



# Introducing reading and cloze tasks as panaceas for Iranian EFL learners' loss of memory: a case of collocation retrieval

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims at examining the influence of receptive (reading three glossed sentences) and productive (completing a cloze task) tasks on retrieving the knowledge of English verb-noun collocations in an Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learning context. To do so, ninety four EFL university learners were divided into two experimental (reading and cloze) groups and one control group. To examine the effects of the tasks, the students in all three groups were given receptive and productive collocation pretests aiming at measuring their existing knowledge of collocation and posttests to measure the learners' gained knowledge of collocation after being exposed to the treatments. Two weeks after completing the treatments, the students were given delayed posttests examining the participants' ability to retrieve the receptive and productive gained of the collocations. The results of Paired Sample t-tests revealed that the tasks were highly effective in helping the students retrieve the already gained knowledge of verb-noun collocations.

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### Introduction

Over the last four decades, language researchers and teachers have started to pay special attention to the issue the role of collocations and collocation learning in the field of English as foreign/second language learning (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Howarth, 1998; Lewis, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003). Collocation which is defined as regular co-occurrence of certain words in a given language (Lewis, 2000) has been found to have an important aspect of each language that needs be incorporated within L2 learning curriculums (Hill, 2000). The body of research on the language learners' knowledge of collocation indicates that those language learners, especially English as foreign language (EFL) learners suffer from lack of acceptable knowledge of English collocations. Besides, the findings of these studies also revealed that language learners are dealing with difficulties when collocations of different kinds (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Biskup, 1992; Nesselhauf, 2003). Considering the aforementioned significance of collocations and the problems they pose for language learners, there may be no wonder that the language teachers and researchers have been taking such a great interest in the role of collocations in the English language classes and trying to examine a variety of methods that may best serve in explicitly and effectively teaching English collocations. Despite the widely recognized importance of collocations, not many studies have empirically turned to investigating the best means of teaching collocations in the English classrooms (Webb & Kagimoto, 2009). This study is an attempt to examine the effectiveness of commonly used methods of teaching single words, reading and cloze tasks in explicitly teaching verb-noun collocations in an Iranian English as foreign language learning.

### Background

In general, studies conducted on collocations can be divided into two categories: studies conducted on the language learners' general knowledge of collocations and research on the teaching

and learning of collocations and research investigating collocation teaching methods in the language classrooms.

Although the importance of collocations has long been recognized, it was not until recent years that experimental investigations were conducted. Among these studies, the shared focus is measuring learners' knowledge of collocations in general, and developmental patterns of their collocational knowledge.

Among the earliest researchers, Channell (1981) conducted an investigation of collocational knowledge with eight advanced EFL students. Using a collocational grid consisting of four adjectives listed as its vertical axis and fifteen nouns as the horizontal axis, Channell asked students to match these adjective-noun collocations together. Though the subjects all understood the meanings of these words clearly, they failed to produce a promising number of acceptable collocations. Channell furthermore suggested: "It is essential to present a good number of typical collocations at the moment a word is first acquired.

Danuta Biskup (1992) studied the L2 learners' knowledge of verb-noun collocations in a format similar to that used by Aghbar. From a slightly different perspective, Biskup intended to see whether L1 had a certain impact on two groups of university students whose mother tongues were Polish and German (34 Polish and 28 German). The results showed that the Polish students were more conservative compared to the German group. The Polish group, who insisted on accuracy, left blanks whenever feeling uncertain about an item. The Germans, on the other hand, used strategies like giving definition or paraphrasing if not knowing the English collocations. Employing two instruments, a translation and a cloze task, Bahns and Eldaw (1993) also investigated fifty-eight German high school students' knowledge of fifteen English verb-noun lexical collocations. Findings in this study revealed that all the subjects

demonstrated insufficient knowledge of lexical collocations as they performed poorly in both tests. Al-Zahrani (1998) examined the students' collocational competence correlated with their writing proficiency and TOEFL scores. He concluded that Students' acquisition of lexical collocations overall paralleled their level of writing fluency and performance on the TOEFL. To sum up, the results of these studies indicated that the language learners suffer from inefficient knowledge of collocations. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that the students' knowledge of single words doesn't parallel their collocational knowledge.

