



The Effect of Explicit Instruction of Collocations on EFL Learners' Language Proficiency*

Eşdizimliliğin Belirgin Öğretim Yöntemiyle Öğretilmesinin İngilizce'yi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenenlerin Dil Yeterliğine Etkisi

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the impact of explicit instruction of collocations on EFL learners' English proficiency. To this end, the performance of two groups of EFL learners in the form of time-series assessment was compared. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a pretest namely Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered. The teacher and the textbooks for both groups were the same, however in the experimental group there was an explicit emphasis on collocations in all four language skills. Moreover, these students were required to keep track of collocations by taking careful notes and using them in their productive skills in order to activate and internalize them. They were also instructed to transcribe the listening passages of the textbook after the tests were administered in class. The control group was only implicitly exposed to collocations. Continuous formative assessment was used to keep track of the learners' progress towards reaching the intermediate proficiency level. To conclude the three-month course, FCE (First Certificate in English) past-papers were given to both groups and a comparison was drawn in their performance. The results indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group, suggesting that teaching collocations explicitly may lead to improvement in language proficiency.

Keywords: Explicit instruction of collocations, EFL learners, test performance, proficiency exams

ÖZ: Bu çalışma eşdizimliliğin belirgin öğretimi yöntemiyle İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin dil yeterliğine etkisini araştırmıştır. Bu amaçla, iki öğrenci grubunun performansları zaman serisi değerlendirme biçiminde karşılaştırılmıştır. Katılımcıların homojenliğini sağlamak için, ön test uygulanmıştır. Her iki grubun kitapları ve öğretmeni aynı olmuştur ancak deney grubunda eşdizimlilik her dört dil becerisi için belirgin biçimde vurgulanmıştır. Buna ek olarak, bu öğrencilerden eşdizimliliği kavramak ve yerleştirmek için dikkatli bir şekilde not almaları ve kullanmaları istenmiştir. Ayrıca, testler uygulandıktan sonra dinleme metinlerini yazıya aktarmaları istenmiştir. Eşdizimlilik kontrol grubundaki öğrencilere ise örtük bir şekilde sunulmuştur. Öğrencilerin orta seviye yeterliliğe ulaşma sürecini takip edebilmek için sürekli biçimlendirici değerlendirme kullanılmıştır. Üç ay süren dersin sonunda, FCE (First Certificate in English) sınavının geçmiş örnekleri her iki gruba da uygulanmış ve iki grubun performansları karşılaştırılmıştır. Sonuçlar deney grubunun kontrol grubuna göre daha başarılı olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu sonuçlardan da eşdizimliliğin belirgin bir biçimde öğretilmesinin dil yeterliğinin gelişimine olumlu katkı yapabileceği anlaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Eşdizimliliğin belirgin öğretim yöntemiyle öğretilmesi, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenenler, sınav performansı, yeterlik sınavları

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1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in the collocation-based approach in teaching English as a foreign language since the 90s, as evident in numerous publications in the field (cf. Bogaards and Laufer, 2004; Granger, 1998; Lewis, 1993, 1997, 2000; McCarthy and Felicity, 2008; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Nation, 2001, 2004; Nesselhauf, 2003; Schmitt, 2000; Sinclair, 2004). In fact, Lewis's (1993, 1997) pioneering work on explicit focus on lexical items, moved vocabulary to the forefront of language teaching. In Lewis's Lexical Approach, the role of lexical units, including collocations, in second language acquisition is emphasized. This shift of interest is in part due to the significant progress made in computerized corpus database technologies facilitating the accurate interpretation and categorization of authentic word combinations in the speech of native-speaking users of a given language, in particular English. As Kennedy (2003) observes, "the corpus-based investigation of collocational relationships has disclosed the extent to which a language may be regarded to be an expansive and complicated collection of word groups that, as a whole, function as lexemes that in turn become associated with particular usages" (480). This, in fact, "challenges syntax-based approaches to language description and pedagogy" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 469), which focused widely on grammatical drills in productive skills of speaking and writing. In contrast to the grammatical approach, proponents of the lexical approach (e.g., Lewis, 1993; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Nation, 2001; and Richards and Renandya, 2002) believe that appropriate knowledge of vocabulary is the guide to developing a strong basis on which both productive and receptive skills could prosper. In this regard, the role of collocations is irrefutable. According to Lewis (1997), "fluency is achievable in case the acquisition of a substantial store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items is accomplished" (p. 15). This has been reiterated by Richards and Renandya (2002), who imply that fluency in a second language would not be accomplished without direct focus on collocations. Along the same line, James (1998) asserts that "the effective application of collocations contributes significantly to one's idiomaticity and native-likeness" (152). Similarly, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) warn against the teaching and learning of lexical items as a long and boring list of isolated words to be defined and memorized, as it was customary in traditional methodologies, such as grammar-translation method. Rather, words should be considered as important linguistic building blocks that should be taught in contextualized, meaningful language so that second language learners can internalize them and use them appropriately. This is echoed in Wray's (2002) observation stating that moving from a word-by-word to a chunk-by-chunk approach increases meaning-based fluency in language use.

