 102).

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) used a fill in the blank test and an Arabic translation task to test Jordanian EFL students' knowledge of English lexical collocations. The fill in the blank test involved eleven collocations which was given to Group A, thirty-four seniors and juniors in English major, however an Arabic translation task was given to Group B, twenty-three seniors in English major at the Higher College for the accreditation of Teachers. The results showed that both ESL learners and English teachers were seriously deficient in knowledge of collocations.

Gitsaki (1997) hired 275 Greek learners in junior high school at 3 levels—post-beginning, intermediate, and post-intermediate, and for material used essay writing to obtain free production of collocations, a translation test to measure cue production of collocations, and a fill in the blank test to extract accuracy in the use. Results showed that L2 learners had problem in producing acceptable collocations.

The outcomes were replicated in Yuan and Lin's (2001) research. He used 32 English-majors and 56 non-English -majors at Ming Chuan University (MCU) in Taiwan. At which they were asked to finish a translation test involving 15 verbal collocations. Results revealed that participants used only a few collocations (English-major, 34%; Non-English-major, 30%). It was a pity that English majors were not by far better than non-English majors.

Empirical studies on collocations were started by Zhang's doctoral dissertation (1993). He investigated the possible correlation between the knowledge and use of English collocations and the quality of college freshmen's writing at university in Pennsylvania. He used 60 freshmen and grouped

them into two groups: 30 native and 30 non-native English speakers. The task given to everyone was one fill-in-the-blank collocation test to measure collocational knowledge and one writing task to know the use of collocations and writing proficiency. He understood that native English writers were by far better than non-native writers on the collocation test, and for the use of collocations in their writing, native writers did better than the non-native writers.

Then he concluded that collocational knowledge is a sign of proficiency in writing among college freshmen. A similar research was later done by Al-Zahrani (1998) and Sung (2003).

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) hired 57 Arab university students of English for weighing their knowledge of English collocations. They were divided into 2 groups. Group A had English fill-in-the-blank test. Group B were asked to translate Arabic sentences into English. Farghal and Obiedat found that they used 4 lexical simplification strategies. Synonymy was used more by both groups. The other strategies were transfer and paraphrasing, used to varying extent by the two groups. The conclusion drawn in the study was that L2 learners cannot cope easily with collocations.

Gitsaki (1996) grouped collocations in 37 categories of overall: 8 lexical and 29 grammatical. Lewis and Hill (1997) reduced this number to five main categories: adjective/noun, verb/noun, noun/verb, adverb/adjective, and verb/adverb.

Following Zhang Al-Zahrani (1998) studied lexical collocations on 81 Saudi EFL students and the relationship between the knowledge of lexical collocations and their general language proficiency 50 fill-in-the-blank 'verb + noun' lexical collocations, a paper-and-pencil TOEFL-like writing test and an Institutional Version of paper-and-pencil TOEFL test were used. Then he found that the knowledge of lexical collocations increased along with the subjects' academic years, and there was a strong relationship between the students' knowledge of collocations and their language proficiency

Sung (2003) examined the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in relation to speaking proficiency of international students enrolled in a university in Pittsburgh area. A total of 24 native and 72 non-native English speakers participated in her study. Each subject completed two tests: one collocation test and one speaking test. The first test was used to measure the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations while the latter was used to elicit the subjects' use of lexical collocations and measure their speaking proficiency. Her results showed that there was a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and the subjects' speaking proficiency.

Mahmoud (2005) hired Arab student who were studying English language. Then he understood that 80% of the collocational errors were because of lexical collocation and 61% of the inappropriate uses (10.71% grammatical and 53.3% lexical collocations) were due to L1 transfer.

### **Empirical studies on collocations on Iranian learners**

Akbari (1995) in his study over EFL's writing, observed that collocation was among one of the main sources, about 50% of the errors.

Zarei (2002) after categorizing collocations in 10 groups had the same result. In addition, he found that collocation of proposition (adjective adverb) are the most difficult and fixed expressions were the easiest.

Zareie and koosha (2002) studied about 2400 pages of materials produced in English by 27 subjects. Then collocational errors were taken. The study had two phases. Five collocational patterns were found and classified into ten categories

.prepositions were the most difficult, and 'adjective + adverbs' and 'fixed expressions' were the easiest for Iranian EFL students. They concluded that knowledge of collocations was an essential part of achieving native like competence in English.

