

COLLOCATION LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY ADVANCED LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. Collocations form a core component of second language competence, yet they remain difficult to master, especially in exam-oriented contexts. Previous research has highlighted the role of first language influence and the importance of deliberate strategy use. However, little is known about how advanced learners independently manage collocation learning in professional domains. This study addresses the gap through an exploratory multiple-case study of three Vietnamese learners working in banking, content creation, and English teaching. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and learner reports and analysed thematically within the AWARE framework (Ying & O’Neill, 2009) [1]. The findings show that learners adopted multiple strategies, including structured input, thematic organisation, and lexical chunking, but the retrieval of collocations in spontaneous communication remained a persistent difficulty. The study highlights the influence of professional demands on strategy choice, and the need for instruction that integrates multiple strategies. The study calls for promoting retrieval-based practice, and supporting contextualised use of digital resources. These insights may extend research on collocation learning by demonstrating how individual and contextual factors shape the strategy use of advanced learners in exam-dominated EFL environments.

Keywords: Collocation learning strategies; Advanced learners; English teaching and learning, Vietnamese Exam-Dominated Context; Second Language at Vietnamese Schools.

1. Introduction

Learners who aim for advanced proficiency in English must develop the ability to combine words in natural and conventional ways. Collocations are central to this process because they support fluent, idiomatic, and precise expression in both speech and writing. In exam-oriented systems such as Vietnam’s EFL system, vocabulary learning is usually directed towards recognition tasks that can be assessed easily. This emphasis may prepare learners for examinations but reduces opportunities to consolidate collocations for flexible use in spontaneous communication. As English becomes increasingly important for study, work, and professional interaction, the productive use of collocations has become a crucial component of communicative competence.

Despite this importance, research has paid limited attention to the ways advanced learners continue to develop collocational knowledge after reaching high levels of proficiency. Much of the existing literature has focused on general or intermediate learners, leaving unanswered questions about how experienced learners adapt learning strategies to meet professional and communicative demands. The present study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of

three Vietnamese advanced learners working in different professional domains. It examines the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ, offering insights into collocation learning in Vietnam and other educational contexts that heavily rely on tests.

2. Contents

2.1. Literature Review

Collocations have been estimated to account for more than 70 percent of English discourse and the number of collocations in English far exceeds the number of single-word units (Nation, 2001) [2]. A wide range of studies has highlighted their crucial role in language learning, especially in the development of comprehension and fluency (Laufer, 2011) [3]. Ellis (2012) [4] emphasized that knowledge of multiword expressions, including collocations, is an essential component of overall language competence. Nation and Coxhead (2021) further argued that deliberate attention to collocations is necessary because learners rarely acquire collocations incidentally. The learning burden remains considerable (Webb & Nation, 2017) [5], since learners must overcome the influence of their first language and the conventions of the second language. Collocational knowledge is closely linked to comprehension (Barfield & Gyllstad, 2009) [6] and also imposes significant cognitive demands (Nation & Coxhead, 2021) [7]. Learners need to encounter collocations across various multimodal learning contexts to strengthen their retention. Collocations also contribute measurably to L2 proficiency in speaking and writing (Siyanova-Chanturia & Spina, 2015; Webb et al., 2013) [8, 9, 10]. These findings confirm the need for systematic integration of collocations into L2 instruction.

Cross-Linguistic Influence on Collocations

The acquisition of collocations is particularly vulnerable to first language influence, which often prevents learners from achieving native-like accuracy and fluency. Studies in diverse contexts have shown that L1 transfer plays a decisive role in the production of unconventional collocations (Laufer & Waldman, 2011) [11]. Evidence from Vietnamese learners confirms this tendency: even collocations that have direct equivalents in Vietnamese can cause errors, while incongruent collocations with no direct equivalents present even greater difficulty (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. These patterns suggest that L1 influence affects not only the transfer of inappropriate word combinations but also the depth of learners' understanding of acceptable usage. As a result, collocational development remains challenging, and learners require explicit strategies and sustained exposure to reduce the impact of cross-linguistic interference.

