Collocation Awareness in the Writing Process

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While recent ELT research has addressed the importance of lexical collocations for second/foreign language learning, little research has been done examining how collocation learning can actually be promoted in the language classroom. This paper reports a classroom-based study that investigated one way – dubbed the CAR (Collocation Awareness-Raising) Process – in which collocation learning can be integrated in EFL[1] learners' writing process. Results suggest that the process does raise learners' collocation awareness throughout and after the writing process and that the quality of student work appreciably increases with the use of collocation tokens. Further, the process helped the learners "learn to write" and "write to learn," becoming more reflective, independent, and "equipped" for learning. Two interesting sub-findings also emerged: the process often produced "islands" of language sophistication in student writing, and in the process, students naturally found and used appropriate and distinct collocations for the theme and genre of writing, without being directed to do so. The CAR Process appears useful for application in many fields of language learning: in writing, and beyond.

BACKGROUND

Collocations and Language Learning

Recent research has included examinations into and demonstrations of the importance of lexical collocations for second/foreign language learning (Bahns, 1993; Michael Lewis, 1998, 2000; Hill, 1999; Morgan Lewis, 2001). Collocation, or word combination[2], is thought to be an important dimension in language learning "because the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to all

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[1] For simplicity, this document uses the term "EFL" throughout, referring to all ESL or EFL English learners.

[2] Collocation has been variously defined within linguistics and language teaching. Some definitions limit collocation to only co-occurring single words, such as *perform: operation* but not *perform: meeting, hold: meeting* but not *hold: operation*. Others define collocation more broadly as all combinations of words, including idiomatic phrases. For the purposes of this paper, collocation and collocational competence follow the latter, more inclusive definition.

language use" (Hill, 2000). Nation (2001: 27) came up with a categorisation of eight aspects of word knowledge, in which "the collocational behaviour of a word" is considered to be an important aspect; thus, for a student to acquire word "knowledge," this knowledge, when full, has to include knowledge of the word's collocations. It is generally agreed that "native speaker linguistic competence has a large and significant phraseological component" (Michael Lewis, 2000). This is also true with successful advanced learners of a foreign language. In Lewis's words, these learners normally have "a sufficiently large and significant phrasal mental lexicon" that is readily available to them when they use the language – their "collocational competence." This competence plays a large part in enabling them to produce language which is "fluent, accurate and stylistically appropriate" – an ability that is the hallmark of an advanced language learner.

However important collocation may be, it constitutes great difficulties for foreign language learners. Substantial evidence has been produced that collocation errors make up a high percentage of all errors foreign learners make. Lennon's (1996) study of a group of German learners of English revealed that even the "advanced" learners used high frequency verbs wrongly, which indicated their "lack of knowledge of collocational probabilities and restrictions." Bahns and Eldaw's study (1993) also suggested that "EFL learners' knowledge of general vocabulary far outstrips their knowledge of collocations." Marton (1977), in an earlier study, found that although collocations did not seem to cause comprehension problems since his learners could comprehend and translate English sentences containing collocations, the fact that they could not produce those same collocations in English meant that collocations did constitute problems at the level of production. Hendricks and Yang (2002) discovered that L1-Chinese EFL students could not reliably judge whether English "simple verb" collocations were correctly or incorrectly used, and that their production ability was even weaker than their judgment ability. This lack of collocational competence often leads learners to "create longer utterances/ paraphrases because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say" (Michael Lewis, 2000), thus producing what Morgan Lewis (2001) labels as "intermediate" sentences and making them "sound odd but perfectly correct". Further, Korosadowicz-Struzynska (1980) remarks that "errors in the use of word collocations surely add to the foreign flavour in the

learner's speech and writing and along with his faulty pronunciation they are the strongest markers of 'an accent.'"

Why do learners often have poor masteries of collocations? Some researchers (for example, Marton, 1977 and Biskup, 1992) believe that the difficulties and problems in EFL learners' collocation use are at least partly caused by the fact that collocations do not generally constitute comprehension problems, and therefore are largely neglected in the process of foreign language teaching and learning. A second, often-hypothesised and commonsensical reason is that collocations are very difficult to learn, particularly because they are so numerous, nonsensical (i.e., there is often no explanation why some words collocate and others do not) and nuanced that memorising them all is nearly impossible.

