

บทความวิจัย (Research Article)

Thai EFL Undergraduate Students' English Collocational Knowledge: Receptive and Productive Competence and Acquisition Processes

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความรู้คำปรากฏร่วมภาษาอังกฤษและกระบวนการเรียนรู้คำปรากฏร่วมของนักศึกษาไทยระดับปริญญาตรี สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารทางธุรกิจ จำนวน 104 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยประกอบด้วยแบบทดสอบ 4 ชุด เพื่อวัดความรู้เชิงรับ (collex และ collmatch) และความรู้เชิงสร้าง (recall และ contrix) ของคำปรากฏร่วมประเภท lexical และ grammatical และการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างกับนักศึกษา 30 คน ผลการวิจัยพบว่า มีช่องว่างระหว่างความรู้เชิงรับและเชิงสร้างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ โดยคำปรากฏร่วมประเภท lexical มีช่องว่างมากกว่าประเภท grammatical ผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยส่วนใหญ่เรียนรู้จากในชั้นเรียนเป็นหลัก และมีวิธีการเรียนรู้คำปรากฏร่วมที่หลากหลาย เช่น การใช้ AI ในการแปล การดูภาพยนตร์และการใช้แอปพลิเคชัน ผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยส่วนใหญ่รายงานว่าไม่เคยรู้จักคำปรากฏร่วมก่อนเรียนในมหาวิทยาลัย ซึ่งชี้ให้เห็นช่องว่างในหลักสูตรระดับมัธยมศึกษา ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าการเรียนรู้จากสื่อที่หลากหลายและกลยุทธ์การเรียนรู้เชิงรุกส่งผลต่อความสามารถในการใช้คำปรากฏร่วมได้ดีขึ้น

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(Received: 15 June 2025 ; Revised: 29 August 2025; Accepted: 29 November 2025)

Abstract

This study investigated the collocational knowledge of 104 Thai undergraduate students studying English for Business Communication and examined their approaches to acquiring this knowledge during their English learning experience. Data were collected by four tests measuring receptive (COLLEX and COLLMATCH) and productive (Recall and CONTRIX) knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations, as well as semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. The results revealed a significant receptive–productive gap, which was larger for lexical collocations than for grammatical collocations. Classroom instruction was reported as the primary learning approach by most participants, although they also used additional methods such as AI-assisted translation, movies, and learning applications. Most participants indicated that they had no prior knowledge of collocations before learning in the university, highlighting a gap in the secondary school curriculum. The findings also show that experience with diverse authentic materials and the use of active learning approaches can enhance productive collocational competence.

Keywords: collocations, receptive knowledge, productive knowledge

Introduction

English collocations are considered pairs of words that frequently occur together in ordinary language and are fundamental to fluent communication (Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017). Word combinations, for instance, "heavy rain" rather than "strong rain", or "make a decision" instead of "do a decision", help to distinguish confident users of English from those still working towards proficiency. For Thai learners of English, developing this kind of knowledge is not easy. The difficulty comes from the fact that many word pairings are unpredictable, and there are no simple rules learners may rely on (El-Dakhs, 2015; Lewis, 2000).

Studies have shown that EFL learners exhibit better receptive knowledge (being able to identify collocations when they hear or read them) than productive

knowledge (being able to actively produce collocations in speaking and writing) (Bueraheng & Laohawiriyanon, 2014; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021). This difference has significant pedagogical implications since it indicates that learners are able to comprehend collocations in context but cannot replicate them in their own production (Nguyen & Webb, 2017).

In Thailand, few studies have looked closely at how collocational knowledge links with the ways learners try to improve their vocabulary (Phoocharoensil, 2014). Therefore, investigating how Thai learners approach collocation acquisition is crucial for developing pedagogical strategies that match their specific learning behaviors and preferences. Earlier work has pointed out that learners tend to handle lexical collocations (such as adjective-noun combinations like "heavy rain") differently from grammatical collocations (such as verb-preposition combinations like "depend on"), and that these types are not equally easy to learn (Benson et al., 2010). Based on this understanding, it is important to consider how these distinctions relate to the broader pattern of receptive and productive vocabulary development. Therefore, the specific factors contributing to this receptive - productive gap in the Thai context - including L1 transfer effects, instructional approaches, and individual learning preferences - need to be more closely examined.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To evaluate Thai EFL undergraduate students' receptive understanding of English collocations
2. To assess Thai EFL undergraduate students' productive understanding of English collocations
3. To investigate how Thai EFL undergraduate students acquire collocational knowledge in their English learning experience

Scope of the Study

The study focused on 104 second-year undergraduate students who were majoring in English for Business Communication at a public university in southern Thailand. These participants were enrolled in the Strategic and Critical Reading Course during the second semester of the academic year 2024.

