Original Article

Learning Collocations: Exploring EFL Learners' Beliefs and Strategies

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Abstract

Collocations are regarded as a major aspect of learning a foreign language. However, few studies have explored collocations from the learners' perspective. These issues include the importance of learning collocations and the different strategies and difficulties associated with learning them. Since beliefs are foundational for developing language skills, this study endeavored to fill this gap. Using a mixed-methods design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 Iranian EFL learners majoring in English and, therefore, having above-intermediate knowledge of English. Next, the participants' recorded responses were probed, tentative themes were drawn, and similar ones were combined to obtain final themes, which were then counted. The findings indicated that learners regarded collocations to be important for various reasons, including the fact that they help with their precision and accuracy ($n=14$), as well as their naturalness ($n=7$). Implicit exposure to English, for instance, by watching films ($n=19$) or reading ($n=14$), was pinpointed most frequently as an effective means for learning collocations. Furthermore, L1 influence and the vast number of collocations were two of the important difficulties in learning them. In addition, most learners considered learning collocations easier ($n=26$) and more important ($n=20$) than learning individual words. Finally, the findings were interpreted through beliefs about external, personal, language-related, and language-learning factors and cognitive, metacognitive, social, compensation, and affective strategies. Implications for language teaching included the responsibility of teachers to reinforce the usefulness of collocations and to set useful tasks. It was also recommended that researchers examine collocation-learning problems in other contexts and compare the effectiveness of the suggested strategies.

Keywords: Collocations, Learners' Beliefs, Learning Problems, Learning Strategies, Thematic Analysis

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1. Introduction

Learning collocations can be challenging for learners, and this has attracted the attention of a great number of researchers (e.g., Bui, 2021; Peters, 2016; Supasiraprapa, 2018). Along with meaning, written form, spoken form, grammatical behavior, register, associations, and frequency, collocations of a word are an important aspect of word knowledge (Zimmerman, 2014). Despite their pivotal role in language and communication, collocations are considered a source of difficulty even by advanced learners of English, and their mastery indicates a degree of native-likeness (Bui, 2021; Leśniewska, 2006; Wu, 2015).

Indeed, lack of mastery of collocations keeps learners from using known words to their full potential (Channell, 1980, as cited in Leśniewska, 2006). One reason for the lack of mastery of collocations is that the rate of expansion of collocations known by learners lags behind the rate of expansion of single-word items and other aspects of proficiency—a problem referred to as "collocation lag" (Men, 2015, p. 42) and "collocation deficiency" (Bui, 2021, p. 100). In fact, in a study by Bahns and Eldaw (1993), collocation errors occurred twice as frequently as lexical errors.

On the other hand, learning collocations, just as learning a language in general, can be dependent on learners' beliefs. Such beliefs are "what the language learner holds to be true about [the objects and processes of learning]" (Benson & Lor, 1999, p. 464). Examples include "beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain strategies, the existence of aptitude, [learners'] expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies" (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, Introduction section). Learner beliefs, although prone to error compared to those held by language specialists (Horwitz, 1987, as cited in Zhong, 2022) and not always acted on (Zhong, 2012), influence the process, product, persistence, and efficacy of learning (Breen, 2001, as cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Mori, 1999). Indeed, as well as being shaped by learning experience, beliefs also shape learning experience.

Importantly, learner beliefs are said to be linked to the strategies learners use (Dörnyei, 2008), which may affect the speed and outcome of learning (Zhong, 2022). This is because the next step after belief is supposed to be action on the belief. Since few studies have attempted to explore learners' beliefs about collocations and the strategies used in

learning them, especially through an open-ended means, the present study intends to uncover learners' beliefs about the importance of learning collocations, what strategies may be used to learn them effectively, and what difficulties may be encountered in this respect.

2. Literature Review

Collocations can play a significant role in developing a learner's language and have been of interest both theoretically and pedagogically (Webb & Kagimoto, 2010). In pedagogical terms, learning collocations is important for four reasons: helping with fluency, sounding more natural, having other ways to say something, and improving style (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005; Shin & Nation, 2007). Despite the importance of collocations, they are referred to as a *hidden* aspect of language use because incorrect or unvaried use of collocations is not considered an explicit error as it does not intrude upon morphological, syntactic, and semantical rules (Leśniewska, 2006). Nevertheless, incorrect collocations can result in imprecision and lack of clarity needed in academia (Howarth, 1996) and are the marker of an accent (Bahns, 1993).

According to Hill (2001), an effective method of learning collocations is reading a large number of texts. Moreover, Sun and Wang (2003) advocate the use of corpora of real language use as another effective strategy for learning collocations. Furthermore, in order to learn collocations, McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) suggest that learners notice collocations in what they read or listen to, check them in a dictionary, and jot down the collocations of a word besides learning the meaning of the word. In addition, they remark that learning collocations is not much different from learning vocabulary and recommend regular revision, meaningful practice, and learning them in groups, e.g., learning all collocations in which the word *way* is used.

