Task Involvement and Input Type in the Acquisition of Verb-Noun Collocations
ACQUISITION OF VERB–NOUN COLLOCATIONS

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Introduction

Within the field of vocabulary acquisition, collocation-specific research is a relatively new area. It is generally agreed that knowledge of collocation is vital for the development of fluency in second language (L2) learners, and that collocation instruction should feature prominently in classrooms (Howarth, 1998; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O’Dell, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2003; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009; Wray, 2000). However, there is little consensus on how this should be done, due to, on the one hand, the wealth of collocations available to be learned, and on the other, the dearth of research into how and what to teach and how (Koprowski, 2005; Lewis, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003; Koprowski, 2005; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009; Wray, 2000). This research project, therefore, will expand upon the small body of literature which explores the effectiveness of teaching collocations by investigating the relationship between input type (receptive and productive) and collocation acquisition, while simultaneously drawing upon the involvement load hypothesis literature in an effort. The project aims to discover whether the degree of task involvement impacts upon input effectiveness in the teaching of verb–noun collocations. Participants shall be drawn from an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) setting and from two proficiency groups: intermediate and advanced.

Research Question

The question framing this research is: Is there a relationship between input type and involvement load in the acquisition of verb–noun collocations by intermediate and advanced ESL learners?

Definition of Collocation
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For the purpose of this research, the term collocation shall be used according to Nesselhauf’s (2003) definition. She identifies of collocations as word combinations in which there is some arbitrary semantic restriction, and further, verb–noun collocations as combinations in which the verb is restricted from combining with all syntactically and semantically possible nouns, while the noun is not unrestricted. An example of this is *take a picture, where take cannot combine with semantically similar words, such as *take a movie.

When both the verb and the noun are restricted (e.g., sweeten the pill), this is identified as an idiom, thereby falling which falls outside the boundaries of this research (e.g., sweeten the pill), as do free combinations, in which neither the verb nor noun are restricted, as in want a car (Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 226).

Problem

Multiple studies have revealed the prevalence of collocation errors of all phraseological types (verb–noun, adjective–noun and noun–noun) in second language (L2) learners’ output (Fan, 2009; Granger, 1998; Howarth, 1998; Wray, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003; Fan, 2009; Wray, 2000), suggesting that even advanced learners are struggling to cope with this essential aspect of fluency in their target language. Since it is widely recognised that knowledge of collocation is essential for second language (L2) learners’ development of fluency and accuracy (Wray, 2000), it is also commonly asserted that explicit collocation instruction should hold a prominent place in classroom language instruction (Laufer, 1991; Wray, 2000; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009; Wray, 2000).

Unfortunately, however, the literature cannot yet reach consensus on how best to teach collocation, due primarily because of the shortage of research on this subject. Thus offering; thus there is little guidance for either teachers or and material developers (Nesselhauf, 2003; Koprowski, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2003; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009).
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Thus, the problem is defined as learners’ poor control of collocations due to a lack of information on how best to structure tasks for maximum acquisition.

Suitability for Research

The Gap

While comparisons between receptive and productive tasks and the involvement load hypothesis feature prominently in current single-word vocabulary research (Griffin & Harley, 1996; Webb, 2005); there have been few studies which analysed the effects of either of these phenomena on collocation acquisition (Webb & Kagimoto, 2009), and none which combine the two. Of those studies which have investigated the relationship between input type and collocation learning, many applied computer-assisted language learning (CALL) technologies such as concordancers and online glosses (Sun & Wang, 2003; Chan & Liou, 2005; Sun & Wang, 2003), while of those that opted for studies that focused on more traditional instruction methods, the majority were conducted in English as a Foreign Language EFL settings, often using translation as a primary feature of tasks, and; thus their drawing conclusions which may not be valid for an ESL setting. My research, therefore, fills a yawning significant gap through its investigation of the relationship between input type and involvement load on the acquisition of verb–noun collocations.

Relevance and Significance

It is useful to analyse how different levels of involvement might positively or negatively impact upon influence the effectiveness of the input, since as the time restrictions of the classroom and the wealth of useful vocabulary and collocations that could be taught and the time restrictions of the classroom, require teachers to carefully consider the efficiency of tasks carefully in order, so as to supply their students with maximum beneficial vocabulary exposure, while minimizing wasted cognitive effort. And, since this impact since previous studies have shown that the relationship between task involvement and the

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ACQUISITION OF VERB–NOUN COLLOCATIONS

Effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition has been proven in previous studies to vary considerably between learners of different proficiency levels (Webb, 2005; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009). Research which incorporates more than one proficiency group becomes necessary. By comparing intermediate and advanced learners’ performance on discrete tasks designed to be implementable as part of a classroom-based language lesson, it is hoped that the results of this research will have direct application in task choice or design for language classrooms. In the longer term, this study might contribute to the small but growing body of literature informing how best to teach collocations.