The investigation encompassed six types of collocations, divided into lexical and grammatical categories. Lexical collocations included adjective + noun combinations (e.g., heavy rain), verb + adverb patterns (e.g., speak fluently), and verb + noun structures (e.g., make a decision). Grammatical collocations comprised preposition + noun constructions (e.g., on time), noun + preposition patterns (e.g., interest in), and verb patterns (e.g., agree to do something). These collocation types were selected to provide a comprehensive assessment of students' understanding of both lexical and grammatical word partnerships in English.

Methods

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used in this investigation (Creswell, 2012), beginning with quantitative data collection through collocational tests, followed by qualitative inquiry through semi-structured interviews to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings.

Population and Sampling

The study focused on second-year students in the English for Business Communication programme at a public university in southern Thailand. Participants were drawn from those enrolled in the required *Strategic and Critical Reading* course, chosen because they formed a relatively homogeneous group in terms of academic level and English exposure. The course itself was also relevant, since it places heavy demands on collocation knowledge for understanding academic material. In the quantitative phase, 110 students initially took part, selected through convenience sampling based on course enrolment. After accounting for withdrawals

and incomplete responses on the four assessment instruments, full data were available for 104 students (79 females, 75.96%; 25 males, 24.04%). Ages ranged from 19 to 21.

For the qualitative phase, students were stratified into three performance groups according to their combined scores on four collocation tests (COLLEX, COLLMATCH, Collocation Recall, and CONTRIX). Predetermined cut-off points were used to identify a high-performance group ($\geq 60\%$, $M = 72.5\%$), a moderate group ($45\text{--}59\%$, $M = 52.0\%$), and a low group ($< 45\%$, $M = 35.2\%$). From these, 30 participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews, with ten students drawn from each performance level to ensure balanced representation. All of the participants had studied English as a compulsory subject throughout secondary school (grades 7–12). Participation in both phases of the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from every student.

Research Instruments

Quantitative Instruments

Four collocational tests were employed to assess participants' collocation knowledge across both receptive and productive dimensions. The COLLEX Test (Collocation Lexis Test), based on Gyllstad's (2009) design, comprised 60 multiple-choice items that assessed receptive lexical collocations across three categories: adjective-noun, verb-adverb, and verb-noun combinations, with 20 items in each category and a maximum score of 60 points. The COLLMATCH Test (Collocate Matching Test), adapted from Gyllstad (2009), contained 60 binary-choice items (Yes/No format) designed to evaluate receptive grammatical collocations such as preposition-noun, noun-preposition, and verb pattern constructions, with 20 items per category and a maximum score of 60 points.

For productive collocation assessment, the Collocation Recall Test, adapted from Szudarski (2012), presented 45 Thai-to-English translation items distributed equally across adjective-noun, verb-adverb, and verb-noun categories (15 items each), with a maximum score of 45 points. Finally, the CONTRIX Test (Constituent

Matrix Test), based on Revier (2009), featured 45 fill-in-the-blank items targeting productive grammatical collocations across preposition-noun, noun-preposition, and verb pattern categories, with 15 items per category and a maximum score of 45 points. All instruments employed a scoring system of one point per correct answer, providing comprehensive coverage of both lexical and grammatical collocations in receptive and productive modalities.

Qualitative Instrument

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

To gain deeper insight into how students experienced collocation learning, the individual semi-structured interviews with 30 participants were conducted. These were drawn from the three performance groups (10 from each) and reflected the overall gender balance of the sample (22 females, 8 males). Individual interviews were selected rather than focus groups, since this format was more likely to reduce social desirability bias and allow students to speak openly about their difficulties (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This seemed particularly important in the Thai context, where hierarchical classroom cultures can make students reluctant to admit problems in front of peers (Patton, 2022). Each interview lasted around 20 minutes and was conducted in Thai, allowing participants to share their experiences clearly and without language difficulties.

