

AN APPLICATION OF COLLOCATIONS IN TEACHING ACADEMIC SPEAKING: A CASE STUDY AT DONGNAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY

BY

Ngoc Lynh Dan Nguyen^{1*}, Ngoc Minh Nguyen²

¹Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam

²Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam



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Corresponding author:

Ngoc Lynh Dan Nguyen

Abstract

The growth in popularity of English as a lingua franca has entailed the demand for communicative competence among learners in different contexts to interact and exchange ideas with other people from distinctive cultural and social background. The acquisition and mastery of communicative competence are inclusive of several criteria such as fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation, which pose a number of challenges for learners. However, from the perspective of intercultural communication competence, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) commonly use English expressions based on their personal assumption and word-by-word translations from their mother tongue into English, which causes inappropriateness in English expressions. As part of cultural naturalness in language expressions, collocations are adopted to serve the functions of certain speech acts with the frequent combination of word choice to foster the sense of cultural awareness in language learners. The study of collocations is also crucial to improve learners' communicative competence in English. Hence, this study is conducted in the context of Dong Nai Technology University Vietnam to investigate the impacts of collocation instructions on learners' communicative competence in the format of the IELTS test. The study adopted a quasi-experimental design in a period of eight weeks in the course of communicative speaking with the expected learning outcomes of intermediate levels of the IELTS test in the presence of both qualitative and quantitative instruments including test, questionnaire, and interview from a corpus-based approach. The findings of the study have proved that collocation instruction played an important role in enhancing learners' communicative competence in fluency and grammatical range and accuracy. In addition, the implementation entailed the higher degree of positivity in the perceptions of learners towards the new model in speaking lessons in terms of confidence and cultural sensitivity. However, the study had to handle a number of obstacles in the application such as time constraint, complexity of the collocations, and demotivation of difficulties in the acquisition of collocation. This study has also proposed a number of strategies and suggestions for other teachers in different rationales to maximize the effectiveness of collocation instruction in speaking improvement.

Keywords- Collocation; corpus; speaking performance, fluency.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of the study aimed to address the challenges faced by English language learners in achieving fluency in their interactions and expressions of ideas. They highlighted the importance of fluency in speaking assessments and the difficulties learners face

due to the influence of their native language and conventional language usage. The authors emphasized the significance of collocations in learners' academic speaking performance and the problems encountered in teaching and learning collocations.

They noted that previous studies in vocabulary teaching have varied in research methods and objectives, with a focus on passive acquisition through multiple-choice questions. This approach has not adequately addressed the need for proficient English-speaking skills, especially in speaking performance. The authors pointed out specific problems faced in the context of DongNai Technology University, including a gap between assumptions and learners' achievements, an imbalance in learners' performance in productive skills, and the neglect of collocations in teaching.

The researchers identified three rationales for conducting the study. Firstly, they aimed to investigate the impact of collocation instruction on learners' spoken fluency and communicative competence in the tertiary education context. Secondly, they sought to reflect on and improve teaching methods and activities based on learners' difficulties. Lastly, they aimed to better evaluate the teaching process by understanding learners' challenges and perceptions.

The study's objectives were to examine the effectiveness of teaching collocations on learners' academic speaking performance, explore learners' perceptions of the usefulness of collocation training, and identify challenges in learning collocations from learners' perspectives. The authors formulated three research questions related to the effects of teaching collocations on speaking performance, learners' perceptions of collocation training, and challenges in learning collocations.

The study's significance was discussed in terms of contributing to the development of TESOL fields, filling the research gap in teaching collocations, providing insights for teachers, and promoting learner-centered approaches. From an empirical perspective, the study aimed to assist teachers in applying collocation training to enhance learners' communicative competence and address their challenges. The scope of the study focused on the impacts of teaching collocations on learners' oral communicative competence for academic purposes, specifically in the context of the IELTS test format.

Overall, the authors intended to investigate the effects of collocation instruction on learners' speaking performance, understand learners' perceptions of collocation training, and identify challenges in learning collocations. The study aimed to contribute to the field, guide teaching practices, and improve learners' communicative competence in an academic setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of collocations

According to Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002, p.87), collocation is “the way in which words are used together regularly.” For example, “in English the verb perform is used with operation, but not with discussion: The doctor performed the operation.” This instance indicates the common utilization of the expression in reality, in which words are combined with high frequencies by the habitualness among language users. In other words, collocations refer to the set of rules that learners are supposed to memorize in the contextual usage on a daily basis of communicative demand.

From the linguistic perspective, Petrovic et al. (2010) states that collocations are “linguistic phenomena that occur when two or more words appear together more than often by chance” and the meanings of the utterance cannot be interpreted based on the meanings of its components in the expressions (p.383). This claim supports the ideas that collocations are problematic for the majority of second-language learners who have little or no exposure to the contextual inference of the meaning (Fan, 2009). The memorization of the common meaning in language learning has resulted in learners' word-for-word translation when they confront with English collocations. The interpretation of meanings in collocations does not obey the principles of compositionality by Fromkin et al. (2017). In the principles of compositionality, the meaning of the utterance is usually understood in the combination of the meanings of its constituents. However, collocations are an exception for this statement. For example, in the collocation tall man, language users do not prefer to use high with the word man although high and tall share the similar meaning. Both high man and tall man are linguistically correct but practically inappropriate in the authentic material. Hence, the linguistic analysis is not sufficient to explain the comprehension in spoken communication and word choice in English.

