

## Verb-Noun Collocations in Spoken Discourse of Iranian EFL Learners

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**Abstract:** *As English speakers speak, they utilize not only grammatical rules but also collocations. Collocations are ready-made prefabricated chunks that are present in the memory of native speakers. Non-native speakers who would like to attain native-like fluency should pay attention to collocations in speaking so that they might not produce sentences that seem odd to native speakers. The current study aims to discover the use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse of English among Iranian college students from one academic year to the next in Iran. To gauge the use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse, there was a task of 60-minutes of telling stories based on a series of six pictures whereby for each picture, three verb-noun collocations were gauged. The results of the statistical analysis of ANOVA for the research question denoted that there was a significant difference in the use of lexical verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse both between and within the four academic years. The results of a post hoc multiple comparison tests verified that the means are significantly different between the first year and the third and fourth years, between the second and the fourth, and between the third and the fourth academic year that designate considerable growth in the use of verb-noun collocations. The essential inference can be the college students are able to implement verb-noun collocations in productive skill of speaking.*

**Keywords:** *Language proficiency, Verb-noun collocation, Spoken discourse, Iranian EFL learners*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

A collocation includes two words that are frequently joined concurrently in the memory of native speakers in both written and spoken discourse. For instance, *kick a ball* and *shoot a ball* are two frequently employed word combinations which are considered as collocations. The noun *ball* repeatedly comes together with the verbs *kick* and *shoot*. Whilst considering utilizing a word means “knowing its collocations” (Lewis, 2000; Nation, 2001; Nation & Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 2008a, 2008b), many researchers insist that collocational knowledge is a significant matter that is a factor in the dissimilarities between foreign language learners and native speakers (Aston, 1995; Fillmore, 1979; Kjellmer, 1991; Pawley & Syder, 1983). Overall scholars believe that if EFL learners cannot use collocations accurately, it will be a main indicator of foreignness (McArthur, 1992; McCarthy, 1990; Nattinger, 1980; Wu, 1996). Various researchers (Fontenelle, 1994; Herbst, 1996; Lennon, 1998; Moon, 1998) also claim that to get overall language proficiency, language learners should achieve collocational competence (Alsakran, 2011; Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Schmidt, 1997; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2010; McCarthy, 1984; Shehata, 2008). The strongest viewpoint, however, is that collocations are a crucial constituent in the process of second/foreign language acquisition (Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006; Lewis, 1997, 2000; Liao, 2010; Liu, 2010; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Zhang, 1993).

Native speakers habitually employ collocations whether fixed or flexible (Prodromou, 2003). It is considered that the automation of collocation aids native speakers employ “chunks” of language that are ready-made to convey their messages fluently. Second language learners make non-native errors when generating utterances because they do not have collocational knowledge. To have native like fluency and competence, second language learners should know the ability to understand and to produce collocations as unanalysed chunks is a significant part of language learning.

There are many English collocations, which are stored in the native speakers’ memory; therefore, they are able to combine words together in a numerous ways to produce appropriate collocations in every situation. Generally, native speakers use collocations intuitively and they choose collocations unconsciously without resorting to vocabulary memory. However, English words are not represented as chunks of language in the non-native speakers’ memory. Therefore, inappropriate collocations are often produced by most non-native speakers (Sung, 2003).

The present study regards correct production of verb-noun collocations as a challenging attribute of second language learning and as a vital element of communicative competence. Collocations are a sub-category of formulaic expressions which are widespread in language discourse and in the speech of native speakers. For instance, Erman and Warren (2000) found that formulaic language constructs 58.6% of the spoken English discourse and 52.3% of the written English discourse which they analysed. Howarth (1998) and Shehata (2008) also maintained that formulaic language creates one-third to one-half of the language used in spoken discourse. The usage of collocations in language are believed to assist learning a second language. This phenomenon is realised in a study by Forster (2001) where it was documented that a substantial amount in unplanned speech of non-native speakers is non-formulaic language.

Collocations may also be important in furthering effective communication (Hussein, 1990). Kjellmer (1991) states that the more correctly language learners can use collocations, the fewer pauses and hesitations they make through stretched chunks of discourse. This is the reason why it is essential for language learners to be proficient in collocations, so that their speech becomes natural and is comprehended by native speakers. Otherwise, their speech is not natural and cannot be understood by native speakers. In addition, Lennon (1998) believes that language learners can utter their thoughts in different ways when they know collocations.