Some empirical studies have demonstrated that there is a correlation between knowledge of collocations and proficiency level of EFL learners (e.g., Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Keshavarz and Salimi, 2007; Mahmoud, 2005; William, 2000). According to William, collocational knowledge correlates strongly with general proficiency, and more proficient EFL learners tend to pick up words through formulaic sequences rather than in isolation. Keshavarz and Salimi (2007) also found a positive correlation between EFL learners' collocational competence and their proficiency level. This finding confirms the results of similar studies such as Bonk (2000), Gitsaki (1996, as cited in Bonk, 2000), and Hsu and Chiu (2008).

However, review of literature shows that most studies on collocation have concentrated on a single language skill, such as *writing* (Bahramdoust, 2012; Ebrahimi-Bazzaz and Arshad-Abd, 2011; Farghal and Al-Hamly, 2007; Gragner, 1998), *listening* and *speaking* (Attar and Allam, 2013; Ebrahimi-Bazzaz, Arshad Abd, Ismi Arif, and Nooreen, 2015; Hsu and Chiu, 2008; Kettabi, 2013), and *reading* (Hsu, 2010; Huang, 2007; Sadat Kiaee, Heravi Moghaddam, and Moheb Hosseini, 2013), and investigations based on continuous assessment of learners' collocational knowledge in all language skills over a course of study (e.g., one semester) are scarce. Therefore, the present study set out to fill this niche by investigating the impact of a

fully collocation-based language course of study on learners' overall proficiency level. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact of explicit instruction of collocation on improving EFL learners' English in order to enhance their performance in a proficiency exam, namely FCE (First Certificate in English). This certificate is granted to those whose knowledge and performance is at the intermediate level of English.

2. METHOD

2.1. Design

To avoid the impact of history effect, this study followed an interrupted time-series design with a comparison group, i.e., the performance of two groups of EFL learners in a series of proficiency tests was compared.

2.2. Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study.

1. To what extent does explicit instruction of collocations lead to the improvement of the four language skills?
2. To what extent is explicit teaching of collocations effective in raising the learners' proficiency level from one level (pre-intermediate) to the next (intermediate)?

2.3. Participants and Setting

Thirty adolescent EFL learners studying at a private language center in Tehran, Iran, participated in this study. They were selected on the basis of convenient sampling, in the absence of access to other EFL groups. The participants ranged from 15 to 19 years of age. They were randomly assigned to two groups: experimental (Group A) and control group (Group B). Collocations were taught explicitly to the experimental group, while they were not highlighted in the case of Group B students. The proficiency level of both groups was pre-intermediate based on the results of their scores on the Cambridge PET test, which was used to homogenize the participants. Students in both groups aimed at reaching the intermediate level of proficiency with FCE as the target certificate. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants in terms of their scores on the PET test.

Table 1. Distribution of participants in terms of language proficiency

| No. of Students | PET Scores | Group A | Group B |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| 8 | Pass with Distinction | 4 | 4 |
| 13 | Pass (B) | 6 | 7 |
| 9 | Pass (C) | 5 | 4 |

It needs to be pointed out that 'Pass with Distinction' in Table 1 refers to the learners' having answered 80+ percent of the PET exam questions correctly, and Pass B and C correspond to 70+ and 60+ percent, respectively. Results below sixty percent are considered as failing grades, based on the PET scoring scale.

2.4. Materials

Oxford FCE Result student's book (Davies & Falla, 2012) together with the accompanying workbook were taught to both groups. For further practice on the FCE proficiency exam itself, Cambridge Test Books 1 to 3 were used. 'Intermediate Oxford Word Skills' by Gairns and Redman (2012) served the purpose of providing the learners with necessary collocations. Thirty-six units of this book were taught during the semester. 'Oxford Word Skills Intermediate' textbook presents vocabulary in the form of collocations. Further collocations were introduced through the students' textbook 'Focus on Vocabulary I' (Schmitt, Schmitt, and Mann, 2011), whose exercises are largely related to vocabulary and collocation.

The rationale behind the choice of these standard and reliable materials was that they met the purpose of the present study, i.e., evaluating the impact of explicit instruction of collocation on improving EFL learners' language proficiency. More importantly, they matched the proficiency level of the participants. It needs to be remembered that the writing sections of the textbooks are used as prompts for learners to write based on the criteria of the exam. This would invariably be followed by a test or a quiz so that learners would remain alert with regard to the importance of collocations throughout the course. It must be pointed out that the collocations used in these books were mainly lexical and most frequent patterns were: noun+noun (e.g., steak knife, rose garden, family home), adjective+noun (e.g., brief interval, constructive feedback, prominent citizen), and verb+noun phrase (e.g., tackle the problem, spoil the view, fulfill his ambition).

It is also worth mentioning that FCE is referred to both First Certificate in English Exam and the books that prepare students for this exam.

