

# **THE EFFECT OF ERROR CORRECTION FEEDBACK ON THE COLLOCATION COMPETENCE OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS**

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## **Abstract**

Collocations are one of the most important elements in language proficiency but the effect of error correction feedback of collocations has not been thoroughly examined. Some researchers report the usefulness and importance of error correction (Hyland, 1990; Bartram & Walton, 1991; Ferris, 1999; Chandler, 2003), while others showed that error correction was of little or no use (Leki, 1990; Truscott, 1996). However, teachers use error correction feedback of collocations most of the time in teaching even though it has not been proven whether there was effect on the improvement of collocation competence of EFL students or not. The researcher tried to investigate the effect of error correction feedback on various categories of lexical collocations (V+N, Adj.+N, N+N), and grammatical collocations (Adj.+Prep., V+Prep., N) in this study based on Benson, Benson and Ilson's (1986) collocations model. The results revealed that error correction feedback was significant and had a positive effect on the collocation competence at advanced and intermediate levels, but not at the elementary level.

## **1. Introduction**

Some studies have been done on the learners' collocation errors (Horney, 1998; Liu, 1999; Huang, 2001; Chen, 2002; Liu, 2002; Tong, 2004), but little research has been done on feedback given to English learners on collocation errors. Several empirical studies (Biskup, 1992; Bahns, 1993; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Howarth, 1998; Liu, 1999b; Chen, 2002; Nesselhauf, 2004) reported that non-native learners have difficulties with learning certain collocations. The lack of appropriate knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations has affected L2 learning

and has created consequently many problems for students. Truscott's (1996) review studies on error correction feedback and his controversial conclusions challenged researchers with the claim that written corrective feedback is probably ineffective and is even harmful in the promotion of L2 acquisition. According to Bahns (1993), EFL learners encounter some difficulties while producing proper word combinations because of their lack of collocation competence. Wang (2001) found that even students who are majoring in English have not enough knowledge of collocations.

The present study attempts to bridge some of the gaps indicated above. This study attempts to investigate the effect of error correction feedback on the various categories of lexical collocations (V+N, Adj.+N, N+N) and grammatical collocations (Adj.+Prep., V+ Prep., N+Prep.).

## **2. Literature review**

Some scholars have proposed different definitions of collocations. Most of them illustrated the co-occurrence between words. Moreover, they mentioned the ways in which words regularly occur near each other (Diegnan, 1998).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) defined collocations from the discourse view. They proposed that "collocation is the co-occurrence of two words, independent of grammatical types and likely to take place over sentence boundaries" and a set is the family of members who have the same privilege to co-occur in collocation. For example, the adjectives 'strong' and 'powerful' belong to the same lexical set. They proposed that these similar patterns of collocations would create a cohesive force if they occur in a sentence beside each other.

As for feedback, it is generally regarded as a strategy. Guenette (2007) suggested that student writing needs the error correction feedback of their teachers to improve their accuracy, and teachers would correct students' writing errors. Feedback plays its role, but the way of its implementations has changed. Four types of feedback are generally discussed: teacher comment, teacher-student conferencing, peer response, and computer- assisted feedback (Ferris, 2003; Hyland, & Hyland, 2006). Huang (2004) illustrates that the student writings benefits more of teachers' face to face feedback in grammar, but peers' response improves their techniques for spelling and better content writing.

Writing conferences place student writers in a one-by-one communication context, in

which they can improve their text and writing skills together (Williams, 2002). Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts (1996) explain that computer is a tool, which can serve as a teacher in language practices to present grammar writing feedback. Researchers suggested that a combination of different feedback sources could be a better alternative in assisting student writers with their revising process (Ferris, 2007; Huang, 2004).

Two important terms to be clarified are direct and indirect feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Terry, 1989; Zamel, 1985). However, Ferris (2006) points out that those expressions have not been used consistently among researchers. Generally, direct feedback is provided when a teacher gives the student a particular correction while indirect feedback occurs when the teacher simply marks the error but does not correct it. In providing indirect feedback, some teachers tend to code mistakes to indicate the precise location as well as the type of error, while others provide encoded feedback that simply locates the error without disclosing its type. Usually, it becomes the student's task to diagnose and correct the mistake. Keh (1990) suggests that feedback on writing activates writers to pass from composing processes to the final written product. The success of process writing implementation depends on feedback to the students' written text (Seow, 2001).

