

Effect of Persian and English colour collocations on L2 learners' proficiency

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Abstract - Collocations play an important role in L2 teaching and learning. The present study investigated the effect of colour collocations in L2 learning. This study was done in 2 phases: In the first phase, the frequency of colour collocations was calculated in English and Persian. Two lists of English and Persian colour collocations were chosen. Each list included 100 colour collocations. The English collocations were chosen from English collocation dictionaries, but the Persian colour collocations were chosen by the Persian native speakers. Chi-square results indicated that there were some differences between the 2 languages, but the differences were not statistically significant.

In the second phase, the (possible) effect of colour collocations on upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners' proficiency was investigated. Sixty upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners, both male and female, were chosen from a private language institute in Isfahan, Iran. The minimum and maximum ages of the participants were about 15-38, and their homogeneity was tested by the OPT. Participants were given a pretest in order to measure their colour collocational knowledge. Then, after the treatment, a posttest was administered. Results revealed that teaching collocations had a significant effect on the participants' proficiency.

Keywords: collocation, colour, l2 proficiency, Persian and English

1. Introduction

Using collocations is an irrefutable part of everyday life. No one can deny the extreme usage of collocations in everyday conversations, writing, reading, and so forth. Collocations are used to express abstract meanings and make them more concrete. According to *The Etymology Dictionary*, the word *collocation* is derived from the Latin word *collocationem*, which means “place together.” Its linguistic sense has been used since 1940. *Oxford Dictionary* has defined that collocations are the pair or a group of words that are habitually juxtaposed. Usually, L2 learners confuse collocations with idioms or proverb. Idiom is a phrase or a fixed expression that has a figurative meaning whose figurative meaning is different from its literal meaning. At the other part, there is proverb. Proverb is usually a sentence which is popularly known and repeated that expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. They are often metaphorical. Proverbs are often borrowed from similar languages and cultures.

Collocations play an important role in everyday life. They are used in a vast variety of contexts and in many aspects of our life to express our thoughts or actions in a metaphorical manner. Collocations are divided into many different groups and can be categorized from different perspectives. Collocations define the relationship between words that come together often. They can come from idioms like *take a break* or a combination of words which are used more in the everyday conversation like *get on a bus*. According to Hill (2000), collocations can fall into two or more words and contain the following components: (1) ADJ + N, (2) N + N, (3) V + ADJ + N, (4) V + ADV, (5) ADV + V, (6) ADV + ADJ, (7) V + PRE + N. Some collocations are longer than what is mentioned before.

From another view, collocations are two types: strong and weak. Strong collocations are where that link between two words is quite fixed and restricted. Weak collocations are where a word can collocate with many other words (Shammas, 2013). Because focusing on all types consumes a large amount of time and would exceed the length of this study, this research mainly focused on collocations in dictionaries and, more especially, on collocations containing colours.

Colour is an important factor that makes us feel and think. Let us see the concept of *colour* from two different views: First, colours have their own meanings from the psychological view; for instance, yellow is a high colour which stands for a bright sense and the ability of analyzing. Second is the cultural view which refers to the different meanings that each culture or even each person can interpret by seeing a certain colour. Here, yellow has two totally different meanings in English and Persian cultures. Although in English yellow is the colour of respect, for Iranian, yellow is the colour of hatred.

Rohrer (1994) mentioned that “colour has many different meanings to different people and cultures. We all have our own favorite colours. People like different colour like they like different foods” (p. 29). Because of all these reasons, humans have symbolized a particular colour for one specific meaning and emotions along many years. Some of these symbolized meanings have become universal and some are culture-specific. Combinations of this symbolic colour with the field of collocations which is unrestricted part of people daily conversations have produced a vast number of colour collocations (e.g., *blue blooded*, *black box*, *green card*).

Collocations play a consequential role in learning an L2 and, more specifically, on L2 learners' proficiency. By being aware about the fact that collocations are fixed phrases which are used continuously in English as an L2 in this study, using them by L2 learners will make the context more understandable for native speakers. Because of these reasons, if L2 learners use these collocational phrases more frequently, the message will be more understandable and more predictable. In addition, some misunderstandings based on wrong spellings in writing, wrong pronunciations in speaking cannot have an effect on the main idea behind the written text or the utterance.

From what was indicated before, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the significant role of collocations in L2 learners' proficiency. Learning how to use collocations helps them to be more proficient in all four skills, notably in the productive skills of speaking and writing. One of the recognizable advantages of learning collocations for L2 learners is that they will sound more native-like. Collocational knowledge allows us to say and write like a native speaker (Nation, 2001). Additionally, learning collocations can help L2 learners make use of the language they know. Woolard (2000) claimed that "learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words; it is often learning familiar word in new combination" (p. 31).