Despite the recognized significance of collocations, very few studies have been carried out in the English classrooms to address the issue of collocation teaching. Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) investigated the influence of concordancing materials presented through data-driven learning (DDL) on teaching/learning collocation of prepositions; furthermore, to find out if knowledge of collocation of prepositions was different among the different levels of EFL learners' proficiency. Finally, to determine the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocation of prepositions is affected by their L1. The results of the study indicated that first, the DDL approach proved to be highly effective in teaching and learning of collocations of preposition. Second, learners' performance on collocation of prepositions was shown to be positively related to their level of proficiency. Third, the analysis of errors of collocations indicated that Iranian EFL learners tended to carry over their L1 collocational patterns to their L2 production. Lin (2002) examined the effects of employing receptive and productive tasks on verb-noun collocation teaching. Participants in this study were divided into two groups of lower-achiever and higher-achiever students. The results of this study indicated that both groups did better on the receptive tests than the productive ones, but lower-achiever student had a slightly better performance on the productive tests than the higher-achiever students after being exposed to the treatments. Tseng (2002) divided about 100 students into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group was exposed to a twelve-week instruction, but the control group didn't receive any treatments. The participants in this study were required to take pre-test on collocation, write a composition and fill out a questionnaire on collocation learning behaviors. The results this study showed that the students had little awareness towards the concept of collocation. Besides, after the instruction, the experimental group had considerably much better performance on the posttests of collocation than the control group. Webb and Kagimoto (2009) investigated the effects of receptive and productive vocabulary tasks on learning collocation and meaning. They conducted this study in Japanese EFL learning and participants were exposed to receptive (three glossed sentences) and productive (cloze) tasks. In order to measure the participants' gained knowledge of collocations and meaning four posttests were given to the students. The results of this study indicated that both tasks led to significant gains in knowledge with a little difference between the sizes of the gains. When participants were grouped according to level, the productive task was more effective for higher level learners, and the receptive task was more effective for lower level learners.

The current study attempts to investigate the effects of receptive of productive tasks used in Webb and Kagimoto (2009) on retrieving receptive and productive knowledge of collocations in an Iranian EFL learning context. In doing so,

some modifications were made to the original design and the researcher tried to add delayed posttests to the design of the study in order to examine the effects of the tasks on the students' ability to retrieve the gained knowledge of collocations. Considering the aforementioned issues, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extents are reading and cloze tasks effective tools in helping students retrieve the gained knowledge of collocations?

## Method

### Participants

About 94 senior and sophomore BA students, majoring in English Translation, participated in this study. Participants were both male and female with the age ranges from 19-28, of these 94 students, 64 were assigned to two experimental groups (Reading = 36, Cloze task = 28) and 30 to one control group. Each experimental group was divided into two sub groups of higher level and lower level based on their scores on the Oxford Placement test.

### Design

To find answer to the research question, an experimental design was arranged. Two weeks before the experiment, all of the participants were administered a pretest testing their receptive knowledge of collocation and based on this pretest target collocations which students were unlikely to know were selected. In the second week, the participants were given a pretest measuring productive knowledge of collocations selected based on the receptive pretest conducted a week before, and then participants were randomly assigned to two receptive and productive experimental groups (about 64 participants) and one control group (about 30 participants). Next week, in the receptive treatment, the receptive experimental group was given the receptive treatment and the productive group was given the productive treatment. Collocations in blanks in the same three sentences that the first experimental group had. The participants were closely monitored by the researcher to ensure that the treatments had been completed. Having completed the treatments, the participants were immediately given the receptive and productive posttests. The control group simply completed the posttests measuring receptive and productive knowledge of collocation without being exposed to the treatments.

## Materials

### Receptive Treatment

The receptive and productive treatments used in this study were taken from Webb & Kagimoto, 2009. In the receptive treatment, the students were given collocations alongside their Farsi meaning, each collocation was followed with three glossed sentences with the related collocation in them. The participants were simply asked to try to understand the collocation, which was written in bold, in each of the three glossed sentences. In Example 1 the glossed sentences for the target collocations *Pull Strings* are shown.

#### Example 1

Pull strings = ندرک یزاب می‌تراپ

Tony is sure he can pull a few strings and get you in.

Do you want me to pull a few strings for you?

