

# The Effect of Pre-teaching Vocabulary and Collocations on the Writing Development of Advanced Students

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## Abstract

This study homes in on the lexical aspects of the language shedding light on the effect of pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations on writing development. It was believed that pre-teaching relevant vocabulary and collocations could be used to improve the learners' writing ability, and the researchers have assumed that learners' L2 writing can be developed over time, in response to instruction, feedback, and practice. Forty advanced students in Goldis Institute participated in the study. Two groups were randomly determined as the control and the experimental groups, each with twenty subjects. A pretest was administered to both groups to ensure the initial equivalence of the groups. After twenty sessions of instruction and five composition tests at regular intervals, the researchers found out that the students in experimental group were more successful than those in the control group who used traditional methods. As statistical analysis of the post-test compositions shows, there is significant difference between the two groups indicating that pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations can be a useful means of helping students to improve their writing quality. Results also show that the L2 writing of these students does indeed develop over time, with notable improvements in a number of features.

**Keywords:** prefabricated lexical bundles, collocation and vocabulary pre-teaching

## **I. Introduction**

What second language learners have always struggled with is the lexical aspect of the language which, in contrast to grammatical and phonological aspects to which a great deal of research effort has been allocated, has not aroused the same degree of interest.

Collocational patterns, the cornerstone of every language, instantly recognizable by native speakers, are what second language learners strive to acquire besides facing the challenge of putting together the right chunks. Relying on their native language, making a desperate bid to convey their message, second language learners fail to communicate effectively, and the dearth of what is considered to be the backbone of the language leads to collocational errors and consequently the breakdown of comprehension, since the equivalent lexical items don't always convey the same sense in two languages for various reasons including cultural differences reflected in the vocabulary of every language.

Taking into account the fact that most native speakers, as a matter of fact, endeavor to write accurately and effectively even on what they are well aware of, casts no doubt on the fact that writing, as most second and foreign language learners shrink from, is the most difficult skill. Needless to say, it is not easy at all for a non-native speaker to do something that an average native speaker usually finds a daunting job to do.

That lexical bundles and collocations, mastering of which has always been a challenge for second and foreign language learners, play a crucial role in writing is an undeniable fact. Had students realized the significant importance of them, they would have deliberated on them much more meticulously.

This research, aimed at advanced students whose greatest fear was to be assigned a writing task, homes in on the usefulness of prefabricated lexical bundles and collocations regarding the intended topics which not only help students build confidence but also equip them with some ideas on what to write and how to write it.

Recent research has included examinations into and demonstrations of the importance of lexical collocations for second/foreign language learning (Bahns, 1993; Hill, 1999; Michael Lewis, 1998, 2000; Morgan Lewis, 2001). Collocation, or word combination, is thought to be an important dimension in language learning "because the way words combine in

collocations is fundamental to all language use” (Hill, 2000, p. 49). Moreover, collocation knowledge helps learners to create more native-like sentences (Nation, 2001).

Nation (2001) came up with a categorization of eight aspects of word knowledge, in which “the collocational behavior of a word” is considered to be an important aspect; thus, for a student to acquire word “knowledge,” this knowledge, when full, has to include knowledge of the word’s collocations. It is generally agreed that “native speaker linguistic competence has a large and significant phraseological component” (Michael Lewis, 2000). This is also true with successful advanced learners of a foreign language. In Lewis’s words, these learners normally have “a sufficiently large and significant phrasal mental lexicon” that is readily available to them when they use the language –their “collocational competence.” This competence plays a large part in enabling them to produce language which is “fluent, accurate and stylistically appropriate” an ability that is the hallmark of an advanced language learner.