Challenges in Learning Collocations

Although collocations form a core component of L2 vocabulary development, learners continue to face persistent difficulties. One major obstacle is interference from the first language. Learners often rely on direct translation and produce unnatural combinations, such as "do an effort" instead of "make an effort" (Peters, 2009) [13]. Even advanced learners experience difficulties with verb–noun collocations because these combinations are highly language-specific (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. Another challenge is insufficient noticing. Many learners focus on individual words or the overall meaning rather than word combinations, which leads them to overlook collocations in their input. (Laufer & Waldman, 2011) [11]. This problem may intensify when collocations contain familiar words in less salient pairings (Peters, 2009) [13].

Limited exposure creates further challenges. This is because collocation learning requires repeated encounters in varied contexts (Bui et al., 2020) [14], yet learners in traditional classrooms often lack sufficient frequency, especially for low-frequency collocations. Exam-dominated systems reinforce this problem, in Vietnam, for instance, vocabulary instruction often emphasises recognition-based knowledge that can be tested in multiple-choice tasks, but this focus does not provide the repetition or varied contexts necessary for productive use (Bui et al., 2020) [14].

Cognitive complexity also adds pressure, as learners must process semantic, syntactic, and contextual features and distinguish between fixed collocations, such as *strong coffee*, and free combinations, such as *strong argument*. These distinctions are not always intuitive (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. Thus, these challenges confirm why collocations remain difficult even at advanced levels.

Strategies for Collocation Learning

Research has identified a range of strategies that learners employ to overcome these difficulties. Attention-raising devices, such as glosses, help learners notice collocations and strengthen their recall (Peters, 2009) [13]. Translation tasks allow learners to compare L1 and L2 patterns, which reduces transfer errors (Laufer & Waldman, 2011) [11]. Repetition and spaced practice promote long-term retention. Structured frameworks, such as AWARE (awareness, why learn, acquisition, reflection, exhibition) guide learners to notice, practice, and evaluate collocations in systematic ways that support both fluency and accuracy (Ying & O'Neill, 2009) [1]. Contextualised practice through role-play, writing, or discussions also strengthens retention (Cao & Badger, 2023) [15]. Learner-centred approaches highlight the importance of self-regulation. Learners may keep collocation notebooks, group collocations by topic, or create mnemonics to reinforce awareness (Li & Boers, 2025) [16]. Research confirms that active use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies correlates with stronger outcomes in both vocabulary and collocation learning (Gu, 2019) [17]. Systematic training in strategies produces measurable gains in vocabulary size and frequency of use (Eyckmans, 2009). Other intervention studies also confirmed the benefits of strategy-based instruction for collocation development. The findings showed that successful learners deliberately used a wide range of strategies to master collocations.

In exam-oriented systems, strategies become even more important. Learners often prepare for recognition tasks that measure receptive knowledge, but such preparation may not support productive use. Vietnamese learners, for instance, may memorise lists in preparation for multiple-choice tests, but this does not prepare them to retrieve collocations in spontaneous communication (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. Rehearsal in speaking, revision in writing, and retrieval practice with feedback can help learners move from recognition to productive use (Webb, 2019) [18]. Evidence suggests that deliberate strategies such as repetition, categorisation, and retrieval are crucial for retention and productive use (Siyanova-Chanturia, 2017) [19]. Without such strategies, learners may develop recognition without communicative competence.

Individual and Contextual Differences

Learners vary considerably in their collocational success. Motivation, exposure, and self-regulation often separate more effective learners from less effective ones (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008) [8]. Prior vocabulary knowledge also exerts a strong influence: learners with a broader lexical base recognise and internalise collocations more easily (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. Practices such as extensive reading and active participation in conversations further promote development. Educational context is another decisive factor. In exam-oriented systems, instruction often focuses on recognition tasks that align with test requirements. Lists, gap-fill exercises, and multiple-choice questions demonstrate receptive knowledge but do not foster productive use. In Vietnam, this orientation restricts opportunities for learners to practise collocations in authentic contexts and prevents automatising in speech or writing (Bui et al., 2020) [14]. Productive knowledge develops more slowly than receptive knowledge (Li & Boers, 2025) [16]. As a result, learners may develop recognition skills without acquiring the ability to retrieve collocations in real-world communication. Collocation learning also reflects the interplay of individual and contextual factors. Learners who bring motivation, vocabulary knowledge, and self-regulation may compensate for exam-driven limitations, yet others remain restricted to recognition-focused learning. Few studies have examined how advanced learners manage this

tension. Research has concentrated mainly on general or intermediate learners, and essential questions about advanced learners remain unresolved (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12].

