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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Receptive-Productive Gap in Verb-Preposition Collocations among Moroccan EFL Learners

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| ABSTRACT

Verb-preposition collocations (e.g., *depend on*, *succeed in*) regularly trouble learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The preposition is semantically opaque and open to first language (L1) influence. Although learners are generally known to recognise more collocations than they can produce, little research has compared receptive and productive knowledge of this specific collocational type, particularly in the Moroccan context. This study examined the receptive-productive gap in verb-preposition collocations among 100 first-semester undergraduate EFL students at Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco. Participants first took a 20-item gap-filling test of productive knowledge, then a 20-item acceptability judgment test of receptive knowledge. Both tests were administered digitally under supervision. Because judgment tasks allow guessing, receptive performance was analysed as raw accuracy, as a guessing-corrected score (hit rate minus false-alarm rate), and as the rate of correct rejection of unacceptable items. Raw receptive accuracy (mean = 66.8%) was modestly higher than productive accuracy (mean = 60.3%), $t(99) = 2.31$, $p = .023$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$, but this advantage was small and sensitive to scoring decisions. After correction for guessing, receptive scores fell below productive scores ($d = -0.63$), and learners rejected unacceptable collocations no more accurately than they produced the correct preposition (61.9% vs. 60.3%, $p = .616$). Receptive and productive scores were not significantly correlated ($r = -0.13$, $p = .213$). On the four collocations tested in both formats, only one difference was significant, and it favoured productive knowledge. The findings suggest that a receptive advantage should not be assumed when receptive knowledge is measured by judgments, because rejecting plausible but incorrect prepositions is at least as difficult as producing the correct one. Collocation teaching should therefore combine retrieval practice with explicit error-detection tasks.

| KEYWORDS

receptive knowledge; productive knowledge; verb-preposition collocations; acceptability judgment; Moroccan EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Collocations, the combinations of words that habitually occur together in a language, are widely regarded as a defining component of fluent and accurate language use (Boers & Webb, 2018), and their absence is a hallmark of learner language that is grammatical yet unidiomatic (Nesselhauf, 2003). Among collocational types, verb-preposition combinations (e.g., *depend on*, *succeed in*, *apologise for*) are especially problematic for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Prepositions in collocations carry abstract, dispersed meanings that are difficult to define, which makes them a frequent source of error (Sicherl, 2004), and even advanced learners appear to rely on collocational knowledge rather than on precise semantic knowledge when

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handling the less central senses of prepositions (Mueller, 2011). Such difficulties are compounded by first language (L1) influence. EFL learners have been shown to make more errors and respond more slowly to collocations that lack an L1 equivalent (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010), and Arab learners' knowledge of English collocations, both receptive and productive, is affected by L1 congruence (Zareva, 2014). Moroccan learners, most of whom speak Moroccan Arabic (Darija) as a first language, are likely to encounter similar mismatches.

A parallel body of research shows that recognising a collocation does not guarantee being able to produce it. Receptive knowledge means recognising a collocation on encountering it, while productive knowledge means retrieving it for use in speech or writing. Receptive scores significantly exceeded productive scores among first- and fourth-year Thai university students (Zhang & Sukying, 2021) and among Thai undergraduates tested on both lexical and grammatical collocations (Tasanameelarp & Girgin, 2025). However, the size of the gap is not fixed. Talakoob and Koosha (2017) reported a significant difference for intermediate Iranian learners but none for advanced ones. Lee (2025) observed that the gap narrows as proficiency rises, yet treated receptive and productive collocation knowledge as distinct constructs. Cross-study comparison is made harder by the many instruments and item formats used to measure collocation knowledge (Ding et al., 2024).

