

The Lexical Approach in Action: Evidence of Collocational Accuracy and the Idiom Principle in the Writing of EFL Intermediate Students

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Abstract

The use of collocation has always been considered as a good yardstick by which the idiomaticity of second language (L2) use is reliably judged. Hence, this study aims at investigating the relationship between optimizing the lexical approach and improving the collocational accuracy and the ability to operate on the idiom principle in the writing of Algerian English Freshmen. To carry out this research, an experimental and a control group were assigned for a quasi-classroom experiment. While the experimental group was taught collocations based on the principled practices of the lexical approach, the control group was taught conventionally with on special attention paid to collocations. Data was collected from 124 compositions (pre/posttests) done by these learners. Results of this investigation show that there is a correlation between training students to chunk language successfully and the increase of collocational strength with high mutual information (MI) scores in their writing. Additionally, the chunk-based instructional program helped the experimental group develop a habit of processing language as building blocks and this, in turn, reflects these students' tendency to operate on the idiom principle. Correspondingly, the paper concludes with pointing out some implications for effective acquisition of L2 lexis and future horizons related to developing the idiomaticity of L2 writing.

Key words: collocational accuracy, high-strength collocations, EFL writing, idiom principle, lexical approach

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1. Introduction

Our daily use of language is comprised of pairs of words whose combinatory nature cannot be explained by grammar only but also by referring to the arbitrary nature of that language. Therefore, the ability to produce language naturally and communicate effectively can only be achieved through the use of words that frequently collocate. Such performance in language is typical of native speaker competence or at least native-like proficiency. In this respect, Bollinger (1979) confirms that "our language does not expect us to build everything starting from lumber, nails or blue-print, but expect us to use an incredible large number of prefabs" (p.23). Collocation, as a term used mostly to describe the habitual co-occurrence of two or more words (Stubbs, 1996), is the one-size-fits-all concept which includes many kinds of ready-made chunks in language. Any underuse, overuse or misuse of collocations will be the number one source of oddity and foreign sounding since collocations enable one to compensate for non-nativeness of L2 use mainly in writing (Pawley & Syder, 1983).

English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, mainly intermediate, seem to be marked down because they don't know the four of five major collocations that serve as the defining vocabulary for the main idea they are writing about (Hill, 2000). This departure from the natural use of language is due to the violation of what Sinclair (1987) calls the "idiom principle". According to this idiomatic account of language production, any text is in nature a compilation of prefabricated utterances and semi-preconstructed phrases that are stored in our mental lexicon and retrieved as single choices for later use (Wray, 2002). Evidence that supports the pervasiveness of formulaic sequences, namely collocations, in the written production of language abounds in the literature. For instance, according to Erman and Warren (2000) more than 40% of native speaker writing is in nature formulaic. In addition, Glucksberg (1989) asserts that on average four collocations are produced in every minute of fluent language use. Thus, non-native speakers may be at a disadvantage of producing language in violation of the holistic nature (idiom principle) and instead in favor of the use of separate words and novel constructs. This tendency, which Sinclair (1991) refers to as "the open choice principle", is usually attributed to the practices of unorthodox methods like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). Such primitive practices are very likely to produce L2 learners who are grammatically competent but communicative and collocationally impaired in the sense that their choice of words will be more typical of the first language (L1) than the target language. For this reason, our study proposes a set of classroom practices based on the lexical approach in order to increase EFL learners' sensitivity towards idiomatic word combinations. The motive behind conducting this study is to answer the main question of whether there is any relationship between the implementation of the lexical approach (variable A) and the improvement of EFL learners' collocational accuracy and ability to operate on the idiom principle (variable B). Our line of researching is then guided by the assumption that helping EFL learners acquire the habit of chunking the input reinforces their tendency to exhibit native-like output.

