



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Collocational Competence in ESL Writing: An Analysis of Common Errors among Matric Students in Lahore

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how proficient matric students in Lahore are in using lexical pairings in their writing, explores their causative factors, and suggests strategies that can help reduce them. Lexical collocations are natural word combinations where specific words frequently co-occur. They are vital for producing native-like language. The study follows a quantitative design using primary data. It adapts a questionnaire and adopts a collocation test from previous studies. These were distributed among 100 matric students who were chosen through simple random sampling. The collected data was analyzed through Spss. The findings of the study reveal that students performed well in verb-noun collocations, did fairly in adjective-noun collocations, but struggled most with noun-noun collocations. Errors are linked to L1 transfer, weak knowledge, and poor strategies and can be overcome through explicit teaching. The study recommends extensive reading of authentic texts, peer-assisted learning, and the use of collocation notebooks to address this problem.

**KEYWORDS** Lexical Collocation Errors, Lexical Pairings, Collocational Competence

## Introduction

Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2002) refers to collocation as a means to produce natural sounding word combinations in speech or writing. Lexical items with varying frequency and acceptability co-occur in collocations (Martynska, 2004). Collocation refers to words that are combined in group either because they commonly co-occur like take a chance or because the meaning of group is not as same as the meaning of its parts, like by the way (Notion, 2001).

Collocations are retrieved from memory, thus language users don't have to form new combinations in light of syntactic rules every time (Kim & Oh, 2020). Collocation comprises non-compositional and ambiguous items which mean that its meaning cannot be predicted from its constituent item. But in some cases it can be transparent and compositional (Aguinaga Echeverria, 2018). Collocation is not a random combination of words but this combination or pairing of words is governed by certain linguistic conventions of a language (Granger, 2018; Hernandez et al., 2018).

First language learners naturally acquire collocation but this aspect of language must be taught to foreign learners of language because they have lesser exposure to the target language (Shehata, 2008). Collocation is important in second language learning

because for a learner to fully grasp a word, it is important that he should be aware of the contexts in which the word can be used.

In second language teaching practices, it has been seen that teacher usually allocate more time to grammar and pronunciation and just like in case of foreign language teaching there is very little concentration on vocabulary (Fernández, Prahalad, Rubtsova, & Sabitov, 2009; Farghal&Obiedat, 1995). However, these teaching practices have evolved over the period of time. Nowadays every ESL teacher recognizes the significance of vocabulary in second language learning (Morra&Camba, 2009).

Collocation is a cluster of words from different parts of speech (Baker, 1992; Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1997; Williams, 2002). There are two types of collocations; restricted and open collocations. Open collocation includes words that can combine with a wide range of words while restricted collocations are fixed like idioms (Al-Salmani, 2001; Emery, 1991). These combinations are classified as lexical and grammatical collocation (Lewis, 2008). Benson and Ilson (1998) have stated various combinations of lexical collocations:

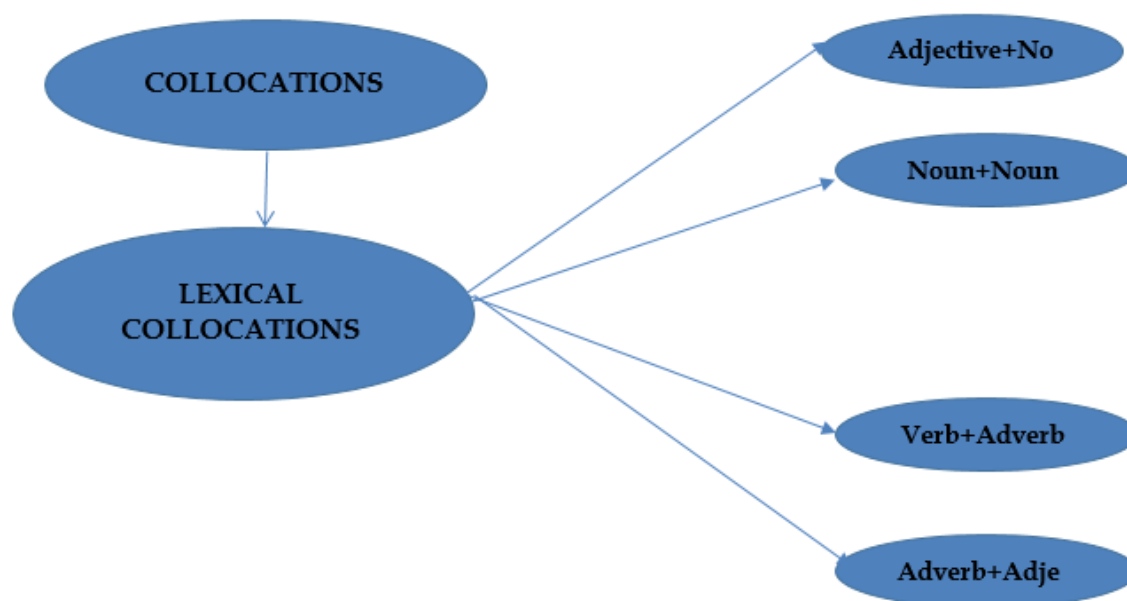


Figure 1: Types of lexical collocations

Errors are a great matter of concern for instructors. Errors play an important role during the examination of foreign and second language acquisition (Corder, 1969). Learners of a language tend to make errors because they have very limited knowledge of the target language. Due to this they produce incorrect forms of lexical collocations. Corder (1973) has divided errors into four different groups;

**Omission:** There are some permanent expressions in the English language which can be used by omitting certain words.

**Addition:** Learners add unnecessary lexis in their utterances.

**Ordering:** Learners may reverse the combinations.

**Selection:** Sometimes, learners do not select appropriate vocabulary items. Due to this they fail to convey their intended meaning.

Beside this there are two more types of errors. Diagnostic errors reflect the state of learning at a particular point during the whole learning period. Prognostic errors enable the instructors and organisers to reconsider the language learning material being provided to students according to their recent problems (Corder, 1967).