However, Truscott and Hsu (2008) claim that teacher feedback does not necessarily enhance students' proficiency. The students are forced to resort to teacher feedback due to a discrepancy between teachers' and students' perception of error feedback strategy. Truscott (1996) cited many studies to reveal that the error correction of grammar is not a good idea. He stated that correction is neither useful nor effective since there was not any sound evidence to support this claim. However, he claimed that grammar correction decreases the students' motivation to learn.

The basis for Truscott's assertion arose from a growing number of studies that have been unsuccessful in providing meaningful evidence that error correction improves the accuracy of student writing (Polio & Fleck & Leder, 1998; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). There is also lack of enough evidence to claim that students may abandon to continue their learning, if too much anxiety is brought to their writing experience.

Ferris (1999) examined all the arguments of Truscott and emphasized continuing error correction. He noted that students like their teacher feedback for confidence of their writing

correction. Before coming to the conclusion on the effect of error correction, further research should be conducted in this area (Ferris, 1999).

Butler (1980) pointed out that the learners who are exposed to less English grammar encounter more trouble correcting their errors than L1 learners while reading their writing aloud. Long (1977) presented the difference between error correction and feedback. Error feedback is to help students recognize errors and correct them. Lin (2000) stated that writing conference produced better feedback since students and teachers interact and communicate together; students discussed writing, learned new contents as well and improved writing. Huang (2004) noted that senior high students' responses improved spellings, content, caused the reduction of apprehension, and assured them of their writing performance and their interest. Teacher feedback promoted students' writing skills and grammar Ferris (2007).

Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang (1998) reported a combination of teacher feedback, a peer review, and a guided evaluation. Teachers guide students on their writing, and students reveal a route in helping their teacher to guide them. Hattie & Timperley (2007) asserted that effective feedback was acquired when it was accompanied by effective training. Truscott and Hsu (2008) emphasized again that error feedback could not help improve the writing competence, revision did not promote students' writing, and learning was increased due to other factors rather than feedback.

Liu (1999b) identified the collocation errors that her students committed. The main factors include over generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, misapplication of synonyms, negative transfer, word coinage and approximation. Wang (2005) also suggested nine sources of mis-collocations: transliteration, language switch, coinage, approximation of L2 language system, over-generalization, use of synonym, ignorance of rule restrictions, use of de-lexicalized verbs and verification. According to Brown (2000), research on ESL and EFL acquisition has shown that language transfer and overgeneralization are common strategies language learners adopt in language learning. Language transfer and over-generalization led them to commit mis-collocations. Brown (2001) noted that preparing and remembering chunks might help learners to think in the native language of another country rather than focus on L1 transfer.

Chen (2002) conducted a study by using high school students as participants to investigate their collocation errors in writings. The unacceptable grammatical/lexical

collocation errors were classified according to types of errors they contained, using a modified classification originally established by Benson et al. (1986). The findings revealed that a total of 272 collocation errors consisting of 147 grammatical collocation errors and 125 lexical collocation errors in the subjects' writing were marked and analyzed. It was also found that Adjective+Noun, and Verb+Noun were the most frequent lexical collocation error types. Preposition+Noun and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocation errors. Other common lexical collocation error types in descending order were (V+Adv), (N+V), and (Adv+Adj.). The least frequent types were (N+to infinitive), (Adj.+to infinitive), (N+That clause) and (Adj.+That clause). Chen's study shows that Verb+Noun were the most frequent in lexical collocation error types.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. Methodology**

This research was an experimental study. Participants of this study were 181 students in English Translation major studying at Azad and Payame Noor universities of Shahrekord. The range of their age was between 19-25 years and they included 121 females and 60 males selected by random sampling. They participated in this project voluntarily. The researchers assured the participants that their information would be kept confidential.

