Patterns of the Iranian Advanced Learners’ Problems With English Collocations: A Focus on Lexical Collocations

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Abstract
Collocations are a pervasive feature of many languages and English seems to be particularly rich in such multi-word lexemes. They have not been a major focus of teaching and research, however, despite the fact that learners have serious problems with the production of idiomatically correct language. The present study, therefore, aimed at finding out the problems of high proficiency level Iranian learners of English with English collocations. The study had two phases. In phase I, about 2400 pages of materials produced (in English) by 27 subjects were carefully studied and a list of collocational errors were extracted. The list was then analyzed and five patterns were found. In phase II, six cued production tasks were developed which were given to 64 subjects. Results showed that Iranian advanced learners of English do have serious problems with English collocations (about 55 percent of the time). The results of the present study can have theoretical and pedagogical implications for syllabus designers, teachers, and translators.

Keywords: Collocations, advanced learners' problems, errors patterns, vocabulary learning

Introduction
During the 1990s, interest in vocabulary teaching and research increased. Nation's (1990) ‘Teaching and Learning Vocabulary’ appeared at the beginning of the decade and proved influential in its
inclusive review of research on vocabulary while providing pedagogical guidance through interpreting the research in terms of classroom applications. According to Michael Lewis (2000), John Sinclair’s (1991) book, ‘Corpus, Concordance, Collocation’ and subsequent collocation studies have revealed new understandings of how English works leading to new descriptions of the language.

Yet, as Zahar, Cobb, and Spada (2000) rightly claim, while L2 vocabulary acquisition is no longer a ‘neglected area’ (Meara, 1980), a lack of progress remains on some basic questions. One important question which remains unresolved concerns whether the L2 lexicon itself can be acquired through reading, or is more likely to result from some kind of direct instruction, or instructionally enhanced reading. No matter which approach to vocabulary acquisition is chosen, one fact remains uncontroversial; that all learners, even advanced ones, have at least some problems with their vocabulary, particularly in their production. One reason for this may be that learners usually try to learn the meaning of words individually without paying much attention to the relations that words form with each other. Carter (1991) asserts that knowing a word completely and for purposes of accurate productive use involves at least knowing (among other things) the network of relations it forms with other words, either collocationally, or in terms of semantic field or colliaginationally.

Firth (1957: 197) introduced the notion of collocation as a part of his overall theory of meaning. It is at the collocational level of analysis, between the situational and the grammatical that he proposes to deal with lexical meaning. More particularly, as Koiranen & Hyrsky (1997) state, Firth (1966: 179) later argued: “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” and this ‘keeping company’ he called collocation and considered it a significant part of the word’s meaning. There is no airtight definition of collocations. Viegas (1996) points out that: “Our general thesis is that there is no single definition for what a collocation is, but rather, collocational behavior emerges from a theory of what the range of connections and relations between lexical items can be”. Viegas (ibid.) claims that much of the allegedly idiosyncratic and language specific collocation in language is in fact predictable from a sufficiently rich theory of lexical organization. Yet,
a number of definitions of collocations have been offered in the literature.

A collocation is often defined as either “an arbitrary and recurrent word combination” (Benson, 1990) or “the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other” (Sinclair, 1991). Newmark (1988) who defines collocations as two or more words that go happily or naturally with each other, for example, pay a visit. Hill (1999) describes collocations as ‘the way words occur together in predictable combinations’. Similarly, Gitsaki (1999) describes collocations as recurrent word combinations, e.g., strong tea, to commit suicide, etc. A similar definition is proposed by Cruse (1986).

Taylor (1997) defines collocations in terms of Saussure’s well-known dichotomy between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of lexical items. The syntagmatic axis refers to a word’s ability to combine with other words in the same string. This is collocation.

In simple terms, there are situations in which “a teacher finds herself saying to a learner that what he said is not wrong exactly, but doesn’t sound English” (The Digital Education Network, 1996). It is here that the notion of collocation comes in handy.

The literature on collocations shows an agreement among researchers and language pedagogists as to the importance of collocations for F/SL learning. As Gitsaki & Taylor (1997) point out, it has been suggested that an increase of the students’ knowledge of collocations will result in an improvement of their oral skills, their listening comprehension, and reading speed (Brown, 1974). Collocational knowledge could also help students overcome problems of vocabulary style and usage. The importance of prefabricated language chunks and routinized formulas for language acquisition and use has been reported by Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992). Gary Chang (1996) quotes Brown (1994) who provides evidence that collocations are important in learning vocabulary because: First, they reinforce the fact that language is spoken and read in chunks; second, high proficiency learners rely on associated meanings as input into memory; third, collocational groups are also rhythm groups; fourth,
collocations define and delimit each other, their defining power can help students infer meaning from context; and finally, from the knowledge of common collocations, the students can more easily understand uncommon or technical ones.

Anderson & Nagy (1991) underscore the importance of taking into account the deep meanings including collocational properties hidden in words. According to The Centre For Instructional Development And Research (2000), our brain tends to store language in chunks, rather than individual words. Thus, familiarity with collocations and the resulting ability to make guesses about a speaker/writer’s speech should increase a non-native speaker’s efficiency as a listener or reader. Gough (1996: 32) claims that students need to know “which words go with which, how words go together normally and how we can manipulate these arrangements to make new meanings for ourselves”.

