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DEVELOPING UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' COLLOCATIONAL SKILLS IN WRITING THROUGH CORPUS-BASED TASKS

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Abstract. *This article examines the development of Grade 8–9 students' ability to use English collocations accurately and diversely in writing through tasks based on the COCA and SkELL corpora. It proposes a system of tasks integrated into four stages of the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, corpus-assisted revision, and production of the final text. Four criteria are developed to assess collocational competence in written work: accuracy, range, appropriateness to the topic, and independent verification. The findings of an educational experiment conducted in schools in the Bukhara region indicate the effectiveness of corpus-based writing tasks.*

Keywords: *writing, collocation, corpus, SkELL, COCA, writing process, self-editing, assessment criteria, upper-secondary school students.*

Introduction

Resolution No. PQ-1875 of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated December 10, 2012, "On Measures to Further Improve the Foreign Language Learning System" [1], and the Concept for the Development of the Public Education System until 2030, approved by Presidential Decree No. PF-5712 of April 29, 2019 [2], identify students' ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language as a key indicator of educational quality. Practical communication takes place not only orally but also in writing. When writing a letter, email, short essay, announcement, or story, students are expected to express their ideas not merely in grammatically correct language, but also through natural and conventional word combinations.

In English, the combinations in which words occur are often determined by established usage rather than logic alone. For example, expressions such as make a mistake, do homework, heavy rain, take a photo, and pay attention cannot be translated word for word from their Uzbek equivalents. Such recurrent and conventional combinations, which differ from freely formed word combinations, are known as collocations. Analysis of written assignments indicates that the texts produced by Grade 8–9 students often contain collocational errors, such as do a mistake, strong rain, and give attention, alongside grammatical errors. Moreover, in an effort to avoid mistakes, students tend to rely heavily on general-purpose words such as good, bad, big, do, make, and get. Consequently, even grammatically correct texts may exhibit limited lexical richness.

Unlike spoken language, writing allows students to revisit, check, and revise their texts. This makes writing particularly suitable for corpus-based learning: students can verify a questionable expression in SkELL or COCA and make independent decisions on the basis of authentic examples of language use. The aim of this article is to substantiate a methodology for developing collocational skills in the writing of upper-secondary school students through corpus-based tasks and to establish criteria for assessing these skills.

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Literature Review and Methodology

The concept of collocation can be traced to J. R. Firth's idea that a word can be understood through the company it keeps [3]. Within the lexical approach advanced by M. Lewis, language is regarded as a repertoire of prefabricated word combinations, and teaching collocations is considered a central component of lexical competence [4]. J. Hill argues that many errors labelled "grammatical" in students' writing actually result from insufficient collocational knowledge, and that a strong command of collocations enables learners to use precise and concise expressions instead of lengthy sentences [5].

In an analysis of texts written by advanced learners of English, N. Nesselhauf found that a substantial proportion of errors in verb–noun collocations were associated with first-language influence [6]. B. Laufer and T. Waldman likewise demonstrated that learners use verb–noun collocations considerably less frequently than native speakers in their writing and that such errors do not disappear completely as proficiency increases [7]. These findings suggest that collocational development should not be left to incidental learning but requires deliberate and systematic instruction.

T. Johns, who introduced the concept of data-driven learning, viewed learners as "researchers" who independently examine corpus data [8]. A meta-analysis by A. Boulton and T. Cobb demonstrates the positive effects of corpus use on language learning, particularly vocabulary development and writing [9]. H. Yoon found that corpus tools help learners make independent lexical choices during writing and increase their confidence [10]. Nevertheless, corpus tools must be accessible and straightforward for secondary school learners. In this respect, SkELL, developed specifically for language learners [11], and the large-scale Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [12] complement one another. Research by K. Hyland further suggests that the naturalness of written discourse depends to a considerable extent on the appropriate use of recurrent word combinations [13].

