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The effect of delexicalization of common verbs on the collocational competence of Iranian EFL students

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Abstract

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

Keywords: delexicalisation, collocational competence, proficiency, common verbs, metalingual judgment test

1. Introduction

Among all aspects of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of collocations is of great importance and is considered as a prerequisite and indispensable component in the mental lexicon, which can heavily influences learners' achievement in language learning (Farghal and Obeidat, 1995; Ellis, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Islam, 2006). In addition, several researchers have pointed out the benefits of learning collocations, such as increasing learners' linguistic competence, enhancing their communicative competence, as well as gaining a native-like fluency (Nattiger, 1980; Berman and Eldaw, 1993; Howarth, 1998; Aghbar, 1990; Williams, 2002). Among many English collocation structures, verb-noun lexical collocations have been found to be particularly difficult for learners to acquire (Berman, 1990). However, few researchers have explored the difficulty that the learners may have with delexicalised verbs which are almost devoid of lexical meaning but bear syntactic information.

Bonelli (2000) refers to delexicalization as "The process through which a lexical item loses its original lexical value and often acquires other meanings and other functions within a larger unit" (P.229). Therefore, the process of delexicalization, as Bonelli defines, can be seen in many uses of common verbs; e.g., while the use of *have* in *have a bicycle* meaning 'possess' is lexical, the use of *have* in *have a bath* is delexicalized. It has been proposed that

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delexicalization poses a problem in developing IL and more specifically for the acquisition of common verbs. Therefore, it seems reasonable that in case of no through acquisition, fossilization will occur in students' IL. Slobin (1973, cited in Hakuta, 1988) introduces a set of *operating principles*, which are the mechanisms that a child uses in constructing grammar, and suggests that selecting clear language, in which meaning is simply recognizable, rather than unclear language, in which meaning is difficult to understand, is preferred by the learners. Therefore, it can be inferred that EFL learners would also face difficulty in the acquisition of delexicalised common verbs because of their lack of transparency. The Research questions of the study included:

1. Do Iranian EFL students recognize delexicalised collocations of common verbs in English which are possible in their L2 (*English*) but not in their L1 (*Persian*) as being acceptable?
2. Do Iranian EFL students recognize delexicalised collocations of common verbs in English which are possible in their L1 (*Persian*) but not in their L2 (*English*) as being not acceptable?
3. Is there any correlation between participants' level of proficiency and their judgments of type 1 (possible in English but not in Persian) collocations?
4. Is there any correlation between participants' level of proficiency and their judgments of type 2 (possible in Persian but not in English) collocations?

2. Methodology

A total of 45 students (14 male and 31 female) from Kashan University took part in the study. They were all English majors (including sophomore, junior, and senior students) and had studied English as a foreign language for at least seven years at the time of the study. Probability sampling (purposive sampling) was used to select the members of the sample. Since the purpose of the present study was checking comprehension of the participants in general and their collocational competence in particular and due to time restrictions, just the reading section of test of CPE was administered. This test was selected as Howarth (2004) refers to the importance of collocational competence in EFL and EAP course books and in exams such as Cambridge Proficiency in English or CPE.

2.1. Metalingual Judgment Test

In order to answer the first two research questions, a metalingual judgment test was used. Metalingual judgment tests have been widely used in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and are assumed to reflect the learners' linguistic competence. One methodological assumption underlying metalingual judgment test is related to what learners know: the implicit and/or explicit knowledge of L2 (Ellis, 1991). The judgment test used in the present study required participants to judge the acceptability of 64 collocations of four common verbs (have, give, take, and make) in different uses in English. The items were divided into two main types. Type 1 items included 20 sentences containing verb-noun collocations acceptable in English but not in Persian. Type 2 items included 20 verb-noun collocations of the four mentioned common verbs which are acceptable in Persian but not in English. The first two types each consisted of 5 sentences containing collocations with the each of four. These verbs are the most common delexical verbs (based on Collins Cobuild English grammar, 1990, p. 147) which are not used in their primary senses. The test also included 24 dummy items, 12 collocations of these verbs (3 sentences with each verb) in delexicalised uses possible in both languages and 12 collocations impossible in both (3 sentences with each verb).

2.2. Think-aloud protocols

Think-aloud protocols consist of observing a user working with an interface while encouraging them to think-aloud; to say what they are thinking and wondering at each moment (Ericsson and Simon 1993). The next step was collecting think-aloud protocols to investigate the validity of metalingual test and to explore the factors involved in participants' judgments of delexicalised collocations of common verbs.

3. Data Collection

First, the proficiency levels of the participants were determined by administering the reading sample of the CPE test to 45 participants from three different academic levels (sophomores, juniors, and seniors). The following week, the metalingual judgment test was administered to the same participants. A week later, the think-aloud protocols were collected from three groups of five participants, one group of CPE advanced proficiency level, one of intermediate level, and one of low level. Before the think-aloud data was elicited, two copies of metalingual judgment test were administered again and participants were asked to compare the test items. Then the mean score and standard deviation (SD) of participants' scores were first measured and then the participants who scored one standard deviation above the mean were included in the high proficiency group, and those who scored one SD below the mean were included in the low proficiency group, and those who scored the same mean score were included in intermediate proficiency groups based on Brown's (1966) characteristics of normal distribution. To assess the reliability of the judgment test, the correlation between the scores from type 1 and type 2 items and the responses to the test items collected immediately prior to the collection of the think-aloud protocols were calculated. The correlation were found to be 0.816 and 0.655 respectively, which were statistically significant at $p < .05$ suggesting that the test was reliable.

4. Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed through one sample t-test between the participants' type 1 mean score (sample mean) and the hypothesized mean score (population mean). There was a difference between the participants' observed mean (75.31) and the hypothesized mean (60). Because the t value ($t = 13.088$) was greater than the standard t ($t = 2.02$) the differences between the two means (observed & expected) is highly significant.

Table 1. One sample t-test statistics of type 1 scores

One-Sample Test							
Dependent Variable	Test Value = 60					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper	
	T1	13.088	44	.000	15.31	12.95	17.67

The second research question was also answered through one sample t-test the t value (3.14) is greater than the standard t of the table of t -values (2.02). Moreover, it is large enough to have a probability (sig: .003) smaller than 0.05.

Table 2. One sample t-test statistics of type 2 scores

Dependent variables	One-Sample Test				
	Test Value = 60				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
TYPE2	3.144	44	.003	5.38	Lower 1.93 Upper 8.83

To answer the third question, the Pearson product moment coefficient of correlation between participants' proficiency scores (test of CPE) and type 1 (possible in English but not in Persian) item scores was calculated. It was found to be 0.133. This correlation coefficient is not statistically significant at $p < .05$, i.e., there was no significant correlation between judgment of type 1 collocations and proficiency level. To answer the fourth research question the Pearson product moment coefficient of correlation between participants' proficiency scores and type 2 items scores was calculated. It was found to be 0.085. This correlation coefficient is not statistically significant at $p < .05$ either, i.e., there was no significant correlation between judgment of type 2 collocations and proficiency level.

To assess the validity of the judgment test, categories of source of judgment were drawn up on the basis of the recorded think-aloud protocols.

4.1.1. L1 interference

Participants made their judgment based on Persian equivalents of the component parts of English collocations, e.g., it was argued that you **give hand* because the primary translation equivalents of the verb and noun collocate in Persian.

4.1.2. One-to-one principle

Participants argued that a collocation was wrong because they knew that the words in question collocated with a different verb, e.g., they knew the expression *make a speech*, and so they judged *make a speech* to be wrong. This can be justified by Andersen's (1990) *one-to-one principle* which led them to reject alternative forms in order to maintain order in the IL. Andersen's one-to-one principle specifies that "an IL system should be constructed in such a way that an intended meaning is expressed with one clear invariant surface form (or construction)" (1984, p. 79).

4.1.3. Intuition

Participants made their judgments because they intuitively thought that a collocation seemed *right*, *wrong*, *good* or *terrible*.

4.1.4. Simplification

Participants argued that a certain verb-noun collocation was wrong because they believed that just a specific verb would be used to express the intended meaning, e.g., the verb *think*, not to *have a think* would be used. Simplification, i.e., omission of L2 features, is a well-documented characteristic of the early stages of both child and adult learning (Chanier, Pengelly, Twidale, & Self, 1992; Erozkhan, A., 2009).

4.1.5. Hypothesis poverty

Participants could not think of an alternative to the verb in the collocation and therefore accepted it by default, e.g., we can have just *made a mistake*. Their hypotheses were constrained by the L1 and their knowledge of the range of uses of L2 lexical items.

4.1.6. Knowledge

Participants claimed to know that the collocation was correct.

4.1.7. L1 specificity

Participants rejected a collocation on the basis that it sounded *typically Persian*.

4.1.8 Drawing analogy

Participants drew analogies with other collocations, e.g., if *make a comment* is possible, then so is *make an explanation*.

4.2. The role of fossilization

In this study it was found that most collocational knowledge of delexicalised uses of common verbs was acquired between intermediate and advanced proficiency levels and at the same time fossilizes at this stage. One possible cause may be the setting where the L2 was learnt. Most of the participants learnt up to intermediate level in a school classroom setting (before entering university), where there is emphasis on accuracy and less emphasis on conforming to native speaker norms and tolerance of mistakes which do not interfere with communication. Selinker (1972) noted that most second language learners fail to reach high language competence. That is, they stop learning when their internalized rule system contains rules different from those of the target language. This is referred to as fossilization. However, in earlier stages, the poverty of the lexicon prevents the formation of this system. Therefore, it may seem necessary to find ways in order to prevent fossilization.

5. Conclusion

The results of the research suggest that the collocation of common verbs in delexicalised uses are not so much difficult to acquire however, in case of no thorough acquisition, fossilization of error caused by an equivalence hypothesis, which leads learners to treat L2 lexical items as exact equivalence of L1 items, will occur. Consciousness-raising about this group of collocations seems a very advisable strategy, not only to facilitate acquisition, but also to empower learners with the necessary cognitive knowledge to pursue their learning independently of the teacher, and provide feedback on the basis of these results.

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