

# **A Critical Review of Mei-Hsing Tsai (2020) The Effects of Explicit Instruction on L2 Learners' Acquisition of Verb–noun Collocations, *Language Teaching Research*, 24(2), 138-162.**

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## Abstract

This study is a critical review conducted to evaluate and interpret the experimental design of Mei-Hsing Tsai's research article "The Effects of Explicit Instruction on L2 Learners' Acquisition of Verb-noun Collocations". Through giving critical comments on the literature review part, figuring out the different variables in this experimental study, giving critical explanations of the whole experimental procedure, and analyzing the internal and external validity as well as the causality of this research, the author finds that the targeted research article is logical, systematic and scientific with a reasonable research procedure, the high internal validity, the clear causality and the great originality. Besides, combined with some defects the author has found about this study, some suggestions for improvement are provided.

**Keywords:** critical review, experimental study, L2 verb-noun collocation acquisition

## 1. Introduction

Collocations are proved to have great significance for second language learners (L2 learners) attempting to gain high degree of competence (Mahvelati, 2019). Due to the importance and the difficulty of learning second language collocations, the research on collocations has attracted substantial attention from linguists in the field of second language acquisition. Many empirical studies have been conducted to address various research topics, covering investigating the developmental patterns of L2 learner's knowledge of collocations, analyzing L2 learners' collocational errors, and assessing the effectiveness of different collocation instructions for L2 learners, etc. (Cao, 2008). Especially for the collocation instructions, studies of different approaches of teaching and learning English collocations indicate that there are two opposing views i.e. the incidental instruction and the explicit instruction. In the article of "The Effects of Explicit Instruction on L2 Learners' Acquisition of Verb-noun Collocations" written by Mei-Hsing Tsai and published in the journal of *Language Teaching Research* in 2020, the author holds the view that in the formal school settings, because of the limit of class time, there is little time that can be dedicated into extensive reading activities (a type of the incidental instruction) to focus on the target collocations, so students ought to be taught in an explicit way. Based on this view, Tsai designed an experimental study to investigate the effectiveness of two explicit methods i.e. form-focused instruction and concept-based instruction for teaching second language verb-noun collocations, especially for teaching the collocated verbs. There is no doubt that this article is of originality to some extent, which is worthy of positive comments on its research design, practical implications for teaching, writing skills, etc. Meantime, there also exist some little flaws needed to be mentioned.

Therefore, this critical review is conducted to evaluate and interpret the experimental design of the research article "The Effects of Explicit Instruction on L2 Learners' Acquisition of Verb-noun Collocations". Based on Wen Qiufang's explanations of the experimental design (2001), in the following parts, I will give critical comments on the literature review part, figure out the different variables in this experimental study, give critical explanations of the whole experimental procedure,

and analyze the internal and external validity as well as the causality of this research. Moreover, some suggestions for improvement will be given.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Incidental Learning and Explicit Learning of L2 Collocations**

As what the author Mei-Hsing Tsai (2020) has stated, one of the most debated issues in the field of second language collocation acquisition (L2 collocation acquisition) is the incidental learning and the explicit learning. According to Zaferanieh and Behrooznia (2011), “explicit processes that involve the construction of explicit knowledge are conscious, deliberative processes”. During such processes, the instructors purposefully emphasize the form-meaning relationships in texts to draw the learners attention to new collocations. This explanation is in accordance with Tsai’s statement that “in explicit learning L2 learners pay particular attention to language itself.” While incidental learning takes place “when the learner’s predominant focus is on the message, rather than the forms, of a given text while some new and particularly noticeable lexical items are acquired” (El-Dakhs et al., 2018). This is also in accordance with Tsai’s elaboration about incidental learning that “L2 learners focus on understanding messages rather than learning language”.