However important collocation may be, it constitutes great difficulties for foreign language learners. Substantial evidence has been produced that collocation errors make up a high percentage of all errors foreign learners make. Lennon’s (1996) study of a group of German learners of English revealed that even the “advanced” learners used high frequency verbs wrongly, which indicated their “lack of knowledge of collocational probabilities and restrictions.” Bahns and Eldaw’s study (1993) also suggested that “EFL learners’ knowledge of general vocabulary far outstrips their knowledge of collocations.” Marton (1977), in an earlier study, found that although collocations did not seem to cause comprehension problems since his learners could comprehend and translate English sentences containing collocations, the fact that they could not produce those same collocations in English meant that collocations did constitute problems at the level of production. Hendricks and Yang (2002) discovered that L I-Chinese EFL students could not reliably judge whether English “simple verb” collocations were correctly or incorrectly used, and that their production ability was even weaker than their judgment ability. This lack of collocational competence often leads learners to “create longer utterances/ paraphrases because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say” (Michael Lewis, 2000), thus producing what Morgan Lewis (2001) labels as “intermediate” sentences and making them “sound odd but perfectly correct”.

Furthermore, Haswell (1991) stated that the use of recurrent fixed expressions reflects a certain maturity in writing while, on the other hand, the lack of these expressions is a marker of novice writers.

Some researchers (for example, Marton, 1977 and Biskup, 1992) believe that the difficulties and problems in EFL learners' collocation use are at least partly caused by the fact that collocations do not generally constitute comprehension problems, and therefore are largely neglected in the process of foreign language teaching and learning. A second, often-hypothesized and nonsensical reason is that collocations are very difficult to learn, particularly because they are so numerous, nonsensical (i.e., there is often no explanation why some words collocate and others do not) and nuanced that memorizing them all is nearly impossible.

Collocation is not a new concept. Already, in the 1970s, Brown (1974) talked about students' difficulty in using proper collocations. Brown called attention to the difficulty of collocating verbs. She also highlighted the importance of providing collocation exercises to the students and presented a number of collocation activities for the classroom.

Although more recognition has been given to the important role of developing foreign language learners' collocational competence recently, a review of literature reveals that much of the related work is concerned with theoretical discussions of collocational competence and collocation restrictions in the English language (Korosadowicz-Struzynska, 1980; Allerton, 1984; Howarth, 1998) or examinations of the need for collocation learning (Smadja, 1989; Laufer, 1990; Bahns, 1993; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Lennon, 1996) and foreign language learners' use of collocations (Zughoul, 1991; Farfhal & Obiedat, 1995). Little research has been done to examine how collocation learning can actually be promoted in the language classroom. There is a need, therefore, to explore pedagogically viable ways to facilitate EFL learners' collocation learning.

It is this need which this study attempts to address, in inventing and then testing a potentially viable classroom-based process, the collocation awareness raising process. The language awareness frame was chosen to help students learn collocations, as students did seem to have problems in not "noticing" collocated items, and it therefore seemed necessary to first raise this awareness before collocation learning and mastery could take place. A good way to promote the vital mastery of collocation would be to conduct an exercise that first

raised learners' awareness of collocations and then guided them in their incorporation of noticed tokens in their output.

This study aimed to investigate the effect of pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations on writing development of advanced students. The present study set out to seek an appropriate answer to the following question as far as the scope of this article permitted: What is the effect of pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations on writing development of Goldis advanced students?

## **II. Methodology**

### *A. Participants*

Participants in the study included forty female AEC II (advanced English course II) students selected out of a population of 50 learners, aged between 18 and 26, studying English as a foreign language in Goldis Institute whose homogeneity was ensured by employing a pre-test to guarantee their equivalence. The participants taking the same course each term were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups each consisting of 20 subjects. Participants all completed intermediate and upper-intermediate courses studying Passages (I and II), an ideal sequel to New Interchange, each unit of which contains one page of writing activities providing instructions on organizational skills and the basics of composition through various genres.

### *B. Instrumentation*

- . In order to fulfill the objectives of the study, the following instruments were utilized:
  1. The structure part of a TOEFL test administered to ensure the equivalence of the participants including two sections: multiple-choice questions (20 items) error-recognition items (20 items).
  2. Frequent dictionary work was stressed to encourage student autonomy to find certain collocations raising their awareness of them and explore the possible environments of a word.
  3. A whiteboard

4. Collocation exercises including topic-based gapped texts to fill in, texts including collocational errors, matching exercises and word combinations that collocate with a certain verb including one combination that doesn't belong, all of which have been included in the appendix.
5. Landmark Advanced book as a resource for revision of discourse markers.
6. Passages I and II books as a resource for revision of organizational skills in writing.
7. Five writing tasks on intended topics the samples of which have been included in the appendix.