The appropriate usage of collocation contributes to one's native likeness (James, 1952). In this perspective, lexical and grammatical collocation errors are equally important (Taiwo, 2004). But more emphasis is placed on lexical collocation errors because it is the choice of words that drives communication.

So, collocation is an important factor while learning a language. Lexical collocation errors have significantly been discussed by a number of researchers because of their contribution to communicative competence. In Pakistan, most of the schools follow old school teaching practices to teach English language. The primary focus of teachers is to familiarise students with grammar of English rather than vocabulary and its real life usage in various contexts. So, this study tends to be beneficial for the local educational landscape of Lahore, where old teaching methods have been hindering the competencies of students.

Despite years of English language instruction, matric-level students in Lahore frequently exhibit errors in collocation usage, revealing a persistent gap between grammatical competence and natural, idiomatic language use. These lexical pairing mistakes not only hinder clarity and fluency in writing but also reflect deeper issues in ESL pedagogy, where rote learning often outweighs contextual vocabulary acquisition. This study seeks to analyze the most common collocational errors found in student writing, understand the underlying causes, and provide recommendations for improving curriculum design and teaching strategies in ESL classrooms.

This study holds significant value as it sheds light on an often-overlooked aspect of collocational competence. It aims to bridge the gap between textbook knowledge and real-world language usage. Understanding these patterns will not only help teachers refine their instructional methods but also support curriculum developers in integrating more context-based vocabulary teaching. This will improve students' collocational accuracy which will ultimately lead to enhanced writing fluency, and greater confidence in English communication.

## **Literature Review**

Hoang My & Thao (2023) analyzed lexical collocation errors in essay writing among Vietnamese EFL students and their perceptions of them. They collected qualitative and quantitative data from 104 students of a private university in Ho Chi Minh City and used essay writing and semi-structured interviews as their research tools. They came across 560 lexical collocation errors in essays, and verb+noun and adjectives+nouns were the most prevalent. This was attributed to lack of competence, negative transfer from the first language, use of synonym strategies, and approximation. The results of the interview highlighted that these students had inadequate knowledge of lexical collocations.

Umair, Imran, and Sarwat (2023) examined the usage of collocation while writing essays among undergraduates. This study was carried out on 250 students enrolled in the BS English program at KFUEIT who were selected through cluster random sampling from the 1st, 4th, and 7th semesters. They conducted an essay test. The topic of this essay test was "My experience as a student at KFUEIT." The corpus analysis of this essay type test was done through Antconc software, which revealed 251 lexical collocation errors. The results showed that there was a greater frequency of lexical collocation errors as compared

to grammatical collocation errors. Besides this, verb+noun and adjective+noun were the most common lexical collocation errors.

Harta, Bay, and Ali (2021) investigated the causes and common types of lexical collocation errors in argumentative writing by 16 EFL students from Universitas Negeri Gorontalo's English department, using a qualitative approach. Data for this study was collected through students' essays and interviews. Essays were analyzed using error analysis, and interviews through content analysis, guided by Benson et al.'s (1997) theory of eight collocation types. They found 54 errors in students' essays. Amongst these the most common were verb+noun errors. Interviews revealed that the key causes of lexical collocation errors include lack of understanding, approximation, overgeneralization, negative transfer from native language, and synonym substitution.

Reynolds & Teng (2021) investigated the corrective feedback ESL instructors provided on collocation errors among Taiwanese secondary school students. Analyzing the ETLTC corpus, which includes student writings and instructor feedback, the study focused on various forms of corrective feedback for word choice errors, particularly Verb-Noun collocations. Findings indicated that some sentences flagged for word choice issues contained rule-based mistakes instead. Teachers tended to favor a balance of indirect and direct feedback over metalinguistic input for these errors. The authors recommended strategies for second language writing teachers to improve their feedback on word choice errors.

Rahman (2021) studied the collocation errors in composition of Indonesian EFL learners. He aimed at identifying and quantifying the collocation errors in their composition. The study involved identifying lexical and grammatical collocation errors from 20 argumentative essays that were collected from final paper work of university students. The results were compared to standard collocation. The result showed that the frequency of lexical collocation errors was greater than grammatical collocation errors.

Dukali (2018) analyzed lexical collocation errors in academic writing by Libyan EFL students, focusing on Verb-Noun and Adjective-Noun combinations. The study examined 250 essays written by 4th-year English students at Tripoli University on topics from past IELTS prompts, using AntConc 3.2.1w. Collocation acceptability was assessed through the Oxford Collocation Dictionary, the British National Corpus, native speaker discussions, and surveys. Errors were categorized as grammatical, lexical, and usage-based across sixteen types, including incorrect verb, adjective, or noun selection, word order issues, number and register errors, and usage category mistakes.

Although the existing studies focus on undergraduate or advanced learners, there remains a notable lack of research targeting secondary school-level learners.

There is limited insight into how younger learners at the high school level in urban Pakistani contexts struggle with collocation use, especially under local curriculum constraints and exposure to informal English. No study has directly addressed the linguistic challenges or learning environments of matriculation students, who often depend on rote learning, insufficient native input, and are less exposed to contextualized vocabulary usage.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is lexical priming theory which was presented by Micheal Hoey in 2005. Lexical priming describes the relation between words.

It elaborates how some words stand in relation to each other. Collocation is a pervasive concept (Hoey, 2005). But at the same time this aspect of language is subversive too. The subversion of collocation occurs in sub-conscious psychological processes. This means that the repetitive use of words develops a pattern of occurrence. Over the period of time, this pattern appears to be natural. Thus, repetitive occurrence acts a prime. It stimulates the brain to develop connections between words automatically.

