Investigating the Collocational Use of ‘Have’ ‘Take’ ‘Make’ and ‘Do’ by Moroccan EFL Learners

Younes Elkhadiri
Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida

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Abstract

Collocational competence is a significant aspect that characterizes native speakers’ communicative competence. This generally entails knowing which words come together and which do not. This paper investigates the use of verb-noun collocations ‘have’, ‘take’ ‘make’ and ‘do’ by Moroccan EFL university students. It attempts to probe the effect of academic level and gender on students’ achievement with respect to the use of these two verbs. For this purpose, two major tests were used for data collection. These tests were completed by three groups of Moroccan university students. The first test, production task, was used to measure the degree of mastery of the verb-noun collocations under study. The second test, acceptability appropriateness task, was devised to examine the receptive collocational knowledge of the students. In this case, the subjects were asked to judge the appropriateness of the targeted sentences that contain either correct or wrong verb-noun collocations. The main findings of this study demonstrate that there exists a highly significant difference in the reported achievement for the three groups under study. Put differently, S6 students with higher academic level and
longer exposure to English outperformed both S4 and S2 students. However, the results between S2 and S4 students were not statistically different as they had more or less similar achievement. Moreover, the results of the present study revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of female and male students. i.e., females were more successful than males in using the verb-noun collocations with ‘have’, ‘take’, ‘make’ and ‘do’ in all the attested cases.

**Keywords**: verb-noun collocations, have, take, make, do gender, academic level

0. **Introduction**

The study of collocations in second language learning has gained considerable attention in the previous few decades. Several studies have been conducted in L2 acquisition research which aimed at examining the effect of the knowledge and use of collocations in developing second language learners’ communicative competence and language performance (McCarthy 1990; Bahns and Eldaw 1993; Lewis 2000; Wray 2002; Stubbs 2004; Schmitt 2004; Nasselhauf 2005; Hoey 2005; Ozaki 2011). Brown (1974) claims that increasing students' collocation knowledge will improve their oral and listening comprehension, as well as, their reading speed. In a similar vein, Laufer (1988) states that collocations represent an important component of a learner's vocabulary knowledge. In this regard, McCarthy (1990) argues that collocations constitute “an important organising principle in the vocabulary of any language” (p.12). Likewise, Carter and McCarthy (1988) claim that English collocations are essential for both comprehension and production of English. They state that “collocations teach students expectations about which sorts of language can follow from what has preceded. Students will not have to go about reconstructing the language each time they want to say something but instead can use these collocations as pre-packaged building blocks” (p. 75).

Furthermore, Nation (2001) asserts that some levels of accurate collocation usage are critical for acquiring native fluency, “all fluent and appropriate language requires collocation knowledge” (p. 318). Thus, the importance of collocations in EFL learners' native-like
performance on the one hand, and the difficulties that EFL learners have with different types of collocations on the other, emphasizes the importance of considering collocational use at an early stage of learning. Along the same line, lexical knowledge can be divided into two categories: receptive and productive knowledge. The ability to recognize words when reading or listening is referred to as receptive vocabulary knowledge, while the ability to produce words in writing or speaking is referred to as productive vocabulary knowledge (Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Henriksen, 1999; Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2014). To this end, measuring collocational knowledge can also be divided into two types: receptive and productive collocational knowledge. Interestingly, several previous studies have been carried out to measure both receptive and productive collocation knowledge of EFL/ESL learners such as studies by (Biskup, 1992; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Schmitt, 1998; Bonk, 2000; and Gyllstad, 2005).

1. Literature Review

1.1. Definition of collocations

The term collocation is derived from the Latin verb *collocare*, which means *to arrange* or *set in order*. Firth (1957) is considered the father of collocations, for he was the first person to coin this concept. He defines collocations as “the company that words keep” (p.183). This indicates that where we find one of the collocating words we can expect to find the other. Palmer (1966) describes collocations as “a succession of two or more words that must be learned as an integral whole and not pieced together from its component parts” (p.5). Likewise, a number of researchers maintain that collocations are groups or chunks of words that share a syntagmatic relation and are generally found together (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Nesselhauf, 2003; Sinclair, 1991). Lewis (1997) argues that “collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency. Collocations co-occur, but not all words which co-occur, are collocations” (p. 44). Such a definition entails that ‘co-occurrence’ is not the only defining characteristics of collocations. Furthermore, Granger & Paquot (2008) claim that the definition of the term ‘collocation’ seems to be a controversial issue in the sense that there is no general agreement of a definite description to this concept and because researchers have approached collocations
from different perspectives. Nonetheless, there are two main approaches to the study of collocations namely: the “frequency-based approach” and the “phraseological approach”.