Moreover, Yamashita and Jiang (2010) suggest that learning collocations happen in three steps: recognizing a collocation usually by acknowledging its meaning, committing it to long-term memory by repeated exposure, and relating the collocation with a mental representation, so that it can work without L1 activation. Most recently, Yamagata et al. (2023) suggest that learners broaden their knowledge of the possibilities through which words can combine—a process known as semantic restructuring. For instance, if the usual

meaning of *wear* is to *wear a dress*, learners' attention should be drawn towards other combinations, such as *wearing an expression*.

Besides, Daskalovska (2015) notes that there is disagreement about the most efficient way of learning collocations, e.g., implicitly or explicitly. For example, Durrant and Schmitt (2010) found that collocations can be learned with repetition and without conscious attention, that is, implicitly. In contrast, Webb and Kagimoto (2010) believe that explicit collocation learning in the classroom can result in significant gains.

Another variable that can affect the efficient learning of collocations is involvement load. According to Naserpour et al. (2020), as learners practice learning collocations through more involved tasks, such as multiple-choice rather than true-false items for comprehension and sentence formation rather than short responses for production, they score better on collocation tests.

As regards the difficulty of learning collocations, O'Dell and McCarthy (2017) contend that collocations can be a difficult area for learners because they may not always be guessed: there is no logical reason, they say, why we say *make friends* and not *get friends*. Moreover, Nesselhauf and Tschichold (2002) believe that learners may not notice collocations as much as idioms or phrasal verbs. Furthermore, Leśniewska (2006) mentions that collocations are particularly problematic because of their nature: they are not totally free (you cannot replace *fast* with *quick* in *a fast car*), so one must put effort into learning them. Indeed, idiomatic expressions are not guessable and are totally fixed, which makes them more salient to learners. However, collocations, though not guessable, are free and hence not as salient as idiomatic expressions (Leśniewska, 2006). Additionally, Yamashita and Jiang (2010) distinguish between two types of collocations for learners. Congruent collocations are those which are directly translatable across L1 and L2, while incongruent collocations are not. Yamashita and Jiang indicate that incongruent collocations are more problematic for learners and that it is difficult to learn them even with abundant exposure. However, resorting to L1 has been found to have a facilitative influence as well (Pulido & Dussias, 2020), especially in the early stages of learning (Jeong & DeKeyser, 2023), and L1 influence is not the only source of difficulty for learners; guessing collocations based on known L2 expressions can also play a role (Yamshita & Jiang, 2010). Furthermore, Ding et al. (2024) found that learners face the difficulty of lacking a criterion for knowing which collocations should be learned,

especially when working independently. Perhaps due to such difficulties associated with learning collocations, which are particularly true for EFL learners (Zhang & Reynolds, 2023), it has been found that learners' knowledge of general vocabulary far exceeds their knowledge of collocations (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993).

As collocations are a significant part of language learning, they are also important in language teaching. Marton (1977, as cited in Bahns, 1993) believes that covering collocations is essential for teaching English at advanced levels. However, Mackin (1978, as cited in Bahns, 1993) casts doubt on the feasibility of teaching collocations as there are just too many of them. A viable solution, he believes, is the prolonged study and noticing of the language. As to which collocations should be the focus of language teaching, it is suggested that those not directly translatable into L1, the most frequent ones, and collocations of common words need to be taught (Bahns, 1993; Daskalovska, 2015; Webb & Kagimoto, 2010).

2.1. Language Learning Beliefs and Strategies

It is contended that learners' becoming aware of their beliefs is an important step in developing their language skills (Bulut & Üğüten, 2003). Beliefs are said to be shaped by general and language learning experiences (Little & Singleton, 1990, as cited in Ellis, 2008; Zhong, 2015).

Zhong (2015) classifies beliefs about language learning into four types: beliefs about external factors, which are mainly related to classroom procedures; beliefs about personal factors, including factors such as language aptitude, weaknesses and strengths; beliefs about second language learning, including beliefs about language, accuracy and fluency; and beliefs about how to approach language learning, whether general or epistemological. She also divides strategies into five categories: Cognitive strategies involve analysis or synthesis of learning materials; metacognitive strategies involve strategies such as planning to regulate learning; social strategies entail interacting with others; compensation strategies include using the language despite the limitations; and affective strategies cover attempts to take control of one's relevant emotions.

In this regard, teachers need to become aware of learners' beliefs, improve their confidence, begin from the students' positions and move slowly from there, improve the beliefs that are inefficient and inclined to change, and show students their accomplishment

(Bassano, 1986, as cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, Discussion of Pedagogical Implications section; Benson & Lor, 1999; Zhong, 2022).

