



The Challenge of English Language Collocation Learning in an ES/FL Environment: PRC Students in Singapore

Yang Ying[†]

*University of Western Australia
National University of Singapore*

This study aimed to seek an in-depth understanding about English collocation learning and the development of learner autonomy through investigating a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' perspectives and practices in their learning of English collocations using an AWARE approach. A group of 20 PRC students learning English in Singapore were engaged in a qualitative collective case study. Findings from the study revealed major patterns of difference between the collocation learning perspectives and practices of students who made significant learning attainment in English language proficiency and those who made marginal attainment. Interpretation of the data, through an inductive development of theory, led to a description and explanation of the learners' processes of learning English language collocations in four main areas. A collocation learning trajectory was discovered. A group of more successful learners were found to travel along this path at a faster rate than the less successful learners. Based on the findings from the study, and discussion of pedagogical implications, a differentiated teaching model is proposed for pedagogical attention and practices in three main areas. Recommendations for future research and pedagogical development are made.

[†]Address for correspondence: Yang Ying, Senior Lecturer, National University of Singapore, Centre for English Language Communication, 10 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117511. Email: elcyangy@nus.edu.sg.

Background

English in Singapore, based on Kachru's (1985) categorisation of World Englishes, is considered a Second Language, meaning that besides formal instruction of the language in the educational settings, the language also is used in everyday social functions. Singapore is well known for its quick adoption of the recent developments in ELT methodologies. The latest developments in ELT, such as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, task based learning and problem-based learning, have taken root in the Singapore language classrooms. The value of learner autonomy and learner centeredness has been long recognised and supported. Communicative activities requiring students' active participation in learning tasks are the norm in language classrooms. Ample exposure to the target language is also an advantage in Singapore where English is an important medium for all social functions.

The English speaking context, a well-developed ELT education system and the overall high English proficiency within the general population have made Singapore attractive to international students, especially those from the Asian regions, as a place to learn English. The majority of such students come from China, either for further education or to learn English well enough to pursue further education in Western countries. These students come from a context where English is learned as a foreign language. Although there has been a growing acceptance of CLT and other innovations in English language teaching, it seems that ELT methodologies that take into account the Chinese traditional beliefs of learning gain more support from Chinese learners of English than those that attempt a drastic pedagogical shift away from the beliefs deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. CLT has a number of features that are not in conflict with the Chinese culture of learning. According to Hu (2002:102-103), "collaborative learning, cultivation of sociolinguistic competence, use of authentic teaching materials, and learning strategy training" are consonant with the Chinese emphasis on "collective orientations, socially appropriate behaviours, and concern for the right way of

doing things.” Hu recommended that some of these features could be integrated into the Chinese ELT pedagogical practices and that “policy makers and teachers should take a cautiously eclectic approach” based on both current ELT developments and an understanding of the unique sociocultural influences in the Chinese context.

ELT decision makers and syllabus designers generally have adopted a technological perspective on language teaching and learning, which over-focuses on methodology and assumes that a well-developed methodology “will lead in a neat, deterministic manner to a predictable set of learning outcomes” (Tudor, 2003:3). This perspective ignores a full range of macro and micro contextual factors that can impinge on language education. In particular, it ignores the role of the learner and their cognitive processes in learning. There is a clear need to move from a content-method focus to a multifaceted focus with the learner and their learning being given the central attention and focus in the learning process.

The AWARE approach examined in this study is an eclectic and multifaceted approach that integrates both practices grounded in some Chinese traditional beliefs of learning and some recent ELT developments and recommendations such as language awareness and learner autonomy. This process-oriented learning approach is based on the key idea that learning will be more effective if learners are made aware of language and language learning at three levels: noticing the particular language features that they need to learn; developing an awareness of learning strategies; and developing a metacognitive awareness by reflecting on their learning process and content. The approach recommends key learning steps such as becoming aware of language features needed for the learner, gaining an understanding of the significance of learning what they learn, adopting effective strategies for learning, consciously reflecting on language and the language learning process, and exhibiting what learners have learned.

The approach, with its multifaceted foci, gives an important place to the role of the learner in the learning process as it emphasizes learners' cognitive and metacognitive awareness of language and language learning. It assumes that heightened language awareness leads to better developed learner autonomy. However, there are concerns that learner autonomy may not be achievable in the Asian context, including China, where traditional teaching and learning are largely teacher dominated and students accustomed to teacher controlled and monitored learning. So far, research studies in learner autonomy for Asian students have produced controversial findings. It is therefore necessary and interesting to examine the use of this approach in English language learning, especially in the Asian context.

This study examined the adoption of the AWARE approach by a group of Chinese students learning English in Singapore, with a focus on their learning of English collocations or word combination¹. This language content area was chosen as the focus for the following reasons:

1. Chinese learners in general lack collocation competence. It is an area of need for this group of learners.
2. Collocation learning is a notoriously difficult area for Chinese learners of English as a foreign language.
3. Linguists (Marton, 1977; Biskup, 1992) believe the lack of collocation competence is partly due to the fact that collocation is not noticed in reading or other language input as it does not constitute

¹ 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. Here, collocation and collocational competence follow this more inclusive definition (definition of collocation is taken from Yang & Hendricks, 2004).

comprehension difficulties. Awareness of this area is therefore needed.

4. Developing collocation competence is considered an important step to help intermediate learners take off again from the intermediate learning plateau and to reach the advanced level (Lewis, 2001). It is therefore an important area of English language learning.
5. Research on collocation learning is limited and more research attention is needed to examine how learners cope with this difficult area of language learning.

The purpose of this study was to understand how a group of these PRC learners made use of the AWARE approach in their English language learning, in particular, their collocation learning. The over-arching research question was: What are the perspectives and practices of PRC English language learners in Singapore in using the AWARE approach for learning English language collocations?

Research Methods

The study engaged a group of 20 PRC learners of English attending a five month special English program in a Singapore university. An analysis of their weaknesses revealed that, as a group, they lacked the much needed collocation competence. A special English program was designed to help them by focusing on collocation learning through using the AWARE approach. This qualitative case study sought to understand the participants' perspectives² and practices in the adoption of this approach in their learning of English collocations. Data were gathered from multiple sources for a maximum understanding of students' learning processes, beliefs, behaviour and learning performance. The multiple data sources and methods of data collection were in three broad categories.

² Students' views, perceptions and evaluation of the role, method and strategies of collocation learning.

Interviews

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted, the first at an early stage of the program and the second at the end. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding.

Student-produced documents

These included three learning journals written by the students at the beginning, middle and end of the program, writing assignments and audio-taped oral reports³. The learning journals revealed students' perspectives about collocation learning and possible changes of such perspectives. The writing assignments and audio-taped oral reports showed students' use of collocations learned.

