The Effect of Reading Short Stories on Learning English Collocation among Pre-Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

One of the most problematic areas for foreign language learning is collocation. Iranian EFL learners mostly complain about being unable to talk voluntarily in class since they are not able to produce collocations and new vocabularies because they have of feeling anxious. This study aimed at investigating the effect of reading short stories on learning English collocations among pre-intermediate EFL Learners. The study had an experimental design and the sample of the study consisted of 54 students chosen from the results of a placement test to determine the pre-intermediate level students in Simin Language Institute in Sari. They were placed into 2 groups of experimental and control. Data of the study were collected through a collocation test used as pretest and posttest. The teacher assessed the effect of reading short stories on learning English collocations among pre intermediate EFL learners. The collected data were analyzed through statistical methods by SPSS software version 21. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the measure. This indicated that reading short stories had a statistical significant effect on EFL learners' collocation learning. Results had implications for teachers, learners and material developers.

Keywords: Collocation, EFL learners, pre-intermediate, short story.

1. Introduction

English has been increasingly important in various fields and the importance of learning it cannot be overstated in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. The English language has official status even in nations where it is not the spoken language. Although teachers aim to enable learners and try hard to rebound students to cope with a second language, most EFL learners are not approximately responding positively and effectively in EFL classes as they are unable to apply appropriate collocations and vocabularies when they are communicating with each other.

The concept of collocation refers to how words occur together either in speech or writing (Kennedy, 2013) and without people's knowledge of collocations, it would be impossible to speak fluently. In fact, to be able to utter native-like utterances, students need to have knowledge of collocations (Ann, 2014). As a result, understanding collocations is an important issue in EFL/ESL settings. Although patterns of collocations are recognizable to native speakers of a language in a simple glimpse, EFL learners may have difficulties comprehending them if such concepts have not been exposed to them previously (Lewis, 2000). As a result, many researchers have investigated the effect of different teaching strategies on learning collocations (Kennedy, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Neselhaaf, 2003).

Storytelling is a practical and powerful teaching tool especially for language learning since language development has become important to education for all age levels. According to Ler Strom (1990, as cited in Lewis, 1993), professional and personal success is related to a person's ability to speak, write, listen and read effectively. In order to provide successful language learning, Pesola (1991) suggested that storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for surrounding the young learners with language.

In dealing with stories, learners have an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication, not the usual 'teachers' of foreign language classroom. Reading short stories develops learning skills in a unique way. While reading stories, learners develop a sense of structure that will later help them understand more complex stories of literature. Collocation learning is one of the central components of developing successful communication and has been considered as an integral part of language by both teachers and researchers. One of the strategies that could possibly enhance EFL learners' understanding about collocations is reading. Lewis (2000) defined reading as an analytic activity which requires learners to reread a story text.

The learners' inability to produce structures using collocations is a frequent problem in EFL classes. Teachers are usually facing this problem at all levels of teaching English. Learners prefer to keep silent unwilling to participate in classroom activity; therefore, teachers should increase learners' ability to use language effectively. If students fail to communicate in the classroom, the whole task of teaching will be unfruitful and ineffective because there will be no communication, no thought and no effort. It is also a need to attempt to eliminate this problem in educational institutions inside Iran. Iranian learners have less opportunity to use English because they do not have enough exposure to foreign language. To overcome this problem, teachers need to find new ways and techniques which are applicable and effective.

Reading stories in the class and entertaining learners will make them eager to take part in classroom activity, they will not have much stress and anxiety as stories engage their minds and let them have different images in their minds forgetting the classroom and the act of teaching. Iranian EFL learners mostly complain about being unable to talk voluntarily in class since they are not able to produce collocations and new vocabularies due to anxiety; therefore, this study was aimed at investigating the effect of reading short stories on learning English collocations among pre-intermediate EFL learners.