Collocations can be categorized in enormous ways: They can be categorized by their meanings or the type of words combined together to make collocations. Here in the current study, the focus was on collocations which contain colours. As long as colours in different cultures have different meanings, this study was an attempt to figure out the (possible) effect of different meanings, which is because of cultural differences, on the frequency of colour collocations. In phase two, the effect of frequency on L2 learners' learning was examined. Here, frequency relates to the frequency of colour collocations in the English and Persian languages.

It is difficult to express the exact meanings of collocations because the meanings are not fixed yet. However, experts define collocations from different views. Cowie (1981) defines collocations as "the occurrence of two or more lexical items as realizations of structural elements within a given syntactic pattern" (p. 81). He made a distinction between collocations and idioms by the way that idioms are at the field of semantics rather than structure. He noted that collocations have a huge variety, whereas idioms do not have such this variety. "In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, nonidiomatic phrases and constructions," Benson (1986, p. 91) said. He called these groups of words *recurrent combinations* or *collocations*. Benson divided collocations into two major groups: grammatical and lexical. As he reported, collocations are words in which two parts are included: The first word is in dominating part (e.g., verbs, nouns, adjectives), and the second one is in the subordinate part.

According to Cruse (1989), collocations are defined as sequences of lexical items that co-occur habitually. He made a contrast between collocations and idioms. He stated that a semantic constituent is shaped by these sequences. He also considered context as a critical factor in expressing the meaning of semantic constituent. In 1998, Larson claimed that collocations are a group of words which occur repeatedly in a language. He also added that collocations may refer to the co-occurrence of words which can be grammatical or lexical.

Cowie revealed a new definition for collocations in 1992. He mentioned that a collocation is a unity. Additionally, collocations can be divided into two subcategories: semantical and grammatical. He has pointed out "collocations are made from two or

more lexical items with grammatical pattern, one is used in a literal sense and one is in as figurative sense” (p. 122).

A significant practical research in this field is the research done by Nofal (2012). He worked in the differences between collocations in English and Arabic. He studied the differences in lexicography, translation, and interpretations of Arabic and English collocations. He especially focused on that area to bring out the nature and significance of collocations and the kind of relation between the collocations in these two languages. He concluded that English and Arabic have come up with similar definitions and categories but may differ in their focuses.

In 2013, Faghih and Mehdizade worked on a contrastive analysis research of patterns of grammatical collocations between English and Azari-Turkish. They worked on collocations based on Benson’s (1986) classification and compared and contrast them with their Azari-Turkish translations. As a conclusion, the authors mentioned that collocations tend to appear in different patterns and orders in English and Turkish.

Eslami-Rasekh and Ghafel (2011) made a contrastive cross-cultural analysis in the metaphorical expressions of basic colours in English and Persian. They especially took Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphor theory as their framework. They noted that although colours share common connotative grounds in the two languages, they do not guarantee the same meaning in these cultures. They are more culture-specific in each language.

Brown (1974) discussed the benefits of collocations in second language acquisition (SLA) by reporting that collocations improved the learners’ oral communications, listening comprehension, and reading speed. Also, teaching collocations provided a situation that the learners could be aware of language chunks used by native speakers in both speech and writing. Cowie (1992) supported this claim, too. He considered collocations as multiword units. He said “it is impossible to perform at a level acceptable to native users, in writing, or speaking, without controlling an appropriate range of multiword units” (p. 4).

Channel (1981) emphasized the awareness of L2 learners because of the importance of collocations in increasing their communications’ power. Channel believed that collocations provide contexts and chance for word association. Both of them are necessary for learning new words and by learning new words, their communication ability will be improved. Nattinger (1980) said “language production includes piecing together the readymade units appropriate for particular situations and that comprehension rely on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations” (p. 341).

As long as learning collocations is known as a major responsibility in SLA, teaching collocations becomes more important and gets the attentions of L2 researchers to find out what the essential parameters in teaching collocations in L2 classrooms are.

One of the first empirical researches in this field was a research done by Channel (1981). This research examined the L2 knowledge of collocations by using a “collocational grid” (p. 231). In her study, collocational grid was used to test ADJ + N. It was revealed that the students failed to recognize most of the acceptable collocations, even though they knew the words in isolation. She concluded that raising L2 learners’ awareness about collocations is necessary to improve their fluency in an L2.