### *C. design*

The present study intended to estimate the effect of the independent variable: the vocabulary and collocations on the dependent variable: the writing skill.

Since the random assignment of the subjects to experimental and control groups was not feasible, an intact between-groups pre-test post-test design was employed. Meanwhile, the groups were randomly determined as the control group and the experimental group to reduce threats to internal validity caused by selection bias. Moreover, a pretest was administered to both groups to ensure the initial equivalence of the groups.

### *D. Procedure*

To begin with, to determine the equivalence of the participants as far as their proficiency was concerned, the structure part of a TOEFL test including two sections was modified to guarantee the homogeneity of 40 subjects selected out of a population of 50 students taking AEC courses in Goldis Institute. The first section included 20 multiple-choice questions marked (A), (B), (C) and (D) and the latter one included 20 error-recognition items containing four underlined words or phrases marked (A), (B), (C) and (D), both containing clear directions. Test takers were required to identify the one which best fit into the sentence in the first set of questions and figure out the one that needed to be changed in order for the sentence to be correct in the second. Having been selected as the homogenous subjects for the

research, the participants randomly fell into two groups: control group and experimental group each consisting of 20 subjects.

The treatment following the pre-test applied in the experimental group, of which the control group was deprived involved choosing a topic lying within our students` interest to heighten their motivation and then stimulating students` schemata in terms of the topic by brainstorming and generating needed vocabulary. Furthermore, a wide circle of key words and phrases lying within their passive knowledge of vocabulary that might have skipped their attention was reintroduced to equip them with some relevant background to facilitate writing. Simultaneous with teaching relevant vocabulary regarding different topics and providing them with useful prefabricated bundles, students` attention was considerably focused on collocations and the restrictions on how different words can be used together.

Subsequently, to evaluate the students` performance of utilizing the input they already received, they were given some vocabulary collocation exercises to complete, prior to having them write about the intended topics. The exercises designed to trigger students` individual autonomous use of collocations and lexical bundles, were to help students investigate how they are used and put the use of them into practice.

The second phase of the research involved assigning a writing task regarding a particular topic whose relevant vocabulary and collocations had already been introduced but the results demonstrated organizational inadequacy, which is why their attention was briefly focused on consolidating organizational skills and observing principles such as unity, coherence, and cohesion in writing drawing their attention to discourse markers they had already been familiarized with in Landmark book (AEC 1) and organizational skills in Passages books.

Having followed the above-mentioned steps throughout 20 sessions of classroom treatment, students of experimental group were assigned to five different writing tasks to see if they could perform differently from the control group assigned to the same tasks.

The scoring system was based upon three major components of writing: frequency of the learned collocations and new vocabulary, variety of them and the organization of paragraphs.

To minimize scorer unreliability, two independent scorers were asked to correct the papers and the means of the two sets of scores were used as a basis for further statistical analysis.

## Results and analysis

The data obtained from the pre-test and the post-test were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences version 17 (SPSS, 17). The results of both pre-test and post-test were analyzed using the independent sample t-test.

Table I  
Descriptive statistics of the pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	20	13.5000	1.46898	.32847
Experimental	20	14.5000	1.84961	.41359

A t-test was run using the total score of the students of the two groups on a grammar TOEFL test adapted from original TOEFL tests to conform to course objectives. The data analysis of the pre-test using SPSS is summarized in table 1 and that of the t-test is presented in table 2. The homogeneity of the groups was confirmed at (.05) significance level.

As the table 1 reveals there is no significant difference between the TOEFL test score means: the mean of the control group was 13.5000 and that of the experimental group was 14.5000. Table 2 shows that the difference was not significant at (0.05) significance level ( $p > .05$ ). It confirms the homogeneity of the groups.