This second reasoning throws light on a significant reason that collocation learning is not taking place as it should: commonly (generally in the past in the Western tradition but ongoing in some areas, such as, notably for this study, much of China), vocabulary learning in EFL has been mainly focused on memorisation, especially memorising lists of single words and their definitions. Within this learning context, learning collocations would indeed be a daunting task, for several reasons. First, this method of word learning, in learning words singly, cuts them out – excises them – from their natural relationships with each other and their collocation environments. This greatly diminishes the possibility of noticing or learning collocations in learning a word. Second, after taking the memorisation approach to word learning, once students learn of the notion of collocations, they naturally attempt to memorise collocations, realise they are too numerous (and nonsensical and nuanced) to memorise, and then give up, declaring collocations to be "unlearnable". Our current study confirmed the presence of this belief, with several students commenting, "How can I memorise all these collocations? A third and fourth reason why the memorisation of single words hinders the learning of collocations is that it subtly reinforces an incorrect view of language; that words, once "learned" may just be substituted for their synonyms at will within grammatical "slots", and that learning the definitional meaning is sufficient for word mastery. These last two problems, which have been investigated at depth, are worth examining with special consideration.

Language simply is not one huge substitution table with vocabulary items being slot-fillers in grammatical structures (Hill, 2000). Sinclair (1991: 33), on this matter, proposed and analysed two principles for language use: (1) The open-choice principle presuming the possibility of "unconstrained combinations of words" under recognised syntactic structures, and (2) the idiom principle claiming that "co-occurrences of words are limited, and ..... the use of one word markedly changes the probability that other words will collocate." In Sinclair's view, the idiom principle takes precedence over the open-choice principle in language use, i.e., words do have restrictions on their co-occurrence. For example,

John is away on a business trip.
John is away on a business journey.

Although the two sentences above have identical syntactic structures and "trip" and "journey" have similar definitional meanings, using the word "journey" after business makes the second sentence unacceptable. Woolard (2000: 44) refers to this collocational characteristic of words as "word grammar"; it is the breaking of these rules of grammar that leads to expressions that are correct in syntactic structures but are not acceptable to the native listener or do not sound "English".

This illustrates a serious problem with using definitional meanings alone in attempting to master word knowledge. When learning a word, learning a word's definitional meaning may be necessary, but is insufficient, as dictionary definitions only offer some knowledge about a word. All too often over-generalisations do not cover all the important characteristics, especially not the subtler characteristics of words. Two words, even when they are synonymous in their definitional meanings, often may not be used interchangeably as their collocational fields (with whatever words they appear) are different. Morgan Lewis (2000: 13) makes use of the pair of words, "injury" and "wound", to illustrate this point. As with "trip" and "journey", the two words share similar dictionary definitions, but proper usage includes "stab wound" but not "stab injury"; "internal injury", but not "internal wound". These examples show that some characteristics of words can only be illustrated and conveyed through their combinations with other words, which dictionary definitions cannot fully illustrate. Knowing only the definitional meaning of a word answers the question

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"What is it?" but leaves out the vitally important answer to the question, "How is it used?" Hence, mastering the definitional meaning of words may help learners in their comprehension of language input, but does little in helping them build their active lexicon, i.e., words they can use in their production of the target language.

In addressing these problems arising from definition-driven learning and EFL learners' lack of collocational mastery, interest has recently been expressed in taking a new approach to vocabulary teaching and learning by giving importance to "the syntagmatic relations of collocation between lexical items" (Gitsaki, 1999). To address the hypothesis that collocations are not learned because they are not even noticed, Morgan Lewis (2001) proposes that language teachers should enhance learners' awareness of collocations by helping them to pay more attention to words and their combinations in reading. "This does not mean finding rare words but rather finding relatively common words which intermediate students already know (or half-know) and pointing out the words they occur with." This is an incentive to consider the role of awareness in learning collocations among EFL learners in this Centre.

The Role of Awareness

Language awareness has been discussed intensively in current literature in terms of "levels" of awareness. One important level of awareness is identified as "noticing." Noticing or paying attention to specific features of the target input is considered a necessary step in learning, and "those who notice most learn most" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Further, linking what learners pay attention to in reception with their target production may perform a "noticing" function that is metacognitive in nature, that is, the "noticing" of their own linguistic gaps. By pushing learners to produce what they have noticed, learners are constantly made aware of gaps: gaps occurring when they are unable to express what they intend to say, and gaps resulting when they realise the discrepancy between what they produce and what is regarded as acceptable in the target language. Noticing these gaps can lead learners to search for answers and solutions from various resources to "fill the gaps". Little (1997) pointed out another metacognitive aspect of awareness, i.e., "the development of a psychological relation to

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one's learning content and process." Once learners are more aware of a process through which something is learned, they are more likely to apply this process again in their other learning tasks (as we found negatively exemplified by learners who wanted to simply memorise all the English collocations). Therefore, a higher level of awareness may help learners to develop independence in learning in the long run.

