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Understanding the Efficiency of the Lexical Approach through Investigating the Acquisition and Use of Vocabulary and Collocation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the intricate relationships between receptive knowledge of collocations, vocabulary size, and writing ability among English department students. The research also evaluates the effectiveness of the lexical approach in equipping language learners with a robust vocabulary foundation, which is critical for the composition of English texts. To investigate these relationships, a sample of 200 Moroccan university students enrolled in the English department in the faculty of letters and human sciences in Cady Ayad university participated in three assessments. These included a receptive collocation knowledge test designed to measure students' understanding of word combinations commonly used in English, a vocabulary size test to assess the breadth of their lexical knowledge, and a writing test. The results of the study revealed a significant correlation between receptive collocation competence and writing ability, suggesting that proficiency in recognizing and understanding collocations may enhance overall writing skills. Additionally, there was a positive relationship between vocabulary size and receptive collocation knowledge, indicating that a larger vocabulary may facilitate better understanding of collocations. These findings underscore the importance of focusing on collocations in language instruction, as they may play a crucial role in improving writing and overall language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Collocations and vocabulary are widely regarded as essential components of language mastery. Language operates as a series of units, as we often use multi-unit expressions and chunks in our daily communication. However, many second language learners mistakenly equate language learning solely with mastering grammar and vocabulary. This assumption can lead to unnatural language use.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at testing the efficiency of the lexical approach in teaching writing via analyzing the relationship between receptive collocation knowledge, vocabulary size and writing ability.

Research Hypothesis

Students who have a rich receptive collocation knowledge and large vocabulary size write efficiently. Thus, there is a positive correlation between receptive collocation knowledge, vocabulary size, and writing proficiency.

Research Question

What type of correlation is there between receptive collocation knowledge, vocabulary size, and writing proficiency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Types of Vocabulary

Receptive Versus Productive Vocabulary

A handful of researchers consider that there is a discrepancy between receptive and productive vocabulary (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Bogaars & Laufer-Dvorkin,

2004). As a matter of fact, the receptive knowledge of vocabulary is related to listening and reading. It is the ability of a language user to understand a set of words without using them in oral or written expression. It is said that there is a tacit knowledge of vocabulary which is not actively used or produced, but one resorts to it to decipher a language discourse, while the productive vocabulary is related to speaking and writing. Apparently, although we can understand novel words when read, we can never use them. That is to say, receptive vocabulary outstrips productive vocabulary. Therefore, language teachers should do their best to help their students broaden their receptive vocabulary knowledge as it has a very effective impact on the productive vocabulary knowledge (Krashen 1982). What Krashen (1982) claims is refuted by Richards (2008) in the sense that "language items that learners recognize and understand in the input they hear do not pass into their productive competence". This entails that learners' receptive knowledge is developing while their productive knowledge is stagnant. Krashen claims that the productive knowledge is influenced by the receptive knowledge. Therefore, he encourages teachers to enrich students' receptive knowledge; he believes that there is a significant relationship between the receptive knowledge and the productive knowledge of vocabulary. However, Richards believes that the productive knowledge is not significantly influenced by the receptive knowledge of vocabulary. Knowing a word involves being in the know of its form, meaning and use (Nation, 2001). In other words, the form is the way a word is spelled and pronounced, the meaning is the semantic content, and the use is how to use it with the appropriate words it goes with. In short, vocabulary plays a very indispensable role

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in language. Although some researchers, Laufer (1998), Laufer and Paribakht (1998), Henriksen (1999), Nation (2001), Read (2000) and Schmitt (2014), call these two types of vocabulary knowledge the receptive and the productive knowledge of vocabulary, others call it the active and passive knowledge of vocabulary (Harmer, 2001). The passive vocabulary knowledge helps learners understand a text by knowing the meaning of the words used in that text. Yet, the active or the productive vocabulary knowledge refers to the ability to actively produce language orally and written (Webb, 2009).