A multiple-choice test of common collocation errors was given to two groups (experimental and control group) as a pretest. The test consisted of 90 collocation items. The identification of collocations was done in a special way. First, collocations were categorized. Then, the categories of collocations were classified based on various models. One of them was the classification of collocations proposed by Benson et al. (1986). Benson et al.'s (1986) model classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations.

This study selected some categories of grammatical collocations due to the limitation of time. This research examined only three grammatical categories like Adj.+Prep., V+Prep., N+Prep. Moreover, three categories of lexical collocation patterns (i.e.: V+N, Adj.+N, N+N) were investigated.

A multiple-choice collocation test was prepared based on Benson et al.'s (1986) categories in this study, 15 items of collocations for each category were selected from *Longman*

*Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combination* and *The British National Corpus*. This multiple-choice test was studied and evaluated by English experts to ensure test reliability and validity. The researchers attempted to use those collocations which are common errors as illustrated in *Common Mistakes Book* (Fitikides, 1936) as well as the collocations used in Chia Chuan's study (2005). At last, 90 multiple-choice tests were prepared for the study. Table One shows the number of categories used in this study and the number of selected items.

Table 1: The number of categories used and the number of selected items of collocations.

Lexical and Grammatical collocations	Items
L1 (V+N)	15
L2 (Adj.+N)	15
L3 (N+N)	15
G4 (Adj. +Prep.)	15
G5 (V+Prep.)	15
G6 (N+Prep.)	15
Total	90

One hundred and eighty one learners were selected. Then 91 subjects were assigned to the experimental group and ninety (90) students to the control group. Both groups consisted of three levels. Students were classified based on their scores in three levels: low, intermediate, and advanced levels. The lowest score of level detection was 2.67 while the highest - 70.67. The means of scores was 32.87 with standard deviation 15.95. *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT) was used to put learners into two levels based on their scores. They were divided into the experimental group (19 students) and (19 students) in the control group at the advanced level. 114 students were included at the intermediate level. They were divided nearly equally in the experimental group (58) and control group (56). The elementary level contained 15 students in the experimental group, which received the treatment, along with 14 students in the control group that they did not receive any treatment. Table Two below summarizes the number of participants in the control and experimental groups.

Table 2: The Number of participants in the control and experimental groups.

Experimental group			Control group		
Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
15	58	19	14	56	19

The pretest of collocation was administered in both groups. As a result, errors of two groups were detected. These collocation errors produced in the experimental group were taught in the experimental group. Due to the prevention of test-to-test effect, a multiple-choice test on collocations was performed after one month as a post-test in two groups again. The data were analyzed by using descriptive (mean, median, and percent) and inferential statistics (t-test).

### 3.2. Results and findings

The collected evidence was analyzed to examine whether a statistically significant relationship existed in the error correction of grammatical collocations and lexical collocations following teaching and receiving educational feedback. The following research questions were formulated.

**Research question 1.** Does error correction feedback have any significant effect on the collocation competence of EFL Persian learners?

The comparison between the score differences in pretest and post-test of the experimental group showed the significant effect in the advanced and intermediate levels ( $p < 0.05$ ). This difference was not significant at the elementary level ( $p > 0.05$ ). Table 3 below shows the differences between pretest and post-test in the grammatical and lexical collocations.

Table 3: Mean score differences between pretest and post-test in grammatical and lexical collocations.

Levels	Test	Pretest	Post-test	Mean scores differences
A	Grammatical scores	110.29±63.73	163.5±51.27	53.21
	Lexical scores	106.19±72.26	161.52±24.43	55.36
B	Grammatical scores	52.03±49.18	102.03±86.03	50
	Lexical scores	37.70±51.63	78.46±76.67	40.76
C	Grammatical scores	24.88±33.31	82.22±97.79	57.34
	Lexical scores	4.88±36.95	54.81±187.09	49.92

**Research question 2.** Which type of error correction feedback has a more significant effect on the collocation competence of EFL learners: feedback in grammatical collocation errors or lexical ones?