The idea that collocations are correlated with the co-occurrence of words has been supported by many researchers such as Firth (1957), Halliday (1961), Nation (2001). This reality is closely linked to the perspective of cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics towards the way collocations are stored and processed in human brain. The collocations are the way to “organize our knowledge of words” into our mind on the nature of frequency (Yule, 2010, p.122). Schmitt and Celcia-Murcia (2010) mentioned collocations as “words co-occur together (e.g. black coffee, strong coffee, etc.)” (p.9). These are usually formed in chunks and regularly used by native speakers. The process of learning collocations deals with the fixedness in the rules of collocation usage and collocation knowledge (Nation, 2001). However, the passive cognition of collocations cannot guarantee the ability to apply these collocations in practice because of the lack of comprehension of the meaning (Hunter, 2011).

Some expressions in English are the variants of original English versions due to the influence of external factors with the “manifestation in speech” (Plag et al., 2015, p.225). The use of collocations and figurativeness of their meanings are manipulated by sociolinguistic factors to create the natural expressions in the target language cultures (Lubis, 2013). The use of collocations in English is more of habits than rules as the choice of words is restricted in terms of frequency and association (Ellis, 2002; Gries & Ellis, 2015; Yi, 2018).

According to Pecina (2008), there is a variety of the definitions; however, collocations should be defined in terms of five fundamental aspects – (a) grammatical boundedness, (b) lexical selection, (c) semantic cohesion, (d) language institutionalization, and (e) frequency and recurrence (p. 15). Thus, a collocation is a combination of words under such associations which language users cannot explain thoroughly and break their relationships. In the aspect of grammatical boundedness, the rules of collocations

set the limit in use for the learners to apply in the real context which are different from the traditional grammar. Some expressions are grammatically correct but they are not used in the target culture. Take raise someone's awareness as an example, the native speakers prefer to use raise instead of increase although both words have the same meaning. Moreover, lexical selection proposes the critical choice in the word use to opt for suitable words in the particular context rather than the subjective assumption in the use of vocabulary. Additionally, while semantic cohesion builds a bridge between the form and the meaning or functions of the expression, language institutionalization refers to the diversity in use of collocations in different regions in the native-speaking contexts. Lastly, frequency and recurrence are the ultimate characteristics that differentiate collocations with normal words choice. When the phrase is considered a collocation, it needs to appear frequently in the actual context of speaking rather than the low-frequency uses of certain rare words.

Hornby (2000, as cited in Zaabalawi & Gould, 2017, p.22) denoted that "collocations are typically viewed as an "idiomatic" aspect of English". Previously, idiomatic expressions are considered the dead metaphor when the expression is attached with one unique meaning or reference to the authentic entity. Collocations also share the characteristics of meaning interpretation but they have the flexibility in the word choice with one certain form of expression. In addition, the term "collocations" refers to the co-occurrence of words which sound natural to native speakers and thus accepted to be right. Any variations of the combinations can create unnatural sound and be wrong (Jiang, 2000). This idea allows the differentiation of collocations and word combination. Collocations are word combination but word combination is not always collocations in the idea of naturalness. Naturalness is a hard-to-define concept as the expression is considered natural if it sounds familiar to the native speakers and accepted widely in the English-speaking society.

Totally, collocations are the combination of two or more than two words that exist together in totally or relatively fixed phrases, and they are frequently used by native speakers in both oral and written language. The length of collocations are not necessarily two words because the combination of verbs and nouns, for example, does not always include only two words. The uniform function of collocations is easily found that they are frequently used in native speakers. Thus, the researcher concluded this general definition.

The reasons for this selection are twofold. First, this definition is supportive of the researcher's objectives and scope. The researcher just examined learners' use of collocations in general and did not consider other linguistic aspects of collocations. Second, the participants are EFL learners; therefore, the collocations are just the primary one.

Speaking and its issues

Harmer (2007) categorized speaking as a productive skill where learners generate their own oral output (p.343). Traditional teaching approaches tend to prioritize reading and listening skills while overlooking the significance of speaking in communication. However, bridging the gap between listening and speaking requires

joint efforts from both teachers and learners in language acquisition.

Burns and Seidlhofer (2010) emphasized the importance of speaking as a fundamental skill for everyday communication, but acknowledged the need for additional attention in teaching and learning this skill. Various factors come into play, including linguistic elements (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) and paralinguistic elements (social and cultural contexts) (p.197). The social and cultural context contributes to the diverse forms of English usage in different English-speaking settings. Social norms shape expressions according to specific cultural rules, while cultural identity adds variation and uniqueness to language use.