Table II  
 Independent samples t-test for equality of means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.559	.459	-1.893	38	.066	-1.00000	.52815	-2.06919	.06919
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.893	36.147	.066	-1.00000	.52815	-2.07100	.07100

Having confirmed the initial homogeneity of the groups, we found it possible to proceed with two different treatments: the experimental group received treatment while the control group received no treatment. An analysis of the post-test results, in the form of a composition, was done using the same procedures to find any significance difference after the inter-rator reliability of the test scores, computed through the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient  $\rho(p)$ , was acceptably high as follows:

Spearman's rho for the Control group test results = .847

Spearman's rho for the Experimental group test results = .925

Table III  
 Correlation between the scores of scorer1 and scorer2 for control group

			Scorer1	Scorer2
Spearman's rho	Scorer1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.847**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	20	20
	Scorer2	Correlation Coefficient	.847**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	20	20

			Scorer1	Scorer2
Spearman's rho	Scorer1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.847**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	20	20
	Scorer2	Correlation Coefficient	.847**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	20	20

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table IV  
 Correlation between the scores of scorer1 and scorer2 for experimental group

			Scorer1	Scorer2
Spearman's rho	Scorer1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.925**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	20	20
	Scorer2	Correlation Coefficient	.925**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	20	20

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 indicates the descriptive statistics for the total post-test results for the control and experimental groups respectively. As the descriptive statistics indicate, there was a greater variance among the subjects in the control group (1.04710) compared to the experimental group (.62103 ).

Table V  
 Descriptive group statistics of the total post-test results

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Control	20	14.2800	1.04710	.23414
	experimental	20	17.9600	.62103	.13887

Table 6 presents the results of the t-test analysis. As shown in the table, the obtained P value (.000) is less than 0.05 ( $p < .05$ ) and, therefore, there is a significant difference between the groups at a  $\alpha = 0.05$  significance level. In other words, pre-teaching vocabulary and collocation seems to have played a significant role in the development of writing skill in students.

Table VI  
 Independent samples t-test for equality of means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	9.929	.003	-13.518	38	.000	-3.68000	.27222	-4.23109	-3.12891
	Equal variances not assumed			-13.518	30.895	.000	-3.68000	.27222	-4.23528	-3.12472

## **Conclusion**

To answer the research question, an intact between-groups pre-test post-test design was computed to show the effect of pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations on writing development of advanced students. The data analysis of the pre-test showed that the difference was not significant at (0.05) significance level ( $p > .05$ ) which confirmed the homogeneity of the groups. To minimize scorer unreliability, two independent scorers were asked to correct the papers and the means of the two sets of scores were used as a base for the post-test analysis. The data analysis of the post-test showed that the obtained P value (.000) is less than 0.05 ( $p > .05$ ) and, therefore, there is a significant difference between the groups at a  $=0.05$  significance level. In other words, pre-teaching vocabulary and collocation seems to have played a significant role in the development of writing skill in students.

The research findings provide support for the research question; pre-teaching vocabulary and collocations seems to have considerable impact on writing development of advanced students in Goldis Institute and improves the quality of their output appreciably. Although this study was conducted on a small group of students, the results of the study have implications for other EFL learning situations as well, as research suggests that collocation is vital for fluent language use.

Overtly teaching collocations and their use seems imperative, as research suggests it cannot be taken for granted that foreign language learners, after years of English learning, will naturally develop an awareness of collocations. As Biskup (1992: 87) pointed out, collocations usually "pose no specific perception problem" to a learner, and therefore are very often unnoticed; consequently, they may not be available for learners' later recall. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to instructional intervention to raise learners' awareness of collocations. "Noticing" and "becoming aware of" collocations might be the first steps leading to internalizing and learning them.

