



# English collocations: A novel approach to teaching the language's last bastion



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## ABSTRACT

Collocations are a class of idiomatic expressions comprised of a sequence of words which, for mostly arbitrary reasons, occur together in a prescribed order. Collocations are not necessarily grammatical and/or cannot be generated through knowledge of rules or formulae. Therefore, they are often not easily mastered by EFL learners and typically only dealt with during the latter phase of second language apprenticeship. Literature has mostly examined the phenomenon of collocations from one of two perspectives. First, there are studies focusing on error analysis and contingent pedagogical advice. Second, there is research concerned with theory development; a genre associated with a specific methodological limitations. This study reports on data pertaining to a novel approach to learning collocations; one based on a learner's incidental discovery of such structures in written texts. Our research question is: will students who have been introduced to and practiced specific collocations in reading texts be inclined to naturally use such exemplars appropriately in novel/unfamiliar subsequent contexts? Findings have implications for EFL teachers and those concerned with curriculum development.

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## 1. Introduction

Moving from being functional in a language to approximating native-speaker like fluency is a Holy Grail objective for those seeking authentic bilingualism. There is literature which suggests that, for most adult non-native speakers with enough time, it is relatively straightforward to become proficient in English through gaining a basic working knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation [21]. However, there is also research indicating that students often struggle to move beyond being merely able to get-by and rarely reach a point where they can pass themselves off as totally conversant in their second language [47].

Applied linguistics scholars advise that a key element of natural fluency in English is mastery of collocations in both their oral and written forms [32,34]. Collocations are a class of idiomatic expression. They contain two or more words that commonly, and for arbitrary reasons, occur together as a standard unit of meaning,

i.e. heavy smoker (not strong smoker) and strong tea (not heavy tea) etc.

This study examines the learner's use of collocations in written rather than oral applications. Its findings suggest that raising awareness about such structures to EFL students may be more important than has been suggested [8,48]. Indeed, the study's results indicate that quite often EFL learners, particularly at the initial stages of their apprenticeship, do not realize that ready-made expressions such as collocations exist in English. Instead, they may combine words that do not typically occur together and consequently produce unnatural sounding, although still meaningful, utterances which meet with ire from native English speakers, i.e. *quick food* instead of *fast food* and *fast look* instead of *quick look*, etc.

The best means of efficiently achieving mastery of collocations is somewhat unclear. It seems likely that awareness raising – and the mere practice of particular word combinations – will result in improved performance when students are asked to reproduce learnt expressions in test situations. If this is the case, the instructor faces a concern about predictive validity. Specifically, it may be that it is possible to do well on a formalized test but not manifest enduring consequential linguistic improvement. However, awareness-raising combined with exposure to certain exemplar

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phrases may result in meaningful and practical linguistic change; change which would be revealed outside the classroom. In this article, we report on the findings of a study which tests this hypothesis. Our research question is: will students who have been introduced to and practiced specific collocations in reading texts<sup>1</sup> be inclined to naturally use such exemplars appropriately in novel/unfamiliar subsequent contexts?

Seventy 18-21 year-old students at Gulf University of Science and Technology in Kuwait participated in this study. The research paradigm used a pre-test/post-test field experiment protocol. The participants were tested on their use of 41 English collocational expressions found in two reading texts in an intermediate writing course extending over 48 tuition hours. Researchers divided participants into experimental and control groups and asked those in each condition to rewrite the two texts, once at the beginning of their English language instruction course and again at the end. Students in the experimental group practiced use of collocations during their 16-week course whereas those in the control group did not. Results suggest that exposure to collocations does lead to a natural inclination to use them appropriately in subsequent novel settings. The study's results index such implicit learning.

This article has five sections. The first, the Literature Review, gives an overview of the nature of collocations and highlights key findings which provide context for the present project. Second, the Methodology section provides detail about what the researchers did in this study together with relevant rationale. Third, the Results section presents raw data pertaining to participant improvement on their use of collocations and relevant analysis. Fourth, the Discussion section interprets analyses and places them in context. The fifth section is the Conclusion where suggestions are offered on how to introduce English collocations to EFL learners in circumstances where the goal is to promote natural, native speaker-like writing and sentence formation. The conclusion also provides EFL instructors with novel insights into instructional techniques and proposes future research agendas.