THE STUDY

Rationale

Although more recognition has been given to the important role of developing foreign language learners' collocational competence recently, a review of literature reveals that much of the related work is concerned with theoretical discussions of collocational competence and collocation restrictions in the English language (Korosadowicz-Struzynska, 1980; Allerton, 1984; Howarth, 1998) or examinations of the need for collocation learning (Smadja, 1989; Laufer, 1990; Bahns, 1993; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Lennon, 1996) and foreign language learners' use of collocations (Zughoul, 1991; Farfhal & Obiedat, 1995). Little research has been done to examine how collocation learning can actually be promoted in the language classroom. There is a need, therefore, to explore pedagogically viable ways to facilitate EFL learners' collocation learning.

It is this need which this study attempts to address, in inventing and then testing a potentially viable classroom-based process, the Collocation Awareness-Raising (CAR) Process. The language awareness frame was chosen to help students learn collocations, as students did seem to have problems in not "noticing" collocated items, and it therefore seemed necessary to first raise this awareness before collocation learning and mastery could take place. A good way to promote the vital mastery of collocation would be to conduct an exercise that first raised learners' awareness of collocations and then guided them in their incorporation of noticed tokens in their output. This is what the CAR Process attempted to do.

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Subjects

A trial group of 46 postgraduate students in the National University of Singapore, all from China and taking a postgraduate English writing course, participated in a trial of the process. Collocation learning and use pose a serious challenge to these students who have come to NUS for their studies in engineering and science. Their vocabulary learning in the past was mainly focused on acquiring a sizable list of "new" words and the definitional meanings of words, and they neglected "the company these words keep" (Firth, 1968). This has led to the following problems in their language production.

Knowing individual words alone leads them to make "translation equivalents" of Chinese words into English. Errors result due to the collocational divergences between the two languages, for example,

> People's life level has increased. (*Rén mín shēng huó shuǐ píng ti gāo le.*)
> (People's [material] standard of living has improved.)

The lack of specific collocations leads them to rely heavily on simple and general expressions, such as using "good" on all positive things, and overusing common verbs such as "do," "have," "get," thus resulting in a simple and flat style of writing, for example,

- a good man, a good book, a good story, a good argument
- do an activity, do a task, do some achievements.

They write awkwardly long sentences because they do not know the collocations which express precisely and concisely what they want to say, for example,

> They did not make the judgment based on many points; they only looked at one point.
> (They made a partial/hasty judgment.)

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Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the validity of the invented CAR Process approach in a writing class, in which attempts are made to (1) enhance learners' collocation awareness, (2) promote their active search for collocations in all the pre-writing, in-writing and post-writing stages, and (3) encourage their incorporation of found collocation tokens in their own writing. This threefold process bridges students from *noticing* to *noting* to *incorporating* desired target forms.

The following research questions were asked about the CAR Process:
1. What does this batch of learners do during the process?
2. How does the process affect these learners' writing?
3. How do the learners perceive the process affecting their collocation learning and their writing?

Methodology

The CAR Process (as used)

Students in this study had already been introduced to the notion of collocation. The collocation awareness-raising process hence involved the following steps, of which *One* through *Five* were carried out entirely in class by the teacher-researcher:

Step One. The students were introduced to a variety of collocation resources: collocation dictionaries, on-line concordances and relevant readings. In this case, the students were introduced to the *BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986) and the online *Collins Cobuild Concordancer and Collocations Sampler* (http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/form.html), and given a set of articles that were related to the subject matter of their writing task.

Step Two. The students were assigned the writing task; in this case, a 350-word summary-analysis (critique) essay, on the theme of "Why Competition?" in response to an article of that name by A. Kohn in *The Humanist* (1980). As part of this task, the students were provided a step by step worksheet (reproduced in Appendix 1)

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to prompt, guide, and record their writing and active search for collocations throughout the pre-, in- and post-writing processes.

Step Three. The students brainstormed for main ideas to develop in their writing task.

Step Four. Students were shown how to notice collocations in the given related articles (which were on the same theme as their essay). As students had previously revealed a penchant for underlining unusual and "new" words when told to mark what they "noticed," they were guided to pay attention this time to relatively common words that they already knew and the words they occurred with, as the common words were most likely to be used in their future output and were more likely to fit into the general style of their own writing. They were then taught to record these collocations for the benefit of their writing, and instructed to record the collocations they "gathered" for this assignment on their worksheets.

