



# The Potential of Corpus-Based Collocation Instruction on the Awareness Level of the Turkish EFL Students in Terms of Reading

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## Abstract

It is an old consensus by now that languages all throughout the world consist of prefabricated chunks or multi-word combinations which are important for EFL learners in their efforts to perceive and produce language of native speakers in the form of combinations or chunks. The combinative nature of English language lends itself in various ways and sometimes they are called as “collocations” which constitute the biggest part of these chunks. In this respect, it is understandable that collocation learning plays a significant role for EFL learners. Thus, the primary purpose of this research is to explore whether corpus based explicit collocation instruction will help the EFL students gain awareness of collocations. Another purpose is to reveal the extent to which EFL learners recognize collocations in different contexts. The final purpose is to observe whether this informed exposure will result in better reading performances in English. The research reported on an experimental study regarding the effect of corpus-based explicit collocation instruction on EFL students' reading performance. The data for the study were obtained through pre-test and post- test scores and interview which included open-ended questions. Tertiary level EFL students (n=50) from the English department of a middle sized university in the Eastern Black Sea region in Turkey participated in the study and the study lasted for eight weeks (spring term). The control group (n = 25) received in-class reading instruction and the experimental group (n = 25) integrated collocations into their reading processes. The study investigated whether there were any differences between the experimental and the control groups in terms of gaining awareness of collocations and exhibiting better reading performances after corpus-based explicit collocation instruction is delivered on a scheduled-order. Based on the analyses of students' reading scores, the main findings showed that the experimental group showed significant improvement when compared to the control group. Both post-test scores and the answers of the students participated in the interview proved that corpus-based explicit collocation instruction had positive effect on the awareness level and reading performances of EFL students. The study, therefore,

concludes that English as a Foreign Language learners' use of collocations or word combinations has potential to create more effective reading performance.

## 1. Introduction

The fact that vocabulary learning is a prerequisite for a second language learning in an EFL setting and that the more vocabulary an EFL learner gains, the better he/she will be able to express his/her opinions and feelings in the target language are old consensuses by now. However, learning the vocabulary of a second language does not consist of single words that can be taught and learnt one by one. There are lexical items, as well, which should be learnt separately as they may vary in meaning because generally the overall meaning of these lexical units cannot be inferred from the meaning of the individual words that they consist of. These lexical items are categorically dealt with under the title of Lexical Approach. These combinations also called as “collocations” help learners achieve a native-like proficiency in a language and sound more natural because a considerable amount of vocabulary consists of collocations, which is why this study tries to highlight collocation instruction as a part of vocabulary instruction as well as its role as playing an important role in the Lexical Approach and focusing on chunking which is the primary interest of this approach.

There is no doubt that vocabulary is a building block for language learning. According to (Wilkins, 1972), vocabulary learning is important since grammar absence can be compensated but there is no way that vocabulary can be compensated for anything. Vocabulary learning constitutes a significant part of language learning and the development of language competence in a language can only be possible through a wide repertoire of words. According to (Giridharan, 2003), vocabulary gaining can be regarded as process in which learners associate word meanings from a text level to a word level. This process helps learners build the mental connection between a word form and its meaning. It is possible to say that at the heart of the vocabulary lies chunking of words which is also supported by the Lexical Approach.

(Richards, 2001) interpret lexical approach as one which “ refers to the kind of teaching derived from the belief that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching, but lexis, that is, words and word combinations” (Richards, 2001, p. 132). According to them, lexical approach in language teaching considers lexicon as the main components of language learning. (Richards, 2001) also inform us that the contribution of technology or the computers were in the form of providing vast databases for research and instruction in classrooms in terms of lexical focus, adding that these studies focus on collocations and multiple word units in ways one can hardly imagine before. At this point, they highlight that collocation has a significant role for lexically based theories of language. Established on the idea that primary concern of language learning and communication is a focus on lexis or words and word combinations, the lexical approach became very in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Richards, 2001). The belief that the “lexical approach claims the centrality of the lexicon in the language learning in the form of multiword lexical units or chunks that are learned and used as single items” (p. 132). It is also the case that there is a need for “implementing the lexical approach in a language classroom and for this to happen, language teaching should shift from the conventional teaching which primarily focuses on grammar and vocabulary to teaching language chunks” (Lien, 2003, p. 61). As one of the other basic elements of Lexical approach, “Collocations are the combined words that frequently occur together in a text” (Vance, 2008, p. 5). Collocations are discussed in the next section. Finally, “Idiomatic expressions are a type of fixed collocations” (Vance, 2008, p. 5). She explains that idiomatic expressions are widely used in corpus linguistics.

