The Acquisition of English Grammatical Collocations by Egyptian EFL Students

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Abstract

The present study investigates the acquisition of grammatical collocations of infinitival and gerundive constructions of the retrospective verbs: *remember*, *forget*, and *regret* by intermediate Egyptian EFL students. These verbs signal different meanings with different patterns, i.e., *verb + to-infinitive* and *verb + verb-ing*. The current study explores both comprehension and production data. The study tests the efficiency of applying the cognitive and traditional approaches to the acquisition of the target constructions. The researcher randomly assigned the participants to three groups: (1) a cognitive group; (2) a traditional group; and (3) a control group. The three groups took part in pre- and posttests. The tasks employed were: (1) a blank-filling task; (2) a picture description task; (3) a picture-based grammaticality judgment (GJ) task; and (4) a sentence-based GJ task. Results of the study revealed that: (1) Participants in the cognitive group outperformed their peers in the traditional and control groups; (2) performance on the comprehension tasks was higher than that on the production tasks across the three groups; (3) participants in the cognitive group obtained higher production scores – compared to comprehension scores – than participants in the two other groups did. The results are in line with previous research: Implementing the tenets of the cognitive linguistics approach in presenting input to L2 learners facilitates the acquisition of the target constructions than both the traditional exposure to input and incidental learning (typical of the traditional and control groups respectively).

1. Collocations

Originating from the Latin verb *collocare*, collocation is defined as "to set in order/to arrange" (Martynska, 2004, p. 2). According to Gitsaki (1996), collocation is devised by the linguist J.R. Firth (1957) as a theory of a combination of words that are associated with each other to convey a particular meaning (p. 114). In defining collocations, Firth (1957) claims that "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (as cited in Leon, 2007, p. 1). This means that some words have specific accompanying words.

In respect of the verbs in question: *remember, forget,* and *regret*, Quirk et al. (1985), who label these verbs *retrospective verbs*, hold that there is a temporal distinction when they are accompanied by either *to-* or *-ing* constructions (p. 1193). Quirk et al. agree that when these verbs are complemented with an -ing construction, they denote that the assigned action had occurred earlier before the mental process – designated by the main verb – started (p. 1193). Conversely, if these verbs are accompanied with a to-construction, they signify that the implemented action happened after the mental process had initiated (i.e., to-constructions refer to the future) (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1193). This is exemplified below.

> a. I remembered filling out the form.
> (i.e., I remembered that I had filled out the form)
> b. I remembered to fill out the form.
> (i.e., I remembered that I was to fill out the form and then did so)

2. The Importance of Collocations in SLA

Within the area of SLA, collocations – as vocabulary items – constitute a critical component that is essential to the formation

of collexemes (aka formulaic language) attested in native speakers' discourse (Webb & Kagimoto, 2009, p. 56). Besides, Henry (1996) holds that formulaic speech is the core of SLA (p. 297). Therefore, investigating collocations is highly important owing to the vital role they play in the formation of native speakers' interactions. Importantly, many SLA researchers emphasize the significance of collocations (Al-Zahrani, 1998, p. 4). Al-Zahrani (1998) argues that those researchers acknowledge that "learners' knowledge of collocations is an essential requirement to the overall mastery of their second language" (p. 4).

3. The cognitive linguistics approach.

Collocations can be studied from a cognitive linguistic perspective which contributes to their mastery and acquisition. Collocations are viewed, from this approach, as a psychological/mental relation between words (Ji-hong, 2014, p. 338). These words neither attain their meaning arbitrarily, nor collocate with other words randomly. Rather, "they either reflect the natural world or are motivated by the underlying conceptual metaphors" (Ji-hong, 2014, p. 338). Examples of lexical collocations which represent the natural world include *dark night* and *a strong horse*, and those which mirror our physical experiences involve *dark hour* and *a strong argument* (Ji-hong, 2014, p. 340).