2.5. Procedure

Initially, in order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a standard pretest namely Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered. The materials described above were taught to both groups by the same teacher over a period of three months; however, in the experimental group, there was an explicit emphasis on collocation, and the students were required to keep track of collocations by taking careful notes and using them in their productive skills, particularly in their writing tasks, in order to activate and internalize them. Later on, the teacher would evaluate the students' mastery of the words through the use of vocabulary quizzes. Moreover, participants in Group A had to transcribe listening passages of the course book after the tests were done in class. This explicit emphasis on the importance and use of collocations was absent in the case of control group. Learners' improvement in the four language skills and vocabulary was evaluated through continuous assessment, using a series of FCE tests, during the course of the study in order to make the assessment reliable. Participants' performance was given specific scores based on the pre-defined scoring system of the tests so that their English improvement could be easily observed and evaluated.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Overview

As mentioned before, the aim of this study was to examine the impact of explicit instruction of collocation on EFL learners' performance in a proficiency exam. For this purpose, the performance of two groups of Iranian EFL learners, each consisting of 15 students, was compared. The areas under scrutiny were the four language skills plus vocabulary. The two groups were different with regard to the treatment of collocations. More specifically, in addition to the routine teaching of the materials in question (i.e., the course books & the supplementary books), the experimental group received explicit instruction on collocations. The progress of both groups of students toward their target proficiency level, i.e., Intermediate Level, was evaluated by means of a series of tests administered at various points during the course with intervals of at least two weeks of intensive instruction. This continuous assessment covered all areas under scrutiny. The result of data analyses for each language skill is presented below separately.

4.2. Listening

Table 2 presents the number of collocations used in each listening lesson and in total. It should be remembered that Group B students, who did not receive any explicit instruction on collocation, ended each listening activity without focusing on transcription and incorporating collocations into their writing tasks.

Table 2. Frequency of collocations in each listening lesson and in total

| Lessons→ | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | Total |
|------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Number of Collocations | 25 | 31 | 28 | 43 | 33 | 42 | 38 | 36 | 45 | 39 | 37 | 43 | 440 |

Figure 1 below displays the results of continuous assessment of the listening skill for participants in Group A.

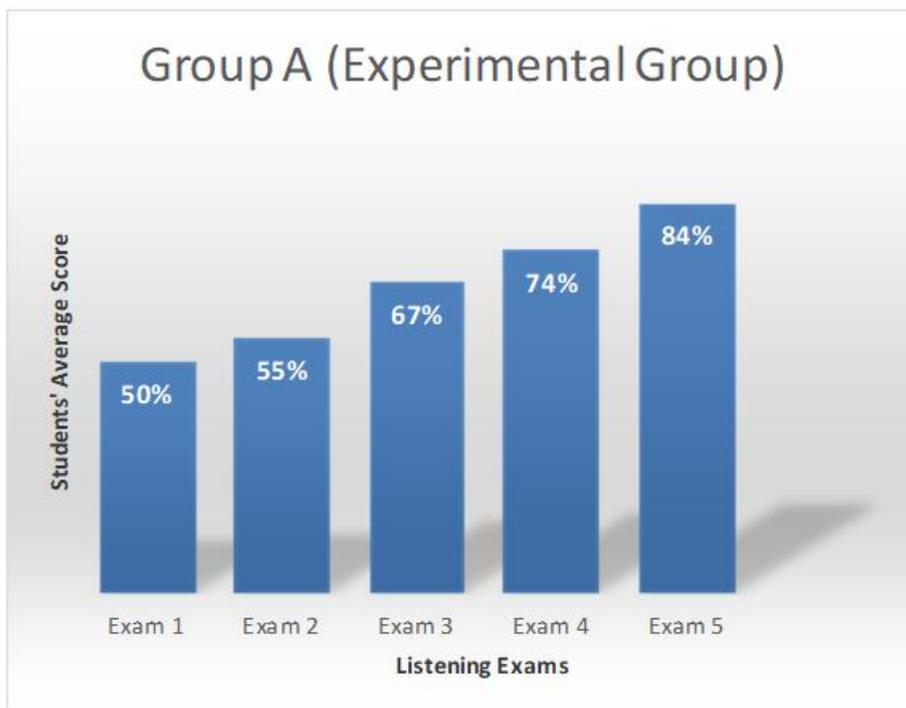


Figure 1. Group A performance in listening exams

As Figure 1 shows, Group A students made a steady progress in the listening skill with focus on collocations. As can be seen, at the beginning of the treatment (Exam 1), the students were far below the passing score (70%); however, the addition of gap-filling exercises in their course book, which directly focused on collocation to make their English more natural and native-like, appears to have raised their awareness towards the use of collocations in English. The results of the last two exams indicate passing scores of B and A, respectively. It seems that the large number of collocations the students have learned in the listening exercises has contributed to the learners' consciousness raising. Thus, it can be concluded that explicit instruction of collocation will enhance the learners' test performance and increase their proficiency level.

Figure 2 below displays the results of continuous assessment of the listening tasks for Group B students.