The Importance of Vocabulary

It is obvious that vocabulary is a very salient part of English language learning. In this regard, Nation (1990) asserts that learners rely on vocabulary to communicate their thoughts. Language learners very often attribute their language incompetence to their poor vocabulary knowledge. However, many linguists working within the realm of language learning and teaching (Allen, 1983; Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Hedge, 2000; Long & Richards, 1997; Maley, 1986; Richards, 1985; Zimmerman, 1997) state that vocabulary has not been given adequate attention in language instruction. Thanks to vocabulary items, learners think about ideas and feelings. Vocabulary also makes it easier for people to depict things around them and translate their feelings, the thing they cannot do without or with a limited repertoire of vocabulary. On the contrary, a varied and rich repertoire helps learners do multiple actions with words. "The more words one is able to use correctly, the better one will be able to express oneself easily and with self-confidence and to understand the world one lives in" (Nandy, 1994). Generally, both grammar and vocabulary are crucial in a language learning classroom, yet vocabulary ought to be prioritized. Flower (2000) claims that, "Words are the most important things students must learn. Grammar is important, but vocabulary is much more important". Similarly, Widdowson (1989), Lewis (1993) and McKeown (2002) regard the place of vocabulary as the crux of language teaching and learning as people communicate using content words. That is, one can still convey a message by uttering words without being grammatically correct, whereas it is impossible to convey a message by using only grammatical patterns. Moreover, Wilkins (1972), Read (2000), Schmitt (2000), Nation (2001), Barra (2005), and Marion (2008) believe that understanding a text depends on word knowledge adequacy. This is to say, the comprehension of a discourse is related to the size of vocabulary that is possessed by a language user. Once learners develop a rich repertoire of words, they can assimilate the speaker's and the writer's conveyed message. Students can understand a writer's message only if they know the meaning of most of the words used in a text. This is fostered by McCarthy (1990) who sees vocabulary as a central component to communicative competence. That is to say; all human acts such as needs, feelings, and thoughts can only be translated into reality

by words. This is proven when a language learner feels frustrated once they cannot voice out some of their ideas due to their insufficient word knowledge. Sometimes, a language learner has great ideas to share, but they cannot because they don't have the adequate words at their disposal to express them. Furthermore, it is frustrating when a language learner is reading a text but cannot understand its core message, due to the fact that they don't understand the meaning of the words used in it.

To conclude, the mastery of vocabulary helps learners communicate effectively by voicing out their needs, feelings, and thoughts. Vocabulary mastery does not only involve words but it also encompasses phrases, chunks and collocations. The latter will be explored in the next section. Collocations. During the 50s, 60s, and 70s much attention was given to teaching grammar at the expense of vocabulary. Most language teachers considered grammar as the crux and the engine of language (Waring, 1997; Basanta, 2004). However, there was an indispensable shift to focusing more on teaching vocabulary in the 80s. As a matter of fact, vocabulary is very essential in any language. More importantly, word combinations or what came to be known as collocations constitute a very important part of vocabulary and of language at large (Bahns, 1991). Generally speaking, when we mention the word "vocabulary" we mean words or linguistic items. That is to say, by saying vocabulary we mean single words; however, mentioning the term "collocation" entails referring to the co-occurrence and co-existence of words together. In this regard, Wallace (1982) states that "words seldom occur in isolation". Hence, what is of paramount importance for language learners is how and what words are related and combined within a naturally-occurring discourse. In fact, in our daily discourse we tend to communicate using thousands of words collocated with each other. To put it differently, we don't use single words to convey a message but we rather put words together. Therefore, Wallace (1982) claims that being in the know of a word means being cognizant of its collocates. In the same way, Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) shed light on the utility of collocations in language reception and production. In other words, EFL and ESL learners should not only give their attention to learning lists of single words, their pronunciation and their meanings. "If they wish to acquire active mastery of English, that is, if they wish to be able to express themselves fluently and accurately in speech and writing, they must learn to cope with the combination of words into phrases, sentences and texts."

Approaches to Defining Collocations

Generally speaking, there are three approaches to the study of collocations; the lexical approach, the semantic approach, and the structural approach. Each of these approaches views collocations from its own perspective.