Cognitive linguistics can be sorted into two main areas of research: *cognitive semantics* and *cognitive grammar* (Evans, Bergen, & Zinken, 2007, p. 5). Cognitive grammar is preoccupied with examining the mental rules which produce linguistic arrangements and with providing a list of the components of language (i.e., morphemes, words, idioms, collocations, and phrasal patterns) looking for explanations of their form, structural potentials and combinations (Evans et al., 2007, p. 6). There are two major assumptions within cognitive

grammar: the symbolic thesis and the usage-based thesis (Evans et al., 2007, pp. 20 – 21).

In light of the symbolic thesis, the basic unit of grammar is a form-meaning pairing (Evans et al., 2007, p. 21). Precisely, this principle is not confined to exploring the features of a syntactic form separately from meaning; rather, it comprises the full range of linguistic elements known as form-meaning pairings (Evans et al., 2007, p. 21). The usage-based thesis is grounded in the supposition that speakers' linguistic knowledge, i.e., their cognitive syntax, is molded by "the abstraction of symbolic units from situated instances of language use" (Evans et al., 2007, p. 22). Here, the discrimination between knowledge (competence) and use (performance) of language disappears because knowledge of language is knowledge of how it is used (Evans et al., 2007, p. 22).

4. Statement of the Problem

Up till now, there has not been enough research conducted on the acquisition of collocations by EFL learners from different L1 backgrounds (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993, p. 103; Schmitt, 2000, p. 6; Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 223). Additionally, existing research done on the acquisition of collocations (e.g., Channell, 1981, p. 120; Hussein, 1990, p. 129; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993, p. 101; Miyakoshi, 2004, p. 1; among others) reveals that EFL learners' acquirability of English collocations is challenging. Thus, enhancing learning collocations is required in EFL classroom settings.

Teaching collocations is fundamental in EFL classroom contexts where learners are exposed to syntactically challenging constructions. Therefore, studying the effect of applying a specific approach on the acquisition of these constructions is highly important. The present study answers to the need to investigate EFL learners' acquirability of collocations.

Little attention has been paid to the implementation of the cognitive linguistics approach in SLA (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 30). Most of the studies have been basically qualitative/descriptive (e.g., Lindstromberg, 1996; Duffley, 2000; Langacker, 2008a; among others). It is worthwhile to mention Langacker's (2008a) belief that research in cognitive grammar is just beginning (p. viii). In the same vein, Bielak and Pawlak (2013) argue that experimental research measuring the efficiency of applying the focal assumptions of cognitive grammar and comparing their usefulness with the impact of employing the theoretical traditional approaches to grammar is limited (p. 3). Thus, it is recommended that cognitive linguists conduct more research to investigate the acquisition of syntactic constructions when adopting the cognitive grammar approach.

5. Aim of the study

The current study is a treatment study which focuses on the acquisition of a specific category of formulaic language: collocations. In particular, the study investigates the acquirability of grammatical collocations of infinitival and gerundive constructions, following the patterns: verb + to-infinitive and verb + verb-ing respectively, by intermediate Egyptian EFL students. More specifically, the study examines students' acquisition of the retrospective verbs: remember, forget, and regret, that allow either construction while representing different meanings. To this end, the study explores participants' performance on comprehension and production tasks.

6. Significance of the study.

The framework or foundation of language comprehension is premised on collocations (Ellis, 2001, p. 45). Collocations constitute a considerable part of native speakers' discourse. Hence, in order to attain native-like fluency and accuracy, it is imperative to master collocations (Ellis, 1996, p. 118). Furthermore, without knowledge of collocations, EFL learners'

expressions can be seen as unidiomatic or unfamiliar—in spite of the fact that learners' speech would be grammatically correct—causing learners to have misunderstandings and to become confused (Alsakran, 2011, p. 35). In view of that, learning collocations is crucial as it promotes the linguistic competence and performance of EFL learners (Nattinger, 1980, p. 337), develops their vocabulary (Laufer, 1989, p. 316), and fosters their language fluency towards the level of native speakers (Ellis, 1996, p. 97). Therefore, the present study is significant as it responds to the need to study the acquisition of collocations.