Despite this growing evidence, three limitations remain. First, existing studies mostly treat collocations as a general category or concentrate on verb-noun and adjective-noun combinations (Lee, 2025; Wu et al., 2021). Little is therefore known about how the gap appears in verb-preposition collocations specifically. Second, research on Arab learners has documented low overall collocational competence (El-Dakhs, 2015) and, among advanced learners, productive knowledge lagging behind receptive knowledge (Alsakran, 2011), but verb-preposition collocations have rarely been the sole focus. Third, research on Moroccan learners remains scarce. Boudribila et al. (2018) examined only the productive knowledge of adjective-noun collocations among BA students. The closest study is El Fakir and Brigui (2023), who compared the receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations among 70 Moroccan learners, found receptive knowledge to be significantly wider, and also reported an effect of frequency of occurrence. Receptive knowledge in that study was scored as raw accuracy on an acceptability judgment test, which can overstate what learners know because judgment tasks allow correct answers by chance.

The present study addresses these limitations by examining receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations among first-year undergraduate EFL students at a Moroccan university. Focusing on one collocational type makes it possible to read any observed gap in light of that type's specific features. The research questions concern whether recognition and production differ significantly, including after controlling for guessing in the judgment task, and how the two are related. The results are meant to inform collocation instruction in first-year university EFL programmes. By drawing a new sample and correcting receptive scores for guessing, the study also extends the earlier Moroccan evidence (El Fakir & Brigui, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Verb-preposition collocations: definition and scope

Collocation has no universally accepted formal definition (Mel'čuk, 1998). Which word pairs count as collocates depends on the criteria applied (Gablasova et al., 2017). Here, a verb-preposition collocation is a lexical verb paired with one grammatically required preposition (e.g., *depend on*, *succeed in*, *apologise for*). Such pairs belong to the wider class of prepositional collocations, in which a verbal, nominal, or adjectival base takes a prepositional collocator (Sicherl, 2004). Traditional grammar calls them prepositional verbs and separates them from phrasal verbs such as *switch off* (Aarts, 1989). Phrasal verbs are excluded so that the target construct stays homogeneous.

2.2 Why verb-preposition collocations are difficult

Research points to two sources of difficulty. The first is semantic opacity. The meaning of a preposition inside a collocation is abstract and dispersed, so it is harder to define than it is in a free combination. Errors are therefore frequent (Sicherl, 2004). Even advanced learners appear to rely on collocational rather than precise semantic knowledge when handling less central prepositional senses (Mueller, 2011).

L1 influence is the second source. Because prepositions are language-specific and context-sensitive, their use in one language often fails to overlap with their use in another, as Aldahesh's (2013) contrastive analysis of English and Arabic verb-preposition structures shows. Collocations without an L1 equivalent produce more errors and slower responses among EFL learners (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010). L1 influence persists even among advanced learners (Wolter & Gyllstad, 2013). Work on Arab learners points the same way. Alotaibi and Alotaibi (2015) attributed Kuwaiti learners' errors with grammatical collocations mainly to literal translation from Arabic, and Alfaqara (2021) found verb + preposition to be the most challenging collocation type for Jordanian learners, with most errors arising from L1 interference.

2.3 Receptive and productive knowledge of collocations

Learners usually recognise more collocations than they can produce, but the evidence shows that the gap is neither uniform nor universal. Zhang and Sukying (2021) found significantly higher receptive than productive scores among first- and fourth-year Thai university students, and the two types of knowledge were correlated. Tasanameelarp and Girgin (2025) likewise reported a significant gap among Thai undergraduates, larger for lexical than for grammatical collocations. Similar patterns are reported for Turkish learners' verb-noun collocations (Mutlu & Kaşlıoğlu, 2016) and for Malaysian ESL learners, whose performance was examined across verb-noun, adjective-noun, and verb-preposition collocations (Kamarudin et al., 2020).

The gap, however, depends on proficiency. Talakoob and Koosha (2017) reported a significant receptive-productive difference for intermediate Iranian learners but not for advanced ones. Lee (2025) likewise found the gap narrowing with proficiency and described the two knowledge types as distinct constructs. Overall levels matter too. Vietnamese learners knew fewer than half of the verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations tested receptively (Nguyen & Webb, 2017). Spanish learners produced slightly more than half of the targeted collocations in a productive test, and exposure to English outside the classroom correlated significantly with their scores (González Fernández & Schmitt, 2015). Studies also differ widely in the tools and item formats used, which complicates comparison (Ding et al., 2024). First-year learners are still developing their lexical knowledge, so a noticeable gap is likely among them.

