

## The Role of Collocations in Academic Writing

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### Abstract.

Academic writing requires precision, coherence, and a formal tone, all of which are closely linked to the effective use of collocations — fixed or semi-fixed word combinations that signal lexical and stylistic appropriateness. This study investigates the role of collocations in enhancing the clarity, logical structure, and professional tone of academic texts, with a particular focus on Azerbaijani university students learning English for academic purposes. The research identifies common challenges faced by learners, including semantic mismatches, grammatical inaccuracies, native language interference, and cultural variations in English usage. Analysis of discipline-specific texts further demonstrates that humanities, social sciences, economics, and technical fields each employ distinct collocational patterns, highlighting the importance of context-aware instruction. Pedagogical strategies, including corpus-based exercises, contextualized practice, collocation dictionaries, guided rewriting, and peer feedback, are proposed to improve learners' collocational competence and overall writing proficiency. The study concludes that mastering collocations is essential for producing coherent, credible, and stylistically appropriate academic writing, thereby enabling learners to communicate ideas effectively and align with international scholarly standards.

### Key words:

*academic writing, collocations, lexical competence, learner challenges, native language interference*

### Introduction

Academic writing is characterized by formality, precision, and objectivity. Its primary purpose is to present information in a logical, credible, and coherent manner, while maintaining a neutral and professional tone. Unlike informal or conversational English, academic writing relies heavily on lexical choices that convey authority, clarity, and scholarly sophistication. Among these lexical devices, collocations — fixed or semi-fixed word combinations — occupy a central role. Examples of academic collocations include expressions such as *conduct research*, *significant impact*, or *comprehensive analysis*. These combinations are not arbitrary; rather, they are conventional pairings that native speakers intuitively recognize as standard in formal discourse.

As highlighted by Lewis (2000) and Nation (2001), collocations enhance fluency and academic credibility by ensuring both lexical consistency and semantic clarity. They serve as essential markers of style, demonstrating the writer's familiarity with academic norms and domain-specific

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terminology. In practice, nonstandard or inappropriate expressions — for instance, *do research* or *big difference* — can reduce the perceived formality and professionalism of a text. Conversely, correct collocation usage, such as *conduct research* or *significant difference*, strengthens the scholarly tone and supports logical argumentation.

Collocations not only enhance lexical quality but also serve a cognitive function in academic writing. They guide writers in constructing coherent ideas and assist readers in comprehending complex arguments. Mastery of collocations enables authors to organize thoughts systematically, maintain consistency, and achieve stylistic uniformity across a text. Consequently, for students learning English for academic purposes (EAP), developing collocational competence is indispensable. It underpins their ability to express ideas clearly, align with disciplinary conventions, and produce academically credible writing.

The significance of collocations in academic writing has been extensively recognized by scholars in applied linguistics, English language teaching, and corpus linguistics. Collocations — fixed or semi-fixed combinations of words — are crucial for both lexical fluency and semantic precision. According to Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1997), collocations are a primary determinant of natural-sounding language. They enable language users to combine words in ways that are idiomatic and socially recognized within a speech community, producing expressions that are coherent, contextually appropriate, and stylistically formal. Learners who fail to acquire correct collocations may produce sentences that are grammatically correct but awkward, unclear, or unprofessional, particularly in academic contexts where precision and clarity are paramount.

From a pedagogical perspective, Pawley and Syder (1983) emphasized that native-like fluency in academic writing heavily depends on collocational competence. Their research highlighted that learners often encounter challenges when translating collocations from their native language into English because literal equivalents rarely exist. For Azerbaijani students, such interference frequently manifests in collocational errors such as *make a research* instead of *conduct research* or *strongly argue* rather than *make a strong argument*. These inaccuracies reduce the perceived credibility of the text and underline the necessity for focused instruction on collocational patterns in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses.

### **Grammatical Structures of Collocations**

Collocations in academic discourse can be classified based on grammatical patterns, each serving specific functional and stylistic roles. Common collocational structures include:

- Adjective + Noun: e.g., *robust methodology*, *critical evaluation*
- Noun + Noun: e.g., *research findings*, *policy framework*
- Adverb + Verb: e.g., *strongly recommend*, *clearly demonstrate*
- Verb + Noun: e.g., *conduct an experiment*, *formulate a hypothesis*

These grammatical patterns are not merely formalities; they perform multiple functions in academic writing. They contribute to the clarity of meaning, establish logical relationships between ideas, and signal the author's evaluative stance. For instance, the adverbial collocation *clearly indicate* signals that the statement is evidence-based and reliable, whereas *critically evaluate* frames the discussion as analytical rather than merely descriptive. Such patterns facilitate textual cohesion and allow readers to navigate complex arguments effectively (Granger, 1998).

### Sources of Collocational Errors

Despite their importance, learners frequently encounter challenges in acquiring collocational competence. Research indicates four main sources of collocational errors:

1. **Semantic Mismatches:** Learners often select words that are correct in isolation but inappropriate when paired, e.g., *powerful argument* instead of *strong argument*.
2. **Grammatical Mistakes:** Errors occur in verb selection or prepositional use, such as *make a research* instead of *conduct research*.
3. **Cultural and Regional Variations:** Differences between British and American English can cause confusion. For example, *take a decision* (British English) versus *make a decision* (American English).
4. **Native Language Interference:** Direct translations from Azerbaijani may result in collocational inaccuracies, e.g., *do a lecture* instead of *give a lecture*.