The Lexical Approach

Halliday (1966) alleges that the meaning of a word is

recognized from its adjacent words. For Firth (Halliday, 2002), there is a clear-cut dividing line between lexis and grammar. This belief entails that grammar is not required in understanding collocations, but it is the lexis that plays a prominent role in doing so. According to Halliday (1966) collocations coincide with grammar. He gives the following example: The sentence “he put forward a strong argument for it” is acceptable in English; strong is a member of that set of items which can be juxtaposed with argument, a set which also includes powerful. Strong does not always stand in this same relation to powerful: “he drives a strong car” is, at least relatively, unacceptable, as “this tea’s too powerful”.[...] “a strong car” and “powerful tea” will either be rejected as ungrammatical (or unlexical) or shown to be in some sort of marked contrast with a “powerful car” and “strong tea”; in either case the paradigmatic relation of strong to powerful is not a constant but depends on the syntagmatic relation into which each enters, here with “argument”, “car” or “tea”. Like others, Halliday gives great importance to the usefulness of collocations in studying lexis. On the other hand, Sinclair (1966 cited in Martyńska 2004), comes up with three terms relevant to the understanding of the word “collocations”: ‘node’, ‘span’, and ‘collocates’. A ‘node’ is the linguistic entity under examination, ‘span’ is the preceding or following items, and ‘collocates’ refer to the constituents of the span. To fully understand these three terms, imagine that there exists a text with types A and B contained in it.

Now, treating A as the node, suppose B occurs as the next token after A somewhere in the text. Then we call B a collocate at span position +1. [...] Similarly, if B occurs as the token immediately preceding A, then B is a collocate at span position -1 (Sinclair, 2004).

Sinclair (1991 cited in Martyńska 2004) rectifies his opinion which was based on the belief that lexis is independent of grammar. Sinclair (1991) argues for the interdependent relationship between both disciplines lexis and grammar. That is, some lexical items collocate with other grammatical items. Consequently, he splits collocations into two groups; “upward” and “downward” collocations. The first group is made up of items which co-occur with other words more recurrent than themselves. For example, the word “back” collocates with “at”, “down”, “from”, “into”, “on”, which occur more often than back itself.

Unlike “upward” collocations, “downward” collocations are items that usually go with other items which are less frequent than they are. In other words, the first group – upward collocations – consists of adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns. It is a grammar-based category. While the second category – downward collocations – is composed of only lexical items such as verbs, nouns and adjectives. Another example of the interdependent relationship of lexis and grammar is the example given by Halliday (1966): “he argued strongly” and “the strength of his argument”. Both sentences are grammatically derived from the collocation “strong argument”.

Generally speaking, the lexical approach accounts for collocations only by means of the lexical analysis. However, it is unable to explain why some words collocate only with some and not with others (Lyons, 1966). E.g. it is acceptable to say make a decision, make a request, and do a favor while it is awkward to say *do decision, * do a request, or *make a favor.

The Semantic Approach

The semantic approach rests on the previous question: why do some words collocate with some and not with others? Semanticists claim that it is the semantic features of a specific word that decide its collocates, for example, Seretan (2011) highlights the importance of the semantic features as a linkage between collocates. She believes that: [...] the link between the items in a collocation is expressed as

the relation between the central word evoking a frame (i.e., a conceptual structure modeling a situation) and the frame elements. For instance, the link between teacher, fail, and student can be deciphered by recognizing the semantic frame evoked by fail, namely, the examination frame, and by associating teacher and student with the frame elements Examiner and Examinee.

