TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH COLLOCATIONS IN EFL CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

When vocabulary teaching is taken into account in EFL classes in Jordan, teachers generally prefer to use classical techniques. The purpose of this study is to find out the effect of a relatively new vocabulary teaching technique; teaching vocabulary through collocations. Pre-test/Post-test, Control Group Design was employed in this study. Sixty-seven freshmen students from two classes in an English 1 course at Petra University in Amman participated in this study. The experimental group was taught new words using collocation technique; the control group was taught new words using classical techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, definitions and mother tongue translation as it was in the previous reading classes before the study. The statistical analysis showed that teaching vocabulary through collocations resulted in a better learning of the words than presenting them using classical techniques and helped in improving students' achievement. Teaching vocabulary through collocations can be an effective factor in helping students remember and use the new words easily in EFL classes. Therefore, teachers of English could be encouraged to attach more importance to vocabulary teaching rather than the acquisition of grammar and the use of current vocabulary teaching strategies in their classes.

Keywords: foreign language learning; vocabulary teaching; teaching vocabulary to freshmen learners; collocation; English as a foreign language

INTRODUCTION

Importance of vocabulary teaching in language learning

Big number of different approaches has been added to language learning, each with a different outlook on vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Jesa, 2008). At times, language teaching methodologies have attached great importance to vocabulary learning, and sometimes it has been neglected (Schmitt, 2000). In practice, grammar and pronunciation are at the core of language learning, while vocabulary is neglected in most foreign language classes (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). Nowadays, vocabulary learning is one of the essential elements of both native language acquisition and of learning a foreign language. Learning vocabulary is seen as a key element to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language by a large number of theoreticians (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Also researchers, teachers and others involved in foreign language learning are paying special attention to foreign language vocabulary acquisition. It is believed that having a large and varied vocabulary is the indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning. Such as writing and reading, vocabulary knowledge is one of the components of language skills (Nation & Waring, 1997). It should be considered as an integral part of learning a foreign language since it leads the way to communication. That is to say, even a sufficient knowledge of vocabulary alone could be enough for a convenient degree of communication to take place. Many scholars approve on that

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vocabulary should be recognized as an essential element in language instruction from the very early stages (Pellicer Sánchez 2015). They further state that having enough collection of vocabulary with a minimum number of structures often helps the learner more not only in reading comprehension, but also in achieving more efficient survival communication than having a perfect command of structures with an inadequate amount of vocabulary. The term Lexical Approach, coined by Michael Lewis, concentrates on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations (Lewis, 1993). Within the Lexical Approach, special attention is directed to collocations and expressions that include institutionalized utterances and sentence frames and heads. As Lewis maintains, we deliberatively try to think of collocations, and to present these collocations in our expressions instead of individual words. That is, rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, we have a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways (Lewis, 1997). Although deliberate vocabulary teaching is only one of the least efficient ways of developing vocabulary knowledge, it is also significantly required for a well balanced vocabulary program. Boers & Webb (2018) determine that foreign language learners pay little attention to collocations, the meaning of which they can easily misunderstand. Vocabulary teaching helps learners when they feel it is most needed especially for the message-focused activities involving listening, speaking, reading and writing (Nation, 2005).

Teaching vocabulary through collocations

With the recognition of the importance of vocabulary, many techniques and approaches for teaching and learning vocabulary have emerged, and collocation is just one of those techniques. It’s a widely accepted idea that collocations are very important part of knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English in order to speak or write fluently and accurately. One of the reasons among which teachers and learners should be interested in collocations is that collocations improve learners’ language fluency and ensure native-like selection.

English language teaching has changed its perspective on the teaching and learning of vocabulary in foreign language classes. A word which collocates with others is thought to be one of the significant aspects related to words besides multiple meanings, synonymy, connotations and register according to dictionary makers. Besides being difficult to acquire for both foreign language learners and second language learners, collocation plays an important role in language acquisition and knowledge of collocation contributes to the difference between native speakers and non-native speakers (Shei & Pain, 2000). Collocations are really important for language learners to be better understood. To know the meaning of a word most effectively, students need to know its associations with other words.