(Vance, 2008) states that lexical approach proposes the teaching of lexical phrases due to the importance of chunking. She continues that the main reason for teaching lexical phrases is to make students produce more native-like language since guessing the meaning of phrases from the individual

words that they consist of is impossible. Thus, she continues, the only way of acquiring these phrases is to learn them just like irregular spelling. She also comments that as the phrases are stored in the memory as a whole, they may contribute learners' fluency.

Recognition and acquisition of language chunks are two terms that are closely related to each other. (Vance, 2008) informs that noticing language chunks is not fully enough for acquisition of these chunks. She suggests that learners should expose to these chunks in reading or listening to make their own interpretation and internalize them by realizing their function in different situations. To ensure this, she also proposes that teachers should provide students with a wide range of reading and listening materials to make students recognize the similarities, differences and restrictions of these chunks.

(Lewis, 1997) proposes a vocabulary instruction through the teaching of words in chunks and this approach prioritizes collocations as important lexical unities requiring more attention in the language classrooms. It is generally known that collocations constitute a big problem for foreign language learners mostly because they are difficult to learn as they are arbitrarily known and internalized by native speakers.

Our empirical knowledge tells us that vocabulary instruction is made through simple and ineffective ways in many EFL settings and with many EFL learners who have difficulty in memorization and retrieving of words one by one. Besides, as vocabulary consists of lexical chunks, apart from individual words, learners need to know these lexical units. In this respect, collocations have gained importance in classroom environment because most of the studies show that it is easier and more effective for learners to learn and retrieve words as multi-word units rather than single words.

There are many definitions of collocation and each refers to a different aspect of these lexical chunks. In general, collocation refers to the natural combinations of words and the way words in a language are closely associated and combined with each other (O'Dell, 2008). (O'Dell, 2008, p. 4) explain the relationship between the words as: "*pay* and *attention* go together, as do *commit* and *crime*; *blond* goes with *hair* and *hair* with *rain*." (O'Dell, 2005) previously state that collocations sound natural to native speakers but foreign language learners have to struggle to learn them because they are difficult to guess. Some combinations by non-native speakers of English may totally sound incorrect to native speakers; "fast" collocates with "cars" but not with a "glance" (O'Dell, 2005). (Jaen, 2007) defines collocation as: "institutionalized combinations of words which, due to their frequency in the language, have become an integral part of the norm and not only of the system" (p.129).

(Lien, 2003) defines collocations as lexical items that constantly occur in texts and almost pre-fabricated in language. For this, he gives the example of "make a mistake" and "in addition" which repeatedly occur in various texts and they cannot be substituted for their synonyms such as "do a mistake" or "in totalling". Collocations may vary from noun phrases like "sound decision", phrasal verbs such as "give up" and other stock phrases like "the rich and powerful" (Lien, 2003). Bolinger defines collocation types as memorized prefabricated chunks that are stored, retrieved, and produced automatically as cited in (Lien, 2003). According to (O'Dell, 2008), collocations need to be learnt because they enable learners to use English more naturally and accurately. They highlight that when somebody says "making a crime", he/she will be understood by native speakers but his/her language will sound unnatural and confusing. They add that learning collocations contributes to the range of learners' English vocabulary. They also exemplify that thanks to knowledge of collocations, learners can replace words like "very, nice or beautiful" with the ones that better suit the context and create a more precise meaning. They add that collocations can also be helpful for foreign language learners in advanced level exams.

The problem with collocations is that EFL learners fail to produce collocations in the properly. According to (Zughoul, 2003) linguistic sequences of these chunks do not follow a prescribed pattern and they are not rule-governed. For this reason, EFL learners need to be instructed and trained in

producing them in the proper context whereas native language speakers acquire them throughout the natural acquisition process. Therefore, they propose that the more the learner is capable of producing the correct collocations, the fewer hesitations or pauses he makes in a discourse and consequently, the more competent in the EFL he becomes.

