The Influence of Using Word forks on Developing Collocative Competence of Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

One of the most problematic areas of learning English as a foreign or second language is learning phrasal verbs (PVs) in collocation with certain nouns. The present study was designed to test a procedure called the *word fork* technique to help intermediate EFL students to develop their collocative competence in using PVs. A group of 30 intermediate Iranian EFL students were randomly selected. They were given a pre – test and a post – test each in two phases. In order to check the efficacy of using the *word fork* technique in developing the participants' collocative competence in using PVs they were required to devote a time period of about 15 to 20 minutes of each class session practicing PVs, using the newly developed technique. This lasted for 20 session. Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that the new technique can efficiently help the target population to improve their collocative competence in using PVs in specific and their communicative ability in English in general.

Keywords: Collocative Competence; Phrasal Verbs (PV); Word Fork

1. Introduction

In order to speak and write English and by extension to understand while listening and reading, we need to learn different types of lexical chunks or collocations which are defined as a group of co-occurring words (Bahns 1993; Aston, 1995; Kita & Ogata 1997; Shei & Pain 2000; Altenberg & Granger 2001; Hoey 2000, 2003; McAlpine & Myles 2003; Nesselhauf 2003; Chen, 2004). However; one of the most difficult aspects of the English language for EFL learners to develop, is collocations of different kinds. One of the most frequent mistakes in language learning appears through the use of collocations (Dundley-Evans, 1994; McAlpine & Myles, 2003). In the same line, Gui and Yang (2002), in their study conducted with Chinese EFL students also found out that mistakes in collocations were the most dominant mistakes that students faced. Altenberg and Granger (2001) and Nesselhauf (2003) have shown that even students learning English at advanced levels have problems with collocations. During the process of learning English collocational incompetency was also observed to be one of the main problems for native Turkish speaking students (Koç, 2006). One of the possible explanations for this problem is that students have difficulty with automating the use of words. In conclusion, these studies are in line with the idea that students need more detailed information on collocations, (McAlpine & Myles, 2003). Yet throughout the history of language teaching few studies have been carried out to find solutions for such a kind of massive problem. That is to say, there is a real paucity of techniques to help EFL learners of English develop their collocative competence. From among the few experts dealing with this problem one can mention Krashen (1983) who suggested that massive amounts of "language input" especially through reading, is the only effective approach to such learning. A second approach to learning lexical chunks (collocations of various types) has been "contrastive." That is to say, some applied linguists have suggested that for a number of languages there is an appreciable degree of overlap in the form and meaning of collocations. Bahns (1993) for instance, suggests that "the teaching of lexical collocations in EFL should concentrate on items for which there is no direct translational equivalence in English and in the learner's respective mother tongue" (p. 58).

As it was mentioned above EFL learners should learn many different kinds of collocations they choose to develop their collocative competence. It was also said that the paucity of techniques to help EFL learners enhance their collocative competence is obvious. In this paper the procedure known as "word fork" technique is going to be

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put to the test to see whether it is effective in developing the collocative competence of EFL Intermediate Iranian students. One type of collocation that is, the collocation of Phrasal Verbs (PV) with certain nouns is focused on.

2. Review of Literature

In order to speak and write English and by extension to understand while listening and reading, we need to learn collocations of different types. To show the importance of collocation in using English appropriately, Mc Carthey and O'Dell (2008) maintain, that you need to learn collocations because they will help you to speak and write English in a more natural and accurate way(P.4). The same authors also believe that learning collocations will help you to increase your range of English vocabulary. For example, you'll find it easier to avoid words like very, nice, beautiful or get by choosing a word that fits the context better and has a more precise meaning. Based on Woolard (2004) collocations are common combinations of words. If you want to develop your spoken and written competence in English well, you need to know them (P.4). Phrasal verbs as a class of key words in English have been found to be of crucial importance in enhancing one's collocative competence. Key words including phrasal verbs are recognized as the most important words to learn. The main reason they are important is because they can combine with lots of other words in short expressions (Woolard, 2005, p. 6). Phrasal verb is defined as a structure that consists of a verb proper and a morphologically invariable particle that functions as a single unit both lexically and syntactically (Darwin & Gray, 1999; Quirk et al. 1985). Throughout the history of language teaching, the importance of phrasal verbs has been recognized by many experts in the field and many techniques have been proposed to teach them. For instance, Upendran (2000) proposes techniques like, substituting a phrasal verb for a single word, rewriting the phrasal verb with a single word substitute and the like. He also believes that even songs can be used to teach phrasal verbs. Based on Pratheeba (2011), word forks indirectly help to enhance the collocative competence of ESL learners as these exercises help them to remember the collocation meticulously. As a part of the regular exercise, continuous re-cycling and revising may be envisaged upon. It will then indirectly lead to the accumulation of the usage of phrasal verbs in the long term memory (p. 13).

