

# Assessing Kufa University EFL Students' Awareness of Lexical and Grammatical Collocation in English

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to assess Kufa University EFL students' awareness of lexical and grammatical collocation in English. It concerns itself with identifying which aspect of collocation is more or less challenging for the students. Thus, this study aims to find out whether there are significant differences between the participants' performance with respect to both lexical and grammatical collocations in three colleges at the University of Kufa- namely: College of Languages, College of Arts and College of Education.

Therefore, a test comprising 20 multiple-choice items concerning both types of collocation has been administered to a sample of 30 students randomly and equally selected from the three aforementioned colleges (10 participants from each college).

The test results have validated the study hypothesis that Kufa University EFL students' knowledge of both types of collocation is inadequate and lacking. Notwithstanding, findings of the study have demonstrated that there is a statistically significant difference regarding students' performance on the test. Students performed well better on the lexical collocations test items than on the grammatical ones, which also proves the study's other hypothesis.

**KEYWORDS:** lexical collocation, grammatical collocation, performance, difficulty, Kufa University EFL students.

## Section One

### 1.1. Introduction

This study endeavours to shed light on the problem concerning the difficulty that Kufa University EFL students encounter when dealing with collocation in English. As EFL students, they are faced with the challenge to correctly use collocations or be familiar with the words that frequently co-occur in English. Consequently, insufficient familiarity with collocation results in committing mistakes both in lexical and grammatical collocation (See Duan & Qin, 2012, p. 1891). More specifically, this study concerns itself with the investigation of two types of collocation only: lexical and grammatical collocation. Thus, a test consisting of 20 items has been conducted in three colleges ( with 10 participants from each college) at the University of Kufa. In addition to measuring students' performance, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

- Are fourth-year Kufa University EFL students capable of using collocation appropriately?

- How variable is the students' performance regarding both types of collocation? Are they equally familiar /unfamiliar with both types?
- How similar/different are students' achievements in the three aforementioned colleges?

In this respect, it is hypothesized that collocation, whether grammatical or lexical, poses a real problem to Kufa University EFL students. Hence, they erroneously use grammatical and lexical collocations. It is also hypothesized that Kufa University EFL students are more familiar with lexical collocation than grammatical collocation.

## 1.2. Objectives

This study aims at:

- Assessing Kufa University EFL students' awareness of grammatical and lexical collocations.
- Identifying the variability of students' achievements in the three colleges.
- Showing how different the students' performance is and whether they are equally familiar /unfamiliar with both types of collocation.

## 1.3. Procedures

The following procedures are adopted in the study:

- Providing a relevant theoretical background about collocation in general, and its two basic types in particular: lexical and grammatical collocation.
- Conducting a test to assess Kufa University EFL students' performance regarding lexical and grammatical collocation in English.
- Employing the percentage equation to analyse and compare the test results.
- Discussing the results of the test and presenting the conclusions.

## 1.4. Test Design

The test comprises 20 multiple-choice items. Each item consists of four options, and the students are asked to underline the correct one. The test is designed and conducted to measure students' performance in correctly using lexical and grammatical collocations. As previously mentioned, 10 students from each college were randomly selected to take the test. The students were allotted half an hour to attempt all the questions. They were instructed not to leave any question unanswered. The number and percentage of right as well as wrong answers and the total percentage of each type of collocation were calculated. This enabled the effective correlation and comparison of test results. To ensure the reliability and validity of all items in the test regarding both types of collocation, all the collocations used in the test have been looked up in well-reputed dictionaries, such as *Oxford Collocations: Dictionary for Student of English*.

## 1.5. Participants

The subjects of the study are Iraqi EFL college students in the University of Kufa. The sample consists of 30 (randomly selected male and female) subjects equally distributed among three colleges in the University of Kufa (namely in: College of Languages, College of Arts and College of Education). The subjects are fourth-year students in the Department of English. The students are native speakers of Arabic, who have been taught EFL for the past three years. Consequently, they have received ample education about collocation in English.

