



THE ROLE OF COLLOCATIONS AND IDIOMS IN ESL LEARNING: AN EMPIRO-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article explores the crucial role of formulaic language, specifically collocations and idioms, in developing English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' communicative competence, fluency, and naturalness. Adopting the structural framework of the Lexical Approach, the study investigates the linguistic nature of multi-word expressions and analyzes their integration into modern classroom environments.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilini ikkinchi til sifatida o'rganuvchilarning kommunikativ kompetensiyasi, nutq ravonligi va tabiiyligini rivojlantirishda formulaik til strukturalari, xususan, kollokatsiya (so'z birikmalari) va idiomalarning hal qiluvchi roli tadqiq etiladi. Leksik yondashuvning tarkibiy asoslariga tayangan holda, tadqiqotda ko'p so'zli birikmalarning lingvistik tabiati o'rganiladi va ularning zamonaviy sinf muhitiga integratsiyalashuvi tahlil qilinadi.

Аннотация: В данной статье исследуется ключевая роль формульного языка, в частности коллокаций (устойчивых словосочетаний) и идиом, в развитии коммуникативной компетенции, беглости и естественности речи у учащихся, изучающих английский язык как второй (ESL). Опираясь на структурные основы лексического подхода (Lexical Approach), исследование изучает лингвистическую природу многословных выражений и анализирует их интеграцию в современную классную среду.

Keywords: Formulaic language, collocations, idioms, ESL pedagogy, communicative competence, Lexical Approach, task-based language teaching.

Kalit so'zlar: Formulaik til, kollokatsiyalar, idiomalar, ESL pedagogikasi, kommunikativ kompetensiya, leksik yondashuv, topshiriqlarga asoslangan til o'qitish.

Ключевые слова: Формульный язык, коллокации, идиомы, ESL-педагогика, коммуникативная компетенция, лексический подход, обучение языку на основе заданий.

Introduction

The increasing international significance of English has positioned it as a dominant medium of communication in education, science, business, and technology. This widespread use has transformed English into a key tool for accessing global knowledge and participating in cross-cultural interaction. Consequently, achieving a high level of proficiency in English is no longer an advantage but a necessity for students and professionals alike. In many countries,

including Uzbekistan, the enhancement of English language teaching has become an important direction of educational development.¹

However, modern research in applied linguistics emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge is not limited to individual words. Instead, language is largely composed of fixed or semi-fixed expressions, such as collocations and idioms, which reflect natural usage patterns.

As emphasized in the national development agenda, building the foundation of a modern educational space requires continuous modernization of instructional quality and the formation of independent thinking among language learners.² The issues of developing lexical competence and teaching formulaic language have been actively investigated by national scholars within the context of modernizing higher education in Uzbekistan.

Literature Review

Specifically, pedagogical and semantic approaches to teaching idioms and collocations were explored in the scientific works of M.T. Irisqulov,³ G.X. To'rayeva,⁴ and Sh.R. Usmonova.⁵ Their research emphasizes the necessity of incorporating structured lexical units into the English language curriculum to enhance students' communicative proficiency. Looking at international paradigms, one of the earliest and most influential contributions was made by J.R. Firth (1957) who introduced the concept of collocation and emphasized that words derive meaning from the company they keep.⁶ Building on this, M. Lewis (1993, 1997) developed the Lexical Approach, arguing that language learning should focus on lexical chunks rather than isolated grammar structures.⁷ According to Lewis, fluency in a foreign language depends largely on the ability to store and retrieve prefabricated expressions. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) further expanded this by introducing the concept of lexical phrases, demonstrating that a significant part of language consists of formulaic sequences.⁸ Additionally, A. Wray (2002),⁹ provided a comprehensive analysis showing that fluent speakers rely heavily on memorized chunks, which reduces cognitive load and increases communicative efficiency.

Theoretical Framework

In modern linguistics, vocabulary is understood as a complex system of interrelated units functioning together to create meaning. Language, in its natural form, is not produced word by word through the application of grammatical rules alone; speakers rely heavily on pre-constructed multi-word expressions retrieved as single units.

