

## TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH COLLOCATIONS VS. DEFINITIONS IN AN EFL CLASSES

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**Abstract.** *This study compares two vocabulary teaching approaches — collocation-based and definition-based instruction — in a Reading and Writing course at Namangan State Pedagogical Institute (NSPI). Forty first-year students of the Foreign Language and Literature faculty were divided into two equal groups. Over three weeks, one group learned target vocabulary through collocations embedded in authentic reading texts, while the other group studied the same words through dictionary definitions. A 30-item pre- and post-test was administered to both groups. The collocations group improved by 35.7 percentage points on average, reaching a post-test mean of 81.0%, whereas the definitions group improved by 18.3 percentage points, finishing at 65.3%. The findings suggest that teaching vocabulary through natural word combinations leads to better acquisition and contextual use of words. Implications for EFL instruction in Uzbek higher education are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *collocations, definitions, vocabulary acquisition, EFL, definition-based teaching*

## EFL DARSLARIDA SO'Z BAHOSINI TA'RIFLARGA QARSHI KO'RSATMALAR ORQALI O'QITISH

**Annotatsiya.** *Ushbu tadqiqot Namangan davlat pedagogika institutining Reading and Writing kursida lug'at o'rgatishning ikki usulini — kollokatsiyon va ta'rifga asoslangan o'qitishni — qiyosiy o'rganishga bag'ishlangan. Tadqiqotda Xorijiy til va adabiyoti fakultetining 40 nafar birinchi bosqich talabasi ishtirok etdi. Ular ikkita teng guruhga ajratildi. Uch hafta davomida birinchi guruh lug'at birliklarini autentik matnlardagi tabiiy so'z birikmalar (kollokatsiyon) orqali o'rgandi, ikkinchi guruh esa xuddi shu so'zlarni lug'at ta'riflari yordamida o'rganib chiqdi. Ikkala guruh ham 30 ta savoldan iborat dastlabki va yakuniy test topshirdi. Kollokatsiyon guruhining o'rtacha bahosi 45,3 foizdan 81,0 foizga ko'tarildi, ya'ni 35,7 ball oshdi. Ta'rif guruhi esa 47,0 foizdan 65,3 foizga yetdi, atigi 18,3 ballga yaxshilandi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, so'zlarni tabiiy birikmalar doirasida o'rgatish ularni yaxshiroq o'zlashtirish va kontekstda to'g'ri qo'llash imkonini beradi. Maqolada O'zbekiston oliy ta'limidagi ingliz tili o'qitish amaliyoti uchun xulosalar ham bayon etilgan.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *kollokatsiyon, lug'at o'zlashtirish, xorijiy til sifatida ingliz tili (EFL), ta'rifga asoslangan o'qitish, kollokatsiyonga asoslangan o'qitish*

## ОБУЧЕНИЕ ЛЕКСИКЕ ПОСРЕДСТВОМ СЛОВСОЧЕТАНИЙ И ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЙ НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО КАК ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА.

**Аннотация.** Данное исследование посвящено сравнительному изучению эффективности двух методов обучения лексике — на основе коллокаций и на основе толкований слов — в рамках курса *Reading and Writing* в Наманганском государственном педагогическом институте (НГПИ). В исследовании приняли участие 40 студентов первого курса факультета иностранных языков и литературы, разделённых на две равные группы. На протяжении трёх недель одна группа осваивала целевую лексику через коллокации, встроенные в аутентичные учебные тексты, тогда как другая группа изучала те же слова посредством словарных определений. Обе группы прошли тестирование до и после учебного вмешательства. Группа, обучавшаяся на основе коллокаций, улучшила результаты в среднем на 35,7 процентного пункта, достигнув среднего балла 81,0% на итоговом тесте. Группа, работавшая с определениями, продемонстрировала прирост лишь в 18,3 процентного пункта, завершив обучение с показателем 65,3%. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что обучение лексике в контексте естественных словосочетаний способствует более глубокому усвоению слов и их правильному употреблению в речи. В статье также обсуждаются практические выводы для преподавания английского языка в системе высшего образования Узбекистана.

