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COLLOCATION COMPETENCY AMONG IRANIAN STUDENTS IN SWEDEN

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Abstract

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Abstract: In the current study, a quantitative approach was taken to explore the impact of the first language on the transfer of lexical collocations, highlighting both positive and negative transfer effects. It explored the correlation between English language proficiency and collocation competency, along with the influence of gender on collocation competency. The current study investigated the phenomenon of transfer in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. It specifically focused on collocation competency among Iranian students studying in Sweden, using the cloze procedure. Transfer refers to how the learner's first language affects their production in the target language, while collocation, which involves the frequent co-occurrence of words, poses a significant challenge for English learners as a foreign language. Understanding the importance of collocation competency in achieving English language proficiency, it becomes crucial to comprehend the mechanisms of transfer and its correlation with collocation competency. This knowledge is essential for developing effective language teaching strategies and improving overall English language proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Keywords: positive lexical transfer, negative lexical transfer, lexical collocations, English language proficiency, collocation competency

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language involves mastering various linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. In order to communicate effectively and fluently, vocabulary is a crucial skill that is usually taught separately from grammar. However, language learners must go beyond memorizing individual words and develop an understanding of how words naturally combine. According to Palmer (1933, p. 7), this combination of words, known as collocation, refers to the inherent tendency of words to appear together in specific contexts. Collocation is particularly important because it enhances learners' ability to recognize and produce natural language. Scholars such as Firth (1951), McCarthy (1990), Robins (2000), and Halliday and Hasan (2001) have acknowledged that collocation competency is important for language learning and emphasized its role in facilitating language proficiency and authentic language use.

An important challenge for English as a foreign language learner is to be able to communicate not only grammatically, but also naturally and appropriately in English. In English as a foreign language, proficiency in collocation refers to a student's ability to create acceptable and natural expressions. Collocation competency is particularly problematic for Iranian students studying English as a foreign language, as they face difficulties in deepening their understanding of word usage (Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007; Shokouhi & Mirsalari's, 2010; Ganji, 2012; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015). Rather than focusing on expanding their vocabulary, English language learners often prioritize memorizing meanings and pronunciations of new words, neglecting the importance of understanding how words are used together. As their vocabulary grows, issues arise in terms of using words appropriately in context, including the challenge of collocation.

Language transfer, including positive and negative lexical transfer, has been extensively studied in the realm of foreign language learning. Language transfer is the process of transferring linguistic components from one language to another when learning a foreign language. Negative transfer occurs when learners apply patterns or rules from their native language to the target language, resulting in inappropriate or incorrect usage of collocations. This phenomenon arises as language learners often rely on their first language when encountering unfamiliar words in the target language. Corder (1978) argued that a systematic

analysis of language learner errors enables the identification of areas that require reinforcement in teaching. Negative lexical transfer (Najjar, 2020, p. 259) can lead to common collocation errors in foreign language learning, impacting the fluency and overall accuracy of learners' speech and writing. Language instructors should be mindful of these types of errors and provide clear instructions on lexical collocations to aid learners in developing more precise and natural language usage. Positive transfer, on the other hand, requires the successful integration of prior knowledge into the second language. Learning is facilitated by perceived similarity, such as cognate forms, and positive transfer may account for much of the transfer effect (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Various factors such as proficiency in the background language (Serrander, 2011), frequency of use (Paradise, 1997), the status of the second language (Williams and Hamburg, 1998), and the influence of the first language (Jessner, 2006) can facilitate language learning and engender positive transfer from the first language to the second language.

This study investigated positive lexical transfer and lexical transfer errors in lexical collocation transfer. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the impact of the first language on collocation transfer and the relationship between participants' collocation competency and English language proficiency based on gender differences. The study is organized as follows: section 2 offers a theoretical framework that focuses on the relationship between the first language and lexical collocation transfer as well as the relationship between collocation competency and language proficiency in English as a foreign language learning. Section 3 illustrates the study's aim, and section 4 outlines the methodology including participants selection, data collection instruments, and data analysis procedures. Section 5 presents the findings, and then section 6 discusses the implications of the study in light of the results and relevant prior research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current study aimed to examine the learning of lexical collocations by Iranian students in Sweden who studied English as a foreign language in Iran. In order to provide a framework for the present study, this chapter begins with a brief overview of language transfer, including positive and negative lexical transfer, and addresses related theories, including interlanguage and usage-based theories. Subsequently, the term collocation will be defined and its importance in the field of foreign language learning will be examined. In addition, this section will include a comprehensive review of previous research on collocation in the context of English as a foreign language. The primary focus of this study is on lexical collocations, verb-noun collocation and noun-noun collocation, in foreign language learning. Thus, it is important to mention that the review of previous studies mentioned in this section on other types of collocations is relevant and can help future research efforts in this field.

2.1. An Overview of Language Transfer

The notion of transfer entails the utilization of similarities and differences across languages to aid comprehension and, to a lesser extent, production during communication (Ringbom, 2006, p. 26). Jarvis (2000, p. 252) defines transfer as “any instance of learner data where a statistically significant correlation (or probability-based relation) is shown to exist between some features of learners’ [TL] performance and their L1 [or L2] background”. Odlin (1989, p.27) describes “transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”. The investigation of language transfer in bilingual language acquisition has become increasingly prominent. Specifically, when discussing specific aspects like lexical transfer, the transfer is often more practically relevant than cross-linguistic influence. Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008, p. 72) introduce the concept of lexical transfer, which pertains to “the influence of word knowledge in one language on a person’s knowledge or use of words in another language”. It is noteworthy, however, that existing research predominantly focuses on negative lexical transfer, while the exploration of positive lexical transfer has been relatively neglected (Cenoz, 2001; Falk & Bardel, 2010).

During the 1980s, the term transfer lost its popularity in second language acquisition (SLA) due to the decline of behaviorism, as noted by Jarvis (2017). To distance itself from the associations of habit formation linked to transfer, Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986) introduced the term ‘cross-linguistic influence’ as a broader concept encompassing various phenomena related to first language influence. These include transfer, interference, interlanguage transfer, avoidance, borrowing, and reverse transfer. However, in recent years, the transfer has regained its neutral status and is now used interchangeably with cross-linguistic influence (Odlin & Yu, 2016). Recognizing the broader understanding of transfer, the terms cross-linguistic influence and transfer are often used interchangeably, (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008, p. 3). The present study prefers to use the term transfer over cross-linguistic influence.

In language learning, the transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. While most studies primarily focus on negative lexical transfer, where false cognates or non-existent words are created based on the second language lexicon, the positive lexical transfer can also occur, resulting in the formation of accurate second language words based on the first language (Najjar, 2020, p. 275). Falk & Bardel (2010) state that determining whether a correctly produced item is a result of the positive transfer or reflects correct target knowledge can be difficult since there is no apparent deviation from the target language. According to (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), positive transfer involves successfully integrating the first language into the target language, and it is assumed that learners use perceived similarities, such as cognate forms, and positive transfer may contribute significantly to transfer effects.

