

THE ROLE OF COLLOCATIONAL COMPETENCE IN ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION



Mounya ABDAOUI*
University of 8 May 1945, Guelma
abdaoui.mounya@univ-guelma.dz

Date of submission: 21/02/2026 Date of acceptance: 24/05/2026 Date of publication: 08/06/2026

Abstract:

Collocations play a significant role in fostering learners' English proficiency. This research investigates the statistical relationship between collocational competence and reading comprehension. It is hypothesized that awareness of collocations positively correlates with reading comprehension. To test the hypothesis, this research was conducted through the correlational method; the coefficient of correlation was counted between the two measurable variables in a group of 15 first-year License students at the Department of English, 8 May 1945 University, Guelma (Algeria). Results indicated that a moderate correlation exists between knowledge of collocations and reading comprehension. Findings further showed the majority of learners have a limited knowledge of collocations. It is therefore recommended that teachers integrate collocation instruction in reading comprehension activities.

keywords: awareness of collocations; collocational competence; collocation instruction; knowledge of collocations; reading comprehension

Introduction

Collocations were given much importance within the lexical approach which advocates that learners should focus on "common word combinations" to increase their English proficiency (Lewis, 2000, p. 127). Hence, research on collocations has attracted the attention of a

* Corresponding Author

plenty of scholars from different perspectives. Some researchers focused on the problem of collocations' equivalence in translation (Emery, 1987; Farghal & Stunnaq, 1999; Metwally & Hamad, 2023); while others investigated the relation between collocations and the four language skills: writing (Abdi & Arrifin, 2020; Abdullayeva, 2022), speaking (Osman & Ahmed, 2020), reading comprehension (Trisviana et al., 2019; Salih & Ahmed, 2019; Enyla & Risnawati, 2022) and listening comprehension (Yazdandoost et al. 2014).

However, none investigated the relationship between collocational competence and reading comprehension in the Algerian context. Collocations are word combinations or lexical chunks that can enrich learners' lexical competence and facilitate reading comprehension. Many students cannot get good scores in reading comprehension because they cannot comprehend the meaning of collocations in the text. Hence, teachers are encouraged to raise learners' awareness of collocations as an effective means of enhancing comprehension in reading. This research aims to examine the statistical relationship between collocations' knowledge and reading comprehension. It is hypothesized that collocations' knowledge positively correlates with reading comprehension. To test the hypothesis, this research was conducted through the correlational method; the coefficient of correlation was counted between the two measurable variables in a group of 15 first-year License students at the Department of English, 8 May 1945 University, Guelma (Algeria). Accordingly, this research addresses the following question:

-Is there a correlation between *collocations' knowledge and use* and *reading comprehension*?

Literature Review

The following is a thematic literature review that aims at providing an overview of previous research on collocations and reading comprehension, in addition to addressing the research gap that is the relationship between collocational competence and reading comprehension in the Algerian context.

1. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is composed of two important concepts: reading and comprehension. Reading is viewed by Goodman as "a precise process. It involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and larger language units" (1967, p. 126). Wong differentiated between passive and active

reading, he maintained that reading is “an active process of inputting information, encoding meaning, and creating associations that help you learn information from printed text” (2009, p. 185). According to Nurdianingsih, “reading has three basic definitions in which learning to read means: (1) learning to pronounce the words; (2) learning to identify words and get their meaning; and (3) learning to bring meaning to a text or extract message from a text” (2021, p. 286). This indicates that reading is related to pronunciation and words’ identification as well as comprehension.

Pardo defined reading comprehension as “a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text” (2004, p. 272). Grabe and Stoller considered reading as “the ability to extract, interpret, and use information from a print or digital text” (2018, p. 12). To sum up, reading comprehension is the process of decoding written or digital input. In this context, reading is an active and a critical process that requires the employment of critical thinking skills to understand what is written. Critical reading is defined by Flynn as “an interactive process using several levels of thought simultaneously” (1989, p. 664). Unlike passive reading, active reading is an approach advocated by Anderson (2013) to emphasize proactive interaction with the text to search for in-depth meaning.