Step Five. The students were taught and encouraged to do keyword searches in the online concordancer and the collocation dictionary for what they believed to be useful for their immediate writing task, and again to record what they found. After completing *Steps Four* and *Five*, which comprise the language preparation stage, students were able to confidently use all of the collocation resources.

Step Six. Students started writing in the provided worksheet. They did this in class until time ran out: their summary-analysis essays were completed outside of class.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Data was collected from two instruments. The first (Appendix 1) was the above-mentioned student process-writing worksheets where students recorded the collocations they found and wrote their summary analysis essays. In their essays, students were told to highlight the collocations they used (incorporated) from what they found (noticed and noted) from the collocation resources. The second data source (Appendix 2) was a questionnaire administered one month after the writing session. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out to investigate what learners

actually did in the process, how the process affected student writing, and how learners perceived the process as contributing to their collocation learning and writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The preliminary results of the study are reported below in terms of the three research questions.

Question 1: What does this batch of learners do during the process?

Use of Collocation Resources

Data from classroom observations, learners' worksheets, their actual writing production and their questionnaire responses reveal that the collocation awareness-raising process was useful in promoting students' active noticing/search, recording and use of relevant collocations during the whole pre-writing, in-writing and post-writing process. While students had initially no exposure to using collocation resources, all 46 students in the study (100%) stated they had searched under collocations from the resources provided for their writing task. Among the three types of resources – collocation dictionaries, online concordancers and theme-related articles – about 72% (33 students) reported having used on-line concordancers most frequently and found them most accessible. 76% (35 students) reported having noticed and recorded collocations from the theme-related articles provided by the teacher/researcher. Only 30% (14 students) reported they used a collocation dictionary.

Types of Collocations Recorded: Genre- and Theme-oriented

An interesting finding was that upon analysis, the collocations students noted and recorded in the appropriate worksheet space in this specific writing task were found to fall mainly into two broad categories: (1) The *genre-oriented collocations* which contain key words and phrases often found in particular types of academic writing (in our case, a summary analysis essay); and (2) the *theme oriented collocations* which are typically found in a particular theme (in this study, "competition"). Table 1 below illustrates these

different groups of collocations with selections of tokens students recorded. While those in the theme-oriented category reflect beliefs or concepts relative to the topic, those in the genre-oriented category are largely phrases that assert a stance on the argument through which the issue is or was presented. Using both these types of collocations allowed students to not only strengthen an argument using appropriate topic-related phrases, but to take positions as critics of the arguments of others, again using appropriate language to mark themselves as critics. This discourse ability is essential in academic writing, particularly at the postgraduate level, and imperative in summary-analysis pieces (critiques). That the students intuitively reached out to find these genre-oriented collocations without being instructed to do so indicates that they knew their gaps in producing these discourse markers, and could generally successfully manage to find the phrases and collocations they needed to participate in the genre.

Table 1. Examples of Genre-oriented and Theme-oriented Collocations Students Recorded

Genre-oriented Collocations	Theme-oriented Collocations
• reject a claim	• achieve your goal or fall short
• an unsupported claim	• beat one's previous record
• a groundless/weak argument	• keeps us on our toes
• present an argument	• thrive on competition
• arrive at / jump to a conclusion	• model a healthy attitude
• erroneous/invalid/wrong/ conclusion	• achieve a certain self-imposed goal
• a thorough/in-depth analysis	• struggle to improve our personal best
• upon further analysis	
• challenge/reject the assumption	• gain insights about one's capacity
• this assumption was not justified	
• the evidence is inconclusive	• develop physical and intellectual skills
• the statistical evidence	
• an overall statement	• identify personal goals call for maximum effort
	• to increase efforts toward

Collocations Noted Versus Collocations Incorporated

Looking at what students recorded on their worksheets, we found that they noticed and noted a great number of useful collocations in the resources. They recorded, as a result of their own searches and

reading, an average of 38 collocations each that they anticipated could be helpful in their 350-word essays. Yet the students did not use all the collocations they had gathered in the language preparation stage. With the exception of one student who did not continue the process through the writing stage and hence used no collocations, the remaining 45 students made actual use in their essays of an average of nearly ten (9.9) collocations each from what they had recorded.

Question 2: How does the process affect these learners' writing?

Collocations in Use

On the whole, the collocations that students found and used in their immediate writing task were used correctly both in terms of meaning and structure. In a random selection of 25 of the student essays containing a total of 207 "adopted" collocations, 185 (89.4%) were, by native speaker judgment, used completely correctly, while 22 (10.6%) were judged to have either grammatical errors or "oddities" in their use, as Table 2 illustrates.

