Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching

Volume 04, Issue 2, (2014) 102-110

www.awer-center.org/gjflt/

# Lexical chunks and retention-production of Iranian EFL learners

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**Suggested Citation:**
Jafarigohar, M. & Nazari, M. (2014). Lexical chunks and retention-production of Iranian EFL learners. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. *4*(2), 102-110.

Received 16 June, 2014; revised 13 July, 2014; accepted 14 October, 2012.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University.
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**Abstract**

This study focuses on the role of collocations in language teaching. Due to vagueness in definition and categorization, we divide the collocations into two types: referential collocations meaning recognizable by just referring to single word companies; and inferential collocations whose meaning cannot be easily discerned by non-native speakers of English. This study compared these two types of collocations among two groups of Iranian EFL learners and found that learners had more difficulty in producing the collocations than retaining. However, learners had difficulty in producing both the referential and collocational expressions with similar degree. The finding further suggests that the categorization for the non-native speakers—Persian learners—make less sense as for them all the lexical chunking is problematic whether idiomatic or referential and they need awareness-raising.

Keywords: Collocation, Inferential, Referential, Iran, Chunks.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of lexical chunking first was introduced by Firth (1952) and later scholars like Halliday (1966) and Sinclair (1991) developed the notion. Soon after Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000) focused on lexical approach and boomed the language vocabulary instruction. Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) also had reported on lexical chunking ending up in the book entitled 'lexical phrases and language teaching'. Moreover, Evert (2004), comments on the theories behind collocational use and how lexical approaches emerged. He states that in structural linguistic tradition (Saussure and Chomsky), no attention was given to collocations and general abstraction about phrases and sentences, whereas, in British linguistics (Firth, Halliday, Sinclair), close attention was casted on lexical chunks and more emphasis on the importance of the context. So the notion is linked to the Firth's contextual theory of meaning which pays attention to social setting as opposed to the idealized speaker of Chomsky and special care toward spoken and textual discourse, mainly stressing the famous quote by Firth that 'You shall know a word by the company it keeps' (1957).

Researchers rarely call back lexical chunks and mostly refer to them as collocations. Founding our paper on the lexical approach of Lewis (1993), and confirming the theoretical background of Firthian school of thought on contextual theory of meaning, we do separate lexical chunks with collocations. Besides, we believe that collocations by definition are part of lexical chunks. Further, in this study we want to introduce another classification of lexical chunks: referential and collocational. Referential meaning of lexical chunks refers not to the literal meaning of its linguistic definition as conveying what is in outside world (Crystal, 2005) while we mean if the parts are individually recognizable by the learners, we call the expression involving a referential meaning or as researchers call explicit meaning (Paciorek & Williams, 2013; Paradis, 2004; Dweik & Shakra, 2011). For example if an expression like 'get milk from a cow', being considered as a lexical chunk, is easily understood by the learner, we call it a referential meaning; whereas, an expression like 'bury the hatch' may be regarded as a collocational or idiomatic expression. Beside, the collocational meaning may be charged with emotive, connotative, metaphorical sense, and implicit meaning (Dweik & Shakra, 2011). The idea is confirmed by the definition proposed by Stephan Grimly and Kurt – Michael Patrol, (2002) that "The term collocation refers to combinations of two lexical items each of which makes a distinct semantic contribution" (p.9). Therefore, the definition of collocational meaning and pragmatic meaning is not clear-cut (Crystal, 2005; Lyons, 2005) suggesting that collocational/pragmatic definition is not 'a coherent field of study' (Crystal, 1997).

So the aim of this study is to improve the Iranian learners' ability in retention and production of the lexical chunks including the referential and collocational meaning. Besides, it aims at finding the differences between the idiomatic, metaphorical, collocational meaning with those of literal, denotative and referential meaning. The two levels of retention and production are also compared.

According to the studies done on lexical chunking in Iran, Goudarzi and Moini (2012), stress that collocations for Iranian students are one of the most difficult aspects of language learning and communication. Most books compiled or written by Iranian authors lack lexical chunking, here after I refer to as collocations, and the books by the ministry of education are not an exception (Akbari, 1995; Zarei, 2002; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006; Pirmoradian & Tabatabei, 2012). Therefore, learners face major difficulties in producing lexical phrases especially the preposition ones (Ahranjani & Shadi, 2012). In addition, the researchers believe that, for foreign language learners, the definitions of collocational and referential ones are not the same as for the native speakers. To the native speakers the collocational meaning and their referential ones happen naturalistically, whereas it may be regarded as a hurdle to the non-native speaker (Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006; Chan, 2008). To non-native speaker, 'take an exam' may sound as difficult as 'fall out with somebody' since both needs being exposed to their chunks (Chan, 2008). In this study the pragmatics is not dealt with since according to Crystal (2005), it is not a coherent field of study which refers to the study of factors governing our choices of language - such as our social awareness, our culture and our sense of etiquette. Raising the questions of

the research, we do not use the term 'vocabulary' and instead based on justifications by Lewis (1993, 2000) we prefer 'lexis'.