2.4 Previous studies with Arab and Moroccan learners

Studies of Arab learners generally report weak collocational knowledge. El-Dakhs (2015) found the lexical collocational competence of Arab undergraduate EFL learners unsatisfactory, and Awaj (2018) found collocations problematic for all of her Libyan participants, with naturalistic exposure more beneficial than classroom learning. Alsakran (2011) found that advanced Arabic-speaking learners' productive knowledge of collocations lagged far behind their receptive knowledge, and that they performed worse on verb-preposition than on verb-noun collocations. Zareva (2014) found that L1 congruence affected the collocational knowledge, both receptive and productive, of advanced Arab users of English. Yet these studies mostly target verb-noun, adjective-noun, or general grammatical collocations, and few compare receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations specifically.

Evidence from Morocco is scarcer still. Boudribila et al. (2018) found that 464 BA students from seven universities had considerable problems producing adjective-noun collocations, but receptive knowledge and prepositional collocations were not examined. El Fakir and Brigui (2023) tested 70 Moroccan EFL learners on verb-preposition collocations with an acceptability judgment test and a gap-filling test; receptive knowledge was significantly wider than productive knowledge, and highly frequent collocations were acquired more readily than less frequent ones. Smirkou and Smirkou (2018) traced copula omission among Moroccan secondary-school learners to transfer from Moroccan Arabic. L1 influence is thus a plausible, though untested, factor in other grammatical domains.

Three weaknesses in the literature are addressed by the present study. Most evidence on the receptive-productive gap comes from Thai, Turkish, Iranian, and Malaysian samples, which leaves its applicability to Moroccan learners uncertain. The conflicting findings of Zhang and Sukying (2021) and Talakoob and Koosha (2017), together with Lee's (2025) proficiency effect, show that results from one proficiency level cannot be assumed to hold at another, and first-semester university students have not been studied in this respect. Finally, the diversity of instruments noted by Ding et al. (2024) limits comparability. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only one published study has compared receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations among Moroccan university learners (El Fakir & Brigui, 2023); the present study re-examines that contrast with a new sample and a correction for guessing in the receptive measure.

2.5 Research questions and hypotheses

On the basis of this review, the study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference between first-year Moroccan EFL learners' receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations?

H1: Receptive scores will be significantly higher than productive scores (Lee, 2025; Zhang & Sukying, 2021), including after correction for guessing.

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between receptive and productive knowledge of these collocations?

H2: The two sets of scores will be positively correlated (Zhang & Sukying, 2021), though not to the point of being equivalent (Lee, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study used a quantitative, within-subjects design: every participant completed a productive and a receptive test of the same collocational type, verb-preposition collocations. Test scores were the dependent variables, and the receptive-productive contrast was the independent variable.

3.2 Participants and ethical considerations

The participants were 100 first-year BA students of English in their first semester at the Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco. Convenience sampling was used to recruit them. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 (M = 19.76, SD = 0.89), and 65% were female. All spoke Moroccan Arabic (Darija) and held the baccalaureate, having studied English as a foreign language in Moroccan secondary schools for about four years.

Participation was voluntary; all students gave informed consent after being told that the results would not affect their grades, and identities were anonymised through participant codes.

3.3 Target collocations

The targets were verb-preposition collocations, defined as combinations of a lexical verb and a required preposition (e.g., *depend on*). Some items were adapted from Sridhanyarat (2018), and the rest were developed by the researcher. The status of each item as an established collocation was verified against the *BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (Benson et al., 1986) and the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (Crowther et al., 2002). Twenty items made up each test. The two tests used different sets of items, except for four collocations that appeared in both and served as common items for comparing performance across the tests.