Nattinger was one of the first researchers to discuss collocations. He states that the meaning of a word mostly depends on the other words that it collocates with; by the help of these collocates the learner keeps the words in memory and can easily infer the meaning from the context. He also argues that the notion of collocations is extremely important for acquiring vocabulary but its potential has not been fully utilized (Nattinger, 1988). Similarly, Chan & Liou (2005) explained that teaching of collocations in English foreign language classes did not get enough attention; as a result, students learning English as a foreign language are weak in collocation use. Rather than teaching vocabulary as single lexical items which causes a lexical incompetence on the part of learners, students must be made aware of the necessity of acquiring collocations (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Fan, 2009). Collocations can be defined in many ways (Moon, 1997), and some of these definitions are as follows: collocations are words that occur together with high frequency and refer to the combination of words that have a certain mutual expectancy. McCarten (2007, p. 5) states that the way in which two or more words are typically used is generally called collocation. Stubbs (2002, p. 215) defines collocation as the habitual co-occurrence of two unordered content words, or of a content word and a lexical set.

Collocations consist of two parts: a pivot word which is the focal word in the collocation and it's collocate(s), the word or words accompanying the pivot word (Shin & Nation, 2008). There are two types of collocations: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations are combinations of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs such as Verb + Noun, Adjective + Noun, Noun + Noun, Verb + Adverb. Grammatical collocations are combinations of content words (nouns, adjectives or verbs) and a grammatical word such as a preposition or certain structural patterns.

Implementing new vocabulary teaching technique in Jordanian EFL classes

While vocabulary knowledge is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner, in EFL classes in Jordan, by taking the easy way out, English teachers still tend to allocate more time to grammar, the structure of the language. Maybe it's because many English language teachers prefer emphasizing grammar rather than vocabulary because grammar is a finite system, whereas vocabulary is not (Sheehan, 2004). And when the teaching of vocabulary items is taken into account, teachers prefer to use classical vocabulary teaching techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, mother tongue translation and definition. As a result, students do not make any effort to reach the meaning and it is expected that they probably will not remember the meaning of the new words, or they won't be able to use the new words they have learned even if they remember the meaning because they don't know the suitable collocates. Therefore, the problem this study deals with is that in most EFL classes in Jordan new words are still generally taught with classical techniques. It is believed that there is a vital necessity of implementing new vocabulary teaching techniques in foreign language classes. Siyanova and Schmitt (2008) advise that teachers should make fundamental changes in their vocabulary teaching pedagogies by focusing on phrasal elements rather than individual words.

Vocabulary learning both within and outside the domain of reading is an important part of English foreign language classes. More student centered approaches beyond rote memorization should be adapted for the purpose of improving retention and usage (Nation, 2005). Teaching vocabulary through classical techniques is thought to be too mechanical for the classroom learning. Acat (2008) states that mechanical vocabulary learning, just memorizing new vocabulary word by word without interaction with existing knowledge, does little to enrich students' vocabulary. Also teaching vocabulary through classical techniques can cause confusion and take more time and effort than expected. Genç (2004) states that in order to arouse interest and awareness in students about vocabulary development and make the vocabulary learning process more meaningful, teachers should try out different vocabulary teaching techniques. Nizonkiza (2017) sightsees the influence of teaching collocations on raising an academic vocabulary. New words could be presented with collocation technique which is extremely important for acquiring vocabulary and has yet to be exploited to its full potential, so that students will be able to use these words later in their own performance. Despite the growing interest in teaching collocations in foreign language classes, experimental studies in Jordanian foreign language classroom settings are still few.

Purpose of the study

The goal of this study is to find out whether teaching vocabulary through collocations will result in better vocabulary learning than teaching vocabulary using classical techniques such as definition, synonym, antonym, and mother tongue translation. The purpose of this study is to show the contribution of collocations to vocabulary learning of freshmen students in English Foreign Language (EFL) classes. It is hypothesized that learning vocabulary through collocations is an effective strategy that positively contributes to the development of vocabulary learning.

Research questions

This study intended to find answers to the following questions:

1. Does presenting new words through collocations result in a better learning of the words than presenting them using classical techniques?
2. Does presenting new words through collocations enhance retention of new vocabulary items?

METHODOLOGY

Pre-test/Post-test Control Group Design was employed in this study. This is the prototypical group design, involving one experimental group and one control group. While the experimental group receives treatment, the control group does not (Schlosser, 2003).

Participants

The participants were two English 1 sections that consisted of 57 freshmen students, the two sections were being taught by the researcher. Before the study, a proficiency test was carried out by the researcher. The results showed that the proficiency levels of the classes were almost the same.

The groups were assigned one as the control group and the other as the experimental group. In the experimental group (Section 1) there were 28 students and in the control group (Section 2) there were 29 students. The mean of the age of the students ranged 19-22 years old. The participants of this study had been learning English for 12 years before this study.

Materials and Procedure

At the beginning of the study, a non-standardized general English proficiency test was prepared by the researcher based on the curriculum to determine the proficiency level of the classes. After revision by the researcher and two qualified English instructors at the university, the test was administered to participants as the pre and post proficiency test. The final form of the test was composed of twenty multiple choice items.