## 2. Literature review

The notion of collocation is typically viewed as an aspect of “idiomatic” English. In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Hornby [24] defines the adjective “idiomatic” as referring to “using, containing or denoting expressions that are natural to a native speaker: he spoke fluent, idiomatic English”. An EFL learner, however, may produce some expressions that are described as “grammatical” but not necessarily as “idiomatic” [18]. Compare the following two sentences where the goal is to apologize:

- (i) Sorry to keep you waiting.
- (ii) Sorry, I have made you wait for a long time.

Each sentence is grammatical in the sense that it follows prescriptive, often arbitrary, “rules” associated with correct English. However, while the former is “idiomatic” because it sounds natural to a native speaker, the latter is not and sounds rather odd. Hence grammaticality and “idiomaticness” are distinct and, at times, conflicting prescriptions for sentence construction [36,39]. An implication of this aspect of language is that EFL learners should favor idiomatic expressions that sound natural to a native speaker over grammatical non-idiomatic expressions [38].

Idiomatic English is normally demonstrated in the use of

“formulaic sequences” [8,30,34,35,43,48,49]. Such prescriptions include “idioms” (it's Greek to me, we're all in the same boat), “discourse markers” (on the one hand, in conclusion), “lexicalized sentence stems” (can I help you?, how's it going?) “figurative expressions” (as cunning as a fox, as dead as a door nail) “pragmatic formulae” (it's my fault, it won't happen again) and “collocations” (commit suicide, make a mistake). Of these six classes of language sequence, collocations are the focus of this research.

A collocation consists of two or more words that frequently occur together [32,46]. Such combinations sound “natural” to native English speakers and are, therefore, judged as “right”. However, other combinations sound “unnatural” and are, consequently, assessed as “wrong”. Table 1 gives examples of each kind of expression.

The phenomenon of collocations reminds linguists that, in spite of the fact that “fast” and “quick” are usually said to be synonyms, they are not interchangeable in certain linguistic contexts. Hence, while the collocations in Table 1's right column may sound natural to native English speakers, those in the left column often seem discordant. The Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English [36] counsels EFL teachers that they should draw attention to collocations. It says:

choosing the right collocation will make his speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like (...). A student who talks about \*strong rain (rather than heavy rain) may make himself understood, but possibly not without provoking a smile or a correction (...). He will certainly be marked down for it in an exam. (p. vii).

Compared with native speakers, EFL learners tend to choose from a more restricted pool of lexical items when using collocates. For example, Saville-Troike [42] notes that “while the adjective big may be perfectly “correct” semantically and grammatically, it may sound “odd” in written scholarly contexts where a native speaker would use large, major, great, considerable, significant, or some other synonym” (p. 179). In her study of English expressions produced by Hong Kong students, Fan [19]; similarly, concludes that non-native speakers tend to use relatively fewer collocates when speaking in than native speakers. A benefit of EFL learners' using collocations is suggested by Howarth [25]. He maintains that, in academic writing, the use of collocations helps learners produce clearer, more precise messages; a learning objective which is typically at the forefront of the minds of EFL teachers [11].

Collocations are technically divided into two categories: lexical and grammatical [22,27]. While lexical collocations usually refer to the combination of two or more content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, e.g. make mistakes (V+N), heavy smoker (Adj+N), deeply concerned (Adv+Adj), whisper softly (V+Adv); grammatical collocations denote the association of these words with a certain preposition, e.g. interest + in, insist + on, happy + with, independently + of [27]; p. 60). The data generated from this study pertain to both of these categories.

The acquisition of English collocations by L2 learners has been researched by linguists for more than two decades. Collocations may attract such interest because there is consensus that when L2 learners master these structures they will have approximated natural, native speaker-like command of the English language [9,14,15,25,32,34].

Those studying collocations as a linguistic phenomenon generally pursue one of two agendas. First, certain researchers seek to eliminate their L2 learners' collocational errors by analyzing individual mistakes and then offering customized pedagogical advice. Second, others focus on the role of collocation teaching in enhancing language performance by using specific instructional techniques.

<sup>1</sup> In foreign language teaching, a distinction is sometimes made between exercises where a written response is required (e.g. a multiple-choice test) and pure reading texts.

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