In this regard, the following research question was presented by the researchers:

1. Does reading short stories have any statistically significant effect on learning of collocation among Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Role of Short Stories in Language Learning

Short stories at the intermediate stages of language learning could be beneficial since literature has the quality of being universal and short stories will allow the teacher to deal with human problems. Students voice their feelings about many issues and are earnestly looking for information that can promote a better understanding of the world in which we as human beings live. Furthermore, because he is expressing his feelings about an issue, he will get involved in the topic which he tends to see as important and will like to spend a great deal of time on it. It is quite natural for human nature to communicate through narration a sequence of actions that could be interesting and sometimes motivating too (Maibodi, 2008).

While sharing a story with EFL students, the teacher invites his learners to be aware of the thinking process through questioning, pausing, sharing of ideas. He relies on students' background knowledge to participate and comprehend when selecting stones in his classroom, such as asking them to visualize and imagine the setting or events, predict what might happen, and relate characters or events to their own lives and to comprehend the cultural aspects involved under the treated story. So, it depends on learners to use what they already know to comprehend new information (Delett, 2001, as cited in Erkaya, 2005). Saka (2014) holds the view that short stories have some advantages to teach foreign language compared to other genres.

2.2 Collocations

The term "collocation", which means word combinations, such as *catch a cold*, *commit suicide*, *bitter disappointment*, *safety belt*, was originally introduced by Firth (1951, as cited in Cowie & Howarth, 1996), directing the attention of ELT practitioners, theorists, linguists and researchers to the highly significant phenomenon of lexicon.

Collocation was first used in a technical sense by the British linguist J.R. Firth (1957), who proposed that the meaning of a word is at least partly determined by its contextual environment, or, meaning by collocation‖ (Firth, 1957). The main insight of this approach is

that it questions the idea of separable word classes (Gledhill, 2000; Sinclair, 1991) and instead conceives of language as a cline from closed class grammatical words at one end to open class lexis at the other (Halliday, 2004).

Although the term *collocation* is used in different senses by a number of authors (Sinclair 1991; Stubbs 1995), two main views of the concept can be identified: the *phraseological approach* and the *frequency-based approach* (Nesselhauf, 2005). According to the frequency-based definition, a collocation is said to be the co-occurrence of words at a frequency that is higher than expected if words were combined arbitrarily in a language. Its main representatives are Firth, Halliday, and Sinclair. In the phraseological definition, "collocations are associations of two or more lexemes (or roots) recognized in and defined by their occurrence in a specific range of grammatical constructions" (Cowie 1994, p. 3169).

2.3 Empirical Research

Collocations are recognized as a crucial part of language use and distinguish native speakers and non-native speakers (Ellis, 2001; Koya, 2006). Many researchers conducted empirical studies found EFL teachers and practitioners figured out English collocations toodiverse, yielding findings of limited practical value. For instance, numerous pioneer studies only examined EFL/ESL learners' knowledge of collocations (Keshavarz & Salimi, 2007) or explored how EFL/ESL learners made errors1 of collocation (Jeng, 2006).

Lin (2002) surveyed the impact of collocation instructions on receptive and productive collocation competence of high-achievers and low-achievers in a group of EFL high school students. The results indicated that all students made more progress in receptive collocation tests than productive ones, but low-achievers performed better in productive tests after collocation teaching. Both groups held positive attitudes toward collocation teaching activities.

Tseng (2002) divided 94 high school participants into an experimental group, who received 12 weeks of explicit collocation instruction, and a control group, who did not receive any training. After collocation instruction, the experimental group far exceeded the control group in the post-test regardless of their prior collocation levels.

Sung (2003) looked at the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in relation to speaking proficiency of international students enrolled in a university in Pittsburgh area. A total of 72 non-native English speakers and 24 native English speakers participated in her study. Her results showed that there was a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and the subjects' speaking proficiency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Fifty-four male students participated in this survey. The students were in pre- intermediate level and their ages were between 12-16. For understanding that all of the learners were in the

same level (pre-intermediate), an OPT (Oxford Proficiency Test) was taken. The important fact in this study was to have pre-intermediate EFL learners; so, 40 students with scores one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were chosen as pre-intermediate subjects.

3.2 Instruments and Materials

The teacher used story books with different stories and pictures. There were questions at the end of each chapter of the story books to help learners understand the story. There were other instruments like placement test, pre-test and post-test.