Research demonstrates the effectiveness of strategy frameworks such as AWARE (Ying & O'Neill, 2009) [1] and confirms the role of deliberate strategy use in collocation development. Local research in Vietnam indicates that learners continue to exhibit significant weaknesses in both receptive and productive knowledge, despite years of study (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. Collocational errors remain strongly influenced by the first language, even when collocations are congruent across English and Vietnamese. Much of this research, however, has focused on general learners or on receptive knowledge. Less is known about how advanced learners in exam-dominated environments develop and adapt strategies for collocation learning in professional contexts that demand precision and fluency. The present study addresses this gap by conducting an exploratory multiple-case study of three advanced Vietnamese learners who work in banking, content creation, and English teaching. It investigates the challenges they face and the strategies they apply, to clarify how individual and contextual factors combine to shape collocation learning in exam-driven environments. The current study addresses this gap by the following questions:

RQ1: What challenges do advanced learners face in learning and using collocations?

RQ2: What strategies do advanced learners apply to learn collocations?

2.2. Conceptual Framework

This study adopted the AWARE framework (Ying & O'Neill, 2009) [1] as the guiding pedagogy and the analytical lens for investigating collocation learning strategies among three advanced Vietnamese learners. AWARE is a process-oriented approach that structures learning into five steps: raising awareness of collocations in input, clarifying the rationale for collocation learning, acquiring collocations through learner-selected strategies, reflecting on learning processes and outcomes, and exhibiting collocational use in communicative tasks. The framework draws on Schmidt's (1990) [20] noticing hypothesis, the role of cognitive awareness in deeper processing, and the importance of metacognitive awareness for learner autonomy. It also reflects educational perspectives that emphasise learner engagement with both language content and learning strategies.

2.3. Research Methodology

2.3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory multiple-case study design. The exploratory orientation was appropriate because collocation learning among advanced learners has received limited attention. Exploratory research aims to generate new insights in areas with limited prior evidence rather than to test predefined hypotheses. This orientation guided the investigation of learners' strategies, challenges, and motivations in relation to collocation learning. The multiple-case study approach provided both depth and breadth of analysis. Yin (2009) [21] defines a multiple-case study as an investigation of several bounded cases, each analysed in depth and then compared across cases. Three advanced Vietnamese learners of English served as individual cases because each represented a distinct professional domain: banking, content creation, and English teaching. Each case was examined separately to capture individual strategies and contexts. The cross-case comparison then identified patterns and differences, which highlighted the influence of both personal and contextual factors.

2.3.2. Participants

This study involved three advanced Vietnamese learners of English (see Table 1). David worked in banking, Hannah in content creation, and Michael in English teaching. Each had achieved advanced proficiency in English and used the language extensively in professional settings. Despite this proficiency, all three reported difficulties with collocation use, particularly in retrieving them in spontaneous communication. Their professional diversity provided a basis

for comparison across contexts. The participants were purposefully chosen because of their advanced English language proficiency.

Table 1. Summary of Participants

Name	David	Hannah	Michael
Age	23	Late 20s	27
Profession	Finance Graduate	Content Creator	English Teacher
IELTS Score	8.5	8.0	8.5
Learning Duration	Over 10 years	Since age 10	Since age 10
Primary Use of English	Business communication with foreign clients	Producing videos, travel advising, audience engagement	Teaching university students and professionals for IELTS and general English

2.3.3. Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and short written reflection accounts. Interviews were conducted in English, with occasional clarification in Vietnamese where necessary. The interviews encouraged participants to describe personal experiences of collocation learning, including both successful and unsuccessful attempts. Prompts addressed sources of input, strategies, retrieval experiences, and professional demands. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Written accounts provided supplementary reflections and supported the reliability of the interview data.