2. Literature Review

In 1720, the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift, on the significance of word choice in successful communication, asserts "Proper words in proper places make the true definition of a style" (as cited in Widdowson, 1993, p.38). To this end, the proper methodology that guides the effective learning / teaching of how to put proper words in their proper places was devised and summed up

in the so-called lexical approach. Michael Lewis is considered to be the founding father of this approach in 1993 but before he brought his premise to the fore, the significance of lexis in language learning and teaching has been asserted in many publications such as *the lexical syllabus* by Willis (1990), *corpus linguistics* by Sinclair (1991), and *lexical phrases in language teaching* by Natingger and Decarrico (1992).

The lexical approach is then based on the idea that fluency centers on the acquisition of a repository of fixed and semi-fixed phrases known as chunks. These chunks, mainly collocations, are of prime importance since they serve as “raw data” in which the structural patterns of language (grammar) are encoded (Lewis, 1993). Scrivener (2011) points out that the Lexical Approach recommends an extensive exposure to language and the use of authentic materials rather than slavishly sticking to the orthodox methodology of the Present-Practice -Produce.

Lexis was overlooked in language teaching as grammar was traditionally considered to be the jewel in the crown of language. Moreover, having effective communicative skills was seen as a matter of mastering the grammatical system of a given language. However, by the publications of Lewis' new views (1993, 1997, 2000) on language use, the latter becomes defined by the lexical approach's key principle as “consisting of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar” (Lewis, 1993, p.36). Therefore, any fluent use of language is in nature a successful use of the building blocks of language, in particular collocation, which is the core element of the lexis approach. The central role of collocations in the creation of meaning was clearly explained by Lewis (1993) in the sense that we cannot, for example, decode the verb *bark* without referring to the noun *dog*. *Since* lexis carries meaning more than grammar, collocations have a generative power of meaning and this qualifies such a habitual co-occurrence of words to be the fulcrum of any classroom practice.

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection Tools

This study is a classroom experiment that aims to put the effectiveness of the lexical approach to the test, i.e. it attempts to assess the impact of training Algerian EFL intermediate learners to notice, identify and store collocations on increasing their collocational accuracy and ability to operate on the idiom principle in their writing. To carry out this study, we first tested our subjects' initial collocational knowledge (homogeneity) prior to the introduction of the instructional program. The collocational test served as a placement test. The latter is designed in the form of multiple-choice questions (see appendix A) which include the six types of lexical collocations explained by Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1997). This test was devised by the author himself using concordance examples taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) and Oxford Collocations Dictionary. The validity of the test was checked by some qualified EFL teachers. Collocations selected for the test were chosen according to their strength of association, i.e., their high mutual information (MI). Second, as far as EFL learners' writing is concerned, each participant from both groups was required to do a composition ranging from 200 to 250 words on a similar topic. In other words, the subjects were asked to play the role of an eyewitness to best describe a crime scene (see appendix B). These learners had to write compositions, inside the classroom and without the use of dictionary, about that topic twice, i.e. before and after the introduction of the treatment.

3.2 Participant

Subjects recruited in this experiment are first year students at the department of English at Chedli Ben Jdid University of Taref in the extreme East of Algeria. Students' ages range between 18 and 34. Most of these participants are females (46), i.e. 74%. The rest are males (16), i.e. 26%. These EFL learners studied English as a compulsory school subject for almost the same period of time (four years at Middle School and three years at High School). They were taught English there following the practices of the competency based approach (CBA) which was adopted by the Algerian Ministry of Education in the late 1990s. Hence, the subjects of this study are homogenous in terms of their age and their linguistic background as well.

To ensure more of such homogeneity in terms of collocational competence, all participants took a collocational knowledge test before the start of the experiment. Their performances in the test were almost the same. The average score (mean) is 11.87 for the control group and 11.80 for the experimental one. For Ethical considerations, the participants were reassured that the results of test are only used for research purposes and not meant for any official assessment. Following the results of that test, these students were randomly assigned to two groups. An experimental group and a control group with 31 students in each.