The study is based on the author-developed "Corpus Detector" exercise system, consisting of noticing, searching, analysing, practising, applying in communication, and reflecting [15]. Students completed tasks on the "CORPUS-BASED COLLOCATIONS' LAB" website. The research employed theoretical analysis, analysis of students' written work, pedagogical observation, and experimental methods. The educational experiment was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year in one school from each district and each of the two cities of the Bukhara region, involving approximately 1,500 students in Grades 8–9.

Results and Discussion

To develop collocational skills in writing, corpus-based tasks were aligned with four stages of text production. At each stage, the corpus fulfils a distinct function: a source of collocations during pre-writing, a support tool during drafting, a verification resource during revision, and a basis for reflection when completing the final text.

Stage	Function of the corpus	Types of tasks	Expected outcome
1. Pre-writing	Source of topic-specific collocations	Use the SkELL "Word Sketch" feature to identify collocations of a key word (e.g., pollution, health); create a "Collocation Map."	A personal bank of 8–10 topic-related collocations.

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Stage	Function of the corpus	Types of tasks	Expected outcome
2. Drafting	Using selected combinations in context	Write a letter, email, or short essay using at least five collocations from the bank.	A first draft containing the target collocations.
3. Corpus-assisted revision	Checking questionable combinations	Follow the "Highlight – Check – Compare – Rewrite" procedure [14]; "Replace a General Word" (do a decision → make a decision; very big problem → serious problem).	A lexically enriched text with independently corrected errors.
4. Final text and reflection	Justifying lexical choices	Record newly learned combinations in a "Collocation Notebook"; exchange texts with a partner and provide feedback.	A final text and the learner's reflection on collocational knowledge.

For example, when studying the environmental topic in the Grade 8 textbook, students first search SkELL for combinations involving pollution and identify expressions such as air pollution, reduce pollution, cause pollution, and serious pollution. They then write a letter to a friend about the urban environment. During revision, a student highlights the questionable expression make pollution less, finds that reduce pollution and cut pollution are more commonly attested in the corpus, and independently corrects the text. In this way, the learner develops the ability to make decisions based on authentic language evidence without waiting for the teacher's intervention.

Four assessment criteria and three performance levels were established to evaluate collocational skills in written work. The criteria were aligned with an assessment framework previously developed for speaking [16], with the additional criterion of independent verification to reflect the distinctive features of writing.

Criterion	High level	Intermediate level	Low level
Accuracy	Almost all collocations are conventional and correct.	Some combinations contain first-language-influenced errors.	Frequent errors make meaning difficult to understand.
Range	Various topic-related patterns (verb + noun, adjective + noun, verb + adverb).	Predominantly one type of combination.	Predominantly general words (good, big, do, make).
Topical appropriateness	Combinations suit the topic and genre of the text.	Some combinations are stylistically inappropriate.	Combinations are unrelated to the topic.
Independent verification	Independently identifies, checks, and corrects questionable combinations using the corpus.	Checks combinations after teacher guidance.	Does not use the corpus.

Observations during the educational experiment showed that learners who used corpora at the revision stage became better able to replace general-purpose words with more precise collocations and to identify their own errors before receiving feedback from the teacher. In the experimental group, the rate of accurate collocation use reached 70–80%. Observations also indicated that the "Collocation

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Notebook" and peer-editing activities enhanced students' independent learning engagement. At the initial stage of corpus use, however, learners experienced difficulties in interpreting concordance lines. Consequently, it was found advisable for teachers to provide preselected concordance examples in the first lessons.

Conclusion

Because writing enables learners to return to and verify their own texts, it provides a particularly suitable context for developing collocational skills through corpus use. The following conclusions were drawn from the findings:

1. Corpus-based tasks are most effective when aligned with the pre-writing, drafting, revision, and final-text stages, since the corpus performs a distinct pedagogical function at each stage.
2. SkELL is well suited to locating topic-specific word combinations during pre-writing, while COCA is useful during revision for examining the frequency and contextual use of collocations.
3. The criteria of accuracy, range, topical appropriateness, and independent verification make it possible to assess the development of collocational skills in written work.
4. Independent corpus-assisted revision develops not only students' collocational competence but also their learner autonomy.

Future research should examine how writing tasks can be aligned with the requirements of the written component of the Multilevel examination.

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