

Collocation Recognition And Use By EFL Learners

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Abstract:

The use of collocations in second language (L2) learning is regarded as a critical tool for effective communication in the target language and is thus widely considered of pressing concerns for L2 researchers, teachers, and learners. In light of this, the present quantitative study aimed to elucidate both male and female Saudi university student recognition of English collocation through the design and application of two questionnaires; one for teachers, and the other for students. Using Microsoft Excel and Cronbach's alpha for subsequent statistical and analytical purposes, the results proved extremely revealing. Specifically, instructors largely agreed that collocations play a crucial role in L2 learning, maintain the major causes of collocation deficiency to be limited English proficiency and L1 transfer, and concur that collocations should be taught at beginner levels. Student performance, on the other hand, varied from one collocational category to another. For instance, they demonstrated high scores in the verb-noun combinations, low in the adjective-noun collocations, and average in the remaining bulk categories. No significant statistical distinction was evident in the performance of male and female learners. The study ultimately recommended the inclusion of collocation courses throughout the curricula and increased emphasis

on the classes of word combinations found to be most problematic for L2 learners.

Keywords: categories; collocations; combination; deficiency; errors.

Introduction

To attain successful, fluent communication and convey meaningful and natural messages to interlocutors, a language learner both must know and select suitable vocabulary and be fully equipped with the necessary tools to facilitate his/her language learning. The use of collocations is one such tool. Wray (2002), Schmitt (2004), and McCarthy & O'Dell (2017) characterize collocations as established word groupings that form a fixed or semi-fixed expression. These words comprise an essential element of the native speaker's lexicon. According to Vasiljevic, (2014), instructors should draw learners' attention to the facilitating effect of formulaic language in advancing students' fluency levels. Malone (2018, as cited in Li, 2021), stated that efficient English learning necessitates learning a considerable amount of vocabulary. According to Yaacob et al. (2019), vocabulary learning is regarded as a fundamental factor in language learning. High performance of vocabulary is likely to enhance the level of language skills (Rahimi & Allahyari, 2019).

. In addition to stand-alone words, learning vocabulary includes combinations of phrases of two or more words that build a formulaic language and have specific usage. Since such formulaic language constitutes a substantial proportion of the written and spoken language (Erman & Warren, 2000; Foster, 2001), it enables the learner to produce more than one word without hesitation (Wray, 2002).

Unfortunately, extensive vocabulary research has found that English language collocations are not easily mastered by L2 students. When compared to their general L2 vocabulary performance, for instance, Nesselhauf (2003) demonstrates that learners' assimilation of collocations is compounded by both limited exposure to the target language and a deficiency in comprehending the meanings of collocations across different contexts. In fact, vocabulary learning, in general, is posing huge obstacles in the way of L2 learners (Chung, E. (2022). Due to the significance of vocabulary in language learning, Nation, (2013b, as cited in Reynolds and Shih 2020) asserted that "Both depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge can be increased through instructors initiating and continually encouraging learner involvement in various vocabulary learning activities. Actually, according to Alqahtani, (2015), inadequate vocabulary knowledge can impede a capability to communicate effectively. Generally, learning groups of words is more beneficial than learning isolated words (Nizonkiza et al., 2013). Interestingly, Ying (2009) confirms that both English and non-

English majors make frequent errors in collocations: namely in preposition + noun combinations; and lexical collocations, specifically verb + noun structures. In fact, L2 researchers report that even advanced L2 learners encounter difficulties with target language collocations, which inevitably hinder their oral and written progress (Bahardoust 2012; Begagić 2014; Laufer & Waldman 2011; Nesselhauf, 2005; Nguyen & Webb, 2016). In another study, You-mei and Yung (2005) investigated the learning of collocations by learners of diverse language abilities. Their findings reveal no significant differences among students of different proficiency levels in their L2 collocational use, since all encountered complexity in selecting the appropriate words. Specifically, all L2 learners faced difficulty with selecting verb + noun collocations.