### Productive Treatment

In the productive treatment, the students were given the collocations used in the same glossed sentences used in the receptive treatment, though collocations used in each sentence, which was written in bold, were replaced. To complete this

treatment, the participants were required to fill in the blanks with the appropriate collocations listed above. The participants' task was to write the two collocations in the correct set of three sentences. Ten sets of two collocations and their sentences were presented in the test. Having completed the cloze task, the participants were given an answer sheet which showed the correct collocation beside the appropriate number so that they make sure about whether or not their answers were correct. In Example 2, the cloze task for the collocations *lose touch* and *meet demand* are shown.

#### Example 2

Launch attacks = ندرک ملمح      Grant wish = ندیسر وزرا هب  
It may be too late to ..... Larry's ..... in time.  
I'd happily ..... him his .....  
I'm looking for someone who'll ..... my .....  
Turkey might be used as a base from which to ..... on Iraq.  
We must make sure we win the ball and then..... our own .....  
From the islands, we will.....the land .....

#### Receptive Pretest of Collocation

A pretest measuring receptive knowledge of collocation was used to measure learners' receptive knowledge of collocations and to select collocations that participants were unlikely to know so that they can be used in the study.

#### Example 3

Lose      a) *touch*      b) *surprise*      c) *trouble*  
d) *peace*      e) *I don't know*

#### Productive Pretest of Collocation

In order to measure the participants' productive knowledge of verb-noun collocations, they were given a cloze test in which they were required to complete sentences through providing appropriate verbs for each sentence. A unique feature in his cloze test was, instead of deleting the verb entirely, the first letter/phoneme of the verbs was provided to prevent subjects from making a wild guess, hence assuring better accuracy in the test.

#### Example 4

Tony is sure he can p..... a few strings and get you in  
Immediate and Delayed Posttests of Productive Knowledge of Collocation Immediate posttest of productive knowledge of collocation used in this study was taken from Webb & Kagimoto, (2009). In this test, the participants were given the node words from the target collocations and had to write the collocates, which they had learned in the treatment.

#### Example 5

*Touch* .....

Immediate and Delayed posttests of receptive knowledge of collocation Immediate posttest of receptive knowledge of collocation used in this study was taken from Webb & Kagimoto, (2009). The test was identical to the pretest designed to select the target collocations. It should be mentioned that both of these immediate receptive and productive posttests were given to the students immediately after completing the treatments.

#### Example 5

Lose      a) *touch*      b) *surprise*      c) *trouble*      d)  
peace      e) *I don't know*

#### Results

In order to answer the research question, the difference between the participants' scores on pretests and posttests, paired-Sample t-tests were conducted to evaluate the impact of the

treatments (reading comprehension and cloze tests) on the participants' collocation learning. The descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, and number of participants) of the scores for the tests measuring receptive and productive knowledge of collocation are reported in Table 1.

Table 2 shows that the reading group's mean score increased from 7.88 to 16.83 on the receptive tests after the treatment and the cloze group's mean score increased from 8.07 to 15.42 on the receptive tests after being exposed to the treatment. As reported in Table 2, the reading group's mean score increased from 7.5 to 13.54 on the productive tests after the treatment and the cloze group's mean score increased from 8.43 to 16.64 on the productive tests after the treatment. As a result, the reading group and the cloze group improved their scores considerably more than the control group

Paired-samples T-tests were performed to measure the participants' scores on the immediate posttests against their scores on the delayed posttests that were given to them two weeks after the immediate posttests. The results of paired sample T-tests are presented in Table 3.

As presented in Table 3, the mean scores of the participants on the receptive collocation posttest was 16.21 and on the delayed receptive collocation test was 16.59, their mean score on the productive collocation posttest was 14.89 and on the delayed productive collocation posttest was 14.65 and their mean score on productive meaning test increased from 12.84 to 13.09 on the delayed productive meaning test.

The results of the paired-samples t-tests, displayed in Table 3, revealed that there were no significant differences between the participants scores on the immediate posttests and the delayed posttests, indicating that the treatments employed in this study proved to be effective not only in learning verb-noun collocation but in retrieving the gained knowledge of the previously learned collocations.