Fargal and Obiedat (1995) investigated a research study in this field. They provided two questionnaires with 22 English collocations with different topics, for instance, food, weather, and clothes. They had two groups: one with 34 English college

students and another one with 23 English students at higher college in teaching. They concluded that the learners used different strategies to answer the questionnaire, but among strategies, synonyms were used more frequently.

Another empirical study in this field is the research done by Saadat Kiaee, Moghaddam, and Hoseini (2013). They worked on the effect of collocations on EFL learners' reading comprehension in the intermediate level of proficiency. They chose 70 students from a language institute and divided them into two groups: control and experimental. They concluded that teaching collocations could play a significant role in enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension.

2. Method

In order to limit the number of effective variables, the participants were chosen from the classes with a similar background. They were selected from upper-intermediate and advanced levels. Sixty L2 learners were selected. All participants were chosen from upper-intermediate and advanced classes, but in order to be make sure about their homogeneity, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was conducted to make them homogenized.

Two lists of collocations were chosen: one in English and one in Persian. Each list contained 100 collocations containing the selected colours. The English collocations were chosen from different monolingual dictionaries such as *Oxford Collocation Dictionary*, *Longman Collocation Dictionary*, and *Macmillan Collocation Dictionary*. In order to make the list shorter, the collocations which were listed more often were chosen. For the purpose of this study, just some specific colours were selected (black, white, red, green, yellow, and blue).

The Persian collocations were selected from different sources. Due to lack of authentic and valid sources in Persian for collocations, this process was more complicated than the first one. The first source was dictionary. *Dehkhoda* and *Moein* were used as common and valid dictionaries in Persian. Because the number of collocations would not suffice, the Persian native speakers were asked to write the colour collocations they used in their everyday conversations as much as they could, but before that they totally understood what was called collocation. These lists were checked by an expert in Persian grammar in order to find out if they were collocations or not, then categorized and, after that, 100 more frequent collocations were selected.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The OPT is an internationally reliable and valid paper-based test (Khalili and Mahsefat, 2012). The test was administered to determine the proficiency level of the participants and check their homogeneity. In this study, the second version of the OPT was used. According to its manual, the learners whose scores are between 0—15 were considered as beginners, between 16—23 considered as elementary, between 24—30 as lower-intermediate, and between 31—40 as upper-intermediate and advanced. Thus, in order to achieve the aim of the study, L2 learners with the score less than 31 were excluded from the test.

Two kinds of test were conducted in this study in order to calculate the participants' collocational knowledge before and after the treatment. The first test was a pretest and the second one was a posttest. The pretest was specifically designed to calculate the L2 learners' proficiency in collocations and measure their ability to recognize the correct combination of words that made a collocation according to their meaning in context. The test was in multiple-choice and because the aim of the study was to differentiate colour in colour collocations, the colour part of collocation was missing.

The pretest and posttest were parallel in form. However, in order to avoid the memory effect on test scores, the order of the questions was changed. The reliability of the test was calculated through KR-21 method and it came out to be 0.82. Furthermore, the validity of the tests was calculated by some university professors.

Here, the collocations were divided into six groups: All collocations with same colour (black, white, red, green, yellow, and blue) were categorized as one group. The first aim of this study was to find out the differences between the frequency of each group in English and Persian. In other words, which colour collocations were used more in these two languages?

In order to research the second aim of the study, the participants had enrolled in an English class. After the administration of the OPT, the learners whose scores were lower than 31 were excluded. As a result, the number of participants became 60. The participants were given a pretest in order to test their colour collocational knowledge. The pretest was administered in the first session of the term. After the test, every session one list of collocations which consisted of the same colour was taught. At the end of the term, when all lists were taught, the learners took the posttest.

3. Results and Discussion

Tallying the number of Persian and English colour collocations yielded the following frequencies:

Table 1 Frequencies of Persian and English Colour Collocations

		Collocations						Total
		Black	White	Red	Green	Yellow	Blue	
Language	Persian	37	21	15	13	8	6	100
	English	29	15	19	12	5	20	100
Total		66	36	34	25	13	26	200

The frequencies of black, white, red, green, yellow, and blue colour collocations in Persian and English are presented in Table 1. Except for blue (Persian = 6; English = 20) where the difference between the two languages was 12, all the other differences between Persian and English for each colour were comparatively small.