3.4 Instruments

Receptive test. The receptive test was a 20-item acceptability judgment test (AJT), a format used in earlier collocation research (Jiang, 2022; Wolter & Gyllstad, 2013). Each item presented a sentence with an underlined collocation, and students judged it as acceptable or unacceptable. Eight items were acceptable collocations (including *seek for*), and twelve were unacceptable.

Productive test. The productive test was a 20-item gap-filling test without options. Students completed each sentence with the preposition that fitted the context. The contexts were restricted so that only one answer was possible.

Shared items. Four collocations appeared in both tests. The remaining items differed. This limitation is discussed in Section 5.2.

Scoring. Both tests were scored dichotomously (1 = correct, 0 = incorrect). Blank answers were counted as incorrect. Because a judgment task carries a 50% chance of a correct answer, the receptive test was scored in three ways:

(1) **Raw accuracy:** the percentage of correct judgments, for comparability with earlier studies.

(2) **Guessing-corrected score:** the hit rate (acceptable items correctly accepted) minus the false-alarm rate (unacceptable items not rejected, including blanks), multiplied by 100 (Snodgrass & Corwin, 1988). Unlike a simple correct-minus-incorrect formula, it is zero for any response pattern unrelated to item acceptability, including a constant tendency to answer "acceptable", which matters here because the test contained unequal numbers of acceptable (8) and unacceptable (12) items.

(3) **Correct rejection rate:** the percentage of unacceptable items correctly rejected, which shows whether learners can detect incorrect prepositions and is unaffected by a bias towards answering "acceptable".

The productive test, which has no response options to choose from, needed no correction. Reliability, estimated with the Kuder-Richardson 20 formula (KR-20), was .84 for the productive test and .62 for the receptive test.

Scoring audit. Productive answers were scored against the target preposition; misspelled or multi-word answers were marked incorrect. Microsoft Forms' automatic scores were audited against the raw responses. Two answer-key errors were corrected: receptive item 16 (*apologized up*, which is unacceptable) had been keyed as acceptable, and productive item 14 (*arrived ___ Paris*, for which *arrived in Paris* is the acceptable collocation) had been keyed as *at* instead of the target *in*. Three isolated entries that contradicted the key were also corrected. Results based on the scores exactly as exported are reported in Table 3.

Materials. Some items were adapted from a similar previous study, namely Sridhanyarat (2018), while the researcher developed other items based on collocations that Moroccan learners frequently misuse in classroom writing activities.

3.5 Procedure

Data were collected in November 2025 in Paragraph Writing sessions. Both tests were administered digitally through Microsoft Forms in a classroom under the supervision of the researcher, so students could not use other devices or consult one another. Each student first completed the productive test (20 minutes), so that the receptive test could not supply answers, and then the receptive test (20 minutes). Participants' scores were anonymous.

3.6 Data analysis

Data were analysed in Python (SciPy). Normality of the difference scores was checked with the Shapiro-Wilk test.

RQ1. A paired-samples *t*-test compared receptive and productive scores, with Cohen's *d* for paired data (*d*) and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval (10,000 resamples). Because the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that some difference scores departed from normality, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test with the rank-biserial correlation (RBC) was run alongside each *t*-test. The comparison was run on (a) raw receptive accuracy, (b) the guessing-corrected receptive score, and (c) the correct rejection rate. Raw accuracy was also tested against the 50% chance level (one-sample *t*-test). As an exploratory post hoc analysis, the hit rate on the eight acceptable items was also compared with productive scores. Four sensitivity analyses examined whether conclusions depended on scoring decisions: (S1) the scores exactly as exported by Forms; (S2) removal of items whose key was doubtful (receptive items 16 and 20; productive items 3, 9, 14, and 16); (S3) exclusion of the two students with ten or more blank responses; and (S4) a lenient productive key that also accepted plausible alternatives (*work at*, *comment about*, *arrive at*, *ask for*).