2.2. Empirical Studies

In the literature, some studies have looked at English vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies and, at times, learning outcomes. For example, Gu and Johnson (1996) investigated vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies and their relationship with learning outcomes by asking 850 Chinese students to fill in a questionnaire to find out their vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies, as well as take a vocabulary test and a proficiency test. Beliefs about vocabulary learning included the necessity of memorization, acquiring words in context, and putting them to use. Strategies to deal with vocabulary were metacognitive regulation, guessing, dictionary use, note-taking, rehearsal, association, and activating words. It was found that the participants believed less in memorization, and more in meaning-oriented strategies. Correlation between the questionnaire results and the results from the tests showed that many of the strategies positively correlated with test results, thus indicating the role of vocabulary strategy use in language proficiency.

Li (2010) examined 102 Chinese students' beliefs when it came to vocabulary learning and its relationship with vocabulary learning strategies and outcomes. The tools to gather data were a questionnaire about vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies, interviews to probe the issues further, a vocabulary size test, and an English proficiency test. The results showed that learners viewed vocabulary learning as important but did not favor rote learning. In addition, the strategies most used by learners were using dictionaries, contextual guessing, note-taking, and attending to input selectively; the least preferred strategies were working with other learners and using wordlists. Beliefs in one's efficacy correlated with vocabulary scores, but no beliefs correlated with general proficiency.

Easterbook (2013) explored vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies and their effect on vocabulary learning. Data was collected using questionnaires on strategy use and language learning beliefs, vocabulary tests, and interviews with Chinese university students. Statistical analysis showed consistency between vocabulary learning beliefs and strategy use. In addition, the strategies revealed by thematic analysis of the interviews and

reinforced by questionnaire results included learning new vocabulary by exposure to English, guessing word meaning, dictionary use, noting words down, saying the word out loud, memorizing spelling and pronunciation, and repetition. Furthermore, there was no significant relation between beliefs and strategy use, on the one hand, and test results, on the other.

Amiryousefi (2015) probed Iranian learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and teaching. Data came from a questionnaire exploring the importance of vocabulary and its learning strategies in language learning, beliefs regarding vocabulary learning and instruction, and the role of dictionaries. The results indicated that vocabulary, both receptive and productive, had a central role in developing language skills; grammar and vocabulary were equally valuable, reading significantly improved vocabulary, and repetition and guessing meaning were popular strategies. Translation and memorization were the least popular. In addition, technology and dictionary use were deemed important.

A rare study was done on beliefs about learning collocations by Wu (2015), who investigated the effect of teaching collocations by reading practice and instructing learners on using online corpora on their attitude towards collocation learning and its issues. The 20 participants completed a pre-and post-survey questionnaire. The results indicated that learners' belief in the importance of chunks grew stronger after the treatment. Moreover, interviews with eight of the participants indicated their heightened awareness of the concept of collocation and the sources of errors. Furthermore, using corpora proved a useful tool for independent learning of collocations.

Hadi and Guo (2020) surveyed vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies. They used a questionnaire targeting beliefs about vocabulary learning, metacognitive regulation, cognitive strategies, and effective strategies with 177 undergraduate Afghan students. The results revealed that learners preferred using words rather than memorizing them to learn them, were able to identify essential words, preferred reading over rote learning, and relied on using a dictionary, guessing, repeating the word, and attending to the sound of the word. Finally, they were able to manage and control their emotions in learning vocabulary.

Although many studies have examined the importance of collocations in learners' proficiency (e.g., Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bui, 2021; Hashemi et al., 2012; Hsu, 2007), collocation learning strategies (e.g., Asbulah et al., 2020; Myers & Chang, 2009; Wu, 2010), and collocation learning problems (e.g., Bui, 2021; Fan, 2009; Laufer & Waldman,

2011), learners' beliefs about collocations is still not adequately appreciated. This is despite the fact that learners' beliefs influence actions done for language learning (Ellis, 2008) and its outcome (Wesely, 2012). Studying learner beliefs only by quantitative means, such as questionnaires, imposes answers and misses the original data about the actual actions taken by learners (Zhong, 2022). In fact, Ellis (2008) underlines the importance of gathering qualitative data to tackle this issue, stating, "To understand how beliefs are related to developing proficiency, it is helpful to examine the learner's choice of learning strategies and how these do or do not reflect beliefs" (p. 22). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring learners' beliefs about learning collocations, strategies used to learn collocations, and the difficulties attached to learning them.

2.3. Research Questions

The present study attempts to find answers to these questions from the perspective of Iranian EFL learners:

1. How does learning collocations contribute to language proficiency?
2. What are effective strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, social, compensation, and affective) for learning collocations?
3. What are the problems associated with learning collocations relevant to personal, external, second-language learning, and approach-to-language learning factors?
4. Which one is easier and which one is more important to build: collocations or words?

3. Methodology

This section describes the design and context of the study, the participants, and the instrument. In addition, it makes it clear how the required data were collected and analyzed.