It was apparent from the above table that the mean score of level A in the experimental group of grammatical collocations was:

- Grammatical Collocation Pretest (GCPRE)
- Grammatical Collocation Post-test (GCPOS)
- Lexical Collocation pretest (LCPRE)
- Lexical Collocation Post-test(LCPOS)

The mean score differences (GCPOS-GCPRE) and (LCPOS-LCPRE) were detected to be 53.21 and 55.36. The mean score differences in level B with the experimental group were GCPOS-GCPRE=50 and LCPOS-LCPRE=40.76. The mean score differences were calculated to be GCPOS-GCPRE=57.34 and LCPOS-LCPRE=49.92.

**Research question 3:** What is the frequency of collocation errors in different categories after error correction?

Mean score differences were detected for each category. A significant relation was observed after intervention in all categories at advanced and intermediate levels ( $p < 0.05$ ). Table 4 shows these results.

Table 4: Comparison between pretest and post-test in experimental group.

<i>Levels</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Pretest</i>	<i>Post-test</i>	<i>Scores differences</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
A	<i>G1=Adj. +Prep.</i>	<i>40.93±25.89</i>	<i>59.53±20.07</i>	<i>18.6</i>	<i>0.028</i>
	<i>G2=N+ Prep.</i>	<i>28.77±20.38</i>	<i>45.26±16.56</i>	<i>16.49</i>	<i>0.027</i>
	<i>G3= V+ Prep.</i>	<i>40.58±21.92</i>	<i>58.71±18.78</i>	<i>18.13</i>	<i>0.024</i>
	<i>L1=V+N</i>	<i>46.19±27.36</i>	<i>60.46±15.19</i>	<i>14.27</i>	<i>0.021</i>
	<i>L2= Adj. + N</i>	<i>29.7±25.13</i>	<i>54.9±16</i>	<i>25.2</i>	<i>0.005</i>
	<i>L3= N+N</i>	<i>30.29±24.39</i>	<i>46.08±20</i>	<i>15.79</i>	<i>0.032</i>
B	<i>G1=Adj. +Prep.</i>	<i>14.25±20.51</i>	<i>34.86±31.96</i>	<i>20.61</i>	<i>0.000</i>
	<i>G2=N +Prep.</i>	<i>14.06±18.30</i>	<i>27.62±27.87</i>	<i>13.56</i>	<i>0.000</i>
	<i>G3=V +Prep.</i>	<i>23.71±20.23</i>	<i>39.54±30.76</i>	<i>15.83</i>	<i>0.000</i>
	<i>L1= V+N</i>	<i>18.69±25.96</i>	<i>29±26.71</i>	<i>10.31</i>	<i>0.000</i>
	<i>L2=Adj. +N</i>	<i>13.67±18.42</i>	<i>28.77±27.28</i>	<i>15.1</i>	<i>0.000</i>
	<i>L3=N+N</i>	<i>5.32±17.65</i>	<i>20.68±30.9</i>	<i>15.36</i>	<i>0.000</i>

C	<i>G1=Adj. +Prep.</i>	<i>2.96±14.63</i>	<i>27.1±36</i>	<i>24.15</i>	<i>0.41</i>
	<i>G2=N +Prep.</i>	<i>5.92±15.92</i>	<i>21.1±31</i>	<i>15.18</i>	<i>0.48</i>
	<i>G3= V +Prep.</i>	<i>16±18.19</i>	<i>33.9±34</i>	<i>17.74</i>	<i>0.48</i>
	<i>L1=V+N</i>	<i>7.55±22.9</i>	<i>21.7±27</i>	<i>14.22</i>	<i>0.43</i>
	<i>L2= Adj. + N</i>	<i>0.59±10.77</i>	<i>19.5±30</i>	<i>18.96</i>	<i>0.42</i>
	<i>L3= N+N</i>	<i>-3.25±14</i>	<i>13.4±35</i>	<i>17.21</i>	<i>0.44</i>