Despite the partial similarity between the words used to define collocations, there is a lack of agreement as to the interpretation and understanding of the exact nature of collocations. According to the Center For Instructional Development & Research (2000), collocations are collections of words that ‘fit together’, i.e., they are predictable patterns and phrases or groups of words that we typically use together. So, idioms like take a break, structures like If I had a chance, I would... and word combinations like get on a bus/ get in a car, are all considered collocations. In much the same way, Gitsaki refers to collocations as combinations of lexical items, conventionalized language forms, prefabricated language chunks and routinized formulas, phrase patterns, and word associations. On the other hand, however, Amold (1995) differentiates idioms from collocations, saying that idioms are strings of words the meaning of which cannot be determined from the meaning of their component parts. In the case of collocations, however, the meaning can be guessed from the meaning of their component parts. What is not predictable is the particular words that are used. Yet again, according to the Center For Instructional Development & Research (2000), collocations can be described in a number of ways. One way of thinking about them is in terms of ‘fixedness’. By a fixed collocation,
it is meant one in which the pattern has very few expected variation, like the idiom *kick the bucket*. In other words, idioms are once more viewed as collocations.

In addition, the Center For Instructional Development & Research (2000) differentiates between collocations and word associations. Also, according to the Digital Education Network (op. cit.), one should not confuse collocations with association of words and ideas. If a psychiatrist asks a patient to freely associate words and the patient comes up with *‘table, wood, trees, birds’*, these are not collocations.

Collocation is one of the darlings of those who follow a philosophy called the lexical approach – a school of thought that says that ‘language consists of grammatical lexis, not lexicalised grammar’ (Morgan Lewis, 1997). But it is now widely accepted that making students aware of the way words combine with others in predictable ways is a vital element in the struggle to engender accurate and natural sounding English. For, students at the intermediate and advanced levels often know the words, but frequently use them inaccurately. For example, they say ‘weak rain’ instead of ‘light rain’.

Such problems arise partly because of the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of collocations. Townsend (1999) says that on a more deeply erratic and idiomatic level, collocation demands that one word is used rather than another in particular contexts and this idiomaticity often defies any obvious logic and is thus very difficult for non-native speakers to predict – for example, *a roaring trade, donkey’s years, and in the nick of the time*, etc. In fact there is no logical reason why certain words go together, e.g., one can say *John is an eligible bachelor* but cannot say *John is an available bachelor*. Why is this? There is no logical reason. This unpredictability of collocation is clearly stated in the following definition of collocations given by ‘Winfield college, Teachers’ Teasers’:

> Collocations are defined as idiomatic expressions... which are easy to understand but not so easy for a learner to produce correctly. One can think of many verbs that might be used with *lion* to describe the sound it makes,
for example, *bellow, shout, scream, yell, holler*. It just happens that English speakers have chosen to use *roar*.

Unlike idioms, collocations do not hold simply between words but some more general item that subsumes them all. For example, one may find a *strong argument, the strength of the argument, he argued strongly, his argument was strengthened*. So the collocation does not hold between *strong and argument* but between all the related words, *strong, strength, strongly, strengthen, and argue and argument*.

**Learners’ Problems with Collocations**

As Gitsaki and Taylor (1997) contend, the task of learning collocations can present both intralingual and interlingual challenges. Collocation describes lexical relations and word combinations, but joining words that are semantically compatible does not always produce acceptable combinations. For instance, *many thanks* is an acceptable English collocation but *several thanks* is not. On the other hand, collocations can differ from language to language, e.g., someone who drinks a lot is a *heavy drinker* in English and a *strong glass* in Greek. *The road is clear* in English but *free in Greek*. Similarly, *snow* is *heavy* both in English and Farsi, but *rain* is *heavy* in English while it is *hard* or *fast* in Farsi. A lot of collocational errors that learners commit were found to be due to negative transfer from L1, unfamiliarity with the structure of the particular collocations, and the tendency to use generic terms instead of specific ones, e.g., *pipe water* instead of *tap water*. (Fayez-Hossein, 1990 cited in Gitsaki & Taylor, 1997)

It is worth noting that, as Cornelia (1999) states, it is the production rather than comprehension of collocations that is the real problem.

As to the interlingual problems, Martelli (1998) believes that mother tongue interference accounts for the generation of wrong collocations. In the same way, Shalev (2000) believes that students learning EFL tend to make mistakes because of the differences between English and their mother tongue. Shalev refers to Gough (1996) who suggests activities to enable pupils to understand their errors and explore collocational relationship. David Crystal (1987) cited in Gough (*ibid.*) is of the opinion that collocations differ greatly
between languages and provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages. For instance, in Japanese, the verb for *drink* collocates with *water* and *soup* but also with *tablets* and *cigarettes*. Yarmohammadi (1997) reports the following errors committed by Iranian learners:

* the chief of the bank (manager)
* the chief of the department (chairman)
* the chief of the college (dean)
* the chief of the university (chancellor)
* the chief of the high school (principal)

With regard to the intralingual problems, O’Neil points out that English words have typical word patterns. In English we can *go for* or *take a walk, catch or miss a bus, watch a film on television, but see it in a cinema*. One *rides a horse and a bike*, but *drives a car*. Naggy & Anderson (1991) give similar examples:

You can say *set forth a valid argument*, but can not in any normal situation say *set forth a warm greeting*; you can say *grant him permission*, but you cannot say *grant him a shove* (p: 698).

