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Developing Collocational Competence in EFL Classes: Evidence of Nativeness in Algerian Intermediate Learners'Corpus

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Abstract: *No wonder that knowledge of how words pair in L2 has been a missing part in many EFL classes and a peripheral element in many syllabi in Algeria. Virtually, many of the current teaching practices still seek to focus learners' attention on the role of grammar in the acquisition process under the assumption that grammar has a generative power of language and learners can in turn produce L2 by mastering the different grammatical structures. This tendency resulted in considering lexis, mainly collocations, as subservient to grammar. As a result, learners' writing has become grammatically well-polished but replete with idiosyncratic wording due to lexical mistakes and deficiency in collocations. Hence, this paper aims at assessing the extent to which developing EFL learners'collocational competence through an explicit contrastive approach can help them produce native- like natural writing. To undertake this research, an experimental and control group of first year English majors were recruited. The former was taught collocations explicitly through a contrastive approach, while the latter was taught English with no focus on collocations. Data were collected from corpora produced by these students in pre and post-tests. Analysis of the findings indicates that pointing out to EFL learners the difference of collocational restrictions between L1 and the target language promotes this learners'collocational competence. Besides, downplaying grammatical mistakes and emphasizing collocational accuracy inside the classroom is very likely to result in learners producing strongly collocated words in their writing. In the light of these findings, the present research paper concludes with some pedagogical implications.*

Keys words*: Collocational competence, corpus, explicit teaching, natural writing, strong collocations.*

Résumé : *La connaissance de la façon dont les mots se couplent en L2 a été une partie manquante dans la plupart des classes d'EFL et un élément périphérique dans la plupart des programmes en Algérie. Pratiquement, la majorité des pratiques pédagogiques actuelles cherchent toujours à attirer l'attention des apprenants sur le rôle de la grammaire dans le processus d'acquisition sous l'hypothèse que la grammaire*

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a un pouvoir génératif du langage et que les apprenants peuvent produire L2 en maîtrisant les différentes structures grammaticales. Cette tendance a conduit à considérer les lexis, principalement les collocations, comme étant asservis à la grammaire. En conséquence, l'écriture des apprenants devient grammaticalement bien formée mais pleine de mots idiosyncratiques, à cause des erreurs lexicales et des problèmes dans les collocations. Cet article vise à évaluer le développement de la compétence collégiale des apprenants d'EFL à travers une approche contrastive explicite et comment ça peut les aider à produire une écriture naturelle de type natif. Pour effectuer cette recherche, un groupe expérimental et un groupe de contrôle des étudiants d'anglais en première année universitaire ont été recrutés. Le premier a été enseigné explicitement à travers une approche contrastive, tandis que le second a appris la langue de manière sans se concentrer sur les collocations. Les données ont été recueillies à partir des corpus produits par ces étudiants dans un pré et post-tests. L'analyse des résultats indique que la mise en exergue des différences entre L1 et L2 favorise la compétence des apprenants en collaboration. De plus, il est très probable que le fait de minimiser les erreurs grammaticales et se concentrer sur la précision de la collocation dans la classe risque fort d'entraîner les apprenants à produire des mots fortement associés dans leur écriture. En conséquence, cet article se termine par quelques implications pédagogiques.

***Mots clés**: Compétence lexicale, corpus-écriture naturelle, enseignement explicite, collocations idiomatique*

1. Introduction

In rebuttal to the idea that grammar is the backbone of language and without it only little can be expressed, Wilkins (1972) maintains "without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (as quoted in Lewis, 1997.p16). However, compared to individual vocabulary items collocation is more generative meaning wise. It is the tailor-made patterning where a group of words can fit together to add more to the power of language.

The prevalence of collocations in native-speakers use of language has underscored their importance in L2 acquisition. Regrettably, the importance of grammatical knowledge in the process of second language acquisition has always secured a lion's share in most instructional programs and school curricula. Despite the fact that ineffective decoding of messages may stem from poor knowledge of grammar, poor knowledge of collocations is likely to result in a total failure to make sense of conveyed messages.

