ELT Research Paper 1

The knowledge and Use of collocations and their Relation with English Speaking Proficiency among Upper-intermediate to Advanced Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations and their relation to the speaking proficiency among upper-intermediate to advanced Iranian EFL learner students at Sadr Institute of higher Education. It is worth mentioning that all of the students had already passed placement test and were preparing themselves for IELTS exam. Data for the study were collected from 20 students. The participants were asked to take 2 tests. The first one was a lexical collocational test for estimating the knowledge of lexical collocation. Another one was an IELTS speaking test, to collect the participants ‘use of lexical collocation and understanding their speaking fluency. Data analysis for correlations between the subjects’ knowledge of lexical collocations and their speaking proficiency showed that there was a significantly positive correlation between students ‘knowledge of lexical collocation and their speaking proficiency in IELTS success. Current study concluded that knowledge of lexical collocation play a significant role in developing speaking proficiency particularly in IELTS exam.

Key words: collocation, lexical collocation, speaking proficiency
1. Introduction

Collocation has become one of the central concerns in EFL teaching and learning for years. Many researchers have understood the influence and importance of collocation and the need for collocation teaching in EFL courses (Brown, 1974; Natinger, 1980; Bahns & Eldaw, 1983; Howarth, 1988).

University students in Iran are currently required to pass an English proficiency test for studying abroad. Among various English proficiency tests available, IELTS & TOEFL are the most well-known among students. In fact speaking can noticeably change score of the examinees; so mastery over collocations can help language learners speak more fluently (Brown, 1974; Sung, 2003). Since use and knowledge of collocation is an inevitable part of every language which can be figured as one of the key points for differentiating native from non-native, it’s a fundamental way for EFL learners to become a native like speaker.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Background

Language speaking proficiency is the high ability to speak in a language. Additionally, we consider a person proficient in speaking who has mastery over range, accuracy, fluency, interaction and coherence. Range is having knowledge in giving ideas in differing linguistic forms and good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. Accuracy is having grammatical control of complex language. Fluency is expressing him/herself with a natural colloquial flow. By interaction one should interact with ease and skill. Coherence is being able to create coherent and cohesive discourse, using wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices.

If we want to define collocation in terms of categories, we have to divide it in two. Some regard it by the aspect of concurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) perceived collocation from the side of discourse. From the view of partnership, Mitchell (1971) defined it from the aspect of vocabulary and grammar. Others viewed it from lexicon. Mitchell (1971) regarded collocation as a lexico-grammatical unit. Firth as the first pioneer for presenting collocation, defined it as a meaning of the word; He said collocation is an “abstraction at the syntagmatic level” and is not directly connected to the “conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words” (p. 196). Additionally, he mentioned that lexical
meaning is taken from adjacency of other words in context. McIntosh (1961) said that” words have only a certain tolerance of compatibility” which is called the recurring lexical patterns “ranges” (p. 33). For instance, the words such as mental, iron, lava, may be matched by the adjective molten. Therefore, “our knowledge of this range and other such as the range of postage and feather enable us to dismiss the molten postage feather scored, weather as unacceptable and uncontextualizable. (p.33)” McIntosh (1961) and Palmer (1976) classified collocations on the basis of the restrictions on words.

As far as the term “collocation” is concerned, it is often defined as either “an arbitrary and recurrent word combination” (Benson, 1990). Some defined collocations from the aspect of partnership or co-occurrence of words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified collocations from the aspect of discourse or the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other” (Sinclair, 1991). Peter Newmark (1988) defines collocations as two or more words that go happily or naturally with each other, for example, pay a visit. Taylor (1997) defines collocations in terms of Saussure’s well-known dichotomy between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of lexical items.

In the present study, the definition of collocations focuses on co-occurrence of words, and the classification of collocations is based on the categories of collocations proposed by Benson et al (1986b). They classified English collocations into two major groups: lexical collocations and grammatical collocations. Lexical collocations are further divided into seven types, and grammatical collocations are divided into eight types. Lexical collocations consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, such as acquire knowledge, arouse my interest, relieve pressure, high ambitions and follow closely. On the other hand, grammatical collocations are phrases containing a dominant word, such as a noun, an adjective, or a verb and a preposition or grammatical structure like an infinitive or clause, such as feel sorry to, listen to the music, major in, and had to write. In sum, using collocation to develop speaking skill especially among IELT & TOEFL examinees can noticeably help them be more successful in perusing their desirable score.