Ghonsooli (2004) in his study attempted to investigate the effect of collocational instruction on Iranian EFL learners' English writings through quantitative as well as qualitative methods in two phases: product phase and process phase. 30 participants from the English Department of College of Ferdowsi University (in Iran) were involved in this study. Over the course of 21 teaching sessions, they were exposed to their course materials including audio, video and textual input. During exploration of those materials, the experimental students (N= 17) were made aware of word combinations, specifically, collocations through different techniques while in the control group (N=13), the conventional slot and filler approach was upheld. According to the results demonstrated by the statistical program, at the product phase, the experimental subjects got higher mean score in their collocation achievement test as well as test of written English (post-test stage) after collocational instruction and at the process phase, the graphic comparisons of subjects' mean scores at each writing component showed vocabulary and fluency considerable promotion as a result of collocational instruction.

Salimi (2005) in his research hired 120 students, and examined relationship between collocational competence and their performance on a cloze test and understood the strong relationship between these two.

Koosha and Jafarpour's (2006) studies were about hiring 200 Iranian university students (in three Universities in Shahrekord) majoring in English who were divided in 2 groups. One group in which prepositions and their collocational patterns were explicitly taught in English or Farsi. The second group (experimental group) had a data driven-based instruction (treatment), it was shown that learners' performance on collocation of prepositions is related to their level of proficiency. It was found that Iranian EFL learners used their 12 collocations based on L1. In their study viewed the influence of L1 in collocation of preposition. Finally they understood that data driven approach could be a good solution for this reason also found that more proficient learners were more dominant in collocation.

Keshavarz (2007) in a study investigated the possible relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in writing stories. The participants in the study were 27 PhD Iranian students in a Malaysian university. A specially constructed C-test measured the subjects' collocational knowledge and the use of collocations was measured by the number of collocations used in essays written by the subjects. For this purpose, participants wrote six different stories in six weeks based on a writing task designed to illicit verb noun collations. The statistical results demonstrated that there exists a strong positive relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in the writing stories.

Shokouhi (2010), in his study had a twofold purpose. The first and foremost was to see whether there exists any correlation between the collocational knowledge and general linguistic knowledge of EFL learners. The second was to reveal which type(s) of collocation was or were more difficult for EFL learners. To this end, 35 subjects, screened by a proficiency test, were given a 90-item multiple-choice test including lexical collocations (*noun+noun*, *noun+verb*, *verb+noun*, and *adjective+noun*), and grammatical collocations (*noun+preposition* and *preposition+noun*). A native speaker checked the final version of the data and necessary corrections

were made. The results showed that, a) there was no significant correlation between general linguistic knowledge and collocational knowledge of EFL learners, and b) the grammatical collocations were more difficult than the lexical collocations for learners and from among all subcategories, *noun+preposition* was the most difficult and *noun+verb* was the easiest.

Motallebzadeh (2011) in his study attempted comprehensively to investigate the effect of Short Message Service (SMS) on the retention of collocations among Iranian lower intermediate EFL learners. To this end, forty university students were assigned into experimental and control group. The participants received English collocations as well as definitions and example sentences either on paper or through SMS messages in a scheduled pattern of delivery two times a week during five weeks. After the third and the sixth session of treatment, students received two quizzes either on paper or via SMS in order to show whether the students' progress during the treatment or not. Students were compared at the end of the study. The results revealed the fact that participants in SMS group could significantly outperform the ones in conventional group.

Eftekhari (2011) in his study aimed to investigate the effect of delexicalisation of common verbs on the collocational competence of Iranian EFL students. It also addressed the effect of proficiency level on their collocational competence. Forty-five English majors with low, intermediate and high proficiency levels at Kashan University participated in this study. To investigate their collocational knowledge, each group received a metalingual judgment test asking them to judge the acceptability of 64 collocations of four common verbs (*have, give, take, and make*) in delexical uses in English. Moreover, think-aloud protocols were collected to assess the validity of the judgment test which revealed different sources of collocational errors made by the participants. The results indicated that not only knowledge of delexicalised collocations tends to fossilize at an intermediate level but it did not increase with proficiency.

## Methodology

### Introduction

This research is a case study which aims to provide a description of language learning or use within specific population and setting and tend to provide detailed description of specific learners within their learning setting (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The subjects speaking performances accompanied by their collocation test. It involved 2 phases, administering the collocation test and then speaking test.

### Participants

The study involved 20 people whose proficiency in English was upper-intermediate to advanced level, Among these participants, eleven of them were males and the other nine students were females, who were aged 20–30 from Sadr Institute of higher Education in Isfahan. All of them had a similar goal, and it was preparing for IELTS exam.

