

# Effect of Electronic Dictionary as an ICT Tool on English Collocation Learning of EFL Learners

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**ABSTRACT**— *Within the last few two decades, media technology has diversified the forms of learners' dictionaries, as electronic dictionaries, for example those on CD-ROM or online, have become well-known among EFL learners all over the world therefore, the degree at which electronic dictionaries have been substituting their printed counterparts is impressive, though not altogether unpredicted. The electronic dictionary has significantly evolved as one of the most popular tools by learners. The main purpose of this study was to investigate on the impacts of using an electronic dictionary in learning a second language collocation. To achieve the intended purposes, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was run among 340 learners in 6 different language institutes. Those learners who scored between 40 to 50 were chosen as the intermediate level. After selecting 100 participants based on the results of the OPT, they were placed in two groups, namely experimental, and control. The participants of the experimental group received new teaching methods of collocations via the electronic collocation dictionary (ECD), while the control group were taught based on the traditional teaching methods. In order to collect the data, participants 'first was given a pre-test, then after teaching, posttest and last one was the delayed posttest. The findings demonstrated that the experimental group using [ED] significantly have outperformed the ones in control group in their acquisition of collocations. In conclusion, the results of the study revealed that employing an electronic collocation dictionary could create a desirable condition to enhance the EFL learners 'acquisition of collocations. This study also has some pedagogical implications for using ED as an influential learning tool in teaching vocabulary.*

**Keywords**— Informational and Communicational Technology (ICT), Collocation, Electronic Dictionary, Vocabulary

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition plays a key role in foreign and second language (L2) learning, especially so compared to background knowledge and grammar (Laufer, 1997). The importance of vocabulary, as a sub-category of language in total and as a constituent of lexical competence in specific, has been signified by EFL/ESL researchers, teachers and even learners. It seems that learners and teachers spend a significant amount of time on vocabulary learning and teaching. Among different kinds and different features of vocabulary, collocations are considered a confusing part of understanding the lexis of English. This term was first introduced by Firth (1957) to express an arrangement of words related with each other, such as to take a photo. Collocations are partially or completely fixed expressions that become recognized through repeated context-dependent use. Benson et al. (1986) call them fixed, distinguishable, non-idiomatic phrases and structures. Undoubtedly, all natural languages contain collocation. Wallace (1982) claimed that “words seldom occur in isolation” (p.30). Collocation is considered a major part of language and also an essential characteristic that distinguishes languages. So, in order to master English well, language learners should pay more attention to collocation.

With the beginning of modern technologies, language learning has extensively been affected by new electronic tools and applications like CD Roms and electronic dictionaries (ED). Although electronic dictionaries (ED) including those saved on CD-ROM or in the Web, have increasingly been used in all language learning situations (e.g., Aust, Kelley, & Roby, 1993; Hulstijn, 1993; Knight, 1994; Koga, 1995), some shifts have brought on their form in Iranian EFL environment. Electronic dictionaries do not have the structural and spatial limitations of paper dictionaries, can recover and blend information based on the specifications of the user. One of the features of using ED is learning English through usage of combined words such as collocation. The words that are freely combined are easy to learn since they root from fact such as red rose. They are “manifestly related to the referential and substantial meaning of the words concerned” (Robins 2000, p.56).

Collocation is considered a hindrance in learners' usage of inter language, especially in the EFL context. Bahns and

Eldaw (1993) believed that while advanced learners try to produce accurate language, they face problems mainly in uttering collocations. This problem roots from the fact that there is no rule that exists to manage learning collocations. The experience of living in an English context enables native speakers to produce the correct collocations. However, non-native speakers lack this experience, and they may bring words in a way that looks strange. So far, language learners have mostly relied on dictionaries and the internet. Nowadays, there are many excellent dictionaries of collocations. A good example is Oxford Collocations Dictionary. This dictionary is considered to have what language teachers and learners need. When language learners face problem in collocation, they can look the key word up from the dictionary. According to the frequency of each collocation, they are listed. In the context of EFL learning in Iran, due to the lack of connection with English native speakers, there are major problems in mastering the word repertoire and collocations. Still unfortunately, not many Iranian EFL learners make use of collocation dictionaries. In addition, the research on electronic and digital dictionaries in Iran is scarce and their application has not been explored so far. The present study investigates whether it is possible to use electronic collocation dictionaries to learn English collocation among EFL learners.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Vocabulary Knowledge**