This has implications for learners of a language. Hoey narrates that priming occurs when a learner encounters a word and assumes generalizations from it. Priming comes from single focussed and generalizing encounters. Thus, instructors can develop teaching material to assist students in developing their shortcuts to priming (Hoey, 2005: 185). It has been proven that the essence of this theory is compatible with the available evidence of how the human brain processes language. But there is a restriction too. L2 instructors may teach a list of colours – yellow, black, blue or green. These words can also occur in other lists too. A native speaker may have been primed for green tea or blue sky, which a non-native may not have been.

Priming is a principle of combining words. Thus, it is not a fixed property of a word. Priming is like a memory shortcut our brains use. When we encounter a word triggers our experience or knowledge about that word. The strength of this experience is dependent upon our experience associated with that word. Every time we encounter a word, it's like a little test for our brain. If the word fits with what we already know about, it strengthens the connections. But if we hear a word in a strange context, it might weaken the connections because it doesn't match what we expect.

This factor has both negative and positive implications while teaching a language. The positive aspect is that even native speakers of language change their conception and perception of a word. And the negative aspect is that sometimes it requires a greater deal of time and effort to impart awareness about usage of words (for example; gay). When this awareness exists, however, deeper understanding should be the logical consequence.

Semantic priming and repetitive priming are usually experimented in psycholinguistics. During semantic priming experiments a prime is provided. These primes can retard or accelerate the recognition of words. Then target prime is provided and how quickly one recognizes the prime is measured. Relationship of meaning between prime and target is insufficient to produce the priming effect if the related words are not also associated (Shelton&Martin, 1992). Meanwhile, in the case of repetitive priming, prime and target are the same.

Lexical priming draws upon repetitive priming. It claims that while listening or reading, the learners' sub-consciously notice the linguistic context of the word. As the learner repeatedly encounters it, they begin to identify the features of the context that are also being repeated (Hoey, 2005). As these encounters with the word, syllable, or word combination multiply, the learners come to identify the word or words that characteristically accompany it (its collocations), the grammatical patterns with which it is associated (its colligations), the meanings with which it is associated and the pragmatics with which it is associated.

Lexical priming theory suggests that when learners encounter words or phrases repeatedly, they not only learn their meanings but they also learn their usage in sentences. Moreover, they link them to certain types of language styles. This linking helps them to figure out contexts in which these words can be used. Thus, they absorb these associations. This influences the way they use these words. In their conversations, they tend to use the

words in the same way they have heard or read them before. They try to match grammar, meaning, and social setting. Thus, this theory implies that usage of language is shaped by understanding how usage of words varies across various styles of communication and contexts.

This isn't like behaviourism, which suggests that every possible combination of words could happen. Instead, it explains how to create new and unique expressions that can be generated while still relying on patterns learnt from past language experiences. While speaking or writing, there are a range of patterns from language encounters, and one has to decide which ones to use. Even with familiar words or phrases, there are many ways to combine them, leading to a lot of potential variations in language output.

Currently, lexical priming theory draws upon psycholinguistic research, but there hasn't been extensive investigation into the psychological aspects of this theory. The evidence from corpus linguistics, which examines large collections of texts, supports some of the theory's ideas, particularly related to textual patterns. However, it's important to note that while specific features like textual colligation may be valid in corpus linguistics, it's still uncertain whether the broader theory behind these investigations aligns with psychological evidence.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Nature of research**

Nature of research outlines step-by-step details for collecting data (Ranganathan et al., 2018). It can be either qualitative & quantitative or mixed. Qualitative research deals with multiple realities, thus it is subjective and quantitative research deals with single reality, thus it is objective. (Johnson, & Christensen, 2008, p. 34; Lichtman, 2006, p 7-8). Qualitative research offers secondary data and quantitative research offers primary data.

This research demands primary data, so its design is quantitative. The reason behind choosing quantitative research is that it helps to navigate the logical and number-based aspects of research.

### **Data collection**

All methods of data collection fall into two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data offers real-time information, while secondary data provides information related to the past (Mesly, 2015). Primary data is collected by researchers in accordance with the specific aims of a particular research (Saunders et al., 2007). Primary data is always original and it is based on facts. This type of data is meant to address research questions of the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2017, p. 180).

For this study, primary data was collected. There are two data collection tools for this study. To investigate the most frequent lexical collocation errors, MCQs based collocation test was adopted from a previous study "Investigating collocation errors of EFL learners at secondary level in Multan". Language testing is generally carried out through multiple choices (Öztürk, 2007). Multiple choice items offer no space to subjectivity due to which they are more reliable as compared to other test types (Öztürk, 2007).

This test consisted of 60 items which were taken from an English textbook of secondary level. Each item had only one key response. Test was randomly distributed among matric students of selected schools and students were allotted 45 minutes to

complete this test under the supervision of their teacher to minimize the chances of cheating.

The other tool for this study was a questionnaire adapted from “An Investigation of Problems Encountered by EFL Learners while Using Lexical Collocations in Writing and their Causes: The Case of Third Year Students at the English Department of Mohammed.” Questionnaires are typically designed to collect primary data (Bell, 1999). This questionnaire helped to reveal the causes of lexical collocation errors and make recommendations to address these errors effectively according to matric students.

### Population

Population refers to all subjects the researcher wants to learn about (Stockemer, 2019). It would be ideal if the researcher includes the whole population, however, it is not possible to carry out research on the entire population (Acharya, 2013, p. 330). Therefore, a sample is selected that represents the entire population. The population for this study is matric students who are enrolled in government and private schools of Lahore.

### Sampling

Sampling involves determining a sample group from the entire population. Simple random sampling was applied to collect data from matric students studying in Lahore. In simple random sampling, each individual is liable to be the part of the sample population (Acharya, 2013). This method is generally applied to a homogeneous population. Thus, various members of the population are selected to participate in research (Bhardwaj, 2019).

The sample size collected through simple random sampling was 100. This sample included matric students who were studying in different government and private schools in Lahore. All these participants have satisfactory background of English because they all have studied English as a compulsory course throughout their academics

### Results and discussion

A collocation test was distributed among students. Moreover, a questionnaire was used for data collection. Line charts have been used for data analysis.