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

This study was carried out in an Iranian university and used a mixed-methods design consisting of thematic analysis and quantifying the themes to answer the research questions. The qualitative part had the potential to help with discovering learners' beliefs (Ellis, 2008), while the quantitative part helped with ordering them by importance.

3.2. Participants

Due to ease of access, the participants of the study were a convenience sample of students voluntarily taking part in the study from various levels of university education, all studying at Shiraz University, Iran. Although known for limited generalisability, convenience sampling was suitable for this study, which aimed to explore, rather than confirm, learners' beliefs and strategies (Learn Statistics Easily, 2023). In addition, since the participants had passed English tests to be admitted to the university, their English proficiency was assumed to be at least at the intermediate level. Moreover, as English students, it was expected that they were already familiar with collocations. The participants' demographic information can be seen below.

Table 1

Demographic Information about the Participants

Nationality	Age range	Gender	University programme	Total number
Iranian	18-40	Male and female	21 BA in English Language and Literature, 11 MA in TEFL, and 6 PhD in TEFL	38

3.3. Instrument

This study used semi-structured interviews in Persian with the participants to explore their beliefs about collocations and learning them. The following questions, inspired by the researchers' experience as TEFL practitioners, were asked (See the appendix for the questions in Persian; back translation suggested correct English translation):

1. What do you think collocations are? Do you think learning them is important? Why?
2. What do you think are effective ways of learning collocations?
3. Why do you think learning collocations may be difficult for EFL learners?
4. How do you evaluate your knowledge of collocations? What has promoted and what has worked against this knowledge?

5. Which one do you think is easier and which is more important: learning new words or different collocations of a word? Why?

Most of the questions were backed by Ellis' (2008) guidelines about seeking learners' beliefs and strategies in relation to language learning. However, they did not address the dynamic nature of and the affective factors involved in learner beliefs (Ellis, 2008), which other researchers could study. In addition, two experts in TEFL, both familiar with EFL proficiency issues, approved of the questions for the study. Therefore, the questions enjoyed content validity, except for not including the two aspects mentioned above, by being backed by the literature and experts.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Each participant was interviewed individually. In addition to in-person interviews, the first researcher interviewed some of the participants over the phone or, in a few cases, by voice messaging in order to elicit data more conveniently from more participants. This procedure may have affected the amount of data obtained from each participant: in-person interviews could be more engaging and might yield more data, followed by the telephone and voice-messaging modes. Data collection stopped after data saturation, that is when it was sensed that no further participants could significantly add more insights. As all the participants were native Persian speakers, the interviews were conducted in Persian to elicit as much data as possible.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The interviews were listened to, and the pertinent points regarding the questions were transcribed. Then, the participants' answers were analyzed qualitatively, and themes were extracted from the data, drawing on the qualitative analysis procedure that Ary et al. (2019) used. This process involved noting the main ideas expressed by the participants as codes, comparing similar ones, and then reducing any similar ones into themes (Saunders et al., 2023). However, in order not to lose significant details, the attempt was made not to aim at final themes that are too broad. Although the interviews were in Persian, not all the transcriptions were translated since the ideas drawn as themes were put in English from the beginning. However, a few illustrative quotes from the participants were translated into English. Back-translation was done, and the two versions were found to be similar to each

other to ensure their accuracy. In addition, the frequency with which the participants mentioned each theme was noted. Half of the total instances were counted again, and the intra-coder reliability measured by the intra-class correlation coefficient turned out to be 0.90, which shows good reliability in obtaining the intra-coder reliability of the counting of the themes (Koo & Li, 2016). Finally, through reflexivity, the themes were revised after analysis to reduce researcher bias and subjectivity due to previous familiarity with the issue (Ary et al., 2019; Darawsheh, 2014). For example, a theme containing *EFL books dedicated to collocations* was reworded as *books dedicated to collocations* since the researcher had actually improvised EFL.

4. Results

The participants' answers to each question are reported below.

1. *What are collocations? Do you think learning them is important? Why?*

Almost all the participants said that collocations were a combination of words that regularly occur together. A few (*n=6*), however, seemed not to make the subtle distinction between collocations and idioms very clearly. In fact, they seemed to think that collocations mean a different thing from the meaning of the words that constitute them—a definition that is closer to that of idioms than that of collocations.

Furthermore, all participants acknowledged that collocations were important for language learning. Different reasons mentioned in order of frequency can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2

How Collocations Contribute to Language Proficiency

Reason	Times mentioned
Contributing to conveying the message precisely and accurately	14
Making the language more natural and native-like	7
Being counted as a mistake if used incorrectly	5
Contributing to better speaking and writing	4
Showing how knowledgeable you are	3
Contributing to fluency	3
Helping with forming sentences	3
Making the language more varied, interesting, and beautiful	3

Being part of everyday language	2
Expanding your range of lexical resource	2
Contributing to better listening	1
Contributing to systematic use of the language	1
Making language learning easier	1
Helping in international exams	1

The answers indicate that the main benefit of collocations is making the language precise, accurate, and native-like. As expressed by one of the participants (relevant, for instance, to the theme *contributing to conveying the message precisely and accurately*), "If someone wants to … improve the nuance and subtlety of their language, [learning collocations] becomes important to them. [Collocations] are part of the delicacy of a language". This view is one of the reasons that can stimulate above-intermediate learners to pursue collocations.