### Instruments

In this study, the data were gathered by two tests, one written test about collocational knowledge and another was IELTS speaking test.

Pilot study didn't seem necessary for checking the validity of the instruments as well as to decide on the time needed for participants to finish each test, since IELTS is considered as a standard test which has an acceptable validity and reliability

### Collocation test

The test of collocations for this purpose was designed by using some vocabulary and grammar books including English Vocabulary in Use (Redman, 2003), English Collocation in Use

with grammatical and lexical collocations as categorized by McCarthy & Felicity O' Dell (2005), Zarei (2003) and some of the major books that were studied by EFL majors in Iranian universities or language centers. For instance, the focus of the book "English Collocation in Use" by "Felicity O'Dell & Micheal McCarthy" (2005) is on using collocations in different passages. So there wasn't any difficulty choosing target collocation.

A Collocation test including 90 Items with three types of tests was designed: matching and fill-in-blank which the distribution in the test was mentioned here:

Pattern	Number of questions
Noun+noun	10
Verb+noun	10
Adverb+adjective	10
Verb+adverb	10
Verb+prepositions	10
Noun+adjective	10
Adjective+proposition	10
Idiom	10
Translation task	10

The order of the collocation type arranged based on their difficulty for learner as can be seen on the table above. Findings showed that free combinations were the easiest to deal with, while pure idioms were the most demanding. In Taiwan, Chen (2002) in his study concluded that adjective + noun and verb + noun were the most frequent types of lexical collocational errors, and preposition + noun and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocational errors. Zarei (2002) found that prepositions were the most difficult, and 'adjective + adverbs' and 'fixed expressions' were the easiest for Iranian EFL students. So attention was taken to order the questions based on these findings.

### Speaking test

The Speaking module assesses whether candidates can communicate effectively in English. The Assessment takes into account Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Pronunciation. The speaking test took approximately 15 minutes and is divided into 3 parts.

There are three main parts in IELTS speaking test:

#### Part 1

The candidate and the examiner introduce themselves and then the candidate answers general questions about themselves, their home/family, their job/studies, their interests and a wide range of similar familiar topic areas. This part lasts between four and five minutes.

#### Part 2

The candidate is given a task card with prompts and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The candidate has one minute to prepare and they can make some notes if they wish, before speaking for between one and two minutes. The examiner then asks one or two rounding-off questions.

#### Part 3

The examiner and the candidate engage in a discussion of more abstract issues and concepts, which are thematically linked to the topic prompt in Part 2. The discussion lasts between four and five minutes.

### Data Analysis

All the data were calculated to give the descriptive statistics of two variables for the study: one variable is the score of collocation test to measure students' knowledge of using collocation and another is the score of speaking test to demonstrate their degree of speaking development.

### Scoring for lexical collocation test

Responses on lexical collocation test were rated, each item was assigned .01 points, Totaling 9 points for the 90-item test. The researcher scored the collocation test By means of the Longman dictionary of contemporary and oxford collocation dictionary Which both show how words collocate and included a wide range of samples from different registers and genres.

### Scoring of speaking test

IELTS scoring system was adopted to evaluate the subjects' performance .Spoken data was transcribed and all of the produced lexical and grammatical collocations were counted .The correctness of the collocations was based on oxford collocations dictionary and Longman contemporary , then scores were calculated out of 9 . For this purpose the transcribed papers of subjects voices were reviewed, and they were given a band score of 0 to 9 like a simulated IELTS speaking test, in the following way:

What happens is that you get a score out of 9 for each of the criteria, they are added together and then that score is divided by 4 which are about

grammar 9

vocabulary 9

pronunciation 9

coherence 9

$9+9+9+9 = 36$  and  $36$  divided by  $4$  equals  $9$ .

### Results

#### Research question

1. To what extent is knowledge of using collocations related to speaking proficiency?
- 2- To what extent the use of collocational words will help students in IELTS speaking success?