## Section Two

### Theoretical Overview

Crystal (2008, p. 112) defines collocation as a term that refers “to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. For example, *auspicious* co-occurs with *occasion, event, etc.*”. As a linguistic phenomenon, collocation is unequivocally found in all languages. Languages worldwide have their own collocations and their own ways of handling them (Wallace, 1982, p. 30). Furthermore, it is a must for native speakers of any given language to be acquainted with the collocations typically used in their language. In linguistics, there has been a burgeoning interest of the importance of collocation as one of the most prominent features of language. (Wallace, 1982).

According to Lewis (1997), the fact that there are no fixed rules for collocation to be learned is one of the problems facing any foreign learner of English. Native speakers of any given language can intuitively use correct collocations due to a lifetime of experience, regularly and routinely coming across words that regularly and frequently co-occur in their daily language activities. By comparison, foreign language learners have a much more limited experience and may thus collocate words in a way that can easily be recognized by native speaker as bizarre or odd.

Additionally, Halliday & Hasan (1976, p. 289) also shed light on the role of historical development in the co-occurrences of collocations. They point out that history cannot be ignored. That is to say, the environment can determine the context within which the item is be used on a particular occasion.

Over the past decades, this area of linguistics, with the aid of corpus-based and computer-assisted analyses, has been significantly developed and advanced. In this respect, studies have unequivocally demonstrated that collocations constitute a crucial component in the lexicon of natural languages. Consequently, learning a language does require adequate knowledge of these collocations. Generally speaking, collocations are regarded to be problematic to foreign languages learners. Numerous studies in this area have proved that foreign language learners manifest a certain degree of incompetence when compared to the full-fledged language of a competent native speaker as the former exhibits certain features indicating clear lack of mastery over the language. (Kennedy, 2014)

#### 2.1. Definition of Collocation

Collocation is one of the most salient linguistic phenomena that are found in all languages. Each language possesses its own collocations and its own way of utilizing them (Wallace, 1982). As for the etymology of "collocation", Skeat (1993, p. 255) states that it is derived from "collocate" meaning to put together. Collocation is originated from Latin “*col-locare*”. It is actually the linguistic company that lexical items or words keep with other words, phrases, prepositions and other linguistic elements. For example, certain prepositions tend to co-occur with certain nouns (e.g. *to go by train, on foot*), adjective and prepositions (e.g. *good at something, but not in something*), adjective and noun (a very *tall man, not a high man*), etc. Thus, it is obvious how in every language, there are collocational restrictions since there are words that co-occur only with certain other words but not with all words.

Furthermore, collocation has been defined variously by different linguists. Firth (1957, p. 55, as cited by Léon, 2005) maintains that "you shall know a word by the company it keeps." Baker (1992, p. 47) maintains that collocations are primarily defined as arbitrary restrictions which do not result logically from the propositional meaning of words. Moreover, Lewis (1997) defines collocation as two or three word clusters occurring with a more than chance regularity throughout both spoken and written English. Thornbury (2004) states that collocations are typically depicted as haphazard as well as language-specific and that the notion of arbitrariness is related to the fact that replacing a synonym for one of the words in a collocational word pair may actually result in an inappropriate lexical combination. Another remarkable

definition of collocation is that proposed by Spence (1969) who defines it as a group of lexical terms placed together to build up a natural-sounding word accompaniment.

## 2.2. Types of Collocation

Collocation has been classified according to different criteria. Broadly speaking, linguists unanimously agree upon the classification of collocation into lexical and grammatical. In this regard, Thornbury (2004) states that collocations are subsumed under two major types: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations (See also Benson, 1986). Similarly, Sinclair (1991) maintains that collocations fall either into the lexical or grammatical type. He further explains that the commonly adopted notion of grammatical collocation is that of a word combination whereby at least one item or word is lexical (open word- class) and at least one item is grammatical (function or closed word- class), as opposed to lexical collocation where the frequent occurrence of words results from some sort of convention instead of mere syntactical dependencies (See Gyllstad, 2014).

