THE IMPACT OF EXPLICIT TEACHING OF VERB COLLOCATIONS ON IMPROVING UPPER-INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILL

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Abstract:
Although impeccable development of collocation is of critical concern to second language acquisition, EFL learners may find it excessively demanding to deal. Therefore, the present study investigated the impact of teaching verb collocation as an assimilated element of collocations on improving Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing ability via explicit teaching as the leading method. Results of numerous studies have shown learners' understanding of collocations may highly depend on their levels of English language. In this study, first, 100 upper-intermediate candidates have been invited to meet the required standards accordingly. Then 40 participants were selected by conducting an Oxford Placement Test. A quasi-experimental design was applied with the steps of inquiring about the outcome, a pretest and subsequently a posttest administered based on MELAB paper-based writing test to assess their competence by the standards of the MELAB writing rating scale. The findings acknowledged the problematic elements and suggested rational solutions which may have further implications for syllabus designers, learners, and teachers principally.

Keywords: explicit teaching, verb-collocation, writing skill

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1. Introduction

Writing skill is critical for diverse reasons and in different types of fields. In other words, nearly all professions have required some forms of writing in their working criterion. To illustrate, good writing is a ticket to greater academic achievement. It is undeniably difficult for EFL learners to perform native-like in writing. According to Rashid, Ye, Hui, Li and Shunting (2022), writing is a complicated cognitive activity involving many processes and techniques. To come up with the challenges of the written products, English language learners at different levels, especially at high intermediate levels, rely on their prior knowledge of words and grammatical structures, overlooking the socio-cultural factors involved in creating a written text.

One aspect of writing that poses difficulties for EFL learners is the role of collocation. EFL learners usually try to learn the meaning and use of prepositions individually without paying sufficient attention to their collocational properties. The use of inaccurate collocation will have an impact on the readers' understanding of interpreting the writing (Handayani & Angelina, 2020). Mahvelati (2019) declared that the analysis of L2 learners' language production reveals that one of the major sources of errors is collocation-related, and this holds even for advanced learners. Not sticking to collocations' rules, undoubtedly, makes EFL learners deviate from native speakers' norms and consequently make sentences that may sound correct but odd.

Tungyai and Rakpa (2021) classified collocations into two main types; grammatical and lexical. They are semi-fixed expressions and are less flexible than fixed expressions that are rather frozen (Ariffin & Abdi, 2020). The co-occurrence is based on a regular basis, rather than being based on a random basis (Zarei & Khojasteh, 2021). For instance, we use *heavy rain* in a sentence but not *heavy sun*, or we apply *make* or *come to a decision*, but we do not use *do a decision*. So, *heavy rain* and *make a decision* are collocations and we say that *heavy* combines or *collocates* with *rain*. Thus, collocations, among many other factors, could play an important role in learners' writing improvement, leading to higher test or exam scores (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). Similarly, Saito (2020) recognized the value of collocations in speech assessment because collocations are perceived as comprehensible, appropriate language chunks produced by most high-level learners of English. One of the efficient ways to encourage manipulating collocations in writing is to teach them through the explicit method. Explicit teaching is an instructional strategy that considers a deliberative process of constructing explicit knowledge consciously. Veritably, that is a structured, systematic, and effective methodology that is rational for learning a new skill. Indeed, the explicit method is an unambiguous direct approach to teaching that includes both instructional design and delivery procedures used by teachers to meet the needs of their students and engage them in a noticeable, clearly articulated teaching process. Therefore, concerning the significance and complexity of the subject, the current study tried to find the answers to the following questions:

RQ1: Does explicit teaching of verb-collocations have any statistically significant effect on improving upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing skill?

RQ2: Is there any relationship between learners' level of English language proficiency and their attempts to use verb-noun collocations in writing?