The main factors influencing lexical transfer include proficiency level, typological similarity between languages, recency of language use, psychotypological factors, and age of acquisition. Proficiency level, as defined by Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008), refers to the level of language competence achieved by the learner. Typological similarity, as described by Ringbom (1987), pertains to the structural and functional similarities between the learner's first language and the target language. Recency of language use considers the frequency and recentness of exposure to the target language, as noted by De Bot (2004). Psychotypological factors encompass individual cognitive and psychological traits that influence language learning and transfer, as studied by Dewaele (1998). Age of acquisition, as discussed by Jarvis (2002), refers to the age at which the learner begins acquiring the target language. In sum, these factors can affect the results of collocations transfer studies.

Biskup's (1992) study examined the impact of the first language on the usage of collocations by Polish and German learners of English. The participants were given two written tasks: a gap-filling exercise and a composition. The findings indicated that both Polish and German learners exhibited collocation errors influenced by their native language. Polish learners relied on literal translations, resulting in incorrect or unusual collocations, while German learners frequently used inappropriate prepositions or verb forms in their collocations. Biskup suggests that exposure to authentic English input and targeted training on collocations can help reduce the influence of the first language on learners.

In a study conducted by Bahns and Eldaw (1993), 58 advanced German learners of English participated in an experiment involving a translation task and a gap-filling task. The researchers emphasized the importance of comprehending collocations, particularly verb-noun collocations, in both German and English. The findings revealed that although the students demonstrated knowledge of collocations, their progress in this aspect did not match their overall vocabulary development. German learners often had an easier time translating many verb-noun collocations in English due to direct equivalents in their first language. However, some German noun-verb collocations lacked direct translations in English, leading to potential collocational errors for German learners. These results suggest that German speakers require specific attention in English language instruction to address collocation-related challenges.

2.2. The Concept of Collocation

The term collocation is used widely, but there is no single definition of it that is generally accepted by linguists. Palmer (1933, p. 7) defines collocation as “a placing together”, or “that which results from a placing together”. Firth (1951, p.195) considered a collocation to be part of the meaning of a word and defined it as “the company words”, regarding its relationships with other words. McCarthy (1990) argues that collocation is a marriage contract between words, and this makes it an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language. In line with Firth's theory, Robins (2000, p. 64) argues that collocation is “the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences”. In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.317) argue that collocation, a means of cohesion, is “the co-occurrence of lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another, because they tend to occur in similar environments”.

Distinguishing between lexical collocations, idioms, and free combinations is important. Collocation is closely related to the concept of the semantic field, which forms cohesive groups that are appropriate in specific situations. Native speakers have an advantage in fluently using collocations, as they have automated and internalized these collocations. In contrast, second language learners face challenges in using non-native collocations. To achieve a level of fluency that resembles that of native speakers, learners need to comprehend and produce collocations as integrated and unanalyzed units. Benson et al. (1986, p.p. 253) illustrate the distinction using combinations with the word ‘murder’, illustrating the varying degrees of cohesion. Idioms are fixed expressions with non-literal meanings, while collocations fall in between, conveying meaning and exhibiting psychological significance. However, there are transitional areas between these categories (Cruse, 1986, p.41), which complicate the classification.

Collocation fall into two major groups: grammatical collocation and lexical collocation (Benson et al., 2010, p. IX). Grammatical collocations consist of a noun, an adjective/participle, or a verb with a preposition or grammatical construction, such as ‘account for’ or ‘adjacent to’. On the other hand, lexical collocations do not include prepositions, infinitives, or clauses, but consist of various collocations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, like ‘truly happy’ or ‘take a nap’. Benson et al. (2010) have identified various structural types within lexical collocations.

- L1. verb (donating creation or activation) + noun (pronoun or prep. phrase): make an impression, take a rest;
- L2. verb (meaning eradication or nullification) + noun: revoke a license, demolish a house;
- L3. adjective + noun: a pitched battle, heavy rain, strong tea, broad shoulder;
- L4. noun + verb: blood circulates, alarms go off;
- L5. noun1 + noun2: an act of violence, a pride of lions, a bouquet of flowers;
- L6. adverb + adjective/ adjective + adverb: sound asleep, deeply absorbed;
- L7. verb + adverb: amuse thoroughly, affect deeply.

Researchers adopt various types of collocation when studying it, some focusing on specific types while others considering a wider range of them. In line with this diversity, the present study seeks to contribute novel insights by examining verb-noun collocations and comparing them to noun-noun collocations. This quantitative investigation provides a unique vantage point for exploring distinctive patterns and findings within the domain of collocation

competency. Since verb-noun collocations are recognized as challenging areas in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, exploring them among Iranian students in Sweden in conjunction with noun-noun collocations can offer valuable insights and potentially reveal differences that enhance our understanding of collocational usage.

2.2.1. Collocation Competency in Foreign Language Learning

“We are familiar with the concept of communicative competence, but we need to add the concept of collocational competence to our thinking” (Lewis, 2000, p. 49). Collocation competency involves not only understanding words’ meaning but also their typical co-occurrence with other words. This highlights the significance of the contextual environment in which words are used. Ringbom (1980, p.p. 3-5) states “the distinction between second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) focuses on the prevailing learning situation, not directly on the learning process itself”. This means that second language acquisition refers to acquiring a language necessary for communication within a population, while foreign language learning typically occurs outside of the natural language environment (Dulay et al., 1982, p. 95) and limits the learner’s opportunities for practicing target language in an authentic environment and engaging in natural communication.

Learners should know the importance of collocations for language learning and communicative competence. The correct use of collocations greatly contributes to the nativeness of learners because, without any collocation competency, learners make something non-native or even unacceptable. Duan and Qin (2012, p.1892) provide an illustrative example where students may encounter difficulty comprehending the sentence ‘She is my immediate neighbour’. Although the individual words in the sentence are familiar to the students, they struggle to understand the meaning of "immediate" in the collocation ‘immediate neighbour’. Memorizing the various collocations associated with a word is essential for mastering its multiple meanings and enhancing overall language proficiency. Incorporating collocational knowledge into vocabulary acquisition facilitates a comprehensive understanding of word usage and promotes effective communication in different contexts.

The challenges faced by English learners as a foreign language in acquiring collocations competency highlight the importance of effective teaching methods and materials that promote the development of collocation competency. Carter and McCarthy (1988) state “there is surely need for an understanding of and a concern with collocation by teachers and students”.

Collocation competency not only improves language accuracy but also enhances overall language proficiency. Recognizing this significance, many authors of EFL (English as a foreign language) textbooks have dedicated sections to address collocations (Richards & Bohlke, 2011), which reflect their crucial role in equipping learners with the necessary language tools for successful communication. By integrating collocations into language instruction, educators can empower English learners to develop the skills required for fluent and authentic communication. The introduction of the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (2003, p. vii) explicitly suggests that “for the student, choosing the right collocation will make his speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like, even when basic intelligibility does not seem to be at issue”.