Shared items. For the four collocations tested in both formats, McNemar's exact test compared the number of students who answered correctly receptively but not productively with the number who showed the reverse pattern, item by item, with a Bonferroni-adjusted significance level ($\alpha = .0125$).

RQ2. A Pearson correlation (with Spearman's rho as a check) examined the relationship between receptive and productive scores. For all other analyses, the significance level was set at $p < .05$. With $N = 100$, a sensitivity analysis indicated 80% power to detect a paired effect of about $d = 0.28$ ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed).

4. Results/Findings

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1. Learners produced the target preposition on 60.3% of the productive items on average (*SD* = 21.5) and judged 66.8% of the receptive items correctly (*SD* = 15.7). Response bias is visible in the receptive scores: learners accepted 74.0% of the acceptable collocations (hit rate) but correctly rejected only 61.9% of the unacceptable ones, so they wrongly accepted 38.1% of the incorrect forms. Raw receptive accuracy was significantly above the 50% chance level, $t(99) = 10.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$. Item-level accuracy varied widely: productive accuracy ranged from 19% (*aim at*) to 95% (*worry about*), and receptive accuracy ranged from 38% (rejecting *laughing on*) to 95% (accepting *deal with*).

Table 1

Summary statistics for productive and receptive scores (N = 100)

Measure	*M*	*SD*	Range	KR-20
Productive test (% correct)	60.3	21.5	5.0-100.0	.84
Receptive: raw accuracy (%)	66.8	15.7	10.0-95.0	.62
Receptive: guessing-corrected score	35.9	29.7	−79.2 to 91.7	—
Receptive: correct rejection rate (%)	61.9	21.9	8.3-100.0	—
Receptive: hit rate (%)	74.0	16.8	12.5-100.0	—

Note. KR-20 = Kuder-Richardson 20 reliability coefficient, given for the two 20-item tests only. The guessing-corrected score equals the hit rate minus the false-alarm rate (× 100), with 0 indicating chance-level discrimination. The correct rejection rate rests on the 12 unacceptable items, and the hit rate on the 8 acceptable items.

4.2 Receptive versus productive knowledge (RQ1)

The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated a modest departure from normality in the raw difference scores ($W = .972$, $p = .029$), so Wilcoxon tests are reported alongside the *t*-tests (Table 2). Raw receptive accuracy exceeded productive accuracy by 6.5 percentage points, $t(99) = 2.31$, $p = .023$, $d = 0.23$ (a small effect); the Wilcoxon test gave the same conclusion, $p = .009$, RBC = .31. About 60% of the learners scored higher receptively than productively.

This advantage disappeared once guessing was taken into account. The guessing-corrected receptive score (35.9) was lower than the productive score (60.3), $t(99) = -6.33$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.63$. The correct rejection rate (61.9%) did not differ from productive accuracy, $t(99) = 0.50$, $p = .616$, $d = 0.05$. In the exploratory comparison, the hit rate on acceptable items (accepting correct collocations) was higher than productive accuracy by 13.8 percentage points, $t(99) = 5.11$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$. H1 was therefore only partly supported: a small raw advantage was found, but it did not hold after correction for guessing or when unacceptable items were considered.

Table 2

Paired comparisons of receptive and productive scores (receptive minus productive)

Comparison	Mean difference [95% CI]	*t*(99)	*p*	Cohen's *d* [95% CI]	Wilcoxon *p*
Raw receptive accuracy	6.5 [0.9, 12.1]	2.31	.023	0.23 [0.03, 0.47]	.009
Guessing-corrected receptive score	−24.3 [−32.0, −16.7]	−6.33	< .001	−0.63 [−0.84, −0.46]	< .001
Correct rejection rate	1.7 [−4.9, 8.2]	0.50	.616	0.05 [−0.14, 0.27]	.383
Hit rate (exploratory)	13.8 [8.4, 19.1]	5.11	< .001	0.51 [0.29, 0.78]	< .001

Note. Differences are expressed in percentage points; for the corrected score, they are points on the corrected scale. Each receptive score was compared with productive accuracy. Confidence intervals for *d* are bootstrap percentile intervals (10,000 resamples).