The interview guide contained 12 open-ended questions, arranged around four broad areas: students' strategies for learning collocations, their awareness of collocation patterns, the challenges they encountered in both learning and use, and their suggestions for improving collocation instruction. To check validity, the questions were reviewed by three experts in Applied Linguistics. They used Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC) analysis, and the overall IOC score was 0.85, which indicates the items were suitable and relevant for addressing the study's aims.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. In Phase 1, quantitative data were collected after participants were fully informed about the

research purpose and assured of their voluntary participation rights. The four collocation tests (COLLEX, COLLMATCH, Collocation Recall, and CONTRIX) were administered without time constraints to ensure the focus on knowledge assessment rather than the processing speed, with the total testing procedure taking approximately three hours to complete. To maintain anonymity, all the data were collected using numerical coding systems rather than participant names.

The qualitative data collection was conducted two weeks after the completion of Phase 1 to allow sufficient time for test scoring and participant categorization. Based on their overall test performance, participants were stratified into three proficiency groups: high-performance ($\geq 70\%$), moderate-performance (50-69%), and low-performance ($< 50\%$). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with willing volunteers from each group, with all sessions audio-recorded upon participant consent. Additionally, detailed notes were taken during each interview to serve as backup documentation and to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information that might not be evident in audio recordings alone. This dual-phase approach ensured comprehensive data collection while maintaining ethical standards and participant comfort throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyse the data, following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) convergent parallel design. On the quantitative side, the descriptive statistics; means, percentages, and standard deviations were calculated to give a picture of students' overall collocation performance. Then, the comparative analyses were used to look at differences between receptive and productive collocation knowledge. Based on these results, participants were grouped into high, moderate, and low performance categories, which in turn provided the basis for selecting interviewees and guiding the qualitative stage of the study. For the qualitative part of the study, the interview transcripts were analysed by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach. This provided the opportunity to work through the data step by step and identify recurring patterns,

themes, and insights into how participants described their collocation learning experiences and the ways they acquired them.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

For the overall performance, analysis of 104 complete datasets revealed the following performance patterns across all four collocational knowledge tests.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Collocational Knowledge Tests

Test	(n=104)		
	Percentage	\bar{x}	S.D.
Receptive Knowledge			
Lexical Collocations COLLEX (60)	55.82%	33.50	7.66
Grammatical Collocations COLLMATCH (60)	57.92%	34.71	4.94
Overall Receptive Knowledge	56.84%	34.12	6.30
Productive Knowledge			
Lexical Collocations Collocation recall test (45)	36.53%	16.44	6.86
Grammatical Collocations CONTRIX (45)	48.81%	21.96	9.00
Overall Productive Knowledge	42.67%	19.20	7.93

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for participants' performance across all four collocation tests. The results reveal a clear distinction between receptive and productive collocation knowledge among the 104 participants. Overall, the participants demonstrated significantly higher proficiency in receptive collocation knowledge (\bar{x} = 34.12, S.D. = 6.30, 56.84%) compared to productive knowledge (\bar{x} = 19.20, S.D. = 7.93, 42.67%), indicating a substantial gap of approximately 14 percentage between these two dimensions of collocation competence.

Within receptive knowledge, participants performed slightly better on grammatical collocations through the COLLMATCH test (\bar{x} = 34.71, S.D. = 4.94, 57.92%) than on lexical collocations via the COLLEX test (\bar{x} = 33.50, S.D. = 7.66, 55.82%), though the difference was relatively modest. In contrast, productive knowledge showed a more pronounced disparity between collocation types.

Participants achieved higher scores on grammatical collocations using the CONTRIX test (\bar{x} = 21.96, S.D. = 9.00, 48.81%) compared to lexical collocations on the recall test (\bar{x} = 16.44, S.D. = 6.86, 36.53%), representing a gap of over 12 percentage. These findings highlight the challenging nature of productive collocation knowledge for Thai EFL learners and underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to bridge the receptive-productive knowledge gap.

Qualitative Findings

Collocation Acquisition Methods Among Thai EFL Students

Thematic analysis of the 30 interviews pointed to six main ways in which participants reported picking up collocations. These methods did not work in isolation. In many cases, they overlapped and seemed to complement each other in students' daily learning.