Overall, developing a strong understanding of collocation is crucial for achieving proficiency in the English language. Thus, an increasing amount of research has been dedicated to exploring learners’ proficiency in collocations, as extensive studies identify the difficulties faced by foreign language learners in developing collocation competency. The following paragraphs present instances from previous studies (Keshavarz and Salimi, 2007; Shokouhi and Mirsalari's, 2010; Ganji, 2012; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015) that clarify the relationship between language proficiency and collocation competency, especially in the transfer of lexical collocations. These investigations recognize the challenges that English learners face in developing collocation competency within the context of learning English as a foreign language. The investigations provide valuable insights into significant challenges faced by English learners in this area.

In their study, Keshavarz and Salimi (2007) examined the correlation between collocation competency and cloze tests performance among Iranian English as a Foreign Language learners. They gathered data from the 100 students using both open-ended and multiple-choice cloze test of lexical and grammatical collocations. The findings of the study revealed a significant positive relationship between collocation competency and language proficiency in completing cloze tests. This implies that a strong understanding of collocation can enhance a learner’s ability to perform exceptionally well while accurately filling in the gaps in cloze tests. Additionally, the results indicated that participants with higher levels of English proficiency demonstrated superior collocational competence and achieved higher scores on the cloze tests. The authors concluded that incorporating collocation instruction into language teaching can prove to be an effective strategy for assisting language learners.

Shokouhi and Mirsalari (2010) conducted a study to explore the connection between collocation competency and general language proficiency among Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The research involved 35 Iranian English learners who participated in both a collocation test and a grammar test. The findings revealed that the participants had a relatively weak understanding of English collocations and frequently made errors in their correct use. Additionally, the study indicated a significant correlation between collocation competency and general language proficiency. Shokouhi and Mirsalari (2010) suggested that a solid foundation in overall language skills can contribute to a better comprehension of collocations. Furthermore, the results indicated that the learners' English proficiency level influenced their collocation competency, with higher-level learners exhibiting a greater understanding of collocations compared to lower-level learners. To enhance collocation competency among English learners, Shokouhi and Mirsalari proposed increasing exposure to authentic language input and implementing collocation-focused instruction.

The aim of Ganji's (2012) study was to investigate the effect of gender and academic year on the collocation competency of Iranian English language learners. This study included 43 Iranian students who were classified into three groups (freshmen, sophomores, and juniors) based on their academic year. Participants completed a 50-item test. The research findings showed that there is no significant difference in collocation competency between Iranian male and female language learners. However, a significant difference was observed in the collocation competency of learners based on the number of years of education they had received. Students with more years of education displayed higher levels of collocation competency compared to those with fewer years of education. This study concluded that language learners should be provided with sufficient opportunities to practice and use collocations in order to develop collocation competency over time through exposure to the language. Furthermore, Ganji's study highlighted the importance of considering years of education when designing language programs and assessing the collocation competency of English students as a foreign language.

Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) conducted a longitudinal study with 36 Chinese English learners who were beginner-level English language learners to examine how their collocation competency developed. At the beginning of the academic year, a pre-test was taken from the participants and then a post-test was taken at the end of the year to measure their progress, and a number of participants (n=10) were interviewed and provided writing samples for more insights into the learners' collocational knowledge. The tests also consisted of multiple-choice

and fill-in-the-gap exercises. The study findings revealed that participants significantly improved their collocation competency during one academic year, regardless of their language backgrounds. However, the study also revealed that this competency is not always stable or consistently used in their writing. Therefore, the study highlighted the importance of explicitly teaching collocations to beginners in language courses. In the following, interlanguage and usage-based theories will be presented to provide a conceptual framework for the current study and a guide for the research questions.

2.3. Interlanguage Perspective

There are different theoretical perspectives on transfer in second language acquisition. The first perspective views transfer as the ‘process’ of linguistic items as equivalent across separate language systems. It suggests that learners rely on a common psycholinguistic frame of reference to detect language similarities (Alonso, 2002). However, this approach has limitations as surface evidence may result from different mental processes (Meisel, 1983), making it challenging to determine the exact underlying transfer process. The second perspective considers transfer as a ‘strategy’ employed to bridge gaps in L2 knowledge. The use of transfer strategies varies among learners and may change over time. Learners have a certain choice, conscious or not, in employing transfer (Meisel, 1983, p. 15). The third perspective presents transfer as a ‘constraint’ on the learner's hypothesis testing process rather than a process itself. Transfer acts as both a facilitating and limiting condition on hypothesis testing, originating from previously acquired languages (Schachter, 1983, p.32). According to Jarvis (2000, p.299), the final perspective suggests that transfer is an ‘inert outcome’ of a shared conceptual system underlying both the first language and interlanguage (IL) structures. Thus, theoretical distinctions in second language acquisition highlight transfer as a process, strategy, constraint, or inert outcome. This view proposes that the first language-based conceptual effect can occur even without explicit comparison or identification of first language and second language features and forms. According to Alonso (2002), incorporating multiple perspectives, a transfer is seen as a complex phenomenon with interlanguage identification, transfer constraints, and varying manifestations.

Interlanguage is widely acknowledged as a perspective within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Selinker, 1972). The interlanguage perspective focuses on the

transitional linguistic system developed by learners as they progress towards acquiring a second language (Ellis, 1989, p. 79). It emphasizes the role of systematicity in learners' language production and acknowledges that errors are a natural part of the learning process. By studying learners' interlanguage, researchers and educators gain insights into the underlying cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition. Interlanguage refers to the intermediate state between the learner's native language and the target language, characterized by systematic and rule-governed linguistic patterns (Selinker, 1972). It recognizes that learners' language production is not simply a reflection of their native language or target language, but rather a unique system influenced by both. According to the interlanguage perspective, learners' errors and language development can be understood as a result of the interplay between native language transfer and target language input and feedback. The interlanguage system of the learner is dynamic and constantly evolving as they are exposed to more input and receive corrective feedback (Selinker, 1972). This perspective highlights the importance of learners' individual processes and strategies in acquiring a second/foreign language.

2.4. Usage-based perspective

Usage-based perspective in linguistics refers to an approach that highlights the significance of language usage and exposure in language learning and the development of linguistic knowledge (Bybee, 2006). In his book 'Constructing a Language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition', Tomasello (2005) presents a theory that explores how children acquire language. Drawing from research in cognitive science, linguistics, and psychology, he challenges the notion that language acquisition is solely driven by an innate 'language instinct'. Tomasello also emphasizes the correlation between language learning and other cognitive abilities. He highlights the symbolic nature of language, which relies on humans' unique capacity to understand the intention. According to this perspective, language acquisition is not solely dependent on explicit rules or abstract knowledge. Rather, it is shaped by the regularities and patterns that emerge from real language use in communicative contexts.