Students' test results and teacher evaluation

The students' scores and bands on pre-test, post-test and the university entrance exam, together with evaluation of written assignments, were used as indicators of students' proficiency level at different stages of the course.

The predominantly qualitative approach aimed to understand the particular group of learners and their collocation learning perspectives and practices through "observable, verifiable facts" (Piantanida & Garman 1999:131-132) and on the basis of the observable features, to reach some possible "empirical generalisations" (Punch 2005:17). Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework of a three step "data reduction", "data display" and "drawing and verifying conclusions" was adopted through three

³ The oral report is a collocation learning task that required the students to read on a particular theme, collect collocations from the readings and making use of the collected collocations to make an oral presentation on the same theme. A step by step guide was provided to assist the students in managing this task.

main operations of “coding, memoing and making propositions” in the data collection and data analysis process of the study.

Results and Discussions

Findings emerging from the study revealed patterns of major difference between the collocation learning perspectives and practices of students who made significant attainment (designated strong learners, n=13 out of 20 students in the group) and those who made marginal attainment over the course of five months (designated weak learners, n=7 out of 20 students). Attainment was measured through teachers’ evaluation of written assignments at different stages of the course and comparison of pre-course test scores against post-course and university entrance exam marks. Four core categories of significant difference were identified: motivation; knowledge about collocation and collocation learning; learners’ metacognitive awareness of collocation learning; and adoption of learning strategies. The characteristic features of each category and differences between the groups are discussed below.

Motivation and Task Motivation

Differences between the two groups in their motivation towards learning and their task motivation towards the oral report activity are summarised in Table 1. Given that the students faced the same demands to improve their English in the English speaking context of Singapore, and similar requirements from the course for them to learn collocations, they shared generally similar instrumental motivation towards learning. Most students in the two groups showed sufficient motivation for wanting to learn English well and shared a common belief in the importance of collocation learning. The most obvious difference between the two groups was that the strong learners, regardless of their commencement levels, saw an unquestionable and essential personal need to learn collocations for the sake of improving their communication and their English language proficiency. In contrast, the students in the other group felt insecure about their language skills and questioned their own readiness to start collocation learning at their

proficiency level. They viewed collocations as a higher level of learning that they could commence only when they had acquired an adequate vocabulary. This difference indicates the second group's lack of intrinsic motivation for collocation learning, their inadequate understanding of the role of collocations in the target language and their lack of confidence in managing their learning of them.

Table 1: Core category 1 - motivation: Different responses of the two groups

General Motivation & Task Motivation	
Features of strong learners	Features of weak learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Saw great importance in collocation learning and a personal need to learn it * Keen to start collocation learning, keen to adopt AWARE approach * Set plans and targets for learning * Had higher task motivation towards the oral report task, finding it useful for collocation learning * Followed the step by step guide in the preparation of the oral report. Made sufficient preparation * Tried to use as many learned collocations as possible * Positive about their own "coping potentials". Had a reasonable level of efficacy about their ability in collocation learning and task management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Acknowledged the importance of collocation learning, but doubtful about personal needs/readiness for collocation learning * Lukewarm or uncertain about adopting new approach, take long to start * Were unsure about what to do and how to proceed * Had low task motivation towards the oral report task, not finding it useful * Failed to make good preparation for the oral report. Unable to use the step by step guide early * Used very few learned collocations in oral report * Negative about their coping potential. Lack of feeling of self-efficacy in dealing with collocation learning and tasks independently

Students in the first group were highly positive about the effectiveness of the oral report as a method of collocation learning. They made elaborate preparations by reading for information and for collocation collection and by writing a script that incorporated as many collocations as possible before the oral report. Task motivation seemed to increase when students felt that effective learning was taking place in the process of coping with the task. Even when some felt initial uncertainty about how to manage this task on their own, they followed the teacher-provided step by step guide to oral reports and found it of enormous help to their management of the task. They were committed to ensuring the quality of their oral reports, and were displeased that some classmates produced poor quality reports that wasted listeners' time. Strong learners viewed this task as a learning opportunity for themselves and for their listeners. It was quite obvious that task motivation with this group was consistent with their general motivation towards collocation learning. By contrast, the students in the weak group were generally sceptical about the role of oral reports in collocation learning. Most did not follow the step by step guide to prepare for their oral report, or started very late in using the guide. Instead of preparing well to ensure a better quality report like some of those in the strong group who also started with weaker proficiency levels, a number of students in the second group explicitly expressed dislike of the learning task, resenting the fact that they had to show their "poor English" in front of class. There seemed to be little task motivation when they clearly lacked the confidence of managing this task on their own, especially at the initial stage of the course. The lack of self-confidence, an important component of motivation according to Dörnyei's (1994) conceptualisation, apparently set the second group of learners into a vicious circle of doing badly, to the detriment to their learning success.

Knowledge of the AWARE Approach and Collocation

Table 2 shows that the two groups of students also varied in their knowledge about the AWARE approach and collocation learning. Students in the strong group exhibited a consistent match between their perspectives and practices in collocation learning. They assigned great importance to collocation learning, acknowledged the usefulness of the AWARE approach and took no time in starting to practice actively what they believed in and followed each of the steps recommended in the AWARE approach. They developed a clear understanding of the concept of collocations early in the course and started to notice and collect collocations in various forms of language input from the very beginning. The weak group, though generally believing collocation learning was important, had either limited understanding of the AWARE approach and how it could be used in their learning, or considered it difficult to follow the steps in the AWARE approach. For example, some felt inadequate to reflect on their learning and were unable or reluctant to make use of the strategies taught. Even those who did took a longer to get started. At the initial stage of the program, some students in the second group were confused about what exactly collocation was and encountered difficulties even in recognising collocations in reading texts. This may partly account for their prolonged focus on single words.

This changed for most of the students in the weak group after teachers went through a few readings with them individually, helping them to recognise useful chunks as collocations. By the end of the course, all students had developed awareness of collocations, especially in readings. This illustrates the necessity for pedagogical efforts to foster early understanding of the AWARE approach and the concept of collocation to help students recognise collocations, so as to sow the seeds for active endeavours towards collocation learning.