Flowerdew (1999) found evidence from an examination of the KWIC (key word in context) that the students knew all about the key lexis, but were not familiar with the naturally occurring environment in which the word usually occurs. Learners may, for example, produce erroneous utterances like:

* *This butter is sour.* (rancid)
* *They made a walk.* (took)
* *I am going to take fish.* (catch)
* *The enemy used a fatal weapon.* (lethal)
* *My tea is very powerful.* (strong)
* *The chief of the college* (dean)
* *Flock of cows* (sheep)
* *herd of sheep* (cows)


In the last example, for instance, there is no meaning distinction between *herd* and *flock* except that one is used with *cows* and the other with *sheep*. Similarly, the words *fatal, deadly, lethal,* and *mortal* are
commonly considered synonyms in that they have in common the meaning *bring about death or disaster*. However, as Rudzka et al. (1985: 170) stress, care must be taken not to use them interchangeably. A *weapon* can be *lethal* but not *fatal*.

Learners, even at advanced levels, are usually not aware of the collocational properties of words. As a consequence, although they might have a large reservoir of vocabulary knowledge, they sometimes produce utterances that simply do not sound English.

In another experiment, Trinh (1993) gave phrases for *fake pharmaceuticals, a worrying reality, etc.* in Vietnamese to be translated into English by Vietnamese candidates. Results showed that phrases like *faked medicines, counterfeit drugs, forged medicines, for fake pharmaceuticals and a worrying situation, a worrisome reality, and a fearful reality for a worrying reality* were produced. This shows that they were unaware of collocations. In other words, a language learner must learn not only what is possible to say grammatically, but also what a native speaker is likely to say. When a learner talks about *taking a fish,* this is a problem of collocations: the word *catch* collocates more readily with *fish* than does *take.* Even learners with good vocabularies, as Hill (1999) states, may have problems in that their collocational competence is very limited. At the same time, very often the difference between words of similar meaning is defined partly by their different collocational fields (Silbermann, 2000).

Martelli (1998) reports errors in which students assume that related words like *job, work, career, employment, occupation,* are complete synonyms and can be used interchangeably (*look for a work* instead of *look for a job,* *dangerous career* rather than *dangerous job).* Although the general sense of these terms is similar, there are differences in collocation and connotation. What makes this difficult is the fact that such difference in meaning is fine and subtle. This difficulty is found in an extreme form in the collective words: *flock of sheep, herd of cows, school of whales, pride of lions.* It is also the case that words may have more specific meaning in particular collocations. Thus, we can speak of *abnormal* or *exceptional weather* if we have a heat wave in November, but an *exceptional child* is not an *abnormal child.*
Gitsaki (1999) classifies learners’ problems with collocations into the following categories:

Intralingua: many thanks but not several thanks

Interlingual: English: heavy drinker  Greek: strong glass

Overuse of a few lexical items: e.g., get: This is an opportunity for you to...knowledge in your field of study.

Unfamiliarity with collocative patterns of words they know well: beautiful noise; shooting stones

All these boil down to the fact that collocations are a pervasive feature of many languages and English seems to be particularly rich in such multi-word lexemes (Cornelia, 1999). Such complex lexemes have not usually been a major focus of teaching and research, however, despite the fact that learners have serious problems with the production of idiomatically correct language. These problems may well warrant a study on collocations and how they can be taught and learnt.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to find out the problems of Iranian advanced learners of English with English collocations. The study aims at discovering the systematically misused collocational patterns that pose a threat to the accurate use of words and hence hinder communication. It also aims at finding out which kind(s) of collocation pose(s) the most severe problems for Iranians.

Method
The study has two phases each with its own subjects and materials.

Phase I
Subjects
The subjects of the first phase of the study were 27 male and female advanced-level (M.A and Ph.D.) students and graduates of English.

Materials
The materials were the productions (in English) of the above-mentioned subjects which consisted of a variety of different kinds of writing including books, theses and dissertations, articles, term papers,
free writings, letters, e-mails, and whatever materials they had produced.