Speaking poses challenges for many EFL learners. According to Burns and Seidlhofer (2010), "spoken interaction involves negotiating and producing language in a different way than it is used in writing" (p.198). Both speakers and listeners referred to as interlocutors, are actively involved in creating and processing language during spoken interactions. Interlocutors use verbal and non-verbal signals, adapting their language to specific contexts and time constraints, all aimed at aiding thorough message comprehension by listeners.

Teaching speaking has been approached from two contrasting views (Burns and Seidlhofer, 2010, pp.207-212). In the first view, emphasis is placed on sentence-level study. This type of speaking class focuses on formal grammatical knowledge and sub-skills to build communication, diagnosing and evaluating specific elements in speaking, employing isolated sentences for training, and being limited in assessing learners' speaking performance beyond the sentence level.

The opposing view prioritizes actual communication skills. This type of speaking class emphasizes communicative competence, utilizes scripted dialogues as authentic materials for learners to observe, analyze, and practice spoken language in specific contexts, and aims to develop learners' communicative repertoire for real-life communication.

Speaking ability is correlated with collocation knowledge (Shin & Nation, 2007). The more proficient learners become in using collocations effortlessly, the higher their level of speaking performance. This fact is evident in the Band Descriptors of many language proficiency speaking tests. For instance, in the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptor, test takers can only score from 8 to 9 if they demonstrate the use of less common vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (which are closely related to collocation knowledge). Overall, learners' use of collocations can significantly impact their speaking performance (Nguyen Thi My Hang & Webb, 2017).

The significance of Collocations in speaking performance

The use of high-frequency collocations is vital for improving fluency in foreign language speakers' interpersonal communication (Wolter & Yamashita, 2018). Fluency is characterized by the ability to produce uninterrupted utterances with limited pauses or hesitation (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Assessing fluency involves observing temporal factors like production rate, number of pauses, and length of pauses (Mueller, 2006). Familiarity with collocations

facilitates faster processing and responses in communication, enabling language speakers to produce utterances more swiftly than when using single words.

The knowledge of collocations is closely linked to word knowledge, with approximately 70% of English expressions including collocations (Yi, 2018). Understanding lexical collocations is crucial for developing speaking proficiency as learners need to familiarize themselves with the patterns and combinations of words. This expands their semantic field and facilitates comprehension of intended words and their co-occurrences. Competence in collocations serves as an indicator of language proficiency, requiring learners to select the most appropriate words to convey messages (Hill, 2000). Collocations also contribute to the acquisition of vocabulary by enhancing breadth and depth, influencing learning strategies for effective communication (Choi et al., 2018).

Collocations in English do not have fixed rules, as they emerge from habitual word combinations influenced by dialects and colloquial expressions (Yule, 2010). Their forms vary, and they occur when word groups frequently appear together. Learning collocations enhances naturalness and native-like expression (Nation, 2004). Meanings can be inferred from context, which often differs from the primary meanings of individual words (Gablasova et al., 2017; Harmer, 2015). Therefore, using low-frequency collocations may lead to misunderstandings among speakers who use English as a lingua franca.

Collocational knowledge is crucial for EFL teaching and learning, as collocations constitute a significant portion of spoken words (Hill, 2000, as cited in Farrok, 2012) and contribute to native-like fluency (Shin & Nation, 2007; Basan, 2017). However, EFL learners encounter difficulties in learning and using collocations, particularly with verb-noun and adjective-noun combinations (Nguyen Thi My Hang & Webb, 2017). These challenges stem from cultural differences and linguistic structures. Various learning approaches have been identified, including intentional learning, incidental learning, psycholinguistic approaches, and corpus approaches (Szudarski, 2017). Intentional learning involves explicit instruction and input modification, while incidental learning occurs without prior awareness. Psycholinguistic approaches utilize strategies such as eye-tracking and direct translation, while corpus-based approaches leverage authentic data from English materials. While there is no definitive answer on the most effective approach, all underscore the importance of collocations in L2 use.

Teaching collocations poses challenges for instructors, as there is no optimal technique to enhance learners' collocation knowledge (Rogers, 2018). Collocation fluency is often overlooked in teaching due to time constraints and limited materials. The use of corpus-based word lists and new technologies can empower collocational teaching techniques. It is essential for teachers to select congruent collocations, which can be facilitated by reliable instruments such as corpora (Rogers, 2018).

METHODS

Instruments

Test (Pre-test/ Post-test)

At the beginning of the course, the participants were required to take a diagnostic test as a pre-test in the format of IELTS to help the researcher collect the data in terms of the performance of the participants. The speaking test was designed to be conducted during about 14 minutes in total with three parts. The full version of the test focuses on four domains of criteria inclusive of fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and fluency. However, in order to fulfill the scope of the study, the test concentrated more on assessing learners' frequency of using collocations and the accuracy of adopting collocations in the test performance.