Words are part of every language and language became known first as words. The creation and the acquisition of new words never stop in every day communications and academic encounters using new words is indispensable. Even in our first language (L1), new words are constantly learnt. Words, if considered as tools, are used for searching and activating our background knowledge, and they are used to learn new concepts. Bahns and Eldaw (1993) darted to the point that the greatest tools of success for students to succeed in their education are good vocabulary knowledge and the skills needed for using those vocabularies. Indeed, the capability to function in today's intricate social and economic worlds is intensely influenced by the word knowledge and language skills. Subsequently, regardless of the situation of learning vocabulary plays a crucial role in communication. Vocabulary experts consider vocabulary in the core of communicative competence (Coady & Huckin, 2003). As a matter of fact, lexical competence is nearly in the heart of all language skill acquisition. For instance, vocabulary is in terms of both proficiency in second language listening and the important role in second language writing (Chang, 2007; Nation, 2006, Coxhead & Byrd, 2007). Also, the results of several other studies show that vocabulary knowledge is in relationship with proficiency in second language reading (Chung & Nation, 2003; Nation, 2006). Vocabulary items include various items such as idioms, special expressions, metaphors, and collocations.

Munday (2009) defines collocations as "the phenomenon of co-occurrence of two lexical items. (e.g. held our breath, human being, in winter wage war); this is a major building block of lexical and syntactic structure" (p. 172). Collocations and phrases are of great importance for EFL learners to gain a native-like fluency in an academic context. "Collocational Competence" according to Lewis (2000) is a characteristic of advanced learners which assist them to produce accurate, fluent and correct English sentences, while lacking such a knowledge may result in creation of incorrect, long and inappropriate phrases and utterances. All material on each page should fit within a rectangle of 18 x 23.5 cm (7" x 9.25"), centered on the page, beginning 2.54 cm (1") from the top of the page and ending with 2.54 cm (1") from the bottom. The right and left margins should be 1.9 cm (.75").

### **2.2 Collocation**

Collocations and phrases are of great importance for EFL learners to gain a native-like fluency in an academic context. "Collocational Competence" according to Lewis (2000) is a characteristic of advanced learners which assist them to produce accurate, fluent and correct English sentences, while lacking such a knowledge may result in creation of incorrect, long and inappropriate phrases and utterances.

Nation (2001) identified collocations as items which frequently occur together and have some degree of semantic unpredictability. Sinclair (2004) described the phenomenon of collocation as the choice of one word conditions the choice of the next, and of the next again. Integration of words is the property of Collocation in general. There are two types of collocations. Collocations can be adjective + adverb, noun + noun, verb + noun. Collocation has no specific law to identify. People only gather certain words more than they put other words together. Indeed, corpus linguistics is the proof of using collocations to become prominent in English and language teaching. Corpus linguistics underlies vast volumes of data spoken and written English to encounter statistics on how regularly people use certain words and word arrangements. There are two types of collocations, namely, strong and weak collocations. Strong collocations point to words that go together most of the time. People understand your words if you stop using strong collocation. Nevertheless, it seems funny to native speakers if you refuse using strong collocation.

Based on some achievements like clarity in speech, fluency of conveying information and flow of current of words the importance of collocation in teaching and learning is revealed. For instance, Webb and Kagimoto (2010) investigated the effect of three features (the number of collocates for each node, the node word position, synonymy) on collocation

learning. The collocations demonstrated that as the number of collocates for each node became more, collocations were learned, the node word position did not have any effect on learning, and synonymy affected the learning negatively.

Some studies have investigated the role of collocations in teaching and learning, among which is the Webb and Kagimoto's (2010) study. They studied the impact of three factors on learning collocations. These factors included: the quantity of collocates each node word, the location of the node word, and synonymy. They found that with an increase in the number of collocates per node words, more collocations were learned; however, learning was not affected by the place of the node word, and synonymy affected learning negatively.

In a study, Bahns and Eldaw (1993) carried out a study on the knowledge base of German advanced EFL students of Verb Noun collocation. In this study 58 German EFL learners were classified into two groups and they were asked to do a translation task through a cloze test. A cloze test was given to the first group in which ten statements had a verb-noun collocation with a blank space for the verb. A German-English translation test was given to the other group. It was shown that only about half of the students could produce correct collocations.

In a comparative study, Sadeghi (2009) studied Persian and English collocations in terms of lexis and grammar. It was found that when negative interference of L1 on L2 occurs, learners encounter problems. Wrong use of collocation result in impaired communication especially when it comes to communicate with native speakers. This can also cause vague and opaque message delivery in both spoken and written modes of language.