Deficiency in the use of collocations, mainly in writing, can result in undermined fluency as it can also adversely affect the linguistic felicities that EFL learners are expected to display in order to achieve the desired effect on their readers. Hence, the motive behind undertaking this research is to seek answers to the following questions: does raising learners' awareness of the generative power of collocations help them become less independent on grammar to produce meaning in L2? Can improving learners'collocational competence by a contrastive approach help them produce strong collocations in their writing? In the light of these questions, we assume that pointing out to EFL learners the fact that lexical mistakes matter more than grammatical ones in the course of self-expression is a productive classroom technique.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of collocation and collocational competence

Because of their vital importance in language studies, collocations are commonly defined as a behavior of two or more words to occur together frequently and regularly in a particular context (Durrant, 2009). Similarly, Wray (2002) includes the notion of collocation in her definition of formulaic sequences. She points out that collocations are

ready-made phrases that are stored and recalled from one's memory to be used as wholes and which cannot be generated or analyzed by grammar rules. According to Oxford Collocation Dictionary (8th edition), the term collocation is defined as "the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing" (McIntosh, Francis, & Poole, 2009, p.V). Lewis (2000) illustrates the notion of collocation by showing the difference between the near synonyms *wound* and *injury*. For example, the word *wound* can collocate with the word *stab* to form the collocation *stab wound.* However, the word *injury* cannot combine with the word *stab* but instead it co-occurs with the word *internal* in the collocation *internal injury.*

From these definitions, it can be concluded that for a number of words to be labeled as a collocation they must not co-occur randomly as they cannot be invented from scratch since they are intrinsic to native-speakers' mental lexicon. Therefore, any created combination of words is very likely to sound anomalous if it does not match with the one that exists in the lexical repository of native speakers and which stems from their natural collocational competence. The latter was introduced by Hill (1999) who describes a collocationally competent user of language as the one who chooses the most appropriate collocations that sum up what he/she wishes to express at best rather than producing longer clumsy utterances. Shiri, Sadighi, Aziz and Nekoueizadeh (2017) emphasize that lack of collocational competence can be seen either in the limited number of collocations used by L2 learners or in the oddity of collocations such learners produce due to the negative effect of their mother tongue. For instance, an Arab learner of English would wrongly use the combination **expensive advice* instead of the correct collocation *valuable advice*. This is due to the fact that he/she may believe that natural word combinations (collocations) in Arabic are always similar to those in English (Mahmoud, 2005).

2.2. Weak collocations versus strong collocations

The classification of collocations according to the degree of fixedness can be narrowed down to two main categories. Strong collocations refer to a combination of two words in which the use of one word of the combination necessarily requires the presence of the other. In crude terms, a constituent element (collocate) of the combination can only co-occur with a very limited number of words. Such a category is characterized by high restriction in terms of putting words together. For instance, the word *mitigating* virtually co-occurs with the words *factors* or *circumstances.* The same thing also goes with the strong collocation *foot the bill* in which the verb *to foot* co-occurs only with the noun *bill*. Weak collocations, on the other hand, refer to the combination of words in which one of the constituent items can co-occur with a large number of other words.

It can be said that this kind of collocations is an open combination where there is little fixedness in terms of the range of items that combine with a given word. For example, the word *broad* can collocate with many words to form collocations such as *broad agreement, broad avenue, broad view, broad smile* and *broad accent* (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2008). Lewis (2000) classifies collocations along the same continuum of strength and stresses that weak collocations are the easiest kind for L2 learners to acquire. This is because any constituent element of a given collocation can be freely combined with other words which make a particular combination of words familiar to L2 learners.