Questionnaire

The survey was conducted with three main parts. The first section aimed to collect the demographic data of the participants in the experimental group. In the second section of the survey, the four-point Likert scale was applied to investigate the extent of students' perspective on the agreement with 20 statements to explore the learners' perception towards the usefulness of teaching collocation in speaking improvement. The omission of the middle neutral one on the scale is because neutrality may lead to indecisive choices (Revila, 2013). There are also two open questions for respondents to express their personal opinion towards the challenges they encounter in learning English collocations. Additional Vietnamese version of the questionnaires were available to ensure that the participants were able to understand the questionnaire. In addition, the reliability and validity of the questionnaires were ensured with the adaptation of Savari's questionnaire (2018).

Interview

A semi-structured in-depth interview of about 15 minutes conducted online with 5 participants in the experimental group to gain more insights into the possible reasons for their learning experience. The questions in the interview were open-ended and attempted to call for the expressions of ideas from the interviewee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reliability and validity of the interview was ensured as the researcher changed the mode of interview into anonymous model via turning off the camera and raising the awareness of the participants of the constructive contribution to the study. This was useful to minimize the anxiety, hesitation, nerve, or bias in the interview to optimize the objectivity of the data (Harris, 2020).

Design and Procedures Participants

The total number of learners in a class was 55 at maximum and the study employed two classes of 54 learners for the experimental group (EG) and 52 learners for the controlled group (CG) which is over 30 to be sufficient enough to ensure the reliability (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). However, at the last minutes, 1 student dropped the course, which caused the number of total participants in the study to remain 29.

Procedure, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The data collected in this study included pre-test and post-test scores, questionnaire responses, and interview recordings. The pre-

test and post-test scores were recorded and stored for further descriptive analysis. Two examiners marked the scores in each assessment criterion. The pre-test was administered before the course as a diagnostic tool, while the post-test was conducted after eight weeks of the course to assess the learners' progress. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items and was distributed to the participants in the experimental groups. The questionnaire aimed to explore their perceptions of collocation instruction and their challenges in acquiring English collocations. Participants were given printed copies and had approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire allowed for objective responses without the presence of the researcher. In addition to the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. These interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 25 minutes each. The interviews aimed to delve deeper into the participants' ideas, experiences, and opinions regarding the hidden factors and the implementation of the collocation acquisition method. All interviews were recorded and stored as digital data. The recordings from the tests and interviews were transcribed to facilitate qualitative and quantitative analysis. The researcher utilized the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 to analyze the descriptive statistics from the data collection. For the test analysis, the scores and collocation usage were quantified and compared between the experimental group (EG) and control group (CG) using statistical tests such as the independent Paired Sample T-test. A significance level (p-value) below 0.05 was considered statistically significant. In the questionnaire analysis, participants were assigned coded identifiers to minimize researcher subjectivity. The collected data were input into SPSS, and ordinal and nominal items were coded into numeric values for interpretation and calculation. The quantification of the data aimed to estimate average scores and attitudes towards different statements in the questionnaire using the

mean value equivalence table. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire provided a foundation for the in-depth interview investigation. The interviews were conducted in line with the research questions and allowed participants to express themselves in ways that may not have been captured in the questionnaire. The interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis to identify themes and common categories based on similarities in expressions and ideas. Transcribing the recordings helped eliminate external distractions and enabled the researcher to critically evaluate the data. The interview instrument complemented the questionnaire and provided flexibility in adapting to participants' responses.

RESULTS

The comparison of EG and CG speaking performance

The descriptive data from the marking scores were collected and analysed in SPSS 20 to figure out the mean score, standard deviation, and the correlation between variables in the study. The reliability of the data was determined and ensured via the value of Cronbach Alpha at 0.791 which was higher than 0.7 to prove the internal consistency of the collected data in the study.

Table 1. The comparison of EG and CG speaking performance in overall score

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	CG-Pretest	4.413	52	.4507	.0625
	CG-Posttest	4.846	52	.3643	.0505
Pair 2	EG-Pretest	4.454	54	.4583	.0624
	EG-Posttest	4.963	54	.4435	.0604

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	CG-Pretest - CG-Posttest	-.4327	.3434	.0476	-.5283	-.3371	-9.086	51	.000
Pair 2	EG-Pretest - EG-Posttest	-.5093	.2658	.0362	-.5818	-.4367	-14.078	53	.000

Table 1 describes the information about the overall scores of IELTS speaking skill after the period. As can be seen, the means of the course completion were 4.846 for CG and 4.963 for EG; the standards deviations were 0.36 and 0.44 respectively. The mean score in EG was higher than that in CG to affirm the implementation had stronger effects on the learners' performance in comparison with traditional teaching approach. The paired sample T-test has $p < 0.05$ to prove the significant effects of the teaching on learners' overall speaking performance.

The result illustrates the data for the speaking performances of learners in EG and CG in terms of fluency and coherence. The means were 5.115 in CG and 5.430 in EG while the standard

deviation were 0.56 and 0.59 respectively. The score of $p < 0.05$ proved the significant effects of the training on learners' fluency and coherence. The mean in EG was higher than that of CG to prove the higher influence of the implementation in fluency and coherence.

The data for the speaking performances of learners in EG and CG in terms of lexical resource. The means were 5.327 in CG and 5.231 in EG while the standard deviation was 0.58 and 0.61 respectively. The score of $p < 0.05$ proved the significant effects of the training on learners' lexical resource. However, the mean in EG was lower than that of CG to prove the less influence of the implementation in lexical resource.

