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Lexical Architecture in Action: The Role of Word Combinations in Developing Communicative Competence of EFL Non-Major Students

Bagoviyeva Ralina

First-Year Master's Student Jizzakh State Pedagogical University

Email: lady_ralina@mail.ru

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Abstract: Communicative competence remains a central objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, yet non-major university students continue to exhibit significant lexical gaps that impede meaningful communication. This study investigates the role of word combinations – including collocations, lexical chunks, and formulaic sequences – in developing the communicative competence of EFL non-major students at a Central Asian university. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study involved 84 undergraduate participants assigned to experimental and control groups over a twelve-week instructional intervention. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and a validated questionnaire. Quantitative findings revealed statistically significant gains in speaking fluency, lexical appropriacy, and overall communicative performance among the experimental group ($p < .001$), while qualitative data highlighted improvements in discourse coherence, idiomatic expression, and reduced hesitancy. The results align with the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993) and contemporary research on formulaic language, confirming that explicit instruction in word combinations produces measurable advances in communicative ability. The study contributes practical pedagogical insights for EFL teachers working with non-specialist learners and calls for greater integration of corpus-informed lexical syllabi in university-level language programs.

Keywords: communicative competence, word combinations, collocations, lexical chunks, formulaic language, EFL non-major students, lexical approach, vocabulary instruction

1. Introduction

Communicative competence has become an indispensable academic and professional skill globally, particularly in contexts where English functions as a foreign language. In Central Asian universities, non-major students – enrolled in disciplines such as engineering, economics, and law – are expected to achieve functional communicative proficiency despite limited instructional hours and minimal authentic English exposure. For these learners, the core challenge is not primarily grammatical but fundamentally lexical and phraseological [1].

Hymes (1972) established that communicative competence extends beyond grammatical mastery to encompass knowledge of what to say, when, and how within a given context. Canale and Swain (1980) elaborated this into a framework comprising grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies, each substantially dependent on lexical resources. More recently, Celce-Murcia (2008) and Purpura (2020) have foregrounded lexical knowledge – including word combinations – as a precondition for fluent, contextually appropriate language use. Despite this, instruction in

many non-major programs remains grammar-oriented, treating vocabulary development as secondary to structural accuracy [2].

Nation (2001, 2022) argues compellingly that knowing a word means knowing how it combines with other words. Collocations — conventionalized pairings such as *make a decision* or *raise awareness* — are central to this understanding. Learners who substitute adjacent words (e.g., *do a decision*) produce grammatically plausible but pragmatically unnatural output. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) demonstrated that fluent production relies heavily on pre-assembled multi-word sequences, while Lewis (1993) elevated this insight into the Lexical Approach, proposing the chunk rather than the word as language's fundamental unit [3]. Psycholinguistic research further confirms that formulaic sequences are processed faster and with lower cognitive load, enabling learners to direct attention toward higher-order communicative functions such as coherence, register, and interactional management.

Non-major EFL students consistently struggle with productive collocational knowledge. They may recognize individual words yet fail to deploy them in natural combinations, resorting instead to word-for-word translation strategies that produce semantically accurate but pragmatically inappropriate utterances [4]. Large class sizes, examination-driven curricula, and teachers trained predominantly in grammar-focused traditions compound these difficulties, leaving learners ill-equipped for the communicative demands of academic and professional life. Existing research has largely addressed English-major or secondary-level populations; studies specifically targeting non-major Central Asian EFL students — a group characterized by post-Soviet pedagogical traditions and growing internationalization pressures — remain sparse. This gap is significant, given that non-major students constitute the largest segment of university-level EFL enrollment globally and face communicative demands that are simultaneously high-stakes and poorly served by current instructional approaches [5].

The present study addresses this gap. Its overarching aim is to investigate the extent to which explicit instruction in word combinations — collocations, lexical chunks, and formulaic sequences — contributes to the development of communicative competence among EFL non-major university students at a Central Asian institution [6]. Three research questions guide the inquiry: (RQ1) To what extent does explicit instruction in word combinations improve the communicative competence of EFL non-major students? (RQ2) Which dimensions of communicative competence show the greatest improvement following word combination instruction? (RQ3) How do non-major EFL students perceive the role of word combinations in their communicative development? The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by situating lexical competence within established communicative frameworks, and practically, by offering evidence-based pedagogical recommendations for teachers working in non-major university EFL contexts [7].