As Table 3 (Appendix 3) illustrates, the vast majority of the incorrect collocations were incorrect simply due to grammatical errors, which were abundant in the student essays throughout and certainly not just present in the collocations. Only a very few of the incorrectly used collocations had actually been misunderstood and hence misapplied by the students. Thus, overall, collocations were indeed incorporated smoothly, indicating that on the whole, once students understand the process, they can indeed put it to good use.

Table 2. Collocations in Use

Essay	Total collocations	Number correct	# incorrect/ "strange"
A	21	17	4
B	11	9	2
C	15	15	-
D	10	10	-
E	10	9	1
F	10	9	1
G	9	8	1
H	8	7	1
I	8	6	2

J	6	6	-
K	5	4	1
L	6	6	-
M	5	4	1
N	2	2	-
O	0	-	-
P	19	19	-
Q	8	6	2
R	6	5	1
S	8	7	1
T	16	14	2
U	8	8	-
V	2	1	1
W	5	5	-
X	6	6	-
Y	3	2	1
total	207	185	22

Improved Student Writing

Upon studying the essays, the teacher-researchers felt that students made fewer structural and usage mistakes and indeed achieved a higher level of sophistication when they used the incorporated collocations, compared to writings done without going through the collocation awareness process.

For example, here are two paragraphs of the same student's writing: the first from a previous assignment on another topic, and the second resulting from the process (Essay A). Words in italics are those which students highlighted as representing collocational tokens they had found and incorporated in their writing.

Undergraduate and graduate students have different reading interests and reading habits. Graduate students are older than undergraduates. When students are young, they are carefree and playing could bring them satisfaction. So they may pay more attention to the information about fashion and entertainment to satisfy themselves. They also like playing around and do not spend much time on reading. But when students become old, they will more concern about what happens around them. Thus, they may spend much time in reading newspapers which is a medium to know about the reality. In addition, graduates also more urge to absorb

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knowledge from reading. Therefore, they will spend more time than undergraduates on reading.
(Student A before the CAR process)

...First, competition can offer ways *to gain insights about one's capacity, to develop one's physical and intellectual skills.* Secondly, competition can help individuals know how to *perform efficiently* with team members in teamwork, help individuals know clearly about their *personal goals* and *the criteria for success.* Third, competition may motivate some individuals *to increase efforts toward* completion of some tasks or even *call for maximum efforts;* competition can also *provide changes of pace* and *releases for energy* and is thought to be the most positive when all participants believe from the start they have equal chances of winning.
(Student A, after the process)

The teacher-researchers agree that the italicised added portions, resulting from the process, represent a level of language sophistication much higher than is present in the student's previous writing, and take the writing from being distinctively "Chinglish" to near-acceptable English.

The author of essay O, a student who generally scored very well on writing assignments due to a higher level of general mastery than the rest of the class, did not follow the process through, as she said she ran out of time and had to write off the top of her head as usual.

Firstly, the author claims that ". . . competition by its very nature is always unhealthy." assuming that once people have competition they could not have cooperation. He questioned the value and stableness of the cooperative relations built up in a team during competition and then claimed that people on different sides always treat each other as enemies. However, in my point of view, cooperation is actually originated from the need of competition; thus, no competition, no cooperation at all. For example, we always hear from the news that one company is cooperating with another one to do something. Why do they need to cooperate, obviously to be more efficient, to get human resource with lower price et al., and in the end to be more competent compared with other similar enterprise. Furthermore, in modern society, we don't really hate our opponents; on the

contrary, we will most likely respect each other. This can be witnessed in many sports, arts, and other competitions.
(Essay O)

The researchers believe essay O clearly illustrates a typical piece completed by a student with good ideas and a good grammatical mastery, but whose output still does not "sound English" due to a dearth of appropriate collocations. (It does, however, sound quite "Chinese"). By comparison, this excerpt from essay J, from a student with comparative structural and lexical mastery, but who followed the process through, seems to display a greater degree of language sophistication:

> ... Actually, competitions should be regarded as a *double-edged sword* and whether they are healthy or harmful really depends on the competitors' attitude. When competitors focus on the desire of winning, not the joy of the process, then they can not enjoy the fun of the process. And *the intense pressure, high degrees of anxiety,* and the fear of failure will do harm to their psychological health. However, competitions can also be positive. If competitors focus on the process, not just the result of competitions, they can enjoy the fun of the process, *build their skills, learn teamwork,* and *identify personal goals.* If we look further at the good things hide inside competitions, we find that competitions *stimulate greater creativity and productivity,*
> (Essay J)

The comparative improvement in terms of language sophistication that results from the CAR Process, as is demonstrated by essay A over the student's previous writing, and essay J over O, leads to the hypothesis that, among students of roughly the same level productive capacity (in terms of quality of ideas, lexicon size and grammatical mastery), those that pay attention to the use of collocation in crafting their output attain a far higher standard of expression than those who make no such effort.

