

Research paper

Investigating the Role of Language Proficiency in Acquiring Delexical Collocations of *Do*, *Make* and *Get* by Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Delexical collocations are of the most error-prone types of collocations. Regarding the importance of these tiny words in L2 competency, the present study investigates the importance of proficiency level in detecting and producing delexical collocations Do, Make, and Get. To elicit the data, ninety male and female subjects were selected from among BA students of Arak and Shushtar Payam Noor University, Iran, majoring in translation English at 3 proficiency levels that is, low, intermediate, and high. The selection of the participants was based on their scores on a proficiency test (Nelson, general proficiency tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976). Participants' knowledge of delexical collocation was examined through a conceptually judgment task (to detect their receptive knowledge) and a translation test (to estimate their productive knowledge). The results reveal that Persian L2 learners have been much better in receptive than productive tasks at all three levels. Analysing the test items also revealed that delexical collocations of *Do* and *Make* were more salient to detect than delexical collocation *Get*, and highly problematic in translation tests, especially for lower level learners. Accordingly, language proficiency plays a major role in receiving and producing delexical collocations of Do, Make, and Get.

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Introduction

Delexical collocations are of the most error-prone types of collocations (Lewis, 1993). These tiny words combination, especially verb + noun collocations cause the most difficulty for L2 learners when compared with other types of collocations (Chi et al., 1994; Liao, 2010; Miyakoshi, 2009; Wang, 2013). Delexical collocations do not have meaning in them, but they take their meaning from the nouns which come after them (Willis, 1990:95). These verbs are

called “delexical” because they contribute little or no meaning to the expression, it is the second word that carries the most of the meaning (Hill, 2000). Juknevičienė (2008, 120) postulated that delexical verbs are those verbs that are followed by nouns as objects to form a verb +noun collocation. Such verbs become delexical when juxtaposing with a noun phrase. Despite the reduction of the semantic weight of these verbs, they cannot be used interchangeably (Guňková, 2011).

Delexical verbs (make, do, take, get, have, and put) are among the most important verb +noun collocations and used far more either in everyday speaking (Carter and McCarty, 2007). According to Nation (2001), this type of collocation seems difficult to learn since they collocate with many words in diverse contexts. Acquiring collocations is a common trap not only for learners of English but also for translators (Vrbinc, 2004) due to restrictions on the range of other words which can combine with them, for example, get a job, but not *get a bath. Even the slightest adjustment of a near-synonym might turn the text into non-standard English (Thornbury, 2002). Acquiring collocation is not an easy task for non-native speakers of English even for advanced level learners as they are not able to produce native-like linguistic expressions that met the native language criteria (Dechert & Lennon, 1989, p.103)

Review of Literature

Having situated this relatively new research in Iran with respect to delexical collocation a brief summary of previous research proposed by well-known researchers is reviewed. Several studies have suggested that a learner’s level of proficiency is a significant factor influencing collocational performance (e.g. Al-Zahrani, 1998; Hsu, 2002; Liao, 2010; Miyakoshi, 2009). A number of previous research studies have compared different proficiency levels of L2 learners in their collocational performance (e.g. Gitsaki, 1996; Liao, 2010; Miyakoshi, 2009; Phoocharoensil, 2011).

Sanguannam (2017) investigates verb+noun delexical collocation errors of Thai EFL learners to answer the questions, of whether delexical collocational performance corresponds to increasing proficiency levels, and how the learner’s mother tongue affects collocation performance. To this aim, a multiple-choice and a semi-controlled sentence construction test, which included do, make, take, get, give, and have collocations constructed. The overall results revealed that advanced learners could perform significantly better than intermediate learners in the multiple-choice test, but not in the semi-controlled task.

Gitsaki (1999) conducted an essay-based study on 275 learners. Her elicitation technique used a cued translation task, with 10 sentences containing collocations to be translated from Greek into English, and a blank-filling task, with three different proficiency groups. The result indicated that the results of the elicitation tests show that collocation knowledge develops as L2 learners ‘overall language proficiency develops. In 2008, Shehata examined the effect of L1 (Arabic) influences on learners’ production and reception of collocations.

Shehata conducted two production tests and one reception test dealing with verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations. The findings indicated that there was a moderate positive correlation between learners' knowledge of collocations and an amount of exposure to the language. It was also concluded that learners' receptive knowledge of collocations was broader than their productive knowledge of collocations.