3.2.1 Collocation Test

A multiple-choice test of collocation was administered to measure students' collocation knowledge of English. The test consisted of 20 items. In this test, there were questions containing collocations. This test measured cued production of collocations. In this kind of test, each sentence contained collocations. The reliability of the test was calculated and approved to be .87 through Cronbach's alpha. In each sentence, one part of the collocation was replaced by a blank space and students were asked to read and chose one suitable word for each blank. The test was validated by Robert Sawlor, Master's of Education, TESOL120 hour certificate, university teacher, Seoul, Korea.

3.2.2 Story book

Three Story books were used in this research. These books were recommended by the Hey there book and all of in the same level of pre-intermediate. There were at least three chapters in each story book and there were exercises at the end of chapters to improve understanding of the story. The books contained pictures.

3.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

The researcher did this survey for six weeks to achieve and understand the effect of reading short stories on learning collocation on pre-intermediate learners. There were two sessions every week and thirty minutes was spent for reading stories and related exercise and summarizing in each session. If one or two of the requirements were not met, the method would be pre-experimental. In order to homogenize the subjects, the placement language proficiency test (OPT) was given. Participant were divided into two groups, 20 learners were in the experimental group and 20 learners in the control group. For determining the learners' knowledge of collocations, a placement test consisting of twenty questions was given by the teacher.

The treatment was given through three story books during 12 sessions. There were two sessions per week and thirty minutes for reading stories in each session. The story books were divided to many chapters and there were exercises at the end of each chapter. The learners were asked to look at the pictures in the story book and then the teacher described and told the story and read it with interesting and colorful pictures, so the learners could be curious to listen to the story and enjoyed the class because there was no stress during story reading. The teacher tried to reduce their anxiety by creating a gentle atmosphere. Sometimes the learners

wanted to take part in telling the story while the teacher was telling the story.

While the teacher was telling the story, they might have heard such a story in their L1 before or sometimes they were eager to guess the end of the story providing an interesting time for them. New collocations were taught to the participant indirectly. The teacher defined the collocations and vocabularies in context and through pictures.

This treatment was given to the experimental group and the control group passed the sessions without reading stories and they were taught just by their regular stuff. The participants were asked to open their books and read the stories and the teacher checked their pronunciation. Then he/she asked them to do the exercise at the end of chapter. They understood the collocations and vocabularies well in these exercise. The teacher gave them time to give a short summary in the class or to summarize it for next session. There was enough exercise at the end of each story book. It meant that when the story book was finished completely, the learners were asked to answer these tests as a treatment. The questions were presented in a sentence form and a missing part. After 12 sessions, the control and experimental groups were given the posttest. The post-test was similar to the pre-test. It contained twenty placement questions which were designed by the teacher. By conducting the mentioned treatment, the researcher hoped to compensate it and encourage learners to learn the collocations.

The data in this study consisted of two sets of scores which were obtained through administering two types of tests, an OPT test and a collocation test used both as pre-test and posttest. To interpret the results of the tests, both descriptive and inferential statistics were provided. Data were analyzed through SPSS version 21.

4. Results and Data Analysis

4.1 Result of the Language Proficiency Test (OPT)

In order to have homogenized participants in terms of their general English language proficiency, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. The descriptive statistics for the OPT is displayed in following table.

Table 1. The Descriptive Statistics of the OPT Test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT	54	24.00	39.00	30.9259	3.69524	13.655
Valid N (listwise)	54					

Table 1 above shows the descriptive statistics of the OPT test. As it can be seen in table 1 above, the mean and the standard deviation of the participants were 30.92 and 3.69 respectively.