Form the aforementioned classification of collocations, it can be noticed that the main difference between these types of natural word combinations lies in the fact that the meaning which weak collocations convey is either literal or semi-literal, whereas the meaning which strong collocations bear is very often metaphorical.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The subjects recruited for the purpose of this study are 60 first year university students at the Department of English in Chedli Benjdid University of El Tarf, Algeria. These participants speak Arabic as their mother tongue and English as a foreign language. Their age ranges from 18 to 33 years old. These EFL learners were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group with 30 participants in each. During the course of the experiment, the researcher himself taught these students and collected the necessary data from them.

3.2 Materials

To conduct this classroom experiment and adhere to the syllabus of the written expression module that is set by the department, collocations were integrated in the content of every class taught to both groups. However, with the experimental group the main objective of every class (beside covering the syllabus) is to immerse learners in activities that are meant to enrich their collocational knowledge and raise their awareness of the difference between the collocational nature of Arabic and English (e.g. identifying, comparing and contrasting, correcting miscollocations and using them in different contexts).

The control group, on the other hand, are focused on studying words in isolation and analyzing the different grammatical structures used in a given text (active/passive voice, types of sentences and tenses). Texts provided inside the classroom were taken from *Collocation in Use* by O'Dell and McCarthy (2008) and *Timesaver: Reading Lessons (intermediate)* by Grise Wood and Meyers (2002). These books were selected for this study due to the fact that the former is a rich source of collocation specifically designed to teach all kinds of lexical collocations while the latter is a textbook intended for intermediate learners (which is the case of our participants) to teach them the reading skills. Hence, it includes semi-authentic reading passages about topics of general interests that aid the comprehensibility of the input. Authentic material was also used in order to help learners sustain their level of motivation to interact with the input and process collocations effectively. Such material includes some excerpts of articles on world affairs taken from some popular news web sites, namely the BBC.

3.3. Method

The aim of this paper is to examine the combinatory strength of words produced in the writing of these EFL leaners after they have learnt or were taught collocations explicitly. To gather the required data, two corpora were compiled: a pre-test corpus and a post-test corpus. Each one consists of 60 compositions written by our participants in both groups. Thus, a total of 120 short essays (the equivalent of 47380 words) represented the sample of EFL learners' writings. Each participant was tasked with writing between

350–400-word compositions. The participants were not allowed to use any dictionary because it is very likely to affect the quality of their word choice. These subjects were given 90 minutes to do the task, i.e. the whole usual class time.

In both tests, the participants wrote on the same topic, i.e. they wrote a report on a crime to police. In order to ensure the needed control over the scope of their output, these learners were given some instructions to follow. In other words, they were provided with two pictures of an imaginary thief to describe as they narrate the event (see appendix). These pictures include no cultural content (specific cultural background) which might trigger different contextual interpretations on the part of the participants and consequently affect their word choice (the use of collocations).

Both corpora were compiled during the academic year (2017-2018). The first corpus was produced one week before the start of the experiment in the late October, whereas the second corpus was produced at the end of the experiment in April.

3.4 Procedure of Data Analysis

To examine learners'collocational competence in writing, the analysis of word combinations in the participants' corpus was limited to lexical collocations. In other words, grammatical collocations, those combinations whose constituent elements are joined together by a grammatical item, were not included in the analysis because they are beyond the scope of this study. Thus, the lexical collocations in question are: adjective + noun (e.g. heinous crime), verb + noun (e.g.to unlocks potential), noun + verb (e.g. war breaks out), noun + of + noun (e.g. a wealth of experience), adverb + verb (e.g. to solemnly swear) and adverb + adjective (e.g. cautiously optimistic). Despite the modest size of the corpus, we believe that by focusing on the analysis of these lexically categorized word combinations we will have a better understanding of learners' word choice since the main carrier of meaning is a lexical item of any class.