Besides, some empirical studies have been conducted to compare the effectiveness between the incidental instruction and the explicit instruction, and have shown that the explicit instruction has higher effectiveness than the incidental one. For instance, Zaferanieh and Behrooznia (2011) compare the impact of implicit and explicit collocation teaching on 54 Iranian EFL learners’ learning and finds that learners’ performance in the group receiving explicit instruction of collocations is meaningfully better than those receiving implicit instruction through mere exposure. Rassaei and Karbor (2012) examine the efficacy of three awareness-raising methods and reveal that the most effective method for enhancing learners’ knowledge of collocation is the most explicit one. Jafarigohar and Imanian (2013) conduct a comparison study in three different modes, focus on meaning, focus on form, and focus on forms, and finds that explicit instruction for English collocations is possible to contribute to the development of implicit knowledge. El-Dakhs et al. (2018) examine which of the explicit learning and incidental learning works better for L2 collocation learning based on the experiment of 114 Arab elementary EFL learners, and finds explicit learning is better than incidental learning in form recognition and recall for short-term and long-term learning gains. Most of the studies have shown the higher effectiveness of the explicit instruction in teaching L2 collocations. Through the above review of the comparative studies, it is obvious that the research on explicit instruction is of great value, and it is also the research focus of the target reviewed article “The Effects of Explicit Instruction on L2 Learners’ Acquisition of Verb–noun Collocations”.

### **2.2 Form-focused Instruction and Concept-based Instruction for L2 Collocation Acquisition**

In terms of the studies of explicit instruction for teaching L2 collocations, most of the research is concentrated on the form-focused instruction (a type of explicit instructions for L2 collocations) and has shown its positive effects on L2 collocation acquisition. For instance, Chan and Liou (2005) investigate the influence of using five web-based practice units on English verb-noun collocations

with the design of a web-based Chinese-English bilingual concordance on collocation learning. Hsu (2010) examines the effects of direct collocation instruction on Taiwanese college English majors' reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Peters (2014) examines how form recall of target lexical items by EFL learners is affected by repetition, by the type of target item and by the time of post-test administration. Ashouri et al. (2014) attempt to shed light on the impact of corpus-based collocation on 60 Iranian EFL learners' collocation learning and awareness. However, just as what Tsai (2020) has stated, there exist "mixed findings". That is because different scholars have tested the different types of form-focused instructions. Moreover, the results can also be influenced by the time length of interventions.

As for the concept-based instruction, this kind of explicit instruction has been tested under different L2 teaching conditions. For instance, Williams et al. (2013) examine the implementation of concept-based instruction from the perspectives of pre-service and novice teachers of French and Spanish by using video recorded data from interviews and observations of classroom instruction. Van Compernelle (2011) discusses the development of second language sociopragmatic knowledge in an intermediate-level US university learner of French, Jane (a pseudonym), who participated in a one-hour concept-based instruction (CBI) tutorial. But in Tsai's research article (2020), he has particularly examined the effectiveness of the Schema for the orienting basis of action (SCOBA), one of the concept-based instruction. In terms of the studies on SCOBA for L2 collocation acquisition, most of the research is conducted by Tsai himself (Tsai, 2020, 2020a; Lantolf & Tsai, 2018). Therefore, as Tsai (2020) has noticed, there are "relatively few empirical studies have compared the effectiveness of a meaning-focused approach and a form-focused approach in teaching L2 collocations."