A number of researchers have sought to pinpoint the reasons for these L2 difficulties. For instance, Hill (2000) argues that the weakness found in L2 learners' oral and written products rests on incomplete collocation competence. This is further complicated by the fact that vocabulary teaching and learning usually concentrate on separate word units, whereas L2 learners study collocation word groupings as a whole. As such, they cannot be broken down into manageable constituent parts of prefixes, suffixes, roots, and so on. This exacerbates the difficulties for the target language learners (Hosseini & Akbarian, 2007). Begagic (2014) attributes the difficulty of mastering English collocations to creating unacceptable items rather than non-understandable ones. In other words, when L2 learners encounter an unknown collocation, they are able to correctly grasp its meaning, but when conveying a specific concept, they are inclined to fall back on word sequences which are unacceptable in the L2. Yamashita & Jiang (2010) attribute the complexity of word combination learning to the seemingly random and semantic nature of the restrictions of collocations despite potential grammatical correctness.

Given the crucial significance of collocations in L2 learning and the paucity of collocational studies on Saudi students' writing then, the present study interrogates the recognition of English collocations by IMSIU Saudi EFLs. Based on the results, the paper also provides significant insights into the improvement of Saudi EFL learners' use of English Collocations throughout their written performance.

Literature Review

Prior research has explored the issue of English collocations from various perspectives. For example, certain commentators have highlighted the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of L2 collocations, while others have focused on the impact of L2 competence level on the target language collocational use, or evaluated their problematic instructional role of L2

collocations. A number of studies have foregrounded the distinctions between perceptive and productive knowledge in learning the collocations of the target language, while others have developed strategies to improve the L2 learner's combinational competence of English collocations, or elicited teacher and/or student perceptions of learning collocations.

Using a correctional perspective, Bonk (2001) utilized a fill-in task taken from a TOEFL test to measure university-level students and demonstrated a positive correlation between learner collocational competence and language performance level. In the Turkish context, Bağcı (2014) evaluated the competence of advanced and intermediate Turkish learners by focusing on student knowledge of verb-noun, adjective-noun, adjective-preposition, and noun-preposition combinations. Once again, the study confirmed a positive correlation between general learner language proficiency and collocational competence. Chen's (2008) study as conducted on Taiwanese university students studying English as a second language, likewise reported a significant positive relationship between learner collocation performance and overall English subject scores. Finally, Keshavarz and Salimi's (2007) study demonstrated a strong positive relationship between L2 learners' collocational performance on both open-ended and multiple-choice tests and general language proficiency level. Such consensus merely underlines the role of collocation knowledge as a fundamental constituent of optimum L2 language performance.

The receptive and productive collocations of L2 learners have also attracted considerable scholarly attention. For instance, Begagic (2014) investigated the receptive and productive competence of lexical collocations among first and fourth-year Bosnian students by concentrating on verb + noun, adjective + noun, and verb + adverb combinations. The results found student collocational knowledge least advanced in the most complicated lexical collocation patterns they faced; namely, verb + adverb constructions. Similarly, Bueraheng and Laohawiriyanon (2014) explored the receptive and productive competence of verb + noun and adjective + noun lexical collocations of senior English majors and international program students. The researcher reported fair collocational knowledge when students' receptive competence outperformed their productive one. However, in comparable studies, such as that of Torabian, Maros & Subakir (2014), learners revealed poor combinational knowledge despite a perceptive collocation competence that surpassed their productive one.

The L1 transfer to L2 collocational learning comprises a further field of L2 research. To this end, Abdul Ridha & Al-Ryahi (2012) analyzed the lexical collocation writing errors of 40 third-year Iraqi EFL students. The findings revealed the Iraqi learners' lexical combinational competence to be

insufficient. In fact, participants clearly avoided the use of specific types of lexical collocations such as adverb + adjective, verb + adverb, and noun + noun patterns, demonstrated low performance across L2 collocations, and committed numerous errors. This was attributed to the negative transfer of their mother tongue (Arabic) to the target language (English). Al-Sullayyi (2015) also analyzed Saudi learners' writing to evaluate their use of English collocations through a grammar-focused methodology based on the essays of 10 Saudi undergraduate learners majoring in English. Five participants were studying in Britain, and the remaining five studying in Saudi Arabia. Although both groups achieved similar scores on the IELTS (5.5 to 6), the results showed that the students studying in the United Kingdom outperformed their domestic counterparts in the use of grammatical collocations. Mahmoud (2005) also examined the ability of Arabic-speaking learners to learn English collocations and confirmed that EFL students rely on interlingual and intralingual techniques when using English collocations. The researcher purported that Saudi learners made errors when producing combinations such as lexical collocations in English due to the interlingual transfer from their mother tongue to the target language. In this case, learners followed the interlingual transfer strategy by substituting Arabic words for English ones. Consequently, certain collocations were produced accurately due to their correspondence to the Arabic language structure, while others were used incorrectly as a result of the discrepancies between the two language systems.

