

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

IMPROVING SPEAKING PERFORMANCE BY USING COLLOCATIONS FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS AT AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTER

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ABSTRACT: This research is centered on investigating the proficiency of secondary students in utilizing collocations within their spoken English language. Specifically, the objective of this inquiry is to assess the present state of collocation usage among 8th and 9th grade students during verbal communication, to identify the inherent difficulties and obstacles encountered by students in employing collocations in speech, and to propose effective strategies aimed at enhancing their utilization of collocations in spoken discourse. The study involves the participation of 30 students from the 8th and 9th grades. Data collection was conducted through the administration of questionnaires and tests. Based on the findings derived from these assessments, the researcher offers recommendations aimed at enhancing students' oral proficiency through the strategic incorporation of collocations.

KEY WORDS: collocations; secondary students; English speaking performance; research; ability.

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1. Introduction

English is increasingly pervasive in our everyday activities, with Vietnamese education placing considerable emphasis on English instruction in recent times. Numerous young individuals recognize its importance for securing lucrative employment opportunities and fostering connections with others and the global community. To integrate into the world, one needs to have a good command of English. Speaking ability is one of the four abilities to which we should pay particular attention because it is a useful skill that directly affects communication.

Each learner has a unique learning approach. Some people practice speaking in front of a mirror while others listen to conversations and the news. Some people focus on grammar, pronunciation, etc., while others concentrate on collocations to convey their views more eloquently. Collocations can be thought of as the national essence of each nation. They demonstrate the distinctive qualities of language and can take the place of straightforward words while retaining the same meaning. They can convey the speaker's level of linguistic sophistication. There are several collocations that are interchangeable with straightforward terms. Collocations are relatively common in Vietnam, and so are in English-speaking countries. Parents, friends, and teachers can educate people collocations so that they can communicate fluently and spontaneously.

The utilization of collocations to enrich speaking proficiency stands out as a noteworthy aspect. Investigating the efficacy of collocations in augmenting learners' speaking skills constitutes the primary focus of this study. The objective is to ascertain whether the integration of collocations genuinely elevates learners' speaking competencies and to provide recommendations for students to adeptly incorporate collocations into their oral communication. Additionally, this research aims to acquire insights into integrating collocations into instructional strategies to enhance students' learning experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Speaking

The concept of "speaking" encompasses various interpretations within the realm of language studies. It constitutes one of the fundamental language skills alongside listening, writing, and reading, holding a paramount significance in daily interactions and serving as an indispensable tool for effective communication (Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012; Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998).

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Hadfield (1997) underscores speaking as a pivotal link for learners, bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world applications. Bygate (1991) posits speaking as an eminent conduit for social cohesion, hierarchical positioning, professional advancement, and commercial interactions, while also serving as a prime avenue for language acquisition. Additionally, the New Webster Dictionary (1992:932) defines speaking as the act of articulating ideas, emotions, and thoughts orally, also referred to as oral communication.

The key factors influencing speaking performance encompass a combination of these elements.

(i) *The first factor is fluency, which consists of three elements:*

Spoken speed: When taking into account the aforementioned requirements, spoken speed is a key element. Speak quietly enough for them to consider their response and translate it into English. This will also make it easier for the examiner to understand their responses. Additionally, it helps to be fluent and coherent. They must be able to speak for extended periods of time without pausing or stuttering while responding to inquiries.

Answer length: In addition to speed, the examiner also expects applicants to provide answers that are appropriate in length for each section of the test.

Coherence: The capacity to appropriately respond to a question and to develop that response by providing illustrative examples or explanations is referred to as coherence. In particular, the ideas are connected by appropriate words or phrases to aid listeners in understanding.

(ii) *Lexical resources:*

It involves discussing diverse subjects using a wide range of vocabulary that is both extensive and accurate. Moreover, the examiner will assess students based on their ability to express ideas in English, even if they may not be familiar with the exact word or phrase. Oftentimes, candidates commit the error of relying on direct translation from their native language to English, leading to the use of non-standard and incorrect vocabulary. This is the most common mistake observed in speaking assessments.

(iii) *Grammar precision and variety:*

The sentence patterns that students employ to respond to the examiner's question are evaluated by this criteria. Students should use as many sentence statements or complicated sentences as they can rather than complete single sentences. They must take care to prevent grammatical and tense faults in particular.

