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Research Article

THE EFFECT OF FORM-FOCUSED MODELS ON TEACHING VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS IN ENGLISH TEACHING¹

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETİMİNDE BİÇİM ODAKLI MODELLERİN EYLEM-AD EŞDİZİMLİ SÖZCÜK ÖĞRETİMİNE ETKİSİ

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Keywords

EFL, Vocabulary learning, Focus on form, Focus on forms, Form-focused instruction, Verb-noun collocations.

Öz

Eşdizimlilik, sözcük bilgisinin temel bileşenlerinden biri olup ikinci ya da yabancı dilde akıcı ve doğal dil kullanımının geliştirilmesinde belirleyici bir rol oynamaktadır. Bununla birlikte, özellikle öğrencilerin sınıf dışı İngilizce girdisine sınırlı ölçüde erişebildiği yükseköğretim düzeyindeki yabancı dil olarak İngilizce (EFL) programlarında, eşdizimlilik öğretimi müfredatta yeterince yer bulmamaktadır. Bu çalışma, anlam odaklı iletişimsel etkinliklerde dilsel biçime dikkat çekmeyi önceleyen Biçime Odaklanma (Focus on Form - FonF) yaklaşımı ile önceden seçilmiş dil unsurlarının belirtir öğretimi içeren Biçimlere Odaklanma (Focus on Forms - FonFs) yaklaşımının, geleneksel öğretimle karşılaştırıldığında eylem-ad eşdizimlerinin öğretimindeki görece etkililiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Yarı deneysel nicel öntest-sontest-gecikmeli sontest deseninin kullanıldığı çalışmada, Türkiye'de öğrenim gören ve İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen üniversite öğrencileri (n=105) iki deney grubuna (FonF n=32 ve FonFs n=40) ve bir kontrol grubuna (n=33) atanmıştır. Öğrencilerin eşdizimlilik bilgisi, eylem-ad eşdizimlerine yönelik bir başarı testiyle değerlendirilmiştir. Veriler normallik varsayımını karşılamadığından, çalışmada parametrik olmayan istatistiksel analizler kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar hem Biçime Odaklanma hem de Biçimlere Odaklanma yaklaşımlarının sontest aşamasında geleneksel öğretime kıyasla anlamlı derecede daha yüksek eylem-ad eşdizimlerine ilişkin başarı sağladığını, biçimlere odaklanma yaklaşımının ise anlamlı etki büyüklüğü açısından sayısal olarak daha yüksek bir değer gösterdiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bununla birlikte, dört hafta sonra uygulanan gecikmeli sontestte, biçim odaklı yaklaşımlardan hiçbirisi uzun vadeli öğrenme kalıcılığı açısından istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir üstünlük göstermemiştir. Bulgular, biçim odaklı öğretimin (Form-Focused Instruction - FFI) eşdizimliliklerin ilk öğrenim sürecinde anlamlı öğrenme kazanımları sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ancak sınıf dışı dil girdisinin sınırlı olduğu EFL bağlamlarında bu kazanımların uzun vadeli edinime dönüştüğü görülmektedir. Bu durum, biçim odaklı müdahalelerin kısa vadeli performans artışları yaratmakla birlikte, kalıcı sözcüksel gelişim için yeterli olmayabileceğine işaret etmektedir. Dolayısıyla, uzun dönemli kalıcılığı destekleyen pedagojik düzenlemelerin müfredat tasarımında yeniden ele alınması gerektiği düşünülmektedir.

Abstract

Collocational competence constitutes a central component of lexical knowledge and plays a crucial role in achieving fluent and idiomatic language use in a second or foreign language. However, it remains underrepresented in curricula at the tertiary EFL level, where learners have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom. This study investigates the relative effectiveness of Focus on Form (FonF), integrating attention to linguistic form into meaning-focused communication, and Focus on Forms (FonFs), involving explicit instruction of preselected items, in comparison with traditional instruction for teaching verb-noun collocations. Using quasi-experimental quantitative pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design, Turkish university EFL students (n=105) were assigned to two experimental groups (FonF n= 32 and FonFs n= 40) and one control group (n=33). Learners' collocational knowledge was assessed using an overall verb-noun collocation achievement measure. Since the data did not meet normality assumptions, non-parametric statistical analyses were employed. The results showed that both FonF and FonFs led to significantly higher collocation achievement than traditional instruction at the posttest stage, with FonFs showing a numerically larger immediate effect size. However, neither form-focused approach demonstrated a statistically significant advantage in long-term retention at the delayed posttest administered four weeks later. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of form-focused instruction (FFI) for initial collocation learning while underscoring the persistent challenge of sustaining lexical gains in EFL contexts with limited exposure beyond the classroom. The study suggests that although both form-focused approaches promote short-term learning, ensuring long-term retention remains a critical issue for curriculum design.