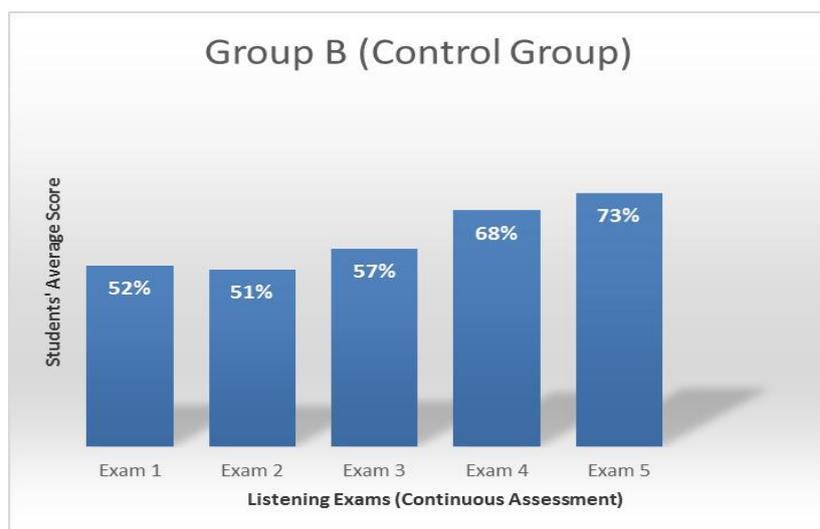


Figure 2. Group B performance in listening exams

As the results of the continuous assessment show, Group B students did not make much progress in the listening skill. Everything being equal, this seems to be due to the fact that these students did not receive any explicit instruction on collocation, and their listening practice was restricted to the routine exercises provided by the book with no direct focus on collocation. As a result, they failed to achieve the passing average scores up to the fifth exam, subsequent to which only grade C was obtained. This, compared to the performance of the experimental group, indicates how explicit instruction of collocation can be effective. Contrary to Group A, even a single student in Group B did not gain score B, let alone a band score of A. This finding is of great significance as it reveals the effectiveness of explicit instruction of target language formulaic sequences.

4.3. Speaking

As far as speaking is concerned, the textbook for both groups was Intermediate Oxford Word Skills; however, in the collocation-based group (the experimental group), the teacher highlighted the collocations. The following figures compare the differences in the participants' performance at the beginning and at the end of the course, both within and across groups.

Figure 3 displays the results achieved by Group A learners at the beginning and the end of the course.

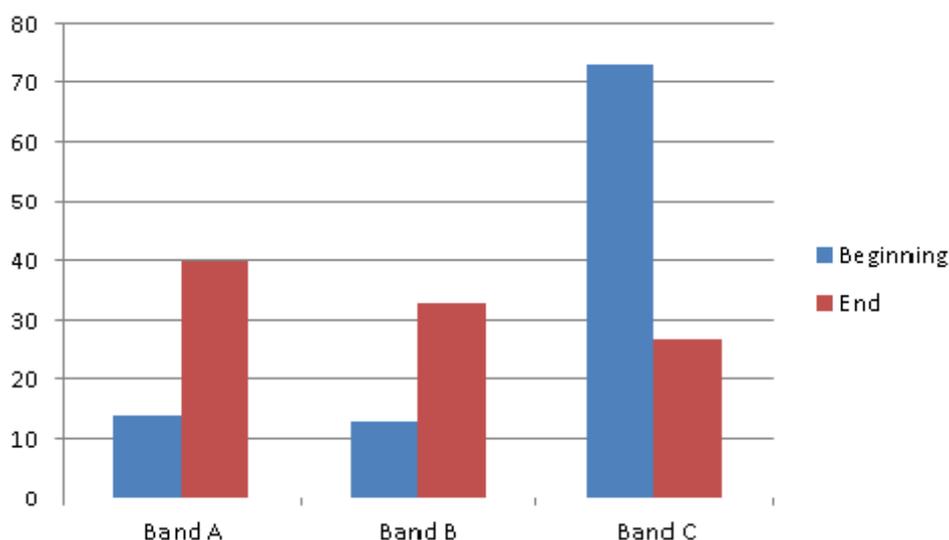


Figure 3. Speaking scores of Group A at the beginning and end of the course

As can be seen, the students' overall performance at the beginning and the end of the semester was substantially different. There was a noticeable increase in Bands A and B scores, and a sharp decrease in the scores of Band C (73% to 27%). This is clearly an outstanding accomplishment since the majority of the students successfully scored A and B within a short study period (one semester).

Next, the performance of group B students at the beginning and the end of the course was compared, as illustrated in Figure 4.