#### Discussion

The findings of this study show that both treatments (completing a cloze task and reading three glossed sentences) proved to be considerably effective methods of teaching verb-noun collocations. The experimental design of this study, which was a modified version of Webb and Kagimoto, (2009), aimed at investigating the effects of receptive and productive tasks on collocation learning, as well as, measuring the effects of the tasks in helping the participants retrieve the previously gained knowledge of collocations after a two-week interval. Mean scores of the reading and cloze groups on both productive and receptive knowledge of collocation tests improved markedly. However, the control group did not demonstrate any remarkable improvement on learning collocations. Although earlier research has shown that receptive knowledge is easier to gain than productive knowledge (Webb, 2005), the findings of this study indicated that, in general, the students who did the productive treatment (productive group) had better performance on productive posttest than receptive posttest, and those who were given the receptive treatment (receptive group) outstripped the productive group in the receptive posttest. Thus, it can be claimed that it is the kind of treatment received by students which has determining roles in gaining knowledge and it cannot be simply claimed that, as a general rule of thumb, receptive knowledge is easier to gain than productive knowledge. The results of this study are in line with those of Azimi (2005). Azimi concluded that the type of task has determining role in collocation learning. Dramatic changes in the participants' scores

on the posttests in comparison with the pretests suggested that reading glossed sentences and completing cloze tasks can be used as effective explicit methods of collocation teaching in English classrooms. The results of the pretests revealed that Iranian English language learners were in lack of necessary knowledge of collocations; this is in line with the results of the previous studies conducted on the EFL learners' knowledge of collocations in different countries (e.g., Channel, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Biscup, 1992; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Elkhatib, 1984; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Alzahrani's, 1998; Abedi, 1998). Furthermore, the findings of the present study provide support for previous studies investigating the effects of explicit methods of collocation teaching in English classrooms (e.g., Renouf & Sinclair, 1988; Lewis, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Sun & Wang, 2003; Chan & Liou, 2005).

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of the tasks on retrieving the gained knowledge of the collocations. Since English is learned as a foreign language in Iran, it is important to examine whether or not a special task is effective in contributing the language learners to retrieve the already gained knowledge of the language. Thus, the participants in this study were given delayed posttests after a two-week interval. The results of the delayed posttests revealed that the two treatments were noticeably effective in retrieving the gained knowledge of the collocations. The results of the study also showed no significant difference in the participants' scores between the immediate posttests and the delayed posttests and this indicated that both tasks were highly effective in helping the participants retrieve the gained knowledge of collocations. One reason for why the tasks came to be so effective might be attributed to the novelty of the tasks. Though the students who participated in this study were all university students, to the knowledge of this researcher, had never been explicitly taught collocations in the classrooms. Hence, the students were so motivated to learn the collocations used in the study that they managed to recall approximately all the collocations after two weeks.

### Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effects receptive and productive treatments on learning verb-noun collocations and retrieving the already gained knowledge of collocations. Participants in this study were randomly assigned to productive and receptive groups. The students in the receptive group were given the receptive task, and participants in the productive group were given the productive task. The findings indicated that participants in both groups were able to gain much receptive and productive knowledge of the collocations under study. The participants managed to gain the receptive knowledge of collocations for approximately 17 of the 20 target collocations, and they were able to gain the productive knowledge of collocations for approximately 15 of the 20 collocations. Generally, no significant difference between the two tasks was found. The results of the delayed posttests revealed that the participants were able to retrieve the knowledge of almost all collocations they had previously learned. Thus, the two tasks proved to be highly effective methods of teaching collocations.

### Pedagogical Implications

The current study has proved that collocations can be taught explicitly in EFL classrooms, through using the methods which are usually used to teach single words. Given the role of collocations in improving language learners' fluency and

accuracy, teachers need to take explicitly teaching collocations into account. In ESL contexts, just making students aware of the importance of the knowledge of collocations may suffice and teachers can simply instruct students to notice and learn the words that regularly co-occur, because they are likely to have enough exposure to the English language. In EFL contexts, however, students are mostly deprived of this chance and teachers should not only make their students aware of the importance of the knowledge of collocations in language learning but they should also try to explicitly teach them in their classrooms.