2.2 Previous studies

There were a lot of empirical researches on collocation (Channell, 1981; Aghbar, 1990; Biskup, 1992) in his study had the same result like Channell’s study. He used a cloze test to
know knowledge of verb-noun collocations among ESL learners. He hired 27 faculty members, 44 native undergraduate and 97 advanced ESL students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The findings showed that ESL learners could provide a few word combinations, and they could comprehend well only on the items where the verb ‘get’ was most likely predictable, like get knowledge, get independence, and get admission.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) used translation and a cloze task to assess German post-secondary learners ‘Knowledge of 15 English verb-noun collocations. Subjects were 58 German university EFL students in two groups. One group of 24 students took a cloze test containing 10 sentences; each had a verb+noun collocation with the verb missing. Another group took a German-English translation test consisting of 15 sentences, each made up by a verb+noun collocation in a sentence to be translated into English. The findings showed that all the learners couldn’t answer well, which showed their unsatisfactory knowledge of lexical collocations. Then they concluded that such problems are not just for learners, collocation is a problem, even for advanced students; even teachers have difficulty dealing with this problem (1993, p. 102).

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) used a fill in the blank test and an Arabic translation task to test Jordanian EFL students’ knowledge of English lexical collocations. The fill in the blank test involved eleven collocations which was given to Group A, thirty-four seniors and juniors in English major, however an Arabic translation task was given to Group B, twenty-three seniors in English major at the Higher College for the accreditation of Teachers. The results showed that both ESL learners and English teachers were seriously deficient in knowledge of collocations.

Gitsaki (1997) hired 275 Greek learners in junior high school at 3 levels—post-beginning, intermediate, and post-intermediate, and for material used essay writing to obtain free production of collocations, a translation test to measure cued production of collocations, and a fill in the blank test to extract accuracy in the use. Results showed that L2 learners had problem in producing acceptable collocations.

The outcomes were replicated in Yuan and Lin’s (2001) research. He used 32 English-majors and 56 non-English-majors at Ming Chuan University (MCU) in Taiwan. At which they were asked to finish a translation test involving 15 verbal collocations. Results
revealed that participants used only a few collocations (English-major, 34%; Non-English-major, 30%). It was a pity that English majors were not by far better than non-English majors.

Empirical studies on collocations were started by Zhang’s doctoral dissertation (1993). He investigated the possible correlation between the knowledge and use of English collocations and the quality of college freshmen’s writing at university in Pennsylvania. He used 60 freshmen and grouped them into two groups: 30 native and 30 non-native English speakers. The task given to everyone was one fill-in-the-blank collocation test to measure colloca tional knowledge and one writing task to know the use of collocations and writing proficiency. He understood that native English writers were by far better than non-native writers on the collocation test, and for the use of collocations in their writing, native writers did better than the non-native writers. Then he concluded that colloca tional knowledge is a sign of proficiency in writing among college freshmen. A similar research was later done by Al-Zahrani (1998) and Sung (2003).

Farghal and Obiedat (1995) hired 57 Arab university students of English for weighing their knowledge of English collocations. They were divided into 2 groups. Group A had English fill-in-the-blank test. Group B were asked to translate Arabic sentences into English. Farghal and Obiedat (1995) found that they used 4 lexical simplification strategies. Synonymy was used more by both groups. The other strategies were transfer and paraphrasing, used to varying extent by the two groups. The conclusion drawn in the study was that L2 learners cannot cope easily with collocations.

In another study, Zhang Al-Zahrani (1998) studied lexical collocations on 81 Saudi EFL students and the relationship between the knowledge of lexical collocations and their general language proficiency 50 fill-in-the-blank ‘verb + noun’ lexical collocations, a paper-and-pencil TOEFL-like writing test and an Institutional Version of paper-and-pencil TOEFL test were used. Then he found that the knowledge of lexical collocations increased along with the subjects’ academic years, and there was a strong relationship between the students’ knowledge of collocations and their language proficiency.
Sung (2003) examined the knowledge and use of English lexical collocations in relation to speaking proficiency of international students enrolled in a university in Pittsburgh area. A total of 24 native and 72 non-native English speakers participated in her study. Each subject completed two tests: one collocation test and one speaking test. The first test was used to measure the subjects’ knowledge of lexical collocations while the latter was used to elicit the subjects’ use of lexical collocations and measure their speaking proficiency. Her results showed that there was a significant correlation between the knowledge of lexical collocations and the subjects’ speaking proficiency.

Mahmoud (2005) hired Arab student who were studying English language. Then he understood that 80% of the collocational errors were because of lexical collocation and 61% of the inappropriate uses (10.71% grammatical and 53.3% lexical collocations) were due to L1 transfer.