2.3.4. Procedure

Each participant took part in an individual interview and also submitted a short written reflection. Participants were recruited through professional networks and selected based on their demonstrated use of English in workplace contexts. Interviews followed a flexible protocol that allowed participants to elaborate on experiences of collocation learning and strategy use. Written accounts reinforced and extended the interview data by providing additional detail in participants' own words. This procedure generated a dataset that combined spoken and written reflections. The AWARE framework (Ying & O'Neill, 2009) [1] guided both data collection and analysis. As mentioned earlier, AWARE consists of five stages: awareness-raising, understanding the rationale for collocation learning, acquisition through strategies, reflection on learning processes, and exhibition of collocational use in communicative tasks. The framework draws on Schmidt's (1990) [20] noticing hypothesis, the role of cognitive awareness in deeper processing, and the role of metacognitive awareness in learner autonomy. It also aligns with Schmitt's (2010) [22] taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies and Nation's (2013) [23] categories of planning, sources, and processes. The AWARE framework, therefore, offered a structured model for coding and data analysis.

2.3.5. Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Deductive coding relied on categories from existing research, such as input-based strategies, lexical chunking, thematic organisation, and retrieval practice. Inductive coding was then applied to capture emergent themes, including the creation of digital databases and the use of AI tools. Each transcript was coded line by line, and codes were grouped into broader themes. This dual approach ensured that the analysis combined theoretical guidance with sensitivity to learner-specific practices.

Thematic analysis identified four central themes: collocation acquisition strategies, retention difficulties, retrieval challenges, and learning motivations. David used structured input and text reconstruction to increase accuracy in banking contexts. Hannah relied on thematic organisation to support fluency in content creation. Michael adopted lexical chunking and applied collocations

in teaching. These findings confirmed that professional demands influenced strategic choice, consistent with research on formulaic language learning.

Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Data triangulation was achieved by combining semi-structured interviews with written accounts, which provided complementary perspectives on learners' strategies and challenges. Member-checking was conducted by sharing summaries of interview transcripts with participants for confirmation of accuracy. To ensure reliability in coding, the dataset was first coded by the authors, then reviewed by a colleague familiar with collocation research, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

2.4. Key Findings

This section examines collocation learning strategies of three advanced English learners. It demonstrates how they acquire and apply collocations through structured input, thematic organization, and productive practice. Despite their high proficiency, all participants reported retrieval difficulties, highlighting the challenge of automatising collocational knowledge in authentic contexts. Table 2 summarizes their strategies, challenges, and professional influences, providing the basis for the discussion that follows.

Table 2. Strategies Used by the Participants

Category	David	Hannah	Micheal
Learning Strategy	Reading finance materials, text reconstruction	Thematic categorization, media exposure	Chunking, contextual learning, structured tasks
Challenges	Retaining less-used collocations	Struggles with spontaneous retrieval	Students struggle with natural usage
Input-Based Learning	High (industry-specific reading)	Moderate (books, media, social input)	High (real-world exposure in teaching)
Active Practice	Moderate (text reconstruction, less speaking)	High (integrates in speech/writing)	High (role-play, exercises, frequent use)
Retention Issues	Forgets rarely used collocations	Struggles with real-time speech recall	retrieval is difficult

Table 2 highlights the strategies, challenges, and professional influences reported by the participants. David relied on structured input and text reconstruction to improve recognition and precision in professional contexts. Hannah applied thematic categorisation and deliberate productive practice to increase fluency and spontaneous communication. Michael used lexical chunking with contextualised practice to support both his own retention and his students' learning.