Understanding these sources of error is essential for designing effective pedagogical interventions that target learner difficulties systematically.

### Discipline-Specific Collocations

Academic collocations are also discipline-dependent, meaning that the choice of collocations varies according to the field of study. For example:

- **Humanities and Social Sciences:** Predominantly use evaluative and descriptive collocations such as *cultural identity*, *linguistic diversity*, and *historical context*. These collocations allow writers to discuss abstract concepts, theories, and interpretations with precision.
- **Economics and Business Studies:** Favor action-oriented collocations like *implement policy*, *assess risk*, and *competitive advantage*, which highlight processes, outcomes, and strategic actions.
- **Technical and Scientific Fields:** Often rely on procedural and methodological collocations such as *adhere to standards*, *measure accuracy*, and *ensure structural integrity*, which convey operational and experimental precision (Cowie, 1998).

By recognizing these patterns, learners can produce texts that are not only grammatically accurate but also disciplinarily appropriate, aligning with conventions and expectations in different academic contexts.

## Research Findings

The research findings underscore the multifaceted role of collocations in academic writing, demonstrating their importance in enhancing lexical precision, logical structure, and stylistic consistency.

### 1. Lexical Precision and Semantic Clarity

Collocations facilitate semantic accuracy by pairing words that are conventionally associated, thereby minimizing ambiguity. For instance, *conduct research* conveys a more precise meaning than *do research*, which is informal and vague. Similarly, *significant impact* is a precise evaluative phrase compared to *big effect*, which may appear casual or unrefined. By employing standard academic collocations, writers achieve lexical clarity, enabling readers to grasp nuanced arguments efficiently.

### 2. Supporting Logical and Cohesive Structure

Collocations function as discourse markers, linking sentences and ideas in a coherent manner. Adverbial and verb-noun collocations like *strongly recommend*, *clearly demonstrate*, and *provide evidence* serve to signal argumentation, indicate results, and highlight the writer's stance. This consistency in lexical choice enhances textual cohesion, facilitating the reader's understanding of complex academic material.

### 3. Establishing Academic Style and Professional Tone

The use of collocations is a stylistic indicator in academic texts. Inappropriate or nonstandard combinations reduce the formality of writing, whereas correct collocations reinforce professionalism. For example, using *important role* instead of *crucial role* may not be grammatically incorrect but is less stylistically strong. Similarly, regional differences in collocational preference (e.g., *make a decision* vs. *take a decision*) must be considered to maintain formal tone.

### 4. Challenges for Learners

Azerbaijani university students face several challenges when using academic collocations:

- **Semantic Confusion:** Learners sometimes choose synonyms incorrectly, producing phrases like *powerful argument* instead of *strong argument*.
- **Grammatical Inaccuracy:** Errors occur when students misuse verbs or prepositions in collocations, e.g., *make a research* instead of *conduct research*.

- Cultural Variations: Differences between British and American English collocations may confuse learners, e.g., *take a decision* (British) vs. *make a decision* (American).
- Native Language Interference: Direct translations from Azerbaijani can produce incorrect combinations, e.g., *do a lecture* instead of *give a lecture*.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Teaching collocations effectively requires a comprehensive, context-driven approach that incorporates exposure, practice, and feedback. Several strategies can improve learners' collocational competence:

- 1.Contextualized Practice: Collocations should be taught within the context of authentic academic texts rather than as isolated lists. This method allows learners to understand both meaning and usage patterns.
- 2.Corpora-Based Learning: Using corpora such as COCA or the BNC helps students identify frequency, patterns, and discipline-specific collocations.
- 3.Collocation Dictionaries and Reference Tools: Tools designed for academic learners provide structured lists of standard combinations, aiding self-study and reference.
- 4.Guided Rewriting and Peer Review: Learners identify collocational errors and revise sentences, receiving feedback from peers and instructors to reinforce learning.
- 5.Explicit Instruction: Teaching principles of collocational selection, including register, semantic compatibility, and grammatical norms, bridges gaps between intuition and academic convention.

Research shows that awareness-raising activities, such as noticing tasks, improve learners' ability to internalize collocational norms (Laufer & Waldman, 2011). Over time, these practices enhance lexical precision, coherence, and stylistic appropriateness, all of which are critical for successful academic writing.

### **Conclusion**

Collocations are indispensable in academic writing, providing lexical, grammatical, and stylistic cohesion. They allow writers to convey ideas precisely, logically, and professionally. The research indicates that learners often struggle with collocational competence due to semantic confusion, grammatical errors, cultural differences, and native language interference.

Discipline-specific collocations further highlight the necessity of context-aware instruction. Humanities, social sciences, technical disciplines, and economics each exhibit distinct collocational norms. Mastery of these patterns not only enables linguistic accuracy but also strengthens argumentation, coherence, and critical thinking skills.

From a pedagogical standpoint, integrating collocation-focused instruction into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses is crucial. Using strategies such as contextualized exercises, corpus analysis, dictionaries, guided rewriting, and peer feedback, students can internalize correct combinations, improve fluency, and align with disciplinary expectations. Collocational competence thus becomes a core component of academic literacy, supporting the production of high-quality scholarly texts.

Ultimately, collocations are more than lexical conventions; they are instruments of academic professionalism, facilitating coherent argumentation, stylistic sophistication, and precise communication. Developing proficiency in collocations represents a key milestone in the academic development of English learners and a predictor of success in international scholarly contexts.

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