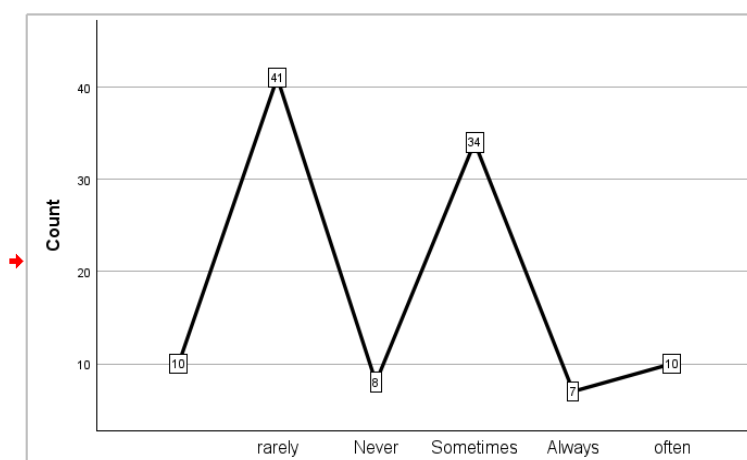


Figure 2: Frequency of dictionary usage

As it is shown in the chart, 41% of students said that they rarely use English-English dictionaries. However, only 7% of students claimed that they always use English dictionaries. 34% students said that they sometimes use it.

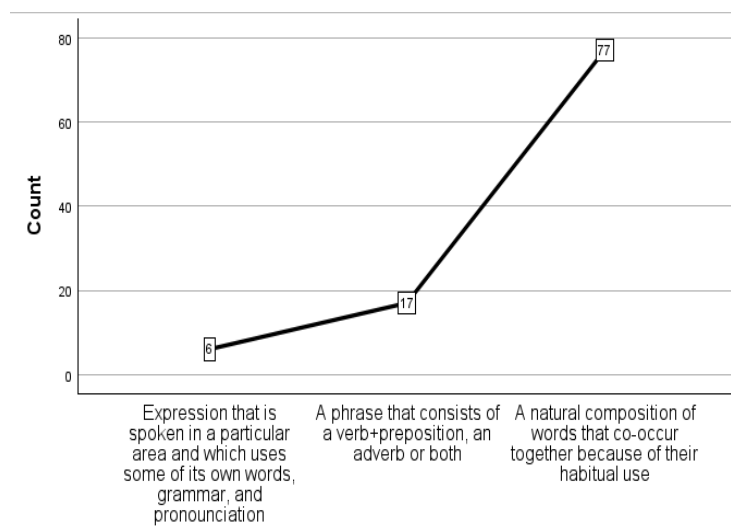


Figure 3: Definition of collocations

Before undergoing the collocation test and this questionnaire, students were given a brief introduction of collocations and lexical pairs. This question aimed to see whether or not students have an idea about what collocations mean. According to the statistics above, 77 students defined collocations as “a natural composition of words that co-occur together because of their habitual use” which is the correct definition of collocations. However, 6 students suggested that collocations are “an expression that is spoken in a particular area and which uses some of its own words, grammar, and pronunciation”. 17 students opted that collocations are “a phrase that consists of a verb + preposition, an adverb or both”,

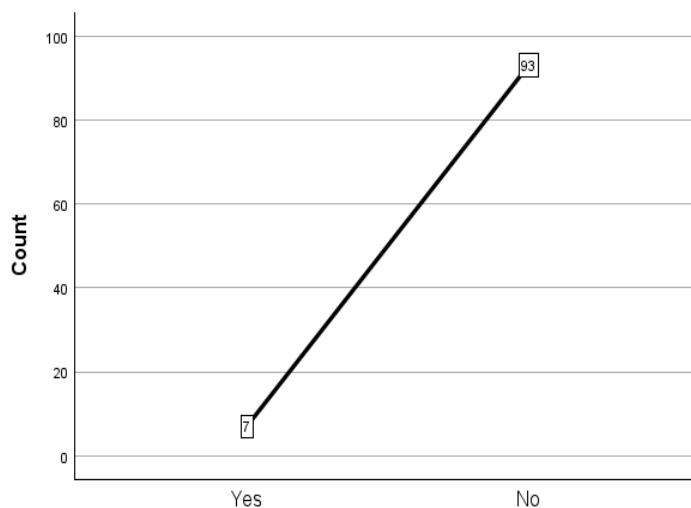


Figure 4: Ownership of collocation dictionary

93 out of 100 students asserted that they do not have a collocation dictionary. Only 7 students claimed to own a collocation dictionary. This shows that a very little number of students are familiar with the advantage of having a collocations' dictionary.



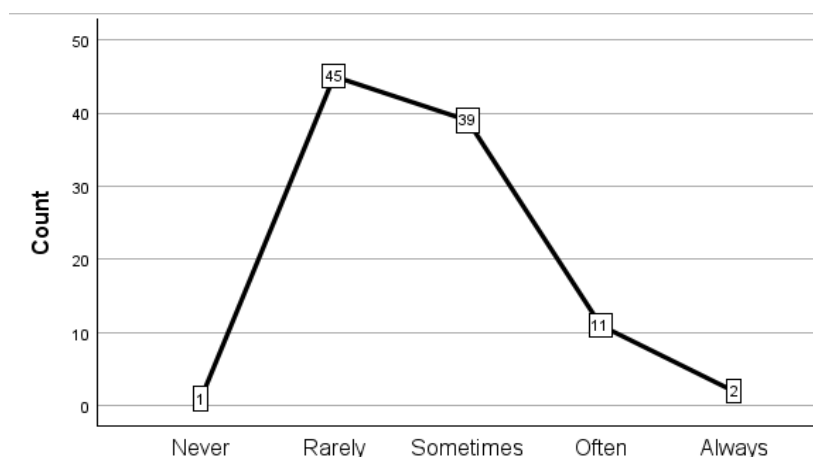


Figure 5: Frequency of leaning words in combinations

Matric students were asked how frequently they learn words in combination. 40 students claimed that they rarely learn words in combinations, and only 2 students affirmed that they learn words in combinations. Thus, the majority of students learn words in isolation.