First of all, the extraction of collocations was done manually starting by identifying all lexical items used in the learners' corpora. Having different parts of speech on hand, we selected the patterns that correspond to the aforementioned kinds of word combinations for the analysis. We used the scores of mutual information (MI) to identify collocations by the degree of the collocability between any two sequenced content words in the corpora. According to the literature on L2 collocation, the MI of three is considered as a widely adopted threshold standard to identify collocations. Measurement of MI can be obtained from the British National Corpus. To ensure the reliability of this procedure, we used Oxford Collocation Dictionary (Edition 2009) to check the meaning of the determined collocations. After having identified collocations, we explored the varying degrees of the fixedness of these collocations. Therefore, we classified them over the scale of the strength of collocability. Differently put, we categorised learners' collocations into three sets according to the following MI data: weak collocations (MI ranges from 3-4), medium collocations (MI ranges from 5-6) and strong collocations (MI starting from 7 onwards).

4. Results and discussion

The examination of learners' corpora reveals a lot about their inclination in combining words to express themselves in writing. First of all, the corpus of learners that

we compiled at the beginning of the year (pre-test corpus) shows that the means (M=5.95/5.75) in both groups respectively are almost the same. Nearly six collocations were produced by every learner in each group. This number is small if we compare it with the average numbers of collocations used by these learners in the post-test corpus.

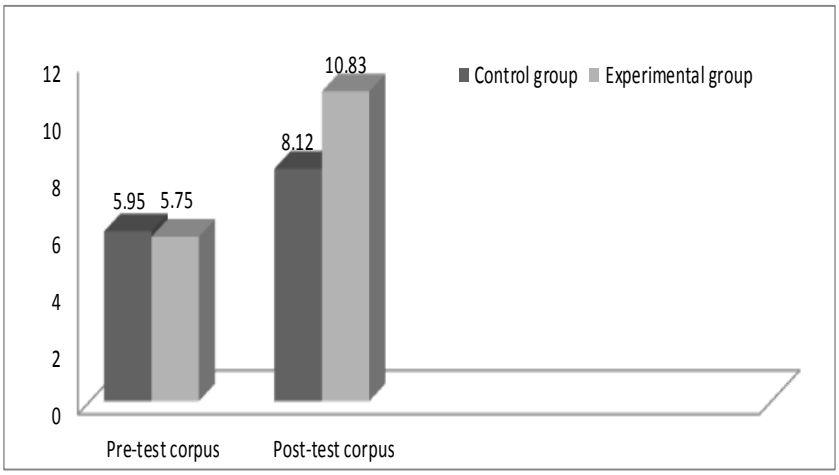


Figure.1. *Density of collocations in learners' corpora*

Generally, the mean (M=8.12) of the control group and the mean (M=10.82) of the experimental group indicate a remarkable improvement in learners'collocational knowledge which is reflected in the amount of collocations they produced in their post-test corpus. Such progress can be attributed to the fact that the use of collocation is affected by the increase of language proficiency. However, if we compare the performances of each group individually in both tests we can say that thanks to the extensive practice of the use of collocations in the experimental group, learners' production of collocation jumped from five (M=5.75) collocations in every essay to almost eleven (M=10.83) ones. This is consistent with what Paker and Ordem (2016) found regarding the increase of collocations in EFL learners output which is due to exposure and regular practice.

Further facts emerge if we look at the quality of collocations used by our subjects. It can be noticed in figure (2) that most of the participants' writings in the pre-test abound with weak collocations. Although there are similar amounts of considerable use of mid-strong collocations in the pre-test corpus of both groups (34.62% control group and 33.51% experimental group), almost half of students in both groups (41.62% control group and 39.10% experimental group) used weak collocations.

This tendency can be attributed to the fact that learners perceived language as a string of open class words that are joined together by different grammatical rules. Moreover, since weak collocations bear close resemblance to free combinations, where no collocational restrictions are put on word choice (e.g. *black car, black cat, black pen,* etc.), learners who have limited vocabulary find it easier to combine words freely. That is why as few as 24.86% and 27.37% of strong collocations are used by the control and experimental groups respectively in the pre-test corpus. A fact as such goes hand in hand

with Granger (1998) and Wray's (2002) claims which imply that L2 learners mistakenly depend on their mastery of grammar to sequence words in L2.