The score differences between two groups were estimated for each category to be (Adj.+ Prep.=18.6, N+Prep.=16.49, V+Prep.=18.13, V+N=14.27, Adj.+N=25.2, N+N=15.79). A significant relationship was calculated in all categories at the advanced level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The comparison between score differences in pretest and post-test of experimental group showed that they were ( $G1=20.61$ ,  $G2=13.56$ ,  $G3=15.83$ ,  $L1=10.31$ ,  $L2=15.1$ ,  $L3=15.36$ ). A positive correlation was detected in all categories at the intermediate level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The comparison between mean scores of pretest and post-test in the experimental group at the elementary level showed the effect, but it was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The comparison between score differences in pretest and post-test of the experimental group showed that they were ( $G1=24.15$ ,  $G2=5.18$ ,  $G3=17.74$ ,  $L1=14.22$ ,  $L2=18.96$ ,  $L3=17.21$ ).

### 3.3. Discussion

**Question 1:** Is there any significant effect of error correction feedback on the collocation competence of EFL learners?

The results given in Table 3 reveal the comparison between the pretest and post-test of the experimental and control groups after intervention at all three levels. The error correction feedback is positive at intermediate and advanced levels. The elementary level shows no positive effect. In previous studies by other researchers, controversial conclusions were found. Some researchers reported the usefulness and importance of error correction (Hyland, 1990; Bartram & Walton, 1991; Ferris, 1999; Chandler, 2003). Other researchers showed that error correction is of little use or no use (Leki, 1990; Truscott, 1996). This study explored that error correction feedback is useful with advanced and intermediate learners and is not equally suitable and valuable at elementary levels. Perhaps these findings can create a path for researchers for more study to verify whether error correction feedback will be a suitable strategy in teaching or not.

**Question 2:** Is there any more significant effect of error correction feedback in grammatical collocation errors than lexical collocation errors of participants?

A comparison of mean score differences between grammatical collocation (GC) and lexical collocation (LC) patterns was shown in Table 2. At the advanced level, the findings were GCPOS-GCPRE=53.21 and LPOS-LCPRE=55.36 in experimental groups. It shows that both groups reported an increase in error corrective feedback. Comparisons assess a significant meaningful difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in both of them. However, lexical collocations are a little more significant than grammatical collocations at this level.

The mean score differences between the advanced and intermediate levels of the experimental groups were GCPOS-GCPRE=50 and LCPOS-LCPRE=40.76, respectively. These differences are more significant for the grammatical patterns than the lexical patterns at the intermediate level. The mean scores differences of level C were calculated as follows: GCPOS-GCPRE = 57.34 and LCPOS-LCPRE = 49.92. These results develop the positive effect and a meaningful difference in the grammatical and lexical collocations in this regard. The mean score differences of grammatical and lexical collocations at the elementary level confirm the hypothesis that error corrective feedback is more significant for grammatical collocations than lexical collocations.

Mahmoud's (2005) findings are in line with the results of this study. He noted the rate of mean score differences in lexical collocations was higher than the differences of grammatical collocation in an essay. In the present study the mean score difference was very low: grammatical pattern=53.21, lexical pattern=55.36. Thus, the present study shows that the effect of error corrective feedback is greater in grammatical collocations than lexical collocations at the intermediate level: grammatical pattern=50, lexical pattern=40.76 and elementary levels: grammatical pattern=57.34, lexical pattern=49.92. The results show that the mean score difference is rather high here, similarly to Mahmoud (2005), who showed that the number of lexical collocations was four times as big as that of grammatical collocations. However, this rate should be in error corrective feedback as well. Therefore, this study proved that the effect of error corrective feedback is bigger in grammatical collocations than lexical collocations.

**Question 3:** Is there any more significant effect of error correction feedback among different categories of collocations?

At the advanced level, as it can be observed in the findings given in Table 4, the score difference is detected from highest to lowest: (L2=Adj.+N=25.2, G3=V+Prep.=18.13, G1=Adj.+Prep. =18.6, G2=N+Prep. =16.49, L1=N+N =15.79 and L3= V+N=14.27).