Table 3 shows how the conclusions held up across scoring decisions. The small raw advantage was significant under the primary scoring and under two alternatives (S1, S3), but not when doubtful items were removed (S2) or plausible alternative answers were accepted (S4). The reversal after correction for guessing was found in every scenario.

Table 3

Sensitivity of the main comparisons to scoring decisions

Scenario	Productive *M*	Raw receptive *M*	Raw gap: *d* (*p*)	Corrected receptive *M*	Corrected gap: *d*
Primary analysis	60.3	66.8	0.23 (.023)	35.9	−0.63
S1: Forms scoring as exported	58.5	64.0	0.20 (.046)	28.7	−0.81
S2: doubtful items removed	62.0	66.2	0.14 (.158)	35.7	−0.63
S3: two students with many blanks excluded	60.1	67.3	0.27 (.008)	37.1	−0.65
S4: lenient productive key	64.0	66.8	0.10 (.318)	35.9	−0.74

Note. Gap = receptive minus productive. *p* values are from paired-samples *t*-tests. Means are percentages (corrected receptive: corrected scale).

4.3 Items tested in both formats

Table 4 reports, for the four collocations tested in both formats, how many students were correct in only one format. After Bonferroni adjustment (α = .0125), only *participate in* differed significantly: 88% of the students produced it correctly, but only 55% rejected the incorrect *participate on* (McNemar $p < .001$). *Depend on* showed a productive advantage that was not significant after adjustment ($p = .023$), and *believe in* and *comment on* showed no significant differences ($p = .307$ and $p = .418$, respectively). For *comment on* and *participate in*, the receptive item presented the incorrect form (*comment in*, *participate on*), so receptive success meant rejecting it.

Table 4

Students' performance on the four collocations tested in both tests

Collocation	Receptive %	Productive %	Receptive only	Productive only	Both	Neither	McNemar *p*
depend on	78	90	6	18	72	4	.023
believe in	91	85	15	9	76	0	.307
comment on	75	69	22	16	53	9	.418
participate in	55	88	8	41	47	4	< .001

Note. Cells show percentages or numbers of students ($N = 100$). "Receptive only" = correct on the receptive item but not on the productive item. McNemar's exact test; Bonferroni-adjusted α = .0125.

4.4 Relationship between receptive and productive knowledge (RQ2)

Receptive and productive scores were not significantly correlated, $r(98) = -0.13$, $p = .213$, 95% CI [−0.31, 0.07] (Spearman's $\rho = -0.08$, $p = .420$). The guessing-corrected receptive score was also unrelated to productive scores, $r(98) = -0.10$, $p = .299$. H2 was therefore not supported.

4.5 Discussion of the findings

The aim was to determine whether first-semester Moroccan EFL learners know verb-preposition collocations better receptively than productively. The answer depends on how receptive knowledge is measured. In terms of raw accuracy, the direction matches the receptive advantage reported for Thai learners (Zhang & Sukying, 2021; Tasanameelarp & Girgin, 2025), for advanced Arabic-speaking learners (Alsakran, 2011), and for Moroccan learners (El Fakir & Brigui, 2023), but the advantage here was small ($d = 0.23$), disappeared under two of the four alternative scoring scenarios, and did not survive correction for guessing. H1 was therefore only weakly supported. Because the earlier Moroccan study also scored judgments as raw accuracy, its significant advantage may partly reflect the acceptance tendency documented here, a possibility that could be checked by re-scoring those data with the guessing-corrected score.