2. Materials and Methods

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design combined with semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. The study was conducted over twelve weeks at a state university in Uzbekistan, selected for its representativeness of the Central Asian EFL context.

Eighty-four undergraduate students from four non-specialist departments — Computer Science ($n = 22$), Economics ($n = 21$), Civil Engineering ($n = 20$), and International Relations ($n = 21$) — participated. Ages ranged from 18 to 22 ($M = 19.7$, $SD = 1.1$). Most participants fell within the A2–B1 CEFR range. Using stratified random assignment, participants were divided into an experimental group (EG; $n = 42$) and a control group (CG; $n = 42$), matched on proficiency, gender, and discipline. Both groups received identical contact hours (90 minutes twice weekly) with instructors of equivalent qualifications.

Instrumentation

Four instruments were used. The **Collocational Knowledge Test (CKT)** comprised 40 items (gap-fill, error correction, forced choice) drawn from the Academic Word List; reliability was $\alpha = .84-.87$. The **Oral Communication Assessment Rubric (OCAR)** assessed six dimensions aligned with Canale and Swain's (1980) framework: lexical range and collocational accuracy, grammatical accuracy, discourse coherence, sociolinguistic appropriacy, fluency, and strategic competence; inter-rater reliability was $\kappa = .81$. The **Learner Perception Questionnaire (LPQ)** contained 28 Likert-scale items yielding three subscales: Communicative Confidence ($\alpha = .79$), Collocational Awareness ($\alpha = .82$), and Instructional Value ($\alpha = .76$). A **semi-structured interview** was administered to 18 purposively selected participants (9 per group) and analyzed.

Instructional Intervention

The EG followed a Lexical Approach-informed syllabus integrated within communicative language teaching. Each session comprised three phases: a 20-minute noticing stage in which students identified and recorded target collocations from enhanced authentic texts; a 40-minute structured practice phase involving matching, gap-fill, error correction, and translation-comparison tasks; and a 30-minute communicative output phase featuring role plays, discussions, and presentations. Representative activities are described in *Table 1*. The CG followed the standard institutional syllabus emphasizing grammar and decontextualized vocabulary exercises.

Table 1. Sample Word Combination Classroom Activities

Activity	Description	Target Combinations	Duration
Collocation Hunting	Students read an authentic text and highlight all verb-noun combinations, then share with the class	<i>make a contribution, draw a conclusion, raise a question</i>	15 min
Chunk Sorting	Word cards are shuffled; pairs sort them into correct collocations through negotiation	<i>reach an agreement, establish a relationship, conduct research</i>	10 min
Error Correction Clinic	Students identify and repair L1-interference collocational errors in given sentences	<i>make/do an effort, strong/powerful tea, take/make a photo</i>	15 min
Translation Challenge	Students receive an Uzbek/Russian sentence and produce idiomatic English using target chunks	Mixed; context-dependent	15 min
Chunk Relay	Oral storytelling in a circle; each student must use one assigned collocation per turn	Variable; from pre-taught pool	20 min
Simulated Academic Discussion	Students discuss a discipline-relevant topic using a provided lexical frame card	<i>In my view..., Evidence suggests..., It is worth noting that...</i>	30 min

Data Analysis and Ethics

Quantitative data were analyzed in IBM SPSS (v. 28) using independent and paired samples t-tests, Cohen's d effect sizes, and one-way MANOVA. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically in NVivo (v. 14) with member checking. Ethical approval was obtained institutionally; all participants provided written informed consent, and participation was voluntary with no grade implications.

3. Results

Collocational Knowledge and Oral Communication

Pre-test scores confirmed baseline equivalence between groups (EG: $M = 18.4$, $SD = 3.7$; CG: $M = 18.1$, $SD = 3.9$; $p = .70$). Post-intervention, the EG achieved substantially higher CKT scores ($M = 29.6$, $SD = 4.1$) than the CG ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 3.8$), a difference that was statistically significant with a large effect ($t(82) = 9.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.13$). OCAR total scores followed the same pattern. Full comparative statistics appear in Table 2 [8].

MANOVA on OCAR subscales revealed a significant multivariate group effect, Wilks' $\lambda = .29$, $F(6, 77) = 31.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$. The largest between-group effects emerged for Lexical Range and Collocational Accuracy ($d = 1.94$) and Discourse Coherence ($d = 1.67$). Notably, Strategic Competence ($d = 1.12$) and Grammatical Accuracy ($d = 0.87$) also showed significant EG advantages despite not being primary instructional targets, indicating positive transfer across competence dimensions [9].