2. Literature Review

Writing is a complicated process that involves several cognitive and metacognitive activities. The byzantine conventions of advanced academic writing in English are notoriously difficult for graduate students and junior scholars to gain control over (Jiang & Hyland, 2020). To illustrate, according to Sararit, Chumpavan and Al-batanieh (2020), writing is the most difficult skill for EFL students due to a number of complicated grammatical patterns, insufficient knowledge of vocabulary, and first language interference. A case in point, conveying a clear written message using appropriate words is a major challenge for Chinese EFL learners in their academic writing (Clark & Yu, 2020). However, the use of collocations has been confirmed as one of the most useful, yet troublesome language mechanics (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). The importance of collocations on one hand, and their challenging nature, on the other, made it a long-standing concern of many practitioners and researchers to find ways of facilitating their learning (Naserpour, Zarei & Esfandiari, 2020). Accordingly, as Pham (2022) mentioned, the mastery of collocations is considered part of communicative competence and an important indicator of EFL learners' language proficiency. One more example is associated with Iranian EFL learners; they usually write sentences that are grammatically correct but lexically incorrect because they do not have any knowledge about collocations (Mousavi & Heidari Darani, 2018). Verb collocation together with nouns, adjectives, and adverbs are the splits of lexical collocation. As Zou (2019) acknowledged, more than half of the errors in writing belonged to verb-noun collocations and these errors can be attributed to factors such as L1 transfer and misuse of synonyms.

Over the past decade, there have been a growing number of empirical studies into learners' acquisition of verb-noun collocations in explicit instruction. Mahvelati (2019) said that positive results have been reported regarding explicit collocation instruction. Verb-noun collocations are problematic for learners, who have difficulties in choosing which English verb to combine with the noun in productive use (Snoder, 2018). In a study of Iranian EFL learners, Keshavarz and Taherian (2018) carried out a study to examine the effect of explicit instruction of collocations on EFL learners' language proficiency and found out that raising students' awareness of collocations through explicit method resulted in improvement in language proficiency. According to Pham (2022), EFL students, even those at an advanced level, tend to make the most errors in verb-noun collocations in comparison with other types. Moreover, to investigate the frequency of unacceptable collocations of Persian EFL learners, the study by Saliminejad and Karimkhanlooei (2018) unveiled that the most common errors in collocation belonged to verb collocations. Since explicit learning is defined as "*conscious awareness and intention to*

learn", it is, therefore, more effective for teachers to teach incongruent (semantically unlike L1) collocations through explicit methods (Khantiwong & Thienthong, 2022). Thus, explicit teaching is regarded as the most genuine procedure dealing with collocations instruction, verb-collocation in particular which is being utilized in this method.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design
This study favored the quasi-experimental design based on a pretest and a posttest scheme. An Oxford Placements Test (OPT) was administered to the preliminary population based on OPT direction. The MELAB paper-based test (The Michigan English Language Assessment Battery, which evaluates advanced-level English language competence of adult non-native speakers of English) was taken as a pretest to measure the learners' initial knowledge of collocation in writing and as a posttest to assess the outcome as well. Ultimately, the quantitative analysis of the data was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science application (SPSS).

3.2. Participants
First 100 language learners at the upper-intermediate level of language proficiency (B2 level in CEFR) from Ariana Language Institute in Bandar Anzali, Iran took part as the primary participants of this study. They were all male, aged from 19 to 24 with the native language of Persian. To homogenize them in terms of their writing proficiency, they were tested using an OPT and were later reduced into 40 participants of the study.

3.3. Materials
The materials of this study comprised of four parts:
1) Materials for proficiency test: an OPT was administered to 100 learners.
2) Materials for pretest and posttest: MELAB paper-based writing test consisted of two sets of questions. The first set of which included two questions, and the participants selected one of them preferably as the pretest and the second set contained two questions and they also selected one of them as the posttest.
3) Materials for treatment: the participants explicitly worked on verb collocation by the teacher for eight weeks of training, two sessions in a week, and each session took one hour and a half working on "Paragraph Development: A Guide for Students of English by Arnaudet and Barrett (1990).
4) Finally, the data were analyzed via "Pearson Correlation Coefficient" through the SPSS software program.

3.4. Methods of analyzing data
Finally, the data were analyzed to determine the effect of explicit teaching of verb collocations on improving Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing ability.

- T-test between the scores of the posttest of two groups.
- The scores of the pretest and the posttest were based on MELAB paper-based objective scoring system.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis of the data

Table 1 delineates the findings of group statistics for the OPT scores that were administered to select homogeneous participants at upper-intermediate level concerning their foreign language proficiency.

Table 1: Statistics for OPT

Statistics		
OPT scores		
N	Valid	100
	Missing	0
Mean		41.9847
Median		42.0000
Mode		36.00
Std. Deviation		10.79172
Variance		116.461
Skewness		**-.193**
Std. Error of Skewness		.212
Kurtosis		**-1.134**
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.420
Range		41.00
Minimum		18.00
Maximum		59.00
Sum		5500.00

The first step in analyzing data descriptively was to determine whether the existing variables, as shown in Table 2, were normal.