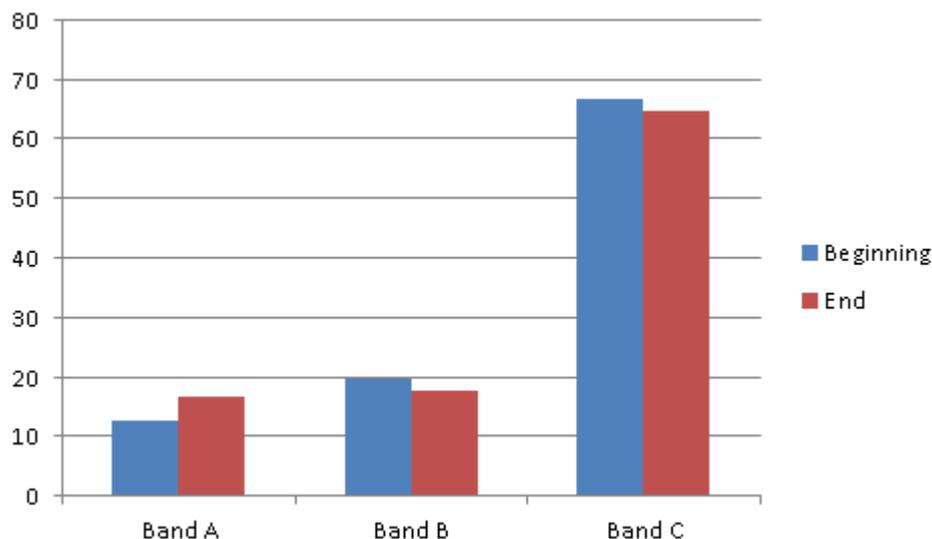


Figure 4. Speaking scores of Group B at the beginning and end of the course

As Figure 4 shows, the results gained by the learners in Group B at the beginning and the end of the course in each of the three bands are nearly the same. In other words, students in this group did not make any progress in the speaking skill over the course of the study. This indicates that learning words alone without emphasis on formulaic expressions and collocations, which is a feature of authenticity and native speech, will result in the vocabulary remaining passive or their usage being ineffective in spoken language.

4.4. Reading

With regard to the reading skill, the learners in both groups had Oxford FCE Result as their textbook. The following figures show the progress of both groups in the reading skill throughout the continuous assessment over the course of the study.

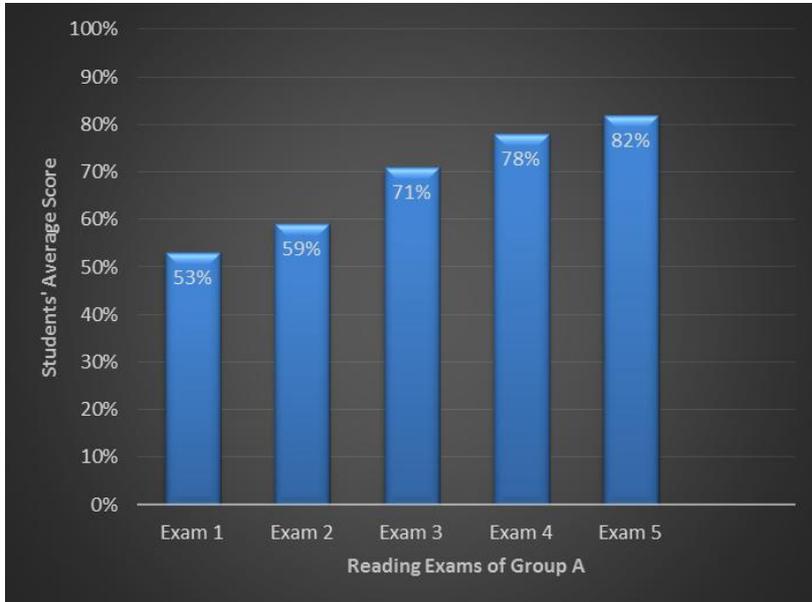


Figure 5. Reading performance of Group A students

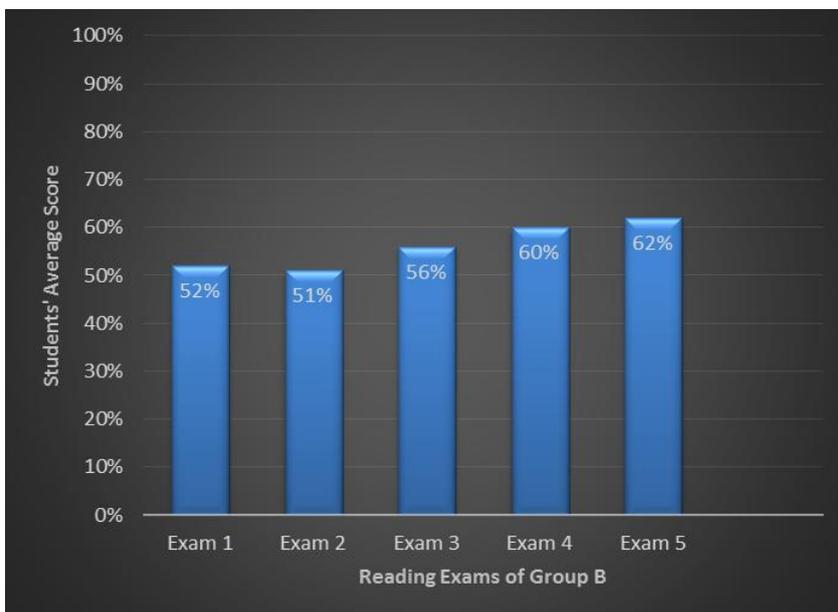


Figure 6. Reading performance of Group B students

The reading section of the course proved to be the most challenging for all the learners in Group A and B. As can be seen, the highest score achieved by Group A was 82%, which corresponds to the band score B. This rather lukewarm success in achieving the intermediate level of English proficiency seems to be due to the fact that the textbooks that try to address the reading section of FCE exams do not present sufficient passages and vocabulary units with a focus on collocation. The FCE Result book presents only twelve reading passages and twelve vocabulary units with insufficient number of collocations. This is incompatible with the

proficiency exams which contain a far wider range of collocations, many of which are unknown to the candidates.