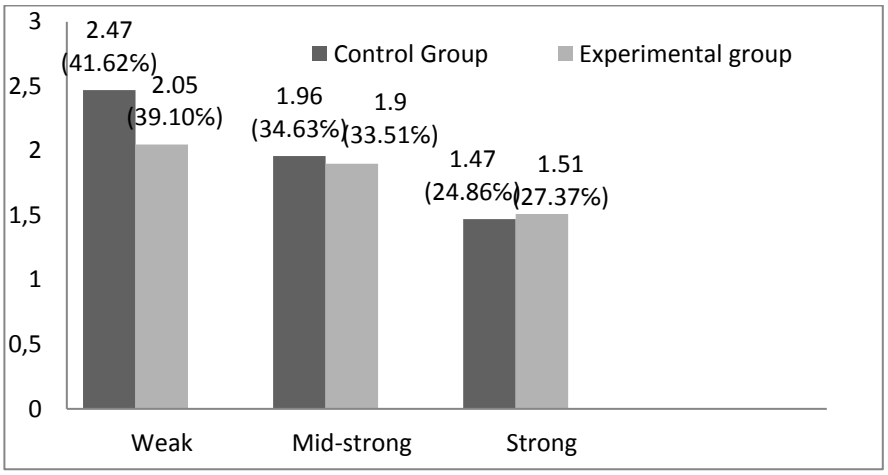


Figure.2. *Strength of word collocability in the pre-test corpus*

Unsurprisingly, the writings of learners in the post-test corpus demonstrate different realities. Clearnly, it can be noticed that in figure (3) there is a considerable improvement in the quality of produced collocations. As opposed to their performance in the pre-test, nearly half (48.36%) of learners in the experimental group proved to produce writing that features a predominant use of strong collocations. While the experimental group demonstrated a deceased use of weak collocations (21.06%) in the post-test corpus, their counterparts' corpus proved to sustain almost the same amount (39.01%) of weak collocations that they used in the pre-test.

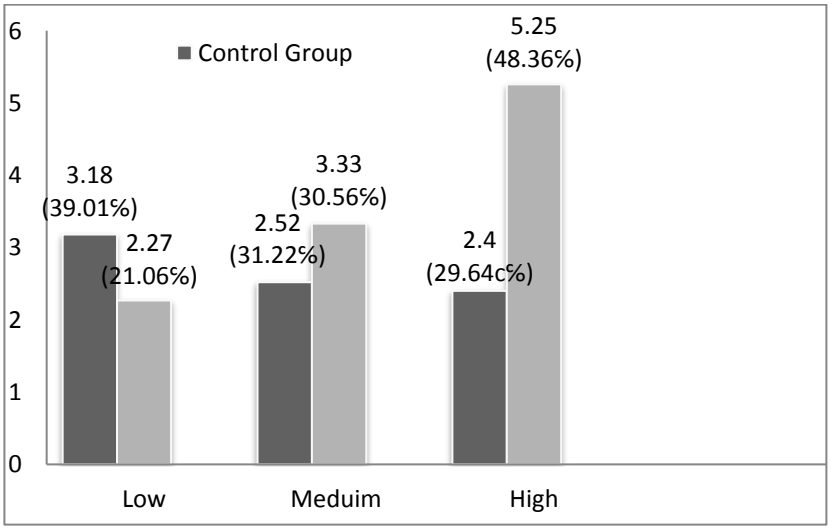


Figure.3. *Strenght of word collocability in the post-test corpus*

It is obvious from figure (2) and (3) that weak collocations in the control group's writing are still the predominant type of word association compared to the low use of mid-strong and, more importantly, strong collocations (21.06%). One explanation of this can be the continuous unawareness of the control group of the fact that the meaning of words in L2 is culturally determined and so are word parings. Despite the fact that the exposure to the target language that we provided to both groups inside the classroom was similar in terms of amount and duration, the control group used mostly the kind of collocations whose constituent elements have a literal meaning (e.g. *violent attack, do a crime*). In other words, they failed to notice the cultural restriction put on word choice, which is responsible for the degree of fixedness and figurativeness of strong collocations. In this respect, Lewis (2000) explains that strong collocations derive their non-literal meaning form the arbitrary nature of the target language, more precisely form what has been decided by cultural conventions and institutionalized accordingly. Therefore, helping learners become aware of the arbitrary nature of L2 lexis improves their acquisition of this kind of collocations.