2.4.1. David: Structured Input and Retrieval Challenges

David, a banking professional, regarded collocations as essential for precision and professional credibility. He identified three main difficulties: the vast number of possible word combinations, uncertainty about appropriacy in formal contexts, and frequent retrieval problems during writing and oral communication. These difficulties reflect the unpredictable and domain-specific nature of collocations. To address these problems, David adopted "input-based learning through finance-related reading and text reconstruction" (David, Reflection paper). He created his own "collocation database and employed retrieval practice" (David, Interview), testing himself before verification with Ozdic and corpus-based dictionaries. David shared his strategies:

Because I work in banking, I need my language to sound professional. Collocations are important, but there are so many combinations that I'm never sure which ones are truly appropriate in formal writing. Even when I recognise a good phrase while reading, I often can't retrieve it when speaking. I read financial texts, rewrote short passages from memory, and kept a personal list of useful collocations.

He also experimented with AI tools to confirm collocational accuracy, a method that has been noted in recent research in technology-assisted vocabulary learning. His approach improved awareness and recognition but did not resolve retrieval difficulty. His case demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of input-focused and technology-supported learning.

2.4.2. Hannah: Thematic Organisation and Productive Practice

Hannah, a tourism content creator, considered collocations central to natural expression and personal confidence in English. She distinguished between recognition of collocations in texts and the ability to use them spontaneously in communication. This distinction mirrors the well-documented gap between receptive and productive knowledge. She relied on thematic categorisation by “grouping collocations around topics such as travel or work” (Hannah, reflection paper), which allowed for more efficient recall. She said:

To me, collocations are what make English sound authentic, not textbook-like. I notice them all the time when I read or watch things in English, but when I have to speak suddenly, my mind goes blank. I started organising useful expressions by daily life topics, so they’re easier to remember. I also practise them by writing short posts and preparing a few phrases before conversations.

She supported this recall practice through deliberate rehearsal, including short writing tasks, preparation of collocations before conversations, and active integration into speech. These practices align with research on incidental and rehearsal-based learning through authentic input. Thematic grouping and rehearsal increased her fluency; however, she still reported “frequent failures in spontaneous recall” during honest conversations (Hannah Interview). Her case confirms both the value of organisational strategies and the continuing challenge of automatising collocations under time pressure.

2.4.3. Michael: Lexical Chunking and Pedagogical Application

Michael, an English teacher specialising in IELTS preparation, experienced challenges similar to those of his students. Collocations often appeared unpredictable, hard to consolidate, and resistant to automatization. Errors such as *do a mistake* or *big rain* illustrated common L1 transfer effects (Michael, Interview). His main approach involved lexical chunking, in which collocations were learned and taught as fixed units (for example, *commit a crime*) rather than as isolated words. He guided students to notice collocations in authentic input such as TED Talks and academic texts, and encouraged productive use in essays and speaking tasks. Michael reported that chunking and contextual practice improved retention, but many students struggled to extract collocations from texts without support (Michael, Reflection Paper). His case underlines the central role of teachers in scaffolding collocation learning by combining authentic input, explicit instruction, and retrieval tasks.

In summary, the three cases confirm that advanced learners continue to encounter persistent retrieval problems despite varied strategies. David depended on structured input, Hannah on thematic organisation, and Michael on chunking, yet none of them achieved full automatization. This pattern supports evidence that productive collocational use develops more slowly than receptive knowledge. The professional context also shaped strategic choice. David valued precision in financial discourse, Hannah prioritised idiomatic fluency, and Michael balanced his personal learning with pedagogy. These findings indicate the need for collocation instruction that is contextualised and responsive to learner goals.

2.5. Discussion and Implications

Three significant implications for English teaching in exam-dominated EFL contexts emerge from these findings. First, instruction should integrate multiple strategies rather than rely on memorisation. Learners in this study combined input-based reading, text reconstruction, thematic categorisation, and lexical chunking. This pattern aligns with previous research that highlights the

effectiveness of combined metacognitive and cognitive strategies (Gu, 2019; Webb, 2019; Webb & Nation, 2017) [17, 18, 5]. In Vietnam, where vocabulary teaching often remains list-based, integration of awareness-raising tasks, authentic input, and productive activities can help learners move beyond recognition and develop more flexible control of collocations.

