

World Conference on Social Sciences, Law and Public Policy
Hosted Online from Toronto, Canada
Date: 26th May 2026
Website: https://econferencia.com

NOTICING COLLOCATIONS: THE ROLE OF CORPUS-BASED TASKS IN UPPER-GRADE EFL CLASSES

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Abstract.
The paper examines why collocations often remain unnoticed by learners and how corpus-based tasks can draw learners' attention to them. Examples of noticing tasks used with grade 8–9 learners are presented.

Keywords: Noticing, collocation, corpus-based task, concordance, upper-grade learners, EFL.

Introduction

According to Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, learners acquire only those features of the input that they consciously notice. Collocations are especially likely to pass unnoticed. A learner who reads She took the medicine understands the sentence without any effort and therefore pays no attention to the verb take. When the same learner later needs to express this idea, he or she may transfer the Uzbek verb and say drink medicine. Thus, collocations are often understood but not learned.

Lewis (1993) argued that one of the main tasks of the teacher is to help learners notice chunks in the input. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) showed that drawing learners' attention to word combinations helps learners remember them. Corpora provide a particularly powerful means of noticing, because a concordance shows

the same pattern many times in a single view, with the key word aligned in the centre (Sinclair, 1991).

In our research with grade 8–9 learners in Bukhara region, the Notice stage of the "Corpus Detective" system included the following tasks.

Highlighted input. At first, collocations in the textbook text were printed in bold, and learners copied them into a collocation table. Later the highlighting was removed and learners had to find the collocations themselves.

Pattern hunt. Learners received 10–12 concordance lines for a key word from the unit (for example, challenge in the unit "It's a challenge") and answered guiding questions: "Which verbs come before the word? Which adjectives?". They discovered patterns such as face a challenge, meet a challenge and a big challenge.

Odd one out. Learners were given four combinations, one of which is not typical in the corpus (for example, heavy rain, heavy traffic, heavy coffee, heavy meal), and had to identify it and justify the choice with corpus evidence (the usual combination is strong coffee).

Spot the difference. Two sets of concordance lines for near-synonyms (say and tell) were compared, and learners formulated the difference in their own words.

These tasks shifted learners' attention from the meaning of single words to the way words combine. Learners began to ask questions such as "Which verb goes with this noun?", which indicates the development of collocational awareness. The tasks were also motivating, because learners felt that they were discovering the language themselves rather than memorising rules (Johns, 1991).



In conclusion, corpus-based noticing tasks help upper-grade learners to see collocations that would otherwise remain unnoticed. They form a necessary first step before practice and production, and they can be integrated into ordinary textbook units with little additional time.

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