(iv) *Pronunciation:*

Students need to focus on achieving accurate pronunciation, which serves as the initial aspect they should prioritize during speaking practice. Incorrect pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings, as judges may struggle to comprehend what students are saying. Conversely, even if native speakers pronounce words correctly, they may not understand the message if pronunciation is flawed. To improve their speaking skills and emulate native speakers, individuals must articulate words clearly. Additionally, they should be mindful of pronunciation conventions and adhere to them when speaking.

2.2. Collocation

Collocation is the naturally occurring combinations of words that frequently appear together in language, forming patterns that are both meaningful and characteristic of a particular language or domain. These word pairings often occur due to semantic, syntactic, or pragmatic reasons, reflecting the conventions and nuances of communication within a linguistic community.

Yan (2010) listed proposed two types as follows:

- *Lexical collocations:* Lexical collocations denote the recurring pairing of words or phrases within a language. These combinations are not arbitrary but rather tend to occur together frequently due to their semantic or grammatical relationship. Lexical collocations can include pairs or groups of words that commonly appear together, such as "strong coffee," "heavy rain," or "take a shower." They contribute to the naturalness and fluency of language use and are an important aspect of vocabulary acquisition and language proficiency.

(1) verb + noun: make a decision, take a chance, and give advice

- (2) adjective + noun: great idea, high chance, and sharp pain
- (3) noun + noun: coffee table, traffic jam, and ice cream
- (4) verb + adverb: sing beautifully, eat quickly, and work diligently
- (5) adverb + adjective: quite difficult, very happy, and extremely cold
- (6) verb + adjective (linking verb collocations): go crazy, fall asleep, and get lost
- (7) noun + verb: a girl sings, a cat drinks, and dogs bark
- (8) noun + adjective: voice loud, sea calm, and dream vivid

Fontenelle (1998) further explains that lexical collocations typically do not involve a subordinate element and are comprised of two equal open-class lexical items, contrasting with the closed class structure of grammatical collocations.

- *Grammatical collocations*: Grammatical collocations refer to combinations of words that occur together frequently due to the rules and patterns of grammar within a language. Unlike lexical collocations, which are based primarily on semantic associations, grammatical collocations are determined by syntactic rules and structures. These combinations often involve specific word order, verb patterns, prepositional phrases, or other grammatical constraints. Grammatical collocations play a crucial role in shaping the structure and coherence of sentences and are essential for effective communication in any language.

- (1) preposition + noun: in disguise, for breakfast, in need
- (2) noun + preposition: difficulty with, demand for, and belief in
- (3) verb + preposition: look up, give up, and take off
- (4) adjective + preposition: interested in, proud of, and good at
- (5) quantifier + noun: a packet of biscuits, a bottle of water, and a can of juice
- (6) preposition+preposition: with against, on to, and from under

1.1. Research questions

The survey of the study aims to address the specified research inquiry in order to achieve its intended goal: 1/What is the current situation of using collocations in speaking of secondary students?; 2/How does using collocations help secondary students improve speaking performance?; 3/What are the implications for using collocations effectively in speaking?

3. Methods

3.1. Research setting

The researcher carried out this research at Aba centre (No.40, 1 cluster, Pham Tuan Tai street). Students come from the Northern midland and mountainous provinces. The center has been dedicated to nurturing language skills and fostering a passion for English proficiency. Their team of highly qualified and experienced instructors brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to every classroom, ensuring that each student receives personalized attention and support on their language learning journey. At Aba center, they offer a wide range of courses tailored to meet the diverse needs of our students. From general English proficiency classes to specialized exam preparation courses such as TOEFL, IELTS, and Cambridge English exams, they strive to equip learners with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in today's globalized world. Students in the experiment are in grade 8 and grade 9. They have been tested by teachers at the English center, and their levels are ranked from A1 to A2 (CEFR). Indeed, they still encounter challenges in utilizing English, particularly in employing collocations during speaking.

3.2. Research method

The researcher segregated the participants into two equal-sized groups: the control group and the experimental group. Employing the true experimental research design (specifically, the pretest-posttest control group design), both groups underwent measurement before and after the experimental group received treatment. Subsequently, the researcher assessed the changes within each group.

3.3. Research procedures

The researcher meticulously conducted the present study. Initially, the researcher identified research questions and selected appropriate data collection instruments, then proceeded to gather and analyze the data.