2. *What do you think are effective strategies for learning collocations?*

The participants noted that there are different strategies for learning collocations. These are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Effective Strategies for Learning Collocations

Strategy		Times mentioned
Being exposed to the language	Watching films	19
	Reading (e.g., novels, newspapers and dramas)	14
	Listening to Music	6
	News on TV or radios	3
	Journals	2
	Listening in general	2
	Social media (e.g., Twitter and Reddit)	1
	English Websites	1
	Podcasts	1
Books dedicated to collocations, e.g., *English Collocations in Use*		11
Practice (e.g., making sentences with collocations, writing them down, recording your own voice, doing topic-based activities) and repetition		5

Using collocations	4
Using a dictionary (general or collocation dictionaries)	4
Receiving instruction	4
Doing Internet search	2
Long-term learning	2
Being in touch with native speakers	1
Extracting collocations from texts and jotting them down	1
Being conscious of collocations while reading	1
Memorization	1

In addition, five participants were of the opinion that learning collocations out of context is more likely to lead to the collocations being forgotten. As the table shows, the learners thought authentic input in its various forms played a key role in learning collocations. However, the higher appeal and authenticity of exposure to language may make learning collocations by reading books relatively less popular. One of the participants commented (relevant, for instance, to the class of themes *being exposed to the language*), "I'm not sure about the ways because I learned them, let's say, instinctively and intuitively. I didn't follow a specific path to learn them. … Reading, listening, and speaking with native speakers helped me learn them step by step".

3. *Why do you think learning collocations may be difficult for learners of a language?*
    Table 4 below shows the respondents' beliefs about the difficulty of collocations.

Table 4

Why Collocations Are Difficult

Reason	Times mentioned
L1 influence, especially one-to-one translation from L1	22
Collocations being numerous, complex, easily forgotten, or confused with each other	11
Unpredictable nature of collocations	7
Learner not using collocations enough	5
Learner not having access to native speakers	4
Learner not being conscious of collocations	2
Collocations not being emphasized in teaching	2

Learners being stressed about speaking accurately	1
Dependence of collocations on L2 culture	1

The most frequently mentioned reason for the difficulty of collocations was the effect of the native language, which is also known to affect language learning in general. Next comes the unpredictable nature of collocations and the great burden that learning collocations put on the learners' shoulders. One of the participants described their difficulty this way (relevant, for instance, to the theme *collocations being numerous, complex, easily forgotten, or confused with each other*):

> My experience taught me, for instance, that I studied a word that had nearly six or seven collocations with different meanings, and they were quite different. I mean, right, they were close but had quite different meanings. This can be difficult for someone who is a beginner.

Another difficulty was the lack of enough access to native speakers, which is due to the context in which the participants lived. However, two participants did not see any particular difficulty with learning collocations.

4. *How do you evaluate your knowledge of collocations? What has promoted and what has worked against this knowledge?*

In response to this question, 11 participants evaluated their knowledge of collocations as below intermediate, 13 intermediate, and 13 above intermediate. In addition, one participant responded, "no idea".

Participants mentioned different factors that had helped or hindered the development of their knowledge of collocations; they are summarised in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.

Table 5

What has Promoted Knowledge of Collocations

Element		Times mentioned
Watching films		16
Reading (e.g., books)		13
Practice	Repetition	2
	Highlighting and writing down collocations	1
	Story making	1
	Sentence making	1

Listening in general	5
Listening to music	4
Collocation books	4
Using collocations	3
Dictionary checking	3
Internet surfing and text-based social media	3
Being exposed to a collocation several times	2
Self-study	2
Teaching English	2
Searching collocation on the internet	1
Group learning	1
Writing	1

Table 6

What Has Hindered the Development of Knowledge of Collocations

Element	Times mentioned
Collocations not being dealt with in language teaching, e.g., in schools, institutes, or universities	12
Learners expend little effort to learn them	8
Learners having little contact with native speakers in Iran	4
Collocations are prone to forgetting	4
Learner being affected by L1 influence	2
There is a vast number of collocations	2
Learners are motivated more to learn vocabulary than collocations	2
Learners not learning them in context	1
Learners not using them	1
Some collocations were not met again	1

Watching films, which are popular among the youth, has been regarded as the most helpful way to develop knowledge of collocations. In contrast, not taking collocations seriously enough in language teaching, perhaps due to their being thought of as secondary to words (see Table 9), was deemed to hinder the development of collocations. One of the participants described their experience with helping and

hindering factors this way (relevant, for instance, to the themes of *collocation books*, *dictionary checking,* and *there being a vast number of collocations*):

> I don't think I know collocations very well at all, but … I can improve quite all right, and I can see it. What has impeded [my knowledge] is the fact that they usually have a broad range. … Things that have helped me in this regard [are] the book *Collocations in Use* and especially using dictionaries.