Table 2: Core category 2 - knowledge: Differences between the two groups

Knowledge of AWARE Approach & Collocation	
Features of strong learners	Features of weak learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Had a clear understanding of the AWARE approach and collocations * Able to start collocation learning soon * Able to identify collocations on their own quite early in the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Lacked a clear understanding of the AWARE approach * Not sure what collocation is * Took long to start collocation learning * Unable to recognise meaningful collocations at the beginning

Adoption of Lexical Strategies

The marked differences between the two groups of students in their adoption of learning strategies are summarised in Table 3. They indicate that while students from the strong group were keen to try out newly taught strategies and to identify suitable strategies for their own use, the weaker learners either felt more comfortable sticking to their former way of learning, or dismissed unfamiliar strategies as “troublesome” and “not useful” even before trying them. The group of strong learners not only used the taught strategies, but also created individual strategies to suit their learning styles. In other words, they developed both cognitive strategies and self-management strategies when they were able to make choices from available resources and alternatives, or even created their own (Dickinson, 1995; Holec, 1985; Little, 1991). Some of the perceived effective strategies included visualisation, categorisation, translation, use of a key word approach and, in particular, use of collocations in various types of productive tasks. According to Laufer and Hulstijn (2001:15), the use of productive tasks such as translation and writing involves a strong cognitive element of evaluation as learners need to make selective decisions about syntagmatic relations of words – how words combine with each other in a particular context.

Table 3: Core category 3: Differences between the two groups - adoption of lexical strategies

Adoption of Lexical Strategies	
Features of strong learners	Features of weak learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Willing to try out new strategies * Created their own strategies * Heightened awareness of collocations in various forms of language input * Started their own collocation inventories * Awareness of collocations went beyond noticing and collection to selection of useful collocations and use of learning strategies to master them * Incorporated learned collocations in productive tasks * Created productive tasks such as sentence making, story making and retelling to use the collocations learned. * Gave focus to “using to learn” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Considered adoption of new strategies “troublesome” and “time-consuming” * Kept to comfortable old ways of learning, or did not use any particular strategies. * Maintained a prolonged focus on single words and gave priority to memorising isolated new words * Developed some awareness of collocations, mainly in print sources * Awareness of collocations, when developed at a later stage, was mainly in the form of noticing and collection * Hoped what was learned could fit into productive tasks instead of seeking opportunities to use them * Showed some attempts at trying out strategies towards the later part of the course

This may offer an explanation for more robust improvements with the group of strong learners as they tended to incorporate learned collocations consistently in productive tasks – a more in-depth cognitive processing of the items learned. The weaker students generally were at a loss about what to do and how to learn. They maintained a prolonged focus on vocabulary and believed their priority should be on memorising enough new words before they gave time to collocations. Even later when they were able to shift their focus gradually from decontextualised learning of single words to collocation learning, they tended to be limited to the level of noticing and collecting collocations. These students made limited efforts use the learned collocations in productive tasks and expressed doubts about the usefulness of collocation learning since what was learned “did not seem to fit into what I needed to write.” It seemed that collocation learning was not important. Even some who started to learn them, lacked deeper levels of cognitive processing that could have affected their mastery of collocations and, in turn, their overall progress in English learning. The results matched findings from Gu’s study (1994) on vocabulary learning strategies adopted by the “good” and “poor” learners:

The poor learner saw learning vocabulary in terms of remembering form and meaning, whereas the good learner was concerned with putting words into context, using them and seeing what collocational patterns particular words had. The poor learner was mostly concerned with memorising new words, while the good learner was much more meta-cognitively active and evaluative in considering which particular strategies would be most useful for a particular purpose (p.378).

Meta-cognitive Awareness and Features of Learner Autonomy

While strategies are cognitive in nature and are necessary for performing and completing a task more effectively, metacognitive awareness helps learners understand how the task is performed (Flavell, 1979; Garner, 1994; Hacker, 1998). The contrasting levels of metacognitive awareness, as summarised in Table 4, was a distinguishing characteristic of the two groups. Learners in the strong group showed some remarkable metacognitive

characteristics such as willingness and deliberateness to carry out tasks related to collocation learning, and ability to reflect on their learning. They made necessary adjustments and took control of their own learning.

Table 4: Core category 4: Differences between the two groups - metacognitive awareness and autonomy

Metacognitive Awareness and Features of Autonomy	
Features of strong learners	Features of weak learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * High meta awareness. Regular reflection. * Able to make changes and adjustments in learning based on reflection * Able to evaluate progress, make plans and move towards targets * Able to identify specific problems and come up with possible solutions * Able to evaluate progress and willing to learn more. * Able to cope with language tasks independently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Limited to required reflective journal. Not knowing what and how to reflect * Showed evidence of minor changes. * Unable to tell how much progress was made. * Unsure of what to do next. * Overwhelmed by problems, unable to identify specific ones and unable to find specific solutions at the early stage of the course * Showed limited ability to evaluate progress * Needed much guidance and handholding.

The positive role of metacognitive awareness in learning is supported by earlier research findings. Metacognitive awareness in the form of reflection about learning (Van Lier, 1996:91), helps students see personal relevance in what and how they learn. Williams and Burden (1997:164) also emphasised the role of metacognitive knowledge, particularly knowledge of oneself, one's personal aims and feelings, in helping learners to discover and develop learning strategies that are of significance and high

relevance to themselves. Zhang's (2001) study on a group of Chinese EFL readers revealed that their metacognitive knowledge of reading strategies was linked closely to their English language proficiency. Barfield's study on collocation learning also discovered that more successful collocation learning (i.e., development) involves a high degree of meta-cognitive awareness and control of both collocation recognition and production. The stronger learners in his study selectively employed a range of strategies to achieve their learning goals and reflection became a critical link in the process of learning and using of language for communication (Barfield, 2006:274-275).

This study corroborates and extends the findings on the positive role of metacognitive awareness of these earlier studies. Students in the strong group in this study exhibited metacognitive awareness in their learning. They were engaged in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activities throughout the various stages of learning.

Most of these students had some general goals about their English language learning from the beginning. Some set realistic and manageable daily targets for what they wanted to achieve in their collocation learning. They directed their attention to collocation learning in general and paid attention to specific tasks of noticing collocations, taking down notes and making use of collocations in their productive tasks. They were able to self-monitor their learning by reflecting on the effectiveness of strategies used, attempted to create their own strategies suitable for their learning styles and made necessary changes and adjustments to their learning. In other words, they became "participant observers and overseers of their language learning" by knowing how they were performing and what difficulties they had when coping with learning tasks (Wenden, 1998:27). Their learning behaviour showed clear evidence of their autonomy and control of their learning processes. The data also seemed to indicate that the characteristic of reflection for better learning was a distinguishing factor of high and low attainment. It was observed to be a common feature in the strong learners, but was not apparent in the

weak learners, especially at the initial stage of the course. Development of such awareness was possible through adoption of the AWARE approach and through pedagogical efforts to promote reflection. There was evidence that some learners developed reflective skills gradually through working on the required reflective journals and, towards the latter part of the course, were better able to evaluate their progress and identify problems in their learning.

