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INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' LANGUAGE EXPOSURE IN ACHIEVING THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF COLLOCATION

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out the sources of language exposures which affected students' knowledge of collocations. This study underlies a qualitative approach. The informants chosen by using random sampling, was a Year 12 class with 24 students from Senior High School near Meulaboh in West Aceh. The researchers obtained the data by using a language exposure questionnaire (promoted by and a collocation C-test. The data analysis concluded that (1) students who got a lot of exposures tend to have more knowledge of collocation, (2) even though language exposures are crucial, not every source of the exposures had the same effect in improving collocation knowledge, and (3) exposures from home, school, and some media had a huge impact on their collocation knowledge especially from chatting online and sending and receiving text messages. With the regard of findings, it might be a good reference to understand the sources that influence collocation acquisition in order to build the memory-banks of collocations of students learning English. The further studies are suggested to correlate pedagogical analysis of language acquisition to students' structural abilities.

Keywords: *vocabulary competence, collocational acquisition, chunking, language exposure.*

INTRODUCTION

The Department of National Education in Indonesia wants students to be able to use English at an informational level of literacy (Depdiknas, 2006). This is the level at which students should have the ability to use the language in order to get access to knowledge with the hope to master English as communicative tool. This issue leads

teachers to provide or train students the linguistics competencies, especially in the aspect of vocabulary since it is widely known as the core that builds competency in a language.

Indonesian teachers try to improve the mastery of vocabulary by students by focusing on increasing the number of new words by way of memorizing lists of words or by translating texts. However, this effort is not enough since knowing a word is a complex process as Nation (2006) has divided word knowledge into the *word form* (i.e., spoken, written, and word parts), *meaning* (i.e., form-meaning relationships, concept and referents, and associations) and *use* (i.e., grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use). Based on these three aspects, Nation saw the word use as having the heaviest learning burden for language learners since it is related to collocations. He took an example of the word *sweet* that has pairing with many words *tooth, smell, flavor, dreams, voice, sound, even home sweet home, sweet-heart* and so on. He believes if English collocations are not parallel to those in the learners' first language, then teachers need to spend time to help the learners understand the new concepts.

The impact of not knowing enough collocations leads to difficulties in producing proper chunks. This problem leads to the production of awkward sentences with awkward or unintelligible word pairings. Eventually, it seems, collocations must get more attention in studying with students. For instance at the students' textbook for 12th graders, Sudarwati and Grace (2007) clearly point out the role of formulaic speech in accomplishing effective reading and writing skills. The writers argue that words need to be read in chunks, not as single isolated words. Further, they propose students need to remember, recall and write using phrases, not single words.

The acquisition of collocation is done by unconscious and also by conscious recognition of the patterns of words in sentences, in which one's memory accumulates the patterns into formed chunks (Ellis, 1997). The retaining of collocations from inputs are thus saved into the learners' short-term memory, then in the long run, the repetition of the occurrences facilitates collocations to be acquired in the mental lexicon. Researchers such as Durrant and Schmitt (2010) have experimented with this process through showing language containing collocations to 84 EFL students. The results showed that the participants gained some information about word pairings or chunks from the text they read. In other words, learners may study collocations unconsciously by getting exposed to inputs containing collocations.

It has been discovered that collocational units are the factor which differentiate the language production ability of native from non-native speakers in terms of language fluency and native-like selection (Pawley & Syder, 1983). They argue that the key to one's ability to produce native-like selections and fluent word choice and sentences lies in the storage of formed chunks in one's mental lexicon. Nevertheless, collocations seem to be problematic for Indonesian EFL learners as Moehkardi (2002) has stated: Thus learners were confused by the collocation's combinations due to interference from the first language. An example Moehkardi gave is many students translated the expression *kopi kental* as heavy coffee while the correct combination is strong coffee. Thus, collocations are an important aspect for learning

vocabulary that is a problematic and challenging area for Indonesian students and teachers alike. Despite this, research in this area is still rare, especially as no study focused on the sources of language exposure where students learn their collocation input. Hence, this study addresses the issue of what are the sources of English language exposures which affect students' knowledge of collocations.