According to the usage-based perspective, in communication, success or positivity is defined in terms of intelligibility rather than strict grammaticality (Ringbom & Jarvis, 2010). Ringbom & Jarvis (2010) state when the Swedish word 'kontrollant' (meaning 'inspector' in English) is foreignized as 'controlant' in Catalan, it is seen as a case of negative transfer because

the resulting word is grammatically incorrect. However, from the usage-based perspective, the assessment of positivity or success can be based on how intelligible the word is rather than its strict adherence to grammar rules. It means that grammar develops as people use recurring patterns of symbols to construct linguistic structures, and children acquire these patterns by listening to the language around them. In this view, ‘controlant’ could be seen as an instance of positive transfer since it effectively communicates its intended meaning to most Catalan speakers.

Overall, the current study uses collocation competency, which refers to an individual’s ability to accurately and effectively use collocations. The impact of the first language in collocation transfer is a significant factor to consider, as learners often rely on their native language patterns and structures when attempting to produce collocations in the target language. This influence can result in both positive transfers, where similar collocations exist between the two languages, and negative transfers, where differences in collocation usage lead to errors. The interlanguage perspective highlights the dynamic nature of language acquisition, acknowledging that learners develop their own unique linguistic system as they progress towards fluency. It recognizes that learners may go through stages of overgeneralization or underuse of collocations as they strive to internalize and incorporate them into their language production. On the other hand, the usage-based perspective emphasizes the role of exposure and language use in learning collocations, emphasizing that learners acquire collocational knowledge through regular and meaningful language interactions. It underscores the importance of understanding and internalizing the patterns and collocations that naturally emerge from real language usage.

3. Aim

Various methods were developed to assess English learners' communicative language skills or foreign language proficiency. According to the studies conducted in lexical collocation competency, correct lexical collocation and lexical collocation errors were examined using a variety of methods. However, the theoretical framework reveals that there are few studies on the relationship between the collocation competency of English learners as a foreign language and their performance in cloze procedure. The present study is expanded and complemented the previous studies because lexical collocation is a problem that foreign language learners encounter in learning English. Several factors, including the foreign language learners' background, first language and age, influence these challenges. Thus, foreign language learners often encounter many challenges in all areas of language proficiency. For the purpose of this study, a cloze procedure was used as the research methodology to examine the collocational competence of Iranian students in Sweden. The cloze procedure was used as a line elicitation tool due to identify the positive and the negative lexical transfer that was developed among university students in their writing aspect. Since in previous studies, research results that participants were Iranian English learners provided valuable insights into foreign language learning, in this study, Iranian students living in Sweden were selected. The participants learned English as a foreign language in Iran and now they are in a country where English is a second language, and it is assumed that the change in the place of the participants can provide different results from previous research. Therefore, the results of the cloze procedure in the current study provided the answers to the following research questions.

1. To what extent does the transfer of the first language affect the production of lexical collocations in the English language texts of Iranian students in Sweden?
2. To what extent does collocation competence improve English proficiency?
3. Is there a significant difference in collocation competency in the gender variable?

4. Methodology

The methodological aspect of the present study is covered in this section. It begins with an overview of the methodology used in the study. That is a brief description of the participant's background, instrument, the procedure used to collect the data and then data analysis.

4.1. Participants

The present study sample comprised Iranian students ($n=30$) who have learned English as a foreign language in Iran. The participants were male ($n: 15$) and female ($n: 15$), aged 18 to 47 (mean age 37). During the time of this study, the participants had been living in Sweden for a period ranging from 2 to 14 years. Their native language is Persian, and English is considered a foreign language for them. The participants' English proficiency level is above the intermediate because admission to the university requires a minimum IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 5.5.

To collect quantitative data, the participants in the present study were selected by purposive sampling method (May, 2011, p.p. 100-101) and snowball method (Etikan et al., 2016, p.p. 1-4). Purposive sampling method and snowball method are perhaps the simplest methods of sample collection because the term snowball method can be defined as a non-probability sampling method, which also involves purposive sampling. In other words, the researcher starts with participants who are selected based on availability and willingness to participate and then expands the participants by asking those initial samples to suggest additional people who should take part in the study. In this study, the purposive sampling method was used to identify Iranian students who are in Sweden and had completed the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test for university admission. Then, according to the snowball method and to help the researcher to find additional participants, the initial Iranian students, participants, identified other Iranian students in Sweden with the same or similar characteristics for the present study.

4.2. Instruments and Procedures

The present study is quantitative research because the collected data were ‘countable’ and had the potential to be variable (Levon, 2010, p.p. 68- 69). The ‘measurement’ was also closely correlated to ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ (Rasinger, 2010, p. 55). The collected data were about the correct and incorrect use of lexical collocations, verb-noun collocation and noun-noun collocation, among Iranian students in Sweden. Thus, it gives information about the collocational knowledge of Iranian university students.

Using different research instruments is related to the purpose of various topics that have been addressed in the studies. According to Siyanova & Schmitt (2008, p. 1), in order to collect data, three general types of elicitation tools are used: 1) written online tasks, often in the form of essays produced by both native speakers and non-native speakers and often collected in large data banks; 2) off-line elicitation tools in the form of productive translation tasks, cloze format tasks and association tasks as well as receptive multiple-choice and judgement tasks; 3) on-line reaction tasks tapping into the processing of collocations in language use. In order to answer the research questions in the present study, participants, Iranian students in Sweden, were asked to do a cloze procedure in 30 items. According to Culhane (1970, p. 410), the cloze procedure is a process whereby words are removed from printed passages. The student’s task is to identify the exact words that were removed. When students predict to replace the deleted word, draw on prior knowledge of vocabulary, context cues, and general comprehension of the subject. In an attempt to replace the removed words, students are forced to focus more on the passage’s message using the remaining words. In addition to the cloze procedure, a background questionnaire was also used. The following background questionnaire was a simple background question to identify participants and their basic background variables.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. How long have you studied English in Iran?
4. What is your level of English?
5. Is this your first time living abroad?
6. How long have you been in Sweden?
7. What is your field of study in Sweden?
8. Have you encountered a misunderstanding in your daily conversation due to not understanding the collocation?
9. How do collocations help your fluency?

According to Benson et al. s' (2010) collocation classifications, there are two subtypes of lexical collocations, namely verb-noun collocation and noun-noun collocation. In this study, instances of lexical collocations were selected from previous studies (e.g. Jabari, 2014; Sadoughvanini & Ghaemi, 2020; Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007). Then 30 selected lexical collocations were checked to ensure their correctness in the BBI combinatory dictionary of English (Benson et al., 2010). For the cloze procedure, the following 30 items were selected from the British National Corpus (BNC). In order to answer the research questions, each English sentence had a lexical collocation, verb-noun collocation (odd n: 15) and noun-noun collocation (even n: 15) from which one word has been removed according to the cloze procedure. The above background questionnaire and the following cloze procedure were sent to Iranian students through Google Forms. The participants were asked to fill in the blanks with appropriate words according to their understanding of the text.