To understand the input, readers pass through four main cycles: the first cycle is *the optical/visual cycle* in which the eye perceives visual input through the help of light. The second cycle is *the perceptual cycle* when the reader interprets the visual input in the brain which sets up the perceptual images of the visual input. The third cycle is *the syntactic/lexico-grammatical cycle*; in this stage, the reader tries to associate the lexical and grammatical patterns together to make the text comprehensible. The last cycle is called *the meaning/semantic cycle*; during this stage, the reader extracts the message from the text to reach comprehension (Goodman, 1988). Furthermore, the context plays a significant role in the process of comprehension, words gain meaning through their surrounding contextual clues (Nagy & Scott, 2000). Therefore, word combinations should be processed to extract meaning because reading occurs in a context rather than in isolation, which reflects the importance of collocations in reading comprehension.

2. Collocational Competence and Reading Comprehension

Collocation has its roots in phraseology which is related to word combinations or phraseological units. The term *collocation* was coined in 1957 by Firth who maintained "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (p. 11). He used it to refer to the association of words in the same context. Palmer defined collocations as "a succession of two or more words that must be learned as an integral whole and not pieced together from its component parts" (1933, p. 5). Firth went further by defining collocations as

[S]tatements of the habitual or customary places of that word order but not in other contextual order and emphatically not in any grammatical order. The collocation of a word or a 'piece' is not to be regarded as mere juxtaposition; it is an order of *mutual expectancy*. (Firth, 1957, p.181)

Thus, collocation is a specific order of lexical items that is perceived as a semantic whole, as indicated by Sinclair (1991), "many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment" (p. 112). It makes learners' language natural and native-like. As McCarthy and O'Dell claimed, collocations "give you the most natural way to say something" (2005, p. 6). They are also referred to as Multi-Word Units (MWU) or lexical chunks (Thornbury, 2002). MWU include *idioms, phrasal verbs, fixed phrases* such as 'of course', 'in spite of'...; and *semi-fixed phrases* like 'a friend of mine'.

Two main types of collocations are distinguished: grammatical and lexical collocations (Lewi, 2000, p. 134). Grammatical collocations are composed of a principal word that is an adjective, a verb or a noun and a grammatical word which is usually a preposition, while lexical collocations does not include grammatical words like prepositions (Lewis, 2000). Lewis coined the term *collocational competence* in 2000 to refer to the ability to produce well-structured lexical chunks; it is highly needed to make correct word associations. Therefore, learners' awareness of collocations should be raised through extensive exposure to lexical chunks based on noticing which a cognitive process that helps learners transform the input to intake (Schmidt, 1993; Thornbury, 1997). Nonetheless, noticing alone is not enough, it should be reinforced by other factors like motivation, engagement, and cooperation (Lewis, 2000). Significantly, collocations' *awareness* means *to have knowledge of* collocations. It is one of the four dimensions of consciousness, including intention, attention, awareness, and control (Schmidt, 1994). In this respect, consciousness-raising is viewed by Ellis as "a deliberate

attempt on the part of the teacher to make the learners' aware of specific features of the L2" (Ellis, 1993, pp. 108-109). Consequently, collocations' awareness is based on purposive teaching that is directed to noticing mis-collocations as well as accurate lexical chunks in order to raise learners' consciousness of them and develop their collocational knowledge which can facilitate reading comprehension (Trisviana et al., 2019; Salih & Ahmed, 2019; Enyla & Risnawati, 2022).

Research Methodology

1. Research Method and Tools

This research was conducted through the correlational method, it aims at counting the coefficient of correlation to examine the statistical relationship between the two measurable variables: *collocational competence* and *reading comprehension*. To assess reading comprehension and assign scores to each student, the Pearson' Reading Comprehension Scoring Rubric (2025) was followed. The scale was chosen because it focuses on both literal and inferential reasoning by identifying scores from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). A text was given to students to read and respond to the corresponding comprehension questions. To assess collocational competence, students were asked to underline all the collocations in the text and indicate their meaning. Test scores ranged from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent).

2. Participants

Research informants include 15 first-year Licence students, enrolled in the Department of English as a Foreign Language at the University of 8 May 1945, Guelma (Algeria) during the academic year 2024-2025. The participants, aged from 18 to 20 years, were randomly selected from first-year groups. The initial group consisted of 36 students; however, due to transfers to other branches, only 15 remained in the group.