2.3 Empirical studies on collocations on Iranian learners

Ghonsooli (2004) in his study attempted to investigate the effect of collocational instruction on Iranian EFL learners' English writings through quantitative as well as qualitative methods in two phases: product phase and process phase. 30 participants from the English Department of College of Ferdowsi University (in Iran) were involved in this study. Over the course of 21 teaching sessions, they were exposed to their course materials including audio, video and textual input. During exploration of those materials, the experimental students (N= 17) were made aware of word combinations, specifically, collocations through different techniques while in the control group (N=13), the conventional slot and filler approach was upheld. According to the results demonstrated by the statistical program, at the product phase, the experimental subjects got higher mean score in their collocation achievement test as well as test of written English (post-test stage) after collocational instruction and at the process phase, the graphic comparisons of subjects' mean scores at each writing component showed vocabulary and fluency considerable promotion as a result of collocational instruction.

Koosha and Jafarpour’s (2006) studies were about hiring 200 Iranian university students (in three Universities in Shahrekord) majoring in English who were divided in 2 groups. One group in which prepositions and their collocational patterns were explicitly
taught in English or Farsi. The second group (experimental group) had a data driven-based instruction (treatment), it was shown that learners’ performance on collocation of prepositions is related to their level of proficiency. It was found that Iranian EFL learners used their L2 collocations based on L1. In their study viewed the influence of L1 in collocation of preposition. Finally they understood that data driven approach could be a good solution for this reason also found that more proficient learners were more dominant in collocation.

Keshavarz (2007) in a study investigated the possible relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in writing stories. The participants in the study were 27 PhD Iranian students in a Malaysian university. A specially constructed C-test measured the subjects’ collocational knowledge and the use of collocations was measured by the number of collocations used in essays written by the subjects. For this purpose, participants wrote six different stories in six weeks based on a writing task designed to illicit verb noun collations. The statistical results demonstrated that there exists a strong positive relationship between knowledge of collocations and the use of verb noun collocation in the writing stories.

Shokouhi (2010), in his study had a twofold purpose. The first and foremost was to see whether there exists any correlation between the collocational knowledge and general linguistic knowledge of EFL learners. The second was to reveal which type(s) of collocation was or were more difficult for EFL learners. To this end, 35 subjects, screened by a proficiency test, were given a 90-item multiple-choice test including lexical collocations (noun+noun, noun+verb, verb+noun, and adjective+noun), and grammatical collocations (noun+preposition and preposition+noun). A native speaker checked the final version of the data and necessary corrections were made. The results showed that, a) there was no significant correlation between general linguistic knowledge and collocational knowledge of EFL learners, and b) the grammatical collocations were more difficult than the lexical collocations for learners and from among all subcategories, noun+preposition was the most difficult and noun+verb was the easiest.

Motallebzadeh (2011) in his study attempted comprehensively to investigate the effect of Short Message Service (SMS) on the retention of collocations among Iranian lower
intermediate EFL learners. To this end, forty university students were assigned into experimental and control group. The participants received English collocations as well as definitions and example sentences either on paper or through SMS messages in a scheduled pattern of delivery two times a week during five weeks. After the third and the sixth session of treatment, students received two quizzes either on paper or via SMS in order to show whether the students’ progress during the treatment or not. Students were compared at the end of the study. The results revealed the fact that participants in SMS group could significantly outperform the ones in conventional group.

Eftekhari (2011) in his study aimed to investigate the effect of delexicalisation of common verbs on the collocational competence of Iranian EFL students. It also addressed the effect of proficiency level on their collocational competence. Forty-five English majors with low, intermediate and high proficiency levels at Kashan University participated in this study. To investigate their collocational knowledge, each group received a metalingual judgment test asking them to judge the acceptability of 64 collocations of four common verbs (have, give, take, and make) in delexical uses in English. Moreover, think-aloud protocols were collected to assess the validity of the judgment test which revealed different sources of collocational errors made by the participants. The results indicated that not only knowledge of delexicalised collocations tends to fossilize at an intermediate level but it did not increase with proficiency.

2.4 Statement of the Problem

When we are dealing with collocation, some problems like negative transfer from L1 may happen; so learners may try to use overgeneralization for collocations. There is a wrong habit that students learn words by paying attentions to their definitions without taking a look at the appropriate collocations about that word. They are prone to learn them individually.

When learners read a passage, they won’t notice collocations as meaningful phrases, which would stop them to understand the text. This study tries to the better understanding about collocation which is the principal step to deal with the above problems. EFL learners usually focus on the individual words and disregard other important information. They learn collocations as separate words rather than in a collocational context. Thus, it
seems that native speakers use a top-down strategy whereas EFL learners adopt a bottom-up strategy, (Shokuhi, 2010).