3.3 Procedure

To evaluate the effect of the treatment on the learners' collocational accuracy and idiomaticity in writing, the experimental group received a training program that was meant to focus their attention on chunking language appropriately to produce natural sounding writing. However, the control group was taught the same content of the instructional program by the same teacher but conventionally (examining synonyms, antonyms and the syntax of the input).

The instructional course designed to teach the experiment group lasted five months (from January 2017 till May 2017). It consisted of 36 sessions taught by the researcher himself over 18 weeks. Each week the experimental group received two sessions. Each one was scheduled for 90 minutes, i.e. the whole class time. This instructional program is based on the practices of the lexical approach and practitioners of this method are required to emphasize the centrality of lexis and develop strategies for chunking the input. Therefore, the methodology that underpins each session of the program is based on Lewis (1997) paradigm of Observe, Hypothesis, Experiment (O-H-E). Correspondingly, the unpacking of the course content was divided into three stages:

A. Observe. After learners were warmed up and introduced to the notion of collocations, the aim of this stage was to direct learners' attention towards lexical collocations found in the input. Each of the first six sessions of the treatment was meant to introduce one of the six kinds of lexical collocations (*Adj+N, N+V, V+N, N+of+N, Adv+Adj, Adv+V*). The major activities that were done in this stage range from highlighting and circulating collocations to matching and crossing out the odd ones. For example, learners were given a reading passage and then tasked with underlining a given set of collocations. Also, to facilitate learning to chunk the input and store these building blocks, learners were provided with typographically enhanced texts (e.g. bolded and italicised collocations) which allow better recognition and retention of collocations. Students were also trained to store the collocations they encounter in a lexical notebook. The latter was divided into sections. Each one was devoted to a record a particular type of lexical collocations.

B. Hypothesise. In this stage and according to Lewis (1993,2000) and O ‘molly and Chamot (1990) learners are expected to make prediction about language use , process the input in terms of form and meaning, compare and contrast the input, and more importantly draw conclusions as to certain collocations they have noticed in the earlier stage. To this end, learners were required to do activities that boost their collocational sensitivity and develop their intuition towards the appropriate collocates. Such classroom exercises were centred on collocation grid (near synonyms), providing missing collocations in addition to activities that reinforce using collocation dictionary to correct miscolllocations. It is in this stage that learners' mental lexicon was enriched as they explored examples of collocations in use taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) in the form of screenshots that we provided inside the classroom.

C. Experiment. Last but not least, learners in this step were required to check the hypothesis they had about the use of a particular aspect of language, in our case lexical collocation, in the previous stage. Thus, learners were involved in communicative activities that were meant to help them convert the intake into output and dismiss their incomplete knowledge of the phraseological nature of language which might be in violation of the arbitrariness of collocation. As Lewis (2000) puts “the communicative situations a learner experiences in or outside the classroom provide the ideal opportunity to use language” (p.178). To illustrate, learners were engaged in “*expand the event – task*” that was introduced by Wilberg (1987) and developed later by Lewis (2000). Ergo, they were required to write four or five nouns that are strongly associated with a topic about something happened to them. Next, learners made use of collocation dictionary they had on their cell phones to provide verbs and adjectives which collocate with those nouns, then the adverbs which combine with the verbs. In so doing, students were able to contextualise the collocations they learnt by using them to write short paragraphs about something related to their personal life (communicative use of language).

4. Results

The findings of this study emerged from a variety of statistically processed data that is related to the performance of learners in different tests. First of all and prior to the start of the instructional program, learners’ initial collocational knowledge was tested to check their lexical homogeneity before assigning them into two groups. According to the results of that test, both groups (experimental group and control group) scored similarly.

Table1

Students' initial collocational knowledge.