The number represents the data for the speaking performances of learners in EG and CG in terms of grammatical range and accuracy. The means were 5.029 in CG and 5.074 in EG while the standard deviation was 0.39 and 0.47 respectively. The score of $p < 0.05$ proved the significant effects of the training on learners' grammar. The mean in EG was higher than that of CG to prove the higher influence of the implementation in grammatical range and accuracy.

The data was enumerated for the speaking performances of learners in EG and CG in terms of pronunciation. The means were 5.077 in CG and 5.046 in EG while the standard deviation was 0.48 and 0.58 respectively. The score of $p < 0.05$ proved the significant effects of the training on learners' pronunciation. The mean in EG was lower than that of CG to prove the less influence of the implementation in pronunciation.

The speaking performances of learners in EG and CG in terms of collocation usage was provided. The means were 4.71 in CG and 5.39 in EG while the standard deviation was 1.33 and 1.94 respectively. The score of $p < 0.05$ proved the significant effects of the training on learners' collocation usage. The mean in EG was dramatically higher than that of CG to prove the more influence of the implementation in the application of collocation in IELTS speaking.

The correlation between the frequencies of collocations and speaking assessment

The results demonstrate the frequency of the use of collocations of learners in the pretest of the controlled group. In general, the frequency of collocation use reached the highest at 11 for 4 times of applying collocations which occupied 20.4% of the total use. The lowest number of times learned used 8 collocations was 2 with 3.7%. The percentage of 9.3% was attributed for those who used 7 and 0 collocations in their performance. It is worth pointing out that the number of students who used 5 and 6 collocations was the same at 7 times with 13%.

The score of the highest frequency was the same as the pre-test in this group; however, a number of changes can be observed from the data. The number of learners used 4 collocations in their test was highest at 15 with 27.8% and the second position was for 5 times of collocation use at 14 with 25.9%. There was only one learner who applied 8 collocations in his/her test with 1.9%. It is worth pointing out that all the students were able to use collocations in their performance of the test, which was the positive point after the course.

The score of the frequency of collocation use in the pretest of the experimental group was highest at 11 in 4 and 5 times with 20.4% while the lowest one was attributed to 9 times of use with frequency of 1 at 1.9%. The figure for 8 and 1 time of collocation use were 2 at 3.7%.

The table 14. enumerates the frequency of collocation use in the posttest of the experimental group. In general, the improvement can be seen in comparison with the pretest of this experimental group in terms of the collocation use. The highest frequency belonged to those who used 5 collocations in the test at 12 with

22.2% while the lowest frequency at 2 was for those with 0, 1, and 3 times of using collocations with 3.7%. The frequency of 5 and 6 times for collocation use was the same at 11 with 20.4%.

The relationship between the frequency of collocations and the criteria

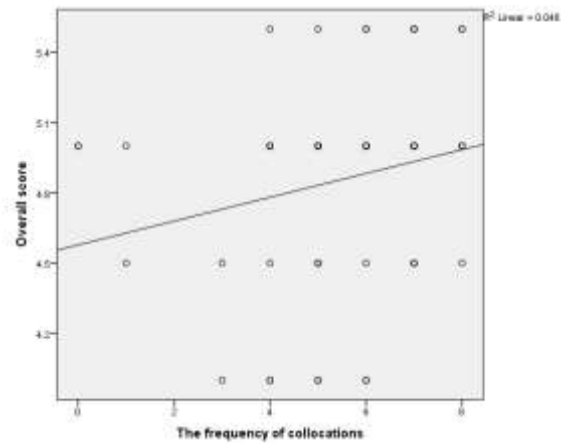


Figure 1: The relationship between the frequency of collocations and overall score

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the frequency of collocation use and the overall score among learners. It can be seen from the diagram that the overall score was proportional to the number of collocation use. The overall score varied in a value of 4.5 to 5.0 when the frequency of collocations increased from 0 to 8 with the value of R^2 at 0.048. This value of R was seen to prove the modest correlation between two variables.

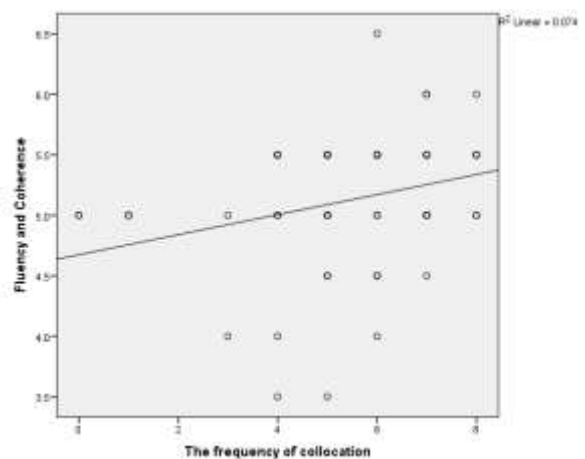


Figure 2: The relationship between the frequency of collocations and fluency and coherence

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the frequency of collocations and the score of fluency and coherence. It can be seen that the score of fluency and coherence was positively correlated with the number of collocation use. This score ranged from 4.5 to 5.5 when the frequency climbed from 0 to 8 with the value of R^2 linear at 0.074. It can be interpreted that two variables had moderate correlation in value.