When learners facing collocational problems, they use shorter collocational expressions and utilizing grammar is one of the strategies. Therefore, lack of collocational knowledge forces foreign language learner to get help from grammar to express his/her opinion which consequently results in grammatical errors. Hence, cause of many grammatical errors is lexical deficiency (Lewis, 2000). Finally it’s so clear that unusual word combinations will be created.

2.5 Research Questions
RQ1: Is there any relationship between students’ knowledge of using collocations and their speaking proficiency?
RQ2: Is there any relationship between the use of collocational words and students’s speaking success in IELTS speaking test?

2.6 Research Null Hypotheses

$H_1$: There is no relationship between knowledge and use of collocations and students’ speaking proficiency.

$H_2$: There is no significant relationship between the use of collocational words and students’s speaking success in IELTS speaking test.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study involved 20 people whose proficiency in English was upper-intermediate to advanced level. Among these participants, eleven of them were males and the other nine students were females, who were aged between 20 to 30 from Sadr Institute of higher Education in Isfahan. All of them had a similar goal, and it was preparing for IELTS exam.
3.2 Instruments

In this study, the data were gathered by two tests, one written test about collocational knowledge and another was IELTS speaking test. Pilot study didn’t seem necessary for checking the validity of the instruments as well as to decide on the time needed for participants to finish each test, since IELTS is considered as a standard test which has an acceptable validity and reliability.

3.3 Procedures

The test of collocations for this purpose was designed by using some vocabulary and grammar books including English Vocabulary in Use (Redman, 2003), English Collocation in Use with grammatical and lexical collocations as categorized by McCarthy & Felicity O’ Dell(2005), Zarei (2003) and some of the major books that were studied by EFL majors in Iranian universities or language centers. For instance, the focus of the book "English Collocation in Use" by "Felicity O'Dell & Micheal McCarthy" (2005) is on using collocations in different passages. So there wasn’t any difficulty choosing target collocation. A Collocation test including 90 Items with three types of tests was designed: matching and fill-in-blank.

The order of the collocation type arranged based on their difficulty for learner as can be seen on the table above. Findings showed that free combinations were the easiest to deal with, while pure idioms were the most demanding. In Taiwan, Chen (2002 in his study concluded that adjective +noun and verb+ noun were the most frequent types of lexical collocational errors, and preposition+ noun and verb collocations were the most frequent types of grammatical collocational errors. Zarei (2002) found that prepositions were the most difficult, and ‘adjective + adverbs’ and ‘fixed expressions’ were the easiest for Iranian EFL students. So attention was taken to order the questions based on these findings.

Speaking test

The Speaking module assesses whether candidates can communicate effectively in English. The Assessment takes into account Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Pronunciation. The speaking test toke approximately 15 minutes and is divided into 3 parts.
3.4 Data Analysis

All the data were calculated to give the descriptive statistics of two variables for the study: one variable is the score of collocation test to measure students’ knowledge of using collocation and another is the score of speaking test to demonstrate their degree of speaking development.

3.4.1 Scoring for lexical collocation test

Responses on lexical collocation test were rated, each item was assigned .01 points, totaling 9 points for the 90-item test. The researcher scored the collocation test. By means of the Longman dictionary of contemporary and oxford collocation dictionary which both show how words collocate and included a wide range of samples from different registers and genres.

3.4.2 Scoring of speaking test

IELTS scoring system was adopted to evaluate the subjects’ performance. Spoken data was transcribed and all of the produced lexical and grammatical collocations were counted. The correctness of the collocations was based on oxford collocations dictionary and Longman contemporary, then scores were calculated out of 9. For this purpose, the transcribed papers of subjects voices were reviewed, and they were given a band score of 0 to 9 like a simulated IELTS speaking test, in the following way. What happens is that you get a score out of 9 for each of the criteria, they are added together and then that score is divided by 4 which are about

Grammar: 9 Vocabulary: 9 pronunciation: 9 coherence: 9

9+9+9+9 = 36 and 36 divided by 4 equals 9.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Research questions

RQ1: Is there any relationship between students’ knowledge of using collocations and their speaking proficiency?

