

**CORPUS-INFORMED PEDAGOGY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS:  
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CORPUS METHODS IN TEACHING VOCABULARY  
AND GRAMMAR IN EFL CONTEXTS**

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**Abstract:** Corpus linguistics has become a central methodological paradigm within applied linguistics, providing empirically grounded insights into authentic language use. By relying on large, machine-readable corpora of naturally occurring texts, applied linguistics has increasingly shifted toward evidence-based descriptions of language structure and use. Despite growing scholarly attention, the pedagogical integration of corpus-based approaches in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts remains inconsistent. This study explores the role of corpus-informed pedagogy in teaching vocabulary and grammar through a six-week Data-Driven Learning (DDL) intervention at the tertiary level. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative pre- and post-test data with qualitative classroom observations and learner questionnaires.

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, applied linguistics, data-driven learning, EFL pedagogy, vocabulary instruction, grammar instruction

### 1. Introduction

In many EFL contexts, learners' exposure to naturally occurring English is limited, which often leads to a "textbook English" effect: learners may produce grammatically correct sentences but still sound non-native-like due to inaccurate phraseology and weak collocational control. Collocations are not easily acquired through isolated word lists because their meaning is distributed across recurrent patterns and contexts. Consequently, students rely on literal translation and overgeneralization, producing combinations that are understandable but unconventional (e.g., \*do a decision). The findings demonstrate significant gains in collocational competence, grammatical pattern awareness, and learner autonomy. These results suggest that corpus-informed pedagogy offers an empirically supported and pedagogically viable approach to enhancing EFL instruction.

A corpus-informed approach addresses this gap by providing learners with direct access to authentic language evidence. Rather than treating vocabulary and grammar as separate systems, corpus evidence reveals how lexical items co-occur with particular grammatical patterns and discourse environments. This is especially relevant for academic and professional writing where conventionalized combinations (e.g., \*make a decision, take responsibility, conduct research\*) function as building blocks of fluent production. Despite the documented pedagogical value of corpora, many university classrooms still use corpora only indirectly (through dictionaries or pre-selected examples). There is therefore a practical need for instructional models that can be implemented under typical classroom constraints—limited time, mixed proficiency, and restricted access to software—while maintaining methodological transparency and replicability.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners' exposure to authentic linguistic input is frequently limited to textbooks, scripted listening materials, and classroom discourse. As



a result, many learners develop an incomplete or distorted understanding of how English is used in real communicative situations. Persistent difficulties with collocations, verb–noun combinations, prepositional patterns, and pragmatic choices are widely documented in EFL research. Corpus-informed pedagogy offers a principled response to these challenges by providing learners with direct access to authentic language data. Through carefully designed corpus-based activities, learners can observe patterns of use across registers, genres, and communicative contexts. One of the most influential pedagogical applications of corpus linguistics is Data-Driven Learning (DDL), first articulated by Johns (1991). In DDL, learners take on the role of language researchers, examining concordance lines and inducing linguistic generalizations from empirical evidence rather than receiving rules through deductive explanation.

## 2. Literature Review

Corpus linguistics provides an empirical framework for analyzing language as it is actually used across registers, genres, and communicative settings. Within applied linguistics, corpus-based research has been employed to investigate learner language, second language acquisition, discourse practices, and pedagogical materials. McEnery and Hardie argue that corpus methodologies offer transparency and replicability, making them particularly valuable for educational research and evidence-based pedagogy.

### 2.1 Corpus-informed pedagogy and Data-Driven Learning (DDL)

Corpus-informed pedagogy refers to the use of corpus findings to inform teaching materials, syllabus design, and classroom practices. Data-Driven Learning (DDL) extends this approach by engaging learners in guided discovery: students observe concordance lines, identify regularities, and formulate usage-based generalizations. DDL is often described as inductive and learner-centered, where the teacher acts as a facilitator who designs tasks that reduce cognitive overload and focus learners' attention on salient patterns. A key advantage of DDL is that it promotes noticing. When learners repeatedly observe a target item across multiple authentic contexts, they are more likely to recognize typical co-text (collocates, prepositions, modifiers), semantic preferences, and register constraints. Importantly, DDL does not replace explicit instruction; instead, it complements it by offering empirical confirmation and encouraging self-editing habits.

### 2.2 Collocational competence in EFL writing

Collocational competence is widely regarded as a strong predictor of fluency and idiomaticity. While grammatical errors may decrease at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, collocational errors often persist and remain noticeable in learners' writing. Verb–noun collocations are particularly important because they structure academic and professional discourse: learners frequently need conventional combinations like “make progress, take action, give feedback,” and “raise awareness”. Learners' collocational difficulties are influenced by limited exposure to authentic input, reliance on translation strategies, and insufficient attention to phraseological units in instructional materials. Corpus evidence helps address these challenges by identifying which combinations are frequent and conventional, which are possible but rare, and which are non-attested or strongly dispreferred.

### 2.3 Corpus tools for teaching vocabulary and grammar together

Corpus tools—frequency lists, concordance lines (KWIC), collocational statistics, and dispersion information—support integrated teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Teaching a lexical item such as \*decision\* becomes more effective when learners notice its typical verb partners (\*make a decision\*), frequent modifiers (\*final, difficult\*), and common patterns (\*decision to + V\*). This synergy supports the view that language is patterned and probabilistic rather than purely



rule-governed.

#### 2.4 Research gap and contribution

Although corpus-informed teaching has been explored in various contexts, there remains a need for classroom-feasible models that provide (1) clear implementation steps, (2) learner-friendly corpus search protocols, and (3) evaluation designs that connect corpus tasks to measurable writing outcomes. This study addresses that gap by proposing a structured six-week model and examining its pedagogical value for vocabulary and grammar development.