It is difficult for learners to learn collocations haphazardly during learning process. They need to pay deliberate attention to these lexical phrases because only in that way they can build up a reasonable amount of collocations. At this point, teachers should provide learners with well-organized collocation instruction which will increase their motivation and also contribute to their vocabulary gain. Only in this way they can raise the learners' awareness of collocations and contribute to their vocabulary development and control over the target language in terms of reading, speaking, writing, listening, and translation. Learners will be able to incorporate collocations into these skills and exhibit better performance thanks to the collocation instruction.

As a result, based on what we have covered so far, it is possible to say that collocations constitute a considerable amount of English vocabulary and they are essential in vocabulary learning, collocations contribute a lot to reading comprehension. (Lien, 2003) further proposes that teaching collocations can make up for the deficiency of traditional vocabulary instruction in reading and that training students to observe and note collocations in reading will gradually raise their awareness far above individual words and they will appreciate the use of word combinations often in the language. Finally, "collocations enhance development of learners' oral communication, listening and reading comprehension, and that teaching collocations enables learners to be aware of language chunks used by native speakers in speech and writing" (Lien, 2003, p. 65). According to (Ooi, 1996), EFL learners may have insufficient knowledge of true collocations, and in order to compensate for this lack of sufficient knowledge, EFL teachers can teach collocations through reading.

In conclusion, it should be accepted that collocations are largely studied in various ways and these studies show that collocation knowledge and instruction have positive impact on EFL learners' language performance.

The main concern of this study is to investigate whether corpus based collocation instruction improves learners' awareness and has any impact on students' reading performances. The following research questions, therefore, were asked and the findings were evaluated in the following sections.

## 2. Research Questions

1. Do the students receiving corpus-based collocation instruction make progress in recognizing the collocations in a new context?
2. Do these students' reading performances become better than those who did not receive corpus-based collocation instruction?
3. What are the perceptions of the EFL learners regarding the use of corpus-based collocation activities?

## 3. Methodology

This experimental study aimed at investigating and finding out whether corpus-based collocation instruction in foreign language classrooms would have a noticeable effect on the learners' awareness of collocations and their reading performances.

### 3.1. Setting and Participants

The setting of this study was the Western Languages and Literature Department of Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey. This study was conducted with the participation of these two prep classes. One of the two prep classes was assigned as the control group and the other was assigned as the experimental group. The participants in this study were 50 intermediate level prep students aged between 18 and 20 from the Western Languages and Literature Department, K.T.U, Trabzon. The participants were 18 males and 32 females and they were from different regions of Turkey. 50 students who were in the class during the application of both tests were chosen and their results were compared.

### 3.2. Instruments

The instruments used in the data collection and used during the sessions included pre/post tests and an open ended interview. As this was an experimental study with two groups, a pretest and a post-test were organized and conducted before and after the instruction sessions in order to compare the collocation knowledge of the students. The researcher aimed at collecting data for the evaluation of the corpus-based collocation instruction process to show whether the study served the pre-determined purposes or not. The main instrument used during the treatment sessions was corpus concordances from BNC and COCA. To be able to identify the difference between the collocation knowledge of the students prior to and after the study, these tests were conducted and their scores were analysed. Open ended interview was another data collection instrument in which 7 participants who were randomly selected took place and they were asked four questions related to the effects of corpus-based collocation instruction. Students were allowed to speak in Turkish to be able to make them express themselves freely. Then, their speeches were translated into English by the researcher and a script of the interview was prepared.

### 3.3. Pretest / Post-test Procedure

As a first step in the study, a pretest consisting of a reading passage and a cloze test was prepared and administered to the experimental and control groups. The test included 20 collocations in total and were taken from “English Collocations in Use” by Cambridge University Press (2005). Each item was rated and correct answers were calculated by the researcher. The main aim of this part was to determine the awareness level of the students, whether they could recognize the collocations in a context, and whether they could write down the nearest meaning of the given collocations which would indicate the relationship between their collocation knowledge and reading performance. The format of the post test was the same as pre-test but the questions were different. The post-test included 20 collocations in total. The aim of the post test was to find out the gains of the experimental group after treatment session and to find out whether there were differences between control group and the experimental group in terms of the scores.