Nizonkiza (2015) investigated English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' receptive collocational knowledge growth in relation to their language proficiency level; and the extent to which receptive knowledge of collocations of EFL learners varies across word frequency bands. Proficiency and a collocation test were distributed to English majors at the University of Burundi. The results of the study reveal that EFL learners' linguistics proficiency develops alongside their receptive collocational competence.

Bazzaz and Samad (2011) investigate the possible relationship between verb-noun collocation proficiency among students from one academic year to the next. The subjects of the study were 212 Iranian students. They were selected from the second term of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years. Their findings showed variability in the verb-noun collocations proficiency within each academic year and between the four academic years. Unlike the above-mentioned research, some other researchers like Shokouhi and Mirsalari (2010) found no relation between students' collocational proficiency and language proficiency. They conducted research on the relationship between collocational proficiency and general linguistic proficiency among EFL learners. Thirty-five subjects were chosen by a proficiency test and were administered a 90-item multiple-choice test that had lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. The results indicate that there was no significant correlation between the general linguistic proficiency and collocational proficiency of EFL learners. They also found that the lexical collocations are easier than grammatical collocations for the students and from among subcategories, noun-preposition was the most difficult and noun-verb was the easiest. Following previous studies, the present study intends to investigate the role of Language proficiency in acquiring delexical collocations Do Make and Get. Therefore, the following questions stand out:

1. Is there a significant difference between the participants' productive and receptive knowledge of delexical collocations?
2. What is the role of language proficiency in acquiring delexical collocations of Do, Make and Get?

Methodology

Participants

Ninety male and female subjects selected among BA students of Arak and Shushtar Payam Noor University, Iran, majoring translation English were participated in this study. They were assigned into the three levels of lower, middle, and higher levels based on their scores on Nelson, general proficiency tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976). The participants' age ranged from 18-24.

Procedures

To examine the learners' delexical collocation knowledge three tests were administered to participants: (1) a general English language proficiency test, (2) an acceptability judgment task, and (3) a translation task. The Nelson test was used as a valid general English language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). The test comprised 50 items, 25 items forming cloze passages and 25 in multiple-choice format focusing on L2 structures. The reliability of the test was 79 based on KR-21. The time allocated to this test was 45 minutes. Having taken the language proficiency test, each participant was rendered a score based on his performance on this test. In order to specify different proficiency levels participants were ranked from highest to lowest scores, based on the obtained mean and SD of the total scores. Participants whose scores fell below -0.5 SD (scores between, 20-22) were selected as lower level (level code 1). Those whose scores fluctuated between ± 0.5 SD (scores between 22-27) were selected as middle level (level code 2) and participants with scores above $+0.5$ SD were assigned as upper level (level code 3). Two weeks later, the acceptability judgment task (test code 1) and translation task (test code 2) were administered to all participants. The former was used mostly to gain views into a competency of delexical collocations Make Do, and Get. This task comprised 25 items, including 5 distracters, and learners were assigned 25 minutes to complete the task. The procedure for scoring the task was making sentences in binary form (0, 1). Wrong responses and uncertainty over options were marked by 0, and right answers were marked. In order to compensate for any deficiency in the acceptability judgment task, the translation task was assigned. Participants were asked to translate 20 sentences that possessed delexical properties from Persian to English. Its construction was similar to the acceptability judgment task (5 on each sub-section). The time allocated to this test was 25 minutes. The procedure of scoring was 1 for targeted translation and 0 for incorrect translation.

Result and Discussion

Research question 1: Is there a significant difference between the participants productive and receptive knowledge of delexical collocations?

After collecting the data, the early step used in analyzing data was organizing the numeral values in terms of percentage and average scores. The result of the comparison of the three groups revealed that all three levels failed to perform consistently across two tasks. The total achievement of the two tasks is represented in table 1.

Table1.

Total score of correct response in acceptability judgment and translation tests

Test Item	Acceptability judgment test	Translation test
Elementary level	61.13%	57.06%
Intermediate level	77.93%	57.33%
Advanced level	83.73%	68.46%

To present a clear picture of the two tasks, a related bar graph is provided. These graphs display the competition of 90 Persian L2 learners in performing on the acceptability judgment task (test code 1) and translation test (test code 2) on three levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) as it is evident, that there are fluctuations in the performance of Persian L2 learners on delexical collocations of Do, Make and Get.