The following theoretical frameworks are proposed, based on the findings of the study.

1. Students moved along the following collocation learning trajectory at different speeds (Figure 1). Strong learners moved along this learning trajectory quickly and consistently took each of the steps in their learning. Reflection on learning may come into any/all of the steps on the learning path, which interacts with the learning process and leads to necessary adjustments and changes. The weak learners, seemed to move along this path more slowly and frequently had taken only the first two steps and had difficulties with the rest of the steps on the learning path.
2. The strong learners seemed to follow the trajectory below towards better developed learner autonomy while the weak learners seemed to have greater difficulties in starting and following this track.
3. Moderately challenging collocation learning tasks, which as course requirements provided extrinsic motivation, became intrinsic motivation when learners were in control of the tasks. Once they were able to manage the tasks independently, they were able to gain knowledge through the process, achieve a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy, that is, they had a heightened intrinsic motivation that contributed positively to their learning success. Learner control could be better developed through proper instructional support and guidance, which, in turn, develops learner confidence in managing their learning tasks.

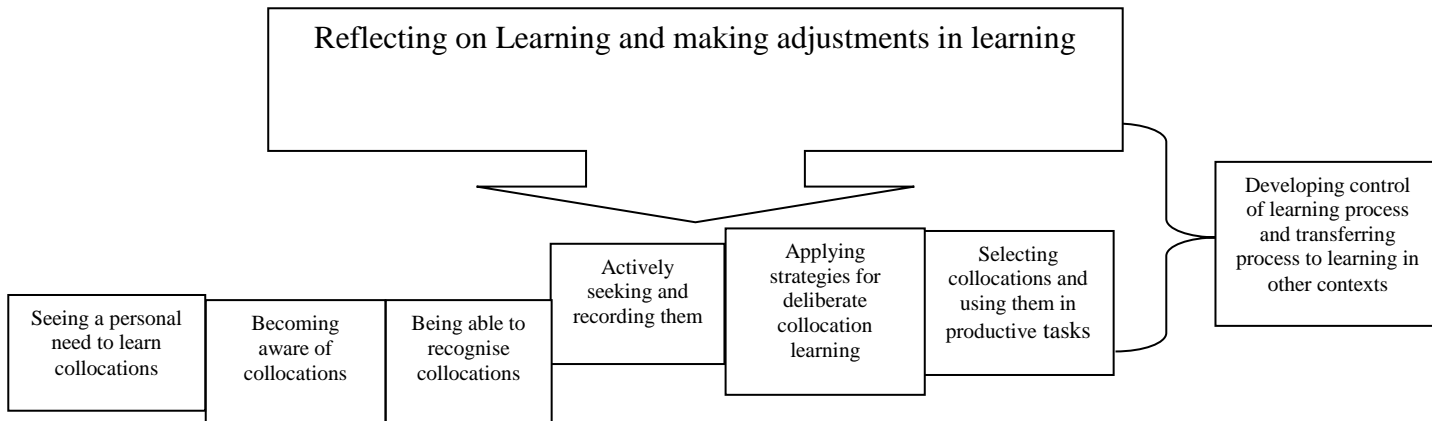


Figure 1: The Collocation Learning Trajectory

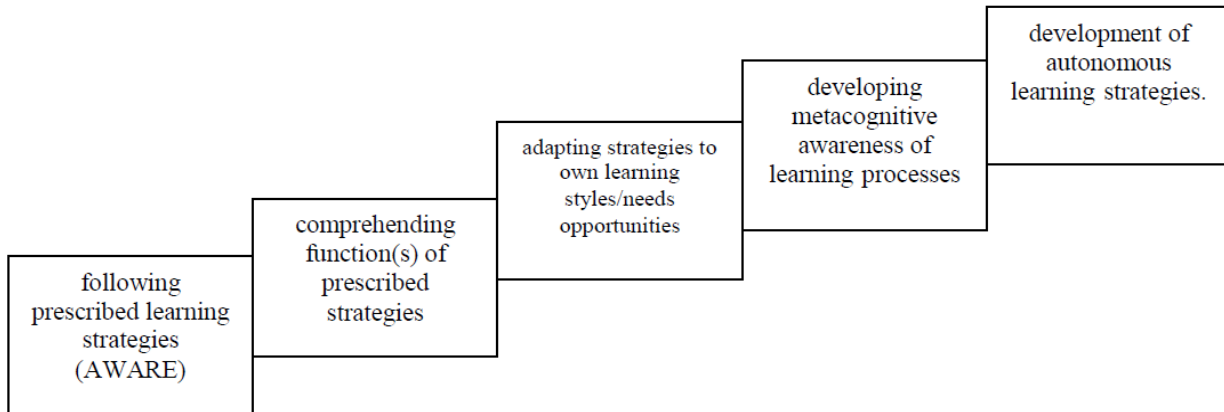


Figure 2: Trajectory for the Development of Learner Autonomy

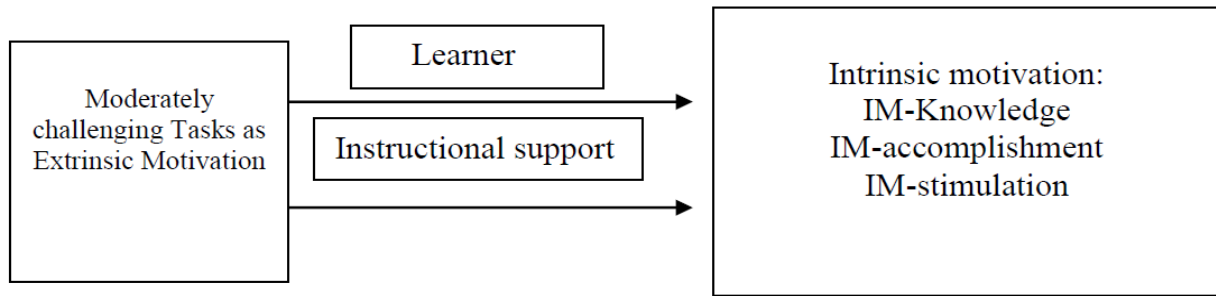


Figure 3: Tasks Converting Extrinsic Motivation to Intrinsic Motivation

4. The study also revealed that some factors or task components contribute to enhancement of task motivation (see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Factors and task components related to learners' task motivation

1. Capability of /readiness for coping with tasks
2. Expectation of learning through the process of task completion
3. The perceived positive outcome of conducting the tasks
4. Meaningful and relevant to learner needs
5. Pleasant and interesting process
6. Self-confidence in task management

Learners are more likely to engage actively in a task if they find themselves ready and able to cope with it. However, tasks should remain moderately challenging so that their completion entails learning, and more importantly, learning things that are considered meaningful and relevant to the learners' needs. Learners are also more likely to have higher task motivation when they find the process pleasant and interesting, though at the same time requiring effort. If students perceive the outcome of the task as effective for their learning, they also might be more willing to invest energy in coping with the task. Some of such task components can be controlled and adjusted, some, such as self-confidence and capability in task management, need to be developed.