1. It's made her look much better, she's ...*put*... on weight and stopped smoking. She was smoking for twenty-five years.
2. During the presentation Mrs.Clark received a ...*bouquet*... of flower from the company. We all wish Adam a long and happy retirement.
3. These range from a power to force a television company to broadcast an apology for lapses in taste or impartiality, to a power to ...*revoke*... a license in the case of a persistent offender.
4. For us an ...*act*... of violence will be an act of physical interference with another.
5. You save enormously on overheads and you ...*save*... money and time by not commuting. The only disadvantage is having no stay indoors on a lovely day.
6. Here is a cunning ...*bit*... of advice one researcher received from an anonymous journal reviewer: This manuscript is terrible.
7. They desperately wanted to ...*make*... an impression on Europe and they have—in the most unexpected way.
8. Phantasy's chamber: # filled was with flies, which buzzed all about, and made such sound. That they encombred all men's ears and eyes. Like many ...*swarm*... of bees assembled round.¹
9. And what of those, my Lord Mayor, who, although not so full of principle as to refuse payment themselves, actually encourage others to ...*break*... the law?
10. Most towns had Aid Spain Committees, which collected tins of milk, ...*bars*... of soap, money for medical aid as well as holding meeting to explain the cause of Republic Spain.

¹In this particular item, the words 'flies' and 'incumbered' were initially misspelt as 'flyes' and 'encombred'. However, I used the correct forms of these words in the cloze procedure.

11. A very respectable looking lady, dear, she said, ...*wearing*... a million-dollar perfume. Is that all?
12. Then most of the, the rows also come out with nice ...*round*... numbers, except this one row here, stands out. Numbers look a bit odd there.
13. Why don't you ask for a rubber when you ...*make*... a mistake?
14. In a country where the top speed ...*limit*... is 70mph, why do they make 140mph cars?
15. ...*Go*...on foot from Thomas More Street or Wapping High Street and get there by 9.45 am.
16. His grandmother telephoned the local radio ...*station*... after hearing callers express their distress over the murder." I don't know how they could be so cruel," she said.
17. Doctors also advised their patients to drink less tea and coffee, ...*go*... on diet, practice pelvic floor exercises (in each case 9%, 26).
18. This passage is given ...*pride*... of place at the start of the title on trusts in UE, but it is not a very laudable analysis of the notion of a trust.
19. Now he took a deep breath and forced himself to ...*keep*... calm. Hadn't they all agreed to keep to a nice, steady speed after the immediate getaway?
20. Please could you get some crossing lights, a zebra crossing, or some ...*traffic*... light put in. It would make us a lot safer and cars may not go as fast.
21. If you can, he says, ...*take*... a rest after the shower and relax in a quiet room or area.
22. In Glamorgan in 1965a company responsible for the ...*collapse*... of the bridge was acquitted of manslaughter but the defense apparently never questioned whether a company can be guilty of manslaughter.
23. In most cases, a couple of tablespoons of olive oil are all that's needed to ...*dress*... a salad. That will easily serve four people as a main course.
24. I have served a place for him at the ...*head*... of the queue to buy shares in the privatized NIE. I hope that all hon.
25. The point's that I think is trying to be made is that there are a lot of people here tonight who do wish to ...*express*... an opinion and that opinion is not necessarily formulated in question form.
26. Of the ...*boarding*... card checks, he added: "I thought it was just a security requirement. It was never explained to me at the time".
27. One has a moral duty to ...*keep*... one's promises because making a promise will lead others to believe that you will do what you promise.
28. The Victoria Cross winner, who led the Dambusters 617 Squadron in ...*World*... War Two, had fought muscle wasting motor neurone disease for over a year.
29. They also achieve another prime objective of Conservative Governments, which is to ...*transfer*... power from the state to the people.

30. Police have little to go. The red Rover ...*getaway*... car was abandoned two miles away and was carrying false number plates.

5. Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the findings of the Iranian students' written responses to the cloze procedure, as described in the methodology section. The main objective of this study was to examine the positive lexical transfer and lexical transfer errors in lexical collocations (Benson et al., 2010), verb-noun collocation and noun-noun collocation, among Iranian students in Sweden. The study focused on exploring the relationship between English language proficiency and collocation competency, as well as the influence of the first language (Persian) on lexical collocation transfer to English. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate whether there are differences in lexical transfer between male and female Iranian students. Transfer, in language learning, refers to the use of learners' knowledge from their first language to their second language usage. Lexical transfer can be categorized into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when a structure or pattern from the first language learner is employed in a second language utterance, resulting in a target-like expression in the second language. On the other hand, negative transfer arises when a structure or pattern from the first language is applied in a second language utterance, leading to a non-target or incorrect expression (Odlin, 1989). Correct lexical collocates represented instances of positive transfer resulting from shared patterns between the first and second languages. On the other hand, incorrect lexical collocations indicated negative transfer resulting from the absence of a suitable equivalent between the two languages. Essentially, incorrect lexical collocations referred to lexical collocation errors.

In the present study, the cloze procedure consisted of 30 items containing one blank each and was completed by 30 participants, including female (n= 15) and male (n= 15), resulting in 900 answers. Of these 900 answers, 391 answers were completed with correct lexical collocates, while 390 answers were completed with incorrect lexical collocates and 119 answers were left blank. By using a usage-based perspective (Tomsello, 2005), to calculate the correct lexical collocations, the participants' typing/spelling mistakes as well as grammar mistakes were ignored and added to the number of correct lexical collocations, for instance, ' putting on weight' instead of ' put on weight' (item 1), 'boquet of flowers' instead of 'bouquet of flowers' (item 2), 'revok a license' instead of 'revoke a license' (item 3), 'saved money' instead of 'save money' (item 5) and 'bar of soap' instead of 'bars of soap'. In addition, 119 cloze procedure responses, which participants left out completely, were counted as incorrect lexical collocations

because participants may have found them difficult and did not respond. In sum, the quantitative data was gathered through the cloze procedure to get the following results. Therefore, 43,5% of the responses were accepted while 56.5% were unaccepted lexical collocations. In the following, the distribution of correct and incorrect answers for the two subtypes of lexical collocations is discussed in order to identify which lexical collocations, verb-noun collocation or noun-noun collocation, provide the greatest difficulty for Iranian students.

5.1. Verb-Noun Collocation vs Noun-Noun Collocation

To answer the research questions, the present study used the cloze procedure to collect data, which consisted of 30 subtypes of lexical collocations, verb-noun collocation (odd n=15) and noun-noun collocation (even n=15). To this end, the total number of 900 responses in the cloze procedure was tabulated. Of these 900 lexical collocation answers, 391 items were correctly written and the remaining 509 items were either written incorrectly. Of these 391 correct lexical collocation answers, 216 items were correct verb-noun collocations and the remaining 175 of the correct lexical collocations were correct noun-noun collocations. These numbers reveal that first language transfer had an effect when Iranian students choose the correct lexical collocations. On the other hand, 509 responses were inaccurate because of negative first language transfer. Of these 509 incorrect lexical collocation answers, 234 items were incorrect verb-noun collocations and 275 items were incorrect noun-noun collocations. This showed Iranian students choose incorrect lexical collocations when they transfer from their first language. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of positive answers which caused the correct selection of lexical collocation as well as the number and percentage of negative transfers that resulted in selection as incorrect collocation in both subtypes of lexical collocations.