Procedures
Over 2400 pages of the materials produced by the advanced-level Iranian learners of English were collected. This corpus of about 270,000 words was then studied carefully, and instances of the misuse of collocations were isolated and listed. The list was then studied and it was discovered that the collocational problems could be classified into a number of categories (see Appendix A). Appendix A gives the list and the kinds of collocational problems advanced level Iranians have with English-collocations. However, this was not sufficient, for several reasons, for the purpose of the present study which aimed at finding out the patterns of collocational problems. First of all, the list included the problems of only a few subjects who may not be accepted by everyone to be a representative sample of all advanced-level Iranian learners of English. Moreover, not all errors were committed by all the subjects for the researcher to claim he had discovered the patterns of collocational problems. In fact, a majority of the errors were those committed by one or only a few subjects. On the other hand, the fact that some errors appeared so infrequently in the corpus could not, in any sense, indicate that those errors were uncommon among Iranian learners of English, hence not systematically problematic. For, the subjects may have used the ‘avoidance strategy’ whereby they consciously avoided doubtful combinations and produced perfectly correct English without revealing any of the many problems they have with English collocations. These factors made a second phase of the study inevitable.

Phase II
Subjects
The subjects of the second phase were 64 M.A and Ph.D. students and graduates of TEFL.
Materials
The materials contained six cued production tasks which were intended to elicit the subjects' use of various kinds of lexical collocations.

Procedure
To confirm that the errors committed by the subjects in their free production tasks were common to a majority of other similar subjects and not individual cases of misuse of collocations, using the list of problems extracted from the subjects' free production, a number of (six) cued production tasks were made. The first task, which had four subtasks, was one which required the subjects to use adjective + noun collocations. The second task (with four subtasks) was designed to test the subjects' ability to use noun + noun collocations. The purpose of task three (with two subtasks) was to see how the subjects performed on noun + verb collocations. Task four was a translation task in which expressions including various kinds of word combinations were given in Farsi to be translated into English. In order not to allow the subjects to avoid producing the intended combinations and to produce circumlocutory translations, parts of the translations were also given. Task five, consisting of three subtasks, contained sentences and expressions which required the subjects to use verbs to collocate with certain nouns. Its purpose was to gauge the subjects' knowledge and use of verb + noun collocations. Finally, task six (with two subtasks) aimed at testing the subjects' use of idioms and fixed expressions. A complete list of tasks is given in Appendix B.

Data Analysis
The data were meticulously analyzed by moving from one item to another within each subtask of each of the six tasks, and examining all the subjects' responses given to any individual item. This kind of analysis showed not only the types of error the subjects had committed but also the frequency of each kind of error. The analysis of the subjects' performance on each of the subtasks yielded the following results:
Table 1. containing information about the subjects’ performance on each of the 16 sub-tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>No of sub</th>
<th>No of answers Possible</th>
<th>No. of answers given</th>
<th>Frequency of errors</th>
<th>Frequency of unanswered Items</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>Sum of problems</th>
<th>% of problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 1.A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1152</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>48.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1.B</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>52.49</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>62.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1.C</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>61.17</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>62.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1.D</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34.51</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>38.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2.A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32.42</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>41.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2.B</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>896</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>46.91</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>55.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2.C</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41.65</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>45.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2.D</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>34.37</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>56.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3.A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>38.92</td>
<td>806</td>
<td>78.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3.B</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>55.75</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>71.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2176</td>
<td>1539</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>35.54</td>
<td>1184</td>
<td>54.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5.A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1152</td>
<td>1034</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>27.17</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>34.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5.B</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>15.93</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>31.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5.C</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>896</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>41.34</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>59.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 6.A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>34.46</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>53.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 6.B</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>32.88</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>51.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that the antepenultimate column in the table (percentage of errors) refers to the percentage of errors out of the given responses. However, owing to the fact that some of the subjects did not respond to some of the items because they did not know the answer, the percentages given in that column do not represent the real percentages of the subjects who had problems with collocations. It was necessary, therefore, to add two more columns. The penultimate
column (sum of problems) refers to the total number of the subjects who had problem with collocations including those who made mistakes as well as those who did not respond. And the last column represents the total percentage of the problems with collocations. Finally, to decide which collocational patterns posed the greatest difficulty for the Iranian learners of English, the subjects’ performance on each pattern was compared with their performance on other patterns, and the following results were obtained. It has to be mentioned that only 5 patterns of lexical collocations are included in the table because task 4 (translation task) did not represent a separate collocational pattern but was a combination of other patterns. So, the results obtained from task four were divided into different parts and each division was added to the corresponding pattern. The results of the comparison are summarized below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>No. of sub</th>
<th>No. of answers possible</th>
<th>No. of answers given</th>
<th>Frequency of errors</th>
<th>Frequency of unanswered items</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>% of problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adj + N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4288</td>
<td>3472</td>
<td>1463</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>42.13</td>
<td>2279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N + N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2816</td>
<td>2232</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>37.90</td>
<td>1430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N + V</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1792</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>48.76</td>
<td>1355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V + N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3136</td>
<td>2499</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>31.41</td>
<td>1422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idioms &amp; fixed exp.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1536</td>
<td>1102</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>33.93</td>
<td>808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion and Discussion**