The findings from the study reaffirm the value of understanding the AWARE approach early in the learning process, to help weak learners cope with the steps on the collocation learning trajectory and to travel along it faster. Strategy training with careful scaffolding is necessary for the development of learner autonomy, in particular for weaker learners, so that they can follow successful learning paths and develop learning behaviours commonly seen in strong learners. Collocation learning tasks, when competently managed, can convert extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation, and contribute to successful English learning in general. Some

factors and task components can be controlled or nurtured to enhance task motivation. Use of collocation learning tasks with appropriate instructional or peer support can be recommended to enhance intrinsic motivation and facilitate learning

Pedagogical Implications

The findings from the study that strong and weak learners exhibited different learning characteristics, that there were learning trajectories to follow to achieve successful learning and that task motivation can be enhanced through pedagogical support and control of certain task components, shed important light on pedagogical practices to facilitate collocation learning and the development of learner autonomy. A differentiated teaching model is thus proposed to ensure pedagogical attention to differentiate the areas of support offered to weak and strong learners, to differentiate strategy training focus at different stages and to use different task types to lead students onto the learning path earlier to promote their further learning success.

Differentiated Areas of Teacher Support for Weak and Strong Learners

Learner progress will be seriously hampered if a teacher withdraws support before a learner is ready to assume full responsibility for an independent form of learning (Benson & Voller, 1997). In this study, while strong learners were able to move along the collocation learning trajectory at a faster rate and practice each of the steps with more consistency after the initial learner strategy training, the weak learners took longer and had more difficulties in managing some of the steps on the learning path. This suggests that different groups of learners require different levels of support and need teacher support in different areas. Teachers can address learner differences by using the collocation learning trajectory as a diagnostic tool to understand which stages of learning students have reached and where their difficulties lie. In general, weak students need more help at the

start up to learn the “how to” of each step, in the preparation process of tasks and for confidence building. For strong students, teacher help can be focused more effectively on after-task feedback. Able students can be encouraged also to practice each step on the learning trajectory with more intensity, and allowed more freedom in the choice of learning content and methods to venture into more self-regulated learning.

More “hand-holding” is needed for weak learners to get started on the learning path. It was found in this study that weak learners initially had difficulties identifying collocations in reading texts, and failed to take the first step on the collocation learning trajectory early enough to move away from a focus on single words. Teachers need to identify such weaknesses early, and go through a few readings with students individually to ensure they understand the concept of collocations and are able to recognise them. Such guidance for weak learners is important: the ability to identify collocations is a prerequisite to proceed to the second step of searching for and recording collocations at later stages.

For weak learners, teacher support should focus on confidence building through more modelling, proper instructional support in task preparation and giving efficacy-promoting feedback to ensure that learners know how to take each of the steps on the learning trajectory. Teachers should withdraw their support slowly rather than leaving the learners to their own devices too soon. The focus of help should be more on helping them “learn how to learn” to build their confidence in the management of learning tasks. As revealed by this study, when dealing with the oral report task weak students became disillusioned when they were unable to manage it independently. Some weak students at a loss as to how to proceed, threw something together without truly learning much from the process. The initial poor performance at the task put these learners into a vicious circle of doing badly – losing confidence – hating the task – putting in less effort to prepare for it – poor performance and little learning. Poor performance on this task caused weak learners to feel “a loss of face” in front of class and to become more discouraged and negative about the task. Such negative

attitudes can be detrimental to learning if no deliberate efforts are made to change them. More modelling on how the step-by-step guide can be used may help. Additionally, before presentation, a written script of the oral report can be required from the weak students for teachers to provide more help in the preparation process enabling them to cope with the task more competently, through which they gradually build up self-confidence.

It is also important that feedback attributes failure in the management of learning to controllable variables (Weiner, 1992) such as not having attempted to follow the step-by-step guide in the preparation process, not having read enough relevant readings to collect the necessary collocations, or insufficient preparation, rather than a lack of ability. As Weiner (1992) pointed out, if learners ascribe their failure on a particular activity to lack of ability, they probably would not attempt the activity again, while if they ascribe the failure to lack of efforts, they are more likely to try again. Therefore, it is important to offer appropriate feedback that does not harm students' self-confidence but encourages further learning attempts.

Strong learners, in contrast, should be allowed more freedom to be self-exploratory. In the oral report task, for example, they were able to cope with the learning task independently after some basic training. With better control of the learning task, they could be given more freedom to choose topics of their own interest, to find more readings relevant to their topics for collocation collection and to choose their preferred methods of preparation. Since they generally start their journey on the learning trajectory early, they should be encouraged to explore various resources for collocation learning independently. The focus should be on the intensity with which students practice each step on the learning trajectory. They can be given less help in the preparation process of the oral report task, but more feedback upon completion of their tasks.

Differentiated Training Focus

Learner strategy training becomes essential to set learners on the learning path and to travel along it at faster to achieve successful learning and heightened learning autonomy. Proper scaffolding to provide the necessary support structure on the journey along the collocation learning trajectory assists learners to develop their independent learning skills and promote more successful learning.

Scaffolding as Strategy Training in Stages. The key concept of scaffolding originates from Vygotsky's (1962) theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD). The core idea of ZPD has two closely related aspects: necessary provision of a support structure from a knowledgeable other to a learner; and setting learners tasks and activities just beyond the level at which they can cope alone. Competent teacher or peer assistance helps learners accomplish the tasks that they would not be able to manage alone and thereby develop their learning competence. Bruner's view on scaffolding (1996:92–93) emphasises the interaction between the external context and the internal factor, the mind of the learner. He states that a person takes an agentive approach to problem-solving and to the surrounding world, but is unable to deploy her or his mind unassisted or unscaffolded; dialogue between the agentive mind and its context builds the scaffold. In other words, the necessary support structure and the appropriate tasks and activities provide the external scaffolds, while the “dialoguing” between the internal factor - the learner's mind - and the external scaffolds leads to internalised learning. External scaffolds are temporary and should be withdrawn gradually. The ultimate purpose of scaffolding is to develop the learner's ability to complete tasks or manage learning independently, to become an autonomous learner (Van Der Stuyf, 2002).