Two features of the acceptability judgment task help to explain this. First, learners tended to accept sentences. They accepted correct collocations readily (hit rate 74.0%) but wrongly accepted 38.1% of the incorrect ones. This tendency inflates raw accuracy and, once corrected for, pushes the receptive score below the productive score. The corrected score is set at zero for chance performance, whereas productive accuracy has no comparable guessing component. The comparison is therefore deliberately conservative and is not proof that receptive knowledge is weaker. The correct rejection rate, which does not depend on the acceptance tendency, matched productive accuracy (61.9% vs. 60.3%). Second, in the exploratory comparison, recognising correct forms (hit rate) was easier than producing them, which is the classical receptive advantage. What the gap looks like thus depends on what counts as receptive knowledge. Recognising a correct preposition seems easier than producing it, but rejecting a plausible incorrect one is about as hard. This fits Lee's (2025) view that receptive and productive collocation knowledge are related but distinct constructs. It also fits the observation that instruments differ widely across studies (Ding et al., 2024).

The item-level results point the same way. Students produced participate in correctly far more often (88%) than they correctly rejected participate on (55%). Producing a collocation correctly therefore does not guarantee rejecting a similar incorrect one. Such a pattern fits accounts in which learners' preposition knowledge is partial and tied to familiar combinations rather than to the meaning of the preposition (Sicherl, 2004; Mueller, 2011). Zhang and Sukying (2021) reported a positive relationship between the two kinds of scores, whereas no correlation emerged here ($r = -0.13$). This study cannot separate the possible reasons. One is the modest reliability of the receptive test (KR-20 = .62), which limits any correlation. Another is that the two tests used mostly different items. A third is the fragmentary, item-specific knowledge expected of first-semester learners. Explanations in terms of L1 influence (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010; Zareva, 2014) are plausible for verb-preposition collocations but remain untested here, since L1 congruency was not analysed as a variable.

4.6 Pedagogical implications

Productive accuracy was only about 60%, and several items were produced correctly by fewer than 40% of the students (*aim at*, *collide with*, *consent to*, *object to*), so retrieval-based practice such as gap-filling without options, followed by feedback, remains warranted. Learners also tended to accept incorrect prepositions, which argues for explicit error-detection and correction tasks. In such tasks, learners judge and repair sentences containing plausible but wrong prepositions. Teaching prepositions within collocations, rather than in isolation, may help (Boers & Webb, 2018; see also Saed & Yassin, 2017, for a small classroom study of prepositions of time and place that had no control group). In assessment, judgment tests should not be treated as measuring an easier kind of knowledge. Scores need to be read with response bias in mind, ideally as guessing-corrected scores or as separate hit and correct rejection rates.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusions

First-semester Moroccan EFL undergraduates' receptive and productive knowledge of verb-preposition collocations was compared here. Receptive scores showed a small raw advantage (6.5 percentage points, $d = 0.23$). That advantage was sensitive to scoring decisions. It did not hold after correction for guessing or when unacceptable items were considered, and the two kinds of knowledge were not significantly correlated. The main contribution is to show that the way receptive knowledge is measured shapes the size, and even the direction, of the receptive-productive difference, because learners tend to accept incorrect prepositions. Instruction should combine retrieval practice with error-detection tasks. Researchers who use judgment tasks should report guessing-corrected scores or separate hit and correct rejection rates.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Several limitations apply. First, only four collocations appeared in both tests. The remaining items differed, so part of any difference may reflect item difficulty rather than knowledge type, although the shared items were analysed separately. Second, the receptive test had modest reliability (KR-20 = .62) and unequal numbers of acceptable and unacceptable items. The corrected score and the productive percentage are also not strictly equivalent scales. Third, scoring involved decisions that affected the raw comparison (answer-key corrections and plausible alternative answers), although the sensitivity analyses make these effects visible. Fourth, the participants came from one institution through convenience sampling, which limits generalisability. Fifth, frequency and L1 congruency were not analysed, so claims about the sources of difficulty remain tentative, and no delayed test examined retention. Future research could test the same collocations in several receptive and productive formats, include frequency and L1 congruency (and the possible role of French) as variables, analyse the incorrect prepositions that learners produce, and compare first-year learners with more advanced cohorts.

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