

Minding the Gap in Vocabulary Knowledge: Incidental Focus on Collocation through Reading

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Abstract

The present study seeks to contribute to our knowledge of the effectiveness of reading in the incidental learning of collocations. The study also addresses the question whether out-of-class exposure such as watching TV, listening to radio or music, reading English books and using social media plays a significant role in the learning of collocations. The research participants were 46 Arabic-speaking young adult EFL learners. They were asked to read a modified text containing 10 pseudo-word collocations and to verify that all were unfamiliar to them. One week later, they read a text containing the actual 21 target collocations, which had been selected on the basis of appearing in instructional materials and a reference corpus, as well as of frequency. Participants were then asked to complete a meaning-recall cloze test in the form of a gap-filling task in which the 21 target collocations were embedded in sentences. Subsequently they were administered a self-report survey about any incidental exposure to English. The analysis of the quantitative results revealed that the target collocations can be learned incidentally through reading although the level of mastery was limited. The survey data showed a positive correlation between the learners' knowledge of collocations and activities such as watching TV, listening to radio and reading English books. The study also confirmed that collocations are particularly difficult for adult EFL learners and is thus an aspect of vocabulary knowledge in need of further empirical investigations.

Keywords: collocation, EFL, incidental learning, pseudo-words, reading

Cite as: Alharthi, T. (2018). Minding the Gap in Vocabulary Knowledge: Incidental Focus on Collocation through Reading. *Arab World English Journal*, 9 (2).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no2.1>