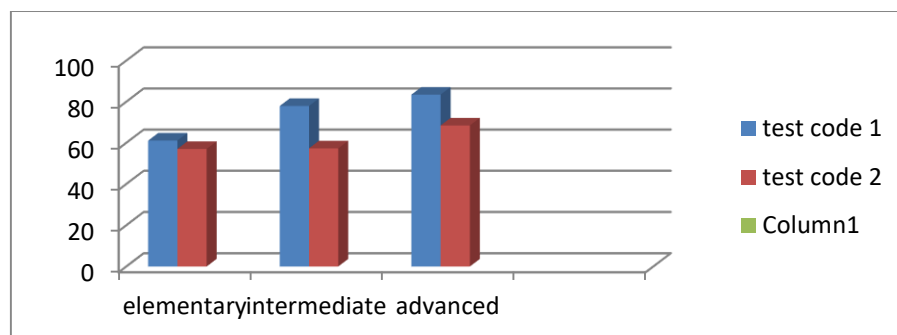


Figure 1
Comparing Persian L2 learners in test code 1 and test code 2

As it is evident, the percentage of correct answers for each delexical collocation in tests were compared with each other between the three levels. Persian L2 learners' performance varied from one task to another. In other words, they failed to perform consistently across acceptability judgment tasks and translation tests. Comparing the total score of correct responses in acceptability judgment and translation tests in table 1, it can be inferred that Persian L2 learners were far better on receptive than productive knowledge tasks. The findings of this study are consistent with Shehata (2008) who found that the participants were better to judge the correctness of L2 collocation on a receptive test but they are poor on a productive test. Jack c. Richard (2015) viewed this problem as "a gap between receptive and productive competence" he emphasized the importance of Noticing (Schmidt, 1990) and focused output (Swain, 2000) as two necessary factors for reducing this gap.

Research question 2: What is the role of language proficiency in learning of delexical collocation of Do, Make, and Get by Persian learners of English?

In order to answer the second research question, the results of test code 1 and 2 are depicted based on the dominancy order.

Ranking of delexical collocations based on the percentage of correct responses in test code 1

Elementary level → Do > Make > Get

Intermediate level → Make > Do > Get

Advanced level → Make > Get > Do

Dominance order shows fluctuations in detecting and producing delexical collocations. For example, delexical collocation *Do* was in dominance condition by the elementary level in test code 1 while *Make* took this position by the intermediate level and advanced levels.

Ranking of delexical collocations based on the percentage of correct responses in test code 2

- Elementary level**→ Do> Make> get
- Intermediate level**→ Do> Make> Get
- Advanced level**→ Do>Get>Make

As the order indicated for test code 2, the dominance order for elementary to intermediate level remained constant (Do>Make>get) that is, no remarkable change was detected in learner’s proficiency from elementary to intermediate level. It means that delexical collocations are acquired superficially at the elementary level, but these learners are unable to produce them until they move to the advanced level. Such dominancy order indicates that delexical collocation *Do* is the most salient to detect and produce for lower-level learners while *Get* is the most difficult for both elementary and intermediate levels. To find the reasons behind this claim, the data for test codes 1 and 2 are quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

Analyzing some Items in test code 1 and test code 2 ItemsDelexical collocation of *Do*

Delexical collocations of *Do* in test code 1 were presented in items 9, 15, 20, 21, and 4.

Table 2

Delexical collocation of do test cod 1

Test Item	Elementary level	Intermediate level	Advanced level
4	66%	55%	72%
9	50%	66%	70%
15	62%	64%	68%
20	49%	60%	72%
21	66%	63%	66%
Avg.	58.6%	61.6%	69%

In test code 1, the learner responses were checked. The number and the percentage of the correct responses are given in the table1. We can see from the table that the awareness of Persian L2 learners steadily rises as their proficiency level increases for delexical collocation of *Do*. The percentage of judging the acceptability of items for test code 1 was 58.6%, 61.6%, and 69% for elementary, intermediate, and advanced level learners respectively. Interesting findings were achieved for item 4 and item 21.

**Item 4: How many errors did you make on your exam?*

**Item 21: We will make our shopping on Tuesday*

As you see, the percentage of rejecting the acceptability of item 4 was relatively higher at the elementary level (66%) than intermediate level (55%), the same results were also found for

Item 21 but the difference was not dramatic, and the percentage of correct responses faced with a steady increase at an advanced level (66%). A potential explanation is that advanced-level learners are more concerned with registers and technical vocabularies, while the acquisition of a single word is the concern of the lower level. As a result, simple sentences containing delexical collocations of Do are more likely to be ignored by advanced-level learners.