- Identification of issues faced by secondary students in using collocations in speaking.
- Review of literature pertaining to speaking, collocations, and their application.
- Formation of a hypothesis and deducing its implications: students can enhance their speaking proficiency by utilizing collocations if provided with solutions to their challenges in using them.
- Implementation of the experiment involving two groups: the experimental and control groups.
- Compilation and refinement of data gathered from questionnaires, pre-tests, and post-tests.
- Presentation of findings and conclusions, including an assessment of whether the results aligned with the initial hypothesis.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The current situation of using collocations in speaking of secondary students

- *Do you know what collocation is?*

Initially, it is imperative to ascertain the proficiency of students in discerning collocation. It can be clearly seen that the majority of students already know what collocations are. With 70% of students knowing about collocations, it shows that they have been exposed to it before. 30% of students are unclear about collocations and do not know.

- *How often do you use collocation in speaking?*

Subsequently, we will investigate the extent to which students employ collocations in their linguistic expressions. It can be seen that the level of occasional use and rare use accounts for the majority. While the levels of often used and never used were at equal levels.

First, 33.3% of students sometimes used collocations when speaking and followed by 26.7% of students rarely used collocation, which showed that students use very few collocations while speaking. Besides, 20% of students never used collocation when speaking, showing that they are not used to using them. And 20% of students often used them and no students always used them.

4.2. Students' results of using collocation before the experiment

The researcher carried out the pre-test with the experimental group and the control group. The speaking scores achieved by both groups, namely the experimental and control groups, were compared.

Table 1. Students' results of using collocations before the experiment

The experimental group		The control group	
No.1: 68	No.9: 73	No.16: 37	No.24: 60
No.2: 54	No.10: 45	No.17: 36	No.25: 69
No.3: 69	No.11: 55	No.18: 70	No.26: 26
No.4: 65	No.12: 53	No.19: 45	No.27: 60
No.5: 46	No.13: 46	No.20: 23	No.28: 54
No.6: 55	No.14: 68	No.21: 62	No.29: 74
No.7: 74	No.15: 60	No.22: 55	No.30: 60
No.8: 62		No.23: 61	

In both groups, there was a mix of high-performing students and those who struggled with speaking. The researcher employed SPSS to analyze the pre-test outcomes..

The researcher predicted that the results of the two groups before the experiment would not be different, meaning there would be no difference in the average value.

Table 2. The average score of each group

Group Statistics					
	STT	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RESULTS	1	15	52.40	15.720	4.059
	2	15	57.00	12.118	3.129

The table presents the mean scores of the speaking tests for both the experimental and control groups. It's evident that there was minimal disparity in the mean scores between the two groups. The experimental group attained a mean score of 57.00, slightly higher than the control group's score of 52.40. This suggests that prior to the study, the proficiency levels of both groups were largely comparable.

4.3. Students' results of using collocation after the experiment

Following seven weeks of engagement with the experimental group, during which specific collocation words were provided for each topic, the researcher proceeded to assess both groups - the control and experimental groups, using the adapted P2RST rubric. The assessment included evaluating the speaking scores of both groups.

Table 3. *Students' results of using collocation after the experiment*

The experimental group		The control group	
No.1: 70	No.9: 65	No.16: 56	No.24: 50
No.2: 63	No.10: 78	No.17: 69	No.25: 59
No.3: 67	No.11: 58	No.18: 40	No.26: 36
No.4: 66	No.12: 78	No.19: 63	No.27: 65
No.5: 60	No.13: 56	No.20: 56	No.28: 30
No.6: 75	No.14: 75	No.21: 60	No.29: 67
No.7: 70	No.15: 76	No.22: 55	No.30: 56
No.8: 70		No.23: 55	

It was evident that while some students experienced a decline in their speaking abilities, the majority showed enhancements in their performance in speaking.

Table 4. *The average score of each group*

Group Statistics					
	STT 1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RESULTS 1	1	15	55.93	12.691	3.277
	2	15	67.53	7.927	2.047

It is evident that the experimental group's mean score of 67.53 was higher than the control group's mean score of 55.93. This substantial difference underscores the distinct effectiveness of the intervention implemented within the experimental group. Such a disparity in scores illuminates the varying degrees of proficiency and mastery exhibited by the two groups, thereby highlighting the impact of the experimental treatment on enhancing speaking proficiency in relation to collocation usage. More specifically, SPSS conducted analysis to confirm that there was a difference between the two groups.

4.4. The implications for using collocations effectively in speaking

Based on the empirical findings, it is apparent that students have derived discernible benefits from the integration of collocations into their learning endeavors, particularly in the context of augmenting their oral proficiency. However, notwithstanding these advancements, students encounter notable challenges that necessitate attention. With diligent focus, these challenges can be effectively addressed. Consequently, the researcher proffers several recommendations informed by the research outcomes.