With regard to the performance of Group B students, as displayed in Figure 6, the absence of focus on collocation led to disastrous results as the highest score obtained in the last exam was 62%. This percentage does not correspond to even the minimum score in the reading exam namely C, which requires 65 percent of the correct answers. The comparison of the two figures shows the significance of an explicit focus on collocations in enhancing the performance of learners in a proficiency exam.

4.5. Writing and Vocabulary

Table 3 lists the number of collocations included in each unit of the book 'Focus on Vocabulary'. These collocations are taught to improve the learners' writing skill. The focus of the textbook was to prepare learners for the writing tasks of FCE, which include formal letters, essays, reports, and proposals. The students received instructions on the format of these writing types and were taught register-appropriate vocabulary through their textbook. In addition to these, Group A students' were given explicit instruction on collocation.

Table 3. Number of collocations in the learners' textbook 'Focus on Vocabulary'

| Units | No. of Collocations |
|-------|---------------------|
| 1 | 25 |
| 2 | 23 |
| 3 | 22 |
| 4 | 20 |
| 5 | 23 |
| 6 | 21 |
| 7 | 24 |
| 8 | 20 |
| 9 | 25 |
| 10 | 24 |
| 11 | 27 |
| 12 | 26 |
| 13 | 23 |
| 14 | 24 |
| 15 | 26 |
| 16 | 20 |
| 17 | 24 |
| 18 | 26 |
| 19 | 23 |
| 20 | 20 |

The total number of collocations covered in the book was 466. Figure 7 shows the performance of Group A students in the writing skill. In this figure, the performance of the participants at the beginning of the course is compared with that at the end of the course in order to rate the learners' progress in the writing tasks.

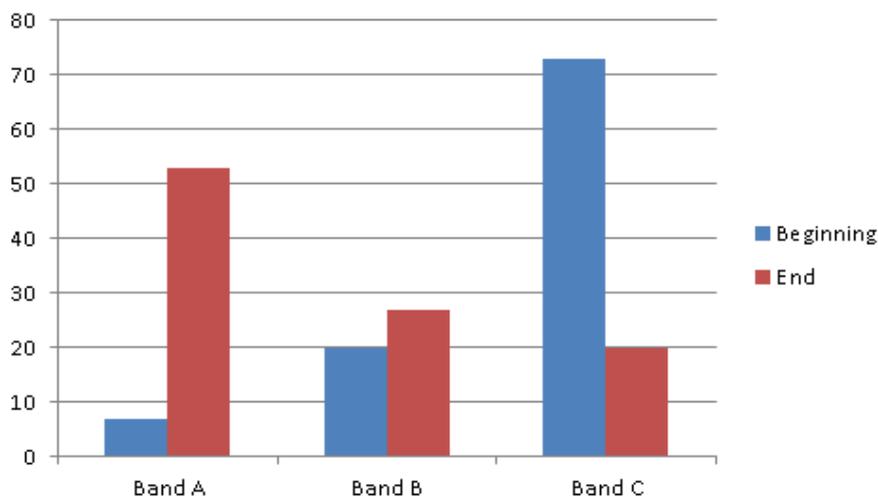


Figure 7. Writing scores of Group A at the beginning and end of the course

As displayed in Figure 7, at the beginning of the course, 73% of the participants scored Band C, which is far below the intermediate level, and only 7% of the class achieved Band Score A. The remaining 20% students scored B, which indicates that their performance was at average level meaning that their production in writing partially reflected the use of authentic language. It must be remembered that Band Score A is indicative of the fact that students have produced sufficiently authentic text at the intermediate level.

At the end of the course, as Figure 7 illustrates, the results obtained by the learners in their fifth exam shows considerable progress. The percentage of band score A rose from 7% to 53%, and band C decreased from 73% to 20%. The end of the term percentages show a substantial progress in the participants' writing skill. This indicates that a collocation-based approach can efficiently increase the learners' chances to score high at a given proficiency exam, even in a short period of study.

Now we turn to the performance of Group B students in the writing skill. Figure 8 provides a comparison between the learners' performance in their writing skill at the beginning and at the end of the course.