Out of 54 participants, 40 were considered homogenous members based on their scores of

OPT ranging from 28 to 36 (lower-intermediate level). Figure 1 below shows the bar chart with the normal curve for the initial participants.
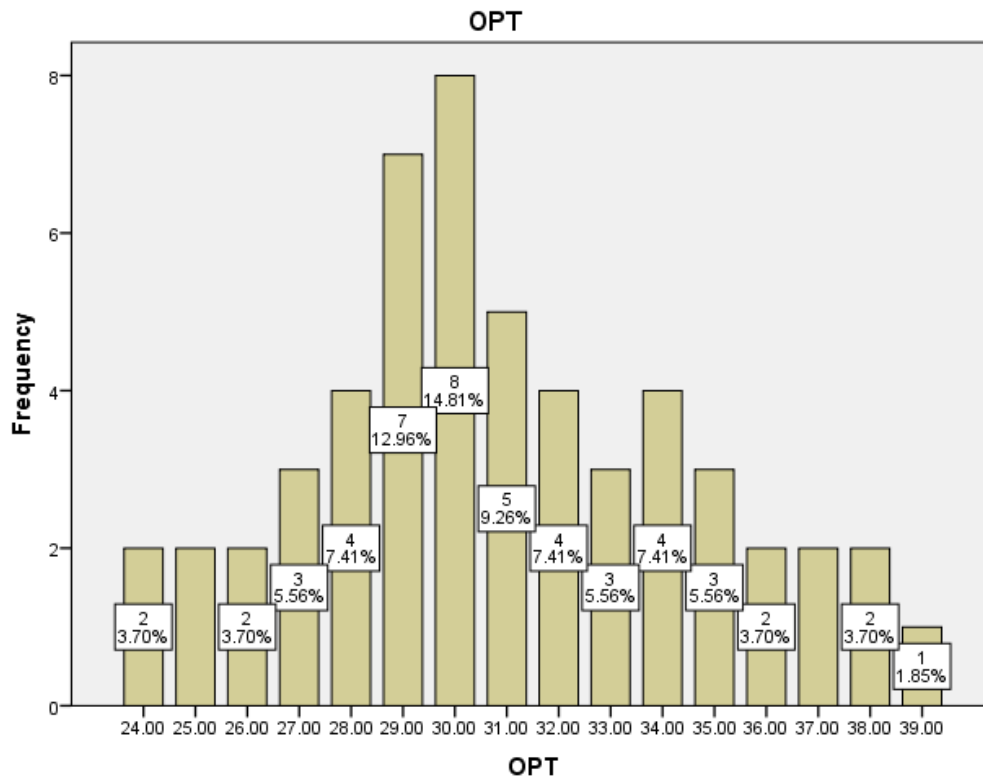

Figure 1. The Bar Chart with the Normal Curve for the Initial Participants

The 40 homogenized participants were randomly put into 2 groups of control and experimental. In the next step, the researcher proves that the two groups were homogeneous before the treatment begins.

Table 2. The Descriptive Statistics of the Homogenized Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Homogenized	40	28.00	36.00	30.9750	2.29255	5.256
Valid N (listwise)	40					

As it can be seen in table 2 above, the mean and the standard deviation of the homogenized participants were 30.97 and 2.29 respectively. Figure 2 below shows the bar chart with the normal curve for the homogenized participants.
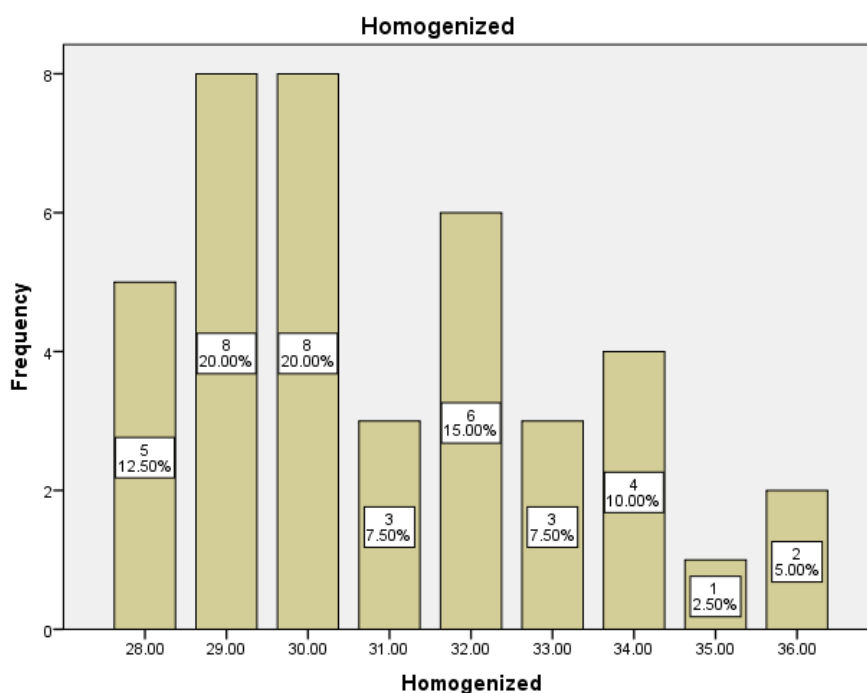
Figure 2. The Bar Chart with the Normal Curve for the Homogenized Participants