Based on the previous studies carried out on learning English phrasal verbs, it has been found that learning this set of English PVs has proved to be problematic for non – native speakers of English. For instance, Pratheeba (2011) carried out a study to see if mastering phrasal verbs is probably problematic for Indian students. He came to the conclusion that phrasal verbs are not only difficult to learn by Indian students of English but also they are even hated by ESL learners of Indian origin. He claims that this is so because this aspect of learning English is peculiar to people who speak different languages in India. He further claims that since their mother tongue is devoid of such an aspect, the Indian students find it very difficult to incorporate the usage of phrasal verbs either in their speech or in their writing. As a result, the usage of PVs is probably avoided by ESL learners whose L1 is devoid of these sets of English verbs. He then concludes his study with the suggestion that various practices are needed, if at all, the ESL learners want to be well versed in the usage of phrasal verbs. It is not then an ESL and by extension EFL learner's cup of tea but a bitter pill devoid of sugar coating. So, if an ESL learner gets accustomed to the usage of phrasal verbs, then his fluency in any linguistic activity will dramatically increase (Pratheeba; 2011, p. 11). Although PVs may be used both in oral and written English, many believe that these set of verbs are mainly used in spoken English. According to many experts and grammarians (Cornell, 1985; Dixon, 1982; Side, 1990) PVs on the whole occur more frequently in spoken than in written language. Throughout the history of language learning and teaching PVs have been focally studied by many researchers among these researchers, one can mention what was said on the part of Dr. Samuel Johnso about 250 years ago. In his preface to a dictionary of English language he writes:

There is another kind of composition more frequent in our language than perhaps in any other, from which arises to foreigners the greatest difficulty. We modify the signification of many verbs by a particle subjoined; as to come of, to escape by a fetch, to fall on, to attack, to give over, to cease; to set off, to embellish... with enumerable expressions of the same kind, of which some appear wildly irregular, being so far distant from the sense of the simple words.

Many researchers have voiced the same opinion. Gairns & Redman (1986) for example, write of "the mystique which surrounds multiword verbs for many foreign learners". In any case, acquisition of phrasal verbs seems not to be so easy for both ESL and EFL learners of English. That is, what is evident in the literature part of which was mentioned above.

3. Statement of the Problem and Rationale of the Study

Based on the brief review mentioned, mastering of the English PVs on the part of non – native speakers of English has proved to be problematic. Many studies have been conducted to see if the acquisition of phrasal verbs by EFL learners is difficult or not. Many have come to the conclusion that these verbs may be difficult to master by both ESL and EFL learners of English. Because of this, English PVs may either be used inappropriately or totally avoided by non – native learners of English. Probably Iranian intermediate students are not exception.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

In order to collect the necessary data for the present study a group of 30 intermediate students enrolling in an English language institute were randomly chosen from a larger population. Their level of proficiency was determined according to the number of academic terms they had passed in the language institute. In addition to that, an Oxford Placement Test was also utilized to better determine the proficiency level of the subjects in the research project.

4.2 Instruments

First an Oxford Placement Test was used in order to determine the proficiency level of the subjects required for the study. Then, a set of *word forks* was used and the students were encouraged to memorize the filled-in word forks. After practicing phrasal verbs using the word fork technique, the students were given a chance to write a *dialogue* between their favorite cartoon characters with as many phrasal verbs as possible or write a *paragraph* describing their daily routines with phrasal verbs practiced using word forks.