Results and Discussion

The coefficient of correlation is symbolised by 'r'. Concerning the interpretation of 'r': if 'r' equals +1 or -1, the correlation is strong/perfect. If 'r' is approximate to +1 or -1 the correlation is high. If it is between '+/- 0.25' and '+/- 0.75', the correlation is average. But if r is near 0 the correlation is weak and if 'r' is 0 there is no correlation. If 'r' is positive (marked by +) this means that if the values for 'x' increase the values for 'y' also increase. But if 'r' is negative this indicates that if the values for 'x' increase the values for 'y' decrease. The results of reading comprehension test are displayed in the following table:

Table 1. *Reading Comprehension and Collocational Competence Scores*

N	Reading Comprehension Scores	Collocational Competence Scores
1	3	4
2	2	3
3	2	1
4	4	4
5	4	3
6	2	1
7	1	3
8	2	2
9	4	5
10	2	5
11	4	3
12	3	4
13	1	2
14	3	4
15	1	3

To count the coefficient of correlation, the following rule was followed:

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n ((x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y}))}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

To count x (the first variable: reading comprehension) and y (the seonc variable: collocational competence), the rule is:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x}{n} \quad \bar{y} = \frac{\sum y}{n}$$

By applying the rule, $\bar{x} = 2.53$ and $\bar{y} = 3.13$. Based on these values of x and y, the coefficient of correlation is counted in the following table:

Table 2. Counting the Coefficient of Correlation

N	x	y	$x_i - \bar{x}$	$y_i - \bar{y}$	$(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})$	$(x_i - \bar{x})^2$	$(y_i - \bar{y})^2$
1	3	4	0.47	0.87	0.4089	0.2209	0.7569
2	2	3	0.53	-0.13	-0.0689	0.2809	0.0169
3	2	1	0.53	-2.13	-1.1289	0.2809	4.5369
4	4	4	1.47	0.87	1.2789	2.1609	0.7569
5	4	3	1.47	-0.13	-0.1911	2.1609	0.0169
6	2	1	0.53	-2.13	-1.1289	0.2809	4.5369
7	1	3	-1.53	-0.13	0.1989	2.3409	0.0169
8	2	2	0.53	-1.13	-0.5989	0.2809	1.2769
9	4	5	1.47	1.87	2.7489	2.1609	3.4969
10	2	5	0.53	1.87	0.9911	0.2809	3.4969
11	4	3	1.47	-0.13	-0.1911	2.1609	0.0169
12	3	4	0.47	0.87	0.4089	0.2209	0.7569

13	1	2	-1.53	-1.13	1.7289	2.3409	1.2769
14	3	4	0.47	0.87	0.4089	0.2209	0.7569
15	1	3	-1.53	-0.13	0.1989	2.3409	0.0169
Total	38	47	5.35	0.05	5.0645	17.7335	21.7335

As a result, $r = \frac{5.0645}{19.6318}$

So, $r = 0.25$, which means that correlation is average.

Statistical results indicated that a moderate correlation exists between collocational knowledge and reading comprehension, which coincides with the results of Enyla and Risnawati (2022) who found a fair correlation between the two variables, and Trisviana et al. (2019) who found a high correlation. However, the results contradict with the findings of Kim and Bae (2012) who claimed that there is no correlation between reading comprehension and collocational competence. Results also indicated that the level of students' collocational competence ranges from poor to excellent, but most of students have an average or bad collocational competence. This aligns with the findings of Salih and Ahmed (2019) who indicated that students' collocational competence is unsatisfactory. Therefore, the lack of collocational knowledge requires special attention by scholars, as advised by El-Dakhs (2015). Within this scope, el Majidi (2025) stressed the importance of teaching collocations to enhance EFL learners' collocational competence.

Conclusion

Statistical data confirmed the correlation between students' collocational competence and reading comprehension. The results of this research stressed the fact that teaching a language requires teaching its vocabulary and lexical items. Therefore, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness of the importance of collocations in learning a foreign language and enhancing the four skills. Future research is needed to provide a clear methodology about teaching reading comprehension through a collocational syllabus. Further research on the relationship between collocational competence and listening comprehension is needed as studies about this skill are limited in number.

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