Does the teaching of lexical chunks improve the Iranian EFL learners' retention and production of referential and collocational meaning of lexis?

Is there a correlation between the teaching of lexical chunks and the Iranian EFL learners' production and retention of referential and collocational meaning of lexis (in the experimental group)?

## 2. Literature Review

This study challenges the collocational meaning of lexical chunks, introducing a new terminology which may trigger some semanticians' feeling—positively or negatively. Lewis (1993, 1997) previously looked at lexical chunks from two angles. He distinguishes between words and expressions, calling the words and collocations convey referential meaning, while expressions convey pragmatic meaning. The former are concerned with the speaker/writer's content, and the latter with the speaker/writer's intentions. This idea is objected later by Crystal (1997, 2005) and Moon (2001), believing that pragmatics is culture-bound and speaker-specific and generally context-specific —making the idea difficult to be measureable.

Lewis divides lexical chunks into four groups of (a) poly-words: extension of words, which is composed of more than one word, for example: as soon as, on the one hand (b) collocation: pairs of words that frequently co-occur with each other, examples can be knife and fork, shake hands, (c) Institutionalized utterances: Chunks that are called whole units and conventionalized in the language, for instance, accepting: I'd be delighted to offering: can I give you a hand, and (d) Sentence frames and heads: serve as the framework builder of the whole sentences, like 'It is suggested that…, The fact is… Lewis (1993, 95) points out that among the four basic types, the first two categories are concerned mainly with referential meaning, and the latter two with pragmatic meaning.

Farrokh and Mahmoodzadeh, (2012), summarized the differences between the lexical chunks and collocations stating that "the native-speakers have a lexicon that consists of prefabricated chunks and that they use these chunks in order to comprehend and produce language". They add that collocations being the largest part of these chunks. Hence, learning collocations is also important for an L2/LF learner in order to achieve native-like, fluency. Oskuee, Pustch and Salehipour (2012), believe that collocational patterns are the cornerstone of every language, recognizable by native speakers, strived to be acquired by second language learners; sometimes this inability leads to collocational errors and consequently the breakdown of comprehension. It has been affirmed that heightening learners' awareness of collocations is a very efficient way of increasing their communicative power (Channell, 1981; Sadoughvanini, 2012).

So as mentioned by Benson (1997), it seems that chunks are predictable. On this issue, Kuo (2009) states native speakers of English have a sense of collocational competence to predict the word companies; it is hard for foreign language learners to foresee the accompaniment of words. Besides, Evert (2004) suggests that predictability may be equated with compositionality conveying similar meanings; he reiterates that idioms are the most extreme cases of non-compositionality. He finally sums up that most collocations exhibit milder forms of non-compositionality. Word combinations that are considered as collocations range from compound nouns (black box), over semantically opaque idiomatic expressions (kick the bucket), to fully compositional combinations that are only lexically restricted (handsome man vs. beautiful woman).

Nevertheless, Crystal (2005) differentiates between collocation and association reiterating that the go-togetherness of words may have nothing to do with ideas. We say in English green with jealousy (not blue or red), though there is nothing literally 'green' about 'jealousy. However, Lyons (1995) draws a distinction between 'descriptive' (or 'propositional') and 'non-

descriptive' (or 'non-propositional') meaning. Focusing on the word-boundary, Lyons (1995) implicitly compares collocational with referential meaning.

Nofal (2012) stated that many linguists have addressed the issue of collocations in English. They have come up with similar definitions and categories, but they may differ in their focus. He argues about two types of collocations: the first type refers to situational meaning of words concerned as in "white coffee", "black coffee", "white race" and "white wine" where these colors are not used with reference to their referents. The other type refers to the referential meaning of words as in "dark night" where one meaning of "night" is its collectability with "dark" and vice versa. The Nofal's classification may be regarded as another support point for collocational and referential division proposed by the researchers in this study.

As far as difficulties in collocational use are concerned, Iranian learners of English are by no means an exception. Any analysis of students' speech or writing indicates a deficiency in this regard. Despite having sufficient lexical or grammatical knowledge, most Iranian EFL learners seem to experience serious problems with the production of collocational patterns. Such erroneous expressions as strong rain, to take birthday, heavy tea, to begin a family, hard question, just to name a few, are not due to poor mastery of grammar or lexis. These problems, as Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) have pointed out, stem largely from lack of appropriate collocational knowledge among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, such multi-word expressions have not usually been the focus of teaching. The fact is that research professionals in Iran and most of the research studies carried out to date (Akbari, 1995; Zarei, 2002; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006) have investigated the use of collocations in the learners' written product with only a few touching on their oral performance.