From the first phase of the study, it can be concluded that the most frequent problems of advanced-level Iranian learners of English with English collocations are in ‘adjective + noun’, ‘noun + noun’, ‘noun + verb’, ‘verb + noun’ combinations, and idioms and fixed expressions. The second phase of the study confirms the result of the first phase and shows that collocations are indeed a significant factor in learning.
English, and on average about 55 percent of the time advanced-level Iranian learners make mistakes in the use of English collocations. Sometimes, they are conscious of the fact that what they say may not be the way English people say the same thing. But since they do not know the right way of saying it, they have no way but to say it their own way. Quite frequently, however, they are not even aware of the collocational properties of words in English. That is why they keep using wrong or unidiomatic word combinations even at the advanced levels. A look at the percentage of errors and problems in table 2 confirms such a claim. The second phase of the study (Table 2) also shows that the following is the sequence of collocational patterns in order of increasing difficulty (from easy to more difficult):

1. verb + noun
2. noun + noun
3. idioms and fixed expressions
4. adjective + noun
5. noun + verb

A point needs clarification here. Although the noun + noun collocations posed more problems in the cued production tasks than idioms and fixed expressions, they are considered, on the whole, to be less problematic than idioms because proportionately more subjects avoided responding to idioms. The same is true with the computed difficulty level of some of the subtasks out of the answers given and their level of difficulty on the whole (Table 1). In addition, from Table 1, one can extract the following hierarchy of the subtasks from the most problematic collocations to the least problematic ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subtask</th>
<th>belonging to pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 3. A</td>
<td>noun + verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 3. B</td>
<td>noun + verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 1. B</td>
<td>adjective + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 1. C</td>
<td>adjective + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 5. C</td>
<td>verb + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 2. D</td>
<td>noun + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 2. B</td>
<td>noun + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 4</td>
<td>combination of all patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 6. A</td>
<td>idioms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows that task 3.A, which gauges the subjects' ability to associate the name of different animals with the sounds they make, is the most difficult task. Task 3.B, which also has the pattern noun + verb, is the second most difficult task. And so forth down the list. Once again, it has to be reiterated that even though task 1.C ranks fourth and task 3.A stands first in the hierarchy of the overall difficulty, when it comes to the percentage of errors committed by the subjects, task 1.C tops the list, while task 3.A is placed in the 7th position. This is simply because more subjects ventured to respond to task 1.C than task 3.A. In a nutshell, the results of this study suggest that knowledge of collocations is an important component of language learning which is largely ignored in case of Iranian learners of English. And this has had consequences; despite the fact that many Iranians have achieved a high level of proficiency with large reservoirs of vocabulary and good command of grammar, their communicative competence is usually far from that of the native speakers of English. There may, of course, be many factors responsible for this. Nonetheless, this study suggests that one such factor which hinders perfect communication may be the problems Iranian learners have with English collocations.

**Implications**

The idea that much native speaker speech is based on prefabricated language rather than created from scratch, that we store and perhaps even acquire most of our language in this ready-made form, obviously has far-reaching implications not only for the theoretical analysis of language, but also for pedagogic theory.
Theoretical Implications
The fact that collocational competence influences one’s overall language ability can hardly be disputed. There is both logical and empirical support for the effective role of collocations in the successful and native-like performance of EFL learners. As Taylor puts it, the knowledge of which collocations are acceptable in English and which are odd can help learners get a feel of the target language and achieve a more native-like proficiency in the target language. Apart from its role in accuracy, becoming aware of collocations is also a way of improving one’s fluency. The knowledge of what problems Iranian students have with collocations can, therefore, be conducive to finding a way of improving their knowledge in the use of English collocations. For, it goes without saying that unless one knows the nature of collocations, and how they are learnt and used, one cannot do much about them.

Pedagogical Implications
Teachers and translators may benefit from the findings of the present study. Teachers can get their students to learn vocabulary more efficiently by presenting words in collocations (INGED, 2000). If students already know the most frequent collocate(s) of a certain word, they will be less likely to combine words freely and produce odd or erroneous word combinations. In fact, the finding of a study by Gitsaki (1999) suggests that language teachers introduce lexical items with their most frequent collocations. Michael Lewis (2000) even believes that the whole language can be taught through collocations. The present study will give teachers some cues as to where problems with collocations lie so that they can focus their attention on the problem areas. Also, the knowledge of the sources of collocational problems will certainly be of help to teachers in enabling their students to overcome such problems. In addition, since collocational problems are the source of many problems in translation, translators can also use the results of this study to improve their translation.

Revised version received 28 December 2002
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O’Neil, R. *To learn words you need to learn much more than words.* OUP.


**Appendix A**

The list of collocational errors committed by the subjects

Note: The correct intended words (as understood from the context) are given in parentheses.

1. **adjective + noun collocations**
   
   ... as **gloomy** as an owl (proud)
   
   It is like giving the child **rancid** milk and then believing ... (sour)
   
   After hearing another **morbid** joke, he ... (sick)
   
   ... listened with **total** disbelief. (blank)
   
   ... helps them grow **harder** bones. (denser)
   
   ... do the scoring with a scoring **scale**. (device)
   
   They must have a **harsh** dislike for the job. (intense)
   
   ... from the **respectful** university of Tehran. (respected)
   
   ... and my **oldest** sister is 29. (eldest)
   
   ... alas, it was only a **brief** happiness. (transient)
   
   ... was as stupid as a **cow** ( )
   
   It was the **rotten** tooth that ... (decayed)
   
   ... because of surfeiting, i.e., eating **extra** amounts of food.
   