Similarly, Benson, Benson, and Ison (1997) have declared that language learners should learn how words collocate with each other in order to use a language with native-like accuracy and fluency in both spoken discourse. Hence, their vocabulary and overall language proficiency level expands as their collocational knowledge expands. Thus, many investigators (e.g. Alsakran, 2011; Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Schmidt, 1997; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2010; McCarthy, 1984; Shehata, 2008) declared that collocational knowledge is the essence of language knowledge. This idea has profound implications on second language acquisition (SLA); and towards researchers who try to examine the use of collocations in the spoken discourse of second or foreign language learners as an indication of their communicative competence and language fluency.

There are not any definite collocation rules to acquire, thus, it has become the main reason why collocation has become one of the more difficult features in second language learning for students of English. The native English speaker intuitively knows where and when to use the correct collocation rooted in his lifetime’s practice of using words in language chunks. Shehata (2008) notes that the foreign language learner possesses less experience and might often collocate words in such a manner as to seem peculiar to native speakers. There is, therefore, a need for formal educational systems to devise a plan on making the instinctive knowledge of collocations more explicit and available to non-native speakers.

In the context of a foreign language environment such as Iran, collocational knowledge can be useful because it helps the students improve their style of written and spoken discourse and helps their speech and writing sound more natural. The Iranian educational system at the university level, however, does not give enough attention to collocations because the main emphasis is on all four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. Explicit learning of collocations may, therefore, be a means to better language proficiency for Iranian students at all levels of education.

It can be concluded that the knowledge and use of collocations is a key issue in language fluency. Ellis (1996) regards collocations as a vital part of L2 lexical development. In contrast, collocational errors are the most common errors of all errors that L2 learners make (Gitsaki, 1999). English as second language (ESL) students face great problems when the whole chunk is not stored in their memory properly. Their limited use of lexical collocations results in their speech being regarded as foreign. To attain communicative competence, EFL students should have a command of collocations among other language skills.

### 2. SPOKEN DISCOURSE

In this section, collocations in spoken discourse are explained. Discourse is the study of language independently of the sentence. In fact, it concerns studying longer texts in the specific situation they occur in (Carter & Nunan, 2001). Salkie (1995) describes discourse as a piece of language which may be longer than one sentence and is essentially about how sentences merge to form texts. Spoken discourse includes mostly phrases and incomplete sentences, and includes many pauses and hesitations. Moreover, spoken discourse refers to reciprocal types of discourse in which the sender can check reception and adjust to it. It is often less planned and sometimes less coherent, where even grunts, stutters or pauses might be meaningful. According to Fillmore (1979), collocations are one of the sources of individual fluency. Grammatical and lexical collocations are present in the speech of native speakers, and they are even more frequent in spoken language than written language (Robinson, 2001).

Additionally, the great importance of collocation is highlighted in the work of many linguistics and second language researchers. Many researchers declare that collocational knowledge is the prerequisite for the native speakers to produce natural and fluent language discourse (Ellis, 1996; Prodromou, 2003), and it is one of the important components of foreign language learners' competence (McCarthy, 1990). Lewis (1997a) supports this idea and claims that collocations will help learners to communicate more efficiently, because they have "the ability to say more of what they want to say with the limited language resources at their disposal" (p. 33), and his opinions are echoed by many others in related fields. To observe the actual use of collocations, researchers studied a learners' corpus as a major source of evidence. They believe that the corpus approach is more appropriate for examining learner language (Granger, 1998) as a collection of corpus lets them get into language in context. As a result, the corpus method is utilised to study the use of collocations in spoken. Nesselhauf (2005) studied the use of collocations involving verbs in a learner corpus of native speakers of German. Nattinger (1980) also affirms that language production includes "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). Institutionalised units (lexical phrases and collocations) also serve communicative needs and enable individuals to reuse and create the units. Cowie (1988) supports this view and indicates that stability and creativity of institutionalised units are complementary and interactive factors in vocabulary' use and suggests vocabulary teaching should keep a balance between lexical phrases and collocations.