Regarding the Indonesian context where English is a foreign language, many students are getting very little exposure to it, especially in less developed areas such as West Aceh. In fact, students in West Aceh have very limited access to English books for pleasure or reading for pleasure. The ESL exposure of the community is negligible and thus students ought to get their input from media or technology or at school. In an area with a scarcity of ESL language exposure, this senior High School tried to compensate for this lack by extending the hours for studying English. The school which has a dormitory facility also obliged students to speak English on Wednesdays to improve their language skills. Thus, we were attracted to investigate the language exposure of these students in relation to their knowledge of collocations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collocation and Its Acquisition

From the thousands of words in English vocabularies, there are nevertheless combinations of words that are commonly used by native speakers as they speak or write. Nevertheless, such combinations may not be known by non-native English speakers (NNES) since the word pairings are considered to be unconscious knowledge. NNES, then, must make a prediction of the words that are used together *e.g.* common phrases, based on the regularity of their occurrence. The words that collocate with each other in the speech of native speakers are called collocations.

Ebrahimi-Bazzaz, et al. (2010, p. 3) stated that collocations are assemblies of words which are followed by another chunk of words in the native speaker's speech. When two or more words collocate to another two or more, these assembled chunks embody with certain circumstances in the native speaker's use of the language. Thus, collocations are mostly about the 'sense' of pairing words after a particular word. It means that even if native speakers (NS) can easily produce collocations, their reason for choosing the words is only because of NS feeling of appropriateness. This is what makes Pawley and Syder (1983, p. 191) believe that collocation is the biggest barrier between native and non-native speakers in terms of language fluency and native-like selection. Without sufficient knowledge of collocations, it is more likely to be the case that non-native speakers produce odd chunks of words.

Ellis (1997) explained that for child L1 learners, they often do not care about grammar or theories of language learning, since they need language mainly for communication purposes. However, the fact that the adult L1 learners achieve fluency is mainly accomplished by their capability in acquiring the language from this exposure. By this means it is possible to acquire collocation unconsciously from repeated exposure. This process happens due to the ability of the human brain to recollect knowledge unconsciously, which is called implicit memory (Ellis, 1995). Ellis called this process chunking. The term chunking was taken from the psychological

processing of information input introduced by Miller (1956). The original notion was to explain how short-term memory gained information by patterning the input into "a sequence of chunks" (Miller, 1956). Thus, the similarity between the retaining of information and collocation is that the brain tends to memorize inputs by associating them into patterns. This means that collocations, despite consisting of more than one word, are accepted as one pattern or unit. Since the acquisition of collocation comes from its occurrences in input, language exposures thus play a significant role to develop one's collocation knowledge.

Sources of Language Exposure

Magno, et al. (2009) refers to language exposure as any contact which occurs between a language and an individual. According to this definition, any kind of language contact can be considered as exposure whether it is through verbal or written communication, books, and songs and so on. Thus, a language learner may not only get exposure in the class through formal learning, but also from random contacts with media such as the internet, newspapers, books and any other forms of the target language. Hence, by following Magno, et al. (2009), students can get exposure from varied sources which can be classified into four main categories: home (bilingualism), dormitory (friends), school (formal and informal), and all forms of media, both aural and printed.

Table 1. The sources of language exposure modified from Magno, et al. (2009).

<i>Sources</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Home	My parents talk in English. English is spoken at home.
Dormitory	My room-mates talk in English. English is spoken in my dormitory.
School	My English teachers speak in English. My teachers (besides my English teachers) speak in English. The activities (English classes) in my school are all conducted in English. The activities (beside the English classes) in my school are all conducted in English. My classmates speak in English.
Media	I chat online in English. I send text messages in English. I receive text messages in English. I browse webpages that are written in English. I listen to songs in English. I watch movies in English. I watch TV shows in English. I read magazines written in English. I read newspapers written in English. I read books written in English. A lot of information I read is in English.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data for this research was gathered from the 12 grader at one of senior high school located near to Meulaboh, the capital of West Aceh District, on September, 12th 2015. A random sampling technique was used to choose the representative students so all of the students in the population had an equal chance to be selected

in the sample. Thus, class 12-a, with 24 students, was chosen as the sample class using a lucky draw technique.

Instruments

Collocation C-test

The collocation C-test was used to collect the students' knowledge of collocation. The C-test is famous for its redundancy principle (C-principle) since some letters are given as cues to the answers for the test (Tabatabaei & Shakerin, 2013). Thus it avoids the learners answering by guessing or giving other answers that might be ambiguous. Further, Read (2000) pointed out that the C-test is a reliable measure since it requires both knowledge of the contextual clues and also of the missing individual words. This study focused on five types of lexical collocations which are considered to be the most common type that appear in texts (Hsu & Chiu, 2008). Those types are Verb+Noun, Adjective+Noun, Noun+Verb, Adverb+Adjective, and Verb+Adverb. The students were given 40 minutes to fill in the blanks on the answer sheet with correct collocation words. The scoring of the answers was 4 for a right answer and 0 for a wrong one, and the highest score was 100. The collocations used in the test were gathered from the textbook for 12th graders written by Sudarwati and Grace (2007). Those collocations were then checked through two highly known websites which are often used for research of corpus data, via: the British National Corpus (<http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>) and the free online collocations dictionary (<http://prowritingaid.com/Free-Online-Collocations-Dictionary.aspx>).