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	31	11.80	5.22		
Experimental	31	11.87	3.68	0.6	0.22

As shown in table 1, the score average is 11.80 for the control group and 11.87 for the experimental group. Besides, the mean difference (0.6) indicates that students in both groups had similar knowledge and mastery of collocation before the start of the instructional course. To

confirm this, the independent T- test was performed. Clearly, the p-value in this test (0.22) explains that, by conventional criteria ($p > 0.05$), there is no statistical difference in the scores of both groups.

Table 2

Students' use of collocation in the pre-test of writing.

Group	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	31	185	5.96	2.13
Experimental	31	179	5.77	2.06

Table 3

Students' use of collocation in the post-test of writing.

Group	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	31	253	8.16	3.05
Experimental	31	337	10.87	4.27

To identify collocations used in the participants' compositions, we checked the learners' combinations in the BNC which is adopted as reference corpus throughout this study. By adopting the MI score of 3 as a standard threshold (as suggested by Durrant & Schmitt, 2009; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015) any combination of two words that failed to meet this standard was not labeled as collocation. Correspondingly, the outcome of this procedure reveals that the number of collocations identified in the pre-test of writing in both groups, as shown in table (2), (185 for the control group and 179 for the experimental group) is quite approximate. Likewise, the average score of the control group ($M=5.96$) and that of the experimental group ($M=5.77$) refers to the similar abilities these groups had in producing collocations in their writing at first. However, if we look at table (3) we can see that the number of collocations in the compositions of the posttest in both groups differ markedly. Given that 253 and 337 are the varying amounts of collocations produced by the control and the experimental group respectively, both groups also differ in terms of their score average ($M=8.16$ for the control group and 10.18 for the experimental group). Compared to its counterpart, the experimental group improved tremendously in the use of collocations in writing.

Table 4

Degree of collocational strength in the pre-test of writing.

Bands of MI	Control group			Experimental group		
	N	Mean	Std.Devt	N	Mean	Std.Devt
Low [3-4.99]	77	2.48	1.43	70	2.06	1.36
Medium [5-7]	62	2	1.18	60	1.93	1.28
High (>7)	46	1.48	0.99	49	1.52	1.03

Table 5
Degree of collocational strength in the posttest of writing.

Bands of MI	Control group			Experimental group		
	N	Mean	Std.Devt	N	Mean	Std.Dev t
Low[3- 4.99]	99	3.19	1.68	71	2.29	1.84
Medium[5-7]	79	2.54	2.33	103	3.35	1.79
High(> 7)	75	2.41	1.83	163	5.25	3.24

The collocations produced by both groups in the pre and posttests were further examined to measure the strength of association between their components. For this reason, we classified these collocations into three bands (categories) following their varying MI scores. Accordingly, the collocational strength is defined by three degrees: low, medium and high.

As table (4) demonstrates, in the pretest half of the collocations (N=77.M=2.48) produced in the compositions of the control group falls into the category of low-strength collocations but only few (N=46 .M=1.48) that can be categorized as high -strength collocations. Similarly, most of the collocations (N=70.M=2.06) produced by the experimental group can be classified as low-strength ones and only small amount (N=49.M=1.52) of such word combinations can be labeled as high-strength collocations. However according to table (5), in the posttest the largest proportion of collocations (N=99.M=3.19) used by the control group are low-strength ones while the smallest proportion (N=75.M=2.41) falls into the category of high-strength collocations. In contrast, the highest amount of collocations (N=163.M=5.25) produced by the experimental group is of a high -strength nature as opposed to the lowest amount (N=71.M= 2.29) which is of a low-strength nature.

Table 6
Correlation coefficient between the variables

Performance	Pearson's correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Collocational knowledge (post experiment)	.543*	0.03
High-strength collocations (posttest of writing)		

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Since this research is aimed at assessing the relationship between the two variables (the lexical approach ,represented by the treatment group scores of the collocational knowledge test after experiment, and the idiom principle, represented by these students' use of high-strength collocations in their posttest of writing), we ran the Pearson's correlation test. Results of this test, as shown in table (6), reveal that the Pearson's correlation is positive ($r = .543$). Besides, the p-value is $.03(p < .05)$, i.e. the correlation is statistically significant at the level $.05$.In other words, there is a positive correlation between the two aforementioned variables.