Park and Lee (2011) conducted a writing and collocation experiment on 80 high school students to assess the impact of collocation-based teaching on language performance. To this end, they administered a pre-test and a post-test for the participants following 7 weeks of instruction. The researchers confirmed that the writing and collocational competence of the learners who received collocation-based instruction improved considerably. Likewise, Kim and Ma (2011) investigated the effect of collocation-based learning on student vocabulary learning. The findings based on the 51-participant experiment demonstrated that both learner vocabulary competence and overall interest in vocabulary learning increased through this pedagogical strategy. A similar result was reported following Koosha and Jafarpour's 2006 study. The researchers examined the impact of data-driven instruction on the performance of 200 Iranian EFL third-level students. The study sample was divided into two: group one received data-driven collocation instruction of prepositional combinations, while group two received conventional instruction. Analysis of the ensuing data showed a marked difference between the performances of the groups, with the experimental group outperforming their L2 peers.

The majority of studies on collocation recognition and competence have identified a significant positive correlation between L2 collocational knowledge and language performance. Research has also highlighted the negative role of L1 transfer in L2 collocation learning and confirmed that while L2 learners generally recognize English collocations, such recognition varies from structure to structure and skill to skill. As such, the present study aims to add to the existing body of collocation knowledge and suggest solutions to the collocation learning problems which continue to affect EFL learners in general, and Saudi students in particular.

Statement of the Problem

Based on extensive experience teaching diverse courses at different college levels, the present researcher concludes that Saudi EFL learners' use of L2 English collocations is generally poor. This deficiency can be attributed to two main sources: (1) collocations are rarely learned in the L2 environment; (2) and the methods through which Saudi students are taught vocabulary. Since vocabulary is usually taught through individual word units as opposed to word groupings, learners are prone to errors whenever they encounter words in combinations with others. Indeed, academic weakness in English collocations can impede their general communicational abilities, particularly in writing contexts. This struggle means Saudi learners have come to perceive L2 writing as an impossible hurdle that frustrates their overall academic success.

The Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study rests on the importance of collocations in L2 learning. This particular language constituent is widely acknowledged as one of the essential components of the target language and plays a pivotal role in developing overall student competency and performance. However, as has been comprehensively established by commentators including Brashi (2009), Noor & Adubaib (2011), Miqdad (2012), and Al-Dakhs (2015), Arab learners in general experience difficulty with English collocations, and Saudi students are no exception. The present research, therefore, aims to devise solutions to decrease, if not prevent, Saudi students' widely-documented tendency to produce inaccurate or awkward collocations. Moreover, due to regional and cultural norms, there is a dearth of L2 studies which explore both male and female learners in the Saudi context. This study will therefore address these gaps by identifying, analyzing, and offering solutions to the problem of assimilating English L2 word combinations.

Methodology

Research Design and Tool

This study applied the quantitative method of two discrete questionnaires to investigate the use and recognition of English collocation by Saudi EFL students at the College of Languages and Translation, IMSIU. Following a pilot phase, the two questionnaires were respectively applied to elicit instructor opinions of Saudi students' use of English collocations and to measure student recognition of collocations across various themes. The teacher questionnaire comprised 23 items which were answered based on the Likert 5-degree scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.) The student questionnaire comprised 24 items divided into seven themes.