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Test Means and Statistical Comparisons

Measure	Group	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Gain	t (with n)	p	Cohen's d
CKT (max = 40)	Experimental	18.4 (3.7)	29.6 (4.1)	+11.2	14.22	< .001	2.13
	Control	18.1 (3.9)	21.3 (3.8)	+3.2	3.71	< .001	—
OCAR Total (max = 30)	Experimental	14.2 (2.9)	22.7 (3.3)	+8.5	13.04	< .001	1.88
	Control	14.0 (3.1)	16.9 (2.7)	+2.9	4.22	< .001	—

Note. EG $n = 42$; CG $n = 42$. Cohen's d reflects post-test between-group differences. CKT = Collocational Knowledge Test; OCAR = Oral Communication Assessment Rubric.

Learner Perceptions

LPQ results showed markedly higher EG ratings on all subscales: Communicative Confidence (EG: $M = 4.21$ vs. CG: $M = 3.14$), Collocational Awareness (EG: $M = 4.37$ vs. CG: $M = 3.08$), and Instructional Value (EG: $M = 4.19$), with 83% of EG respondents agreeing that collocational instruction had improved their communicative ability [9].

Interview analysis yielded three themes.

Heightened lexical awareness: EG learners described a shift from isolated word memorization toward pattern-based thinking. One participant stated: *"Before, I would translate every word from Uzbek. Now I think — what words go together in English? It is different thinking."*

Reduced communication anxiety: Pre-learned chunks lowered the cognitive load of speaking [10]. One student noted: *"When I know the phrase already — like take into account — I don't have to think and speak at the same time."*

Cross-contextual transfer: Students in technical departments reported spontaneously applying academic collocations in disciplinary writing and presentations beyond the English classroom [11].

4. Discussion

The experimental group's large post-intervention gains (CKT: $d = 2.13$; OCAR: $d = 1.88$) substantially exceed the thresholds for pedagogical significance in applied linguistics intervention, confirming that systematic word combination instruction produces robust communicative development. These findings extend the work of Webb and Nation (2017) and Nguyen and Webb (2017), who found collocational knowledge to be a stronger predictor of speaking performance than grammatical knowledge [12].

The differential subscale pattern is theoretically significant. Gains in lexical range and discourse coherence align directly with Canale and Swain's (1980) grammatical and discourse competence dimensions, confirming that multi-word lexical knowledge is foundational to both [13]. The indirect improvements in strategic competence support Celce-Murcia's (2008) argument that lexical competence enables broader communicative functioning – teaching learners how words combine does not merely improve test scores but generates qualitatively richer communicative behavior [14].

The qualitative findings complement this picture. Reduced anxiety through collocational readiness aligns with Horwitz's (2001) identification of lexical uncertainty as a primary source of foreign language anxiety, while the metacognitive shift toward pattern-based lexical thinking reflects the chunking processes described by Ellis et al. (2020). The unprompted cross-disciplinary transfer reported by technical students suggests that collocational instruction can function as a cross-curricular literacy intervention – an insight with direct implications for content-language integrated approaches in non-major programs [15].

Pedagogically, the study demonstrates that collocation-focused activities are feasible and effective within existing communicative frameworks without requiring complete curricular overhaul. Limitations include the single institutional setting and the twelve-week timeframe, which may not capture long-term retention [16]. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs across diverse EFL contexts and incorporate foreign language anxiety measures alongside collocational and communicative assessments

5. Conclusion

This study provides robust evidence that explicit instruction in word combinations significantly advances the communicative competence of EFL non-major university students. Gains were most pronounced in lexical range, collocational accuracy, and discourse coherence but extended to communicative confidence and strategic flexibility, reflecting the holistic nature of language competence.

The findings affirm the theoretical foundations of the Lexical Approach, Nation's (2022) account of deep word knowledge, and Hymes's (1972) and Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence frameworks, while generating contextually specific evidence from a Central Asian non-major population underrepresented in the international literature.

Most fundamentally, the study demonstrates that teaching learners not merely what words mean but how they work together produces communicative development that is more fluent, more confident, more coherent, and more contextually appropriate than referential vocabulary instruction alone can achieve. For the large and often underserved population of non-major EFL students globally, this distinction carries considerable educational consequence.

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