The "Island" Effect

Interestingly, the improvements to student writing resulting from the CAR Process often did not always seem to result in improvement to the level of writing throughout, but rather in islands of language sophistication in otherwise intermediate, at best, texts. This effect was especially apparent in students whose writing was

so "Chinglishy" that the sophistication of the collocations was an enormous contrast. For instance,

> ... For example, in the World Cup we can often see such an exciting scene: the sportsmen of two sides shake hands, hold each other and exchange team uniforms at the end of game no matter *how intense the contest was* one minute ago. In fact many competitions especially in research field are aimed to *promote communication and cooperation.* That explains why the Soviet Union and America astronauts can meet in the space during the "ice war".
> (Essay X)

This essay selection, while quite intelligible, offers its clearly best language chunks in the italicised collocations, which resulted from the process. These few islands of sophistication make a big difference in such a text, and represent the beginnings of an enormous jump in mastery.

Question 3: How do the learners perceive the process affecting their collocation learning and their writing?

Students reported positive contributions of the CAR Process to their writing and collocation learning in various ways. First, students were happy to learn about the collocation resources, which they had not been aware of before, and stated that these were necessary tools for their writing since their greatest difficulty still lay in "not being able to express what I want to say." A full 97.8 % of students in the study (45 out of 46) commented on the process as an enlightenment to pay attention to what was largely a neglected dimension in their past vocabulary learning.

Students were also positive about using the collocation awareness element throughout the writing process. They stated that a heightened awareness of collocation promoted their active search for useful collocations and helped them in their "language preparation" for the writing task, brainstorming of ideas, and noticing and learning of new collocations in the process (24 comments). Students also commented that they became more aware of finding the right and specific words to express their ideas (39 comments). They were made more aware of the possible problems in their collocation use and engaged themselves in an active search for collocations to confirm and revise their language use (14).

When students were asked to rank the usefulness of their collocation search at each of the three stages of the writing process, they reported having searched for and found most of the relevant collocations in the pre-writing process, which was most helpful to them in the learning of collocations. However, they felt searching for collocations in the in-writing stage was more efficient for the immediate writing task as they "noticed gaps" (where they were unable to express what they wanted to say), searched for expressions to fill in the "gaps," and completed their task.

Further, student responses indicate the process influenced their learning and writing strategies at the metacognitive level in two ways: influencing the way they prepare to write, and influencing the way they read. They commented that the process helped them reflect on their past learning habits and pushed them to make necessary changes suitable to different learning tasks. They admitted that most of the time in past writing, they used to write off the top of their heads or at best, if they read anything in preparation for their writing, they were mainly reading to search for ideas. They realised through this collocation awareness raising process that paying attention to collocations in theme-relevant readings led them through an important language preparation stage.

In their past reading, students reported being more concerned about figuring out the meanings of words they did not know rather than paying attention to the expressions that they knew but were unable to use in their own writing. This confirms our observation before the process, that when students were told to underline what they paid attention to in a reading passage, they almost invariably underlined new words or chunks that constituted comprehension problems. However, they learned through the process that paying more attention to common words and their relevant collocations in theme-related readings is more useful for improving their language production. More than 70% of the students reported that they had become more aware of collocations in their out-of-class readings, and they had begun to pay more attention to "known words" and how they combined with other words. Some students reported that after the collocation awareness-raising process conducted in our course, they got into the habit of maintaining a daily record of useful collocations from their reading of newspapers and journal articles. Some even commented that finding and recording collocations such as "sweep ... under the carpet" and "... is a bitter

pill to swallow" (from news reports in the local newspapers) was an exciting and useful learning experience.

The heightened awareness of collocation also carried over to their other academic work. 97.8% (45 out of 46) of the students expressed their interest in continuing to actively search for collocations for their future writing tasks. Among these, 58% stated they had already (one month after they were introduced to the process) used a similar technique to the one taught them in the study for their other production tasks (oral presentations and writing assignments).

Problems and Difficulties Encountered

Students also voiced their difficulties and concerns regarding the process. Some mentioned that the entire process was quite time-consuming. A few failed to appreciate the awareness-raising and reference-creating purposes of the process and were more concerned about how to memorise the collocations they found. They also found that the theme-oriented collocations were too broad an area for them to search in the pre-writing stage. The remark was also made that while it was possible for students to search for collocations when they knew what keywords to use (in online and print collocation references), revising lengthy expressions in their own writing could be difficult, since they might not know what keywords to search under to find the correct, more concise collocations.