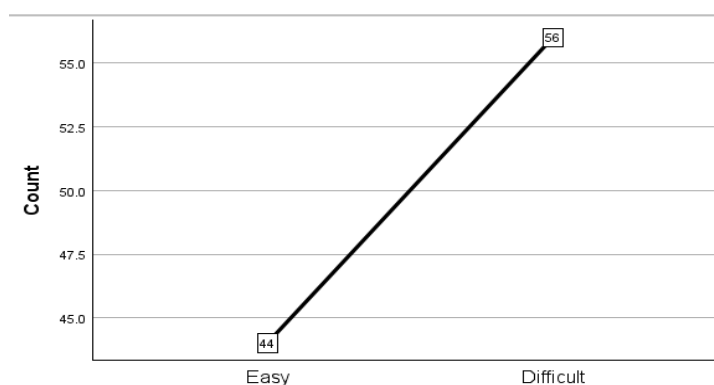


Figure 6: Attitude towards acquiring new word combinations

As it is shown in the chart above, 56 students found that acquiring new words combination is difficult for them, while 44 students claimed that it is easy to acquire new word combination

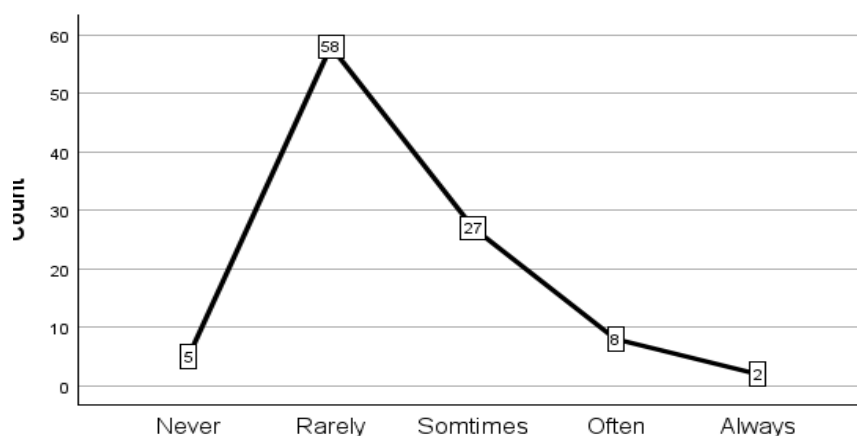


Figure 7: Frequency of leaning collocations in classrooms

It is evident from the above chart that teachers do not make matric students notice words that are used together. 58 students claimed that their teachers rarely make them notice the lexical pairs in the textbook, and 8 students said that their teachers often follow this practice.

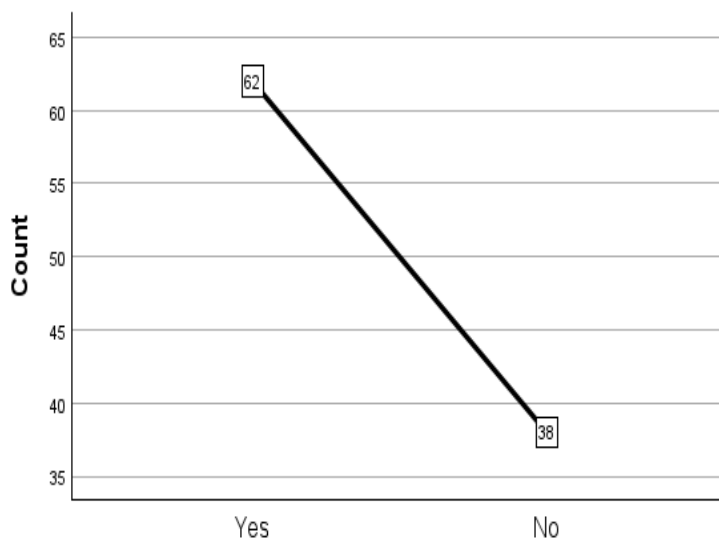


Figure 8: Attitude towards collocations in writing

According to the above figure, 62 students stated that while writing they face a problem if they have to combine words appropriately. On the other hand, 38 students claimed that they face no problem in choosing appropriate collocation while writing.

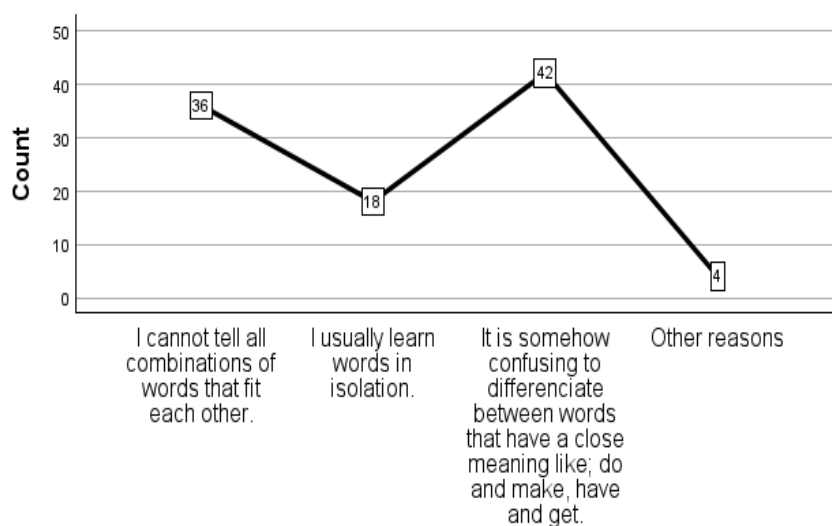


Figure 9: Kinds of problems in using collocations in writing

There was a mixed response by matric students regarding the problems in using appropriate collocations in writing. 42 students expressed difficulty in differentiating between words that bear close resemblances in meaning. 36 students find it challenging to recall word combinations accurately. 18 students cited the habit of learning words in isolation is a hindrance to their mastery of lexical pairings.