Table 3. The Result of Normality Test for the Comparison of the Control and Experimental Groups

	ContG_ExpG	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Homogenized	control	.898	20	.088
	experimental	.907	20	.055

The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows that the data are normally distributed for the two sets of scores (Sig>.05). Therefore, the independent samples t-test should be used for comparison. The descriptive statistics of the two groups is shown below.

Table 4. The Descriptive Statistics for the Comparison of the Control and the Experimental Groups

	ContG_ExpG	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Homogenized	control	20	30.7500	2.07428	.46382
	experimental	20	31.2000	2.52566	.56475

The extracted means of the control and experimental groups are 30.75, 2.07 and 31.2, 2.52 respectively. The result of the independent samples t-test for the comparison of the groups

before treatment is presented below.

Table 5. The Result of the Independent Samples T-Test for the Comparison of the Control and Experimental Groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Homogenized	Equal variances assumed	1.107	.299	.616	38	.542	-.45000	.73081
	Equal variances not assumed			.616	36.616	.542	-.45000	.73081

As table 5 above shows, the assigned control and experimental groups were homogeneous in terms of language proficiency (Sig = .542, $P > .05$).

4.2 Testing the Null Hypothesis

The null hypothesis of this study was as follows:

H0. Reading short stories does not have any statistically significant effect on learning of collocation among Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners.

Before testing the null hypothesis, the two groups should be compared on their pretest of collocation in order to prove their homogeneity. Table 6 below shows the test of normality.

Table 6. The Test of Normality for the Collocation Pretest of the Two Groups

| | Shapiro-Wilk | | |
	Statistic	df	Sig.
ContPretest	.858	20	.007
ExpPretest	.768	20	.000

The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the two sets of scores (Sig<.05). Therefore, the appropriate test for mean comparison would be the Mann-Whitney U test. The descriptive statistics of the two groups is shown below.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest of Control and Experimental Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
ContPretest	20	2.00	5.00	3.6000	.75394	.568
ExpPretest	20	2.00	6.00	3.7000	.86450	.747
Valid N (listwise)	20					

The mean and standard deviation of the control and the experimentalgroups are 3.6, .75 and 3.7, .86 respectively.

Table 8. The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Pretest Comparison of the Control and the Experimental Groups

	PretestScores
Mann-Whitney U	183.500
Wilcoxon W	393.500
Z	-.497
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.619

As table 8 above shows, it can be concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of collocation before the treatment (*sig* = .619, *P*>.05). In the next step, the collocation scores of the control and the experimental groups were compared for their posttests. Table 9 below shows the result of test of normality.

Table 9. The Test of Normality for the Collocation Posttest

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
ContPosttest	.887	20	.124
ExpPosttest	.911	20	.067

The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows that the data are normally distributed for the two sets of scores (Sig>.05). Therefore, the independent samples t-test should be used for mean comparison. The descriptive statistics of the two groups is shown below.

Table 10. The Descriptive Statistics for the collocation Posttest of the Control and the Experimental groups

	Group12	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PosttestScores	control	20	10.5000	1.19208	.26656
	experimental	20	14.9750	1.60980	.35996

The mean and standard deviation of the control and the experimental groups are 10.5, 1.19 and 14.98, 1.6 respectively.