### 3.4. Corpus-based collocation instruction

The corpus-based collocation instruction was done in the English Department of Karadeniz Technical University and lasted for eight weeks with two- hour weekly sessions. These instructions were done in the computer lab, equipped with individual computer stations connected to the internet. Corpus resources available to the experimental group included Karadeniz Technical University Corpus of Learner English (KTUCLE), AntConc 3.0.1 (Anthony, 2004), British National Corpus (BNC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The steps below were followed:

1. Introduction: Teaching corpora. Equipping them with the basic skills for corpus-based collocation analysis.
2. Exploitation: Helping them discover ways to learn collocations with concordancing software.

3. Transformation: Using corpus concordances to learn collocations.
4. (Aston, 2000, p. 7)

<b>Duration</b>	<b>Systematization</b>	<b>Procedures</b>
Week 1	Introduction	Corpus defined, Word lists Concordances, Frequency data, BNC, COCA.
Week 2	Exploitation	BNC search words and the use of collocation function
Week 3	Exploitation	BNC- target head words and their collocates, finding collocations with all matches to the query,
Week 4	Exploitation	COCA-target head words (make, do, take )and their collocates
Week 5	Exploitation	Dialogue completion task with the most probable collocation hits from BNC and COCA
Week 6	Exploitation	Dialogue completion task with the most probable collocation hits from BNC and
Week 7	Exploitation	Matching collocations based on the hits from BNC and COCA
Week 8	Transformation	Discussion of the benefits of using corpus concordances for collocation search and how we can use these findings while reading.

**Table 1:** The corpus based collocation instruction scheme on a weekly basis

### 3.5. Open-ended Interview

An open ended interview composed of four questions was conducted with the subjects. Each of these interviews lasted around 15 minutes and almost all the subjects preferred to be interviewed in their classrooms. The answers were short and this eased the transcription of the data. For reliability issues, same questions were restated during the course of each interview. After the interview was completed, I had a talk with the subjects in order to be sure that the responses given during the interviews are the same or not.

## 4. Data Analysis

The goal of the study was to find out whether corpus-based collocation instruction would increase the learners' awareness of collocations and result in better reading performances. In order to collect quantitative data, a pretest and post-test were carried out by the researcher. Two groups, an experimental group and control group, participated in this study. In the experimental group there were 25 students. In the control group, there were 25 students. In total, 50 students participated in this study. In order to collect qualitative data, an open ended interview was designed and carried out as part of the experimental data. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Qualitative data was obtained from students' interviews which aimed at finding out how the corpus-based collocation instruction contributed to their awareness.

Between a pretest and post-test, collocations were explicitly taught and quantitative data was obtained through the comparison of participants' pretest and post-test results. These tests were used to evaluate the results about the effectiveness of collocation instruction. The researcher rated the each answer in pre/post-tests independently and gained the results.

#### 4.1 Pretest / Post-Test Documentation

The overall findings of the study were obtained from quantitative data, namely pretest and post-test. During the application of the pretest, neither of the groups was informed about the aim of the study. When the pretest results of both groups were compared, it was seen that the scores were low and there wasn't a significant difference between them because both groups did not know the exact meaning of collocation and what it really refers to. However, the post test results showed that there was a significant difference between the scores of control group and the experimental group.

The pretest/post-test scores of the control group and experimental group, arithmetic means and standard deviations are given in the Table 1. It is seen on Table 1 that the control group made a nearly remained the same whereas there was quiet a significant increase on the scores of experimental group. The mean scores of the control group in the pretest is 34, 64 and the standard deviation is 10, 28. It can be seen that overall success of the students is quite low. The means of the post-test results of the group is 37, 24 and the standard deviation is 12, 26 which means that there is not a considerable difference between the results because the students in the control group did not receive corpus based collocation instruction during the study. The mean of the pre-test scores of the experimental group is 34, 92 and the standard deviation is 8, 9. However, the mean of the post-test scores of the experimental group is 65, 56 and the standard deviation is 10, 16. There is a significant difference between the post-test results of the two groups. Prior to the treatment sessions, the scores of the groups were similar to each other. However, a corpus based collocation instruction, experimental group made progress and obtained better marks than control group.