Nine small reading passages were chosen from the Global Intermediate student's book. Those passages were chosen as their level was appropriate for the students and they contained very useful new words for the students. Also, the passages were really interesting and authentic. In order to select the words that students do not know a list of words was given to students for each passage. The aim of the lists was to find out the words that the students did not know because these words were to be taught during the treatment. The two sections had to indicate their knowledge of the words by circling one of the two options: 'I know the word'; 'I don't know the word'. And in order to get realistic results the students had to write the meaning of the word if they had circled the 'I know the word' option. Only those words they indicated they did not know were selected for further use. Three passages were presented in a week and the study went on for three weeks. Then for those unknown words, multiple appropriate collocates were found by using Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, and Oxford Word-power Dictionary. And the subjects were instructed for approximately nine hours during a three-week period until nine reading passages were presented. The new vocabulary was presented to the control group through classical techniques such as synonyms, antonyms, definitions and mother tongue equivalences as it was in the previous classes before the study. The experimental group was introduced to the new vocabulary through their collocations which were thought to be the most frequent ones. The unknown word was written in a circle in the centre of the board. Then, collocates especially which were thought to be the most frequent ones were written around that word. Some presented examples are below:

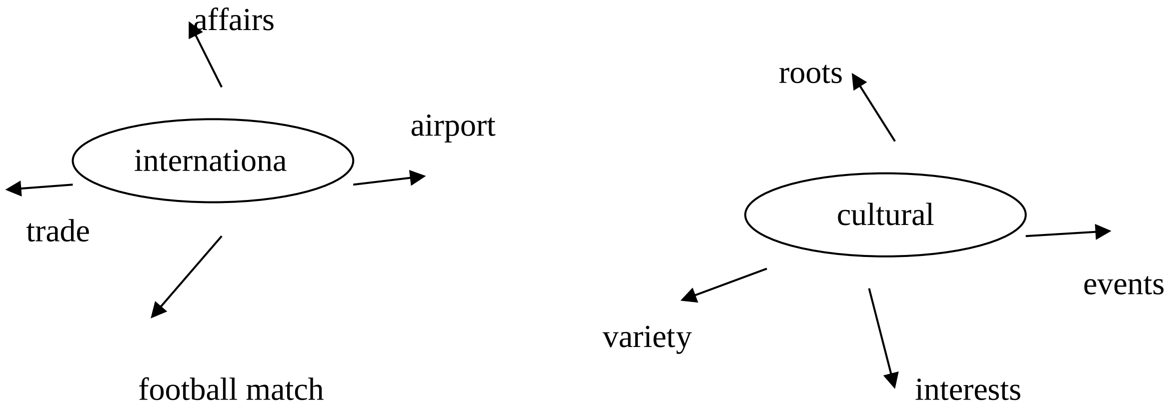

Figure 1. Examples of the presentation of unknown words to the experimental group

The researcher was teaching both the control and experimental groups during the treatment. In the experimental group the students first read the passage and then the teacher presented the new vocabulary items. She presented multiple suitable collocates for each word. In this way, students were learning a new word through its collocations. After presenting all the new words through the use of collocates, five comprehension questions related to the passage were asked and answered to make the task more meaningful. A test containing gap-filling exercises wherein the students were supposed to choose the answer from the list of words was practiced for newly learned vocabulary at the end of each week after three reading passages had been presented. Students were supposed to choose the best word and also fill in the blanks with the appropriate word.

In each test, there were thirty words to choose from but there were twenty questions to be answered to reduce the influence of chance factors on the results. After one week, a mixed test containing the gap-filling exercises used in the previous tests was administered simultaneously to both groups to determine the retention. The students both in the control and experimental group were used to those kinds of vocabulary tests especially multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks tests. It could be said that both the students in the control and experimental groups were all familiar to the same degree with the design of the vocabulary tests. For this reason, it is believed that the design of the vocabulary tests did not give the experimental group an advantage. Finally, the same proficiency test was administered to see whether there was a progress between the pre and post proficiency levels of the groups. The participants were instructed that each gap should be filled in with only one word. The participants were allowed to guess if they were unsure and they were asked to fill in every gap if they could. Instructions were given orally and in writing. Each test contained twenty questions and five points were given for each correct answer. So the maximum score a student could get was 100.

The control group received the same reading passages and followed the same procedures. But for this group while the teacher was presenting the new vocabulary, only classical techniques were used as it had been before. That is, the words were presented to this group as it was in the previous reading classes before the study, no new application was implemented.