In terms of collocation use in students' production, as discussed above, they were able to use most of the collocations correctly, but they sometimes had difficulties in coping with the appropriateness of use in a larger context. For example, a few students were able to use "... is a double-edge sword" correctly in a sentence, but others were unaware that this is used when one discusses the positive as well as the negative side of a certain issue or activity. Some students only focused on the positive side, not realising it is inappropriate to use the term "double-edged sword" in this case.

Another difficulty apparent in student writings which is of great concern stems from encouraging students to model their writing after texts. We found a significant minority of students in

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the study (nine of the 25 sampled) who, following the noting and incorporating stages of this exercise, did not pay attention to the line between learning and "lifting" from texts. This "over-incorporation" from texts, at some point in their essays, resulted in what the teacher-researchers agreed could be judged as plagiarism. While all writers within good practice do learn phrases from input and apply them to their own writing, too often writers, particularly EFL writers, go too far and step into the realm of plagiarising texts. It seems that instructors wishing to apply this exercise or any other exercise that uses source texts must clarify with students very directly what represents appropriate and inappropriate incorporation from texts.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

A Need to Teach Collocation Awareness

Generally speaking, the results of the study show us that the CAR Process is a valid approach that plays a positive role in the students' learning and writing processes, and improves the quality of their output appreciably. Although this study was conducted on a small group of 46 PRC postgraduate students at NUS, the results of the study have implications for other EFL learning situations as well, as research suggests that collocation is both vital for fluent language use and generally not mastered by learners.

Overtly teaching collocation awareness and use seems imperative, as research suggests it cannot be taken for granted that foreign language learners, after years of English learning, will naturally develop an awareness of collocations. As Biskup (1992: 87) pointed out, collocations usually "pose no specific perception problem" to a learner, and therefore are very often unnoticed; consequently, they may not be available for learners' later recall. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to instructional intervention to raise learners' awareness of collocations. "Noticing" and "becoming aware of" collocations might be the first steps leading to internalising and learning them.

Raising learners' awareness of collocations by leading them through the whole pre-writing, in-writing and post-writing process helps them "learn to write" and "write to learn". They "learn to write" better when they understand that writing is a recursive

process and they can make use of the collocation resources to prepare for writing, achieve better writing sophistication and to edit and revise their mistakes in collocation use. More importantly, they "write to learn" when the writing process drives them to actively search for suitable collocations. For example, in the pre-writing stage, very often learners are engaged in brainstorming, searching for information, and outlining (planning content). But for EFL learners, "language preparation" should be given due weight in this stage of the process. In the case of the PRC students in this study, they usually could quickly learn and produce good organisational structures for essays, and had no lack of content in terms of ideas. Their greatest problem remained the insufficiency of proper expressions to convey their ideas. The use of the CAR Process encouraged learners to explore in language, looking for useful phrases for the particular genre and theme of the writing at hand. The collocations students noticed and recorded offered them more language learning input as well as adequate resources to aid in expressing their ideas. As famously summed up in Swain and Lapkin's (1995) output hypothesis, learners improve their language production when pushed to use what is not in their current repertoire.

Practical Advice on the CAR Process

It seems that this collocation awareness-raising process does work well as designed. The basic steps of this method are:

- Make sure students understand what collocations are. Give illustrations from the target and possibly first languages.
- Begin collocation awareness-raising relevant to some in-class task; introduce source materials for target collocations including articles, collocation dictionaries, and online concordancers, if available, and show the students how to find collocations in them.
- Teach the students the steps of *noticing – noting – incorporating*. Include instruction on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable degrees of incorporation.
- Examine and give feedback on student work including the incorporated collocations.

It seems that these steps can be incorporated into many different EFL learning situations; whether the class is working on

production or reception, the noticing and noting of collocations can be beneficially introduced and incorporation can be introduced for output, including spoken and written forms.

In view of the difficulties learners reported in the process in terms of time constraint, a practical suggestion might be to establish collective pools of collocations. These, whether ongoing or of limited duration, would allow students to put together what they have collected for a particular writing task so that they may have a larger but relevant resource of their own to use for a specific genre and a particular theme. Such a shared repository could be easily created and used in environments that use Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) elements: multiuser accessible common storage spaces such as weblogs or specific environments such as Bereiter and Scardamalia's (n.d.) CSILE programmes are obvious fits to this purpose; however, simple written lists could also work.