RQ2: Is there any relationship between the use of collocational words and students’s speaking success in IELTS speaking test?
4.2 The Results of the Correlational Analysis

The Appendix at the end of the paper shows the result of the collocation and the speaking test scores administered to the participants. Variables of data set is very highly correlated, if the correlation coefficient $r$ whose magnitude lies between 0.9 and 1.0; highly correlated, if the correlation coefficient $r$ whose magnitude lies between 0.7 and 0.9; moderately correlated if the $r$ magnitude lies between 0.5 and 0.7; low correlation, if the value of $r$ lies between 0.3 and 0.5 and linear correlation if the magnitude is less than 0.3

![Graph showing the relationship between the scores of collocation test and speaking test](image)

Figure 1. The relationship between the scores of collocation test and speaking test

As it can be seen in the above figure, the scores of collocation test and speaking test experienced the same trend with the significant increase from 5 points, reached the top of average 7.5 points and then dramatically decreased to 9 points. The numbers of good marks from 8 points to 10 points is very limited, which might reveal a limited capability of using collocation and speaking English. However, the emphasis is the positive relation between collocations and speaking; in this positive relationship, high values on one variable are associated with high values on the other and low values on one are associated with low values on the other. So, it’s clear from the graph that that students’ knowledge of using collocation and speaking proficiency is positively correlated. Table 1 below shows the percentage of the correct answers in each category.
Table 1. The percentage of correct answers per category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Collocation</th>
<th>Subtypes</th>
<th>Correct Answers (%)</th>
<th>Total Correct</th>
<th>Mean (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lexical</td>
<td>Noun + Verb Adjective</td>
<td>62.09</td>
<td>225.69</td>
<td>56.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+Noun</td>
<td>55.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verb + Noun</td>
<td>54.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noun + Noun</td>
<td>53.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical</td>
<td>Preposition + Noun</td>
<td>51.66</td>
<td>94.32</td>
<td>47.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noun + Preposition</td>
<td>42.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less fixed collocation</td>
<td>Idiom</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translation task</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results showed that the grammatical collocations were more difficult than the lexical collocations for learners and from among all subcategories, noun+preposition, idioms were the most difficult and noun+verb were the easiest for Iranian EFL learners. The following conclusions can be drawn. Lexical collocations are easier to acquire than grammatical collocations. (The mean percentage for lexical collocations is 56.42 and for grammatical collocations is 47.16; on the other hand less fixed collocations like idiom and L1 to L2 translation was the most difficult with the mean of 40 which is less than other.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Results of previous studies also showed positive relationship between the knowledge of collocations and other language skills, such as writing (Zhang, 1993); language proficiency (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000), reading (Lien, 2003) and speaking (Sung, 2003). Thus, it could be concluded that knowledge of collocations is indicative of non-native speakers’ language proficiency.
Sung (2003) reported that there was a moderate correlation between the speaking proficiency and the frequency of collocations used in the speaking test among the non-native speakers residing in the United States. One possible explanation might be due to the different focuses on the categories of lexical collocations. Sung (2003) included more subtypes of lexical collocations (L1-L7 based on Benson et al., 1997) in her recording of students’ spoken data. In the current study, we looked at the subjects’ L1-L5 subtypes of lexical collocations which are fewer than Sung’s. Another possible explanation might be that the subjects in Sung’s study were residents in the United States; they may be more proficient in English. Still, it is beyond the scope of the current study to draw a concrete conclusion on the relationship between use of collocations and speaking proficiency. Therefore, further larger scale research could investigate the correlation between these two variables.

The results proved the positive relationship between knowledge of collocation and speaking proficiency. In this study the purpose was to see whether there existed any relationship between the Iranian EFL learners knowledge of collocation and their production in speaking, furthermore, the aim was to explore the relationship between the use of collocational knowledge and degree of success among EFL IELTS speaking test. The results showed that a significant correlation existed between their collocational knowledge and production of collocations in general and their speaking production.

The results of the previous studies (Loan, 2011) showed that a noticeable correlation existed between the EFL learners knowledge of collocations and speaking proficiency. Sung (2003) and Hsuans Chiu (2006) examined the knowledge of lexical collocations and its relation to the speaking proficiency of the Taiwanese international students. They found that learners apply their knowledge of collocation in their oral productions, and in general the production of collocation.

Based on the findings of current study, an insignificant correlation existed among participants ‘production and use of collocation whose score of IELTS speaking reckoned between 1 to 5.5 .This means that the participants do not put into use of their perception of collocations when producing collocations in speaking. Therefore, we can understand that collocational knowledge may not be a good factor for measuring their speaking proficiency. These findings are in line with the findings of previous studies (Sung, 2003).
References


## Appendix

### Result of the Collocations and the speaking test scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Scores of collocations test</th>
<th>Scores of final speaking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
N=20

\[ \sum x = 303.2 \text{ (x : collocation test score)} \]

\[ \sum y = 322 \text{ (y : final speaking test score)} \]

\[ \sum xy = 2321.65 \]

\[ \sum x^2 = 2470 \]

\[ \sum y^2 = 2488 \]

r=0.5998