One of the pioneers of this approach, Lyons (1966) criticizes Firth’s theory of meaning for being inadequate to account for collocations. He considers Firth’s definition of meaning as being not comprehensive enough. Rather, he believes that the meaning of a word is seen as a combination of the semantic features of that word. Thus, the collocates of a word are determined by its semantic properties. In this approach, collocations can be explained in terms of the semantic relations between words. More importantly, the fact that the words which share some semantic properties co-occur frequently is a piece of evidence. This latter attests the importance of semantics in the study of collocation (Palmer, 1976). In this light, the belief that each word entails one meaning is not accepted by Robins (1967 reviewed in Gitsaki, 1999). Words in isolation are meaningless or, in Robins’ words: “word meanings do not exist in isolation” (Robins 1967 as cited in Gitsaki 1999). Like linguists working within the lexical approach, semanticists in the semantic approach study collocations from a semantic view point as separate from grammar. Semanticists claim that words collocate on the basis of semantic properties. However, the semantic approach is deemed as insufficient for it cannot elucidate why some words co-occur with some and not with others regardless of the semantic properties. For instance, although “heavy drinker” is an acceptable collocation, the two words do not share the same semantic features. In other words, the word “heavy” does not belong to the semantic field of the word “drinker”. Thus, the co-occurrence of words is thought to be beyond the semantic features of words.

The Structural Approach

This approach considers collocation to be studied through

structure and involves syntactic patterns (Gitsaki, 1996). This approach combines lexis and grammar together. Although this approach unifies lexis and grammar, there is a division between the two elements. In simple words, there are two categories: lexical and grammatical collocations. However, there is a lucid piece of evidence behind the interdependent relationship between lexis and grammar due to the fact that the meaning of lexical items stems from grammatical patterns. Therefore, it should be noted that the integration of meaning and grammar is very appropriate (Mitchell, 1971). Along the same lines, Hunston (1997) believes that there is a strong relationship between lexical and grammatical collocations. Words cannot be completely meaningful unless they co-occur with other grammatical items. That is, a word derives its meaning from the word it co-occurs with.

To sum up, the lexical approach claims that the collocation phenomenon is accounted for in terms of the lexis, not grammar. Pioneers working within this approach draw a dividing line between lexis and grammar. The semantic approach, on the other hand, stands for the separation between semantics and grammar in the study of collocations. It attributes the co-occurrence of words to the result of sharing the same semantic features. The structural approach, as its name suggests, claims that collocations are studied in the light of structure and patterns.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a matter of fact, to have valid and reliable results it is highly indispensable to choose the most convenient research design. This study falls within the correlational and exploratory research, since it studies the relationship between receptive collocation ability, and writing proficiency, vocabulary size and writing proficiency. To

this end, the researcher used three tests as instruments : vocabulary size test, multiple choice question collocation test, and composition. In other words, the subjects were asked to choose the right meanings of words in the vocabulary size test. They also were required to judge whether a collocation is accepted or not. Finally, they were given a topic to write a paragraph about it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocabulary size and the receptive knowledge of collocation

This research question concerns the relationship between EFL learners' vocabulary size and their receptive collocation knowledge. The findings revealed that these two language areas are significantly related. Apparently, the scores in both tests, the vocabulary size, and the receptive collocation tests, are significantly correlated $r = 0.764$ $P = 0.000$ & 0.01 . This statistical relationship can be explained as follows: vocabulary knowledge has a critical influence on the ability to understand and recognize collocations. So, being familiar with sufficient vocabulary items entails the ability to know and judge whether or not a collocate is acceptable. In other terms, the number of words a student has at her or his disposal has a significant relationship with the ability to judge the acceptability of collocations. It follows that, the students who have a fairly good knowledge of vocabulary tend to excel in knowing to what extent a word combination is an appropriate collocation. To sum up, the results foster the hypothesis which claims that there is a relationship between vocabulary size and receptive collocational knowledge. This hypothesis is based on the idea that when learners know a considerable number of words they naturally tend to know a wide range of collocations.