As regards applying the cognitive grammar model in L2 contexts, Jacobsen (2012) claims that this paradigm is profitable for second language learners (L2ers) owing to its emphasis, when learning syntax, on real-life contexts which can make the form-meaning relations understandable for L2ers (p. 52). Jacobsen (2012) contends that cognitive grammar affords the most comprehensive and reasonable explanation concerning the form, meaning, and usage of language (p. 2). The current study is also important because it adopts the cognitive grammar approach which, if properly implemented, can get rid of the restrictions of L2 acquisition (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 2). In effect, this approach has the potential of providing learners with notions not existing in any other theoretical approaches or educational curricula, which can noticeably promote L2 acquisition (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 2). Employing the cognitive grammar model, in respect of the target infinitival and gerundive constructions, offers learners a profound and concise justification for their form-meaning connections as well as for applying their inherent meaning in different contexts.

Smith (2009) contends that cognitive grammar considers all linguistic items – involving infinitival to and -ing morphemes – to be meaningful, providing significant information to the whole construction in which they are located (in this case the

constructions include verb + to-infinitive and verb + v-ing) (p. 367). Smith (2009) maintains that research studies reveal that people can connect and then figuratively expand prelinguistic image schemas, based in a concrete domain, to more abstract domains—comprising those pertinent to the constructing of conceptual content for syntactic representation (p. 367). Regarding to-infinitive, it appears that *to* of the infinitive originates from the preposition to meaning toward where the idea of movement is proposed (Fanego, 2004, p. 27). Smith (2009) argues that the connection with movement has its origin in the Source-Path-Goal schema (SPG) (p. 371), as figured below.

Figure 1. the SPG Schema

With respect to the retrospective verbs in question, to-infinitive can invoke the notion of "futurity" (Smith, 2009, p. 370) in the temporal domain since goals are reached "subsequently to movement along the path" (Smith, 2009, p. 370). This meaning extension is extracted from the SPG schema as the goal, in the concrete domain, is located at the end of the path and is only reached after the path is travelled (Smith, 2009, p. 373). Therefore, reaching the goal occurs, in the temporal domain, in the future (Smith, 2009, p. 373). Smith (2009) demonstrates that "the future-oriented sense of to thus evokes the conceptual transfer of the SPG schema from the concrete physical domain to the temporal domain" (p. 373). Additionally, the meaning of to-infinitive, which is also driven by its

prepositional meaning, relies on the meanings of the verbs it co-occurs with (Smith, 2009, p. 371).

Nagy (2009) holds that the schematic meaning of the -ing construction is built on the container schema figured below (p. 76). The container schema is "a schema consisting of a boundary distinguishing an interior from an exterior" (Lakoff, 1987, p. 271)
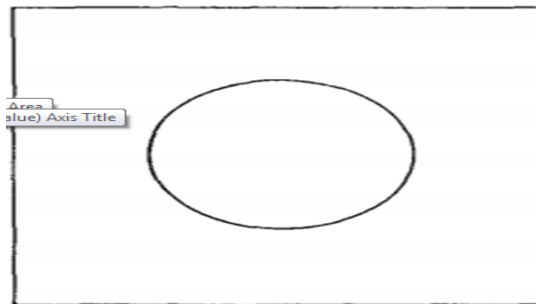

Figure 2. The container schema

As regards the target verbs: *remember*, *forget*, and *regret*, Smith (2009) holds that the -ing construction is evoked as they generally signal prior overlap between these verbs and the following gerundive construction (p. 377). This means that the act in the gerundive construction had been completely done before the time of the governing verbs, i.e., there is a previous experience or connection with that act (Smith, 2009, p. 383). In brief, from the viewpoint of cognitive grammar, the pattern verb + v-ing generally reflects the concept of conceptual overlap together with some particular semantic content such as actual and prior overlaps which are evoked by the meanings of the governing verbs (Smith, 2009, p. 381).