Many researchers discussed the relationship between collocations and the productive language, especially writing (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Farghal & Al-Hamly, 2007; Hsu, 2002; Zhang, 1993). Moving away from EFL learners' writing skill, Sung (2003) focused on the possible connection between collocations and speaking fluency. She explored EFL students' knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in their relation to speaking fluency. In her experiment, 24 native and 72 non-native speakers took two tests: a collocation test and a Speaking Test. The collocation test assessed the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations while the Speaking Test elicited the subjects' use of lexical collocations and measured their speaking fluency. Her findings indicated that a significantly strong correlation existed between the EFL students' knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking fluency. Later on, Sung assumed that, "... knowledge of lexical collocations is a more significant indicator of degree of speaking proficiency than other factors such as the use of lexical collocations or length of stay in the U.S." (p. v).

Unlike the previous studies, Hsu (2002) performed an experiment to study lexical collocations in the classroom situation and found out that emphasising lexical collocations led to students learning new collocations in the written and spoken discourse. It also assisted them to use them in new and creative ways. My study is different from them because I used cross-sectional

quantitative qualitative design. The use of verb-noun collocations in spoken of Iranian foreign language learners in different academic years – freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior- was measured by and speaking about a series of six picture tasks.

The aim of this study is to discover the use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse of EFL learners in Iran. I hope that the study may contribute to a better understanding about the role of verb-noun collocation instruction in the development and enhancement of spoken discourse in EFL situations.

### **3. THE CURRENT STUDY**

The current study is a section of my PhD thesis; first, the relationship between language proficiency and collocational competence was estimated. The results of the statistical analyses proved that there was a high positive relationship between collocational competence and general language proficiency of learners (Ebrahimi-Bazzaz, Samad, Ismi, and Nooreen, 2012). Second, the relationship between verb-noun collocation proficiency and academic years was calculated. The results of ANOVA demonstrated there was variability in the verb-noun collocations proficiency within each academic year and between the four academic years. The results of a post hoc multiple comparison tests verified that the means were significantly different between the first year and the third and fourth years, and between the third and the fourth academic year (Ebrahimi-Bazzaz, Samad, Ismi, and Nooreen, 2014). Third, the use of verb-noun collocations in written discourse of Iranian learners were measured. The results of the statistical analysis of ANOVA specified that there was a significant difference in the use of lexical verb-noun collocations in written discourse both between and within the four academic years. The results of a post hoc multiple comparison tests verified that the means are significantly different between the first year and the third and fourth years, between the second and the fourth, and between the third and the fourth academic year which indicate substantial development in verb-noun collocation proficiency (Ebrahimi-Bazzaz, Samad, Ismi, and Nooreen, 2015, forthcoming).

The review of literature displayed that there was a requirement to accomplish research on the employing verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse of Iranian EFL students. Nevertheless, a few research focused on the growth and connection between verb-noun collocations and the productive language, especially speaking Birjandi and Ahangari (2008); Hsu and Chiu (2008) and Sung (2003).

In this paper, verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse of Iranian EFL learners was argued. The current study also appends and develops those previous studies but attempts to fill the gap by discovering the use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse of English among Iranian college students from one academic year to the next in Iran. It raises the following research questions:

- Is there a significant difference in the correct use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse among Iranian EFL students from one academic year to the next?

### **4. METHOD**

#### **4.1. Participants**

There were 212 participants in this study. They were four groups of English major students in an English Department in a university in Tehran in April 2010. They were selected from the second term of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. There were 44 males and 168 females who were 18-35 at the time of the study. All of them were native speakers of Persian. In the test session, a demographic questionnaire, and a test of telling story were administered to students. The research design utilised in this study was a Cross-sectional design and comprised the data was collected quantitatively. Nonetheless, the foremost short coming in the Cross-sectional design, which encompasses quantitative data, is the lack of the randomised sampling process and the researcher utilises the four intact groups of learners. This inadequacy was taken care by selecting groups through cluster sampling from the second terms of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior to gather the data.

Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table was utilised to compute identical sample sizes in all cases where the researcher converts the t value used based on population size and knows the

populations. Based on this formula, the population of this study was 480 and the needed sample size of the study was established as two hundred fourteen, but as in most of research, 10% is added to that number in case some students would not like to participate in the study. Therefore, two hundred thirty five students were selected from four intact groups of male and female students. However, some students withdrew from the experiment in the test session; two hundred and twelve students finished the test. All groups were selected through cluster sampling from the second term of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years. Therefore, participants in the present study belonged to four groups which represent each academic level. Group 1 comprised fifty-one students in the second term of their freshmen year. Group 2 included forty-seven students in the second term of their sophomore year, Group 3 consisted of sixty-four students in the second term of their junior year, and Group 4 comprised of fifty students from the second term of their senior year. All respondents were Iranian nationals and spoke Persian as their mother tongue.