Statistical analysis

For the evaluation of the differences between the groups Independent Samples T-test was used at the end of the tests. For the evaluation of the differences between the immediate and delayed proficiency tests Dependent T-test was used. The results were analyzed. Values for all descriptive are presented as means and standard deviation (SD).

RESULTS

After all the tests were practiced, the means of the two groups for each test were compared with Independent Samples T-test. Also, the difference between the pre-proficiency level test and post-proficiency level test was compared with dependent T-test for the experimental and control group. All the results were presented in the tables below:

Table 1. Proficiency level test results of Independent-Samples T-test. (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Tests	**Groups**	**M**	**SD**	***t***	***p***	**Mean Differences**
Pre-Proficiency Level Test	Experimental Control	30.67 32.24	12.44 13.60	- 0.46	0.64	- 1.57
Post-Proficiency Level Test	Experimental Control	43.00 29.48	12.36 10.80	4.48*	0.00	13.52

Note. *p<0.01

Pre-proficiency level test results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups' proficiency level statistically before the teaching practice (p>0.05). So the groups were assigned, one as the control group and the other as the experimental group.

Post-proficiency level test was given three weeks after, including a one-week delay after the instruction, the pre-proficiency level test to determine the specific impact of teaching practice on each group. There was a significant difference between the two groups after three weeks of vocabulary teaching practice (p<0.01).

Table 2. Proficiency level tests results of experimental and control group dependent (paired) T-test

Groups	**Tests**	**M**	**SD**	**t**	**p**
Experimental pair 1	Pre- proficiency Level Test Post- Proficiency Level Test	30.67 43.00	12.44 12.36	4.59*	0.00
Control pair 1	Pre- proficiency Level Test Post- Proficiency Level Test	32.24 29.48	13.60 10.80	1.01	0.32

Note. *p<0.01

Table 2 showed that after three weeks of teaching practice there was a significant increase in the experimental group's pre- to post-proficiency level test performance on this measure (p<0.01), while the pre-post scores of the control group did not differ significantly from one another (p>0.05).

Table 3. Vocabulary tests results of Independent-Samples T-test. (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Tests	**Groups**	**M**	**SD**	***T***	***p***	**Mean Differences**
Vocabulary Test 1	Experimenta Control	23.17 14.66	23.62 14.39	1.68	0.10	8.51
Vocabulary Test 2	Experimental Control	25.67 15.86	26.02 20.53	1.61	0.11	9.80
Vocabulary Test 3	Experimental Control	51.67 27.41	30.30 25.45	3.33*	0.00	24.25

Note. *$p<0.01$

At the end of each week, a test containing gap-filling exercises was practiced for newly learned vocabulary. There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups' test performance (p>0.05) in the first two tests. However, in the last vocabulary test there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups' performance in favor of the experimental group (p<0.01).

Table 4

Retention test results of Independent-Samples T-test. (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Test	**Groups**	**M**	**SD**	***T***	***p***	**Mean Differences**
Retention Test	Experimental Control	31.20 13.38	26.89 18.02	3.00*	0.00	17.82

After all the vocabulary tests were administered to both groups, a retention test was given simultaneously to both groups to check the long-term effect of the experiment on the learning of the vocabulary covered throughout the study after a one-week delay. There was a statistically significant difference between the control and experimental group in terms of vocabulary retention (p<0.01).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results yielded by this experimental research lead us to conclude that teaching vocabulary through collocations resulted in a better learning of the words than presenting them using classical techniques and enhance retention of new vocabulary items. Based on the results, this paper has suggested that it would be advisable to teach vocabulary through collocations. Although the experimental group scored higher than the control group in all the vocabulary tests, only in the last test there was a statistical significant difference. In fact, the experimental group was expected to score higher than the control group in the other vocabulary tests too. This might be because the collocation technique was a relatively new technique for the learners. Before the study, they had not experienced such a vocabulary learning technique. So maybe they needed some more time to adapt the new technique to their own learning habits. It is believed that if they had more time, they would get used to learn the new words through their collocations and get higher scores than the control group as in the last vocabulary test. The same proficiency test was practiced again as a post-proficiency test after the vocabulary tests. The experimental group was significantly more successful than the control group in this post proficiency test. This might suggest that teaching vocabulary through collocations improved students' proficiency levels in the experimental group while the same positive effect did not occur in the control group. The expected effect due to collocation technique was obtained. Collocation technique helped learners to remember the vocabulary items better than the classical techniques did. On the basis of this result, it could be stated that teaching vocabulary through collocations may enhance retention of new vocabulary items in EFL classes.