Study Population, Participants, and Setting

The setting of the present study was the College of Languages and Translation (IMSIU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. As English is the medium of instruction throughout the college, the study participants were drawn from the student body and academic faculty. A total of 40 academic instructors, mostly holders of Ph.D., completed the questionnaire. All the teachers boast extensive and varied experience including vocabulary and are familiar with the students' difficulties using English collocations. The 121 Saudi EFL learners who responded to the student questionnaire were level-two undergraduates studying at the College of Languages and Translation, IMSIU. Since their language learning for the prior 11 years had been entirely local, they had not systematically studied English collocations. The study addresses two main research questions:

- 1. What do EFL teachers think of collocations for EFL learners?**
- 2. To what extent do IMSIU EFL learners recognize collocations?**

Methodology

The researcher devised a student questionnaire schedule consisting of 24 questions that fell under seven collocational themes. These were designed to be answered by level-two male and female Saudi learners at the College of Languages and Translation, IMSIU. The student questionnaire was initially appraised by two experts. A number of items were deleted and others added based on their suggestions, and the final version was then distributed to the participating informants. Similarly, the researcher devised a teacher questionnaire consisting of 23 statements related to collocation. This was also submitted for expert review prior to distribution to the teacher sample.

Results and Analysis

The researcher coded the primary data obtained to ensure compatibility with Excel. This included certain statistical treatments to safeguard the consistency and stability of the instrument and to calculate the means and standard deviations required to answer the main questions of the study. Cronbach's alpha equation was applied to check the rigour and precision of the instrument. Since the closer the value to 1, the higher the reliability, the 0.79 value obtained by this equation indicates a good level of reliability.

Importance of Collocation

Table 1 presents teacher viewpoints regarding the importance of collocations in language learning. The results confirm the respondents considered collocation to be an important component of language learning with an average score of 86%. There was a high rating for the item concerned with vocabulary followed by an academic writing item. The teachers maintained that students needed collocations more with vocabulary learning and for academic writing:

Table 1: Importance of Collocations from Teacher Viewpoint

Item	Percentage
Collocations have a big role in vocabulary learning	89%
Collocations have a big role in academic writing	87%
Collocations have a big role in speaking	85%
Collocations have a big role in reading	83%
Collocations have a big role in listening	85%
Average	86%

Teacher Practice

Table 2 presents teacher practice in terms of collocation teaching. The score of 66% is relatively low. The majority of 80% agreed that they would teach collocations when teaching new words. However, they arguably focused more on the collocations they see in common, with a rating of 83%. As the results show, most respondents reported they would not teach all the collocations in the textbooks they were required to use:

Table 2: Teacher Practice

Item	Percentage
I often discuss collocations when teaching new words	80%
I teach all collocations in the textbook	28%

I teach only the collocations I see common	83%
I use traditional methods for teaching collocation	69%
I use technology for teaching collocation	71%
Average	66%

Cause of Collocation Errors

Table 3 outlines the causes of collocation errors from the teachers' perspectives. The overall rating was 72%. Students' low English proficiency and L1 transfer were rated as the greatest cause of collocational errors, with a rating of 82% and 80%, respectively. Only 21% considered textbooks to be the cause of collocational errors. With a rating of 69%, teaching strategies were also deemed a cause for such errors:

Table 3: Errors in Collocations

Item	Percentage
Student errors in collocations can be attributed to L1 transfer	80%
Student errors in collocations can be attributed to textbooks	21%
Student errors in collocations can be attributed to teaching strategies	69%
Student errors in collocations can be attributed to learning strategies	75%
Student errors in collocations can be attributed to low English proficiency	82%
Average	65%

Male-Female Performance

Table 4 outlines the differences between male and female students in terms of collocational competence. At 61%, almost two-thirds of the respondents maintained there was some difference between male and female learners regarding the use of collocations in L2 academic writing:

Table 4: Male/Female Student Performance from Teacher Viewpoint

Item	Percentage
There is some difference between male and female students in the use of collocations in L2 academic writing	61%
Male students outperform female students in the use of collocations in L2 academic writing	42%
Female students outperform male students in the use of collocations in L2 academic writing	63%
Average	55%

Teacher Suggestions

Table 5 outlines teacher suggestions as to how EFL learners may improve their collocational ability. The items were related to the commencement and duration of EFL learner exposure to collocations, the type of courses necessary to accommodate this, and the language aspects deemed significant for teaching collocations.