### **2.3 Evaluation of the Literature Review Part of the Experimental Study**

Through the above review of the previous studies on L2 collocation acquisition, from my point view, the research gap of this experimental study is in accordance with my own reviewing results of the literature. Besides, the entire arrangement of its literature review part has a logic train of thoughts. The author Tsai presented the studies on incidental instruction for L2 collocation acquisition firstly, and then based on the limit of incidental instruction, Tsai gave explanation of the explicit instruction and presented abundant studies about it, leading to the conclusion that "its effects need to be further assessed". In the following, the author elaborated the influence of the Cognitive Linguistics on L2 collocation acquisition, based on which the definition of concept-based instruction, particularly the SCOBA, was put forward. After presenting specific explanations and substantial literature of the SCOBA, the author finally pointed out the research gap—there were few studies that make comparison of the effectiveness between the form-focused instruction and the concept-based instruction, according to which, Tsai raised three research questions: (1) Will CBI and FFI improve L2 learners' collocational ability? (2) Will CBI and FFI lead to different learning gains made by L2 learners? (3) Are CBI and FFI associated with different levels of collocation retention? It is obvious that the process of raising the research questions strictly follows Wen Qiufang's statements of procedures of developing research questions (2001: 53) i.e. identifying a research topic (the effects of

explicit instructions on L2 verb-noun collocation acquisition), narrowing down the topic (the relative effects of form-focus instruction and concept-based instruction on L2 verb-noun collocation acquisition), and finally forming questions.

In sum, Tsai has drawn abundant studies to support his claims, and has found the proper research gap and research questions, which makes the whole research more convincing.

### **3. Variables in the Experimental Study**

#### **3.1 Independent Variables**

Through the above elaboration, it is obvious that the independent variables of this experimental study are the two explicit instructions of teaching L2 verb-noun collocations i.e. the form-focused instruction and the concept-based instruction. To manipulate the independent variables, the author has adopted the previous studies' claims.

In terms of the form-focused instruction, the author defined it as the instruction "in which L2 learners' attention to form is considered a crucial step toward acquisition" based on Schmidt's research (2001). In this experimental study, the form-focused instruction is manipulated as two exercises i.e. underlining the collocations and filling in the blanks which are also the operational definition of the form-focused instruction. More specifically, in the exercise of underlining the collocations, students are asked to underline every target collocation in three sentences provided and to comprehend the sentences after the instructor introduces the target collocation and its Chinese equivalent by reading them aloud. Followed by the second exercise of filling in the blank, students are required to decide between two collocations for each set of sentences and then to write down the two collocations in the correct pair of sentences.

In terms of the concept-based instruction, it is defined as teaching the primary meaning of the collocated verbs first and then illustrating how related meanings are developed through forms. This is done through Schema for the Orienting Basis of Action (SCOBA) developed by Gal'perin (1989, 1992). SCOBA refers to a complete set of orienting materials that transfer an abstract learning object into a material form for scientific understanding. In this experimental study, the operational concept of concept-based instruction is the SCOBA's of the target collocated verbs.

#### **3.2 Dependent Variable**

In this experimental study, there is only one dependent variable i.e. L2 learners' acquisition of verb-noun collocations. And the acquisition mainly focuses on students' mastering of the verb-noun collocations' form and meaning.

In order to measure the dependent variable, there kinds of tests are applied including form recall test, form recognition test, and meaning recall test. The following Table 1 has shown the contents of the three tests.

Totally, there are 12 target collocations. For each test, all of the 12 collocations are involved. Besides, the students' answers are scored dichotomously: a correct response gains 1 point, an incorrect or no response 0 points.

**Table 1: Contents of Three Tests for Measuring the Dependent Variable**

Types of Tests	Format and Requirements	Example
From recall test	<b>Fill in the blank:</b> to write down a collocated verb on the basis of the definition provided (the node noun of each collocation has been provided)	_____ responsibility (to agree to be in charge of something)
Form recognition test	<b>Multiple-choice:</b> to circle the correct answer or the I don't know option (the node noun of each collocation has been provided)	_____ responsibility (to agree to be in charge of something) (a) make (b) raise (c) take (d) get (e) I don't know
Meaning recall test	<b>Translation:</b> to translate the collocations into Chinese	Take responsibility _____