**4.2. Instruments**

The instruments of this study were a demographic questionnaire and a test of speaking in which students told six stories in 20 minutes in the language laboratory. Each story was based on a picture, but the nouns were not provided to see if the participants can use verb-noun collocations correctly.

**4.3. Data Analysis**

In order to examine the research question, three statistical measures were used. First, descriptive statistics of all years were used to show the means, the standard deviations, the minimum and the maximum scores of each of the four groups on the Speaking Test in which students tell six stories about a series of six pictures to find the general distribution of the data in the spoken discourse. Second, to investigate the between-group and within-group differences, a One-Way Analysis of Variance, ANOVA, was used. Third, after the results of the One-Way ANOVA were obtained, a post hoc multiple comparison test was performed to determine which means were significantly different from each other.

The results of descriptive statistical analysis show that there is an increase in the students' scores in the written discourse from one year to the next. The summary of the differences among the four academic years for written discourse are depicted in Table 1 below.

**Table1.** *Summary Table of the Differences among the Four Academic Years in Spoken Discourse*

	N	M	SD	SE	95% CIM		Min	Max
					LB	UB		
First	51	12.25	1.99	0.28	11.69	12.82	10.00	17.00
Second	47	13.17	1.71	0.25	12.66	13.67	10.00	16.00
Third	64	14.06	1.68	0.22	13.64	14.48	11.00	17.00
Fourth	50	14.64	1.77	0.25	14.13	15.14	10.00	17.00
Total	212	13.56	1.99	0.14	13.29	13.83	10.00	17.00

Table 1 shows noticeable differences among the mean scores of the four academic years for speaking. Such differences are shown to be greater between the first and the fourth years than the second and the third years. In the Speaking Test, the first year students' scores ranged from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 17, with a mean score of 12.25. The second level students' scores also ranged from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 16, with a mean score of 13.2 indicating a moderate increase from the first to the second academic year; nevertheless, the third year students' scores showed a moderate increase as compared to the first and second year students' scores. That is, their scores ranged between a low of 11 and a high of 17, with a mean score of 14.06 and a standard deviation of 1.69. The fourth year students' mean scores have not risen much in comparison to the third year students' in speaking scores, their scores ranged between a low of 10 and a high of 17; with a mean score of 14.64 and a standard deviation of 1.27, indicating the lowest increase as compared to the first, second, and third year students. Looking at the confidence intervals of means for speaking; nevertheless, it can be seen that differences are less noticeable, as shown by the standard deviations of 2, 1.71, 1.69, and 1.77 in speaking for academic year of 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

In brief, although there are overall differences throughout the four years, the magnitude of such differences between certain groups are not the same. That is, there is a significant difference in students' performance on the speaking task, as shown by their mean scores, as students pass the first year, with the difference of 1.05 for speaking. However, the difference between the performances of the fourth level students is the lowest as compared to that between the first, second and the third year students. In other words, the performance of students in the four academic years can be described as if students have improved their use of collocations in a steady pace in spoken discourse as was observed in spoken discourse.

To measure the use of lexical verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse, a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used. Before considering ANOVA, the homogeneity of variance of four groups was calculated by Levene's test to observe whether the variance in scores is the same for each of the four groups. The observed value of 0.457 for spoken discourse is greater than 0.05; therefore, the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. It indicates the variances of four groups in spoken discourse is equal, hence ANOVA can be employed.

The results of the One-Way ANOVA showed there is variability in the use of verb-noun collocations within each academic year and between the four academic years. Table 2 shows the between-group and within-group variability in the use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse.

**Table2.** One-Way Analysis of Variance for the Use of Collocations in Spoken Discourse

Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	168.481	56.160	17.498	0.000
Within Groups	667.595	3.210		
Total	836.075	211		

**Note:** Difference is significant at the 0.05 level

The results of the One-Way ANOVA, as shown in Table 2, clearly indicates that there was a significant difference in the use of lexical verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse both between and within the four academic years,  $F(3,208) = 17.498$  at the  $p < 0.0001$  level which is much less than the level of 0.05 for spoken discourse.