Table 1

Correct Lexical Collocation & Incorrect Lexical Collocation

Lexical Collocation	Correct Collocation		Incorrect Collocation		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	
Verb-Noun	216	48	234	52	450	100
Noun-Noun	175	38.9	275	61.1	450	100
Total	391	43.5	509	56.5	900	100

The results of lexical transfer in the cloze procedure were compared between verb-noun collocation and noun-noun collocation. It means that for each of the 30 items in the cloze procedure, the number of correct and incorrect verb-noun collocations was tabulated and compared to the total number of correct and incorrect noun-noun collocations. A further calculation showed that of the 391 lexical collocations rated correct, 48% were correct verb-noun collocations and 38.9% were correct noun-noun collocations. Thus, while the percentage of incorrect verb-noun collocations was 52%, the percentage of incorrect noun-noun collocations was only 61.1%. In sum, 43.5% of the lexical collocations were written correctly whereas 56.5 % of the lexical collocations were written incorrectly.

The data analysis also revealed a lot of evidence for the influence of Iranian students' first language on English as their foreign language. In some instances, lexical transfer may occasionally lead to correct lexical collocations. To put it another way, Persian as the first language assisted Iranian students in selecting the correct lexical collocations in English. In items 21, 16, 28 and 5, the lexical collocations 'take a rest (26 times), 'radio station' (23 times), 'world war' (22 times), 'save money' (20 times), are examples of the positive lexical transfers from the Iranian students first language to English. In addition, the results showed that lexical transfer from the first language resulted in lexical transfer errors in English. For example, in items 2, 4, 12, 19 and 27, the Iranian students wrote 'basket of flowers instead of 'bouquet of flowers', 'a little of advice' instead of 'bit of advice', 'correct numbers' instead of 'round numbers', 'be calm' instead of 'keep calm' and 'stay promise' instead of 'keep promise'. In these cases, first language transfer may be considered as a source of lexical error because the Iranian students wrote literal Persian words as the correct lexical collocation.

These findings are consistent with the principles of interlanguage theory, which suggest that language learners often rely on their first language knowledge and transfer linguistic structures into the target language. The positive transfer observed in certain noun-noun collocations can be attributed to the similarities between Persian and English, leading to accurate usage. Conversely, the occurrence of errors in specific noun-noun collocations highlights the influence of negative transfer from the first language, resulting in incorrect usage. This interlanguage phenomenon demonstrates the ongoing language development process and the interplay between the learners' first language and their acquisition of the target language.

5.1.1. Correct and Incorrect Verb-Noun Collocations

In the current study, a total of 30 items were selected from the British National Corpus (BNC) for the cloze procedure, with 15 of these items representing verb-noun collocations (odd numbers). The data collected from these items were analyzed to gain insights into the participants' usage of verb-noun collocations. Table 2 provides an overview of the number of verb-noun collocations produced by Iranian students in Sweden. Out of the 450 responses gathered from the participants, 216 items were identified as correct verb-noun collocations, while 234 items were classified as incorrect verb-noun collocations. These findings highlighted the challenges faced by the students in accurately utilizing verb-noun collocations.

Table 2

Correct and Incorrect Verb-Noun Collocations

	Lexical Collocation	Correct Collocation		Incorrect Collocation		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Put on weight	14	46.7	16	53.3	30	100
3	Revoke a license	10	33.3	20	66.7	30	100
5	Save money	20	66.6	10	33.4	30	100
7	Make an impression	16	53.3	14	46.7	30	100
9	Break the law	16	53.3	14	46.7	30	100
11	Wear a perfume	13	43.3	17	56.7	30	100
13	Make a mistake	23	76.6	7	23.4	30	100
15	Go on foot	12	40	18	60	30	100
17	Go on diet	8	26.6	22	73.4	30	100
19	Keep calm	11	36.6	19	63.4	30	100
21	Take a rest	26	86.6	4	13.4	30	100
23	Dress a salad	12	40	18	60	30	100
25	Express an opinion	12	40	18	60	30	100
27	Keep one's promise	15	50	15	50	30	100

29	Transfer power	8	26.6	22	73.4	30	100
Total		216	48	234	52	450	100

The analysis of participants' responses in the cloze procedure reveals that for items 21, 13, 5, 7, and 9, they accurately produced 67.3% of all the correct verb-noun collocations. However, for items 17, 29, 3, 19, and 15, 67.3% of their responses contained incorrect verb-noun collocations. This indicates that English verb-noun collocations such as 'take a rest', 'make a mistake', 'save money', 'make an impression', and 'break the law' exhibited a higher number of positive transfers. On the other hand, notable errors were observed in verb-noun collocations such as 'go on a diet', 'transfer power', 'revoke a license', 'keep calm', and 'go on foot'. Table 2 presents the results of the cloze procedure, providing details for all 15 verb-noun collocations, including the number of possible responses, involving both positive and negative transfer answers. Interestingly, in verb-noun collocations, an equal proportion of positive and negative lexical transfers were identified. These findings shed light on the complexities and challenges faced by participants when using verb-noun collocations in their interlanguage development.

5.1.2. Correct and Incorrect Noun-Noun Collocations

There are 15 items that were utilized to collect data on 15 noun-noun collocations, which were carefully selected from the British National Corpus (BNC) and integrated into the even-numbered items of the cloze procedure. This approach allowed for the examination of the participant's usage of noun-noun collocations. A total of 30 Iranian students took part in the study, providing valuable insights into their interlanguage development and the specific challenges they encounter in utilizing noun-noun collocations accurately. The results indicate that the Iranian students produced a total of 450 noun-noun collocations, consisting of 175 (38.9%) correct noun-noun collocations and 275 (61.1%) incorrect noun-noun collocations. Table 3 provides an overview of the number and percentages of noun-noun collocations written by Iranian students in Sweden.

Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is noteworthy that among the correct noun-noun collocations, Iranian students produced 69.3% for items 16, 28, 14, 10, and 4. Conversely, they produced 84.6% of all the incorrect verb-noun collocations. This indicates that 'radio

station', 'world war', 'speed limit', 'bars of soap', and 'act of violence' exhibited the highest rates of positive transfer in noun-noun collocations. On the other hand, the greatest number of errors in noun-noun collocations occurred in 'collapse of bridge' (item 22), 'bit of advice' (item 6), 'boarding card' (item 26), 'getaway car' (item 30), and 'round numbers' (item 12).