Now, in order to find out whether these differences between Persian and English colour collocations boiled down to an overall statistically significant difference or not, chi-square was employed:

Table 2 Chi-Square Results for Comparing Persian and English Colour Collocations

	Value	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.71	5	.057
Likelihood Ratio	11.14	5	.049
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.35	1	.021
<i>N</i> of Valid Cases	200		

In Table 2, the *p* value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column in front of the Pearson chi-square is larger than the specified level of significance (i.e., $.057 > .05$), indicating that the difference between the Persian and English colour collocations was not statistically significant.

Effectiveness of Teaching Colour Collocations

At the outset of the second phase of the study, a pretest was given to the 60 participants. Then, the English colour collocations were taught to the participants and a posttest was administered. The pretest and posttest scores of the participants were compared by means of a paired samples *t* test to see if the instruction had been effective or not. The results of the analysis are as follows:

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Comparing Pretest and Post-test Scores of Learners

	Mean	<i>N</i>	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	7.76	200	3.51	.24
Posttest	19.60	200	4.06	.28

As it can be seen in Table 3, the difference between the pretest ($M = 7.76$) and posttest ($M = 19.60$) mean scores of the participants was a large one (with a mean difference of 11.84). To find out whether this difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the participants was statistically significant or not, the following *t* test table had to be consulted (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of Paired Samples T-Test Comparing Pretest and Post-test Scores of Learners

Paired Differences	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pretest – Post-test	-11.84	4.22	.29	-12.43	-11.25	-39.61	199	.000

As seen in Table 4, there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 3.51$) and posttest ($M = 19.60$, $SD = 4.06$) scores of the participants

because the *p* value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column was less than the significance level (i.e. $.000 < .05$). This means that the treatment (i.e., teaching colour collocations) had been effective as far as the language proficiency of the participants was concerned.

Learning the lexicon of a language, as an important part of a language, is one of the L2 learner's concerns when he or she begins to learn a new L2. L2 learners always face numerous difficulties in vocabulary. In this stage, they extend the number of vocabulary and their vocabulary knowledge in order to use them appropriately in L2 contexts. Vocabulary learning includes learning some techniques which consist of learning collocations.

Due to the fact that collocations have the linguistic and cultural basis, they should be taught when someone wants to learn an L2. The cultural aspect of collocations relates to the way they convey the meaning and without being aware of them misuse of collocations causes misunderstanding in communication. The overall purpose of current study was to figure out the differences between English and Persian collocations, especially those groups of collocations which contain colours.

The results concluded that the frequency and percentage of collocations which contain the colour black had a huge diversity among all the chosen colours in both English and Persian. It was shown that this colour plays a significant role in constructing colour collocations in both languages, as it had the first place in both. It is important to consider the connotation meaning of this colour in English and Persian. For most cases and in many cultures, the colour black is associated with secret, ambiguity, fear, and is known as the colour of mourning—perhaps the reason comes from this truth that black is the colour of night. English and Persian have many common points in the meanings of black. In both cultures, this colour has a feeling of mysteriousness and it is the colour of mourning. This similarity perhaps causes this sameness in the frequency of using this group of collocations.

The results obtained from the data analysis presented the frequency of white collocations which demonstrated that their frequency was 15 in English and 21 in Persian. It can be claimed that the frequency of white collocations in English was more than its frequency in Persian. It had the second place in Persian, but the fifth place in English. This differentiate could come from the fact, in Persian, making a contrast between white and black is more often than in English. It means that, in Persian, the opposite form of black collocations was made by replacing black with white, but, in English, we rarely see this occurrence (by comparing just these two lists of colour collocations as our sources).

The colour red had the third place. The results indicated that after black and white, the colour red had the most frequency among colour collocations in Persian. It is worth mentioning that the colour red had the same place among the English colour collocation. Red always stands for the feeling of excitement, love, and anger. We can claim that this sameness in frequency shows that this colour has the same implicit meaning in both languages (i.e., English and Persian).

Green had the frequency of 13 and it had the fourth grade among colour collocations in both English and Persian. Generally, the colour green stands as a colour of nature and it stimulates the feeling of happiness, relaxation, and health. The meaning

of this colour is the same in English and Persian (because it stands as a colour of nature and the attitude toward this colour is more common among many cultures) and the frequency was the same, too.

The next colour was yellow. The results showed the frequency of the yellow collocations was 8 in Persian and among English collocations was 7, although the frequencies were so close to each other but, in English, it was the last one and, in Persian, it was in the fifth place compared to other colours. The colour yellow is known as a colour of respect in the English culture; on the other hand, it stands as a symbol of hatred in the Persian culture. According to this explanation, it is obvious that these differences in connotation meaning may cause this difference in the frequencies of this colour in the English and Persian collocations.