Second, retrieval practice is crucial. All three participants reported difficulty with spontaneous recall, which reflects the persistent gap between receptive and productive knowledge. Similar findings have been reported by Peters (2009) [13] and Webb and Kagimoto (2009) [24]. In exam-dominated systems, learners often train to identify correct collocations for tests but may not use them under pressure in authentic tasks. Therefore, instruction should include retrieval-based activities such as timed speaking tasks, and focused writing practice (Webb, 2019) [18]. Such tasks are more likely to promote automatization and prepare learners for real communication.

Third, instruction should take account of contextual needs and make use of technology. Each participant in this study selected strategies based on professional goals: precision for banking, fluency for creative content, and chunking for teaching. This diversity supports research that highlights the impact of individual goals and prior knowledge on collocational development (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. In Vietnam, learners' needs range from academic writing to business interaction. Teaching should, therefore, be contextualised and learner-centred. At the same time, technology such as AI tools and digital corpora now plays a growing role in collocation learning. Teachers should guide learners in critical use of these resources to ensure accuracy, appropriacy, and effective integration with traditional sources (Bui et al., 2020) [14]. In summary, the findings demonstrate that advanced learners employed varied strategies but continued to face challenges with retrieval. For a better uptake, collocation instruction should combine multiple strategies, retrieval practice, and contextualised tasks, so that they can address these challenges more effectively, particularly in exam-oriented environments.

This study suggests three main implications for English language teaching in Vietnam and similar exam-oriented contexts. First, learners benefited from combining strategies such as input-based reading, text reconstruction, thematic organisation, and chunking. The finding supports Gu's (2019) [17] view that vocabulary growth is most effective when cognitive and metacognitive strategies are used together; teachers should therefore move beyond rote memorisation to include awareness-raising tasks (Peters, 2009) [13], authentic input (Schmidt, 1990) [20], and productive practice. Second, participants' persistent retrieval difficulties reflect the receptive-productive gap noted by Peters (2009) [13] and Webb and Kagimoto (2009) [24], showing the need for retrieval-based activities like time-limited speaking, and focused writing to strengthen automatization (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008) [8]. Third, the findings confirm that collocational development is shaped by learners' professional goals and prior knowledge (Nguyen & Webb, 2017) [12]. This suggests that instruction must be contextualised and learner-centred, with careful integration of digital tools such as AI and corpora.

3. Conclusions

This study has shown that advanced Vietnamese learners consistently face difficulties with collocations, particularly in spontaneous retrieval. This gap between receptive and productive knowledge, widely noted in earlier research (Peters, 2009) [13], confirms that collocations remain challenging even for learners at high levels of proficiency. Although the participants applied strategies such as structured input, thematic organisation, and lexical chunking, these methods only improved awareness and recall without securing automatization in spontaneous communication. The evidence highlights that recognition-based preparation alone is insufficient in exam-dominated contexts. This study also has limitations, including small sample size, which

limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples to strengthen the generalisability of findings.

The findings suggest implications for pedagogy. Teachers should integrate multiple strategies beyond rote memorisation, adopt retrieval-based activities to foster productive use, and design instruction that reflects professional goals with guidance on digital resources. Although the small sample restricts generalisability, the study provides insights into how advanced learners approach collocation learning in exam-dominated environments. Future research should involve larger cohorts and longitudinal designs to explain how learners consolidate collocations across time and transfer knowledge from recognition to productive use in spontaneous communication.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview prompts

1. Are you aware of collocations?
 2. Why do you use collocations, and how often do you use collocations?
- Are there any difficulties in learning and using them?
4. In what ways do you learn collocations?

Appendix 2: Reflection Prompts

1. What collocations have you noticed recently in your reading or listening? How did you recognise them?
2. Which strategies helped you remember collocations most effectively? Why?
3. Think of a time you tried to use a collocation in speaking or writing. Did it feel successful? Why or why not?
4. Which collocations do you often forget or confuse? What patterns do you see in these difficulties?
5. What goals do you want to set for yourself in learning collocations this week?
6. Which strategies (e.g., repetition, grouping, retrieval practice) did you use most often this week?
7. How confident are you in using collocations spontaneously? What can you do to improve?
8. Which strategy do you find least useful? Why?