In contexts similar to this study, scaffolding can be constructed by following the steps of the collocation learning and strategy building trajectories. At each step, teacher assistance and training, peer assistance and peer interaction and varied types of moderately challenging study tasks can be provided to promote learning.

Dialogue between the agentic mind and its context can very well refer to the reflection in the learning process. Scaffolding in the training of collocation learning strategies at different stages of a language course might incorporate Harris and Grenfell's (2004) steps for strategy instruction (see table 6).

Table 6: A sequence of steps for strategy instruction (Harris & Grenfell, 2004)

No.	Step
1	“Awareness raising” of the strategies the learners are already using.
2	“Modelling” of the new strategies by the teacher and “persuasion” of the value of expanding repertoire of strategies.
3	“General practice” of new strategies through whole class, pair and group work.
4	“Action planning”; identifying personal difficulties or goals and the most useful strategies to address them.
5	“Focused practice” and fading out of reminders; gradual withdrawal of scaffolding to the point that learners are able to select and operationalise appropriate strategies for themselves.
6	Evaluating strategy acquisition and learning: reviewing progress and identifying new goals.

At the initial stages, awareness-raising of the strategies learners are already using, modelling of new strategies and helping learners see the value of expanding their repertoire of strategies are important steps. When students are taught the AWARE approach and the need for collocation learning, they can be asked to think about vocabulary learning strategies they have already adopted and to reflect on the purpose and usefulness of such strategies. By doing so, students develop a more explicit understanding of the role of strategies in learning and see meaning in what they learn

and may be better able to appreciate the value of new approaches. As evident from this study, collocation awareness was raised only when pedagogical practices made it an explicit target and content of learning. Therefore, it is essential to raise students' awareness of collocations in various language input through reiterated modelling and practice of how awareness of collocations can be enhanced.

Modelling can come both from the teacher and from the other students. The teacher can take the learners through the step by step guide (see Figure 4) for oral report preparation with more intensity at the beginning to ensure learners fully comprehend the rationale of the process learning method and develop skills to manage the task independently. Modelling can also come from peers, if initially all students work on a given set of readings to prepare for an oral report on the same topic. Weaker students will learn from the strong ones how collocations in these readings are exploited and gradually students can choose their own topics when they develop better control over the task.

Generally, practice of new strategies should follow through whole class, pair and group work, initially more as in-class activities. Timely teacher support when students encounter problems in strategy management can promote a sufficient level of automaticity to enable students to proceed on their own. As Wenden (1998) suggested, autonomy does not mean that students can be left to their own devices; autonomy should be developed slowly with more teachers' help at the beginning and only gradually reduced or withheld.

Action planning is a critical step in the process when students learn to identify personal difficulties or goals and search out useful strategies to address them. Initially, students may be at a loss about what kind of goals they can set for collocation learning. In this study, students tended to set very general targets; some weak ones did not seem to know what to do. Teacher guidance at this stage helped students break down general targets to smaller, realistic and manageable targets.

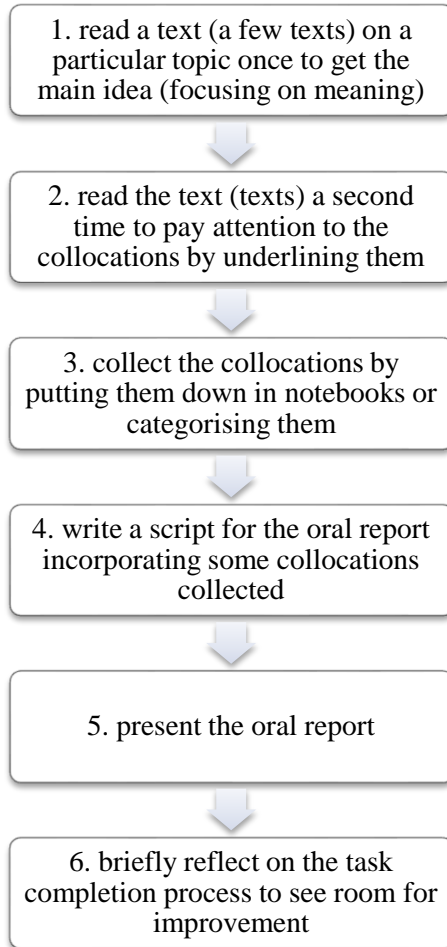


Figure 4: Flow Chart of a Step By Step Guide to the Preparation of an Oral Report

For example, teachers set a reasonable number of readings related to the theme taught weekly; students go through on their own with an awareness of collocations; decide how many collocations they can collect each day and what and how to select some of them; and adopt cognitive strategies to commit them to memory and to use them in productive tasks. Once students know how to set such specific goals for learning and break down the learning tasks into “bite” size, they are more likely to try to achieve the goal. Small successes can motivate them to maintain effective strategies on their own.

As students achieve a certain level of automaticity in the use of strategies with focused practice, more after-class work replaces in-class practice. Explicit scaffolding tasks can be withdrawn gradually, and reminders faded out, as students are better able to operationalise the strategies on their own. As learners are given opportunities to use strategies in the ways they consider most appropriate for themselves, their sense of self-efficacy is likely to increase. At this stage and later, they should also be encouraged to evaluate their strategy use, reviewing their progress and making changes and adjustments. Reflective journals, for example, as a pedagogical practice, can “force” less reflective students to think about their learning, evaluate the effectiveness of their learning, identify difficulties and problems and set new goals and targets. Scaffolding quite directive tasks initially, such as listing the strategies used in the learning period, evaluating their use of them, and then writing a sentence or two in which they set small strategic goals for the next learning period as a personal progress plan may be productive (see Table 7).

Table 7: “Bite size” reflections

Strategies used	Evaluation of effectiveness
Plan for next learning period/task	

Scaffolding as Collaborative Work. Scaffolding can also be done through a collaborative peer support structure that goes beyond teachers' classroom training and help for the weak learners, as suggested by Wood et al. (1976: 89–99), so that help or guidance given by more capable learners in an interactive task serves as scaffolding. Initially, it helps build students' confidence if collocation learning, especially the oral report, forms a collaborative task where groups of three to four students collectively prepare the script of the oral report, following the step by step guide, and choose one among them to present it in class. Weaker students learn by participant observation with other group members in preparing for the presentation. Their requirement for actual oral presentation can be deferred until they have seen the others do it and have gained sufficient confidence to present something of a better quality prepared by the group. Group oral reports offer more opportunities for “focused practice” since each group has several chances of doing the report every week, unlike individual reports when each student may have only one chance every fortnight to present an oral report. Individual work can be phased in when students have mastered a process approach and feel more at ease about speaking in front of the class. Even then, it is still useful to assign study partners to support each other in the preparation process and check each other's work before it is “exhibited” in class.