   (excessive)
   
   She picked up the **withered** apple and began to ... (shriveled)
   
   ... in a hot and **tainted** weather like this ... (rotten)
   
   The student replied with a **weak** voice ... (feeble)
   
   They are obviously seeking a more **placid** way of life. (peaceful)
   
   That may be an explanation for the **constant** conflict between husbands and wives. (eternal)
   
   A **celebrated** linguist later told us about ... (distinguished)
   
   ... with 20 **valuable** stones (precious)
   
   ... preferred the **fried** rice. (browned)
   
   ... permitted them such a **generous** expenditure (lavish)
   
   ... to consult with an **eminent** actress (a famous)
   
   One of Julia’s upper teeth was **slack**. (loose)

---
... only the stifled throb of the engine could be heard. (muffled)
His aberrant explanation did not satisfy her. (elusive)**
... turned as white as snow. (sheet)
... never thought of doubting a decorous friend like him. (decent; honest)
Of the four siblings, three were married and one celibate. (single; unmarried)
Despite a severe cold and coarse voice,... (hoarse)
... won with a dominant majority (clear)
... a strong promise not to ... (solemn)
It was as clear as daylight that... (bell)
... were shaking like a willow (leaf)
... a spindly grace (slender)
Members of the lighting group were ready. (crew)
... was as dirty as a mule (stubborn)
... spoke in such a callous language ... (coarse)
They live a nonluxurious life. (simple; spartan)
They were using faked names. (fictitious)
...and he was rather abusive-mouthed. (foul-mouthed)
The gloomy air of the class was once more filled with noise.
(dull)
... the feral murderer was... (brutal)
He sat as still as a statue. (stone)
Their water supply was running short. (low)
The dead animal produced a sort of stench and decayed odour. (putrid)
... villages are more frugal than people... (**)
She hated his bitter humour. (ill)
Speaking totally in English with nascent learners ...(elementary)
They gathered some dried brunches. (dead)
A loaded gun is always a fatal weapon. (lethal)
..., for he was madly enamoured of the actress. (fond)
... didn’t have any special tendency for teaching. (talent)
... had an itchy leg (foot)
Once the water boiled, put some dry tea, and wait... (black)
Whether in boldface or _lowface_, it should be italicized. (lightface)
Sometimes, they are difficult to translate into _appropriate_ English.
(proper)

He was one of those youngsters who wear _open-collar_ shirts with
_sticky_ jeans. (open-necked; tight-fitting)
... her _gentle_ love for... (tender)
... walked with an _agile_ pace. (a brisk)
... and he had to put up with a _water-cooked_ egg. (boiled)

2. _Verb + Noun_ collocations
... after only a week, he _ran away from_ prison. (broke)
He _refrained_ from voting. (abstained)
... their attempt _died_ in the bud. (nipped)
... to stadium to _encourage_ our favourite team. (bolster; support)
... fill the glass with water, then _solve_ a teaspoonful of ... (dissolve)
It didn’t take them long to _understand_ that he was ill. (learn)
Have you _provided_ the book yet? (obtained)
... _can bring_ many reasons... (give)
He _rose_ his hand to ... (raised)
To _drive_ an airplane ... (pilot; fly)**
I tried unsuccessfully to _halt_ my yawn. (smother)
A teacher who constantly _violates_ his/her promise cannot... (break)
... like an addict who has to _use_ drugs to... (take)
... where you spend it (money) like _sand_. (water)
... _can raise_ many different flowers. (grow)
... decided to _block_ the country’s assets. (freeze)
She waited and waited until she _revealed_ her spite. (vented)
... in S/FL classes _may develop_ successful results. (yield)
... who _train_ their children in private institutes who ... (educate)
After _reeling off_ the list of names, ... (calling, reading)
I wouldn’t like to _run_ to the conclusion that...; (jump)
The Ministry of High Education _delayed_ the exam due to...
(postponed)
They _took away_ the kidneys of the executed prisoners. (removed)
Never before, had their income _permitted_ them such a _generous_
expenditure. (allowed)
She grew white and her lips shivered. (trembled)
... suddenly increased speed and won the match. (gathered)
Nowhere in the world does such a crime demand death penalty.
(attract)
... see how culture encloses poetry and ... (embraces)
... is a tune which envisages the spirits of the dead. (conjures up)
Teaching that way is much like training tigers. (taming)
I was progressing towards the silent woods... (advancing)
... having company with bad people (keeping)
She kept on huddling her little son... (cuddling)
Suddenly, it racked my mind to... (crossed)
He made the lead and others followed. (took)
... brought excuse after excuse (invented, made)
They reduced their distance ... (shortened)
Now, go and get money, become rich. (make)
They had already got access to ... (gained)
... is that the teacher should not pull side in these cases. (pull string, take side)
It wounds the soul that ... (afflicts)
He put forward his resignation and... (tendered)
They got 400 new soldiers. (recruited)
Seeing the bend, he lowered the gear .... (changed down a gear)
Children were shaking their hands as the train was leaving the station.
(waving)
She moved her hand in her hair. (ran — through)
I was so hungry that I could eat a cow. (horse)
They decided to increase taxes. (put up; raise)
At first, I did not consider his threat seriously. (take)
To arrive on time, he quickened his speed. (pace)
... couldn’t stand the loss. (bear; suffer)
... would retaliate his kindness with a dinner party. (repay)
Whatever we did, we couldn’t appease the angry woman. (pacify; placate)
The other man was breaking sticks to make a fire. (chopping)
She had already set the table. (laid)
He gave tribute to the guest speaker.  (paid)
You shouldn’t criticize yourself for that.  (blame; reproach)