7. Methodology

Participants. The participants are intermediate EFL students majoring in English language and literature at the Faculty of Arts, Menoufia University. Their ages range from 18 to 21 years old. The intermediate participants were randomly

assigned to three groups: (1) the cognitive group (n = 50); (2) the traditional group (n = 49); and (3) the control group (n = 45). Students in the cognitive group were inductively exposed to input tackling the target constructions from the cognitive grammar approach via employing the explicit focus on form and the task-based learning method (addressed in further detail in a later subsection). This means that, besides employing tasks, a cognitive linguistic explanation of the target constructions was included. Conversely, the traditional group's participants were deductively exposed to the target constructions through implementing the traditional formal PPP procedure. Participants in the control group did not receive any kind of input. Participants in all three groups took part in pre- and posttests.

Research questions. The present study aims at answering the following two questions:

(1) Are cognitively instructed EFL students (the cognitive group's participants) able to acquire the form-meaning connections pertinent to the target infinitival and gerundive constructions, if compared to the traditionally instructed students (the traditional group's participants) and to students who do not receive any kind of instruction/input (the control group's participants)?

(2) Is there a significant difference whatsoever among groups' participants concerning their receptive and productive knowledge of the target infinitival and gerundive constructions?

Research hypotheses. The current study hypothesizes that students in the cognitive group will be able to acquire the conceptual form-meaning associations of the target forms as opposed to participants in the traditional and control groups. Moreover, this study presumes that students in the whole groups will perform better on the comprehension tasks than on the production tasks, i.e., their receptive knowledge will exceed their productive knowledge of the target constructions, with

participants in the cognitive group outperforming those in the two other groups.

Data collection and procedures. Data collection was performed in the department of English language and literature at the Faculty of Arts, Menoufia University. Data collection was scheduled over the course of three weeks. The pretest was conducted and then, two weeks later, the posttest took place. The pretest included the aforementioned four tasks. It was run in the first week of the experimental study.

The traditional treatment. The researcher led the traditional teaching session. A PowerPoint-based session was devoted to teaching the traditional group's participants the target constructions from the traditional deductive formal approach through implementing the presentation, practice, and production procedure (PPP). According to De la Fuente (2006), a PPP lesson normally involves three phases: (1) the presentation phase in which the teacher introduces the target structures; (2) the practice phase where learners replicate the target forms and practice with such pre-planned activities as matching, completing dialogues, and providing answers; and (3) the production phase in which learners produce the acquired forms freely through, for instance, a role-play (p. 268). Thus, this traditional model highlights the *focus on formS* model, typically explicit deductive grammar acquisition (De la Fuente, 2006, p. 268).

As regards treatment of the constructions under investigation (namely, the retrospective verbs: remember, forget, and regret which allow both to- and -ing constructions), first, the formal rules governing their use were introduced and explained to the students. Second, participants took part in a blank-filling exercise composed of separate decontextualized items about the target constructions that they had to answer in a separate sheet of paper. The students' incorrect answers (i.e., output) were modified through providing them with explicit feedback (i.e., via

giving students the correct answer instead of negotiating their incorrect output and trying to elicit the modified output). Lastly, students were classified into groups in which each group was asked to write a sentence using a certain construction (e.g., forget + v-ing) to talk about their past visit to the Pyramids and the Sphinx. In each group, each student worked independently of the others. The participants' employment of the target constructions was addressed - again though giving them explicit feedback. This traditional formal treatment lasted for 45 minutes.