1.2. Frequency-based approach
The frequency-based approach, first developed by Firth (1957), focuses on the frequent combination of words in language. It identifies collocations according to the frequency and co-occurrence of words in a given corpus. In the same vein, Halliday (1966) and Sinclair (1966), known as Neo-Firthians, highlighted the importance of the co-occurrence of collocations. They further argue that a word combination is only considered to be a collocation if the frequency of co-occurrence of its lexical items is statistically significant and within a certain distance in the sentence. Along the same line, Sinclair (1991) asserts that “the usual measure of proximity is a maximum of four words intervening” (p. 170). This measurement tends to demarcate the length of word combination. Likewise, Carter (1998, p. 51) claims that collocation is the frequent co-occurrence of words within a certain distance recognised to be four words to either side of the specified focal word or node.

1.3. Phraseological-based approach
On the other hand, Nesselhauf (2005) considers that collocations can be seen as “a type of word combination, most commonly as one that is fixed to some degree but not completely” (p. 12). Such view is known as the "Phraseological Approach" and it has been widely embraced by scholars in the domains of lexicography and education, such as Cowie (1981) and Sinclair (1997). This latter, claims that any English term can associate with other words whether they belong to the same cluster, like snow and block, or to separate clusters but are part of the same lexical set, for instance street and language. Moreover, collocation is distinguished from other types of word combinations, such as idioms and free combinations, by its definition. The difference between collocations and free combinations, on the other hand, is determined by whether the substitution of lexical components is random or prompted by semantic commutability.

Furthermore, Collocations are defined by Cowie (1981, 1994) as word combinations that occur at an ambiguous position on a continuum
between free combination and idioms. In this regard, he distinguishes between free combinations and fixed on the basis of two main criteria: "combinability" and "transparency." On one hand, **combinability** refers to how easy or difficult it is to substitute words in a combination, whereas **transparency** refers to whether the elements (words) in the combination have a denotative or connotative meaning. In other terms, it entails that whether or not the words are utilized literally is determined by the transparency feature (Cowie 1981). As a case in point, the substitutability of lexical items in free combinations, according to Cowie (1981, 1994), is based on semantic features; for example, the object in *drink tea* can be substituted by any noun possessing the semantic trait [+LIQUID]. In contrast, the substitutability of lexical components in collocations is arbitrary and henceforth cannot be semantically changed, as when the word *perform* is replaced with *do* or *make*, resulting in violations such as *make/do a task*. Nonetheless, the difference between collocations and idioms is based on semantic transparency i.e., whether the meaning of the word combinations is clear or not. Collocations require at least one lexical element to have a literal meaning, whereas idioms contain "non-literal" and "non-compositional" meanings (Cowie 1981, 1994; Hausmann 1989).

**1.4. The taxonomy of collocations**

Despite the fact that collocations can be categorized in a variety of ways, the most typical division is the one proposed by Benson (1985): grammatical and lexical collocations. The first group is a phrase that is made by combination of a dominant open class word like a noun, a verb or an adjective, plus a grammatical word like a preposition or grammatical structural pattern, like a clause or an infinitive. The second group, on the other hand, only has different combinations of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs. It discards clauses, infinitives or prepositions. (Benson et al. 1986a). Such classification can be clearly presented in the following table.
Table 1. *Types of collocations.* (Benson 1985).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammatical Collocations:</strong></td>
<td>● (to) get at, (to) go for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● different from, curious about, full of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● fed up with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● for sale, on time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● She sent the book to him/ She sent him the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● He described the book to me/ *He described me the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● verb + preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● adjective + preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● adjective + preposition + preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● preposition + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● dative movement transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● noun + verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● noun + of + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● adverb + adjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● verb + adverb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● (to) reach a verdict, (to) launch a missile, (to) lift a ) blockade,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(to) revoke a license</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● reckless abandon, sweeping generalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● adjectives modify, alarms go off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● a bunch of flowers, a piece of advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● deeply religious, fiercely independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● (to) apologize humbly, (to) affect deeply</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lexical Collocations:**
- verb + noun (pronoun, prepositional phrase
- adjective + noun
- noun + verb
- noun + of + noun
- adverb + adjective
- verb + adverb

1.5. Previous studies on Arabic EFL milieu

A quick review of the literature on collocation studies revealed scarcity of research that looked at language learners’ collocational understanding in EFL settings. First, Hussein (1998) investigated the use of collocations by Jordanian EFL learners. The findings showed that the students’ performance was unsatisfactory in the sense that they got high percentage collocation errors. Another study that tackles the significance of collocation was introduced by Farghal and Obiedant (1995). They found that the students’ knowledge of
collocations was poorer than anticipated. Brashi (2009) investigated the link between productive and receptive knowledge of verb-noun collocations among Saudi students. They found that collocations pose a significant challenge to Saudi English learners. Also, students' receptive collocational knowledge outperformed their productive collocational knowledge.