Findings from this study also show that students believed in the usefulness of collaborative work. The student who made the greatest progress consistently engaged in collaborative work to achieve better learning. Most of the students were used to an individual way of learning and did not take the initiative to work with other students after class. On one hand, students may perceive collaborative work as “cheating” as the most common means of assessment, especially in the Asian context, is based on individual performance. Conversely, students may think that they lose out by participating actively in collaborative tasks, as they are competing with classmates for higher grades. Teachers' efforts in encouraging “self-improvement” in assessment, avoiding competitive ranking in the performance of such tasks, can

overcome such resistance and focus students on their own progress over time and encourage “self-competing” rather than peer competition.

Differentiated Task Types to Promote Learning

Differentiated task types can be adopted to enhance learners’ motivation towards collocation learning as they help turn extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation. Motivation in language learning generally has been categorised into two types. Extrinsic motivation comes from external demands and requirements. Intrinsic motivation is an internal drive to learn. Noels et al. (2000) described this as IM-knowledge, learning for the sensation of learning new ideas and knowledge; IM-accomplishment, learning for a sense of accomplishment of tasks and goals’; and IM-stimulation, learning out of a feeling of excitement over learning or learning out of aesthetic appreciation of a language. Earlier research found intrinsic motivation could be cultivated in three ways. First, intrinsic motivation can be fostered through enhancing learners’ self-confidence by providing moderately challenging tasks and necessary instructional support (Spaulding, 1992). Second, feedback that attributes the success or failure in the management of learning to controllable variables rather than a lack of ability can contribute to the enhancement of self-confidence and in turn foster intrinsic motivation (Weiner, 1992). Third, giving learners a certain amount of freedom and responsibility in the choice of learning materials, methods and performance outcomes fosters learner autonomy, which in turn stimulates learners’ intrinsic motivation (Holec, 1981; Zimmerman, 1994; Littlewood, 1999).

While this study found substantial agreement with these earlier studies, it should be pointed out that extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation seemed to function as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Tasks with optimal challenges, at one end, served as extrinsic motivation with external requirements and needs that student must fulfil. However, this extrinsic motivation translated

to learners' intrinsic motivation in three major ways. First, it pushed learners in search of new ideas and collocations through reading; that is, developing IM-knowledge. Second, it gave rise to a sense of self-efficacy when learners, with instructional guidance, developed ability to fulfil set goals and tasks. In other words, the challenge of and the success in meeting the external requirements helped develop IM-accomplishment as the learners gained self-confidence and experienced the rewards of learning. The third was the freedom given to students for self-selection and self-discovery when preparing for collocation learning tasks caused them to see the learning process as interesting and helped them see the beauty of the English language, that is, IM-stimulation. Based on this finding, pedagogical recommendations are made to adopt differentiated task types in collocation learning. Using a variety of collocation tasks that cater to both the affective and cognitive domains of learning can open up many alternatives for the learners to select what they find to be the most appropriate and effective ways to learn and therefore see more personal relevance in learning. With proper peer and instructional support in the completion of such tasks, extrinsic motivation is likely to turn into intrinsic motivation towards the adoption of the AWARE approach in collocation learning and, in turn, facilitate the learners' overall English language proficiency.

Motivating Tasks, Letting students take the stance of “student as expert” or “student as teacher” when handling the oral report requires them to find something to include in their oral reports that will be instructive to their peers. This is extrinsic at first, but viewing the oral report as a student teaching opportunity when other students learn from them stimulates their motivation to produce a piece of quality work. In the process of better preparation, more learning takes place helping students become positive about what they do rather than, in the case of weak learners, feeling intimidated at having to show their “poor English” in front of class and, conversely, causing resentments among motivated students who regard listening to poor quality oral reports as a waste of time.

Specific requirements on collocation use in tasks may also increase students' motivation. For example, students can be asked to break down the oral report task by focusing on a reasonable number of collocations per day and using a particular number of collocations in each oral report. It helps build self-confidence from small gains through strenuous task involvement. It also is useful for students to show an OHP or Power Point listing collocations they have used in the oral report. The visual presentation is initially an extrinsic motivation, as well as a pedagogical strategy to reinforce learning in the oral report process, but becomes internalised as a routine learning strategy. This requirement has two benefits: it can drive students to make use of collocations learned and to go through a more careful process of preparation rather than speaking off the cuff; and secondly, it increases learning opportunities, especially for less proficient learners to better note useful collocations when they are displayed visually, rather than just hearing them. The boost to their confidence is an important component of intrinsic motivation.

Tasks of Cognitive Depth. Most students in the study focused on recognition and collection of collocations as their most frequently used strategy. Awareness at the level of “noticing” was developed successfully. However, although noticing language chunks is a crucial initial process in collocation learning, noticing alone is not sufficient (Sinclair and Renouf, 1988; Baigent, 1999; Lewis, 2000). In this study productive tasks played a more important role in helping learners master the collocations, as in the case of the group of strong learners, who actively used collocations to learn. Therefore it is important to incorporate collocation learning and use frequently in productive tasks to facilitate mastery through a deeper level of cognitive processing. Some moderately challenging tasks are listed in Table 8.

Table 8: Tasks promoting collocation learning

Types of Tasks	Description of Tasks
Translation	A translation task requiring students to do chunk to chunk translation, rather than word for word.
Collaborative reconstruction tasks	One group listens to a radio program/reads a text and selects a list of useful collocations for another group to use the collocations to reconstruct the text.
Feedback control	Students underline 4 to 5 places in their own writing assignments where they would hear feedback from the teacher on use of collocations.
Forced choice writing	A list of collocations is given by the teacher/peers and students are required to use them for a particular writing task.
Reformulation tasks	One round of essay revision is exclusively focused on revising collocation use. Students underline some key words, check dictionaries for the possible combinations of these words to improve writing sophistication.
Writing an online blog	As an alternative or supplement to oral report task, students can be encouraged to write online blogs regularly to use collocations learned as a regular exhibition task.

Most of the tasks listed involve writing. Since writing is a frequent course requirement, it can be exploited to promote collocation learning and use. Preliminary tasks to support use of collocations in writing include collecting of collocations from class readings, and selecting some for inclusion in an essay. Since students are required to revise and write at least two drafts of an essay, it is helpful if one round of essay reconstructing comes with particular focus on using collocations. Students may be asked to underline key words in an essay, search the collocation dictionary to check possible combinations for these words and see whether better

expressions can replace what they have written. This process of “reformulation” (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005), was found to provide a good opportunity for learning when students go through cognitive conflicts to notice changes and differences in the two versions of the essay, here with a focus on collocation use.