3. **Noun + Verb collocations**
The fender of his car was penetrated in the crash.  (dented)
The committee was persuaded that … (convinced)
…because their father had banned them from watching TV.

( **)
…like a lion that lures a rabbit.  (stalks)
…but it (colour) didn’t fit the wall.  (match)
The only thing that disrupted the silence was the distant barking of jackals.  (howling)
His anger relieved when he heard the news.  (subsided)
…fell down the steps like a ball turning round on the ground.

(rolling)
…, security was enhanced.  (tightened)
The boy had put on boots and his trousers were pushed in his boots.

(tucked)

4. **Noun + Noun collocations**
…a leg of beef… (side)
…even hear the squeaking of crickets (chirping)
As expected, the chief of the faculty rejected the proposal.  (dean)
…it was all because of electricity cut.  (power failure)
…be charged in the region court.  (district)
He suffered from severe language damage.  (impairment)
Syllabus design is concerned with the selection and gradation of content.  (grading)
They were kept in a military custody center.  (detention)
…a car burglar ( **)
…including a pack of cotton were destroyed in fire.  (bale)
…and the windscreen cleaner did not work.  (wiper)
They were watching a terror film when…  (horror)
Since the family adjusting programs failed, …  (planning)
5. Fixed Expressions

According to the importance of vocabulary in ... (owing to; due to)
Although he used to bite bones with me, I actually... (pick)
Indeed, it augured very bad since... (ill)
Nobody can make such dangerous criminals free. (set free)

6. Adverb + adjective collocations

This is nearly related to the principles of case grammar. (closely)
... looking with eyes wide agape. (open)
The man proved to be mentally crazy. (deranged; insane)
He was orderly shaven. (smoothly)

7. Verb + Adverb collocations

I thanked her greatly. (profusely)

Appendix B

The complete list of the cued production tasks

Task 1 Adjective + Noun

A. Match the adjectives given in column II with suitable nouns given in column I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compulsive</th>
<th>behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasive</td>
<td>gambler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expensive</td>
<td>results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustive</td>
<td>answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impressive</td>
<td>plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventive</td>
<td>criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive</td>
<td>tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permissive</td>
<td>tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloomy</td>
<td>view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismal</td>
<td>face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief</td>
<td>child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transient</td>
<td>happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloquent</td>
<td>words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
articulate  encounter  
abject  disaster  
unmitigated  poverty

B. Supply proper adjectives. Follow the model. EX: as light as a feather.

as ... as a bat  as ... as a bee
as ... as a bell  as ... as a daisy
as ... as an eel  as ... as a mule
as ... as an owl  as ... as brass
as ... as a priest  as ... as a lamb
as ... as a wolf  as ... as a scarecrow

C. Use adjectives that can go with the given nouns and can be translated as 'پایه کاس، قنادیه'  

Some ... butter  some ... cream
Some ... eggs  some ... milk
... bacons  ... brains
what a ... weather  I have a ... tooth.
A ... cabbage

D. Choose the adjective that can best collocate with the given nouns.

1. a/n ... joke  
a. morbid  b. sick  c. diseased  d. unwholesome

2. a/n ... colour  
a. sickly  b. ill  c. morbid  d. diseased

3. a/n ... curiosity  
a. ill  b. sick  c. sickly  d. morbid

4. a/n ... food  
a. unwholesome  b. diseased  c. morbid  d. sickly

5. a ... expenditure
a. lavish  b. generous  c. profuse  d. lush

6. ... thanks
a. generous  b. profuse  c. lush  d. lavish

7. ... apologies
a. profuse  b. generous  c. lavish  d. lush

8. ... green grass
a. lush  b. profuse  c. lavish  d. generous

Task 2 Noun + Noun

A. Fill in the blanks with appropriate measure words.
   Example: a box of matches
   
   1. a ... of soap
   2. a ... of sardines
   3. a ... of paper
   4. a ... of lamb
   5. a ... of beef
   6. a ... of bread

B. Fill in the blanks with suitable words having the general meaning of ‘group’.

   a ... of fish
   a ... of sheep
   a ... of cows
   a ... of whales
   a ... of lions
   a ... of beautiful girls
   a ... of bananas
   a ... of flowers
   a ... of keys
   a ... of thugs
   a ... of newspapers
   a ... of sticks
   a ... of grapes
   a ... of nerves
   a ... of chairs
   a ... of dishes
   a ... of hills

C. Supply words that have the general meaning of ‘head’ or ‘boss’

   the ... of the bank
   the ... of the department
   the ... of the college
   the ... of the university
   the ... of the university
the ... of the high school  the ... of the faculty
the ... of the police  the ... of staff
the ... of the hotel  the England football ...