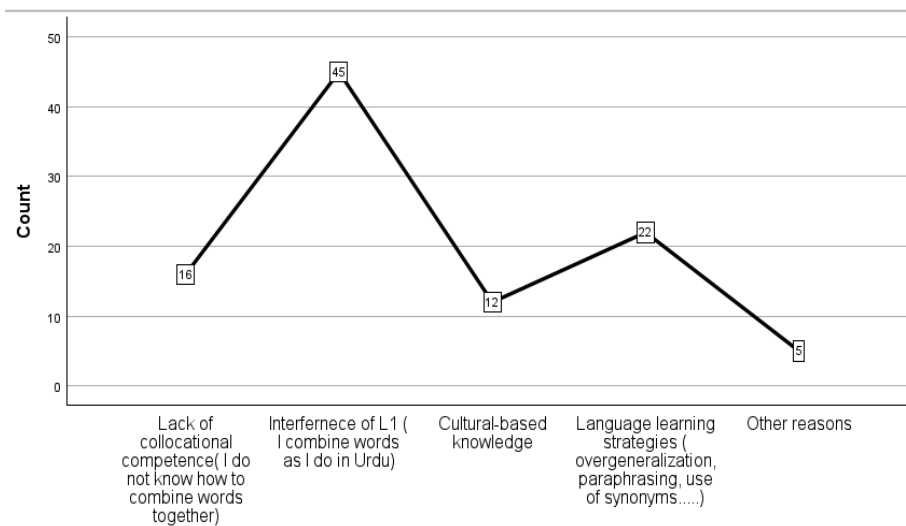


Figure 10: Main cause of collocation errors in writing

The provided chart illustrates that 45% of matric students attribute their problems with lexical pairings in writing to their tendency to combine words as they would in their first language, Urdu. Additionally, 16% of students identified a lack of collocational competence as the root cause of their difficulties. Moreover, 32% mentioned learning-type strategies, such as the use of synonyms, overgeneralization, and paraphrasing, as causing problems with collocations. Matric students found that relying on synonyms causes inaccuracies in collocation usage, and overgeneralization leads to misinterpretations of collocational nuances.

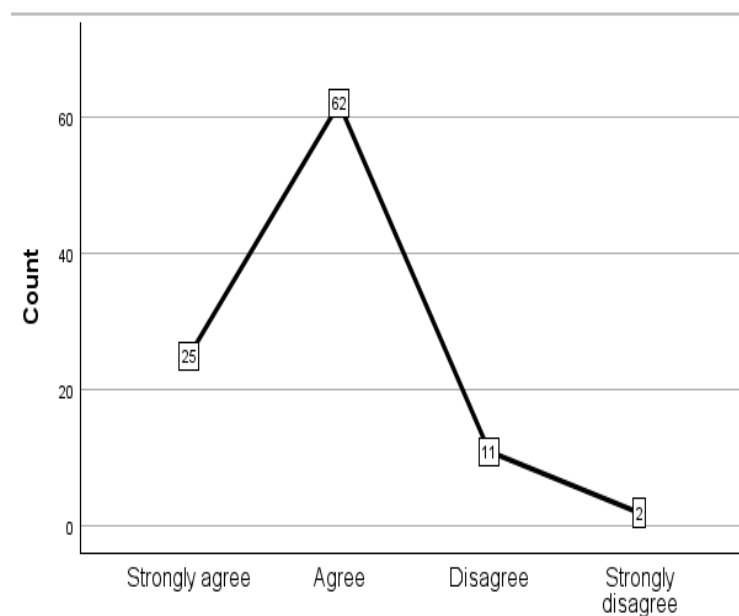


Figure 11: Teaching collocations to improve writing proficiency

The data presented in the above figure indicates that 25 students of the total sample strongly agreed that their teachers should incorporate collocations into their teaching practices, while a significant majority of 62 students expressed agreement with this notion. However, 11 students disagreed with this. 2 students strongly disagreed that their proficiency in writing will be benefited from explicit instruction in this area.

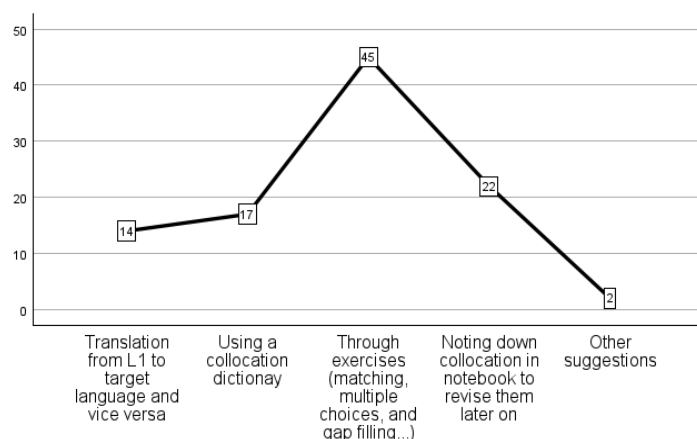


Figure 12: Most effective method for learning collocations

As per the participants' perspectives on the most effective approach to learning collocations, it's notable that the majority (45%) favours exercises on collocations. Additionally, 22% students expressed interest in learning collocations by noting them down and revising them later on. 17 students believed that using a collocation dictionary can benefit them. Fourteen students expressed belief in the efficacy of translating from their Urdu to English and vice versa as a helpful method for learning collocations.