4.3 Procedures

First of all, the standardized Oxford Placement Test was given to a group of English students enrolled in a language institute. A pre-test in which the selected participants were required to write dialogues between their favorite cartoon characters and paragraphs to describe their daily routines with phrasal verbs of their choice was given .Then, the researchers who was also the teachers of the participants in the language institute provided the participants with the chance of devoting a short time (about 15- 20 minutes) of each class session using word forks to practice phrasal verbs. This procedure continued for 20 sessions. After that, an exit test in which the students were required to use as many phrasal verbs as possible to write dialogues between their favorite cartoon characters or to describe their daily routines was given.

In order to compare the performance of the participants in pre- test with that of post-test a t-test was done to assess the efficacy of the training. To see if there is any significant relationship between the performances of the participants in the present research project, the researcher also determined the correlation between their performances as they made dialogues between their favorite cartoon characters and that of the description of their routine activities. To sum up, then, statistically speaking a matched t-test was done to determine any significant difference between the pre-test and exit-test performance of the subjects participating in this research inquiry and then in order to better determine the influence of using word forks as a technique to help develop the participants' usage of PVs, the correlation between the subjects' made dialogues and their descriptions their daily activities using PVs was calculated.

5. Results and Discussion

Before giving the results obtained from the study it seems necessary to say that four tests were used in the present research. The following tables simply show the tasks used and they also specify which tasks were given as the pre and post – tasks. The same tables also indicate what the participants were required to do as they took each test.

Table 1: Tasks used in the study before using the word fork technique

The Name of the task	What the students were supposed to do
task A	Writing dialogues between cartoon characters using PVs
task C	Describing their daily routines utilizing as many PVs as they could

Table 2: Tasks used in the study after using the word fork technique

The Name of the task	What the subjects were required to do	
task B	Writing dialogues between their favorite cartoon characters using as many PVs as they could	
task D	Describing their daily routines utilizing as many PVs as possible	

The results obtained from these different tests as pre and post tasks are given below. Note: The following data have been obtained from tasks A and B

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Paired sample statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1A&B	4.4667	30	2.12916	.38873
	8.8000	30	2.17192	.39654

Table 4: Paired sample correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 A&B	30	.081	.672

Table 5: Paired sample t – test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair1 A & B	-4.33333	2.91646	.53247	-8.138	29	.000

The following results were obtained from tasks C and D, namely the pre and post tests in which the students were required to describe their daily routine activities using as many PVs as they could (see tables one and two).

Table 6: Paired sample statistics obtained from tasks C and D

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	C&D	3.5000	30	1.69685	.30980
		8.0333	30	1.99107	.36352

Table 7: Paired sample correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 C&D	30	107	.573

Table 8: Paired sample t – test between pre and post tasks of C and D

	Mean	Std. Deviation		ror ean t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair1 C & D	-4.33333	2.75097	.502	-9.026	29	.000

The mean of the pre – test A was 4.46 and that of the post test B was 8.80. Table three presents the results of the t – test run on the means of the tests A and B as pre and post tests respectively. The results obtained from the second phase of the study, namely pre and post tests of C and D respectively were given in table six. Then, as the results show the mean of test D was 8.30. Based on the above mentioned huge differences between the means of the pre – tests and post – tests of the new technique, that is, the word fork technique, might have been beneficial in improving the participants' collocative competence as they attempted to use as many PVs as they had in their disposal. To test our research hypotheses namely H1 and H0, referring back to tables 5 and 8 seems to be mandatory. Based on the data given in these two tables P is 0/00 and obviously this value is far below %5 (P<%5). Furthermore, the value of t