**Ключевые слова:** коллокации, усвоение лексики, английский язык как иностранный (EFL), обучение на основе определений, обучение на основе коллокаций,

## INTRODUCTION

Learning vocabulary is one of the most challenging aspects of studying English as a foreign language. Without a solid vocabulary base, students struggle to read academic texts, write coherent paragraphs, or take part in meaningful communication. This challenge is especially visible at the university level, where students are expected to use English not just for everyday purposes but also for academic tasks such as reading research articles and producing written arguments. At Namangan State Pedagogical Institute, first-year students of the Foreign Language and Literature faculty encounter this challenge from their very first semester. In the Reading and Writing course, students are regularly introduced to new vocabulary items, yet many continue to misuse words in writing — choosing incorrect combinations, producing unnatural sentences, or simply forgetting words they had memorised earlier. This suggests that traditional vocabulary instruction, which largely relies on presenting word definitions, may not be sufficient for developing the kind of vocabulary knowledge that students need for productive use. One alternative that has attracted growing attention in second language research is teaching vocabulary through collocations. A collocation is a pair or group of words

that naturally go together in a language — for example, English speakers say make a decision, not do a decision, and strong coffee, not powerful coffee. These combinations are not random; they reflect patterns that native speakers follow instinctively. When learners are taught vocabulary as part of such natural combinations, rather than as isolated items with definitions, they develop a more functional understanding of how words are used.

Despite the growing body of research supporting collocation-based instruction, most EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan — including at the tertiary level — continue to rely on definition-based approaches. This is partly a matter of tradition and partly a reflection of the materials and methods used in language teaching. However, national education policy has been shifting in recent years: Presidential Decree No. PD-2909 (2017) called for a move away from rote memorisation toward communicative and context-based teaching, and Presidential Decree No. PD-5117 (2021) reinforced this by promoting innovative and digitally supported methods of instruction. These reforms create both an opportunity and a need to explore how vocabulary teaching can be made more effective at the institutional level.

This study was therefore carried out to examine whether teaching vocabulary through collocations produces better learning outcomes than teaching the same words through definitions. The experiment was conducted during the Reading and Writing course at NSPI with first-year students, using a pre-test and post-test design. Two research questions guided the study:

RQ1: Does collocation-based instruction lead to greater vocabulary gains than definition-based instruction among first-year EFL students at NSPI?

RQ2: Which types of vocabulary tasks — matching, gap-fill, or multiple choice — show the greatest difference between the two groups?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers across different traditions agree that vocabulary is central to language learning. Nation (2001) argues that learners need to know at least 95 to 98 per cent of the words in a text before they can read it with reasonable comprehension, which means that a limited vocabulary directly restricts what students can read or

write. Wilkins (1972) made the point more bluntly: without vocabulary, nothing can be communicated.

An important distinction in vocabulary research is between receptive and productive knowledge. Receptive knowledge means being able to understand a word when you see or hear it; productive knowledge means being able to use it accurately in speech or writing (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). Traditional definition-based teaching tends to build receptive knowledge — students learn to recognise a word and its meaning — but does not necessarily help them use the word in context. This gap between recognition and use is a common problem in EFL settings and is particularly visible in students' written production.

The idea of teaching vocabulary through collocations is not new. Lewis (1993), in developing the Lexical Approach, argued that language is not best understood as a set of grammar rules and isolated words, but as a collection of fixed and semi-fixed expressions. Learners who know that you take responsibility, not carry it, or that you face a problem, not meet it, can produce more natural English more quickly because they retrieve whole phrases rather than assembling sentences word by word. Psychological research offers an explanation for why this works. Craik and Lockhart (1972) proposed that information is remembered better when it is processed deeply and meaningfully, rather than at a surface level. Learning a word inside a natural phrase — seeing how it connects to other words and what situations it fits — requires this kind of deeper engagement. Sweller's (1988) cognitive load theory adds that storing ready-made chunks reduces the mental effort needed during writing, leaving more cognitive space for organising ideas and constructing meaning.

Empirical studies support these theoretical claims. Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) found that learners who received explicit collocation instruction produced more idiomatic and accurate language. Webb and Kagimoto (2011) reported that collocation-based learning led to better long-term retention than single-word learning. Nesselhauf (2005) showed that many learner errors in writing — such as do a mistake instead of make a mistake — occur precisely because students have not been taught how words combine, which is something that definition-based instruction does not address.