### 2.2.1. Lexical Collocation

Benson (1986) defines lexical collocation as arbitrary, recurrent and regularly frequent word combinations. A distinguishing feature of lexical collocations is that they do not contain prepositions, infinitives, clauses or any of the function words. They generally consist of nouns, adverbs, verbs and adjectives. Furthermore, lexical collocations usually consist of two equal lexical components. Moreover, Thornbury (2004, p. 221) distinguishes lexical collocations from grammatical ones and describes lexical collocations as having such combinations as:

✓ Verb + noun

e.g. *join a club, do a degree*

✓ Adjective + noun

e.g. *great fun, loud music*

✓ Adverb + adjective

e.g. *happily married, incredibly easy*

### 2.2.2. Grammatical Collocation

Grammatical collocation, on the other hand, does contain function words or grammatical elements. According to Gyllstad (2014, p. 5), "grammatical collocation involves a noun, an adjective, or a verb plus a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or a clause", e.g. *account for, advantage over, at night, by accident, to be afraid that*, etc. Generally, they fall into such categories as:

✓ Noun+ preposition, e.g. *blockade against, apathy towards*.

✓ Noun + to- infinitive, e.g. *He was a moron to do it*.

✓ Noun + that – clause, e.g. *we reached an agreement that Jane would stand for us in court*.

✓ Preposition + noun, e.g. *by accident, in agony*.

✓ Adjectives + prepositions as in *fond of kids, hungry for power*.

✓ Adjective + to - infinitive, e.g. *it is nice to be there*.

✓ Adjective + that – clause, e.g. *Henry was afraid that he would not pass*.

**Section Three**

**Data Analysis, Results and Discussions**

The test results, as shown in the tables below, validate the study hypothesis that collocation, whether grammatical or lexical, poses a real problem to Kufa University EFL students. The test consists of twenty items. The first ten items of the test are concerned with lexical collocation, whereas the last ten ones concern grammatical collocation. The results conspicuously indicate that the students face noticeable difficulties in the use of both lexical and grammatical collocation. This is clearly reflected in the poor performance rates of the students in most items of the test across the three colleges.

The tables below show the overall results of the test as well as the test results in each college.

**Table (1): Comparison among the three colleges in terms of students’ overall performance on the test**

College Name	Number & Percentage of Answers in Lexical Collocation		Number & Percentage of Answers in Grammatical Collocation		Total Number and Percentage	
	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong
College of Arts	41 (41 %)	59 (59 %)	34 (34 %)	66 (66 %)	75(37.5%)	125 (62.5%)
College of Education	44 (44 %)	56 (56 %)	37 (37 %)	63 (63 %)	81 (40.5%)	119(59.5%)
College of Languages	48 (48 %)	52 (52 %)	40 (40 %)	60 (60 %)	88 (44%)	112(56 %)
<b>Total ( in all colleges)</b>	133 (44.3 %)	167 (55.7 %)	111 (37 %)	189 (63 %)	244 ≈ (41. %)	356 ≈ (%59.)

**Table (2): College of Languages/ Students’ performance on the test**

Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Lexical Collocation				Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Grammatical Collocation			
	Right Answers		Wrong Answers			Right Answers		Wrong Answers	
1-	6	60 %	4	40 %	11-	8	80 %	2	20 %
2-	5	50 %	5	50 %	12-	5	50 %	5	50 %
3-	5	50 %	5	50 %	13-	4	40 %	6	60 %
4-	4	40 %	6	60 %	14-	3	30 %	7	70 %
5-	6	60 %	4	40 %	15-	2	20 %	8	80 %
6-	4	40 %	6	60 %	16-	3	30 %	7	70 %
7-	4	40 %	6	60%	17-	5	50 %	5	50%
8-	5	50 %	5	50 %	18-	3	30 %	7	70 %
9-	4	40 %	6	60 %	19-	3	30 %	7	70 %
10-	5	50 %	5	50 %	20-	4	40 %	6	60 %