Moreover, Al-Zahrani (1998) studies the relationship between lexical collocation knowledge and overall language proficiency. The findings revealed a positive association between participants' collocation knowledge and their overall language skills. To put it differently, highly skilled English learners had extensive collocational knowledge, whereas less proficient participants had little collocational knowledge. Similarly, Al-Amro (2006) evaluated Saudi EFL learners' lexical and grammatical collocations, as well as their productive and receptive collocational knowledge. The findings revealed that the individuals lacked collocational knowledge, as evidenced by their poor performance on the collocational test. Shehata (2008) investigated the impact of the L1 on advanced Arabic-speaking English students' productive and receptive collocation knowledge. The findings revealed that L1 interference had a significant impact on the participants' collocational knowledge. Another intriguing finding was that participants performed better on the verb-noun collocation test than the adjective-noun collocation test. Awaj (2018) examined the collocational knowledge of Libyan EFL learners. She found that collocations represent a problematic issue of language for all L2 learners in the study. Finally, Boudribila (2020) investigated the relationships between collocation knowledge, vocabulary size, and writing ability. The main findings of this study seem to show that there is a significant correlation between collocation knowledge and writing ability. Also, there appears to be a substantial correlation between vocabulary size and writing ability. Additionally, the findings point to a significant relationship between collocation knowledge and vocabulary size. Besides, it was shown by the results that the majority of subjects made more mistakes in the productive test when dealing with collocations which depend on adjective-noun structure.
2. Methodology

2.1. Research questions
This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- Is there a significant difference between the participants’ productive and receptive knowledge of collocations?
- Is there a significant effect of the participants’ academic level and gender on their achievement on verb-noun collocations?

2.2. Hypotheses
For the purposes of this study, the hypotheses are

- H0-1: There is no observable difference between the participants’ productive and receptive knowledge of collocations.
- H0-2: There is no significant effect of the participants’ academic level and gender on their achievement on verb-noun collocations.

2.3. Participants
A total of 120 Moroccan university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at Chouaib Doukkali University constitute the respondents of the present study. These respondents are divided into three major groups from both sexes, but with different academic levels: a freshmen group which consists of 40 students pursuing their studies in the second semester, 40 students in the fourth semester and 40 students in the sixth semester. Equally important, each group contains 20 females and 20 males. Furthermore, the main criteria on which the selection of subjects has been established are their availability, gender and their level of study. What is more is that the instrument utilized in this research has been administered to all the students in the classroom.

2.4. Research instruments
For this purpose, two major tests were used for data collection. These tests were completed by three groups of Moroccan university students. The first test, production task, was used to measure the degree of mastery of the verb-noun collocations under study. The second test,
appropriate judgment task, was devised to examine the receptive collocational knowledge of the students. In this case, the subjects were asked to judge the appropriateness of the targeted sentences that contain either correct or wrong verb-noun collocations.

2.4.1. Production test
This test tries to measure the degree of mastery of the verb-noun collocations under study. It is composed of forty sentences where one lexical item of collocations is given and the other is missing. In this test, it is the verb that is missing in all cases. Thus, the targeted respondents are required to read the sentences carefully and choose from the box one verb that they think is correct. Needless to say that the test has a high level of reliability with Cronbach Alpha value of .92.

2.4.2. Judgment-appropriateness test
This test is used to examine the receptive knowledge of the students by judging the appropriateness of some verb-noun collocations. It is made up of forty sentences that include the four targeted verb-nouns collocations. One should know that half of the collocations in this test are correct, and the other half are incorrect. Thus, the informants are requested to provide their judgments as to whether the use of the collocation in each sentence is correct or not. In case a sentence is judged unacceptable, the students are required to provide the alternative verb which they believe to make the appropriate collocation. Likewise, it is decided to use different collocation items in the receptive test to eliminate any memorisation effects. Finally, the reliability index of the test is very high as indicated by the obtained value of Cronbach Alpha .88.