Table 3

Delexical Collocation of Do in test code2

Test Item level	Elementary level	Intermediate level	Advanced level
1	81%	93%	96%
4	85%	84%	90%
5	83%	53%	88.6%
6	77%	83%	89%
18	62%	74%	93%
Avg.	77.8%	77.6%	91.2%

It is apparent from the table that the usage of correct delexical collocation of make was fall of at intermediate level (77.6%) while it showed great progress at an advanced level (91.2%). After analyzing the items for test code 2, contradictory results were achieved for Item 4 and 5.

Item 4: / bayaddarharkarinahayatsayatrabokoni/

* You should make your best at every work.

Item 5:/Negarpishraftziadidarriazikard/

* Negar had did a great progress in math

She has made considerable progress in the study of Math.

In performing on these items, intermediate level learners were less successful than elementary levels at utilizing correct delexical collocation from Persian into English. The difference was not remarkable for item 4, but it was more dramatic for item 5 because of the non-linear nature of vocabulary growth (Nizonkia 2015). A great number of intermediate level learners mistakenly selected *Do* instead of *Make* due to the fact that they find it difficult to make a choice between *Make* and *Do* because they use only one verb for " *Do*", and "*Make*" (kard) in their L1. It seems that they have been influenced by overgeneralization. According to Liu (1999), some students may think that words such as *Make* and *Do* are delexical verbs so they can replace one another freely.

Table 4

Delexical collocation of Make test code 1

Test Item level	elementary level	intermediate level	advanced level
10	43%	70%	80%

11	75%	81%	84%
13	47%	80%	76%
14	56%	86%	77%
16	42%	43%	56%
Avg.	52.6%	72%	74.6%

As the table shows detecting the unacceptability of sentences with delexical collocation of Make was the most difficult for elementary level (52%) compared to intermediate (72%) and advanced level learners (74%). The results indicated that Persian L2 learners are on the way to using delexical collocation of Make in Persian into English translation as their proficiency level increases.

Table 5

Delexical collocation of Make test cod 2

Test Item level	elementary level	intermediate level	advanced
2	82%	73%	63%
7	60%	60%	56%
8	43%	63%	73%
13	62%	50%	53%
16	40%	70%	76%
Avg.	57.4%	63.2%	64.8%

As table 5 shows, the result was less than satisfactory for delexical collocation of Make in test code 2. As we can see, less dramatic progress can be observed for all three levels in using Make in rendering Persian into English sentences. The potential explanation for the slowly growing of all three levels in mastering delexical collocation of Make is that learners' at all three levels seem to have been baffled by a polysomic sense of Make. Taylor (1995, 108) referred to the interrelatedness of meaning of Make and Do as follow "Meaning A is related to B in virtue of some shared attributes. Meaning B in turn becomes the source for a further extension to meaning C, which is likewise chained to meaning D and E and so on.

Make: create→ cause→ become→ gain→ estimate→ put something forward for consideration→ manage to reach a place or a position→ ensure the success of→ behaving as if one is about to do something.

Do: Perform, cause to have, be acceptable→ manage→ reach a destination→ put in order→ take place→ take→ punish.

Item 2: / bazifilmayeghamangizmano be gerye mi andazand/

* Some sad movies cause me cry.

Item 7: / ma mikhahimjomjenaharberimbiron/

* We planned to go out to lunch on Friday.

According to Hayati (2009) these tiny words with multiple meanings, always run the risk of ambiguity for Persian L2 learners. Persian L2 learners' mis-collocations with the create/produce sense may be attributed to the transfer of the Persian verb Sakhtan (produce), which can collocate with almost all different nouns referring to objects.

Table 6*delexical collocation of Get test code 1*

Test Item	elementary level	intermediate level	advanced level
25	51%	52%	83%
19	48%	40%	63%
11	36%	60%	82%
5	41%	41%	66%
16	50%	43%	61%
Avg.	45.2%	47.2%	71%

The overall results regarding the receptive performance of Persian L2 learners on delexical collocation of Get are presented in table 2. The average scores in the table indicate that neither elementary (45%) nor intermediate (47.2%) is adapted to recognizing unacceptable sentences with Get delexical collocations. As it is evident in the following test items, L2 learners don't know for sure what verb can accompany delexical verb of Get.

***Item 5:** *I need to find a job so I can pay my rent.*

As you see, elementary (41%) and intermediate (41%) detected the unacceptability of Item 5 at the same rate.

Item 11: *I got the sack from my job last month.*

For Item 11 elementary level learners (36%) selected this item less frequently than intermediate (60%), and advanced (83%) levels.

