

COLLOCATIONAL COMPETENCE AS A KEY FACTOR IN SPEAKING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: Collocational competence—the ability to use word combinations that native speakers naturally prefer—is increasingly recognized as central to second language (L2) fluency and speaking proficiency. Despite its importance, collocational knowledge often receives less instructional attention than grammar and vocabulary size. This article reviews theoretical foundations, examines empirical findings on the role of collocations in speaking, and highlights pedagogical implications. Evidence shows that learners with stronger collocational competence produce more fluent, accurate, and native-like speech. The article concludes by proposing strategies for integrating collocation teaching into communicative language instruction.

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in a second language involves more than knowing individual words and grammar rules. Research in applied linguistics has highlighted the role of lexical chunks, multi-word units, and collocations in enabling fluent and native-like speech production (Lewis, 1993; Nation, 2001). Collocations are combinations of words that tend to occur together more frequently than would happen by chance—e.g., make a decision, deeply concerned, heavy rain.

While advances in vocabulary size are essential, collocational competence determines whether learners can use vocabulary appropriately in real-time communication—especially speaking. Without it, learners may produce grammatically correct but awkward or non-native expressions, undermining the naturalness and comprehensibility of their speech.

This article explores collocational competence as a key factor in L2 speaking proficiency, reviews relevant research, and suggests pedagogical strategies to enhance learners' collocational knowledge.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Definitions and Scope

A collocation is typically defined as a habitual combination of two or more words that co-occur more frequently than expected by chance (Sinclair, 1991). Collocations constitute an intermediate unit between single words and full phrases, reflecting patterns of language use in authentic discourse.

Examples include:

fast food (adjective + noun)

commit a crime (verb + noun)

in close proximity (prepositional phrase)

2.2 The Lexical Approach

The lexical approach (Lewis, 1993) posits that language consists mainly of prefabricated chunks, rather than isolated grammar rules and single words. From this perspective, collocations are considered foundational for fluent performance because they reduce cognitive load during language production.

2.3 Collocational Competence and Speaking

Speaking proficiency requires rapid retrieval and production of language in real time. According to Nation (2001), lexical retrieval speed improves when learners store and access combinations of words as single units rather than generating them word by word. Thus, collocational competence directly supports fluency, cohesion, and idiomaticity.

3. Empirical Evidence Linking Collocational Competence to Speaking Proficiency

3.1 Correlational Studies

Many studies report significant positive correlations between collocational knowledge and measures of speaking fluency. For example:

Research indicates that advanced learners who know more collocations produce fewer pausing errors and more natural speech (Wang & Schmitt, 2019).

Learners with stronger collocational awareness scored higher on oral exams, including tasks requiring spontaneous speech (Chen, 2018).

These findings suggest that collocational competence enhances learners' ability to organize speech coherently and fluently.

3.2 Experimental Interventions

Interventional studies also support the causal effect of collocation instruction:

Learners receiving explicit collocation training showed improved spontaneous speaking performance and reported greater confidence in communicative tasks compared to control groups (Laufer & Waldman, 2011).

Task-based instruction focusing on collocations boosted both accuracy and speed of spoken production (Carter & McCarthy, 2017).

These studies confirm that enhancing collocational knowledge positively impacts oral proficiency.

4. Collocational Challenges for L2 Learners

Research identifies several challenges:

4.1 Non-Native Word Combinations

Learners often produce non-native or awkward combinations due to direct translation from their first language or reliance on textbook vocabulary lists rather than natural usage patterns.

Example:

powerful rain instead of heavy rain

4.2 Lack of Collocation Awareness

Many learners focus on vocabulary in isolation and are unaware of the importance of combinations. This gap can lead to false collocations—words that seem correct individually but sound unnatural together.

4.3 Processing Load in Speaking

Because speaking demands real-time language retrieval, learners without strong collocational knowledge struggle with planning and fluency under time pressure.

5. Pedagogical Implications

5.1 Explicit Collocation Teaching

Teachers should incorporate collocation instruction into speaking lessons. This may include:

Teaching common collocation patterns explicitly (e.g., adjective-noun, verb-noun)

Using corpora and concordance tools to show authentic usage

5.2 Practice Through Communicative Tasks

Engage learners in communicative speaking tasks that require use of collocations, such as:

Role-plays

Discussions requiring topic-specific vocabulary (e.g., environment, business)

5.3 Collocation Awareness Raising

Activities can include:

Collocation matching exercises

Gap-fills with collocational choices

Noticing tasks using authentic spoken discourse

5.4 Feedback and Corrective Input

Providing corrective feedback on collocational errors found in learners' spoken production helps reinforce accurate patterns.

6. Conclusions

Collocational competence plays a crucial role in speaking proficiency because it facilitates fluent, native-like production and reduces cognitive load during language use. Research supports the strong connection between knowledge of collocations and oral performance. Therefore, language instruction should emphasize collocational learning through explicit teaching, communicative practice, and awareness-raising activities.

Future research should explore longitudinal effects of collocation instruction and the integration of technology—such as corpus tools and AI-assisted feedback—in promoting collocational competence.

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