In terms of independent language learning, we believe that once students are taken through the process, they can appropriate the process or something similar themselves beyond the classroom, in their own reading and in their preparation for other language production tasks. Indeed, the majority of the students in this study reported a heightened awareness of collocations in their out-of-class reading and indicated their interest in continuing to make use of the available resources on collocation for their other language tasks. Simply going through the guided process once in class helps bridge reading and writing and helps the students to gain the power to handle independently other writing tasks with a heightened awareness of collocations. In addition to minimising class time spent, this would encourage students to become more in charge of their own learning, as "opportunities for learning increase when learners are in charge of creating them" (Van Lier, 1998). Once they become aware of collocations and are equipped with basic techniques to "learn" and use them, the way is paved for EFL learners to develop their own collocation masteries.

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Appendix 1. Worksheet Used in the Process

Writing Task: You are required to write a summary analysis of 350 words on "Why competition?" Please follow the steps below in writing:

[Step One & Step Two are omitted in this appendix as they do not involve collocation learning elements]

Step Three: Language Preparation (1): Read the articles on competition. In the space below, type out the collocational expressions you feel that might be useful for your writing
You may also read other articles on the internet, please paste the link(s) below and note down the collocational expressions.

Step Four: Language Preparation (2): Select 10-20 key words that you feel might be useful for your summary writing, do a search in dictionaries or on-line concordancers to note down those collocations that you might find useful for your summary writing. (If you have difficulties coping with this, please let me know). Type the collocations you have found in the space below. The two collocation links are:

> http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/form.html
> http://thetis.bl.uk/lookup.html

Start writing your essay in the table below. **Refer to the collocation dictionary, the on-line concordancers and your recorded collocations above.**

Write your title here:

	Introduction Source information Brief summary of the text (Use of summary markers) Your thesis statement
	Body Paragraph 1 Author's point (main point 1 to be analysed) Quote (optional) Your topic sentence Your support (facts, statistics, examples…)
	Body Paragraph 2 Author's point (main point 2 to be analysed) Quote (optional) Your topic sentence Your support (facts, statistics, examples…)
	Body Paragraph 3 Author's point (main point 3 to be analysed) Quote (optional) Your topic sentence Your support **(facts, statistics, examples…)**
	Conclusion Point(s) you have proved Implications Recommendations

Now, take another look at the work you have done. Underline expressions you are not sure of. Do a collocation search to confirm whether you have used the right expressions.

Appendix 2. Questionnaire Administered a Month after the Process

Questionnaire

Your feedback here will be cited for my research on the role of collocation in writing. Please tick one of the choices below to indicate whether you allow your feedback to be cited *anonymously* (**without mentioning your name**) for academic research purposes only.

Please put a stroke (/) in the box in front of each choice and write down your comments when required. You can choose more than one option when necessary.

1. **Did you do any collocation search during the process of writing your summary analysis?**
   ☐Yes   ☐No

2. **If yes, from what sources did you search your word collocations?**
   ☐ Dictionaries   ☐ On-line concordancer
   ☐ Texts and passages with relevant themes
   Others, please specify:

3. **If your choice is no, what is the main reason for you not to do so?**
   ☐ I have no time   ☐ I don't think it's useful
   ☐ I don't know how to   ☐ Others, please specify:

4. **During which stage of writing did you search for collocations? You can tick one or two or all the three if you search for collocation throughout the writing process.**
   ☐ When I was preparing for writing
   ☐ When I was in the process of writing
   ☐ When I was reviewing my writing
   ☐ Others (please specify)

5. **Do you think collocation search is helpful to you?**
   ☐ Yes (a brief explanation is appreciated)
   ☐ No (a brief explanation is appreciated)

6. **If yes, in what ways do you think collocation search helps you in your writing? Write your comments in the space below:**

7. **Please rank the order of frequency of your collocation search in your writing process. 4 means you search most frequently at this stage, 1—least frequently.**

Writing Process	Ranking
When I was preparing for writing	
When I was in the process of writing	
When I was reviewing my writing	
Others (please specify)	

Comments, if any:

8. **What difficulties did you encounter when you were doing collocation search?**
   ☐ I do not know where to find the relevant collocation.
   ☐ I don't know how to search the internet for relevant collocation
   ☐ I don't know how to categorize what I have found
   ☐ No difficulty.
   ☐ Others, please specify:

9. **Are you interested in using collocation search technique to do your writing for your other courses and your thesis?**
   ☐ Yes (indicate if you have already used this technique in your other writing tasks)
   ☐ No (a brief explanation is appreciated):

Thank you for the time.
Your candid feedback is very much appreciated.

Your name (optional):