Based on their study with 200 participants, Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) concluded that majority of Iranian EFL learners had good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; however, they seemed to have serious problems with the production of collocational patterns, especially collocations of prepositions. Accordingly, it has been proven that learning vocabulary through chunks has long-term retention (Lewis, 1993, 1997, 2000). It can also lower the burden of memorization and expand the learners' vocabulary repertoire (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Moon, 2001).

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Subjects*

The subjects of the study were 66 boys of high school students aged 16-18 in Tehran. The subjects are divided into two groups of experimental and control, 33 in each. They were chosen from among 8 classes of grade one, two of the classes were homogenous. The learners were all taught by the same teacher.

### *3.2. Design*

The study keeps and experimental design with control-experimental group and conducting pre-post tests, so following a quasi-experimental design. Besides, a t-test and correlational analysis is carried out.

### *3.3. Materials*

There is a multiple choice of 50 items test on lexis, 20 related to collocational meaning and 30 to referential meaning, piloted and validated for the intended audience. The test is based on students' book one of high school. Besides, the learners are required to produce the English equivalents of the Farsi given chunks to be assessed on their production ability. Therefore, the vocabulary of the four lessons of book one by the ministry of education is taught and evaluated. Moreover, applying SPSS, the reported reliability was 0.90.

### *3.4. Procedure*

1. First a multiple choice test of lexical chunks is prepared, validated and piloted for the post test.
2. The learners in the two classes are pre-tested with the same test prepared in advance.
3. The learners' instruction starts. The vocabularies for the lessons are taught with applying chunks and collocation examples. The instruction took 45 days.
4. The experimental groups received chunking examples of vocabulary while the word list was supplied for the control group and they were asked to memorize the word list presented to them.
5. The groups were post tested, both through multiple choice test as a recognition aspect and written English-Farsi equivalent exam.
6. The data was analyzed through applying SPSS and the findings were reported.

## 4. Data collection and analysis

The data was analyzed through SPSS, applying independent t-test as well as paired one. First, two groups of students were randomly chosen from among 8 classes of grade nine in high school. All the eight classes were pre-tested to find the targeted control and the experimental groups. So the two groups of students were compared to ensure of no initial differences in their scores. Hence the pre-test is analyzed to show the learners' homogeneity.

Table 1. pre-test group statistics

| | Group Statistics | N | Mean | S. D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Groups | Experimental | 33 | 12.69 | 6.78 |
| | Control | 33 | 12.96 | 6.36 |

As the mean and the standard deviation in table 1 show, the two groups signify to be homogenous. To ascertain the claim, the given data was t-tested independently through the following table (2). As being indicated, the t-observed (0.16) is much less than the t-critical (1.67) for 66 subjects, whether directional or non-directional. So we can confer that the difference between the two groups was not significant at the pre-test stage.

Table 2. pre-test analysis independent samples test

| | Sig. | T | df | Sig | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0.0 | 0.95 | -0.16 | 64 | 0.86 | -0.27 | 1.62 |

Now to answer the questions of the study raised in the introductory section, further analysis of the data was required. Answering question one which stated that if the teaching of lexical chunks improve the Iranian EFL learners' retention and production of referential and collocational meaning of lexis, the subjects' results in the experimental and the control group were compared using independent t-test.

Table 3. post-test total score statistics

| | Groups | N | Mean | S.D | SEM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total score | Experimental | 33 | 32.75 | 7.62 | 1.32 |
| | Control | 32 | 24.81 | 9.18 | 1.62 |

By a glance at the descriptive data in table 3, some inferences might be made about the mean differences between the two groups. However, to make statistically cocksure, the data is rallied on into the following table.

Table 4. post-test total independent t-test

| Post-test | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. | SED |
| Total | .98 | .32 | 3.8 | 63 | .00 | 2.09 |

The above table illustrates that the t-observed is higher than the t-critical and the two groups are significantly different. It implies that teaching through chunks was meaningfully significant for the experimental group whereas the control group did not receive any chunking practices.

So the above tables confirm that the teaching of chunks improved the learners' performance. Further analysis shows if the production and recognition abilities of the learners have improved compared to the control group. Table five shows the mean and standard deviation, but again more precise analysis is required to spot the differences.