The other research tool for this study was a collocation test. It had 20 NN, 20 VN and 20 AN items. The data was collected from the matric students and it was analysed through SPSS.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Verb-Noun Results**

Scores	Frequency	Percent	Vallid Percent	Cumulative Percent
11	3	3	3	3
12	3	3	3	6
13	7	7	7	13
14	16	16	16	29
15	21	21	21	50
16	20	20	20	70
17	19	19	19	89
18	7	7	7	96
19	4	4	4	100
Total	100	100	100	

This table reveals significant insights into the performance of students regarding verb-noun collocations. According to this table the minimum score is 11, which is scored by 3 students. This translates to a mere 3% of the total, signalling a minimal representation of students scoring at the lower end of the spectrum. The maximum score of this section of the test is 19 which is scored by 4 students. The disparity between the minimum and maximum scores is evident. The majority of student's scores ranged from 14-17. This cumulative frequency spans from 29% to 89% out of the total 100%, emphasizing that a significant portion of students struggled to achieve proficiency in this particular linguistic area.

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Adjective-Noun Results**

Scores	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
9	4	4	4	4
10	5	5	5	9

11	6	6	6	15
12	9	9	9	23
13	20	20	20	43
14	19	19	19	62
15	27	27	27	89
16	5	5	5	94
17	4	4	4	98
18	2	2	2	100
Total	100	100	100	

This table provides a comprehensive overview of the statistical outcomes related to the adjective-noun collocation test administered to matric students. While the minimum score stands at 9, the maximum score reached by students is 18. This considerable gap underscores the variance in performance levels among students in grasping adjective-noun collocations. A closer look at the cumulative frequency distribution unveils noteworthy patterns. At the lower end of the scoring spectrum (9), the cumulative frequency remains at 4%, denoting the limited representation of students achieving this score. In contrast, at the highest attainable score (18), the cumulative frequency reaches 100%, indicating that only two students out of the hundred examined attained almost full marks in this category.

These findings shed light on the proficiency levels of students in utilizing adjective-noun collocations. A very little number of students demonstrate competence by securing higher scores; the majority appears to struggle, as evidenced by the prevalence of mid-range scores

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics of result of Noun-Noun**

Scores	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
8	1	1	1	1
9	5	5	5	6
10	3	3	3	9
11	7	7	7	16
12	16	16	16	32
13	21	21	21	53
14	20	20	20	73
15	17	17	17	90
16	7	7	7	97
17	3	3	3	100
Total	100	100	100	

This table presents the results pertaining to noun-noun collocations. The data indicates that the highest score attained by students is 17, with a frequency of 3, signifying that three students achieved maximum marks in this category. Conversely, the minimum score, obtained by only one student, registers a frequency of 1%, highlighting a modest representation of students scoring at the lower end of the spectrum.

**Table 4**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Total Test**

Scores	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
35	3	3	3	3
36	2	2	2	5
37	4	4	4	9
38	6	6	6	15
39	7	7	7	22
40	5	5	5	27
41	9	9	9	36
42	13	13	13	49
43	14	14	14	63

44	6	6	6	69
45	15	15	15	84
46	8	8	8	92
47	5	5	5	97
48	2	2	2	99
49	1	1	1	100
Total	100	100	100	

The table shows that the lowest score of the collocation test is 35, and only 3% of students managed to get this score. On the other end, the highest score of this collocation test is 49. Only 1% of students reached this top score.

**Table 5**  
**Overall score of three types of collocations**

	VN	AN	NN	Total
Maximum	11	9	8	
Minimum	19	18	17	
Sum	1544	1373	1321	4238

**Minimum score:** 11>9>8 VN>AN>NN

**Maximum score:** 19>18>17 VN>AN>NN

#### **Overall Score of Verb-Noun in Equation**

Percentile= Total score obtained  $\times$ 100 /Total questions in one type  $\times$ Total students

$$1544 \times 100 / 20 \times 100 = 77.2\%$$

The total score obtained by students in the VN category is 596. Thus, 77.2% result is obtained in VN out of 100%.

#### **Overall Score of Adjective-Noun in Equation**

Percentile= Total score obtained  $\times$ 100 /Total questions in one type  $\times$ Total students

$$1373 \times 100 / 20 \times 100 = 68.65\%$$

The total score obtained by students in the VN category is 1373. Thus, 68.65% result is obtained in AN out of 100%.

#### **Overall Score of Adjective-Noun in Equation**

Percentile= Total score obtained  $\times$ 100 /Total questions in one type  $\times$ Total students

$$1321 \times 100 / 20 \times 100 = 66.05\%$$

The total score obtained by students in the VN category is 1321. Thus, 66.05% result is obtained in NN out of 100.

#### **Discussion**

Depending upon the research questions of this study, the findings have been divided into three sub-levels. The main points are summed up to review the present study concluding opinions.

### **Proficiency of matric students in Lahore at using lexical pairings in their writing**

The research findings indicate that students exhibit greater proficiency in VN type of collocation, with a score percentage of 77.2%. This outcome likely stems from the pivotal role verbs and nouns play in constructing sentences compared to adjectives. Verbs and nouns serve as primary building blocks of sentences, whereas adjectives may not always be essential components. Noun-Noun collocations are the least scoring collocations according to tests conducted among matric students. This lexical pairing is not found frequently in English language teaching, hence, students could not score well in this type of collocations. This aligns with the frequency hypothesis which proposes that the order of development in L2 acquisition is determined by the frequency with which different linguistic items occur in the input (Hatch & Gough, 1976)