Practicality and Potential for Analysis

Expanding on the work of Webb and Kagimoto (2009), who used simple receptive and productive language tasks to measure collocation acquisition, this research will design tasks that incorporate three levels of task involvement per input type: a total of six tasks. Through these tasks, quantitative data will be collected on the depth, that is the levels ranging from orthographic to semantic, of acquisition resulting from each of the treatments. Levels of knowledge will be tested in order to give a more complete picture as to the benefits and drawbacks of the different tasks. An additional delayed post-test will measure rate of decay, providing a sounder detailed picture of acquisition success. Results will be comparable with current research on collocations, and in the broader vocabulary acquisition field.

Research Journey

Importance of Teaching Collocations
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Initial reading confirmed the observation that learners of all proficiencies struggled with collocations. They were found to use fewer collocations and a severely restricted range of collocations (Fan, 2008; Howarth, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003; Howarth, 1998), and to be more accepting of combinations found unacceptable by native speakers (NSs) of the language (Granger, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). It has also been shown that processing time of collocations by intermediate and advanced learners was significantly slower than for NSs-native speakers (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). However, considering that the difference between intermediate and advanced learners’ processing time and native-likeness of judgement was also significant, it is clear that collocational knowledge can be acquired as the L2 develops.

**Implicit or Explicit Teaching**

Initial reading also prompted the dismissal of any focus on improving students’ noticing of collocations in through reading texts, as various researchers have shown that incidentally acquiring meaning through reading is a slow process (Horst, Cobb & Meara, 1998; Waring & Takaki, 2003) and is highly dependent on the number of repetitions and quality of context (Nation & Wang, 1999; Waring & Takaki, 2003; Webb 2007, Webb 2008). Therefore, it was decided to refocus on explicit instruction.

**Involvement Load and Traces**

Further searching revealed studies which suggested that learning collocations, even highly idiomatic combinations, as discrete items was manageable for both intermediate and advanced students (Boggards, 2001). CALL based studies of collocation also revealed significant gains on the part of learners using glosses and concordance resources (Sun & Wang, 2003; Chan & Lio, 2005). Of particular interest is Boggards’ (2001) finding that idioms containing known lexical items were easier acquired than more obscure single-word lexical items, suggesting that some multi-word lexical items are easier
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to accommodate within the learners’ pre-existing vocabulary. This is known as tracing. CALL-based studies of collocation learning also revealed significant gains on the part of learners using glosses and concordancers (Chan & Liou, 2005; Sun & Wang, 2003). On the other hand, in their study, Sun and Wang (2003) found that concordancers, which involve a high involvement load, yielded better results for collocation acquisition than glosses. It therefore became apparent that traces: Taken together, the literature on involvement load and traces suggests that traces, whether they are the result of involvement load or otherwise, are as relevant for collocation acquisition as they are for single-word vocabulary items.

Input Type and Vocabulary Depth

Two other key concepts emerged in my research at about this time during the research. These were input type and vocabulary depth. Webb (2005), researching single-word vocabulary acquisition, found that advanced learners benefited more from productive input, such as rote copying or simple sentence writing, while intermediate learners on the other hand showed a preference for receptive input, such as glossed sentence reading. This finding was later tested on collocations by Webb (2009), with similar results by Webb (2009). However, vocabulary knowledge is not as simple as knowing or not knowing a word. Most vocabulary researchers agree that there is a difference between vocabulary used receptively and that used for production, and that this distinction is not dichotomous, but rather exists as a continuum (Melka, 1997; Read, 2000). However, in other words, vocabulary knowledge is not as simple as knowing or not knowing a word. Thus, Nation (2001) has suggested that various elements of word knowledge should be taken into consideration when judging someone’s proficiency with a lexical item. For this reason, it was decided that, in addition to testing the efficiency of tasks which utilise input type and involvement load research, depth studies should be employed in the design of
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the information-gathering tool. This will mean involves testing various levels of word knowledge in order to determine the extent of acquisition. Further With this in mind, research into input hypothesis and depth studies is being conducted currently ongoing.

Conclusion

This investigation of the possible relationship between input type and involvement load in the acquisition of verb–noun collocations by intermediate and advanced L2 learners in an ESL setting will contribute to knowledge of collocation acquisition. The focus on verb–noun collocations and selection of participants from intermediate and advanced proficiencies makes this research comparable with previous studies, thereby offering a more complete picture of collocation acquisition as a result of discrete tasks. Finally, by designing these tasks to reflect classroom realities, results gained will have direct relevance for practicing teachers, and potentially contribute towards choices made by material designers as they seek to afford collocations their rightful place in the language classroom.
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tasks that incorporate three levels of task involvement per input type: a total of six tasks. Through these tasks, quantitative data will be collected on the depth of acquisition resulting from each of the treatments. The tool for measuring the depth of acquisition will draw on the work of Richards (1976) and Nation (2001), who identified knowing a word as entailing pronunciation, orthographic, morphosyntactic, semantic, register and collocational knowledge. These levels of knowledge will be tested to give a more complete picture of the benefits and drawbacks of the different tasks. An additional delayed post-test will measure rate of decay, providing a detailed picture of acquisition success. Results will be comparable with current research on collocations and in the broader vocabulary acquisition field.

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