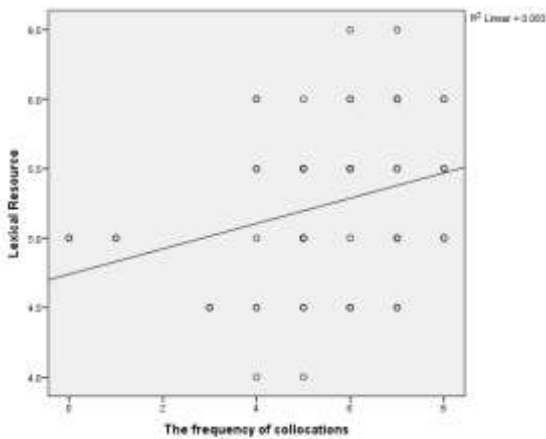


Figure 3: The relationship between the frequency of collocations and lexical resource

Figure 3 enumerates the correlation between the frequency of collocation use and the score of lexical resource. In general, the data indicates the positive correlation between the frequency of collocations and the score in the lexical resource. The linear flow of the score for lexical resource increased from 4.75 to 5.5 simultaneously with the rise of the frequency from 1 to 8 with the value of R2 at 0.083. This R-value proved the high correlation between two variables.

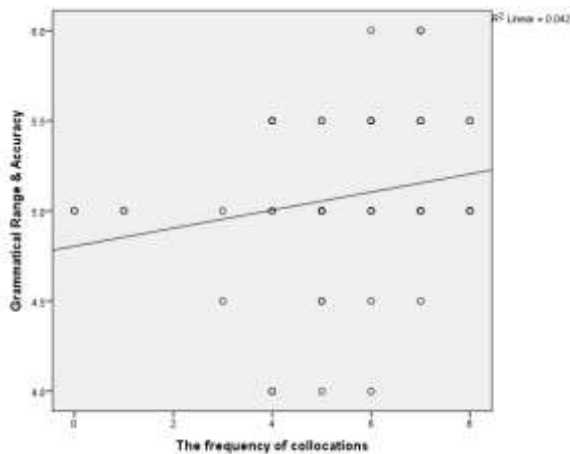


Figure 4: The relationship between the frequency of collocations and grammatical range and accuracy

Figure 4 demonstrates the relationship of the frequency of collocations and the score of grammatical range and accuracy. The value of R2 at 0.042 proved the low correlation between two values in the linear progress. The score for grammatical range and accuracy ranged from 4.8 to 5.2 when the value of frequency varied from 0 to 8.

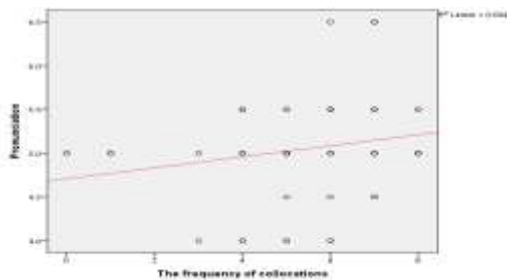


Figure 5: The relationship between the frequency of collocations and pronunciation

Figure 5 analyses the relationship between the frequency of collocations and the score for pronunciation in the group. At the first glance, the frequency of collocations was proportional to the score of pronunciation. The manipulation of the score in pronunciation was from 4.75 to 5.2 when the frequency ran from 0 to 8. However, the value of R2 at 0.044 indicated the low correlation between two variables.

The scatter diagrams in the figure 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 shows the information about the relationship between the number of collocation usage and the speaking assessment criteria. In general, the number of collocations were proportional to the score in each criterion and the overall score. This proved the linear correlation between collocations and speaking performance in the format of IELTS test.

The internal comparison of the mean score fluctuation in EG and CG

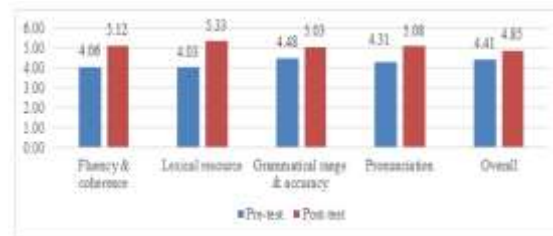


Figure 6: The internal comparison of the means score in the controlled group

Figure 6 provides an insight into the comparison among the means score of four speaking criteria and the overall score. In general, all the criteria and the overall score experienced an increase over the period. In the pretest, the highest mean belonged to Grammatical range & accuracy at 4.48 while the lowest one referred to lexical resource at 4.03. After the period of time, the lexical resource owned the highest score in the post-test at 5.33 and the overall was the lowest at 4.85.