Verb-noun collocations selected for this study were all made up of simple words that all participants were likely to know. The purpose of choosing unknown collocations that are made up of known words was two-facet. First, to teach these collocations to the participants, and to make them aware that vocabulary learning is not just the matter of learning meaning of single words, and they need to pay attention to other aspects of the knowledge of vocabulary which go beyond learning single words. Teachers can use this technique to make their learners aware of the importance of collocations, and thereby encourage them to learn the patterns in which words regularly co-occur.

### Limitations of the Study

The first limitation is related to the number of collocations employed in current study. Due to the time constraints, only 20 verb-noun collocations were used to run the treatments. Given that all the students who participated in this study were university students, using more collocations could have made better treatments and more reliable tests, measuring the participants' receptive and productive gained knowledge. The second limitation concerns with the type of collocations used in the present study. The reason why verb-noun collocations were used in this study was that they have proved to be highly problematic for EFL learners (Chan & Liou, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2003) but other types of collocations such as collocations of prepositions can equally cause difficulty for EFL learners (Koosha & Jafarpoor, 2006). Thus, the treatments might have been more beneficial to the learners if both kinds of collocations had been used in the design of the study.

The third limitation of the current study pertains to the unlimited amount of the time the participants were given to take the tests. Webb (2005) showed that when there was no time limit for students and they were granted as much time as they wanted to do receptive and productive tasks, productive tasks were more effective; however, when there was a time limit the converse situation held true and receptive tasks came to be more effective. Hence, the results of this study might have been different if the participants had faced time limits.

The final limitation of this study is related to the pretest and posttest measuring productive knowledge of the collocations. In order to prevent the participants from having wild guesses, the initial letter of each collocate was provided for the participants; this might have affected the students' performance on the receptive tests.

### Suggestions for Further Research

The following recommendations for further research are based upon the results in this study:

First, the focus of this study was investigating the effects of receptive and productive tasks on learning of only verb-noun collocations. It is recommended to examine the effects of these tasks on other kinds of collocations such as adjective-noun collocations or prepositional collocations in further studied to

see whether or not the tasks are effective in learning the other kinds of collocations.

Second, time is an important factor for language learners to function in real life contexts; they are not likely to have as much time as they want to produce or understand the target language. Thus, it is recommended that for further studies, which attempt to investigate the effects of receptive and productive tasks on language learning, consider controlling the amount of the time learners are allowed to spend on completing the tasks.

Finally, when scoring the participants' responses to the translation exam in this study, it was found that 37% of the participants had resorted to word by word translation instead of writing target collocations they had already learned. This problem may be due to their lack of understanding of the concept of collocations. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies, which aim at investigating the methods of collocation teaching, teachers should make students aware of what collocations are before embarking on teaching collocations to them so that they know what exactly they are required to do when completing the tasks or taking the tests.

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**Table1, Participants**

	N	
Control	30	
Experimental	Reading (receptive)	36
	Cloze task (productive)	28
Total	94	

**Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics**

Learning Condition			Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	Pair 1	Receptive collocation pretest	8.3000	30	1.78403	.32572
		Receptive collocation posttest	8.4667	30	1.90703	.34818
	Pair 2	Productive collocation pretest	8.0333	30	2.22033	.40538
		Productive collocation posttest	8.3333	30	2.03983	.37242
Reading	Pair 1	Receptive collocation pretest	7.8889	36	2.31489	.38582
		Receptive collocation posttest	16.8333	36	1.82835	.30472
	Pair 2	Productive collocation pretest	7.5000	36	2.37246	.39541
		Productive collocation posttest	13.5389	36	3.44643	.57440
Cloze task	Pair 1	Receptive collocation pretest	8.0714	28	2.76122	.52182
		Receptive collocation posttest	15.4286	28	2.33220	.44074
	Pair 2	Productive collocation pretest	8.4286	28	1.79358	.33895
		Productive collocation posttest	16.6429	28	1.47106	.27800

**Table 3. Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. D	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Receptive collocation posttest - Receptive Delayed Posttest	-.37500	2.13437	.26680	-.90815	.15815	-1.406	63	.165	
Pair 2	Productive collocation posttest - Productive Delayed Posttest	.24062	2.59571	.32446	-.40776	.88901	.742	63	.461	
Pair 3	Productive meaning - Meaning Delayed Productive	-.25000	3.01320	.37665	-1.00267	.50267	-.664	63	.509	