Language Exposure Questionnaire

The language exposure questionnaire was used to find out the sources of students' English exposure. The questionnaire was modified from one used by Magno, et al. (2009). The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions which were answered by one of five frequencies; *always, often, sometimes, rarely, & never*.

Data Analysis

The data was first analyzed by scoring the students' answers from the collocation test. The students were categorized following their performance on the collocation test by dividing them using score levels proposed by Ary, et al. (1996). Those level were very good (80-100), good (66-79), average (56-65), low (40-55), and very low (30-39). Then, the data from the questionnaires was analyzed based on the categories of the students to see whether the differences between the sources of language exposure of the students correlated with their different knowledge of collocations. Finally, the discussion shows the main findings and crucial information to answer the research problem. In the results and the discussions the students are referred to by the initials from their names.

RESULTS

The questionnaire results from students with very good knowledge of collocation. Only two students (8%) had very good collocation knowledge: R.A and O.I. Both of these students also had almost similar choices of the sources and

frequency of language exposures. They *always* got language exposure from their English class which came from the interaction with their English teacher. Also both students *often* got contact with English from media, especially from web-pages, songs and movies. The rest of the sources they were exposed to just sometimes. We also noticed there were two major differences in their exposures. The first, unlike O.I., R.A. often got language exposure at home. The other difference is in the individual preferences of media that they spent time with. For instance, even though both of them liked browsing web-pages, listening to songs and watching movies, only R.A. often chat online and did text messaging, while O.I. preferred watching TV shows and reading books.

The Questionnaire Results from Students with Good Knowledge of Collocation

Five students (20%) had good knowledge of collocation. These students considered activities in their English class, interaction with English teacher, and listening to English songs as the sources of exposures that they could *always* get. While from media, most of these students *often* chose English movies and TV shows, either preferring only one or both of them. They also said that English was *sometimes* used in their dormitory with their roommates and peers.

Watching English movies was chosen as the most common source of exposures. With frequency of *sometimes*, the students got exposures from their dormitory (both from roommates and peers) and from media: chatting online, sending and receiving text messages, browsing web-pages, reading books, and reading information around them. While on the frequency of *rarely* and *never*, the students answered they rarely or never got any exposure from home, either from their parents or from other family members. English magazines, newspapers, non-English class activities, and non-English teachers were also regarded as *rare* exposures.

From those descriptions, the main sources of exposures of these five students were at school and from media. The school provided exposures from their English teacher and their English class activities as the students marked both sources in the *always* and *often* frequency.

The Questionnaire Results from Students with Average Knowledge of Collocation

Nine students (37%) had average collocation knowledge, and their exposure data were also diverse. However, there were some similarities among the choices of exposures they answered. For instance, in the frequency of *always*, the students mostly answered English teacher and English class activities as the exposure sources, while five of the students added listening to songs and watching movies to be regarded as exposures they could easily get anytime.

The sources for the *often* frequency are varied, for instance, O.M. talked with classmates and chatted online, while R.S. liked browsing webpages. The data also showed that the students marked most of the contact frequency of language exposures into *sometimes* and *rarely*. On the frequency of *sometimes*, the sources were coming from talking with friends at dormitory, interacting with classmates, chatting online and reading magazines. While for the *rare* frequency, the sources

were from home, non-English teachers, non-English class activities, text messages and newspapers.

There was also a case of O.M., A.A.F. and R.K., who had a possibility that English was *sometimes* used at home. However, the three students agreed that their parents *rarely* spoke English. It seems that even though parents did not talk in English, the other family members such as sisters or brothers might talk with the students as they could practice English at home.

The Questionnaire Results from Students with Low Knowledge of Collocation

Eight students (33%) had low knowledge of collocation. Three of them (S.R, A.R, and C.N.) considered that there was no exposures that they got in the frequency of *always*, not even from school. While both R.R. and N.N. considered they *always* got exposures from their English teacher, English class activities, English songs and movies, two other students, E.A. and D.M. chose only their English teacher.

In the frequency of *often*, S.R, A.R, and C.N. marked English teacher and English class activities. Unlike other students, they seemed to consider that the school did not always provide English exposures. The exposure sources of listening to songs, watching movies and TV shows were also chosen as *often*.