Table 3

Correct and Incorrect Noun-Noun Collocations

	Lexical Collocation	Correct Collocation		Incorrect Collocation		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
2	Bouquet of flowers	12	40	18	60	30	100
4	Act of violence	19	63.3	11	36.7	30	100
6	Bit of advice	4	13.3	26	86.7	30	100
8	Swarm of bees	10	33.3	20	66.7	30	100
10	Bars of soap	20	66.6	10	33.4	30	100
12	Round number	6	20	24	80	30	100
14	Speed limit	20	66.6	10	33.4	30	100
16	Radio station	23	76.6	7	23.4	30	100
18	Pride of place	6	20	24	80	30	100
20	Traffic light	12	40	18	60	30	100
22	Collapse of a bridge	3	10	27	90	30	100
24	Head of the queue	8	26.6	22	73.4	30	100
26	Boarding card	5	16.6	25	83.4	30	100
28	World war	22	73.3	8	26.7	30	100
30	Getaway car	5	16.6	25	83.4	30	100
	Total	175	38.9	275	61.1	450	100

There are 15 items (even numbers) that were utilized to collect data on 15 noun-noun collocations, which were carefully selected from the British National Corpus (BNC) and integrated into the even-numbered items of the cloze procedure. This approach allowed for the

examination of the participants' usage of noun-noun collocations. A total of 30 Iranian students took part in the study, providing valuable insights into their interlanguage development and the specific challenges they encounter in utilizing noun-noun collocations accurately. The results indicate that the Iranian students produced a total of 450 noun-noun collocations, consisting of 175 (38.9%) correct noun-noun collocations and 275 (61.1%) incorrect noun-noun collocations. Table 3 provides an overview of the number and percentages of noun-noun collocations written by Iranian students in Sweden.

Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is noteworthy that among the correct noun-noun collocations, Iranian students produced 69.3% for items 16, 28, 14, 10, and 4. Conversely, they produced 84.6% of all the incorrect verb-noun collocations. This indicates that 'radio station', 'world war', 'speed limit', 'bars of soap', and 'act of violence' exhibited the highest rates of positive transfer in noun-noun collocations. On the other hand, the greatest number of errors in noun-noun collocations occurred in 'collapse of bridge' (item 22), 'bit of advice' (item 6), 'boarding card' (item 26), 'getaway car' (item 30), and 'round numbers' (item 12).

5.2. Lexical Collocation Competency by Gender

The current study aims to investigate lexical collocation transfer based on the gender variable. The data collected focuses on verb-noun and noun-noun collocations and aims to address the second and third research questions. A total of 900 lexical collocations were analyzed among Iranian students. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of correct verb-noun and noun-noun collocations combined is 43.5%, while the percentage of incorrect collocations is 56.5%. The findings reveal that Iranian students, both male and female, produced 217 and 175 correct verb-noun and noun-noun collocations, respectively. Conversely, they also produced 234 incorrect verb-noun collocations and 275 incorrect noun-noun collocations.

The participants' language English proficiency was evaluated through their correct lexical collocation response scores in the cloze procedure. Each item in the dataset had one valid response. One point was awarded for each correctly answered question, and a maximum score of 30 points was achievable by answering all 30 questions accurately. In the present study, a score higher than 60% was considered to indicate satisfactory language proficiency. In fact, higher language proficiency correlates with greater success in producing accurate lexical collocations. Calculating 60% of 30, we find $(60/100) * 30 = 0.6 * 30 = 18$. Thus, a score of 18

or above out of 30 indicates a language proficiency level above 60%. Table 4 provides an overview of the overall findings from the cloze procedure and presents the number and percentage of lexical collocations, including both verb-noun and noun-noun collocations, for each participant.

Table 4

Correct Answers in Cloze Procedure

Male Student Number	Total correct answer		Female Student Number	Total correct answer	
	N	%		N	%
1	21	70	1	10	33.3
2	19	63.3	2	6	20
3	18	60	3	11	36.6
4	27	90	4	13	43.3
5	22	73.3	5	11	36.6
6	17	56.6	6	9	30
7	22	73.3	7	14	46.6
8	10	33.3	8	10	33.3
9	5	16.6	9	0	0
10	17	56.6	10	3	10
11	6	20	11	12	40
12	11	36.6	12	8	26.6
13	28	93.3	13	11	36.6
14	17	56.6	14	14	46.6
15	4	12.3	15	16	53.3

The findings of this study provide clear evidence of gender differences in lexical collocation competency. It is important to highlight that the accurate use of lexical collocations is positively associated with higher language proficiency. Analysis of the data regarding the number and percentage of correct lexical collocations indicated that out of the 15 male students who participated, 7 scored above 60%, while none of the 15 Iranian female students achieved a passing score. These results suggest a significant difference in language proficiency between male and female students. Specifically, Iranian male students demonstrated higher language proficiency (46.6%) compared to their female counterparts (0%). This indicates a strong

relationship between language proficiency and collocation competence among male students compared to female students. It means that students with lower proficiency exhibited a higher number of lexical collocation errors. In the context of this study, the variations in lexical collocation competence between male and female students may reflect differences in their interlanguage systems and the ways in which they transfer language proficiency.

6. Discussion

In this section, the results of the current research are discussed according to the previous research studies that are stated in the theoretical framework. The aim of the current study was to investigate lexical collocation transfer from the Persian native language into English as a foreign language among Iranian students in Sweden and to explore the impact of collocation competency and gender on English language proficiency. Both the interlanguage and usage-based perspectives are used to draw conclusions. It is also worth noting that the data used in this study were selected from the British National Collection (BNC) and the participants completed 30 sentences in the cloze procedure. As revealed in Table 1, of the 509 incorrect lexical collocation responses, 61.1% were incorrect noun-noun collocation. This shows that the use of noun-noun collocation is very limited. On the contrary, among the 391 correct lexical collocation answers, 48% of them were correct verb-noun collocations, which shows that Iranian students use more verb-noun collocations in their discourse.

In the present study, a usage-based perspective was adopted to evaluate the correct lexical collocations of the participants. As mentioned in the data analysis and results section, collocations, such as 'boquet of flower', 'revok a license' and 'saved money' were identified as typing/spelling errors and grammar mistakes. Despite these errors, they were still considered the correct collocations. Consistent with the present study, Ringbom and Jarvis (2010) argue that when the Swedish term 'kontrollant' (meaning 'inspector' in English) is changed as 'controlant' in Catalan, it is traditionally viewed as negative transitive due to its grammatical inaccuracy. However, according to the usage-based perspective, it is considered a positive transfer because it effectively conveys its intended meaning to most Catalan speakers. In this view, the evaluation of success or positivity is based on the word intelligibility rather than its adherence to grammar rules.

The first research question focuses on the influence of the first language on the production of correct lexical collocations and lexical transfer errors in Iranian English learners. The findings indicate that the students' competence in verb-noun collocations differs from their knowledge of noun-noun collocations. Iranian students demonstrate a higher likelihood of using correct verb-noun collocations compared to noun-noun collocations. This suggests that the participants are more aware of the differences between verb-noun collocations in the two languages and exhibit a stronger positive collocation transfer to the second language. The

results of this study support the interlanguage theory and collocation competency of previous studies conducted by Biskup (1992) and Bahns and Eldaw (1993).