2.5. Data coding
One important line that connects the data collecting process and data analysis is the data coding. It is the process of assigning numbers to the values or levels of the variables investigated (Morgan, Leech, Gloeckner & Barret, 2004). In this regard, the nature of the tasks and the research conducted necessitate the type of coding employed in the present study. For students’ academic level, the S2 group was coded as 1, the S4 group as 2 and the S6 group as 3. Concerning the production test, the researcher used a binary scale coding (correct/incorrect). To this end, the score of a correct answer was one
point whereas the score for an incorrect answer was zero. If a participant left any item blank, he/she was given zero. Providing no answer means that the participant lacks the knowledge about the correct use of the targeted collocation. The total score was out of forty. The second task, namely the judgment-appropriateness test, was scored the same way as the previous test; i.e. assigning one point for a correct response and zero for an incorrect one. The total score was also out of forty.

2.6. Data collection procedures
The data collection starts by administering the Productive Test, which takes about 20 minutes for the participants to complete. Following this, the Receptive Test is given to the participants, and they are given another 20 minutes to do the test. In order to ensure all participants take both tests, thus, each of them is given a number and both instruments (Productive Test and Receptive Test) are also numbered. During the tests, participants are not allowed to use dictionaries and to leave blank any item that they are not sure of. This is to prevent them from guessing.

2.7. Data analysis
To substantiate the analysis and discussion of the tests, the data are processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The findings of the tests are calculated via different statistical analyses in an attempt to test each hypothesis of the study. In an attempt to determine whether or not there is an observable difference between the participants' productive and receptive knowledge of collocations, a Repeated-measures t-test is run. This test is used to check for any significant differences in within-subjects-factors (i.e., the participants’ production and reception of collocations). It is used to test if the means of two paired measurements, such as productive/receptive scores, are significantly different. On the other hand, to check the effect of the participants’ academic level and gender on their competence on verb-noun productive/receptive collocational knowledge, Two-way Manova is run. Such a test is used to compare two or more continuous response variables (e.g. productive scores and receptive scores) by two or more independent variable (e.g. academic level and gender).
3. Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the results of the data analysis in relation to the two research objectives stated earlier.

Is there any Significant Difference between the Participants’ Productive and Receptive Knowledge of collocations?

In an attempt to answer this question, a repeated-measures t-test is run. It is worth mentioning that the total score of this task is out of 40. Table 2 displays the results of descriptive statistics with respect to the participants’ productive and receptive knowledge of collocations. The mean scores show that students achieve higher in the productive test (M= 23.65) and lower in the receptive test (M=22.61). Likewise, to find out whether or not the difference between the two means is statistically significant, we need to consider the results of the paired t-test in table 3. In this regard, it is clear that the mean difference (1.04) between the productive and the receptive knowledge is statistically significant ($p= .005$). This demonstrates that even though the participants show a higher level of the productive knowledge of collocations, they still have problems with respect to their receptive collocational knowledge i.e., when targeting their tacit knowledge, the respondents were not successful in deciding whether a set of collocational patterns is appropriate or not. Also, standard deviations indicate that the scores of both the productive test (6.21) and the receptive test (7.68) were relatively heterogeneous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Within-Subjects Effects</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is there a significant effect of the participants’ academic level and gender on their achievement on verb-noun collocations?

In order to check whether the participants’ academic level and gender have any effect on their achievement on verb-noun collocations, a Two-way Manova is run. The obtained results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in students’ achievement based on their gender. $F (4, 113) = 4.74, p < .005$; Wilk's Λ = 0.923, partial $\eta^2 = .78$. Such a result shows that the difference between the means of both groups was statistically significant in favour of females. However, the effect size was small. According to Cohen (1988), effect size from .2 to .5 is small. In other words, although the difference between the means of both groups was statistically significant, the effect of the gender factor was small in its influence on the collocational knowledge of males and females. Similarly, the results demonstrate that there is a statistically significant difference in students’ achievement based on their academic level. $F (4, 226) = 4.85, p < .005$; Wilk's Λ = 0.536, partial $\eta^2 = .69$. Such findings show that the participants with advanced academic level managed to perform better on both the productive and the receptive tests. Along the same line, the interaction of gender and academic level indicates that there is a statistically significant effect on the combined dependent variables (productive & receptive tests) $F (2, 226) = 2.075, p = .004$; Wilks' Λ = .930. Furthermore, the results of the tests of between-subjects effects display that there is a statistically significant interaction effect between gender and academic level on both the receptive test scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Productive</th>
<th>Receptive Test</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Deviation Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,042</td>
<td>4,007</td>
<td>.366</td>
<td>.317</td>
<td>1,766</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and the productive test scores respectively $F(2,114)= 4.099$, $p= .002$ and $F(2,114)= 3.309$, $p= .003$.