> Furthermore, one participant did not think anything hindered the development of their collocation knowledge.

5. *Which one do you think is easier and which one is more important: learning new words or different collocations of a word? Why?*

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, 26 participants believed collocations to be easier, while 11 deemed words to be easier. However, one participant did not express their ideas conclusively in this regard.

Figure 1

Ease of Collocations vs Words

Those who believed collocations to be easier for learners mentioned various reasons, as summarised in Table 7 below. Some ideas were not perceived very clearly, and it was later difficult to interpret and thematize them; therefore, the numbers in the table did not add up to 26.

Table 7

Why Collocations Are Easier Than Words

Reason	Times mentioned
Already knowing the words in the collocation	13
Collocations being learnt in the context or phrase they are used in	3
Collocations giving us a ready-made chunk to use in sentences	2
Some collocations being very frequent	1
Collocations being less easily forgotten	1
Words being easily forgotten	1

It turned out that because the meaning of collocations is usually transparent from the meaning of individual words, unless the constituent words are unknown, learning collocations may be relatively easy. Furthermore, as opposed to words which are sometimes learnt out of context, collocations were regarded to be usually learnt in context. The reason may have to do with the relative lack of attention to collocations in language teaching (see Table 6), leading to the exposure to collocations in context being the dominant learning method (see Table 3). In addition, the participants who deemed words easier to learn talked about various reasons. These are summarised in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Why Words Are Easier Than Collocations

Reason	Times mentioned
Collocations are numerous and need more time to master.	4
Collocations are made up of several words.	2
Collocations are similar and confusing.	2
Collocations are easily forgotten.	1
Collocations are less flexible to use than words.	1
Words are associated with basic concepts.	1

One of the participants compared the relative ease of learning collocations versus words by saying (relevant, for instance, to the themes. *Collocations are numerous and need more time to master,* and *Collocations are similar and confusing.*).

Of course, words are easier because, as I said, [collocations] have a very broad range. I mean, each word may have 6-7 collocations, and you cannot learn them all at

once. Also, you may get confused a lot because, you know, they all look the same…
[However,] you can use [words] in sentences and memorize them [relatively easily].

Regarding the importance of collocations versus that of words, 20 participants
believed collocations to be more important than words, five participants the other way
around, and the rest did not have any absolute views. Some of the ambivalent views
contained interesting comments:

- Vocabulary is more important for beginning levels; collocations are important for
advanced levels or more motivated students. (5 mentions)
- Vocabulary matters more for reading and collocation for speaking. (2 mentions)
- Collocations are more important in native settings. (1 mention)
- Vocabulary matters for practical reasons; collocations matter for making one's
language beautiful. (1 mention)

Figure 2

Importance of Collocations vs Words
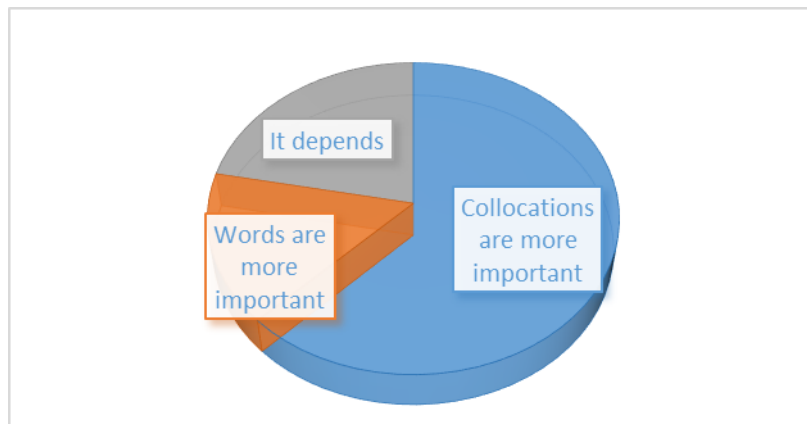
The reasons mentioned for the superiority of collocations and that of words are
summarised in Tables 9 and 10, respectively. Note that some participants referred to more
than one reason, so the numbers do not add up to the totals mentioned above.

Table 9

Why Collocations Are More Important Than Words

Reason	Times mentioned
Collocations make clear how to use a word in context.	10
Collocations are more frequent, attractive, and useful.	5

Collocations can make you more fluent.	4
Collocations make you more natural and native-like.	3
Collocational errors are more serious.	1
Collocations convey the message better.	1

Table 10

Why Words Are More Important Than Collocations

Reason	Times mentioned
Words are building blocks of language.	2
Words are more useful.	2
You can understand collocations after knowing words.	2
Range of vocabulary matters.	1

The two tables show that the most valued contribution of collocations was helping with using words; however, words were regarded as important because they formed the basis of a language. This suggests that learning words may precede learning collocations, a possible reason for inattention to collocations noted in Table 6. One of the participants compared the usefulness of collocations versus words by saying (relevant, for instance, to the theme *You can understand collocations after knowing words*), "I don't think one is more important than the other because they are dependent. Unless you know a word, you cannot learn its collocations".