Tasks that Promote Reflection. Promoting reflection on learning processes can be done in two ways. First, individual reflection can be encouraged through use of an oral report task preparation folder in which students note down the sources of readings done for the oral report and the list of collocations collected with those used in the oral report highlighted. Reviewing the folder together with the students served a “play back” function (Cribb, 2000) for them to understand specifically what went well and what didn’t. After completion of the task, students can be asked to write a short reflection on their learning process, initially with a set of guiding questions. Manageable sized reflection on a specific task will help weaker learners understand how to reflect. Alternatively, it may be helpful to allow the use of learners’ L1 in their reflective journals, especially at the initial stage of the program to promote reflection and assist them in gradually developing their metacognitive abilities and autonomy.

Besides encouraging individual reflection, it may also be useful to organise group discussions for students to share and explain the learning strategies that work well for them. Such discussion is likely to lead to reflection, which serves both the functions of “reinforcement and alternatives” (Lehtonen, 2000:70). Sharing useful strategies with peers serves as reinforcement and confidence building, while other students’ shared strategies may open new alternatives for effective learning. The interactive nature of such discussions may enhance learner awareness of their own learning. Although consciousness of strategies may generally be considered as intra-individual properties, the motivation for strategy use can also come from a peer or an interactive situation. Lehtonen’s case study (2000) revealed that teacher-initiated learner training, incorporated with learner discussion and

interaction, could offer many more opportunities for students' reflection on learning and promote better approaches to learning. These are of great personal relevance once learners see the benefit of doing so. Metacognitive reflection with group members helped the students in Lehtonen's case study take a balanced approach through developing strategies, awareness of such strategies, understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses and self-confidence, all of which played important parts in turning "strategic awareness" into "strategic performance" (Lehtonen, 2000:74).

Students' Projects as Learning Tasks, Students' projects can also be encouraged for building resources as well as for extending and maximising collocation learning opportunities. For example, the compilation of a Collocation Inventory can be done as a student project in which students organise themselves to collect from each class member collocations they have recorded during the week, categorise them under themes or functions and compile their own collocation inventory to be shared on the course website. All students can participate by forming small groups, with each group taking charge for one week, with responsibility for collecting collocations from the other class members, categorising them and putting them online. Recognising the difficulties that Chinese students may have in abandoning the exam oriented mindset, it may be used to their advantage and boost their motivation if a core collocation list from the collocation inventory can be compiled and tested to encourage less motivated students to build up a pool of common expressions for use in their productive tasks.

Online resources can be created including readings with a collocation learning focus. The key word approach can be adopted in setting up such resources for a particular topic or text. Highlighting key words and some common collocations, useful adjectives and verbs for a noun, commonly used adverbs for a verb, for example, in a pop up box when students scroll the cursor over such words. This job can be passed to the students as their learning projects with proper teacher monitoring. Engaging learners in the creation of collocation resources extends their

learning opportunities by letting them learn from their peers as well as through the process itself and activities also hands over more learning responsibilities to the learners themselves.

Conclusion

As English language gains growing importance as a “world language” and the number of EFL learners from China steadily increases, research into their English language learning processes is of great significance. Since collocation learning is considered an important aspect of English language learning, helping learners to progress from the intermediate learning plateau, the implications of this research into their collocation learning processes are significant. This study, through examination of a group of PRC students’ collocation learning perspectives and processes in a language classroom, tested the use of the AWARE approach in the specific area of English collocation learning. In this study, the approach, when used with a particular focus on English collocation learning, was found to be a viable pedagogical and learning approach that promoted successful collocation learning and learner autonomy. Those who actively practiced the steps recommended by the approach were more successful in their collocation learning and overall language proficiency and developed better learner autonomy. Even for initially weak learners, the adoption of the approach was instrumental in their positive changes towards collocation learning and development of independent learning skills.

Adoption of this approach by students led them onto a learning trajectory towards successful collocation learning and better-developed learner autonomy. It was also found that learners’ motivation could be enhanced through moderately challenging collocation learning tasks and was affected by six factors. Pedagogical attention can be paid to these factors to enhance learners’ task motivation to maximise learning effectiveness.

The study also shed light on possible pedagogical practices that could be adopted to foster positive norms to inspire more autonomous behaviours in the learning of English collocations. The collocation learning trajectory identified will provide useful and practical guidance as pedagogical efforts can be invested in leading learners onto this trajectory at a faster rate. The learning path can also serve as a diagnostic indicator of learners' developmental stages in collocation learning so that support can be given to address different learners' differential rates of development. Findings from this study revealed ways of learning "how to learn" collocations so that learning can be more effective and learning opportunities extended as learners develop autonomy and control of their learning. Similarly, pedagogical efforts can be put into starting learners on the strategy developmental path, and monitoring their stages of development to increase their rates of progress. The learning trajectories discovered may serve as the basis of a framework for coordinating pedagogical strategies to help learners in their management of collocation learning and development of autonomous learning strategies.

Analysis of the effect of the AWARE approach on a group of learners of varying abilities identified possible limitations and constraints in the AWARE approach. The study revealed that even though awareness of collocation improved among all the students, and most of them acknowledged the importance of collocation learning, learner progress could still be seriously affected if learners were unable to see their personal readiness for collocation learning. Learner progress also was impeded when they lacked the confidence and competence in adopting effective strategies and managing learning tasks independently. Without a sense of self-efficacy from competent management of learning tasks, the level of learner motivation could remain low and overall language development restricted. In response to learner differences identified in the study, a differentiated teaching model was proposed to address the needs of strong and weak learners. The study demonstrated a need for pedagogical intervention to raise learners' awareness of English collocations and to move them away from prolonged focus on acquiring vocabulary. Learners

need a clear understanding of the concept of collocations and the AWARE approach to foster confidence in their readiness for collocation learning. Strategy training should be conducted with proper scaffolding and moderately challenging tasks to motivate learners. Support structures should be available to assist where seen to be necessary. Reflective practices, leading to positive adjustments should be encouraged and conducted in “bite size” to help learners learn how to reflect. The results of the study provided understanding of the importance of a process-oriented learning approach for learning enhancement.

Finally, the study offers a curriculum proposal for language program designers to incorporate the AWARE approach and the collocation learning component in language courses for students at the low-intermediate to intermediate level of language proficiency. The study has yielded empirical evidence that supports the positive role of a three dimensional focus in a language course: adding the language content of collocation learning; training learners to develop the necessary strategies for coping with learning; and putting learners at the centre of the learning process. The positive contribution to the autonomous learning skills of these students is expected to have long term benefits for their further learning.

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