In principle, the results of this study revealed that verb-noun collocations represent a problematic issue to Moroccan EFL learners, as the achievement of the three targeted groups were still beyond the required performance of English speakers. This problem with collocations may be attributable in part to the arbitrary nature of word combinations, as well as to the insufficient grammatical rules in providing appropriate combinations (Lewis 2002). Moreover, the low achieved results could be due to the fact that Moroccan EFL learners were probably not well – trained on collocations. This is in line with Bahns and Eldaw (1993) who claim that learners’ knowledge of collocations does not develop in parallel with their knowledge of vocabulary; this may be attributed in part to the fact that collocations are not taught and, as a result, learners pay little attention to learning them. Although the results indicate poor students’ collocational knowledge in general, S6 students show more advanced collocational competence than S4 and S2 students. This could be related to their long exposure to English compared to the other groups.

Regarding the first question, which targeted the effect of the difference between the productive and the receptive collocational knowledge, the results revealed that there was a significant difference between the two dependent variables. Learners demonstrated better productive than receptive collocational knowledge. This finding is in agreement with Al-Amro (2006) who found that the participants were more accurate in the productive collocational test than in the receptive test. Similarly, Awaj (2018) found that the two groups of learners in the study illustrated better productive than receptive knowledge of English collocations. However, the results of this research ran counter to the findings of Brashi (2005) who found that the participants in their studies had low collocation competence regarding production knowledge. Also, Shehata (2008) found that the subjects were able to judge the correctness of the target collocations in the receptive test but they faced difficulties in producing the correct collocations in the productive test.
Concerning the second question which aimed at investigating the effect of academic level and gender on the combined dependent variables (receptive & productive), the results indicate that both females and students with advanced academic level managed to perform better on the productive and receptive tests. This finding is in line with Al-Zahrani (1998) who revealed a favourable association between participants' collocation knowledge and their overall language competency. To put it another way, highly skilled English learners have extensive collocational knowledge, whereas less proficient participants have little collocational information. Hill (2000) argues that language learners who have a good mastery of collocations are not likely to encounter any problem with regard to the reception and production of naturally-occurring language since a significant part of our language is made up of collocations.

On the other hand, the result of the present study is inconsistent with Ramadhan (2017) who found that the results of his study generally revealed significant differences between the mean scores of males and females in the individual receptive and productive tests. However, male participants seemed to achieve significantly higher mean scores than female participants on the tested collocations. In the same vein, Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah (2003) claim that even advanced L1 Arabic learners of English had difficulty with English collocations. Finally, Hsu (2002) revealed that there is a lightly positive relationship between learners’ use of lexical collocations and their overall language proficiency.

4. Conclusions and Implications
Overall, the results of the present study indicated that there was a significant difference in the collocational verb-noun knowledge among Moroccan EFL learners. The appropriate use of collocations seems to be demanding, in the sense that learners still face many problems. Nonetheless, S6 students with approximately higher academic level and longer exposure to English outperformed both S4 and S2 students. Still, the results between S2 and S4 students were not statistically different as they had more or less similar achievement.

Moreover, the results of the present study showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of female and
male students. i.e., females were more successful than males in using the verb-noun collocations with ‘have’, ‘take’, ‘make’ and ‘do’ in all the attested cases. Thus, it appears that a longer time of exposure is required for the sake of boosting participants’ proficiency through incorporating sufficient diversified input to trigger the required adjustment to better match the appropriate use of English collocations. For instance, Teachers should work to increase EFL students' awareness of collocations. In fact, teachers should be aware that learning a foreign language does not entail the acquisition of new knowledge, but rather the application of what EFL students already know. This is in agreement with Nesselhauf (2003) who argued that “in most of the recent publications on the teaching of collocations, making learners aware of the phenomenon is considered the foremost task of the teacher” (p. 238). One approach to achieve this is to promote the use of collocation dictionaries, which provide instances of lexical items with various collocates and contexts of use. This can help learners build their collocational knowledge and skills. Also, Students should be encouraged to read as much as possible since collocations seem not to be rule-governed. This is in line with Krashen (1988) who stated that the more word input language learners see, the more productive they become.

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