5. Discussion

This study attempted to discover the beliefs that learners hold and the strategies they use regarding learning collocations, a rather neglected area in the literature. The previous section presented the participants' responses to the questions about the nature of collocations, their significance, the challenges and opportunities, and the comparison between learning collocations and learning words. In what follows, the research questions posed in the introduction are answered, and the answers are discussed in light of the literature review.

5.1. How Does Learning Collocations Contribute to Language Proficiency?

Responses to this question (see Table 2) correspond to beliefs about learning a second language in Zhong's (2015) classification. Many responses were consistent with the literature. For instance, a great number of respondents (*n*=14) pointed to the precision and accuracy afforded by using collocations, an opinion that is in line with that of Howarth (1996). Another point frequently referred to was that using the correct collocation makes language production more natural and native-like (Bahns, 1993; Bui, 2021; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005). Additionally, the learners emphasized the importance of collocations as a legitimate part of language when they referred to collocation errors as not only an indication of non-nativelikeness (*n*=7) but also a deviation from natural, accurate language use (*n*=5). Moreover, the learners believed in the role of collocations in better speaking and writing. Another perceived advantage of learning collocations was that collocations can show learners how to use the words they know, which reflects Łuszcz's (2016) belief that using collocations enhances communicative skills. All in all, it seems that teachers should reinforce such beliefs in learners who are willing to produce accurate language to build their collocation knowledge alongside their vocabulary knowledge. Since other less frequently mentioned reasons for the importance of collocations are still representative of EFL learners' beliefs, they are worthy of attention and especially useful for EFL teachers to discuss in the classroom with their students in order to improve their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn collocations.

5.2. What are Effective Strategies (Cognitive, Metacognitive, Social, Compensation, and Affective) for Learning Collocations?

Answers relevant to this question (Tables 3 and 5) partly reflect beliefs about external factors (Zhong, 2015), where specific strategies are mentioned that can be used to expand students' learning strategies. According to Zhong's (2015) classification, they were cognitive (e.g., making sentences with collocations), metacognitive (e.g., being conscious of collocations while reading), and social (e.g., being in touch with native speakers). There were little or no traces of compensation and affective strategies, but it could be inferred that using collocations, as mentioned by some learners, could be done despite the difficulties (a compensation strategy). In addition, being in touch with other L2 users, as mentioned by a few learners, might count as relevant to affective strategies since such

social relations could set the right affective mood. Finally, it must also be noted that not all the strategies mentioned are equally effective for every individual (Recker & Pirolli, 2009).

More generally, answers in Tables 3 and 5 somehow involve beliefs about approaches to language learning (Zhong, 2015). It appears that most respondents believed that collocations could be learned through implicit means (Ellis, 2015), i.e., receiving linguistic input by methods such as watching films or reading books. This view is consistent with that of McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) and the finding obtained by Pellicer-Sánchez (2017), who found it viable for learners to learn collocations incidentally by reading. In fact, the present study has found that reading collocation books, referred to by a participant as a *dry* method, is not the most preferred way of improving collocations. This finding can be considered in line with the view that repetition may not lead to long-term recall (Zhang & Reynolds, 2023). It is also a tentative response to the call for further comparison between implicit and explicit methods of collocation teaching (Mahvelati, 2019). Moreover, many respondents believed that some practice is required in order to solidify their knowledge of collocations. In fact, it makes sense that a lack of sufficient exposure to the same collocation through the means mentioned will not result in a strong connection between the collocation and its mental representation (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010). This agrees with the view that practice can turn explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge or that declarative knowledge may become proceduralised (Ellis, 2015).

5.3. What are the Problems Associated with Learning Collocations Relevant to Personal, External, Second-Language-Learning, and Approach-To-Language Learning Factors?

Tables 4 and 6 provide information regarding this question. According to Zhong's (2015) classification, the beliefs in this regard were relevant mostly to external factors (i.e., little attention to collocations in classes) and personal factors (i.e., L1 influence). In addition, some beliefs are concerned with learning a second language (e.g., unpredictableness of collocations) and approaches to learning (e.g., necessity of using collocations frequently).