Table 11. The Result of the Independent Samples T-Test for the Comparison of the Collocation Posttest Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
PosttestScores	Equal variances assumed	.753	.391	9.991	38	.000	-4.47500	.44791
	Equal variances not assumed			9.991	35.020	.000	-4.47500	.44791

Based on the Table 11 above, the experimental group performed significantly better on the posttest of the collocation than the control group did, (Sig = .000, $P< .05$). Hence, the researcher safely **rejects** the null hypothesis that reading short stories does not have any statistically significant effect on learning of collocation among Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The main question of the study investigated whether reading short stories has any statistically significant effect on learning of collocation among Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners. Based on the results, the experimental group performed significantly better on the posttest of the collocation than the control group did, (Sig = .000, $P< .05$). Hence, reading short stories had a statistically significant effect on learning of collocation among Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners.

Studies in the literature supported the findings of our study. For instance, Nemat Tabrizi and Akhavan Saber (2016) investigated the effect of critical reading strategies on EFL learners' recall and retention of collocations. Nelson proficiency test was administered to ninety (n=90) Iranian EFL learners studying at Zaban Sara language institute in Esfahan, Iran. Sixty (n=60) language learners were selected based on their scores on Nelson test. The findings of the study through independent samples t-test revealed that teaching critical reading strategies had a positive effect on both recall and retention of collocations.

Our results were also supported by Khabiri and Pakzad (2012) who revealed that critical reading strategy is an effective approach to learn vocabulary, especially in terms of retention. Their study was carried out using intermediate adult EFL learners and is very similar to the current study except for the fact that this study deals with learning collocations. In a similar study, Talebi and Marzban (2015) investigated the effect of teaching critical reading strategies on retention of vocabulary items by adult EFL learners. They concluded that over two-week interval between the treatment and the retention test, no particular, change had occurred in vocabulary knowledge of the participants.

Also, Wu (2015) studied the the effect of teaching collocation on the students' attitudes toward language learning in the classroom. To enhance both oral reading and speaking fluency, the researcher used the repeated reading method to check the participants' productive performance. In addition, the participants are introduced and taught to use the online language database during the learning process. The results revealed that the participants' language performance had been significantly affected by the instruction of collocations. Grabe (2004, as cited in Nemat Tabrizi and Akhavan Saber, 2016) asserted that there is a meaningful relationship between reading strategies used by language learners and their vocabulary knowledge. Hilton and Hyder (1995, as cited in Nemat Tabrizi and Akhavan Saber, 2016) also posited that target language vocabulary contributes to reading comprehension of EFL learners. Thus, the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension is mutual.

The findings of the present have the following pedagogical implications for teachers, learners, policy makers, and material developers: Teachers should give time to students in order to make them read short stories with their peers in the groups in class than make students read them at home. Vocabulary knowledge is not only about the meanings of given words in isolation, but also knowing the words that tend to co-occur with it. This means that the environment in which the words occur is very important. This is also correct for collocations. Teacher education programs can provide instructional workshops for teachers on how to use short stories in short stories to improve the collocation learning of the EFL learners. While EFL learners are engaged in reading short stories, teachers can maximize the students' interaction in English, and it can take away the big burden of running large classes. Therefore, the teacher has to change his or her role to be a motivator or problem solver.

In the light of the results and conclusions of the present study, the following suggestions are present to researchers for conducting future studies: There were not many participants in the two groups makes the generalizability scope limited. Future studies should include more participants. Researchers can do studies on how much English imported textbooks have established learning of collocations through reading short stories for the language learners. Further studies can be conducted on using cooperative methods of reading short stories for improving collocation learning of EFL learners. Future studies can compare the effect of learner variables such as age, gender, proficiency level on using short stories for improving collocation learning of EFL learners. The focus of the future research could be the effects of collocations and instruction to raise students' collocation and phrasal verb awareness and the appropriate use of them in their speaking ability.

The significant gains of the experimental group on the collocation posttest supported the effectiveness of reading short stories to improve collocation learning. Hence, Teachers and policy makers should devote more attention to the use of short stories for improving collocation learning of EFL learners.

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