Theme 1 Teacher-centred formal instruction

Almost every student (28 out of 30) said that the classroom was still their main source of collocation knowledge. This was true across all performance groups. Teachers were described as the most reliable and accessible source. As Participant 15 reported; *"Teachers are still our main source for learning collocations. We depend on what they teach us in class because we trust their knowledge."*

Several students also admitted uncertainty about independent learning. Participant 7 explained; *"If teachers don't teach it, we don't know where else to learn from. We're not sure which books or websites are reliable."*

This reliance suggests that while formal teaching is valued, it may also restrict students' development of autonomous strategies.

Theme 2 Assessment-driven memorisation

Twenty-six participants said they memorised collocations mainly for exams, reflecting the strong test-oriented culture of Thai education. Participant 22 described: *"I memorize collocations mainly for tests and exams. I write them down and repeat them until I remember, but after exams, I often forget them."*

This led to a cycle of temporary learning rather than long-term acquisition. Participant 11 commented: *“We study collocations hard before tests, but since we don’t use them regularly, they disappear from our memory quickly.”*

Theme 3 Technology-Mediated Learning

More than twenty students mentioned using technology to help them with collocations. Google Translate was the most common tool, but some also talked about other apps, and a few even brought up ChatGPT. Participant 19 explained: *“I use Google Translate and other apps to check if word combinations sound natural. Sometimes I ask ChatGPT about collocations too.”* Participants, on the other hand, reported varying levels of confidence in technological reliability. Participant 4 admitted: *“These tools are convenient, but sometimes I’m not sure if they’re giving me the right collocations for academic writing.”*

Theme 4 Social Media Engagement

Social media also came up often. Ninety students reported that they picked up collocations from platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. Participant 12 described *“I follow English learning accounts on Instagram. They post daily collocations with examples, and it’s easier to remember because of the images and short videos.”* Also Participant 8 reflected that *“Social media makes learning easy. I don’t feel like I’m learning when I watch English videos on TikTok.”*

Theme 5 Gaming-Based Incidental Learning

Some students, more often male, said they learned collocations while gaming online with international players. They felt this gave them a chance to use English in a fast and authentic way. Participant 26 explained: *“When I play online games with international players, I pick up phrases and word combinations naturally. I learn them without trying.”* Participant 30 noted *“In games, you have to communicate quickly, so you learn which words go together because they work in real situations.”*

Theme 6 Entertainment Media Exposure

Twelve participants reported that they noticed collocations in films or TV. Participant 5 explained; *“I sometimes notice repeated phrases in movies, especially in dialogues. But I don't write them down or study them formally.”* This mean of acquiring collocations tended to be more passive. As Participant 17 mentioned; *“I hear collocations in movies, but since I don't practice using them, I don't remember most of them.”*

The data reveals that successful collocation learners employ multiple acquisition methods simultaneously. High-performing participants typically combined formal instruction with technology tools and entertainment media, while lower-performing students relied primarily on classroom teaching and memorization. This suggests that diversified acquisition strategies contribute to more effective collocation learning outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusions

The overall gap between receptive and productive collocational knowledge aligns with established second language acquisition theory and previous research in the Thai context (Bueraheng & Laohawiryanon, 2014; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021). This finding supports the developmental hypothesis that receptive knowledge typically precedes productive competence in vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2014). At the same time, the interviews showed that nearly all of the students reported that they had never come across the idea of collocations before entering university, as reported by participant 2:

“I never learned about collocations in high school. We only studied individual words.”

This absence of early exposure seems to play a part in the difficulties students now face, and may even help explain why challenges persist for those who otherwise perform strongly.

The substantially larger gap in lexical collocations (19.3%) compared to grammatical collocations (9.1%) confirms Nation and Shin's (2007) assertion about their relative difficulty. Lexical collocations' arbitrary nature, as demonstrated through participants' production errors and interview responses regarding word combination difficulties requires extensive exposure to authentic usage patterns rather than rule-based learning (Lewis, 2000). This finding has important pedagogical implications, suggesting that lexical collocations require more intensive and varied instructional approaches, particularly through authentic materials that provide natural usage contexts.

The qualitative analysis of interviews with thirty participants identified three key themes related to collocation learning experiences among Thai EFL students. These findings provide insights into both the difficulties students face and the strategies they employ when learning collocations, showing that collocation acquisition patterns extend beyond simple proficiency level differences.