The fact that most of the respondents referred to L1 effects, or the difference between collocations in L1 and L2 (non-congruency), as a problem with learning them supports some earlier research findings (e.g., Jiang, 2022; Lee, 2016; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010), which indicated possible L1 effect on collocation learning and errors. However, while this study found the one-to-one translation of the words in a collocation from L1 as a source of

error, the facilitative effect of L1-L2 differences in learning collocations, such as better recall, has also been noted (Pulido & Dussias, 2020). Furthermore, this study has found that learners perceive the great number of collocations as an important hurdle on the way to mastering them. In addition, collocations are perceived, perhaps rightly, to be unpredictable (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2017). Moreover, the learners referred to teachers' lack of attention to collocations, which may create an unfavorable condition for learners to master collocations. One reason why collocations may be neglected in such contexts is giving absolute priority to exam success rather than improving students' communicative skills (Akbari, 2015). In addition, since all the participants in this study were Iranians, the various problems mentioned are in a way reminiscent of the problems known to exist in language learning in this context, which Akbari (2015) assumes to be due to the students, teachers, materials, methods, evaluation, curriculum, and politics.

What teachers could do in this regard, as suggested by the data, is to raise learners' consciousness of the place of collocations in language learning and to set tasks for learners as part of the courses they are taking, for instance, according to Mahvelati and Mukundan (2012), by introducing books such as *Collocations in Use* (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2017), and *Key Words for Fluency* (Woolard, 2004). Furthermore, as incongruent collocations may cause problems, teachers can suggest using mnemonics to learn such collocations as a tenable strategy.

5.4. Which One Is Easier and Which One Is More Important to Build: Collocations or Words?

Two sets of beliefs about second language learning (Zhong, 2015) were involved here. First, the difficulties of learning collocations in contrast to learning other aspects of their L2 knowledge, such as vocabulary, as mentioned in Table 8, reflect what is referred to in the literature as collocation lag or deficiency (Bui, 2021; Men, 2015). Second, it was found that most learners who participated in this study regarded collocations to be easier than individual words and, at the same time, more important. If that is truly the case with most learners and in practice, teachers should draw learners' attention to the fact that they can improve their English with less effort and better results by spending more time on learning collocations instead of hardly-used vocabulary by bringing illustrative examples. However,

since words are the building blocks of collocations, it would be wise to know enough vocabulary before trying to learn collocations.

6. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to investigate EFL learners' beliefs about issues involved in the acquisition of collocations. It turned out that all participants regarded learning collocations as important mostly due to the precision and naturalness of expression it affords; implicit learning works better; L1 effects primarily cause difficulty in learning them; and, finally, collocations were easier and more important than single vocabulary items. The results can benefit teachers in three ways. After becoming aware of learner beliefs, teachers may continue classroom practice that is in agreement with them, modify it to match the beliefs or raise learners' awareness about the beliefs that interfere with learning (Zhong, 2022).

It should be admitted that this study suffered from some limitations, and future studies may enhance it. First, interviews may not yield the beliefs that are held deep in the learners' unconscious (Zhong, 2022). Other studies may triangulate our results by obtaining more meditated beliefs from written accounts (Zhong, 2022) or questionnaires rooted in the literature since they can show what learners may not readily tell the researcher. Studying which beliefs are more readily put to action, why, and which are changeable could be another area for research (Zhong, 2022). Furthermore, the affective factors involved in learner beliefs and the dynamic nature of the beliefs (Ellis, 2008) were not paid due attention in this study and could be examined closely by future research. Secondly, all the participants of the study were students of English (though of different specialties) at the university level, who, to the researchers' knowledge, mostly knew English at above-intermediate or advanced levels. Therefore, their voices do not represent all learners of English at all levels of proficiency. Future studies can triangulate our results by seeking answers from learners at the beginner level. Moreover, this study was conducted in Iran, an EFL context. There are differences between EFL and ESL contexts in terms of the resources learners can use to improve their language (Longcope, 2009), and contextual influence on learner beliefs has been alluded to (Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Zhong, 2022). For instance, the general idea of having contact with native speakers reported in this study might be expressed in finer detail by ESL participants. Consequently,

other researchers may repeat this study in an ESL setting. Finally, future research can expand on the results of the current study by, for example, comparing the effectiveness of different strategies for learning collocations proposed by learners here and measuring their correlation with learning outcomes. Future studies can also continue filling gaps in our knowledge about each of the difficulties associated with learning collocations mentioned by the learners, such as incongruent collocations.

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Appendix: Interview Questions in Persian

١. به نظرتان کالوکیشن چه هست؟ آیا فکر می کنید یادگیری‌شان مهم هست؟ چرا؟

٢. فکر می کنید راه‌های موثر یادگیری کالوکیشن چه هست؟

٣. فکر می‌کنید چرا یادگیری کالوکیشن ممکن است برای یادگیرندگان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی دشوار باشد؟

٤. دانش خودتان را از کالوکیشن چطور ارزیابی می‌کنید؟ چه چیزی به این دانش کمک کرده و چه چیزی مانع آن شده؟

٥. از بین این دو کدام یک یادگیری آن آسان‌تر است و کدام مهم‌تر است؟ یادگیری کلمات جدید یا یادگیری کالوکیشن یک کلمه؟ چرا؟