At the intermediate level, the results were G1=Adj.+Prep.=20.61, G3=V+Prep.=15.83, L3=N+N=15.38, L2=Adj.+N=15.1, G2=N+Prep.= 13.56, L1=V+N=10.4. These findings show that error corrective feedback creates a positive effect.

The findings of the elementary level show that the score differences between pretest and post-tests are G1=Adj.+Prep.=24.13, L2=Adj.+N=18.96, G3=V+Prep.=17.74, L3= N+N=17.21 G2=N+ Prep.=15.18, and L1=V+N=14.22.

The results show that corrective feedback has positive effects on grammatical collocation at the intermediate and advanced levels. The different categories of Mahmoud's (2005) study show the highest rate of errors in lexical categories (V+N and Adj.+N), this rate is the highest in lexical category (L1=V+N) as well. Table 4 shows error corrective feedback from high to low.

Table 4: Error correction feedback in collocations from high to low.

Levels	Categories	Error corrective feedback
A	L2= Adj.+N G3= V+Prep. G1=Adj.+Prep. G2=N+Prep. L3= N+N L1=V+N	25.2 18.13 18.6 16.49 15.79 14.27
B	G1=Adj.+Prep. G3= V+Prep L3=N+N L2= Adj.+N G2+N+Prep. L1=V+N	20.61 15.83 15.38 15.1 13.56 10.31
C	G1=Adj. +Prep. L2= Adj.+N G3= V+Prep. L3= N+N G2=N+Prep. L1=V+N	24.13 18.96 17.74 17.21 15.18 14.22

Another study revealed that participants made fewer lexical collocation errors (67:35.6) than grammatical collocation errors (121:64.4) (Chia Chuan, 2005). Some researchers emphasized other types of classification of collocations in their studies (Chen, 2002; Tong

2004). The present study did not investigate all the categories of collocations due to time limitations. The researchers studied the six categories, while the other nine categories are yet to be explored. The findings show that the participants are not equal in the two patterns. The recognized percents are not very high in comparison with the participants. The findings of the current study showed that lexical error feedback was the most difficult, which was in contradiction to Chen's study.

Studies by Liu (1999b) and Chen (2002) on Taiwanese students clearly revealed that collocation error occurred frequently in learners' productions. Liu's (1999b) study pointed out that Verb+Noun pattern and Verb+Preposition+Noun patterns were noticeable errors. Chen's (2002) study showed that Adjective+Noun and Verb+Noun were the most frequent types of lexical collocation errors, while Preposition+Noun and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocation errors.

The sum of scores in each category at the three levels is as follows: G1=Adj.+Prep.=63.34, L2=Adj.+N=59.26, G3=V+Prep=51.87, L3=N+N=48.38, G2=N+Prep.=45.23, L1=V+N=38.80. This frequency of error rates in collocation errors and collocation error corrective feedback are in line with each other.

Results indicated that L1 (V+N) and G8 (D) (V+Prep.+O/ V+O+Prep.+O) errors occurred most frequently in the participants' writing and G6 (Adj.+ to infinitive) errors were the least occurring errors. The results of the questionnaire showed that the participants considered the categories G4 (Prep.+N) and G5 (Adj.+Prep.) as the most difficult categories and G8 (V+O+to be+C/ V+O+C/ V+C) and G8 (V+to Inf. / V+O+to Inf.) as the easiest categories. The findings of this study are in line with the existing research. The first point explored in the first and second research questions is that we should pay more attention to some difficult distinguished categories like V+N while teaching collocations. While other researchers such Bahns (1993) and Liu (1999) emphasized grammatical collocations, the current study shows that it is necessary to place more emphasis on learning lexical collocations using other strategies than error corrective feedback.

#### **4. Implications and conclusions**

The current study reveals that error correction feedback is positive and useful at the intermediate and advanced level, but it is not effective at the elementary level. The study shows

as well that error correction feedback is better for grammatical collocation than lexical collocation patterns. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to lexical collocation errors using other strategies than error correction feedback. It is recommended that teachers use error correction feedback in teaching.

Teachers who use error correction feedback in the classroom can use this strategy in confidence to teach collocations. This study shows a new route and alleviates the controversial theories about error correction feedback.

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