#### The Results of the Correlational Analysis

Result of Collocation and speaking test scores

Number of students	Scores of collocations test	Scores of final speaking
1	5	7.5
2	7	7.5
3	6.5	6
4	7	6.5
5	7	7
6	5	7.5
7	6	7
8	8.5	8.5
9	9	9
10	6.5	7.5
11	8.5	7.5
12	9	7
13	6.5	8.5
14	6	6.5
15	7.5	7
16	5.5	7.5
17	5.5	7.5
18	6.5	7.5
19	8	9
20	5	7

$N=20$

$\sum x = 303.2$  ( $x$  : collocation test score)

$\sum y = 322$  ( $y$  : final speaking test score)

$\sum xy = 2321.65$

$\sum x^2 = 2470$

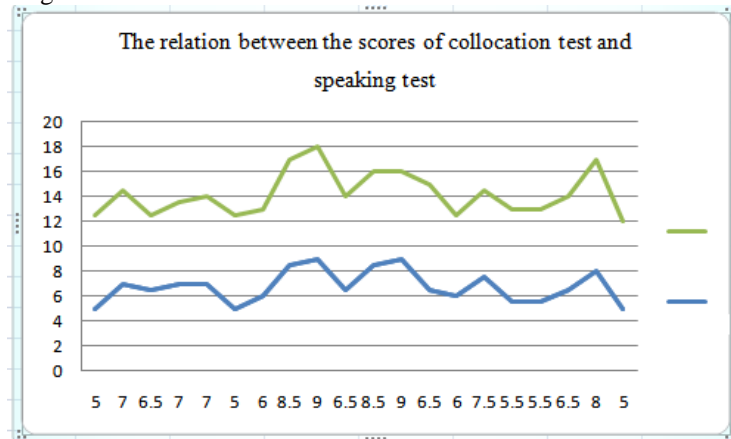
$\sum y^2 = 2488$

$r = 0.5998$

### Results

Variables of data set is very highly correlated, if the correlation coefficient  $r$  whose magnitude lies between  $0.9$  and  $1.0$ ; highly correlated, if the correlation coefficient  $r$  whose magnitude lies between  $0.7$  and  $0.9$ ; moderately correlated if the  $r$  magnitude lies between  $0.5$  and  $0.7$ ; low correlation, if the

value of  $r$  lies between  $0.3$  and  $0.5$  and linear correlation if the magnitude is less than  $0.3$



It's illustrated from the graph that the score of collocation test and speaking test experienced the same trend with the significant increase from 5 points, reached the top of average 7.5 points and then dramatically decreased to 9 points. The numbers of good marks from 8 points to 10 points is very limited, which might reveal a limited capability of using collocation and speaking English. However, the emphasis is the positive relation between collocations and speaking; in this positive relationship, high values on one variable are associated with high values on the other and low values on one are associated with low values on the other. So, it's clear from the graph that that students' knowledge of using collocation and speaking proficiency is positively correlated.

### Conclusion

In the same manner, the results of previous studies also showed positive relationship between the knowledge of collocations and other language skills, such as writing (Zhang, 1993); language proficiency (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000), reading (Lien, 2003) and speaking (Sung, 2003). Thus, it could be concluded that knowledge of collocations is indicative of non-native speakers' language proficiency.

Sung's (2003) reported that there was a moderate correlation between the speaking proficiency and the frequency of collocations used in the speaking test among the non-native speakers residing in the United States. One possible explanation might be due to the different focuses on the categories of lexical collocations. Sung (2003) included more subtypes of lexical collocations (L1-L7 based on Benson et al., 1997) in her recording of students' spoken data. In the current study, we looked at the subjects' L1-L5 subtypes of lexical collocations which are fewer than Sung's. Another possible explanation might be that the subjects in Sung's study were residents in the United States; they may be more proficient in English. Still, it is beyond the scope of the current study to draw a concrete conclusion on the relationship between use of collocations and speaking proficiency. Therefore, further larger scale research could investigate the correlation between these two variables. From Sung's study in 2003, there was a moderately significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and frequency of lexical collocations in the speaking performance of the non-native speakers in the United States. The relationship between knowledge of collocations and their use of collocations is not obvious and we are far from drawing any convincing conclusion. Therefore, further investigation could look into this particular relation.



### The percentage of correct answers per category

Type of Collocation	Subtypes	Correct Answers (%)	Total Correct	Mean (%)
Lexical	Noun + Verb	62.09	225.69	56.42
	Adjective +Noun	55.61		
	Verb + Noun	54.85		
	Noun + Noun	53.14		
Grammatical	Preposition + Noun	51.66	94.32	47.16
	Noun + Preposition	42.66		
Less fixed collocation	Idiom	32.6	89	40
	Translation task	30.1		

The results showed that the grammatical collocations were more difficult than the lexical collocations for learners and from among all subcategories, *noun+preposition* ,idioms were the most difficult and *noun+verb* were the easiest for Iranian EFL learners.

The following conclusions can be drawn:

Lexical collocations are easier to acquire than grammatical collocations. (The mean percentage for lexical collocations is 56.42 and for grammatical collocations is 47.16; on the other hand less fixed collocations like idiom and L1 to L2 translation was the most difficult with the mean of 40 which is less than other .