– observed from the two paired pre and post tests of A-B & C-D are 8.13 and -9.02 respectively. The degree of freedom based on the same tables were 29 for both pre and exit tests of A-B and C-D in the two phases of the study, that is to say, based on the value of P which is less than %5 and the given t (t=8.13& -9.02) and the value with the specific df (df=29) obtained, H0 is rejected and H1 is accepted. That is, there seems to be a significant difference between the pre and post test means in the two phases of the study. So, we can increase our certainty about the efficacy of using word forks as a new technique to develop our students' collocative competence in using PVs in different written and spoken activities the students were supposed to take part in. To better compare the performance of the participants in the study on different practiced PVs using the word Fork technique a few of the phrasal verbs have been selected to and presented graphically in appendix one. Based on the data provided, the vast difference between the students' performance in pre – test of A and C and the post – test of B and D is evident. This further increases our certainty about the efficacy of the word fork technique in enhancing the Iranian intermediate students' collocative competence in using PVs.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

A comparison of the performance of the subjects participating in this study in the pre – test and the exit test showed that the participants were able to enliven their usage of phrasal verbs in a rather satisfactory way. In other words, it can very well be concluded that a training session of this kind which makes use of word forks can be adapted to develop both communicative and collocative competence of any intermediate EFL learner of English. That is to say, despite the fact that English phrasal verbs are one of the problematic areas of the language to master on the part of English intermediate students around the globe in general and Iranian EFL learners in particular, based on the findings of this study, it is highly likely that the use of the new technique, namely the WORD FORK technique can be beneficial to develop the EFL collocative competence. But as the final remark, what was said above is not to be taken as an all inclusive absolute conclusion as this study like all other studies conducted in the field of SLA has its own limitations. That is to say, in order to better test the proposed technique, i.e., the word fork technique, more studies should be carried out in other contexts with other EFL intermediate learners to better verify its usefulness.

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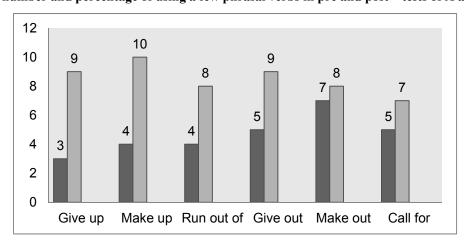
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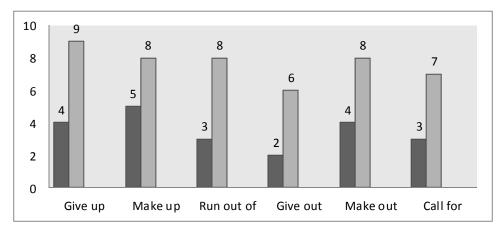
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Appendix one: Graphic presentation of a few of phrasal verbs used by the participants in pre and post – tests of A and B

Graph 1: The number and percentage of using a few phrasal verbs in pre and post - tests of A and B



Graph 2: The number and the percentage of a few phrasal verbs used by the participants in the pre and post – tests of C and D



Based on graph one, for instance, we can compare the number of times a sample verb like *give up* has been used (only 4 times) by the students as they developed dialogues between their favorite cartoon characters. However, the same verb has been used 9 times by the same group of subjects to do the same thing in the post – test. The reader can then easily follow the same procedure and compare the students' performance in using some of the phrasal target verbs in both pre and post-tests. Then, based on the above mentioned discussion founded on the data obtained from this study, one can further his certainty about the efficiency of the application of the word fork technique in helping EFL Iranian intermediate students in particular and probably other EFL learners with the same level of English proficiency in general.

Appendix two: A few examples of the word forks used in this study

	Cigarettes			Heat
Give up	Smoking			Sound
	An hour		Gave out	A perfume
	Career			Light
				A gas
	A story			A cup of tea
Make up	Her face		Do with	A cold drink
	Career] [Some help
	The			Some advice
	prescription			

				A cheque
	The house			A case
Do up	Your button		Make out	Some figures
	Your coat			The outline
_				A shop list
	Cheers			Money
	Laughter			A fight
Broke into	The shop		Put up	A struggle
	The bank			
	The house			Resistance
				Proposal
				Case
	Coffee	<u> </u>		Action
	Tea			Quality
Run out of	Sugar		Call for	Subsides
	Rice			An explanation
	Wheat			A plan