### 3.3 Control Variables and Intervening Variables

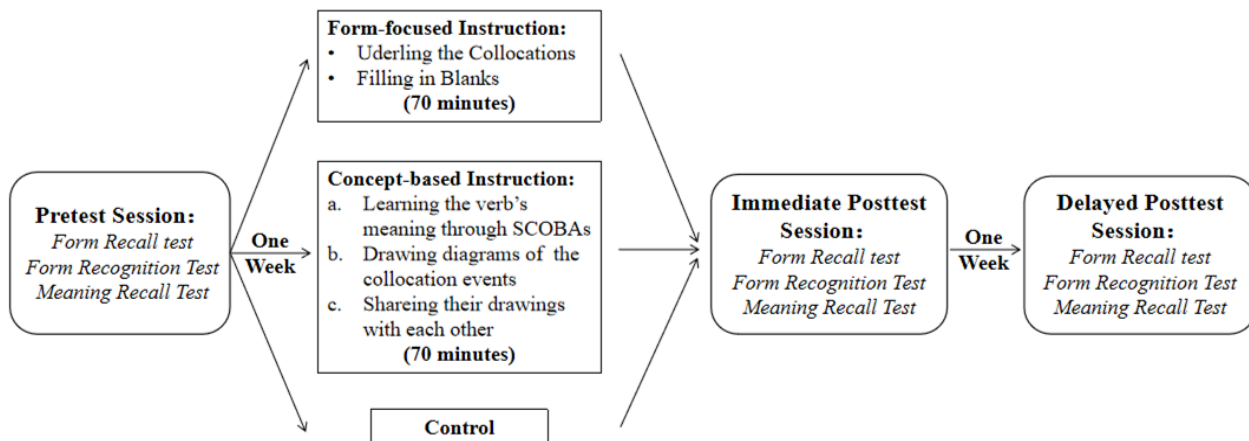
To avoid the influence of some factors on the research results, the author Tsai has controlled some variables. For instance, the English proficiency level of the 73 participants are comparable for they were all first-year students and studied in three intermediate English classes. The target collocations are all items frequently used by native speakers based on the occurrences in COCA. The difficulty of the collocations is also controlled. The time gaps between the pretest and the interventions, and between the immediate posttest and the delayed posttest, are controlled as one week. Besides, the experimental setting is all in a regular classroom setting, and the time length of interventions of the two types of instructions is restricted to 70 minutes. Moreover, the instructor is the researcher himself.

Though the author has made great efforts to control the experimental conditions, there still exist some intervening variables, such the gender of the participants, the major of the participants, etc. If such variables are not controlled properly, it may cause deviation of the research results.

### 4. Explanations for the Procedure of the Experimental Study

To solve the research questions, the author Tsai has designed an experimental study involving two intervention groups i.e the form-focused instruction group and the concept-based instruction group as well as a control group. All of the three groups participated three sessions including the pretest session which was provided one week before the interventions, the immediate posttest session which was provided after the interventions and the delayed posttest session which was provided one week after the immediate posttest session. And each of the three sessions consists of three tests: form recall test, form recognition test and meaning recall test. Statistics were collected through these tests in which the participants' performances are presented in the form of scores. Based on the scores, the mean knowledge scores and the standard deviations of each test were calculated. Besides, ANOVA and

post-hoc Tukey comparison test were also used to see if the differences between groups are significant. In terms of the interventions, the form-focused instruction lasted for 70 minutes and was provided in the form of two exercises, while the concept-based instruction also lasted for 70 minutes and included three steps to teach students the meaning of the collocated verbs through SCOBAs and to ask them to draw diagrams of collocation events based on their understanding. Figure 1 has shown the procedure of this experimental study specifically.