Table 5: Teacher Suggestions for Collocations

Item	Percentage
Teaching collocations should start with beginner levels	76%
Teaching collocations should be delayed till higher levels	36%
There should be specialized courses for teaching collocations in EFL programs	76%
I see that reading is the language skill most efficient for teaching and learning collocations	77%
I see that listening is the language skill most efficient for teaching and learning collocation	69%
Average	67%

Student Collocational Ability

The second instrument applied in this study was a collocation questionnaire wherein students were required to select the sentences with correct collocations from a list. This list itemized 24 sentences with seven collocation themes, comprising verb-noun, verb-adverb, verb-prepositional-phrase, noun-verb, noun-noun, adjective-noun, and complex collocations. In verb-noun collocations, both the male and female student scores exceeded 90%, with female students scoring relatively higher. The scores in adjective-noun collocations were the lowest; with 60% for the male students and 57% for the female learners. The scores of the other collocation types of verb-adverb, verb-prepositional-phrase, noun-verb, noun-noun, and complex collocations, ranged between 74% and 85%. The overall scores narrowly favoured the male students with 78.7%, while their female counterparts scored 76.2% across all collocation types:

Table 6: Student Performance of Different Collocation Types

Collocation Types	Gender	Scores	Average
Verb-Noun	Male	91%	92%
	Female	93%	

Collocation Types	Gender	Scores	Average
Verb-Adverb	Male	83%	80.5%
	Female	78%	
Verb-Prepositional-Phrase	Male	78%	79%
	Female	80%	
Noun-Verb	Male	76%	75%
	Female	74%	
Noun-Noun	Male	85%	80.5%
	Female	76%	
Adjective-Noun	Male	60%	58.5%
	Female	57%	
Complex	Male	78%	77%
	Female	76%	
Overall Average	Male	78.7%	77.45%
	Female	76.2%	

Table 6 confirms the student's collocational ability as average. This underscores the necessity for interventions that boost student awareness and enhance their knowledge of collocations in English.

Discussion

To reiterate, the present study sought to answer two main questions:

What do language teachers think of collocations for EFL learners?

To what extent do IMSIU EFL learners recognize English collocations?

In addressing the first question, the researcher analyzed language teacher responses to items related to: (1) the importance of collocations; (2) their own practice in terms of collocations; (3) causes of errors in collocations; (4) male/female differences in terms of collocational ability; and (5) suggestions for enhancing student collocational capability. The majority of the instructors held collocations to be a core constituent of language learning and placed more emphasis on courses concerned with vocabulary building and academic writing courses. This demonstrates their awareness of the importance of EFL learners having an adequate command of collocations, which, in turn, informs other language aspects such as reading, speaking, and listening. This aligns with Alqahtani's (2015) contention that collocations are a significant component of language learning, leading to effective language production.

However, set against that awareness, teachers did not regularly integrate collocations into their lesson plans, either as currently required or as they should ideally be. They reported discussing certain collocations as they arose within certain vocabulary, but did not generally instruct their students with collocations specified in their textbooks. This apparent oversight may be justified by the day-to-day pressures of teaching, wherein teachers focus on the main skills required for teaching in the textbook, whether it is vocabulary, grammar, reading, etc., and avoid the 'optional' others, such as collocations. The other possibility is that certain teachers do not fully appreciate the significance of collocations in developing EFL learning, (Hill, 2000). The teachers mainly attributed student collocational errors to low proficiency in English and L1 transfer. That indicates a correspondence between proficiency level and L1 interference: the weaker the student, the more likely he/she to resort to L1 structures and collocations. This finding aligns with those of Kim and Ma (2011), who demonstrated that L2 collocation capacity could be enhanced through L1 where congruence between the two languages existed.

Certain male/female differences seemed to be evident; at least from the teachers' perspectives. The majority of instructors discerned a number of distinctions between male and female students; with the differences in favour of female learners. This may be partly attributable to the fact that Saudi, female university students currently outnumber their male counterparts and usually outperform them in academic performance. In 2021, IMSIU, for example, set a minimum admission score for girls at 85% (an average score in high school and the standardized test) while the score for boys was 80%.

To address the first question adequately, the researcher asked the teachers to offer suggestions as to how EFL learners might improve their use of English collocations. Most agreed that teaching collocations should commence at beginner levels and not be delayed until higher stages. This implies that some mastery of collocations can build up from beginner levels and help in other language aspects. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between age and language acquisition: thus, the earlier the better (Muñoz & Muñoz, 2006). The teachers largely maintained that there should be courses designed for teaching collocations in EFL programs. If available as a beginner-level course, this could open the door for EFL learners to start learning collocations and applying them in their writing and speaking tasks. As to the language aspects considered as most appropriate for enhancing collocations, some 77% of instructors purported that reading was the optimum language skill for teaching and learning collocations. However, 69% expressed the opinion that listening was the most appropriate language skill to advance the teaching and learning of collocations.