***Item 16:** *you need to become ready for your holiday.*

As it is shown in the table, elementary levels (48%) were much better than intermediate levels (40%). The result was also the same for Item 19, 48% and 40% for elementary and intermediate level learners respectively.

***Item 19:** *Let's go, we can't stand here all day.*

Table 7*Delexical collocation of Get test cod 2*

Test Item	elementary level	intermediate level	advanced level
3	42%	90%	90%
5	60%	85%	93%
9	73%	90%	84%
17	37%	66%	73%
19	53%	90%	87%
Avg.	53%	84.2%	85.4%

As the table shows in the translation test Persian L2 learners' performance on Get delexical collocation were remarkably lower for elementary level (53%) compared to intermediate (84%) and advanced level learners (85.4%). The Persian delexical verb "shodan" has two equivalents

in English "become" and "get". Persian L2 learners tend to use "become" wherever they need "shodan" because of Polysemy which eventually can lead to an L1 transfer. The verb "to get" can have different meanings, such as "procure" (I'll get the drinks), "become" (they got scared), "understand" (she gets it), "have" (I've got two cats), "to move to a different place or into a different position" (getting into the car).

Item 3: / *kei gharar ast ezdevaj konid?* /

* *When do you want to marry?*

(*When are you planning to get married?*)

Item 5: / *bayad beravim vagarna a zghatar ja mimanim.* /

* *We should go otherwise it become late to reach the train.*

(*We need to get going or we will miss the train.*)

Item 19: / *be khaneh residam.* /

* *I reach home. (I got home)*

In test code 2 a fluctuation was seen across proficiency levels; the total percentage remains constant at an intermediate level. That is, the errors did not vanish as their proficiency level increased for delexical collocation in the translation tests. It can infer that advanced level learners have a greater depth of delexical collocation than those at intermediate level and lower levels. The findings are in line with Nizonkiza (2015) who argued that receptive collocational competence develops alongside EFL learners' linguistic proficiency. In other words, Advanced levels were more aware and competent in using proper chunks. These findings are in contradiction with Shokouhi and Mirsalari (2010) who failed to find any relationship between language proficiency and the acquisition of collocations, and Sanguannam (2017) who showed that advanced learners could not perform significantly better than intermediate learners across tasks, especially in the production task that indicates the production knowledge of delexical verb+noun collocations. Rico (2014) referred to this problem as the source of the difficulty of productive knowledge including insecurity, unwillingness to use the target language, lack of knowledge and language transfer, time allocation, and the teachers' methodology. In order to improve learners' in-depth delexical collocation knowledge in terms of both receptive and productive abilities, it is very important to make use of communicative tasks.

As can be seen, For Persian L2 learners' delexical collocations of Make and Do are more salient to detect than delexical collocation of Get for test codes 1 and 2 for elementary and intermediary level learners. As Get is from among highly polysemous delexical verbs (Srinivasan & Rabagliati, 2015), it requires the use of more complex metalinguistic skills for elementary and intermediate-level learners than advanced-level learners (Banka, 2006). However, they did not have in-depth knowledge of the delexical verbs, especially at elementary and intermediate levels and they struggled with acquiring and using delexical collocations in different contexts. It seemed that our students in the present study knew the lexical meaning of each verb response but they might not have proper knowledge of delexical collocations. The researcher insisted that L2 learners of English can acquire the meanings and usages of

polysemous verbs by exposing them to authentic English materials, and awareness raising of delexical collocations to L2 learners in instructional settings (Webb & Kagimoto 2009).

Conclusion

According to Pignot-Shahov (2012) knowing a word is being able to recognize it (receptive knowledge) and to use it correctly (productive knowledge). Delexical Collocations play a crucial role in L2 comprehension and use. Regarding the importance of these tiny words in L2 competency, the present study compared receptive and productive knowledge of Persian L2 learners in the case of delexical collocations of *Make*, *Do* and *Get* in two test types, conceptually judgment task and translation tests respectively. Findings reveal that the acquisition of delexical collocations depends on the learner's proficiency level. The results also indicated that Persian L2 learners have been much better in receptive than productive tasks at all three levels. It is also revealed that delexical collocations of *Do* and *Make* were more salient to detect in test code 1 than *Get* in the same test code. However, these collocations, *Do* and *Make*, were highly problematic in a translation test, especially for lower-level learners. For most items, they resorted to avoidance strategy because of uncertainty due to their unawareness of the importance of delexical collocation.

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