A post hoc multiple comparison tests was carried out by using Turkey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) after the One-Way ANOVA. It was employed in order to find out which pairs of means were significantly different from each other. Table 3 shows the multiple comparisons of the means of the four academic years in spoken discourse.

**Table3.** Multiple Comparisons of the Means of the Four Academic Years in the Use of Collocations in Spoken Discourse

(I) grade	(J) grade	MD (I-J)	SE	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					LB	UB
First	Second	.92	.362	0.059	-1.8535	.0229
	Third	-1.81*	.336	0.000	-2.6785	-.9367
	Fourth	-2.39*	.356	0.000	-3.3085	-1.4617
Second	Third	-.892*	.34415	0.050	-1.7836	-.0010
	Fourth	-1.470*	.36398	0.000	-2.4125	-.5271
Third	Fourth	-.578	.33814	0.322	-1.4533	.2983

\*.The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 above shows that the means are significantly different when first year is compared with the third and fourth years in spoken discourse at  $p < 0.0001$ . It signifies students improved significantly in their use of collocations in spoken discourse through their academic years.

For the second year and the third year students, there is a significant difference in the spoken discourse at  $p = 0.050$ . There are also significant differences between the mean score of second year and the fourth year students in the spoken discourse, as shown by significant level  $p = 0.0001$ . However, there is no significant difference in the mean score of third and fourth year in the spoken discourse.

Thus, the findings show that there are statistical differences in the mean score of the four groups in spoken discourse; however, there is no significant difference between the first and the second, and the third and the fourth years in spoken discourse. Even though, there is an improvement in the score from one academic year to the next, these improvements have not been found to be statistically significant. Nonetheless, significant values are gained when students' scores in an academic year are compared to scores attained by students two or more years below them. These differences are the most prominent if the first and the fourth years are compared in spoken discourse. Based on these findings, such statistical differences obviously represent the increase in students' use of collocations; therefore, the fourth null hypothesis of the present study is rejected.

The results in spoken discourse are in line with the findings of Sung (2003) who focussed on the possible connection between collocations and speaking fluency and found a correlation between EFL students' knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in their relation to speaking fluency. Several other studies' findings also concur with the findings of current research such as Hsu and Chiu (2008) whose results showed that there are correlations between the subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency, between their use of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency. There is also correlation between their knowledge of lexical collocations and their use of lexical collocations. Birjandi and Ahangari (2008) focused on the ability EFL learners have to utilise their L2 knowledge in language production in Iran and found that there were significant differences in subjects' oral discourse in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity when tasks are repeated.

In brief, the results obtained in this study suggests that the acquisition of collocations and students' use of collocations, which was found by students' performance on the series of six pictures for spoken discourse, was improved through their four academic years. The results also indicate that the use of verb-noun collocations may be very closely associated with speaking fluency.

### 5. DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

The results from one-way ANOVA for the research question exposed that there were statistical differences in the mean score of the four groups in spoken discourse. Subsequently, a post hoc test was exploited to discover which pairs of means were significantly different from each other. The results of the statistical analyses of the present study indicated that there was a difference among the four academic years tested. Students' scores in speaking tasks demonstrated that there was a statistically significant mean difference between the first and the fourth years in spoken discourse, followed by a minimal mean difference between the second and the third years in spoken discourse; however, the lowest difference was in the third and fourth years. The results indicate students' verb-noun collocational knowledge has developed through their academic years in university. The result in spoken discourse is consistent with the findings of Birjandi and Ahangari (2008), Hsu and Chiu (2008), and Sung (2003).

The results of research question puts forward at least two implications to the present literature on collocations. The first implication is regarding the use of academic year as an independent variable to measure subjects' use of collocations in spoken discourse. It also shows academic year can be an adequate measure of subjects' use of collocations in spoken discourse. The second implication of the current study the use of verb-noun collocations is an indicator of speaking fluency.

The current study has the following contributions. The first contribution of this study is it adds to the very few collocational studies that have been done in Iran and is the first to examine the use of collocations in spoken discourse of EFL learners in Iran. The second contribution provides empirical data about how lexical collocations are actually used in spoken discourse of EFL learners. Collocations have so far been viewed as a difficult linguistic aspect of English for EFL/ESL learners. The third contribution of the study shows that learners are able to use lexical collocations correctly to tell stories. Finally, the results show that students use more collocations correctly in their fourth academic years than the first year which indicates that more exposure to language leads to greater use of collocations.

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