Table 5. post-test total Recognition and production statistics

| Post-test Recognition | Groups | N | Mean | S.D | SEM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recognition Referential Chunks | Experimental | 33 | 10.81 | 2.78 | .48 |
| | Control | 32 | 8.65 | 3.01 | .53 |
| Recognition Collocational Chunks | Experimental | 33 | 10.00 | 2.89 | .50 |
| | Control | 32 | 8.28 | 2.86 | .50 |
| Production Referential Chunks | Experimental | 33 | 6.96 | 2.02 | .35 |
| | Control | 32 | 4.62 | 2.45 | .43 |
| Production Collocational Chunks | Experimental | 33 | 5.00 | 2.66 | .46 |
| | Control | 32 | 3.25 | 2.59 | .45 |
| Total Production | Experimental | 33 | 11.66 | 3.96 | .69 |
| | Control | 32 | 7.46 | 4.61 | .81 |

Table 6. post-test total Recognition and production t-test

| Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. | SEM |
| Recognition Referential Chunks | 0.60 | 0.44 | 3.00 | 63 | 0.00 | 0.71 |
| Recognition Collocational Chunks | 0.06 | 0.79 | 2.40 | 63 | 0.01 | 0.71 |
| Total Recognition | 0.20 | 0.65 | 2.92 | 63 | 0.00 | 1.31 |
| Production Referential Chunks | 1.88 | 0.17 | 4.20 | 63 | 0.00 | 0.55 |
| Production Collocational Chunks | 0.15 | 0.69 | 2.68 | 63 | 0.00 | 0.65 |
| Total Production | 0.50 | 0.48 | 3.93 | 63 | 0.00 | 1.06 |

As shown in table six above, in all cases of recognizing and producing the referential as well as the collocational chunks the experimental group's results surpassed that of the control group. Observable in table six, all the differences in the two groups are significant—all t-observed are higher than the t-critical and significance is above 0.05 percent. Therefore, it can be wrapped up that the chunking helps students' recognition and production ability compared to their control group counterpart.

To reply question two and trace where exactly the experimental group's performance was highlighted, a paired t-test was carried out, besides the correlation between the scores was calculated. It was the place where we can make conclusions on the significance of chunking practices.

Table 7. Paired Samples Statistics

| | | Mean | N | SD | SEM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Recognition Referential | 10.81 | 33 | 2.78 | 0.48 |
| | Recognition Collocational | 10.00 | 33 | 2.89 | 0.50 |
| Pair 2 | Production Referential | 10.27 | 33 | 3.58 | 0.62 |
| | Production Collocational | 8.33 | 33 | 3.94 | 0.68 |
| Pair 3 | Recognition Referential | 10.81 | 33 | 2.78 | 0.48 |
| | Production Collocational | 8.33 | 33 | 3.94 | 0.68 |
| Pair 4 | Recognition Referential | 10.81 | 33 | 2.78 | 0.48 |
| | Production Referential | 10.27 | 33 | 3.58 | 0.62 |
| Pair 5 | Recognition Collocational | 10.00 | 33 | 2.89 | 0.50 |
| | Production Collocational | 8.33 | 33 | 3.94 | 0.68 |

Table 8. Paired Samples Correlations

| | | N | Correlation | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Recognition Referential & Recognition Collocational | 33 | 0.60 | 0.00 |
| Pair 2 | Production Referential & Production Collocational | 33 | 0.45 | 0.00 |
| Pair 3 | Recognition Referential & Production Collocational | 33 | 0.28 | 0.10 |
| Pair 4 | Recognition Referential & Production Referential | 33 | 0.12 | 0.50 |
| Pair 5 | Recognition Collocational & Production Collocational | 33 | 0.18 | 0.30 |

Tables seven and eight above indicate that pair 5 as recognition and production of collocational chunks reveal very low correlation meaning that although learners are better at recognizing the collocational chunks they need more practice on producing them. Besides, the same issue happens for pair 4 as recognizing and producing referential chunks show significantly very low correlation. It also signifies that in referential chunking which seem to be easier to learn, there sounds to be more to study.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study the role and effect of chunking on students' performance was investigated. It was found that the experimental group outperformed the control group's performance on chunking ability. However, students were able to recognize but not produce the chunks. It means that more practice is needed on producing chunks than just helping them to recognize. In addition, contrary to many who believe that students have more problems on collocational chunks, it was found that learners faced more difficulty producing the referential chunks than the collocational one. For example when learners taught that 'get down to the lesson' means 'pay attention'; they mostly answered and produced the required response. Whereas seemingly simple expressions like, 'it is *getting late*' '*this* is Reza (on the phone)' and 'I can't *hear* you' the learners were not so successful in producing such expressions. It can be somehow inferred that the learners focused on collocational expressions more than the referential ones; however, in producing the referential chunks they may receive more prominence and attention. Moreover, the findings suggest that learners need to focus on chunking in speaking and writing exercises. Teachers also need to make students aware of simple referential chunks which seem to be easy but are difficult when produced.

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