Table 2: Tests of Normality

VAR00004	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]				Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Experimental group	Pretest experimental	.155	20	.200*	.934	20	.185
	Posttest experimental	.148	20	.200*	.932	20	.170

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

To certify that the data gathered were normal, a Kolmogorov-Smirnova was computed. The obtained number of the treatment group was sig = 0.200 > 0.05 which was larger than 0.05 and proved the normality of the data.

Table 3 shows the scores of the groups on their pretest performance. As it is regarded, the experimental group consisted of 20 participants. The mean of the scores

equaled 71.02 while the standard deviation of scores was computed as 13.34. Compared to the mean score of the control group which equaled 70.2, there was not any statistically significant difference in terms of the group's mean score on the pretest performance. However, the standard deviation of the scores of the control group was 15.666. This could imply that the scores of the control group were more scattered and had less consistency than those of the experimental group.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the groups on the pretest

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Experimental	20	71.02	13.34
	Control	20	70.2	15.666

Table 4 illustrates the mean and standard deviation of the scores on the post-test performance for both groups. The experimental group's scores mean was 73.8 which was slightly improved after the treatment while the mean score of the control group equaled 68.35 which did not indicate any improvement in terms of their post-test performance. Regarding the standard deviation of the scores, the experimental group scores showed more consistency with the calculated SD of 13.181. On the other hand, the control group's scores had a SD of 15.885 which indicated that the scores were less homogenized. Generally speaking, the experimental group performed more homogenously in both pretest and posttest.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for the groups on the posttest

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Experimental	20	73.8	13.181
	Control	20	68.35	15.885

4.2. Inferential analysis of the data

Due to obtaining information based on inferential analysis, a t-test was administered to compare the performance of the two groups in the post-test administration. The post-test results of the two groups were compared through an independent-sample t-test statistical procedure. Then, the collected data were tabulated to be analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 21. The first part of Table 5 shows the Levene's test which is used to determine the equality of the variances. Accordingly, the significance level came to .129 which is larger than 0.05. This confirms the equality of the variances. The mean difference equaled -5.450. The t-test section of Table 5 shows that the significance level equaled .245. This amount is larger than the critical value (0.05), which holds that explicit teaching of verb collocation has no effect on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The data are summarized as follows:

Sig = .245 < 0.05 = α

Table 5: T-test for the experimental and control groups' posttests

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal Variances Assumed	2.413	.129	-1.181	38	.245	-5.450	4.616	-14.794	3.894
Equal Variances not Assumed			-1.181	36.750	.245	-5.450	4.616	-14.804	3.904

5. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

Unlike some previous studies which taught collocation explicitly through drills and exercises, this study included teaching collocations explicitly by incorporating them into contextualized activities. The result of the study suggests that the use of explicit instruction aids L2 learners in acquiring collocations slightly. In this regard, the findings are in line with some other studies such as Mahvelati (2019) that also reported positive results in terms of explicit collocation instruction plus Keshavarz and Taherian (2018) that found out that increasing students' awareness of collocations via explicit method led to improvement in language proficiency.

Paying particular notice, basically to the following points might be meticulously practical to enhance students' efficiency and better comprehension of collocations to be anticipated. First, teaching collocations from the least to the most difficult to encourage noticing and consciousness-raising process. Second, making use of a lexical dictionary or further genuine sources are useful to maintain the collocations correctly. Third, teaching the steps and procedures of noticing and noting collocations, and giving EFL learners some compelling feedback on the use of collocations in their writing. And fourth, utilizing a mixture of both implicit and explicit methods of teaching collocations rather than generalizing only one.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of explicit instruction of verb-collocations on intermediate (B2 level in CEFR) EFL learners' writing ability and the findings provided pedagogical significance for curriculum developers, syllabus designers besides researchers of interlanguage and cross-linguistic fields remarkably. Teaching of verb-collocation should be carefully planned and designed to ensure raising students' awareness of collocations significance in written discourse since it is a delicate and productive process that requires a considerable level of precision and competence though. However, the outcome of the present study proved that the explicit method

solitarily is not always beneficial in teaching collocations linked to improving writing. Although, it is considered to get the most promising results in this category so far, the optimum method should be chosen according to some factors, including learners' proficiency and prior level of knowledge, individual characteristics (e.g. cognitive style), skill and the type of collocation in which needed to be worked on. Therefore, continuous reframing of the policies through shifting methods to obtain the most suited option is advised. To sum up, further researches might explore the same independent variable besides implicit teaching to measure students' performance and competence in writing skill.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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