Participants	Control Group		Participants	Experimental Group	
	Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test
1. M.N.	34	36	1. H.G	36	78
2. M.F	20	12	2. T.Y	25	76
3. S.Y	33	41	3. G.H	45	74
4. F.Y	28	29	4. F.T	26	74
5. G.K	23	36	5. B.M	43	78
6. V.N	35	25	6. N.B	44	70
7. A.S	26	36	7. A.K	41	70
8. F.U	33	24	8. E.F	46	70
9. H.I	43	47	9. O.P	15	73
10. B.N	32	29	10. V.N	35	78
11. M.A	33	24	11. A.R	20	62
12. C.V.B	36	46	12. D.H	35	68
13. E.T.Y	24	37	13. R.Y	35	65
14. A.D.T	36	44	14. H.U	35	66
15. F.G	18	32	15. A.F	45	70
16. B.Y	44	32	16. G.Y	40	66
17. S.E	66	54	17. Y.L	31	68
18. C.Y	34	42	18. D.F	31	40
19. M.T	47	53	19. I.K.L	52	64
20. A.R	28	56	20. A.E.D	28	46
21. D.S	43	40	21. M.L	32	63
22. G.H	36	41	22. G.B.M	45	48
23. E.T.R	26	20	23. A.L.N	32	52
24. Y.U	43	30	24. O.H	25	62
25. P.O	45	65	25. S.R	31	58

	M=34,64 Sd= 10,28	M=37,24 Sd=12,26		M=34,9 Sd=8,9	M=65,56 Sd=10,16
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**Table 2:** Pretest / Post-test Results of Control and Experimental Groups

## 4.2 Analysis of the Interview

After the corpus based collocation treatment sessions, post-tests were carried out in the experimental group and control group and results were obtained and evaluated. It was seen that experimental group performed better than control group and got higher marks. Therefore, an open ended interview was designed to demonstrate the positive impacts of corpus based collocation instruction on the students in the experimental group. Seven students were selected and they were asked three questions:

1. What do you think is the significance of collocations in foreign language learning?
2. Do you think corpus-based collocation instruction raised your awareness of collocations and enabled you to recognize these chunks in various contexts? How?
3. Do you think collocation instruction contributed to your reading comprehension? If so, how?
4. What are your perceptions regarding the use of corpus concordances in order to observe collocational patterns?

Question 1: What do you think is the significance of collocations in foreign language learning?

The first interview question asked to the subject students their perceptions regarding the significance of collocations for EFL learners. The responses to this question were various in scope and extent. S1, for instance, stated that she was not familiar with the term “collocation”, indicating that the term is relatively new but certainly important in her efforts to learn the language. In fact, this response may not be surprising if we consider the low level of awareness of EFL learners towards the existence and significance of collocations. What is more, the absence of focus and attention in the text books and the curriculum towards the collocation patterns may well be yet another important factor behind this picture. The accounts of S4 and S6 also indicated that they now appreciate the significance of so many collocation patterns to master. S2’s response to this question also shows that collocations are vitally important and necessary both in expository and academic writing.. The following quotations depict the commonly shared views:

Student 1: “... To be honest, I wasn’t familiar with the collocations but now I have come to realize how important and needy they are for me and I will pay extra effort to learn them...”

Teacher 4: “This was almost the first time I have consciously worked on collocations in the concordance lines and my familiarity and understanding grew much stronger...”

Teacher 6: “... I heard about collocations but I didn’t use them in my writing but now I know that using matters very much while writing my argumentative papers...”

Question 2: Do you think corpus-based collocation instruction raised your awareness of collocations and enabled you to recognize these chunks in various contexts? How?

The second interview question asked to the subject students the effect of corpus based collocations instruction in their ability to recognize and use collocations in various contexts. Majority of the interview respondents agreed that they are now familiar with the collocations more than ever and that they will benefit from this familiarity in several ways while, for example, while writing essays.