Primarily, educators are advised to meticulously evaluate the quantity of English collocations embedded within instructional materials prior to disseminating them to students. Adjusting the volume of collocations to align with students' cognitive capacities can facilitate comprehension and optimize learning outcomes. This adaptive approach underscores the success of the pedagogical intervention and underscores the appropriateness of the instructional content.

Furthermore, to mitigate potential feelings of overwhelm among students during the learning process, educators are encouraged to incrementally augment the complexity or length of collocation exercises or assignments. Gradually expanding the scope of tasks can enable students to gradually acclimate to more intricate linguistic constructs, fostering incremental skill development and minimizing cognitive strain.

In the realm of language instruction, several recommendations have been proposed to aid teachers in augmenting their pedagogical approaches toward teaching collocations, as well as to assist students in bolstering their proficiency in this lexical domain.

For Teachers:

Provide Explicit Instruction: Offer clear and explicit instruction on collocations, including definitions, examples, and usage contexts, to ensure students understand how to use them effectively.

Incorporate Authentic Materials: Use authentic materials such as texts, videos, and audio recordings that contain natural instances of collocations to expose students to real-world language usage.

Integrate Collocations Across Skills: Integrate collocations into various language skills activities, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks, to reinforce learning and promote holistic language development.

Offer Practice Opportunities: Provide ample opportunities for students to practice using collocations in meaningful contexts through activities such as role-plays, discussions, and collaborative projects.

Provide Feedback: Offer timely and constructive feedback on students' use of collocations, highlighting correct usage and providing guidance on areas for improvement to support ongoing language development.

For Students:

Active Engagement: Actively engage in collocation learning activities in class by participating in discussions, completing assignments, and seeking clarification when needed to deepen understanding.

Use Collocations in Context: Practice using collocations in authentic contexts such as conversations, writing assignments, and presentations to develop fluency and confidence in their usage.

Utilize Resources: Make use of resources such as dictionaries, online collocation databases, and language learning apps to expand vocabulary and reinforce learning outside of class.

Regular Practice: Dedicate regular time to practice using collocations through activities such as flashcards, quizzes, and self-tests to reinforce retention and improve accuracy.

Monitor Progress: Keep track of personal progress in learning collocations by setting goals, tracking vocabulary acquisition, and reflecting on areas for improvement to stay motivated and focused on language development.

5. Conclusion

The three research questions in the study have some inferences that can be drawn from the key findings that were covered in the preceding chapter.

The pre-test and pre-questionnaire answers provided the answer to the first research question. The majority of the students struggled to acquire collocations and had poor speaking proficiency. The vocabulary scores of the experimental group and the control group did not differ in the speaking test.

The response to the second study question demonstrates how collocations raise student achievement. The post-test and post-questionnaire data were used to get the conclusion. The experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of scoring. The experimental group's pre- and post-test results differed from one another. Collocations, in the researcher's opinion, thereby improved the students' speaking abilities. The majority of students believed that collocations were helpful to them.

From the two first questions, the researcher drew implications which are useful for both teachers and students when they use collocation in speaking.

The study's conclusions demonstrate that collocations are useful for increasing vocabulary acquisition among students and add interest to their responses. For students with low vocabulary, they are worth utilizing.

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Cải thiện kĩ năng nói bằng cách sử dụng các cụm từ cố định cho học sinh Trung học cơ sở ở Trung tâm tiếng Anh

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tập trung vào khả năng sử dụng các cụm từ cố định trong kĩ năng nói của học sinh trung học cơ sở. Cụ thể, mục đích của nghiên cứu này là tìm hiểu thực trạng sử dụng cụm từ cố định trong khả năng diễn đạt của học sinh lớp 8, 9, tìm hiểu những khó khăn, thách thức của học sinh khi sử dụng cụm từ cố định và đề xuất một số giải pháp hữu hiệu giúp các em cải thiện khả năng sử dụng cụm từ cố định trong kĩ năng này. Trong nghiên cứu này, người nghiên cứu sẽ làm việc với 30 học sinh lớp 8 và lớp 9. Tất cả dữ liệu được thu thập từ bảng câu hỏi và bài kiểm tra. Từ kết quả này, tác giả đề xuất một số gợi ý nhằm cải thiện khả năng nói tiếng Anh của học sinh bằng cách sử dụng cụm từ cố định.

Từ khóa: cụm từ cố định; học sinh trung học cơ sở; kĩ năng nói tiếng Anh; nghiên cứu; khả năng sử dụng.