### **Factors that contribute to misuse of lexical pairings among matric students in Lahore**

The contributing factors to matric students' problems with lexical pairings in writing are another central concern of this study. The results questionnaire have demonstrated that most of the errors in lexical pairings result due to negative influence of L1. Mother language acts as a primary reference for ESL learners. Second language learners depend upon their L1 when they try to communicate. They try to develop one-to-one correspondence between lexical items in L1 and L2 (Shooshtari, 2013, p. 772). The results of the questionnaire show that a large number of students believe that their mother language influences the way they think in their target language to a greater extent. Hence, when they have to express their thoughts while writing they associate English words as they do in Urdu or Punjabi. Which induces unequal associations or errors in lexical pairings because of the thinking mode of the English language. This result is similar to the result of studies carried out by Biskup (1992), Lewis (1997), and Darvishi (2011). This factor has much to do with lexical priming theory (Hoey, 2005). When we encounter a word, it subconsciously influences the processing of other related words (Hoey, 2005). Therefore, the brain prepares for what might come next based on what we have already seen. Therefore, when we encounter a word, the related words are primed in our mind. In case of ESL language, the collocations from native language are primed more rapidly as compared to target language. This leads learners to use collocations from native language which might sound unnatural in the English language. Therefore, when matric students encounter a word, they tend to rely on the patterns of their Urdu language.

The findings of this study reveal that the incompetency of matric students in collocations leads to misuse of lexical pairings in their writings. According to the results of the questionnaire, lack of collocation competence ranks as the second main cause of miscollocation in writing. Besides this, it has been found in results of the collocation test that most of the students have very limited knowledge of the concept of collocations. This factor was also acknowledged by Lewis (2000) who argued that the concept of collocation competence is alien to most of the EFL learners; therefore they fail to combine chunks in a native-like manner. Shooshtari (2013) suggested that even if learners master a lexical item, they might not be able to use it properly. Lack of collocational competence also came out to be the primary cause of miscollocation in previous studies such as n Unver (2008), and Darvishi (2011).

A number of learning strategies used by matric students such as paraphrasing, over generalisation or synonym replacement lead to misuse of lexical pairing in writing. The students claimed that they tend to substitute a component of collocation with its synonym. In a collocation test, a large number of students made a wrong choice of key response to form lexical pairs because they were adopting synonym strategy. Many students failed to

choose key responses because not all words can be replaced perfectly by their synonyms. Moreover, students overgeneralized the usage of words to different word combinations. Overgeneralization resulted from matric students' faulty understanding of distinctions in the English language which is being learnt. The results of the collocation test suggest that these students overgeneralized the usage of one word to form collocations. Approximation is another source of misuse of lexical pairings in this study. In the collocation test, students were unable to choose key responses from the appropriate word class to produce the correct lexical pair. Many researches such as Huang (2001), Zughouli and Abdul-Fattah (2003) and Taiwo (2004) utilise strategies such as over generalization, synonyms or paraphrasing to improve their vocabulary acquisition. However, these strategies affect their learning and use of collocations negatively.

Besides these main reasons behind students' miscommunication in writing, cultural based knowledge came out to be the least ranked reason, according to the questionnaire. This result is similar to the findings of some other researchers such as Biskup (1992), Alpaslan (1993) and Telya et al. (1998). The use of word combinations varies across different languages due to social conventions. Thus, ESL learners must be mindful of target culture. Moreover, students revealed in the response of questionnaire do not pay much attention to teaching lexical collocations or the usage of vocabulary items in classrooms.

### **Overcoming the misuse of lexical pairings in writing among matric students in Lahore**

Like the other educational environments globally, the students in Lahore struggle with mastering lexical pairings in writing. This problem is particularly prevalent among matric students, as they find it challenging to express themselves coherently and effectively in their written discourse. This minimizes the overall quality of their written work. Misuse of lexical pairings does not allow them to convey their intended meaning precisely. Despite this, there are a number of ways to address this challenge and enhance the clarity of written work.

Utilizing an English-English dictionary can benefit them. This will not only improve their understanding of meanings of words but will also introduce them with native word combinations. Regular usage of such dictionaries will enable them to grasp the nuances of lexical collocations. Moreover, it will improve their ability to use the most appropriate lexical collocations in their writing tasks.

Moreover, students strongly agreed upon that incorporating explicit instructions on lexical pairings in classrooms is essential. During English lectures, the teachers can make their students highlight common word combinations in textbooks of English such as 'make a plan' or heavy 'traffic'. Moreover, they should emphasize their correct usage and encourage students to utilize them in their writing tasks. This will develop collocational competence among them.

Additionally, teachers can provide them with collocation dictionaries and encourage them to explore these resources and learn word combinations. This will enhance their understanding and memory of collocations. Ultimately, this will help them to overcome the challenge of choosing appropriate word pairings in their writing.

These students should have an understanding of meaning and nuances of individual words in lexical pairings. They should not simply memorize the pair of words, rather they should focus on their individual meaning and individual usage. This can be achieved if these students have exposure to English text in the form of literary or academic



articles, literature or newspapers, which will familiarize them with contextual usage of words.

Lastly, addressing the root cause of the problem—specifically, the lack of collocational competence—requires a comprehensive approach that combines vocabulary instruction with language practice. By systematically teaching and reinforcing word combinations through targeted lessons, exercises, and feedback, matric students in Lahore can gradually enhance their ability to use collocations accurately and appropriately in their writing

### **Conclusion**

The present study focuses on the errors in lexical pairings among matric students in Lahore. In this study, three types of lexical pairings (VN, AN, NN) were considered. The results reveal that matric students mostly suffer with Noun-Noun collocations. However, they performed well at Verb-Noun collocation, and their performance at Adjective-Noun collocation was satisfactory. These errors in lexical pairings resulted from language learning strategies, negative influence of L1, incompetency in usage of collocations, and lack of cultural knowledge. Most of the students strongly agreed that incorporating explicit instructions on lexical pairings in classrooms can help them.

### **Recommendations**

- Promote extensive reading habits among students to naturally internalize lexical pairings in different contexts
- Expose students to authentic English texts to enhance contextual understanding of collocations.
- Foster peer-assisted learning through classroom activities where students collaboratively edit writing samples, focusing on identifying and correcting collocation errors
- Developing collocation notebooks or portfolios.

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