Definitions are not without value. For beginner learners or when encountering a completely unknown word, a clear definition gives the learner a starting point. Nation (2013) acknowledges that definitions, especially when accompanied by example sentences and visual support, can facilitate initial understanding. Learner dictionaries have also improved significantly, now including sample collocations, usage notes, and corpus-based examples. The problem arises when definitions are used as the main or only method of vocabulary instruction. Laufer (1997) observed that words learned through definitions alone often remain at a surface level — learners can match a word to its meaning in a test but struggle to use it in a sentence. Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) describe this as 'inert knowledge': information that can be retrieved in controlled conditions but does not become part of the learner's active vocabulary. Barfield and Gyllstad (2009) suggest that definitions and collocations should be used together in a sequence, with definitions providing the initial meaning and collocational practice embedding that meaning in use.

### METHODOLOGY

The study used a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design. Both groups were tested before and immediately after the instructional period, so it was possible to compare how much each group improved and to identify differences between the two approaches. A quasi-experimental design was chosen because students at NSPI are already assigned to groups at the start of the academic year, so it was not possible to randomly assign individual participants.

Forty first-year students of the Foreign Language and Literature faculty at NSPI took part in the study. All participants were studying English as a foreign language, with an approximate CEFR proficiency level of A2–B1. The students were divided into two groups of twenty, matched on the basis of their pre-test scores to ensure that both groups started from a similar level of vocabulary knowledge.

Group	n	Method
Experimental	20	Collocation-based instruction
Control	20	Definition-based instruction

*Table 1. Participant groups*

Twenty vocabulary items at A2–B1 level were selected from high-frequency word lists relevant to topics covered in the Reading and Writing course: travel, advice, borrow, prepare, decision, experience, accident, journey, visitor, opportunity, explain, improve, suggest, information, important, problem, remember, different, possible, learn.

**Experimental group.** Over three 30-minute sessions integrated into the Reading and Writing course, students were introduced to target words through natural collocations. For example, rather than being told that travel means 'to go from one place to another', students encountered the phrase travel abroad in a short reading text, noticed how it was used, and then practised it in gap-fill sentences and a short writing task. Collocations such as give advice, make a decision, gain experience, and go on a journey were introduced in the same way. Students worked in pairs to produce their own sentences using the target collocations.

**Control group.** The same twenty words were taught over the same number of sessions, but through dictionary-style definitions. Students were given definitions such as: advice – a suggestion about what someone should do; decision – a choice made after thinking carefully. They matched words to definitions on a handout and then wrote example sentences of their own. No specific attention was drawn to collocational patterns. A 30-item vocabulary test was used as both the pre-test and post-test (with items reordered). The test comprised three sections of ten items each: matching words to definitions, fill-in-the-blank sentences, and multiple-choice questions. These sections were designed to assess both receptive knowledge (matching and multiple choice) and productive application (gap-fill). The maximum possible score was 30 points.

## RESULTS

Before instruction, both groups performed at similar levels. The experimental group scored a mean of 45.3% and the control group 47.0%, a difference of less than two percentage points. After instruction, the experimental group reached 81.0% and the control group 65.3%. Table 2 shows these figures together with each group's improvement.

Group	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Improvement (%)
Experimental	45.3	81.0	+35.7
Control	47.0	65.3	+18.3

*Table 2. Pre-test and post-test means by group*

The experimental group improved by 35.7 percentage points, while the control group improved by 18.3 percentage points. The difference between the two improvement scores was 17.4 percentage points, meaning the collocation-based group gained approximately twice as much as the definition-based group over the same instructional period.

Table 3 breaks down post-test performance by task section for each group.

Task	EG /10	EG %	CG /10	CG %
Matching	8.3	83%	6.7	67%
Gap-fill	8.0	80%	6.5	65%
Multiple choice	8.0	80%	6.4	64%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>6.53</b>	<b>65.3%</b>

*Table 3. Post-test scores by task type (EG = Experimental Group; CG = Control Group)*