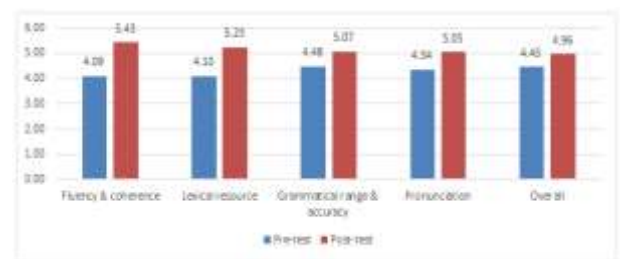


Figure 7. The internal comparison of mean scores in the experimental group

Figure 7 illustrates information about the comparison of mean scores among the speaking assessment criteria and the overall in the experimental group. It can be seen that all the factors experienced a rise over the period. In the pretest, the highest mean was 4.48 in Grammatical Range and Accuracy while the lowest one was fluency and lexical resource at 4.09 and 4.10 respectively.

This reality was identical to the pretest in the controlled group. After the implementation, the highest score was lexical resource at 5.23 and the second position was for fluency and coherence at 5.43. It is clear that the lowest one was the overall at 4.96.

Learners' perceptions towards the usefulness of collocation instruction in academic speaking

In general, the majority of items received the agreement from the participants in EG. The highest mean score was 3.09 for the development of sociocultural understanding when learners acquired collocations. The lowest score as a disagreement with the mean score of 2.36 was for the ideas of improving learners' pronunciation. In addition, the improvement in grammar and the complexity of collocations gained the same mean score of agreement at 2.69.

Moreover, the increase in confidence and fluency got approximately the same degree of agreement at 2.98 and 3.00 respectively. It is worth pointing out that the standard deviation varied from 0.43 to 0.70, which was equivalent to one interval scale in the questionnaire.

Learners' challenges in the acquisition of English collocations

The open-ended questions in the questionnaires provides the researcher with qualitative data about the learners' perception towards the usefulness and challenges of learning collocations. The ideas from the questionnaires were gathered and classified as follows:

Based on the responses from learners in the experimental group, the following difficulties and challenges were identified in the acquisition of collocations:

1. Time-consuming nature: Learners expressed that memorizing collocations requires a significant amount of time and effort. They mentioned spending hours and feeling that it takes a long time to learn English collocations. The need to focus on exploring meanings and getting familiar with language use contributed to the time required for collocation learning.
2. Lack of cultural competence: Differences between the learners' native language culture and the target language culture posed challenges in comprehending the meaning of collocations. Learners mentioned not knowing the meaning of certain collocations and finding some collocations hard to understand. The unfamiliarity with English cultures added to the difficulties in interpreting the meanings of unfamiliar collocations.
3. Complexity of collocations: EFL learners found collocations in English to be complex, requiring them to predict meanings and understand different forms of expression. Some combinations were considered abstract and arbitrary, making it challenging for learners to grasp and remember the expressions. Learners mentioned that English collocations are tricky, and they struggled to remember all of them or think of the appropriate collocations immediately.
4. Misuse of collocations: Learners admitted to making mistakes in using collocations correctly. Due to the

difficulty in remembering all collocations, they sometimes adopted assumptions or made incorrect choices when using collocations. This led to frustration and uncertainty about whether they were using the correct collocations.

These challenges highlight the difficulties learners faced in acquiring collocations in the experimental group. The time-consuming nature of memorization, lack of cultural competence, complexity of collocations, and the potential for misuse all contributed to the learning obstacles encountered by the learners.

The in-depth interviews

Based on the data collected from the in-depth interviews with learners from the experimental group, the following are the coded responses and findings:

I1: "I love the way teacher explain the meaning of collocations."

I2: "When I study collocations, I can learn them in groups, therefore I can produce speech easily and confidently. It's cool to use collocations." "I like the way teacher explain the relationship of the words and analyze the meanings. Some meanings are not familiar with us." "Teacher should give students the freedom to choose the topics they like and develop ideas based on the topics."

I3: "I had to spend a lot of time trying to remember the collocations and check online websites in COCA." "There are too many words to learn. It's so stressful as they are very hard for me." "At first, I was so confused to find out which words to use in IELTS speaking, therefore I often chop the expressions into single words. After the course, I can put them into phrases to speak more fluently and confidently."

I5: "I think collocations are important in academic speaking as I want to gain higher scores, therefore I want to learn collocations. When I try to remember, I practice using them and I feel my accent can improve, and it's better than word-by-word translation from Vietnamese to English. It makes me feel more like an American speaker." "The individual feedback was very little for each of us."

Based on the responses, the learners identified the following strengths and positive experiences in learning collocations:

1. Fluency and naturalness: Learners mentioned that learning collocations helped them speak more easily and confidently. They appreciated the fact that collocations come in groups, which facilitated their speech production and made their expressions sound more natural.
2. Explanation and analysis: Learners expressed a preference for the way their teacher explained the meaning of collocations and analyzed the relationship between the words. They found this approach helpful in understanding the meanings of collocations, especially when some meanings were unfamiliar to them.

However, learners also highlighted the following difficulties and areas for improvement:

1. Time-consuming: Learners mentioned that learning collocations required a significant amount of time, including searching for collocations online. They found

this process time-consuming and, in some cases, stressful.