Also for the experimental group, there was a statistically significant difference between the Pre and Post Proficiency Tests. That is, the proficiency level of the experimental group improved during the vocabulary teaching period. As a result, we might suggest that collocational vocabulary teaching is an effective technique for the learners' proficiency development. But for the Control Group there is not a statistically significant difference between the Pre and Post Proficiency Test results. As it is clear in Table 2, the proficiency level of the control group remained stable. This might suggest that classical vocabulary teaching techniques did not do the same positive effect on the students' proficiency levels.

Vocabulary plays an important role in communication as well as the other components of language. In my opinion the lack of needed vocabulary is one of the most common causes of students' inability to express themselves in English in EFL classes in Jordan. Students cannot use English outside the classroom in real life situations in spite of studying English for years. Also, they have serious problems in finding suitable collocates of words mostly because of the differences between the word order in Arabic and English. I believe that this study may be helpful for teachers and students in terms of becoming familiarized with a comparatively new technique which will be helpful in their vocabulary development. Nist and Simpson (1993) state that knowing the definition of a word is important and may be sufficient in many situations, but it is just a beginning point. According to them a memorized definition is often the tip of the iceberg, the part mistakenly believed to be the total iceberg because it is so visible and obvious. Beneath the surface of the water is a much larger mass of ice which is far more important. Their explanation about knowing the definition of a word which we think one of the classical vocabulary teaching techniques supports the assumption that classical vocabulary teaching techniques do not contribute to the development and retention of new vocabulary items. Similarly, Maghsodi (2010) supports the same idea by stating that even though memorizing terms with their respective translations is quick and preferred by learners, it is superficial and does not let students use the needed vocabulary correctly in context. Also similar to this study, Hsu (2010) investigated the effects of direct collocation instruction on Taiwanese college English majors' reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Similarly, the author concluded that direct collocation instruction improved the subjects' vocabulary learning and improved retention. His suggestion is in accord with the findings of this study in that collocation instruction could be worthwhile to explore as a teaching option.

To sum up; the results of this experimental study have supported the hypothesis that learning vocabulary through collocations is an effective strategy which positively contributes to the development of vocabulary learning and retention of vocabulary. At the same time the findings have supported the previous studies on collocation such as Maghsodi (2010), Hsu (2010), Nist and Simpson (1993) whose results emphasize its positive effect on foreign language learning in many aspects.

IMPLICATIONS

In the past there was a period of time when vocabulary was neglected. With the current trends vocabulary began to gain importance. So students should be aware of the different vocabulary learning strategies. The traditional memorization techniques, preparing bilingual word lists or other classical vocabulary learning techniques should be given up since they create a kind of unwillingness on the part of the students. Teachers should be familiarized with the current vocabulary teaching techniques and apply them in the class.

Collocational vocabulary learning is now considered as a widely-accepted modern technique, so it is suggested that it should be introduced to EFL classrooms. McCarten (2007) confirms this suggestion about teaching vocabulary through collocation. He states that vocabulary can be taught and practiced deliberately through collocation technique at higher levels.

This study showed that teaching vocabulary through collocations improved the vocabulary learning more than classical techniques. Therefore, teachers of English could be encouraged to spare some more classroom time for this type of training in their classes and to assign more importance to the application of certain learning strategies in vocabulary development in order to make vocabulary learning process more effective and more meaningful for the students. Similarly, Deveci (2004) states that in recent years, English teachers and theorists attach more importance to vocabulary teaching in the sense that grammar could help learners sufficiently only with a wide range of vocabulary. Also he argues that a wide range of vocabulary without sufficient grammar knowledge does not help learners too because a single word rarely stands alone. Therefore, language teachers need to teach collocations in order to help learners acquire the language more quickly and efficiently.

Based on the results, it might be suggested that language teachers should keep in mind the fact that students have to be aware of what “knowing a word” means. They should know that just knowing the definition or mother tongue equivalent of a word does not mean that they know that word. For using a word in a context, they should know the collocations of that word. Students should be encouraged to develop a system of vocabulary learning which will lead them to be independent vocabulary learners.

We might also say that teachers should not stick to certain vocabulary teaching techniques and activities.

They should be open to innovations in the field and encourage students to develop strategies for handling new vocabulary. They should tolerate any type of prejudgments towards vocabulary learning and try to make the students like vocabulary learning and vocabulary studies.

A suggestion to other researchers in the field is to study with a wider group of students in a longer time period. Because extended exposure to the collocations is an important factor. It is believed that longer time period will help a lot to have a better result especially for the younger learners.

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