### Discussion

#### Overview

In this research it was tried to find out if there was a relationship between the knowledge and use of collocations and their relation with English speaking proficiency among upper-intermediate to advanced Iranian EFL learners.

#### Discussion

The results proved the positive relationship between knowledge of collocation and speaking proficiency.

In this study the purpose was to see whether there existed any relationship between the Iranian EFL learners knowledge of collocation and their production in speaking, furthermore, the aim was to explore the relationship between the use of collocational knowledge and degree of success among EFL IELTS speaking test .The results showed that a significant correlation existed between their collocational knowledge and production of collocations in general and their speaking production.

The results of the previous studies (Phan Thi Thanh Loan,2011),showed that a noticeable correlation existed between the EFL learners knowledge of collocations and speaking proficiency. Sung (2003) and Hsu and Chiu (2006) examined the knowledge of lexical collocations and its relation to the speaking proficiency of the Taiwanese international students .They found that learners apply their knowledge of collocation in their oral productions, and in general the production of collocation .

Based on the findings of current study, an insignificant correlation existed among participants 'production and use of collocation whose score of IELTS speaking reckoned between 1 to 5.5 .This means that the participants do not put into use of their perception of collocations when producing collocations in speaking. Therefore, we can understand that collocational knowledge may not be a good factor for measuring their speaking proficiency .These findings are in line with the findings of previous studies .Sung (2003) .

### Performances of IELTS speaking participants and usual speakers

In addition to the measurement of the correlations between the participant`s collocational knowledge and their production in speaking, the interesting part was that they had more difficulty in less fixed collocations like idiom. One probable reason for the subjects' lack of competence in collocation may be due to L1 influence. For example, Martelli (1998) believes that L1 interference accounts for misunderstanding and the generation of wrong collocations. Similarly, Shalev (2000) maintains that students learning EFL tend to make mistakes because of the differences between English and their L1. Of course, there is no way of guaranteeing whether L1 influence actually occurred, but similarity approximation may be an indication of such influence.

#### Limitations of the Study

The subjects were limited to the students at the level of upper intermediate to advanced who were not a lot. Therefore, while the study revealed interesting findings about the relationship between learners' use of lexical collocations and their speaking fluency, the findings may not be easily generalized beyond the subjects of the study. As a result, other studies with the attendance of larger participants should be recommended. The second limitation pertains to the number of the selected collocations used in the study. Due to the time constraint, this study made use of only 90 items of collocation in one collocation test to measure the reception of the participants 'knowledge of collocations. However, the use of more collocations will be better to give a comprehensive measurement of learners' collocational competence and more tests.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the theoretical concepts and the practical procedures, some related studies can be recommended: Collocations, an important focus in EFL research, have started to gain increasing attention in the past two decades. As the current study investigated subjects' knowledge and use of collocations as well as their speaking proficiency, several recommendation may be made for future research.

First, a strong relationship was found between the knowledge of lexical collocations and speaking proficiency among the Iranian university EFL learners in the study. However, the subjects' use of lexical collocations did not show significant correlation with either knowledge of lexical collocations or their speaking proficiency in the study. Thus, Iranian EFL learners' use of collocations could be further examined. In the current study, the researchers used only one type of speaking test in the study to elicit the subjects' use of lexical collocations. Future studies could consider using different discourse tasks for eliciting the subjects' spoken data, such as face-to-face conversations, interviews, and speeches. Second, the current study aimed at the subjects' knowledge and use of collocations in relation to their speaking proficiency. Future research could be extended to explore the relationship between knowledge of collocations and other

Language skills, including listening, reading, and writing. It could provide a better understanding of the connection between Iranian EFL learners' collocational knowledge and their general English proficiency. Lastly, the study also found Iranian EFL students performed differently on the five major categories of lexical collocations.

#### Conclusion

The current study has attempted to explore the relation between English collocations and second language acquisition. More specifically, it examines whether a correlation exists between knowledge of using collocation and their speaking skill proficiency. The main contribution of the study is the emphasis

on the significance of using collocation to develop speaking skill especially among IELTS examinees. Understanding this kind of relationship will highly motivate teachers to pay more attention to knowledge of collocation to students in class lessons. Moreover, once students comprehend the meaning and the role of collocation in enhancing their speaking skill, they are led to practice using collocation, master it sufficiently and apply it more regularly. So, the study generates strong motivation in both teachers and students, not only third-year but other levels.

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