The responses to the second question fully exposed the extent to which IMSIU EFL learners recognized English collocations. In fact, student recognition of acceptable collocations was excellent in some types and weaker in others. Both male and female informants excelled in verb-noun collocations. Such results imply that this type of collocation might be the most common and easiest (Evert, 2008), or be attributed to student recognition of the significance of the verbs as major components of sentences, which, unlike prepositions or adjectives, for example, can stand alone without their inclusion. This finding is upheld by the previous studies of Miqdad (2012) and Al-Dakhs (2015).

Student subjects achieved average scores with other types of collocations ranging from a maximum of 80.5% (noun-noun collocation) and a minimum of 75% (noun-verb collocation), except for adjective-noun collocations (58%). It is hard to know whether this was because such collocations are less common or more difficult. One explanation for that relatively weak performance is that participants may be influenced by the grammar of their mother tongue (Arabic), which, unlike English, follows a post-modifier system (the adjective follows the noun it modifies). Once again, this finding corresponds to those of Miqdad (2012) and Al-Dakhs (2015).

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Study Limitations

The present study attempted to elicit language teachers' perspectives of collocations in terms of EFL learners, and the level of recognition of English collocations by IMSIU EFL respondents. This researcher maintains that what teachers think and do in terms of collocations is inevitably reflected in the students' recognition and use of collocations. As stated by the teachers, collocational competence is significant for EFL learners since it can boost other skills such as reading and listening comprehension, and speaking and writing. The results of the study demonstrate considerable congruence with the recent research undertaken by Zareva and Shehata (2015); particularly in the context of L1 interference. Their study concluded that errors tended to be higher when there was less congruence between L1 and L2 in terms of collocations and expressions. Therefore, L1 interference can be positive if there are similarities between the two languages, and negative if the differences are more pronounced. However, Zareva and Shehata also found that congruence exerted more impact on perception than on production.

The results of the study also show that EFL learner acquisition of the L2 may be affected by the word class of collocation. In this research, the participating learners proved better at verb-noun collocations than adjective-noun combinations. Student recognition of collocations was generally average, as described above. Although the teachers held to the significance of collocations for EFL learners, neither their teaching practice

nor their student performance reflected that. This lacuna requires teachers and curricula designers to revisit the level of congruence between L1 and L2 in order to properly engage with collocational issues. While general collocation types can be similar in some languages, which words actually collocate with each other makes all the difference. Furthermore, teachers should ideally place emphasis on collocations across all the courses they teach, and wherever possible, devise a collocation course to be taught at beginner levels.

Finally, due to the inherently difficult nature of English collocations, it is obvious that EFL learners will not use them efficiently unless they have sufficient exposure to real practice in classrooms (Benson et al., 2010). Although the results of this research are somewhat better than several comparable studies, the findings regarding the adjective-noun collocations remain consistent with previous studies in that L2 learners do not have adequate collocational competence (Begagić 2014; Al-Dakhs, 2015; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2005; Nguyen & Webb, 2016; Miqdad, 2012). Further quantitative and longitudinal research in the problematic field of English collocation is therefore essential.

Potential pedagogical solutions include teaching vocabulary based on word-groupings or 'chunks' rather than individual word units as a means to equip language learners with expressions and word combinations that promote their language performance and fluency. This speaks to the inclusion of systematic instruction for collocations in the L2 learner curricula since English collocations are accepted as difficult to assimilate (Nesselhauf, 2003; Begagić, 2014). In order to communicate naturally and efficiently, in other words, EFL learners must learn combinations of words rather than single ones from the outset of their L2 instruction (Celce-Murcia et al., 2013). Suggestions for future studies could include an analysis of a sample of the EFL learner textbooks and activities assigned to students to determine whether collocations are properly addressed, and how this may affect other language skills.

Acknowledgment

The researcher's deep gratitude is due to the teacher and student subjects who actively participated in this research and contributed to the success of the study. The expert teachers who examined the pilot study also deserve many thanks.

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