Raising learners' awareness of collocations by leading them through the whole pre-writing, in-writing and post-writing process helps them "learn to write" and "write to learn". They "learn to write" better when they understand that writing is a recursive process and they can make use of the collocation resources to prepare for writing, achieve better writing sophistication and to edit and revise their mistakes in collocation use. More importantly, they

"write to learn" when the writing process drives them to actively search for suitable collocations. For example, in the pre-writing stage, very often learners are engaged in brainstorming, searching for information, and outlining (planning content). The use of the collocation awareness process encouraged learners to explore in language, looking for useful phrases for the particular genre and theme of the writing at hand. The collocations students noticed and recorded offered them more language learning input as well as adequate resources to aid in expressing their ideas. As famously summed up in Swain and Lapkin's (1995) output hypothesis, learners improve their language production when pushed to use what is not in their current repertoire.

Results suggest that the process does raise learners' collocation awareness throughout and after the writing process and that the quality of student work appreciably increases with the use of collocation tokens. Further, the process helped the learners "learn to write" and "write to learn," becoming more reflective, independent, and "equipped" for learning.

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## Appendix A

A sample of an experimental group`s writing about travelling

( the pre-taught lexical bundles are all in italics)

Travelling undoubtedly has a great influence on our life. Once overcome by the gloominess of *dismal routine of life*, we can *get away from it all*. The time is ripe *to escape the hectic pace of life* and *get the bulk of responsibilities off our chest*. Travelling also opens our mind and eyes to life, *broadening our life experience* and changing our attitude towards life besides the opportunity it provides to touch other people`s lives and familiarize you with other cultures.

The best idea which does wonders for me is relaxing holidays which *soothe the tension, ease the anxiety*, relieving the stress and pressure of *the rat race of city life*. What I like best about relaxing holidays is the *refreshing and revitalizing effect* they have on me. Once back, I can *start everything afresh*.

Having said all this, we can draw this conclusion that travelling plays a crucial role in every individual's life, *injecting energy, hope*, fun and adding variety to their lives and *boosting morale* as well.

## Appendix B

A sample of an experimental group's writing about "*the importance of work in our life*"

Getting a good job based on the qualifications one has is a prime target everyone would like to achieve *at the peak of their youth*. As far as I'm concerned, not only do you need a permanent job as a source of income but also it's a spiritual need and you'll live purposefully. Furthermore, it adds variety to life because making a living and living independently *boosts morale* and *enhances one's prestige*. Moreover, *one gains the respect of every single person* by having a good job. Therefore, as a result of the numerous employed people our economy will prosper and be revitalized.

Unfortunately unemployment has got *fatal consequences* for both individuals and the society. Without a job your life would *lack direction* and would be repetitive. Almost all of the unemployed are complaining about *the mundane monotony of life* and living idly. The effect which joblessness has on society is a controversial issue. As a matter of fact

joblessness which *has its root in* economic instability and recession, gives rise to corruption, addiction and different crimes besides the disruptive influence it has on economic growth.

Also in third world countries underestimating the significant role women play in the society would be a contributory factor in *paralyzing* half of *the society*.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above-mentioned things is that the government should *take drastic measures* to *eradicate joblessness*. Otherwise it would be idle to pretend that the economy expands while people are suffering from joblessness. *Last but not least*, underestimating the crucial role one`s job play in their life is not logical.

## Appendix C

### Collocation exercises

Cross the odd one out in the following exercises:

1. morale                      depress/boost/raise/improve
2. insatiable                  desire/longing/thirst/money
3. squander                   a wish/talents/opportunity/time
4. hope                        abandon/encourage/smash/nurture
5. pain                         abate/persist/linger/forfeit
6. progress                   hamper/intensify/hinder/impede

Match the words in column A that collocate with the ones in column B:

- | A               | B            |
|-----------------|--------------|
| a. soothe       | a. hypocrisy |
| b. dodge out of | b. tension   |

- |                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| c. highly      | c. obstacle         |
| d. treacherous | d. unlikely         |
| e. insuperable | e. a responsibility |

Fill in the blanks using the following words:

accelerate/concerted/parent-bashing/pressure/push/abused/nurture/hothouse

Some children are raised in a family.....in which parents  
.....their children to study hard, putting them under.....,  
making a .....effort to .....their talents and  
.....the learning process.

The resentful ..... teenagers feel emotionally .....