The last colour one was blue. Blue means differently in the English and Persian cultures. In Persian, blue is regarded as the colour of peace, relaxation, and calmness; it is somehow related closely with this fact in the Persian culture it is considered as symbol of water (known as a colour of water). But in the English culture, in addition to these features, the colour blue stands as a colour of discipline, depression, and security. It is known as a masculine colour. These differences caused a huge variation among the English and Persians collocations with blue. As the result, the English blue collocations had the frequency of 41 and the Persian blue collocations had the frequency of 6. This large interval between the English and Persian collocations is because of a large variety in the meaning of blue collocations in English and Persian.

And, the second phase of the study was done to investigate the (possible) effect of the collocations on L2 proficiency. As a result, the second research question is answered as the following: Teaching colour collocations has a significant effect on L2 learners' proficiency.

4. Conclusion

On balance, although some similarities and differences were found out in the Persian and English colour collocations, the chi-square had to be calculated in order to show if the differences were significant or not. The results from the data analysis showed that the difference between the Persian and English colour collocations was not statistically significant.

In the second phase, the second research question was answered. In order to find out the (possible) effect of collocations on L2 learners' proficiency, the pretest and posttest scores were compared through paired samples *t* test, the results of which revealed that teaching collocations had a significant effect on the upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners' proficiency.

The findings of this study can be compared what was done before. Nofal (2012) believed that English and Arabic have some similarities in categorization, but they are different in their focuses. As the results revealed, the English and Persian collocations had similarities, but their distribution was different. According to what was done by Gyllstad (2007), there is a close relationship between the knowledge of collocation and the size of vocabulary and the level of proficiency. The finding of this study showed this relationship, as well. Additionally, Durrant (2008) stated that the problem of retention in collocations for L2 learners can be solved by increasing the number of input

and enough repetition. This study considered regular teaching as one of the solution for this problem. According to Channel (1981), raising L2 learners' awareness about collocations is necessary to improve their fluency in an L2. As it was depicted before, raising L2 learners' awareness can be done by teaching collocations directly.

Another study by Saadat Kiaee et al. (2013) came to the conclusion that teaching collocations could play a significance role in enhancing L2 learners' reading comprehension. Moreover, as what reported by this study, teaching collocations can affect L2 learners' proficiency, as well. There is some research done by researchers like Shooshtari and Karami (2012) as well as Atarodi (2011) that worked on the relation between teaching collocations and L2 learners' skills in English. All of them support the claim that by teaching collocations, L2 learners' skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) will elevate. Consequently, when all skills elevate, L2 proficiency will improve.

As the participant of the study were L2 learners whose ultimate goal is to learn how to use L2 in a proficient manner, it is necessary to make L2 learners aware about the benefits of learning collocations. Once they are informed about this importance, they show more enthusiasm in learning collocations. On the contrary, L2 teachers are responsible for this eagerness, too. They should teach collocations in line with their learners' needs.

Those in charge of curriculum management in L2 environments should consider that collocations must be taught in all four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), not in isolation. There must be some listening which is replete with collocations. Thus, L2 learners, on the one hand, can distinguish collocations, and this listening can give L2 learners as much input as they need, on the other hand. Some activities should be allocated to collocations in speaking and conversations. Accordingly, L2 learners will learn how to use collocations in oral communication.

Collocations in reading help L2 learners observe the way they are used in texts; therefore, they can learn to use collocations accurately in their writing. To have an effective L2 learning, both L2 teacher and L2 learners as well materials designers should devote more time to collocations. The results of this study may help L2 instructors and researchers follow better ways of teaching collocations to L2 learners. Also, the results may be helpful to finding out the problems and arranging well-established ways to overcome and eliminate them.

Like any other study, the current study has some limitations. A major limitation would go to the type of collocations selected for the purpose of the study. Consequently, as no reliable source exists for collocations in all languages, finding them is a tough and time-consuming task. Another striking limitation was lack of upper-intermediate and advanced learners in language institutes. In addition to the abovementioned limitations, L2 learners' awareness of their participating in study can be added here.

The type of collocations chosen as the subject for this study is just one of the collocation categories. More research studies on different categories of collocations are required. Similarly, further research can be conducted on the (possible) effects of collocations on different aspects of learning, such as speed of speech, listening comprehension, and so forth. Future researchers can investigate other variables such as beginner L2 learners, just males or females, or students with different ages. Finally, in the present study, the effect of collocations on L2 learners' proficiency was investigated. This exploration can potentially lead to the assessment of other collocation groups like those that are combined with parts of the body.

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