D. Fill in the blanks with words which have the general meaning of ‘mass’ or ‘piece’

For example: a slice of toast

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of dough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of cake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of china</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>of melon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Task 3  Noun + Verb

A. Do you know what sounds these animals make?

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dogs</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>owls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mice</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crickets...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>camels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apes</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>bulls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pigeons</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>ravens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turkeys...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>donkeys...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>bears...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>jackals...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>snakes...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Fill in the blanks with suitable verbs which can convey the meanings specified.

II ( درخشیدن - پری زدن )

Teeth ... Stars ... An white-hot coal on a fire... A candle flame ... in the breeze.

Societies ... A gold object ...

Potatoes ... A diamond necklace ...

Thunder ... ( فوران می کند ) A volcano ... ( می خورد )

An epidemic ... ( شیوع می ستواند )
Task 4  Translation Task
Translate the following expressions into English.

1. to ... somebody’s attention
2. to be at somebody’s ...
3. to ... with someone
4. to ... bad company
5. The air in the room was ...
6. a tune which ... the spirits of the dead
7. She has a/an ... tongue
8. ... baggage
9. He had a/an ... tongue.
10. She was a/an ... mother.
11. ...
12. ...
13. ...
14. ...
15. ...
16. ...
17. ... apple
18. ... thanks
19. a ... smoker
20. a ... traveler
21. a ... place
22. a ... weapon
23. a ... drug
24. a ... danger
25. a ... combat
26. ... poison
27. ... wound
28. ... accident
29. ... mistake
30. ... piece of land
31. ... stones
32. ... possessions
33. brain ... 

Task 5  Verb + Noun
A. In each group of the following sentences and phrases, fill in the blanks with appropriate verbs given. Note: A blank may be filled with more than one word, and a word may be used more than once.

enhance – heighten – intensify – aggravate
1. Everyone has the desire to ... his/her reputation.
2. They ............... the enjoyment of their trip by swimming I the lake.
3. He is never helpful. He can only ........... rather than solve problems.
4. The presidential candidates ........... their campaign.
5. The war between the two countries ...........

break – violate - infringe
6. She ........... her promise and did not attend the meeting.
7. I don’t like anybody to ....... my privacy.
8. They don’t respect the laws. They frequently ........... the regulations.
exterminate – slaughter – butcher – massacre – murder – assassinate -
execute
9. They had to ……. rats to prevent the spread of disease.
10. Take care to ……. lambs by humane methods.
11. The invading army ………. the whole village.
12. The court decided to …………… the prime minister.


instigate – launch – initiate - commence

To …... a course
To …... an employment
To …... criminal proceedings
To …... a strike
To …... an enquiry
To …... a new product

B. Fill in the blanks with suitable verbs.
1. He …... her and did not let her finish her speech.
2. The strike …... the production.
3. The thieves …... the house looking for valuables.
4. Please don’t …... through my papers, you will put them
out of order.
5. She was …... of all her jewelry while she slept.
6. The troops are …... ing and looting wherever they go.
7. Our house was …... while we were on holiday.
8. He took an …... that he would never help her again.
9. It surprised me to …... of her decision.
10. During the election about 28 million people …... their
ballots.
11. You …... a film on TV, but you …... it in the cinema.

C. Supply verbs that collocate with the given nouns and
convey the meanings specified.

To …... a yawn
Task 6 – Idioms
A. Complete the following sentences or phrases to form idioms according to the given meanings.

1. A: How is your grand mother? B: Oh, the old girl finally kicked the .... (died)
2. Once the teacher heard the name ‘Mary’, he flew off the .... (became angry)
3. Whenever I did anything wrong, one of those stupid kids would .... the beans.
   (reveal the secret)
4. They even .... no bones to assert that they hate English classes. (speak frankly)
5. He was so brave that he was always ready to take the bull by the .... (face difficulty)
6. They finally decided to bury the .... and work together to solve the problem. (end their hostilities)
7. He only sees his father once in a while. (quite infrequently)
8. Can you give me a hand with this? I can't do it alone. (help me)
9. He was the pride of his mother's eye. (his mother loved him)
10. Come off it, Jack. He is full of himself. (he is boastful)
11. He never accepts any responsibility. He always tries to...the buck. (shift responsibility to somebody else)
12. To give someone the shoulder. (treat sympathetically)
13. To sell like hotcakes. (be popular)
14. To be in the hot seat. (difficult position of decision making)
15. To be under the collar. (angry)
16. To ... bones with someone. (argue or quarrel with)

B. Complete the following phrases.
To fit like a glove.
To run like a cheetah.
To sing like a songbird.
To sleep like a baby.
To shake like a leaf.
To swear like a sailor.
To smoke like a chimney.
To spend money like a queen.