Firstly, the data from the interviews shows that most of participants lack of prior collocation awareness. They reported they had no knowledge of collocations before university study, as reported by participant 2:

“I had never heard the word 'collocation' until I came to university. Only when taking this course did I understand what it was. In high school, we learned vocabulary and grammar separately.” (participant 2)

Unlike other aspects of language learning where students build upon previous knowledge, collocation learning begins from zero at the university level. This late introduction explains why even advanced students struggle with productive collocational competence - they lack the extensive exposure time that Nation (2013) identifies as crucial for deep vocabulary knowledge.

Secondly, the majority of participants (23 out of 30) demonstrated excessive reliance on teacher-provided instruction, showing reluctance to seek independent learning opportunities. Participant 28 reported the following:

“If teachers don't teach it, we don't know where to learn from. It's easier to wait for teachers to provide everything. We don't know which sources are reliable.”
(participant 28)

This reliance on teachers shows what Holec (1981) described as weak learner autonomy - students struggle to manage their own learning independently. For collocations, this dependence creates real problems because students need far more exposure to natural language than any classroom can provide. The educational system itself encourages this dependency by rewarding students who follow instructions and repeat what they learn, rather than those who explore and take initiative. Students get used to being told what to do, which makes them even more dependent on teachers over time. This becomes a serious limitation for language learning that needs to continue long after formal classes end. This pattern was evident in interview responses, where 25 out of 30 participants indicated they rarely sought collocation learning opportunities outside formal instruction.

The last theme is curriculum integration needs. The data from the interviews showed that the majority of the participants expressed the need for structured collocation teaching across all their English courses, rather than treating it as an isolated topic. One of the participants reported in the following quotes:

“We want every course to emphasize collocations, not just vocabulary classes, because some subjects barely focus on this at all. It's important for writing and speaking too.” (participant 10)

This student recommendations support the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as well as Ellis' (2003) Focus on Form approach. Students tend to understand naturally that collocations are not individual grammatical points to memorise, but rather important elements of how English functions in all aspects of communication. However, successful integration will require an integrated changes in institutions - teacher training, curriculum redesign, and evaluation modification - that reaches far beyond individual classroom innovations. Students viewpoints provide tremendous encouragement for such revisions, demonstrating that learners recognise the need for more comprehensive methods to collocational instruction.

Suggestions

Suggestions for application

The findings of this study point to several practical ways to improve how collocations are taught in Thai EFL classrooms. Rather than treating collocations as isolated vocabulary, teachers should build students' awareness of them across all language skills. This can be done by using authentic materials like films, apps, and other modern media into lessons in a regular and meaningful way. Teachers also need to show students how to pick out collocations in real texts and give them simple, practical strategies for noting and revising them. Additionally, tasks should help students move from just recognizing collocations to actually using them, through communicative activities that focus on getting collocations right, not just grammar.

Curriculum planners and school leaders also have a key role in creating the right conditions for collocation learning. In secondary schools, it is important to raise collocation awareness early, using age-appropriate materials and proper teacher training. At university, collocational work should run through all English courses, so students can build up their knowledge gradually. Educational technologists can help by designing tools that offer rich contexts and gradually increase the challenge. At

the same time, administrators need to back this up by investing in technology, supporting ongoing teacher development, and making sure students have access to up-to-date, authentic materials. Finally, assessment needs to reflect the importance of collocations as part of language proficiency, supported by policies that allow collocation teaching to become part of everyday practice

Suggestions for further studies

1. Longitudinal studies should follow students' collocation development from secondary school through to university graduation to build a clearer picture of how collocational knowledge grows, where difficulties tend to persist, and how learning strategies change over time. These studies should also look at what helps students retain collocations in the long term, particularly after formal instruction ends.

2. Comparative research should replicate these findings across different institutional contexts to establish the generalizability of the receptive-productive gap and learning strategy patterns identified in this study. Cross-cultural studies would help distinguish universal collocation acquisition challenges from Thailand-specific educational factors, potentially informing pedagogical approaches across similar EFL contexts in Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Prince of Songkla University, Surat Thani Campus, 2024 Grant No. LAM6803048S. The researchers would like to thank all the students who participated in this study.

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