Total number & percentage of right answers: 48 (48 %)	Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 52 (52 %)	Total number & percentage of right answers: 40 (40 %)	Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 60 (60 %)
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**Table (3): College of Education / Students' performance on the test**

Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Lexical Collocation				Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Grammatical Collocation			
	Right Answers		Wrong Answers			Right Answers		Wrong Answers	
1-	5	60 %	5	40 %	11-	7	70 %	3	30 %
2-	4	50 %	6	50 %	12-	5	50 %	5	50 %
3-	5	50 %	5	50 %	13-	3	30 %	7	70 %
4-	4	40 %	6	60 %	14-	3	30 %	7	70 %
5-	6	60 %	4	40 %	15-	2	20 %	8	80 %
6-	3	40 %	7	60 %	16-	3	30 %	7	70 %
7-	4	40 %	6	60%	17-	4	40 %	6	60%
8-	4	50 %	6	50 %	18-	3	30 %	7	70 %
9-	4	40 %	6	60 %	19-	3	30 %	7	70 %
10-	5	50 %	5	50 %	20-	4	40 %	6	60 %
Total number & percentage of right answers: 44 (44 %)		Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 56 (56 %)		Total number & percentage of right answers: 37 (37 %)		Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 63 (63 %)			

**Table (4): College of Arts /Students' performance on the test**

Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Lexical Collocation				Item No.	Number & Percentage of Answers in Grammatical Collocation			
	Right Answers		Wrong Answers			Right Answers		Wrong Answers	
1-	5	50 %	5	50 %	11-	5	50 %	5	50 %
2-	3	30 %	7	50 %	12-	4	40 %	6	60 %
3-	5	50 %	5	50 %	13-	3	30 %	7	70 %
4-	4	40 %	6	60 %	14-	3	30 %	7	70 %
5-	5	50 %	5	50 %	15-	2	20 %	8	80 %
6-	3	40 %	7	60 %	16-	3	30 %	7	70 %
7-	4	40 %	6	60%	17-	4	40 %	6	60%
8-	3	30 %	7	70 %	18-	3	30 %	7	70 %
9-	4	40 %	6	60 %	19-	3	30 %	7	70 %
10-	5	50 %	5	50 %	20-	4	40 %	6	60 %
Total number & percentage of right answers: 41 (41 %)		Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 59 (59 %)		Total number & percentage of right answers: 34 (34 %)		Total number & percentage of wrong answers: 66 (66 %)			

The results, as shown in all of the above tables, clearly and unequivocally indicate that collocation in English, whether grammatical or lexical, represents a major difficulty for Kufa University students. The total number and percentage of wrong answers regarding lexical collocation in all three colleges is 167 out of 200



(55.7 %), while the total number and percentage of wrong answers of grammatical collocation is 189 out of 200 (63.5 %).

However, the results (as shown in the tables above) also indicate that the students in all colleges are more aware of and find it easier to use lexical collocation since they performed far better in the items that are concerned with lexical collocation. The total number of lexical collocation items answered correctly in all colleges is 133 correct answers, with a percentage of 44.3 %, which is higher when compared with the number and percentage of wrong answers in the grammatical items (111 wrong answers representing a 37% percentage). According to Corder (1971, p. 71), lexical errors are deemed as more serious than all other types of errors since "it is in the choice of words that effective communication is hindered most". Despite students' poor performance in all colleges, the results show variation among three colleges in terms of performance.

Lewis (1997) states that ineffective learning strategies, mother tongue influence, overgeneralization, lack of practice in and exposure to the target language and the influence of L1 transfer severely affect EFL learners' awareness of collocation. This is clearly exhibited in the students' poor achievement on the test.