S3, for example, stated that corpus concordances seemed at first difficult to deal with but only after she learned how to use them she felt relaxed and was able to integrate this skill into her writing.

S7, on the other hand, was a bit cautious about the use of corpus concordances in order to make new discoveries of collocations, stating that rather than making a discovery based collocation activities he would prefer using ready-made collocation lists which are prepared on the basis of frequency.

Question 3: Do you think corpus-based collocation instruction contributed to your reading comprehension? If so how?



General tendency in the interview responses indicated a positive contribution of the corpus based collocation instruction to the respondents' reading abilities. S1, for example, clearly stated to have benefitted from corpus based concordances. Unlike S2 and S5 who have responded positively to the question of reading effect, S7 expressed his concerns over the use of corpus concordances but was quite sure that collocations are important for the development of reading.

S1: "It helped me learn I have to look for some together words while reading and they may exist in all the reading..."

S2: "I now think that collocations are very many in English and their meaning may change when they are together in words and while reading they come very often, I think..."

S5: "They are much more than I think in English and in corpus they look more clearly and I see in my readings them better now and I think to understand more now because I see them as a whole now..."

S7: "I don't think so, even if corpus may be a good tool I will not use it but I think collocations are important and I need to learn them better for reading improvement"

Question 4: What are your perceptions regarding the use of corpus concordances in order to observe collocation patterns?

The fourth interview question dealt with the participants' perceptions about the use of corpus concordances while observing collocation patterns. The contents of the responses to this question showed that almost all participant students felt that they may profit in one way or another from the use of corpus concordances. Moreover, the participants were found to hold the view that use of corpus concordances would be beneficial not only for in writing but also in other skills such as translation S1, S2, S3 and S5's responses to this question indicate the high level of awareness and perception that subject students have formed towards potential benefits of corpus concordances in their search for patterns.

S 1: "... I believe that we can may profit from concordances if we know what we are looking..."

S 2: "... concordances were helpful to find the collocations and I found some of them easily with many examples in the concordances..."

S 3: "I will use corpus concordances with translation as well as while writing may be beneficial both for the students and teachers while they are writing and translating..."

One respondent (S7), however, expressed his concerns regarding the use of concordances as too difficult and complex to understand and the length of the sample sentences are more difficult to follow.

S7: "Corpus itself is not easy and the sample sentences given in the lines are very long and difficult to understand. I would prefer using dictionary but not corpus for translating"

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study intended to investigate the effects of corpus-based collocation instruction on the awareness levels of EFL learners in terms of reading performance. The findings indicate that experimental group showed a significant progress in terms of displaying collocation awareness. The pre- and post-test results of the control group were approximately the same. In the post test, experimental group was quite successful in underlying the collocations in the text whereas they couldn't perform the same success in the pre-test. Besides, during the interview, almost all respondents commented that thanks to the corpus-based collocation instruction, they learnt to recognize the collocations in a text and became aware of the significance of these chunks. They also realized that collocations help them gain proficiency in English as these lexical units enable them to sound more natural and native. All in all, the best conclusion to be drawn from the findings related to the collocation awareness is that students can realize the importance of lexical units, which constitute the heart of vocabulary learning, and develop better awareness if an explicit instruction is provided.

The findings also reported a significant progress in terms of reading comprehension and performance. Post-test results showed that most of the students could notice the collocations in the text. They also learned to guess the meaning of the collocations from context thanks to collocation instruction. Moreover, during the interview, all the students commented that as reading is an important language skill as it is based on decoding the intended meaning and as written texts include a more elevated language, readers need to know enough vocabulary in language to be able to make correct interpretations; at this point they added that collocations are significant part of vocabulary and thus, the more learners are qualified in collocations, the better their reading performances will be.

The results of this relatively small scale research showed that there is a relationship between the students' proficiency level and collocation instruction. This is because there was a considerable increase on the post-test scores of the experimental group although the scores were quite low prior to the treatment sessions. Besides, the pre-test and post-test which were designed to exhibit the benefits of collocation instruction showed that there is statistically a significant difference, in a positive way, on the performances of EFL students.

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