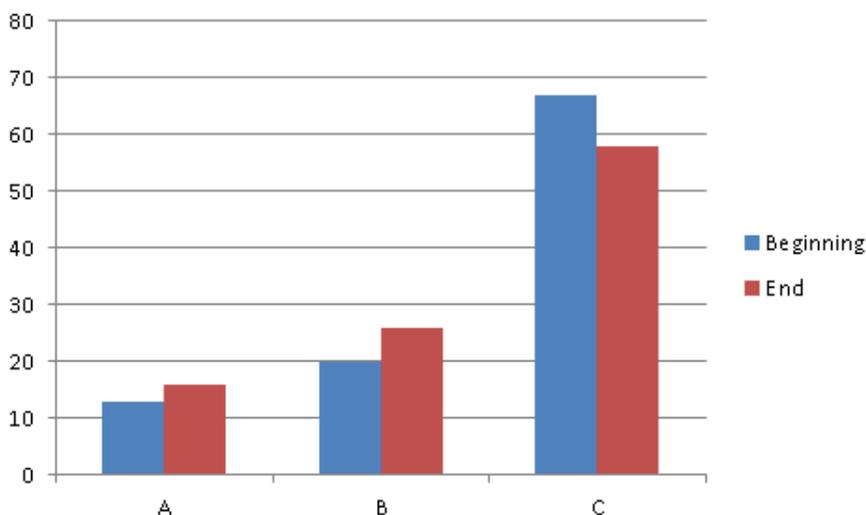


Figure 8. Writing scores of Group B at the beginning and end of the course

As displayed in Figure 8, the scores of Group B students at the beginning of the course are similar to those achieved by Group A as the majority of the students in both groups scored

C, and only a small percentage scored A. However, unlike Group A, students in Group B did not show any progress at the end of the course (i.e., in the last exam). As the figure shows, the majority of the participants (58%) still scored C, and the increase in the band scores A and B was insignificant. This is indicative of the fact that the absence of instruction of collocation, as the only missing factor in Group B, results in slow progress as regards proficiency in the target language.

5. DISCUSSION

Most studies in the field of collocation have been conducted on the positive correlation between knowledge of collocation and individual language skills (e.g., Bahardoust and Raouf-Moeini, 2012; Ebrahimi-Bazzaz et al., 2015; Farghal and Al-Hamly, 2007; Hsu, 2010; Mingchia Lin, 2014; Reza and Ashouri, 2016; Sadat Kiaee et al. 2013), and empirical studies on the effect of explicit instruction of collocation on overall language proficiency are scarce. Thus, in an attempt to partially fill this research gap, the present study aimed at investigating the impact of explicit teaching of collocations on learners' performance in all four language skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Overall, the findings of the present study lend support to the claim made by some scholars in the field (e.g., James, 1998; Lewis, 1997; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Richards and Renandya, 2002; Wray, 2002) that knowledge of collocation contributes significantly to fluency and idiomaticity in a second language.

The findings are consistent with those of other researches, including Attar and Allami, 2013; Bahns and Eldaw, 1993; Bonk, 2000; Hsu and Chiu, 2008; Huang, 2007; Lin, 2002; Macaro and Masterman, 2006; Nesselhauf, 2003; Norris and Ortega, 2006; Shooshtari, and Karimi, 2013; Spada and Tornita, 2010; Zaferanieh and Behroozi, 2011; and Zhang, 1993. All of these researchers claim that explicit instruction is more effective in teaching collocations than implicit teaching methods as it can speed up the learning process and can have a more long-lasting effect on memory retention. For example, the results of the speaking tests in the present study showed a significant improvement in the students' speaking performance at the end of the treatment thanks to the explicit instruction of collocation. This finding is in line with those of Attar and Allami (2013), Arshad-Abd et al. (2015), Ebrahimi-Bazzaz et al. (2015), and Hsu and Chiu (2008). With regard to the writing skill, the results of the current research demonstrated that explicit instruction of collocation has a positive effect on students' writing performance. This finding confirms the results of studies conducted by other researchers, such as Ebrahimi-Bazzaz and Arshad-Abd (2011), Farghal and Al-Hamly (2007), Hsu (2007), Karami (2013), and Liu (2000). Similarly, the results of the reading skill are in line with those of Hsu (2010), Huang, 2007; Lin (2002, 2014), Reza and Ashouri (2016), and Sadat Kiaee et al. (2013). However, the findings of the present study go against those of Zarei and Tondaki (2015), who claim that there is no difference between implicit and explicit instruction with regard to their effect on the acquisition of collocation. The difference in the findings of the two studies may be due to different proficiency levels of participants. The participants of the present study were lower intermediate students, whereas those in Rezaei and Tondaki's study were upper intermediate students.

The results are also in stark contrast with those of Altınok's (2000) research who found that explicit instruction of vocabulary through collocations did not yield any positive learning outcome. This seems to be mainly due to the amount of time spent on teaching collocation in Atkinok's study--only two class hours, compared to three months of intensive instruction in the present study. As the researcher says, "the treatment took place over two consecutive class hours" (Altınok, 2000, p. 24). It is obvious that with this limited treatment time no learning outcome can be expected.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the conclusion drawn from the results of the present study is that explicit instruction of collocation has a great impact on learners' proficiency in all four language skills. The performance of the experimental group demonstrated that at the end of the treatment all participants achieved passing grades with five of them obtaining band score A in the FCE exam. This is in stark contrast with the poor performance of the control group who lagged behind and did not achieve the attempted goal. This is largely due to the absence of explicit instruction of collocation in the case of the control group as the only missing factor in this group's syllabus.