**Figure 1. Comparison among the three colleges in terms of lexical and grammatical collocation (Note: 1- College of Arts 2- College of Education 3- College of Languages)**

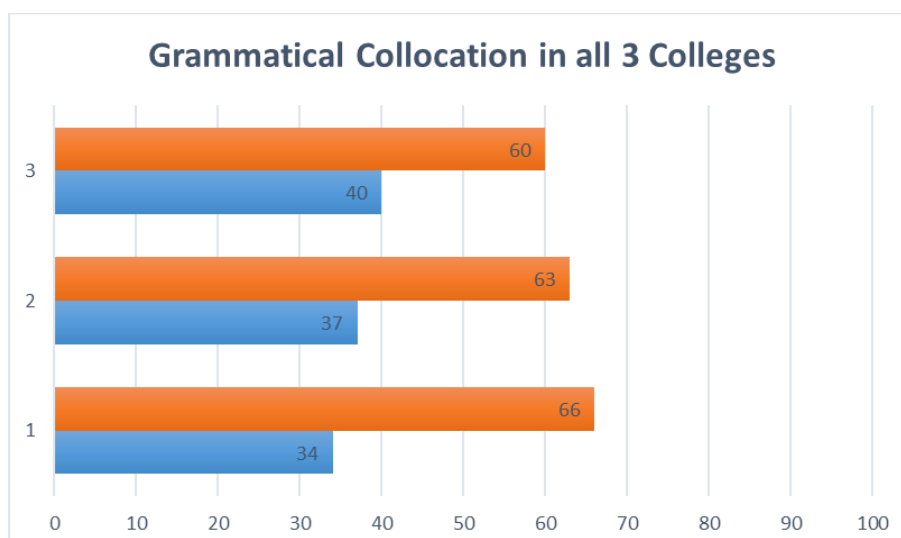
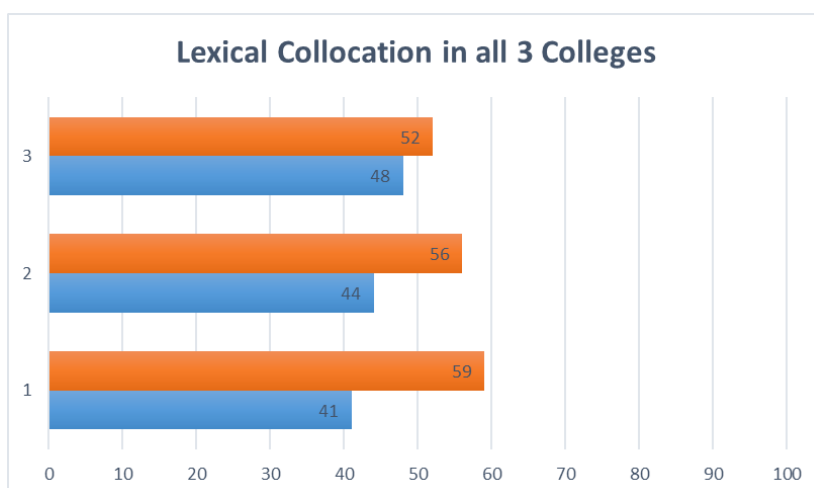
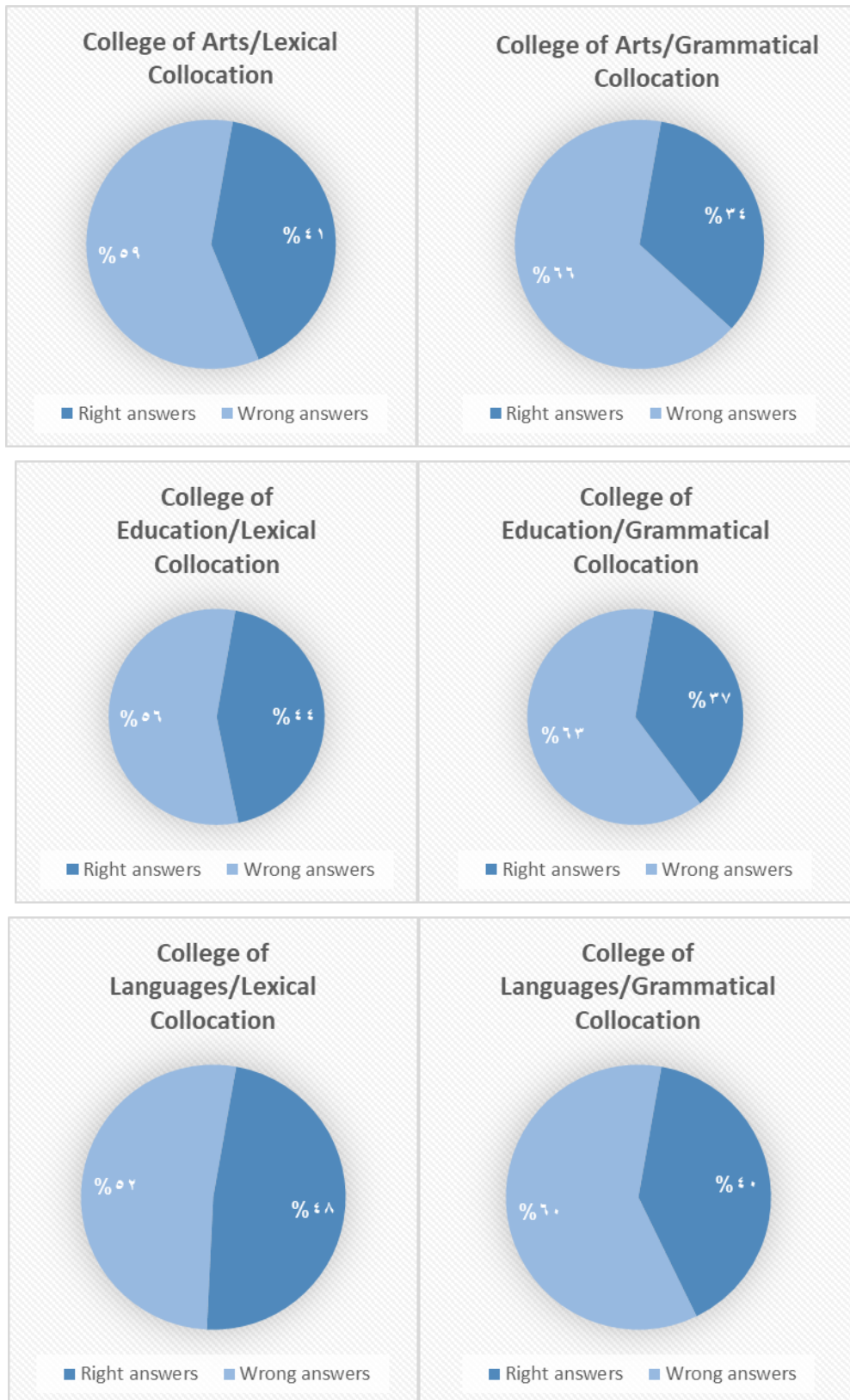


Figure 2. Comparison of students' performance within each college (horizontally) and among the three colleges (vertically)





## Section Four

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the test results discussed above, the study concludes that Kufa University EFL students' awareness of lexical and grammatical collocation in English is inadequate; hence, collocation - whether grammatical or lexical - poses a real challenge to them. This actually confirms the hypothesis of the study. Kufa University EFL students do not possess the adequate qualification that is required for the appropriate use of collocation and its various types and patterning. Therefore, they may combine words incorrectly due to a variety of reasons, such as the negative L1 transfer and lack of learning experience and exposure to the target language.

Furthermore, the results show variation among the three colleges in terms of the students' performance on the test. Nevertheless, it has been found that students in all colleges are more familiar with lexical collocation since they performed far better in the items that are concerned with lexical collocation. This also supports the study's hypothesis that Kufa University EFL students' are more aware of lexical collocation than grammatical collocation.

In this respect, it is recommended that EFL students attempt to learn the different word patterns and how words conventionally and frequently combine. In actuality, EFL students that are concerned only with mastering words individually will not succeed in acquiring a native-like competence. As Nattinger and DeCarrio (1992, p. 104) point out, "vocabulary learning is more than the study of individual words".

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