5. Discussion:

The main concern of this paper has been to assess the extent to which EFL writing can be idiomatic as an increased attention to lexical collocations is paid. To this end, the experiment we conducted provided the subjects with an extensive exposure to different kinds of lexical collocations in an attempt to enrich their mental lexicon.

It can be noted from the findings of this study that the number of collocations identified in all of the compositions of both groups is comparable. Arguably, any similarity between these groups in terms of the number of produced collocations, in the first compositions, on the one hand and the degree of idiomaticity of such collocations on the other hand can be accounted for from different perspectives. At first, the majority of the participants' writings featured collocations with low MI scores due to the fact that this EFL learners' exposure seems to have been affected by their growing tendency to process any input as either grammatically well-formed or ill-formed language constructs. Simply put, intermediate EFL learners rely heavily on their grammatical knowledge to build their mental lexicon and in turn produce language accordingly. This can be the driving force behind these learners' word choice in the sense that poorly associated collocations are, to a great extent, similar to free combinations. No doubt that the latter are not problematic to use, since they considerably allow the substitution of either constituent elements which is not in violation of the mechanisms of the L2 word order. It is noteworthy that these findings are in line with those of Granger (1998); Howarth (1998) and Wray (2002) who point out that L2 learners tend to use language as separate words attached together by grammar rules.

Another point to consider is the level of restrictedness between the constituent elements of collocations in the first compositions which can be attributed to the effect of L1. In crude terms, the participants of this study drew on their knowledge of word association in Arabic to combine words in English. This means that such EFL intermediate learners are still unaware of the uniqueness of the socio-cultural and arbitrary nature of L2 lexis. Such results lend support to what was recently reported in the literature, mainly that of Granger and Bestgen (2014) and Chen (2017) who concluded that EFL intermediate learners avoid using strongly associated lexical items due to their poor mental lexicon.

A clearer picture emerges if we consider the increase of the density of collocations in the second compositions of learners. Although the effect of the lexical approach was naturalized in the control group, the latter shows a slight improvement in the production of collocation. This is undoubtedly natural because collocations are part of learners' vocabulary which develops as a result of more experience with the target language. However as for the experimental group, it is evident that collocations mushroomed much more, not only in terms of size but also in terms of the strength of association, due to the great impact of the pedagogical intervention. It is also wise to acknowledge that the O-H-P classroom practice that we adopted enriched the target learners' knowledge of the collocational range of English words, which resulted in learners getting more able to combine words more naturally and in turn convey meaning using native-like chunks. Furthermore, the results of this research suggest that L2 learners started gaining a processing advantage of collocations which can tremendously help them harmonize their retrieval of language with the appropriateness of the situational context. Such findings are significant in the sense that they echo Pawley and Snyder's (1983) study which highlights the processing advantage and the

effortless production of language that non-native speakers can have when they acquire institutionalized forms.

It is worthwhile inferring from the outcome of our classroom experiment that raising learners' awareness of the customary nature governing the L2 word choice (co-occurring of lexical items) can prompt adequate production of idiomatic forms. In other words, learners can feature high-strength collocations in their writing as they notice the behavior of different lexical phrases in language and are sensitized to the nature of the lexical gap between their L1 and the target language. It is therefore wise to emphasize that our study, though reveals a moderate positive correlation, experimentally confirms that the more EFL learners notice, store and retrieve collocations the more strongly associated words their writing features. This conclusive evidence, in turn, confirms our hypothesis that helping learners acquire the habit of chunking the input successfully reinforces their tendency to exhibit accurate collocations and idiomatic output.