2. Difficulty and stress: Some learners felt that learning collocations was challenging due to the large number of words they had to learn. They perceived collocations as hard, which added to their stress in the learning process.

Based on their experiences, the learners recognized improvements in their speaking skills, particularly in terms of fluency and lexical resource. They felt that learning collocations helped them use phrases instead of single words, leading to more fluent and confident speech.

In terms of suggestions for teachers, the learners recommended:

1. Providing topic freedom: Learners suggested that teachers should allow students to choose topics they are interested in and develop ideas based on those topics. This approach would likely enhance student engagement and relevance in learning collocations.
2. Individual feedback: One learner expressed a desire for more individual feedback. Providing personalized feedback to each student could offer specific guidance and support for their collocation learning.

These findings from the in-depth interviews provide insights into learners' perspectives and experiences with collocation instruction in the IELTS speaking context.

DISCUSSION

The text discusses the impact of collocation instruction on IELTS speaking performance. The study found that collocation instruction had a significant positive effect on fluency and coherence, while its impact on lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation varied. In terms of fluency, the use of collocations helped learners process information faster and produce utterances more quickly, resulting in improved scores. However, there was no significant improvement in vocabulary use, as learners tended to make mistakes when attempting to use collocations. The study did not find a statistically significant difference in grammatical range and accuracy between the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG), indicating that the influence of collocation instruction on this aspect was not meaningful in the short eight-week period of the study. Nevertheless, learners became more aware of word order and the combination of grammar points, which contributed to their overall grammatical understanding. Surprisingly, the study found that pronunciation scores in the EG were slightly lower than those in the CG. The researchers attributed this to the difficulty of mastering the pronunciation of all the words in collocations and the lack of individualized feedback due to the large class size.

Overall, the EG had a higher mean score than the CG in terms of the overall assessment, supporting the effectiveness of the collocation instruction approach. Regression analysis indicated a positive relationship between the use of collocations and assessment scores, suggesting that the more collocations learners used, the higher their scores.

A questionnaire revealed that learners perceived learning collocations as useful, despite the time investment required. Learners agreed that learning collocations improved fluency, increased engagement, and enhanced cultural awareness. However, learners faced challenges in learning collocations, such as recognizing and determining the types of collocations, the influence of their native language, and time constraints leading to vocabulary misuse.

In conclusion, the study demonstrated the positive impact of collocation instruction on IELTS speaking performance in terms of fluency, while its effects on other aspects varied. Learners perceived collocation instruction as useful but encountered challenges in mastering collocations.

CONCLUSION

The study conducted at Dong Nai Technology University demonstrated the positive effects of collocation instruction on the academic communicative competence of non-majored English learners. The implementation of collocation instruction resulted in improved mean scores for assessment criteria and received positive responses from learners. This implementation has several implications for EFL teaching.

Firstly, this study serves as a foundation and reference for English teachers in tertiary education with similar teaching contexts. By incorporating collocation instruction, teachers can move beyond teaching vocabulary as isolated words and help learners develop fluency and confidence in speaking. The instruction enables learners to process information in chunks, facilitating understanding and meaning-making. Additionally, the analysis of collocations raises learners' cultural awareness, allowing them to contextualize the intentions of English-speaking cultures.

Moreover, the application of collocation instruction in IELTS speaking can enhance learners' language skills, making their speech more native-like and reducing the influence of their first language. By internalizing collocations, learners can maximize the use of functional expressions and improve their oral communicative competence.

The study's results also assist curriculum developers and course designers in understanding the specific influence of collocations on particular criteria. This understanding can shape and modify materials to adapt to learners' characteristics and preferences. Learners' perceptions of the usefulness of collocations in IELTS can guide lesson plans and foster positive attitudes towards learning strategies.

Recommendations for further teaching practices include ensuring sufficient learning conditions with electronic devices, such as stable internet connections and online learning management systems. Learners' proficiency level should range from intermediate to upper-intermediate, and the application should align with programs or courses targeting naturalness and fluency in speaking. The curriculum designers should integrate the corpus-based approach into material design, maintaining consistency across program, course, and lesson levels.

Regarding teacher characteristics, instructors should possess a breadth and depth of understanding of lexical resources and semantic fields. Cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence are crucial for explaining collocations beyond their form and connecting them to cultural meanings. Teachers need to guide learners in understanding meanings appropriately, based on objective understanding rather than subjective assumptions.

The study's limitations include the small number of participants, the concentration on specific subject traits, the limited exploration of different collocation types and cultural awareness, and the challenges of managing large class sizes and individual progress tracking.

In conclusion, the research confirms the positive effects of collocation instruction on EFL learners' speaking performance. Students exposed to collocation instruction demonstrated higher collocation application and improved fluency. The instruction also triggered positive attitudes among learners. However, challenges exist in recognizing, memorizing, and producing collocations due to learners' familiarity with single-word vocabulary learning. Further research can explore the impacts of different collocation types and instruction methods on various language skills, as well as the effects on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation development.

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