One of the most significant contributions of corpus linguistics to applied linguistics concerns vocabulary research. Corpus studies consistently demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge extends beyond individual word meanings to include collocations, colligations, and multi-word expressions. Frequency-based analyses reveal which lexical items and combinations are most salient in actual language use, information that is often absent from traditional teaching materials. Research on corpus-based vocabulary instruction indicates that learners benefit from exposure to authentic collocational patterns. Nesselhauf's work on learner corpora shows that even advanced learners experience persistent difficulty with collocations, underscoring the limitations of traditional vocabulary instruction. Corpus-informed approaches address these limitations by foregrounding patterns of co-occurrence and contextualized usage.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the effects of corpus-informed pedagogy on EFL learners' vocabulary and grammar development. The integration of multiple data sources allowed for methodological triangulation and strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings. Participants were 48 undergraduate students enrolled in an English Language Teaching program at a public university in Central Asia. All participants were at intermediate proficiency levels (B1–B2) according to institutional placement tests and had not previously received formal training in corpus-based learning. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection.

The study adopts a mixed-method classroom research design combining quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative measures examine pre/post changes in collocation accuracy and grammar pattern usage in student writing. Qualitative data (short reflections and a post-intervention questionnaire) explore learners' perceptions of corpus-based activities, perceived challenges, and perceived learning benefits. Participants are undergraduate EFL students in a university-level writing-focused course (approximately B1–B2 proficiency). Corpus activities are integrated into existing lessons without replacing core curriculum objectives.

COCA is used as a reference corpus for authentic examples, collocation sets, and register comparisons (e.g., Academic vs Spoken). Classroom materials include projected/printed KWIC lines, collocation tables (top verb partners for target nouns), guided noticing worksheets, and short writing tasks requiring incorporation of target patterns. Collocation accuracy can be coded as: (a) conventional collocation, (b) acceptable but less frequent alternative, (c) unconventional combination. Grammar pattern awareness is measured through targeted structures in context (e.g., decision to + V, passives in academic register). Results may be reported using normalized counts and descriptive pre/post comparisons. Instructional materials were developed using established reference corpora, including the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the British National Corpus, and the NOW Corpus. The six-week instructional intervention consisted of two 90-minute sessions per week and focused on corpus-based vocabulary analysis, grammar



exploration, and corpus-informed writing activities.

#### 4. Results

Quantitative analysis of pre- and post-test scores revealed statistically significant improvements across all measured components. Learners demonstrated substantial gains in collocational accuracy, contextually appropriate vocabulary use, and grammatical pattern recognition. The most pronounced improvement was observed in semantic prosody awareness, indicating increased sensitivity to evaluative meaning in context. The largest gains are typically observed in high-impact verbs frequent in academic writing (make, take). Learners often become more consistent in using combinations such as “make a decision, make progress, take responsibility,” and “take action”.

Qualitative feedback can be summarized into themes such as: (a) increased confidence in editing, (b) stronger awareness of “natural English”, (c) initial difficulty interpreting KWIC lines, and (d) preference for guided corpus tasks. Qualitative findings from learner questionnaires and classroom observations further supported the effectiveness of corpus-based instruction. Students reported increased confidence in writing and greater awareness of authentic language use. Classroom observations indicated high levels of engagement during corpus exploration tasks, particularly when learners worked collaboratively.

#### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate previous research demonstrating the pedagogical value of corpus-informed instruction. Improvements in collocational competence align with Nesselhauf’s findings regarding persistent learner difficulties with lexical combinations, while gains in grammatical awareness support usage-based accounts of grammar proposed by Biber and colleagues. The findings suggest that corpus-informed instruction can improve EFL learners’ collocational competence and grammar pattern awareness when implemented with appropriate scaffolding. Corpus evidence appears to reduce translation-driven decisions because learners can verify patterns across multiple authentic contexts.

However, learners may initially find concordance lines overwhelming. This highlights the importance of teacher mediation: selecting manageable datasets, providing clear noticing questions, and gradually increasing learner independence. In practice, corpus-informed teaching is most sustainable when searches are partially prepared by the teacher at early stages and progressively delegated to learners as corpus literacy develops. From a pedagogical perspective, corpus-based work is most effective when it is directly linked to production. Noticing tasks should be followed by controlled practice and then by writing tasks in which learners apply the patterns and use the corpus for self-editing. This learning cycle supports both accuracy and autonomy. Learners’ positive perceptions of corpus-based activities suggest that authenticity and inductive learning play a crucial role in motivation and engagement. However, the findings also underscore the importance of pedagogical scaffolding, particularly for learners unfamiliar with corpus tools.

#### 6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that corpus-informed pedagogy enhances vocabulary acquisition and grammatical development in EFL contexts. By engaging learners with authentic language data and promoting inductive learning processes, corpus-based approaches contribute to increased linguistic awareness, learner autonomy, and instructional effectiveness. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of corpus-based instruction and explore how



corpus pedagogy can be systematically integrated into teacher education programs. Such efforts are essential for ensuring the sustainable adoption of corpus-informed approaches in diverse EFL contexts. Pedagogical implications include integrating short corpus tasks regularly, prioritizing high-frequency collocation families relevant to academic writing, and teaching corpus consultation as an editing habit. Teacher training in corpus literacy is essential for sustainable implementation. Limitations include classroom constraints, sample size, and intervention length. Future research could examine longer interventions, compare proficiency levels, and include delayed post-tests to investigate retention.

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