The cognitive treatment. In order for students in the cognitive group to acquire the novel conceptual terms, the researcher explained these concepts verbally via employing simple equivalents such as diagram and background knowledge to refer to image schema and cognitive domain respectively. The researcher led the cognitive treatment session which encompassed three parts:

1. Illustrating the cognitive nature of linguistic structures.
2. Addressing the target constructions from the cognitive grammar approach.
3. Tackling the task-based approach through utilizing tasks.

8. Results

The obtained results revealed that participants in the cognitive group were able to outperform those in the traditional and control groups. Particularly, the findings reflect that: (1) Participants in all three groups did better in the receptive tasks than in the productive tasks, with participants in the cognitive group outperforming those in the two other groups; (2) participants in the cognitive group got higher production – compared to comprehension – scores and overall test score gains between the pre- and posttests than participants in the two other groups did. These results lead to the conclusion that establishing the conceptual form-meaning associations of the target constructions can facilitate and promote the acquisition of the

target constructions. Additionally, cognitive exposure to input enhances the productive knowledge of the target constructions.

9. Discussion

In line with prior SLA research testing the validity of applying the cognitive linguistics approach in SLA, the present study reveals that cognitive exposure to input is more beneficial for L2 acquisition than the traditional exposure to input. Furthermore, this study corroborates with previous studies that results of the comprehension tasks are higher than those of the production tasks. However, this study differs from previous research in several ways: (1) Such research did not examine the impact of implementing the cognitive grammar approach on the acquisition of the constructions under investigation, viz., grammatical collocations of infinitival and gerundive constructions of the verbs: remember, forget, and regret; (2) no previous studies investigated the acquisition of the target constructions in an Egyptian EFL environment; (3) results of only the cognitive group's participants were significantly higher in the comprehension tasks of the posttest than those of the pretest; and (4) students in the cognitive group got higher production – compared to comprehension – scores and overall test score gains between the pre- and posttests than participants in the traditional and control groups.

Receptive versus productive knowledge. In connection with the participants' receptive and productive knowledge, the present study corroborates with previous research: Results of the comprehension tasks are higher than those of the production tasks. This finding is not astonishing as receptive knowledge generally precedes productive knowledge (Begagic, 2014, p. 54). In the same vein, Siskova (2016) argues that learners' productive knowledge typically lags behind their receptive knowledge because producing a linguistic element seems to be more challenging than comprehending it (p. 28). In the current study,

judging the grammaticality of sentences, i.e., the comprehension tasks, appears to be easier for students than filling in the gaps or describing pictures, i.e., the production tasks.

The communicative task-based learning method, relevant to the cognitive group's participants, proves to be instrumental for fostering the production skills. This may be attributed to the participants' (in the cognitive group) preference for the tasks which encourage production and which demand group work to be fulfilled. Moreover, participants in the cognitive group approve of these tasks (according to their comments and feedback got after conducting the whole experiment) owing to their complexity, i.e., these tasks require some sort of cognitive effort to be completed.

The traditional treatment. Participants in the traditional group received a traditional formal deductive learning through employing the PPP procedure. They were not requested to consider the meaning behind the target constructions. Actually, the traditional exposure to input did not bring a new clarification for the target constructions. Importantly, participants in this group stated – after carrying out the entire experiment – that they had already studied these rules before. Furthermore, they noted that they had come across the employed practice exercises (the blank-filling drills) before. Absence of what is referred to as the usage-based nature of language, which is typical of the traditional approaches, has a negative effect on the traditional group's participants, as opposed to the cognitive group's participants. This proposes promoting the traditional learning/teaching methods through applying a more discerning approach than the one implemented in most EFL classroom settings.

The cognitive treatment. The cognitive group's participants, on the other hand, were provided with meaningful input following the key insights of the cognitive grammar approach (namely, the symbolic nature of the target constructions

– i.e., the form-meaning association – and the usage/task-based view of grammar, i.e., employing the target constructions within context). The outperformance of the cognitive group's participants is interpreted below.