The experimental group outperformed the control group in all three sections. The largest gap was in the matching and multiple-choice tasks (16 percentage points each), followed closely by the gap-fill section (15 percentage points). The fact that the experimental group did better even on the matching task — which is essentially a receptive measure — suggests that collocation-based instruction improved not only students' ability to use words but also their ability to recognise and distinguish them. Looking at the pre-test results in more detail, both groups found the multiple-choice section hardest (experimental: 40%, control: 38%) and performed best on gap-fill (experimental: 51%, control: 53%). This pattern suggests that at baseline, students

could sometimes place a familiar word in a sentence but struggled to choose precisely between similar meanings — a skill that collocational knowledge helps to develop.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study are fairly clear: the group that learned vocabulary through collocations made much greater progress than the group that learned through definitions alone. This outcome is consistent with findings from previous research carried out in other EFL contexts (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Gyllstad, 2007; Webb & Kagimoto, 2011), and the present study adds evidence that similar patterns hold for first-year students at a Uzbek pedagogical institute. One reason collocation-based instruction seems to work better has to do with how memory operates. When a student learns that decision means 'a choice made after thinking carefully', the word stays isolated in memory. When the same student encounters make a decision in a reading passage, uses it in a fill-in-the-blank exercise, and then writes a paragraph about a difficult decision they once faced, the word becomes connected to meaning, context, and personal experience. According to the depth of processing framework proposed by Craik and Lockhart (1972), this kind of engaged, multi-dimensional processing leads to much stronger long-term retention.

There is also a practical advantage. When students know the phrase make a decision as a unit, they do not have to stop and think about which verb goes with decision when they are writing. The phrase is already stored and can be retrieved as a whole (Sweller, 1988). This matters in a Reading and Writing course, where students are constantly producing written text under time pressure. The ability to retrieve natural word combinations quickly and accurately is precisely the kind of vocabulary skill that the course is meant to develop. The fact that the experimental group performed better even on receptive tasks — matching and multiple choice — is worth noting. These task types do not require students to produce language, only to recognise it. Yet students who learned through collocations were still better at identifying correct meanings. This suggests that exposure to words in meaningful, naturally-occurring combinations not only improves production but also sharpens recognition. This is consistent with usage-based accounts of language learning (Ellis,

2003), which argue that repeated, meaningful exposure to patterns gradually builds up an implicit network of lexical knowledge.

The control group also improved, which is expected. Definitions are not useless — they provide a starting point, particularly for students who have never encountered a word before. But a gain of 18.3 percentage points versus 35.7 percentage points illustrates the limitations of stopping at definitions. Many of the control group's errors on the post-test came in contextual tasks: students knew what a word meant in the abstract but were unsure how to use it in a sentence, or chose a grammatically possible but lexically unnatural combination. This is exactly the kind of error that collocation instruction is designed to prevent (Nesselhauf, 2005). It is worth connecting these findings to the broader policy context in Uzbekistan. Presidential Decree PD-2909 (2017) specifically called for a departure from rote memorisation and translation in language teaching, towards more communicative and contextualised approaches. Collocation-based vocabulary instruction fits squarely within this policy direction: it is grounded in authentic language use, requires active engagement from students, and produces practical communication skills rather than passive recognition of word meanings. The Reading and Writing course at NSPI provides a natural and appropriate context for this kind of instruction, since written production tasks give students regular opportunities to practise vocabulary in context and receive feedback on their choices.

That said, the present study has some limitations. The instructional period was short — three sessions over three weeks — and the post-test was given immediately after the final session, so nothing is known about how well students retained vocabulary over a longer period. The sample came from a single course at one institution, so the results may not generalise to other groups or proficiency levels. Future studies could address these limitations by including a delayed post-test, extending the intervention across a full semester, or including qualitative methods such as student interviews or writing portfolios to capture a fuller picture of vocabulary development.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to compare the effectiveness of collocation-based and definition-based vocabulary instruction in a Reading and Writing course at NSPI. The results showed that students who learned vocabulary through collocations improved by nearly twice as much as students who learned through definitions, and this advantage was consistent across all three task types used in the assessment. For instructors at NSPI and in similar EFL contexts, the practical implication is straightforward: when introducing new vocabulary, presenting words in natural combinations and giving students opportunities to practise those combinations in reading and writing tasks is likely to produce better learning outcomes than presenting definitions alone. This does not mean abandoning definitions entirely — they remain a useful first step — but they should be a starting point rather than the endpoint of vocabulary instruction. Integrating collocation-based instruction into EFL courses also aligns with Uzbekistan's current educational priorities, which emphasise communicative competence, authentic language use, and active learning. Given the centrality of vocabulary to reading comprehension and written expression, making this shift in how vocabulary is taught could have meaningful long-term benefits for students' academic and professional language development.

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