Candy Chen-Pin Liu (2000) testified strategy use in producing lexical collocations among freshmen English majors at the Chinese Culture University. Overall, retrieval, literal translation, de-lexicalized verbs, synonyms, and appeal to authority were the most influential sorts of strategy use pointing to production of suitable collocations.

### **2.3 Electronic Dictionary**

The term electronic dictionary (ED) is supposed to utilize for referring any reference material saved in electronic arrangement that provides information on spelling, meaning, or words usage. Therefore a spell-checker in a word-processing program, a tool which scans and interprets written words, a word list for on-line teaching materials, or an electronic form of a related hard-copy dictionary are all EDs of a type, categorized by the similar system of packing and retrieval.

Language learners recently have been using electronic dictionaries and their pedagogical ability is too much to be neglected (Nesi, 1999). According to Nesi (1999) belief's it sounds to be many merits in electronic dictionaries versus printed dictionaries. A range of search tasks (thus quicker look-up), relates with audiovisual aid archives (e.g. sounds and pictures), really no space restriction (thus extra instances and databases), relates with other software, and movability (in the subject of hand-held dictionaries) are some examples of those merits. In terms of vocabulary learning, it is yet a practical question if rapid searching is certainly beneficial to the learning process (Guillot& Kenning 1994).

Printed monolingual description dictionaries are mainly structured as lists of words (cf. Tarp, 2006): every part is a list of items ("Angaben" in Wiegand's sense), i.e. of lexicographical facts letting the user to suppose information about different linguistic characteristics of the lexical object preserved in the entrance: for instance its morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics (microstructure). Electronic dictionaries which have been converted from printed ones tend to preserve this linear construction, probably with the attachment of overall relations from each word form looking in one of the items to that word's entry.

The study of electronic dictionary use is relatively new in the field of language learning and teaching. Previous research which frequently emphasized on the effect of electronic dictionaries and pocket dictionaries (PD) on second or foreign language learning has led to comprehensive outcomes. According to Hulstijin (1993) advanced learners were less likely to use a dictionary if they could infer the unknown word from the context.

In an experiment, Koga (1995) sought to find out whether an online ED works better in L2 reading or and a pocket dictionary. The participants who were Japanese university students read some texts using no dictionary, using PD, or using ED, and to answer follow-up questions. It was found that reading with no dictionary is faster than in the ED, and reading using the ED is faster than reading using PD.

In another study project, Inami, Nishikata, Nakayama, and Shimizu (1997) tried to teach some words using a dictionary based on CD-ROM and a printed dictionary. The participants were eighty Japanese undergraduate and graduate students who were supposed to learn the meaning or spelling of each English word using a dictionary based on CD-ROM or a printed dictionary. Later, they were tested based on the treatment. The scores on both tests (spelling and definition) were higher in the CD-ROM condition compared with the PD condition. The present study aims to find out if collocation words can be better learned using electronic dictionaries. Moreover, the study tend to investigate whether electronic dictionaries have any significant effect on long-term retention of collocations among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The electronic dictionary is an independent variable and the learning English collocation by the EFL learners in the intermediate classes is the dependent variable in this study.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1 Research Question**

The present study attempts to answer the following question:

Does using electronic collocation dictionaries have any significant effect on improving collocation learning Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

#### **3.2 Research Hypothesis**

This study attempts to test the following hypothesis:

Using electronic collocation dictionaries has no significant effect on improving collocation learning Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

#### **3.3 Participants**

The participants of this study were 100 intermediate male and female students of a Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. The mean age of the sample was 17 years, ranging from 15 to 20. The participants were selected randomly from non-English majors. Persian was their first language and English was their second language. None of the students studied English abroad.

#### **3.4 Instruments**

##### **3.4.1 Oxford placement test**

One of the instruments in this study was a 60-item Oxford Placement Test (OPT) used to measure proficiency level of the participants to have a homogeneous sample. OPT is among the most common and standardized proficiency tests worldwide and the researcher does not doubt its reliability and validity. At the beginning of the study, 340 learners participated on OPT and the scores were announced in percentage. After calculating the mean scores, those participants whose scores between 40 to 50 were chosen and 100 students were selected as the sample of the study (60 female and 40 male).