In the current study, it is worthy to note that the cognitive exposure to meaningful input yields better results than the traditional exposure which focuses on just showing the formal aspects of the implemented constructions. This is because the cognitive exposure to input, which reveals the conceptual form-meaning connections of the constructions in question, contains all the elements endorsed by SLA researchers about meaningful input.

Students in the cognitive group received input which uncovered the form-meaning pairings of the target forms. They were probed to think about the meaning and how it was conveyed in different contexts of use. The cognitive treatment emphasized the symbolic (i.e., meaningful) nature of the target grammatical constructions. Explicit associations were actually drawn – via employing the image schemas representing to- and -ing constructions – between the different syntactic forms and their inherent meanings. In short, the present study verifies that infinitival and gerundive constructions can be dealt with as symbolic elements with their own meanings.

The highly significant performance of students in the cognitive group can be ascribed to the focus on form method which accentuates the form-meaning associations within a communicatively-focused classroom as well as to the assumptions of cognitive grammar which is context-based. Additionally, the study findings assert that consciousness-raising tasks can work as a valid tool of guiding students' attention to particular facets of L2 forms.

The cognitive group's participants also surpassed the traditional group's students thanks to the inductive exposure to

input in which students were prompted to deduce the rules rather than being directly instructed such rules (as it is the case with the traditional group's participants). Due to the better performance of the cognitive group's participants, it can be inferred that cognitive grammar can further ease L2 acquisition (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 223).

The cognitive treatment can be described as an exposure to a different kind of input. According to their comments, participants in the cognitive group held that they had not received such a way of learning before (i.e., the cognitive method of learning). Besides, they treasured this type of input which underlined the form, meaning, and usage of the target constructions. They valued the usage-based representations of the target constructions which were incorporated into the treatment session through employing different (and novel as well) instruments such as pictures and real-life examples (taken from the COCA). In summary, applying the target constructions within meaningful authentic contexts helps enhance their assimilation.

To recap, the traditional formal approaches do not offer any novel visions regarding the target constructions. This, "in fact, may reinforce misinformation" (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 236). According to the study results, integrating the cognitive linguistics insights into the learning process helps make it more meaningful. The cognitive grammar representations of the target constructions focus on aspects which are formally addressed by the traditional deductive approaches. The cognitive treatment, which is based on focus on form, proves to be crucial for acquiring the constructions under investigation. Thus, this recommends applying the cognitive linguistics approach in L2 classroom settings. Moreover, the guiding insights of cognitive linguistics provide a practicable theoretical foundation which can be implemented in SLA contexts, thereby making the primary linguistic structure explicit and, as a result, reasonably comprehensible for L2ers (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 239).

10. Implications of the Study

A general implication of the current study is that the theoretical notions of the cognitive linguistics approach can be applied in L2 classroom settings. Within the context of the present study, applying the cognitive grammar approach to the acquisition of the target constructions proves to be a profitable work. Expanding the results of the current study into a wider framework and carrying the theoretical foundation into classroom contexts can function as a useful basis which guarantees the constancy of learning and teaching practices and which expectantly structures how L2ers can acquire an L2 (Jacobsen, 2012, p. 240). In a few words, cognitive linguistics offers L2ers a cohesive vision of language and demonstrates the rational associations between syntactic forms and their core meanings. This, in turn, indicates that cognitive linguistics can serve as a strong advocacy to a fruitful L2 acquisition.

11. Conclusion

To conclude, the study results assent to previous studies: Exposure to meaningful input via cognitive exposure facilitates L2 acquisition of the target constructions more than the traditional exposure to input. In addition, the study findings reveal that underlining the form-meaning associations and the usage-based view of the target forms are the factors of the cognitive treatment which provoke the difference in the ultimate performance of the three groups. Drawing on the higher performance of students in the cognitive group, it can be deduced that applying the cognitive grammar approach gives rise to acquisition of the target constructions.

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