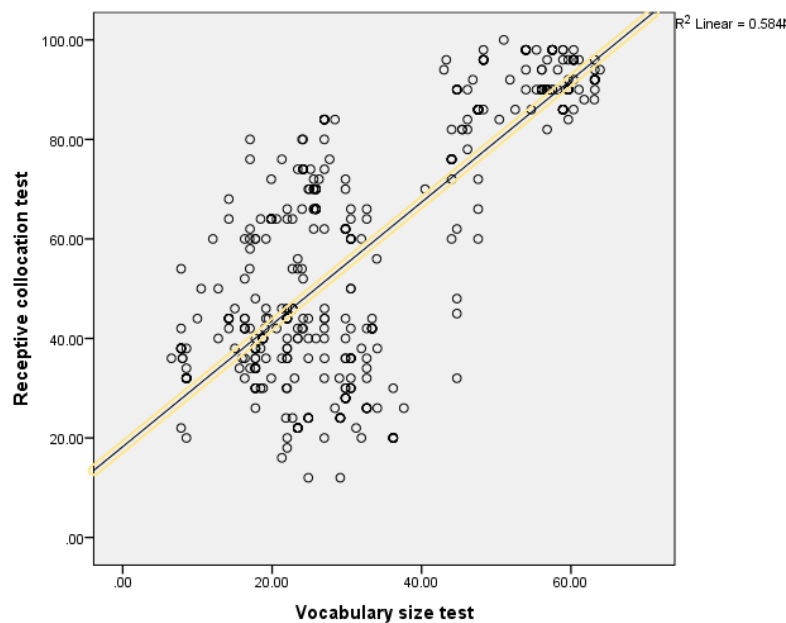


Figure 1: The relationship between the Receptive collocation Knowledge and Vocabulary Size

The Relationship between Receptive Collocation Knowledge and Writing Ability

As a matter of fact, we can conclude from the findings in figure (2) that this relationship, the receptive collocation competence and writing ability, is strongly and positively evident. This is fostered by the Pearson correlation coefficient test $r = 0.736$. Thus, there is a strongly

positive correlation between the receptive collocation competence and writing ability. These findings show that there is a mutual impact between the students' receptive collocation knowledge and their writing competence. That is, the teaching and learning methodologies in this faculty ought to consider the activation and the use of collocations.

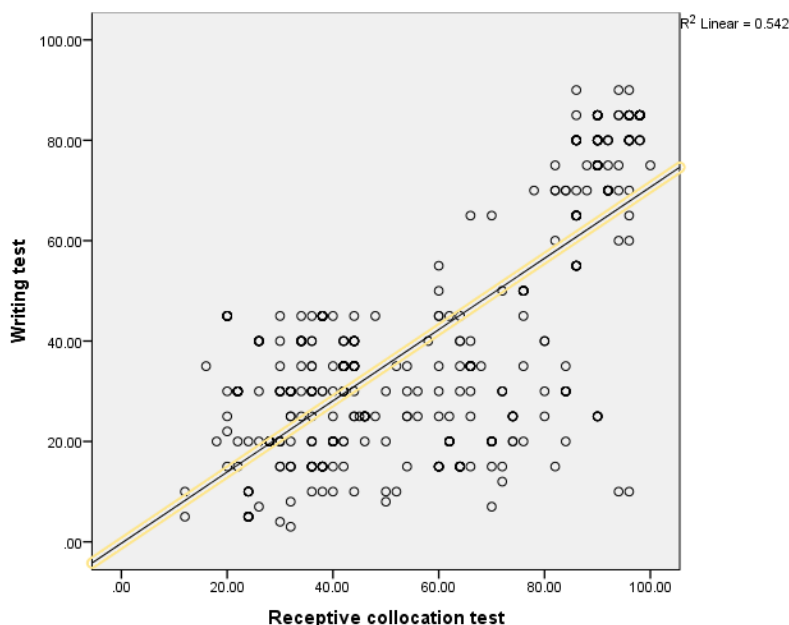


Figure 2: The relationship between the Receptive collocation Knowledge and writing ability

The Relationship between Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability

The relationship between vocabulary size and writing ability is shown to be strongly correlational. The amount of vocabulary a student has internalized has an impact on language production, particularly writing. More importantly, the participants who write effectively have a rich vocabulary size in reserve for their use, yet the others who cannot manage to write well their vocabulary is relatively poor. This can best be confirmed by the findings in figure (3). That is, the correlation is highly significant $r = 0.797$. That is to say, there is a significant relationship between writing ability and vocabulary size. For this university, to improve their students' writing, they can adopt a language approach or a method that advocates and highlights the teaching and learning of vocabulary such as the lexical approach. It is proved that good writers are good vocabulary learners and users. Generally, in this faculty English is not taught as a language for the sake of communication, but as a subject; students study and know everything about English except English itself. Teaching programs are not made in a way that gives importance and priority to language communication. These findings show that these participants lack basic words; consequently, they produce relatively poor writings. Good writers have bigger vocabulary size and tend to regularly learn more words.

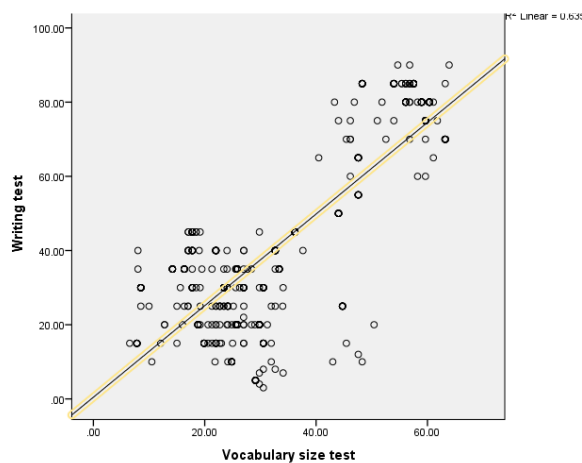


Figure 3: The Relationship between the Vocabulary Size and Writing Ability

Discussion

In sum, this study's results indicate that Moroccan EFL university students lack an adequate collocational competence with respect to verb-noun & adjective-noun structures. This supports previous research studies like (Hussein, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003; Martynska, 2004; Mahmoud, 2005; Brashi, 2009).

In what follows, the results concerned with statistical relationships will be discussed and interpreted with

reference to this paper's research question:

Vocabulary size and their receptive knowledge of collocation

This question concerns the relationship between EFL learners' vocabulary size and their receptive collocation knowledge. The findings revealed that these two language areas are significantly related. Apparently, the scores in both tests, the vocabulary size, and the receptive collocation tests, are significantly correlated $r = 0.764$ $P = 0.000 < 0.01$.

This statistical relationship can be explained as follows: vocabulary knowledge has a critical influence on the ability to understand and recognize collocations. So, being familiar with sufficient vocabulary items entails the ability to know and judge whether or not a collocate is acceptable. In other terms, the number of words a student has at her or his disposal has a significant relationship with the ability to judge the acceptability of collocations. It follows that, the students who have a fairly good knowledge of vocabulary tend to excel in knowing to what extent a word combination is an appropriate collocation. To sum up, the results foster the hypothesis which claims that there is a relationship between vocabulary size and receptive collocational knowledge. This hypothesis is based on the idea that when learners know a considerable number of words they naturally tend to know a wide range of collocations.

Vocabulary size and writing ability

This research question is meant to delve into the relationship between the size of vocabulary and writing proficiency. A vocabulary size and a writing test were administered to 200 students to highlight this relationship. The resulting findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing proficiency $r = 0.797$. Furthermore, these findings indicated that students with high scores in vocabulary tests are more likely to be proficient writers. In other words, successful vocabulary users can write fluently and correctly since they are equipped with the necessary lexical materials to express themselves and articulate their ideas and serve their needs regarding writing. Accordingly, EFL students should be encouraged to learn sufficient frequently used vocabulary items to produce correct and fluent writings.

It was hypothesized that there is no relationship between vocabulary size and writing proficiency, assuming that the students who know a large number of words are not necessarily good at writing; in the sense that they learn words out of context. Yet, in the light of this current study it looks like the size of vocabulary is part and parcel of the writing proficiency. Commanding a large number of words enables EFL students to know the word and its natural occurring collocates.

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