The unsatisfactory performance of Group B students in the proficiency exam may imply lack of awareness of EFL learners about the semantic and collocational restrictions of English lexicon. This problem may stem from the fact that EFL learners generally try to learn English vocabulary as isolated words rather than in combination with other words. Thus, teachers should put emphasis on the explicit instruction of collocation vocabulary teaching. In order to write and speak natural and authentic English, foreign language learners need to be taught collocations explicitly as lack of awareness of features of collocation often causes problems for EFL learners. Thus, it is the teachers' responsibility to draw learners' attention to collocation and give them tests in order to evaluate their intake and use of collocations in various contexts at regular intervals.

Another pedagogical consideration is that, as Hussein (1990) implies, the mere knowledge of collocations is considered passive and does not necessarily provide the learners with the authenticity in production at any given level. It is, therefore, necessary to activate the use of collocations so that learners would take advantage of these great tools in the productive skills of speaking and writing. One way to do so is by integrating the language skills with collocations. For example, the listening tasks could be easily integrated with the writing and speaking skills so that production with a high degree of authenticity would be facilitated.

7. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of the present study should be interpreted with caution since the sample size was small owing to convenient sampling. Research conducted with a more representative sample may yield different outcomes. This investigation was also restricted to intermediate level of proficiency; therefore, further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction of collocation in other proficiency levels. Moreover, the results of the present study may have been partially influenced by the learners' characteristics, such as motivation and learner autonomy, which may lead to different rate of learning. The current study did not investigate the degrees of difficulty various kinds of collocations pose for the learners. Future studies, then, can address this issue. Further research may also be conducted to see how collocational errors are treated by language teachers.

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Extended Abstract

While many studies have been conducted on the positive correlation between knowledge of collocation and individual language skills, empirical studies on the effect of explicit instruction of collocation on overall language proficiency are scarce. Thus, in an attempt to partially fill this research gap, the present study set out to investigate the impact of explicit teaching of collocations on learners' performance in all four language skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For this purpose, the performance of two groups of EFL learners in different language skills in the form of time-series assessment was compared, employing a standard proficiency exam, i.e., First Certificate in English (FCE). To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a pretest namely Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered. The teacher and the textbooks for both groups were the same, however the two groups differed with regard to the treatment of collocations. More specifically, in addition to the routine teaching of the materials in questions (i.e., the textbooks and the supplementary materials), the experimental group received explicit instruction on collocations. That is, the teacher would highlight the collocations in the language skill tasks and would elaborate on them. Moreover, these students were assigned homework on

collocations and were required to keep track of collocations by taking careful notes and using them in their productive skills namely speaking and writing in order to activate and internalize them. They were also instructed to transcribe the listening passages of the textbook after the tests were administered in class. The control group was only implicitly exposed to collocations. Continuous formative assessment, by means of a series of standardized tests administered at various points during the course with intervals of at least two weeks of intensive instruction, was used to keep track of the learners' (both experimental and control groups) progress towards reaching their target proficiency level, i.e., Intermediate Level. This continuous assessment covered all areas under scrutiny. To conclude the three-month course, FCE (First Certificate in English) past-papers were given to both groups and a comparison was drawn based on their performance in different language skills.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent does explicit instruction of collocations lead to the improvement of the four language skills?
2. To what extent is explicit teaching of collocations effective in raising the learners' proficiency level from one level (pre-intermediate) to the next (intermediate)?

The overall results of the present study demonstrated that explicit instruction of collocation has a great impact on learners' proficiency in all four language skills. The performance of the experimental group showed that at the end of the treatment all the participants achieved passing grades with five of them obtaining band score A in the FCE exam. This is in stark contrast with the poor performance of the control group who lagged behind and did not achieve the attempted goal. This is largely due to the absence of explicit instruction of collocation in the case of the control group as the only missing factor in this group's syllabus. The results of the present study confirm those of similar studies conducted by other researchers in the field, as reviewed in the preceding sections of this paper.

Pedagogically speaking, the unsatisfactory performance of Group B students in the proficiency exam may imply lack of awareness of EFL learners about the semantic and collocational restrictions of English lexicon. This problem may stem from the fact that EFL learners generally try to learn English vocabulary as isolated words rather than in combination with other words. Thus, teachers should put emphasis on the explicit instruction of collocation vocabulary teaching. In order to write and speak natural and authentic English, foreign language learners need to be taught collocations explicitly. Lack of awareness of features of collocation often causes problems for EFL learners. Thus, it is the teacher's responsibility to draw learners' attention to collocation and give them tests in order to evaluate their intake and use of collocations in various contexts at regular intervals. However, the results of the present study should be interpreted with caution since the sample size was small owing to convenient sampling. Research conducted with a more representative sample may yield different outcomes. This investigation was also restricted to intermediate level of proficiency; therefore, further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction of collocation in other proficiency levels. Moreover, the results of the present study may have been partially influenced by the learners' characteristics, such as motivation and learner autonomy, which may lead to different rate of learning. The current study did not investigate the degrees of difficulty various kinds of collocations pose for the learners. Future studies, then, can address this issue. Further research may also be conducted to see how collocational errors are treated by language teachers.