**Figure 1: The Procedure of the Experimental Study**

Therefore, based on the above elaboration of the research design, it can be seen that this study adopts the quantitative analysis, and the whole arrangements of this experimental study is logical and clear. This kind of research method is regarded as the best choice to investigate the effects of the explicit instructions on the L2 verb-noun collocation acquisition, and the research questions can be answered by doing the comparison of the statistics among the three groups in the three sessions. Moreover, the author has shown a rigorous attitude towards the research design to some extent. Take the options' settings of the form recognition test as an example. This kind of test is in the form of multiple choices. When choosing the distracters, the author tested these distracters by two steps in order to ensure the uniqueness of the right answer. First, the occurrences of the distracters in COCA should be far less frequent than occurrences of the right answer. Then the author adopted the mutual information to test if the association between the collocated noun and the distractor was statistically significant or not. By doing so, it can help avoid the ambiguity between the right answer and the distracters.

However, though the design can fit for the research purpose, there still exist some defects. For instance, when conducting the interventions in the form-focused instruction group, the researcher asked the students themselves to correct the second exercise fill-in-the-blank. Actually it's better to correct the exercise by the instructor or to ask students to do the peer review in order to avoid the situation that students want to give a good impression to the instructor so that do not correct the exercise seriously. But such defect does not prominently influence the whole research procedure. This kind of research method can still fit for the research purpose.

## 5. Validity and Causality of the Experimental Study

### 5.1 Validity of the Experimental Study

According to Wen Qiufang (2001: 150), “the basic criterion for evaluating an experimental study is validity.” Validity includes the internal validity and the external validity. The internal validity is concerned with the question that to what extent the extraneous variables have been controlled, while the external validity is concerned with the question that to what extent the findings can be applied to other populations or other settings. The factors that influence the two kinds of validity are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Validity in Experimentation**

Types of Validity	Definition	Factors Influencing Validity
Internal Validity	The controlling of the extraneous variables	Factors related to the environment
		Factors related to subjects
		Factor related to measurement
		Factor related to the selection of subjects
		Factors related to a treatment
External Validity	The generalizability of research findings	Factors related to the environment
		Factors related to subjects

In terms of internal validity in this experimental study, many extraneous variables have been well controlled. First, the experiment is conducted in a regular classroom setting, which controls the environmental factor. Second, the 73 participants are all first-year students in a university of Northern Taiwan, China. All of them have studied English for a minimum of six years and studied in three intermediate English class after the English Placement Test, so the participants' English proficiency is well controlled. Third, three tests including form recall test, form recognition test and meaning recall test are used as the measurement to assess the dependent variable. Because these three tests are same in the three sessions, it is possible that learning effects of the two preceding tests may have been implicated in the results on the meaning-recall test. But just as what the author Tsai has stated (2020), “students were not aware of any relationships between these first two tests and the meaning-recall test.” Furthermore, Tsai holds the view that “the L2 meanings could not be directly translated into L1 meanings.” Based on the two claims, “it is likely that any learning effects would have been very limited.” Thus, the factors influencing the measurement are also controlled. Fourth, the treatment is conducted in a regular classroom setting, which lasts for 70 minutes for each instruction, and the instructor is the researcher himself. So the person who implements the treatment is well controlled. But the time length of the treatment is a little short. According to Wen Qiufang (2001: 155), the time length of the treatment may affect the internal validity of an experimental study. So the time length needs to be longer to make the research findings more convincing. Therefore, based on the above



analysis, it can be seen that for this experimental study the internal validity is high in general because most of the variables have been well controlled.

As for the external validity, it is concerned with the research subjects and the research environment. In this experimental study, the research subjects are L2 learners, but the sample only comprises 73 Chinese students. Therefore it may influence the generalization of the research findings to some extent. As for the research environment, the classroom setting is same as the usual setting, so this kind of external validity is not influenced.