6. Conclusion

Collocation is an important aspect of natural language processing and an essential prerequisite to produce native like language. This research paper therefore provides a major contribution to the ongoing discussion of the acquisition of native-like building blocks. The instructional paradigm we tested in this study proved to be highly effective in the sense that helping EFL learners acquire the habit of perceiving language as building blocks correlates with the acquired ability to produce language idiomatically. In the light of this study results, it can be concluded that the success of the lexical approach lies in the fact that its underlining methodology is of more exploratory nature than explanatory one since the lexical nature of language itself is arbitrary, i.e. it is unlikely to be adequately explained by the grammatical system. Besides, developing learners' sensitivity towards the arbitrary nature of word co-occurrence in L2 can tremendously help them positively transfer their tendency from operating on the L1 idiom principle to that of the L2.

Pedagogy wise, the main implications drawn from this investigation lie in the fact that the lexical approach can provide a shortcut methodology for EFL learners and teachers alike to speeding up the process of L2 acquisition by enriching learners' mental lexicon. Textbooks writers and syllabus designers are also recommended to consider the arbitrary nature of the target language lexis and insure the authenticity of the teaching materials in order to increase learners' exposure to high-strength collocations.

Obviously, the main limitation of this study is the small number of participants and the shortness of their compositions. Experimenting the lexical approach on a wider population and a larger size of corpus would yield richer results. In addition, focusing our approach on the acquisition of longer lexical chunks (e.g. idioms and proverbs) would enrich our understanding of new and better ways to develop the acquisition of the idiom principle in L2 writing. It is hoped that the findings of this research pave the way for future inquiries to advance our understanding of the acquisition of native-like selection.

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Appendix A: Collocational Knowledge Test

Dear students, fill in the gaps by choosing the right word from the items provided between the brackets.

1. 5,7,9 and 53 are all..... numbers (strange, weird, odd)
2. Most of the world populations live the poverty line (beneath, under, bellow)
3. The sunk gives offsmell to defend itself (strong, powerful, heavy)
4. Ottoman remaining castles havehistory and culture (rich ,valuable, precious)
5. Most of the newspaper articles that I read by reiterating the main decisions of the parliament.(end, finish , conclude)
6. Some of those articlesquestions about how to adopt the austerity measures (rise, arise, raise)
7. The internship can help you your professional skills (advance, hone, promote).
8. The suspecthis shoulders and denied accusation (shrugged, shook, moved)
9. Usually, at night the temperature(decreases, drops, diminishes)
10. It was midnight and my energy started to (lower, flag, decrease).
11. She felt aof anger when he treated her unfairly. (surge, torrent, storm)
12. Parents feel an/aof pride when they see good exam results of their children (touch, sense, aura)
13. The president was given aof applause as he delivered his speech (shout , round, blast)

14. She waited him but he proved to be uninterested (excitedly , patiently, happily)
15. Shelaid her hand on the orphan's arm (mildly, softly, gently).
16. The guards were.....injured during the explosion.(terribly, seriously , dangerously)
17. I amaware that everybody agrees with me (acutely, totally, entirely).
18. The room hotel we booked wasexpensive (highly, tremendously, totally).
19. Alcohol forbidden in Saudi Arabia. (strictly, strongly, totally).
- 20.Only half of the young people can.....their right to vote (exercise, perform , do)
- 21.The local authority can.....it responsibilities at time(discharge, do, actualize)
22. They answered all chargesagainst him by his rivals. (leveled, given, done).
- 23.The company advisory panel is going the a lecture this evening (do ,deliver, make).
- 24.The government.....rejects any negotiation with kidnappers (totally, definitely, flatly)
25. Any government.....condemns any terrorist attack (forcefully, vehemently, extremely)

Appendix B: Writing Test

Imagine you were once walking down the street and you happened to witness a crime. In no more than 500 words, explain how you would report that attack to police by describing the crime scene you have witnessed.