##### **3.4.2 Pretest and Posttest**

In order to examine the effect of electronic collocation dictionary on improving collocation learning among Iranian intermediate EFL learners, pretest was devised by the researcher, and all of the participants sat for that test. This test was in the form of fill in the blanks and contained a series of simple and difficult collocation items. In order to choose the collocations to be taught using the electronic dictionary, the contenders were displayed with a list of eighty collocations and were asked to write the meaning of the collocations down in Farsi. Fourteen words which students could recognize their meanings were rejected. Accordingly, sixty four words were selected. After the placement test, the 100 participants who were from the required level of proficiency were placed in experimental and control groups. The classes were held 2 days a week for one month. The participants in both groups received the treatment in 8 sessions, 45 minutes each. The learners in the experimental group were allowed to use the soft copy of the Oxford Collocation Dictionary during this month to find meanings and definitions of the new collocation items, while the learners in control group followed the traditional method for looking up the new collocation items. Participants in the experimental and control groups took part in weekly intermediate classes. During every session, eight new words were taught by the teacher. At the end of the course, a posttest was administered.

##### **3.4.3 Oxford Collocation Dictionary**

In the present study, one type of learners' dictionary, namely, Oxford Collocation Dictionary (for students of English) was utilized by participants in the experimental group. A pretest was administered in each group. This test was in the form of fill in the blank including 64 items. Both groups were given an immediate posttest after the treatment.

#### **3.5 Procedure**

This study was conducted among Iranian intermediate EFL learners learning English at Isfahan English language institutes. At first, in order to select and place the participants in the right course, the oxford placement test was administered. This way, the participants of the study were selected. Then four institutes were selected with eight classes consisted of 11 learners plus one class with 12 learners with the same atmosphere and educational conditions. The 100 participants who were from the required level of proficiency were placed in experimental and control groups. A pretest was administered in each group. This test was in the form of fill in the blank including 64 items then participants in both groups received the treatment. The

learners in the experimental group were allowed to use the soft copy of the Oxford Collocation Dictionary during this month to find meanings and definitions of the new vocabulary items, while the learners in control group followed the traditional method for looking up the new vocabulary items. Both groups were given an immediate posttest after the treatment.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

After the data had been marked and the responses of the 100 test-takers had been calculated, the data were processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 20). Descriptive statistics like means and standard deviations were acquired. The t-test was used to investigate significant differences between scores taken in the experimental and control groups.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Performance of the Participants in Two Groups in the Pretest

At the onset of the study a pre-test was run to ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their collocation knowledge. As it is shown in table 1, the mean scores of the participants in the experimental group is 43.22 and that of the control group is 42.40 which is not considered to be significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant at the beginning of the study.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of the performance of participants in two groups in the pre-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Exp group	50	43.2200	6.05515	.85633
	Cont group	50	42.4000	5.60248	.79231

As it is shown in Table 1, the mean score of the participants in experimental group is 43.22 and that of the control group is 42.40 which is not considered to be significant. However, to be more objective an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The results of independent samples t test between the experimental and control groups' pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.039	.844	.703	98	.484	.82000	1.16664	-1.49516	3.13516
	Equal variances not assumed			.703	97.414	.484	.82000	1.16664	-1.49534	3.13534

According to the statistics presented in Table 2, the level of significance is .484 which is higher than the identified level of significance (.484>.05); therefore, it can be concluded that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant at the beginning of the study.

#### 4.2 Performance of the Participants in Two Groups in the Posttest

Having assured the homogeneity of the participants in two groups, the participants in the experimental group were exposed to the treatment which included teaching the unknown collocations using electronic dictionaries. At the same time the students in the control group were taught the unfamiliar collocations without using electronic dictionaries. After the treatment the participants in both groups sat for a test, as the post-test, designed based on the unknown vocabularies. According to the statistics depicted Table 3 it can be seen that the mean difference of the post test is 5.88 (the mean for the experimental group is 48.98 and that for the control group 43.10) which is considered a significant difference.

**Table 3:** Descriptive statistics of the performance of participants in two groups in the post-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Exp group	50	48.9800	6.44756	.91182
	Cont group	50	43.1000	6.51607	.92151

According to the statistics depicted in Table 3, it can be seen that the mean difference of the posttest is 5.88 (the mean for the experimental group is 48.98 and that for the control group is 43.10) which is considered a significant difference. In order to be more exact that the mean difference between the means of experimental and control groups' posttests is significant, an independent sample t-test was run between the posttest scores of the control and experimental groups. Table 4 illustrates the results of this t-test.