As for the *sometimes* frequency, talking at the dormitory were chosen as well as browsing webpages, sending and receiving text messages. Four students also *sometimes* read books written in English, and the others *sometimes* found information around them written in English. While on the *rarely* frequency of exposure, most students chose home and dormitory as the place they *rarely* got exposure.

DISCUSSION

Exposures at Home

The sources from exposures at home were from parents and other family members. It seemed that exposures at home contribute to a great deal of collocation knowledge as the student (R.A.) who often received this exposure got a very high score on the collocation test. This finding could support Unsworth's (2015) statement that home was the most important and influential source of exposure which provided the growth of vocabulary acquisition. Further, it could be seen that what differed between the students with very good knowledge and the students with good knowledge of collocation was that the latter marked exposures at home as *rare* or *never*. Thus, while having almost the similar amount of exposure at school and to media, their collocation score was at a lower level as they did not receive the exposure at home.

However, it should be noted that there were six students that had exposure with the frequency of *sometimes*. Three of them had average knowledge of collocation and the other three got a low score for collocation. This brought the conclusion that even though students received exposure at home, it did not make a definite gain in collocation knowledge. As there were some reasons on this matter, such as the low proficiency level of language usage (Unsworth, 2015). Thus, it was

concluded that in spite of the importance of family background to collocational development, other language exposures also play a big role.

Exposures at Dormitory

Students of this school were supposed to have an English speaking day each Wednesday; however, it seems that while some of the students talked regularly, some others did not manage to practice English. The students' data showed that there were no students who *always* or *often* used English in the dormitory. Most of the students from all levels of collocation knowledge marked their dormitory in the frequency of *sometimes*.

This we concluded that practicing with their friends without any monitoring from English teachers did not particularly improve the knowledge of collocation. As there is still no research in this area, the exact cause is in need of further research, however, Unsworth (2015) has commented that the proficiency level of language usage could great influence language acquisition, especially the knowledge of vocabulary and hence of collocation.

Exposures at School

School provides both formal and informal language settings in the classroom. Since the participants of this study were from the same class, they also got the same amount and frequency of English in the classroom. However, there were differences in the answers from their questionnaires. For instance, some marked their English teacher as the only source they *always* received, whilst some marked only English class activities, and there were some who marked both of these sources.

The questionnaire data, then, brought up an interesting finding that three students (S.R., A.R., and C.N.) did not put exposure at school on the frequency of *always*. This was odd since the other students did not leave the *always* frequency blank. It seems that these students either did not get involved or pay attention to the class activities or to their teacher. All these three had a low level of collocation knowledge. Thus, we might conclude that exposures at school either in informal or formal settings were essential for retaining collocations in the mental lexicons of students.

Exposures from Media

Media can be considered as an informal language learning setting (Bahrani, Sim, & Nekoueizadeh, 2014). Students can get knowledge by getting exposures from watching movies, reading books, and so on. Media in this study had the most sources of exposure with 11 items. Most of the students, from every level of collocation knowledge, chose English songs and English movies to be the sources they *often* or *always* had contact with. This might be due to modern culture that has spread through the internet and television. It was also a matter of personal preferences for hobbies viz. to pick up a book or browse internet web-pages.

From the 11 media sources of exposure chatting online, sending text messages and receiving text messages were the main sources for collocation acquisition. By practicing English through the internet or on the phone, the students were actually

using the target language in real life situations which were rich with authentic conversations on a daily basis. As Magno, et al. (2009) believes that exposures to the target language may reinforce one's motivation to learn the language itself. This brought a good benefit for the students' language development, especially in vocabulary acquisition since not only could they use and receive exposure, they could also get feedback from their conversations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions of the language exposure sources, there are three points from the analysis. It is obvious from the data that the students who got high scores on the collocation test also had high frequency of language exposure. Also, students who got low scores had fewer exposures. Thus we summarized the more language exposures students get, the more collocation knowledge they would retain in their memory. The second point is that even though language exposure is crucial, not every source of exposure can bring much benefit in gaining collocation knowledge. Therefore, it is more about the amount of the right language exposure rather than gaining random exposure from many sources. For instance, practicing English with dormitory peers may not improve one's collocation, rather than practicing the target language with people online. The last summary is that there are some exposures which bring the most advantage for improving knowledge of collocation. Those are exposures from home, especially with parents, exposures from school: the interaction with English teachers and the activities in English class, and exposures from media, especially from chatting online and from sending and receiving text messages.

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