Another point to consider is that it can be argued that the jump from the low use of strong collocations in the pre-test corpus to the high use of those in the post-test corpus of the experimental group can be accounted for in a number of reasons. The explicit instructional program may have improved learners' collocational knowledge and competence to identify the kinds of collocations whose meaning does not have a direct equivalent in L1. Put another way, learners' attention became more focused on expressing themselves accurately at a proper word choice level than at a sentence level.

In so doing, learners developed much interest in learning to use strong and fixed collocations and this attitude was reflected in their writing (e.g., *shrug his shoulders*, *police siren wails*, *footed the bill*, mitigating *factor).* Hence, the experimental group started writing in a more native-like way. It can also be argued that these findings are significant in the sense that they echo what Brashi (2009) and Nesselhauf (2003) emphasize concerning the importance of sensitizing learners to the difference between L1 and L2 collocations in order to increase their proficiency in writing. Furthermore, the explicit teaching of collocations accustomed learners to notice how words fit together in a particular unpredictable arbitrary way which helped them avoid combining words randomly and draw on less grammar to produce meaning.

This is in line with a study recently conducted by Chen (2017) where he reveals that learners can use strong collocation if they are trained to notice and identify this kind of collocations. Besides, the current study's results lend support to what Gablasova, Brezina, and McEnery (2017) recently found concerning the fact that since strong collocations are intrinsic to native speakers' mental lexicon (stored as wholes and cannot be generated from scratch by grammar), featuring them in L2 writing qualifies it as natural and native-like.

5. Conclusion

The acquisition of collocational competence of the target language can secure learners' access to the world of L2 community as it can also contribute tremendously to the communicative force of their writing. Our objective in this study is to examine the combinatory strength of words in the writing of learners in relation to an explicit contrastive teaching of collocations.

The findings of this inquiry proved that learners' writing became pithier and more natural and native-like as they relied more on using strongly collocated words than using a mere sequence of grammatically governed word combinations. In this respect, it can be concluded that managing to develop learners' collocational competence requires focusing their attention on the unique collocational restrictions that do not exist in their L1.

However, it is evident that though this study into collocations is based on a small-scale corpus analysis, the longitudinally compiled corpora may still be a rich and reliable source of data since tracking learners' progress of the target language use can reveal a lot about the acquisition process of a particular language form. In addition, although our target population are intermediate EFL learners who can only produce limited compositions, their production of this target language at different stages (pre and post-tests) can contribute to advance our understanding of the acquisition of L2 collocational competence. In turn, this lays the groundwork for future research to broaden our horizons on L2 phraseological competence in general.

Another thing that deserves our close attention is that although collocations can be approached syntactically in terms of the usual word order which can define the expected class of words in a sequence, strongly collocated words, as one of the main ingredients of native-speakers' use of language, are not governed by any grammatical rule. Hence pedagogy-wise, it is necessary to design a special syllabus oriented towards the teaching of strongly associated collocations that are very often different from those collocations in the learners' L1. It is also recommended that English departments had better integrate the teaching of collocations in general in the syllabus of grammar and written expression modules that are intended for EFL intermediate students. This contributes to yield better results in terms of the language proficiency such departments prepare their students for.

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Appendix

Imagine you were an eye-witness. You witnessed a street crime (robbery). A thief attacked and robbed a woman of her bag. You are going to help her by reporting that crime to a police station.

Step one: start your report by narrating the story of how the crime happened in that street (how the thief came? Where was that woman walking? How did the thief attack her? etc.)

Step two: try to describe the thief in the pictures below to help police identify and capture him.