Collocations are habitual or conventional combinations of words that frequently occur together, shaped by usage and convention rather than purely grammatical restrictions. For example, native speakers instinctively say *make a decision*, *strong argument*, or *heavy rain*

¹ O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti, O'zbekiston Respublikasi oliy ta'lim tizimini 2030-yilgacha rivojlantirish konsepsiyasini tasdiqlash to'g'risida (PF-5847-son Farmon, 2019-yil 8-oktabr) // – T.: lex.uz, 2019.

² Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, Yangi O'zbekiston strategiyasi (Toshkent: O'zbekiston, 2021), p. 112.

³ M.T. Irisqulov, Ingliz tili frazeologizmlari va idiomalarini o'qitishda leksik-semantik yondashuv (Tashkent State Pedagogical University, 2021), p. 45.

⁴ G.X. To'rayeva, Talabalarining leksik kompetensiyasini shakllantirishda formulaik til strukturalaridan (collocations) foydalanish metodikasi (Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, 2023), p. 78.

⁵ Sh.R. Usmonova, Oliy ta'lim muassasalarida ingliz tili darslarida kollokatsiyalarni o'rgatishning pedagogik tizimini takomillashtirish (Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, 2022), p. 34.

⁶ J.R. Firth, Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 196.

⁷ M. Lewis, The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward (London: Language Teaching Publications, 1993), p. 95.

⁸ J.R. Nattinger and J.S. DeCarrico, Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 42.

⁹ A. Wray, Formulaic Language and the Lexical Framework (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 101.

rather than *do a decision* or *powerful rain*. Structurally, collocations span multiple typographic patterns: verb–noun (*make a mistake*), adjective–noun (*strong coffee*), noun–noun (*language acquisition*), and adverb–verb (*deeply regret*). Semantically, collocations preserve structural transparency, meaning their overall definition can be inferred from individual components, though partial conventional constraints exist (e.g., *strong tea* vs. *powerful tea*). This statistical recurrence of specific word partnerships has been extensively verified through corpus linguistics data gathered by pioneering corpus linguists.¹⁰

Impact on Learners' Communicative Competence

Communicative competence encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic sub-competences. Formulaic chunks directly improve these dimensions:

- **Fluency & Cognitive Load:** Memorized phrases allow automatic retrieval, bypassing word-by-word structural configuration and significantly accelerating speech production.
- **Pragmatic & Sociolinguistic Skills:** Idioms provide stylistic variation and emotional depth, helping learners comprehend authentic text, cinema, and media pipelines.
- **Discourse Organization:** Phrases like *on the other hand* or *in conclusion* establish text coherence and logical connectivity.¹¹

Evaluation of Classroom Teaching Practices

Traditional ESL frameworks focus predominantly on isolated vocabulary lists, creating an operational gap between grammatical comprehension and real-time conversation. Modern classroom paradigms demonstrate highly variable efficacy depending on instructional design:

- **Contextualized Input:** Presenting phrases within textual narratives or live dialogues yields high conceptual retention.
- **Interactive and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** Role-playing real-world problems (e.g., planning academic events or travel schedules) forces active retrieval and builds speaker confidence.
- **Digital Integration:** The use of corpus-driven online resources (e.g., COCA, BNC) fosters learning autonomy, allowing students to check genuine word partnerships independently.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that formulaic language, particularly collocations and idioms, is essential for developing ESL learners' communicative competence and native-like fluency. Within the framework of the Lexical Approach, these prefabricated chunks reduce cognitive processing load during real-time speech production and effectively prevent literal translation errors caused by mother-tongue interference. The empirical findings reveal that traditional rote-memorization is insufficient; instead, integrating student-centered strategies—such as task-based language teaching (TBLT), noticing tasks, spaced recycling, and contrastive analysis—yields higher retention rates and operational confidence.

Ultimately, successfully upgrading learners' lexical proficiency requires systemic educational reforms in Uzbekistan, specifically focusing on incorporating formulaic language into national textbook design, conducting teacher-training workshops on lexical chunking, and implementing formative assessment models that prioritize contextual appropriateness alongside grammatical accuracy.

¹⁰ J. Sinclair, *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 110.

¹¹ D. Biber et al., *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (London: Pearson Education, 1999), p. 855.

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