In the present study, the participants transfer lexical collocations from their first language to the target language. Participants used phrases such as ‘be calm’ instead of ‘keep calm’ and ‘first of the queue’ instead of ‘head of the queue’. The present findings were similar to the findings of Biskup (1992), who explored the impact of the first language on participants’ language use and found that the participants often relied on literal translations from their mother tongue, which resulted in the use of unacceptable verbs. In addition, the results obtained from the number of positive and negative responses as in the Bahns and Eldaw’s (1993) study support the main principles of the interlanguage theory, which highlights the dynamic nature of learners’ interlanguage system. The current study, such as Bahns and Eldaw’s study, indicates that collocations with equivalents in English, such as ‘world war’, and ‘radio station’ are more likely to be learned and understood by learners compared to those without equivalents in the first language. Consequently, in accordance with the findings of Bahns and Eldaw’s study, verb-noun collocations elicited a higher number of correct responses in the present study. This suggests that learners’ interlanguage system evolves as they encounter new language patterns and acquire collocations competency specific to the target language. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of considering the influence of the first language and the availability of equivalents in English when teaching and learning collocations.

In response to the second research question, collocation competency can be considered as a crucial factor in improving English language proficiency. The complexity of collocation competency, which is inherent to first speakers, can pose challenges for learners due to language-specific collocability and the absence of universal semantic restrictions (McCarthy, 1990). Therefore, the more correct collocations make more proficient of English learners and get closer to the English native language. Thus, the findings of the present study revealed that 7 male students who got above 60% scores, showed their collocation competency and English language proficiency in verb-noun collocation. The findings of Keshavarz and Salimi's (2007) and Shokohi and Mirsalari's (2010) studies align with the investigations conducted by the present study. Together, the current study as well as Keshavarz and Salimi, and Shokohi and Mirsalari's studies demonstrated that the participants with weak English collocation competency made more errors. In summary, individuals who exhibited a high level of English proficiency achieved superior scores on the test. These findings support the perspective of

interlanguage, as it suggests that improving the collocation competency of English learners as a foreign language plays a crucial role in enhancing English language proficiency.

Another important finding was that the Iranian students had passed the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test, but they faced difficulties with lexical collocation transfer. In the cloze procedure, 7 out of 30 participants were able to have the most positive transfer and get a score over 60%. The findings aligned with a similar study on Chinese students by Siyanova-Chanturia (2015). The findings of Siyanova-Chanturia's study indicated that while Chinese students made significant progress in acquiring collocation competency over an academic year, this competency does not remain stable in the long term. Taken together, according to the interlanguage theory, language learners progress towards acquiring a second language, but they might overlook the significance of the frequency of collocation usage and recent exposure, both of which are crucial factors for collocation competency. They rely on literal translations from their first language (e.g. 'be calm', section 5.1) and produce lexical collocation errors.

Regarding the third research question, from an interlanguage perspective, the comparison between the present study and Ganji's (2012) study on the effect of gender on Iranian language learners offers insights into how learners develop their language competence. The interlanguage perspective emphasizes that language learners construct their own unique linguistic system as they progress in acquiring a second language. Ganji investigated the effect of gender on Iranian language learners and concluded that there is no significant difference in collocation competency between male and female Iranian students. But unlike Ganji's study, the Iranian male students in the present study exhibited a more positive transfer and obtained higher grades than their female counterparts. The present finding aligns with the interlanguage perspective, which acknowledges that learners' language development is influenced by a variety of factors, including their individual cognitive processes, strategies, and the interaction between their first language and the target language. Thus, further exploration is necessary to better understand the complex interplay between gender and collocation competency among Iranian language learners.

6.1. Limitations and Directions for Further Studies

The present study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the small sample size of Iranian students who studied English as a foreign language in Iran may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations. Future studies should aim to involve a more varied sample to improve the external validity of the results. Secondly, while the study examines the impact of the transfer on lexical collocation learning, it mainly focuses on the positive and negative lexical transfer features. Other factors, such as individual variations in language acquisition techniques or sociocultural impacts, were not fully investigated. Including these variables in future searches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the difficulties associated with collocation acquisition. The study further confirms the existence of collocation errors, although it was outside the present study to conduct a detailed analysis of the specific types and frequencies of these errors. Conducting a thorough analysis of collocation errors and their underlying causes can provide valuable insight into the Iranian students' problem in Sweden when encountering collocations in English. Lastly, in addition to the time and resource constraints, the study only briefly addressed the influence of gender on collocation learning. Future research should explore the significant impact of gender on collocation acquisition to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the language learning process by examining the interplay between collocation competency and English language proficiency. By considering these aspects, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how gender influences collocation acquisition and how collocation learning interacts with overall English language proficiency. Despite these limitations, the current study provides to the expanding body of studies on transfer and collocation learning between Iranian students in Sweden. The findings provide valuable insights and offer insightful information for more research in this area.

7. Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to investigate positive lexical transfer and lexical transfer errors in verb-noun and noun-noun collocations among Iranian students residing in Sweden. The study focused on the influence of collocation competency on improving English language proficiency and aimed to explore the impact of the first language on the production of lexical collocations. Furthermore, the research aimed to discover the difference in lexical transfer between male and female Iranian students and to show the relationship between English language proficiency and gender. Participants for this study were selected based on their experience of learning English as a foreign language in Iran and their successful completion of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test for university admission. They currently reside in Sweden and were assessed using the cloze procedure described in the methodology section. The data analysis employed interlanguage and usage-based perspectives and provides insights into the accurate verb-noun and noun-noun collocations produced by participants. Moreover, the current study revealed the incorrect lexical collocations resulting from lexical transfer errors, as well as correct lexical transfer through positive lexical transfer.

The interlanguage perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the influence of the first language in order to enhance second language learners' proficiency in producing appropriate lexical collocations. The findings strongly indicate that when second language learners are unable to express themselves effectively in the target language, it is common for them to revert to their first language. This highlights the need for second language learners to develop an understanding of how words and phrases combine to create natural and fluent language, but collocation is often overlooked and receives little attention in English classes in Iran. Due to the tendency of both students and teachers to neglect the importance of learning collocations, their command of the English language is consequently limited. Based on the findings, a small number of students prioritize collocation learning, as the majority of Iranian students who took part in the present study were unable to achieve high scores despite completing multiple intense English courses and residing in a country where English is spoken as a second language. Therefore, this study contributes to our understanding of the language difficulties experienced by Iranian students when transferring lexical collocations and highlights the importance of addressing lexical transfer errors in language teaching and learning.

Overall, the participants' competence in collocations did not improve in accordance with their vocabulary knowledge, possibly due to the absence of collocation instruction. Furthermore, the data analysis of verb-noun and noun-noun collocations revealed differences in their usage among the participants. Therefore, further research is necessary to determine the factors that contribute to positive and negative lexical transfer between males and females, as competence in collocations is essential for effective English communication.

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