**Table 4.** The results of independent samples test for the experimental and control groups' posttests

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means						
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
				.004	.950	4.536	98	.000	5.88000	1.29638
	Equal variances not assumed			4.536	97.989	.000	5.88000	1.29638	3.30737	8.45263

According to Table 4.6, the t-value is equal to 4.536, with an alpha= 0.05 and df= 98; therefore, the difference is statistically significant (.000<.05) and this shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

As explained before, collocation is a big problem in learners' interlanguage, especially in the EFL context. Bahns and Eldaw (1993) suggested that in producing correct English, collocations turned out to be a main problem for advanced students. This is probably because inadequate attention has been paid to the teaching of collocation in teaching practice. In the context of EFL learning in Iran, due to the lack of interaction with English native speakers, there are major problems in mastering the word repertoire and collocations. So far as the concrete methods of learning collocation are concerned, students can make use of the rich resources of dictionaries and the Internet. A good case in point is the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English. The dictionary can meet the needs of students and teachers. Whenever you meet a difficulty in collocation, you can just look up for the collocation's key word in the dictionary. All its collocations are listed sequentially according to the frequency of each collocation. In addition to helping students understand the meaning and concepts of collocations, electronic collocation dictionaries can help EFL learners master the pronunciation of the collocations.

This study focused on the effects of electronic dictionaries on English collocation learning of EFL learners. Regarding the first research question, results indicated that presented that electronic dictionaries, affect learners' collocation learning, that is the learners' vocabulary knowledge especially collocation words improve while using dictionaries. Using dictionaries can be useful for English learners in that it has flexible grammar and also according to the needs of the use has different levels of difficulty. Therefore, in this study, the experimental groups outperformed the control group in collocation vocabulary test.

After conducting different analyses, it was made clear that using electronic dictionaries to teach collocations can be a suitable media which can significantly enhance mastering collocations. The findings of the present study are in line with those of Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) that investigated the impact of using electronic dictionary on vocabulary learning and retention of Iranian EFL learners. During the five sessions of the treatment, 35 vocabularies were instructed for two groups. The ED group received the words through a CD-ROM dictionary to find the meaning and definition of newly taught words, while printed dictionary group followed the ordinary method using PD. The results of the t-test revealed that the students in ED group outperformed those in PD group. Hence, it is suggested that an ED can enhance learning and retention of vocabulary. In fact, the group that received the new collocations through electronic dictionary outperformed the other group that was taught the collocations without making use of electronic dictionaries. The effectiveness of using electronic collocation dictionary on English collocation learning vocabulary was supported by the results. The treatment group did better than the control group in posttest, and also this group gained more receptive and productive knowledge of collocation words. In addition, the experimental could use more collocations in writing. Thus the use of ECD could be a powerful tool for improving students' collocation learning. Most of the learners utilized the components of collocation unconsciously without realizing them to be taken account as collocations. These findings are in line with those of Bahns and Eldaw (1993) examined the knowledge base of German advanced EFL students of Verb Noun collocation. Results showed that only about half of the students were able to produce acceptable English collocations. The experimental group of learners mentioned that by using the electronic dictionary completely changed their English knowledge. Evidences revealed that EFL learners scarcely referred to the dictionary before this study, or they check the dictionary to get the correct pronunciation of words. However, one of the findings of this research was that the learners' improved their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge. Also, they got to know the correct usage of collocations in sentences. Therefore, this study implies that the dictionary is the an influential tool which can help learners in all stages of English learning, specifically if this dictionary would be installed on mobile phones for learners. Therefore, it is essential for all EFL learners to learn how to use the dictionary technically and correctly.

Like other studies, the present study has a number of limitations. First, this study was only performed in four institutes and among intermediate level of learners only. It is worth performing this study in several institutes and compare the level of proficiency in English and its relationship with the other levels. The participants were chosen based on their language proficiency; therefore, their age range was not considered.

Like any other research studies, some suggestions were generated from this study for further research. The L2 proficiency of the learners is an important factor and this study was performed among intermediate level of learners. It is hoped that further research can be taken into consideration for the proficiency level of L2 learners. There is a great body of research considering other characteristics of vocabulary like the etymology, parts of speech, pronunciation and examples which were with these words.

The study in hand intended to investigate the role of using electronic dictionaries in EFL classes. In fact, this study would provide a combination of technology and language practice in mastering the collocations of language. In light of the possible findings of this study, EFL learners could be aware of the characteristics of ED, and applied its advantages appropriately to their learning. This study was going to suggest that an increase of the students' knowledge of collocations with more learners' accuracy was guaranteed through using electronic dictionaries. Collocational knowledge could also help students overcome problems of vocabulary style and usage. These problems might well warrant a study on collocations and how they could be taught and learnt. The findings could provide guidance for teachers in the language institutes for improving students' vocabulary knowledge. In addition, the managers and owners of language

institutes could introduce electronic dictionaries in language classes and this way could help learners learn languages better.

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