Actually the research findings are supported by abundant previous studies as the author Tsai has stated in the Discussion part. By conducting this experimental study, Tsai has found that, both of the two explicit instructions i.e. the form-focused instruction and the concept-based instruction can improve L2 learners' collocational ability, and this finding is supported by many previous studies like Chan & Liou, Laufer, Laufer & Girsai, Peters, Sun & Wan, etc. listed by Tsai in the Discussion part. Moreover, the author has also found that, the concept-based instruction for teaching L2 verb-noun collocations shows some advantages over the form-focused instruction. Specially, the concept-based instruction group was able to sustain learning gains on the delayed posttests, especially in the fill-in-the-blank and the multiple-choice test formats. And to support these claims, the researcher has adopted expressions like "in line with Liu (2010) and Verspoor and Lowie (2003)", "in accordance with previous research (e.g. Serrano-Lopez & Poehner, 2008; White, 2012)", "as Lakoff (1987, p. 283) stated", "in line with Liu (2010)", and "according to Laufer (2017)", etc. to list the previous studies that can help prove the accuracy of his research findings. From this point of view, the research findings are in line with many previous studies so that the findings can be applied to a more general environment to some extent. Besides, such writing skill can also be an implication for thesis writing.

## **5.2 Causality of the Experimental Study**

According to Wen Qiufang (2001:149), there are three identifying conditions for causality, i.e. temporal precedence, necessary connection and the absence of spuriousness within the cause-effect relationship. In this experimental study, the causality is clear for the following reasons.

In this experimental study, the independent variables are the two explicit instructions for L2 collocations acquisition, and the dependent variable is the acquisition of the verb-noun collocations. It is obvious that the treatment of the independent variables took place before the measurement of the dependent variable, which means it meets the condition of the temporal precedence. In addition, based on the previous studies in the literature review part, it can be seen that the explicit instructions do help students learn the collocations, and through this experimental study, the author Tsai has also reached the conclusion that "learning gains resulting from explicit instruction facilitated the L2 learners' development of initial form-meaning relationships" (Tsai, 2020). So, the independent variables and the dependent variable in this experimental study are covaried, which meets the condition of necessary connection. As for the third condition, there are two ways to eliminate the plausible causes (Wen, 2001:150). First, the experimental group and the control group are divided through randomization. In this experimental study, the author has explicitly pointed out the participants "were randomly assigned

to two intervention groups and a control group” (Tsai, 2020). Second, the effects of the extraneous variables should be removed in the process of data analysis. As what has been analyzed in the internal validity part (5.1), for this experimental study, most of the extraneous variables have been well controlled, which leads to a high internal validity. So the third requirement is also met.

## 6. Conclusion

After the specific evaluation of the research article’s entire arrangements, it can be concluded that, as a whole, this experimental study is logical, systematic and scientific for it has the proper research questions which are put forward based on the review of abundant previous literature, and has the reasonable research procedure which is in accordance with Wen Qiufang’s elaboration of an experimental study (2001), and also has the high internal validity and a clear causality which are reached by the researcher’s serious controlling of the extraneous variables. But because of some defects in the settings of the participants, the external validity is not that high.

Therefore, combined with the defects I have found about this study while reading and analyzing the article, I would like to give some suggestions for improvement. First, the sample size can be enlarged in order to make the research findings more representative. Second, the components of the sample are all students from Taiwan, China. But the actual research subjects in this experimental study is the L2 learners, so the research subjects can be restricted to Chinese L2 learners, or the author could make some adjustments to the selected samples. Also, the gender and major of the sample should be clarified in order to avoid such factors’ influence on the research results. Third, it can be seen that the time length for interventions is only 70 minutes which is just a short-term explicit instruction. So studies of long-term interventions of explicit instructions like one semester or one academic year can be conducted so as to generalize the research results. Finally, this experimental study adopts the quantitative method, so the data are all in the quantitative form. Actually, it can combine with the qualitative method to design questionnaires or conduct interviews with the students, in order to further analyze the effects of the explicit instructions on learning the verb-noun collocations based on some free-response data.

Through my several readings and serious evaluation of this research article, I think this research has the originality about the research focus, especially about the concept-based instruction—SCOBAs, and it is a well designed experimental study which is easy to understand. Thus, I will learn from the design, the wording and the structure of this research to make my own research more scientific.

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