¹This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics. At the time the research was carried out (2019), ethics committee approval was not mandatory. Nevertheless, the necessary institutional permission was obtained from the institution where the study was conducted. The approval details are as follows: Düzce University Rectorate, Department of Personnel Affairs, Academic Affairs Branch Office, approval dated 14 November 2018, No. E65405.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a cornerstone of second and foreign language proficiency, as it supports learners' performance across all language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Kılıç, 2019; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Tong, Hasim & Huzaina, 2023; Yılmaz & Kavanoz, 2025). Contemporary accounts of lexical knowledge further emphasize that proficient language use depends not only on knowing individual word meanings but also on knowing how words typically combine in recurrent patterns (Nation, 2001; Sinclair, 1991; Wray, 2002). Within this broader view, collocations—conventionalized word combinations that co-occur with greater than random frequency—represent a central yet challenging component of lexical competence because they contribute to fluent, idiomatic, and processing-efficient language use (Aisenstadt, 1979; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Sinclair, 1991; Webb & Nation, 2017).

Despite their importance, collocations remain difficult for EFL learners. Learners often underuse, misuse, or avoid collocations, relying on literal translation or semantically plausible but non-conventional combinations, which can result in language that is grammatically accurate yet noticeably non-native (Bahns, 1993; Ding, Reynolds, Szabo & Boone, 2024; Howarth, 1996; Nesselhauf, 2003; Shehata, 2008). This difficulty is well documented even at advanced proficiency levels, suggesting that collocational competence does not develop automatically through general vocabulary growth or increased years of instruction (Howarth, 1996; Nesselhauf, 2003). At the instructional level, collocations have traditionally received limited systematic attention in many EFL contexts. Vocabulary teaching has often prioritized isolated word meanings, and collocations are frequently addressed incidentally rather than through sustained, planned instruction (Eid & Al-Jamal, 2023; Hill, 2000; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Lewis, 2002; Sun & Park, 2023; Vassiljev, Skopinskaja & Liiv, 2015). This gap is particularly salient in tertiary EFL settings where exposure to English beyond the classroom is constrained, and curricular and assessment pressures may favor grammar and discrete vocabulary items over formulaic language (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2002; Vassiljev et al., 2015). Against this background, the present study examines how different instructional orientations—Focus on Form (FonF), Focus on Forms (FonFs), and traditional instruction—shape learners' development of verb-noun collocations over time.

1.1. Collocations and lexical competence in EFL learning

Collocations are widely viewed as a core component of lexical competence and a key contributor to fluent and idiomatic language use (Nation, 2001; Sinclair, 1991; Sun & Park, 2023; Webb & Nation, 2017). From a usage-based and phraseological perspective,

language is to a large extent formulaic: speakers rely on recurring multiword units in real-time communication, which supports processing efficiency and fluent production (Sinclair, 1991; Webb & Nation, 2017; Wray, 2002). Accordingly, collocations occupy a central position among semi-fixed lexical combinations characterized by conventionality and distributional patterning (Aisenstadt, 1979; Sinclair, 1991; Ding et al., 2024). However, collocational knowledge tends to develop more slowly than knowledge of single words and remains a persistent source of difficulty for EFL learners (Howarth, 1996; Nesselhauf, 2003). Learners may know the meanings of discrete lexical items but fail to combine them in target-like ways, producing non-native-like expressions (Howarth, 1996; Nesselhauf, 2003). Learner corpus research and corpus-informed analyses further indicate that collocational misuse—particularly in verb-noun patterns—constitutes a recurring source of error and often calls for instructional support (Granger & Paquot, 2008; Laufer & Waldman, 2011). In many EFL settings, limited access to rich and sustained authentic input can hinder the consolidation of collocations, increasing the need for pedagogical interventions that promote noticing and productive use (Sun & Park, 2023; Webb & Nation, 2017).

1.2. Verb-noun collocations as a pedagogical focus

Among different collocation types, verb-noun combinations (e.g., *make a decision*, *take responsibility*) are particularly salient because they occur frequently and play a key role in expressing actions and events (Altenberg, 1993; Sun & Park, 2023). At the same time, they pose persistent challenges for EFL learners due to their partially arbitrary nature, limited cross-linguistic transparency, and learners' tendency to rely on word-for-word translation from the L1 (Bahns, 1993; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Nesselhauf, 2003). Because verbs are often semantically light and context-dependent, inaccurate verb choice can distort meaning and reduce comprehensibility (Asadova, 2024; Nesselhauf, 2003; Zhao, 2024). Empirical studies consistently report that verb-noun collocations are especially problematic, even when learners know the component words (Asadova, 2024; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Semiyeva, 2025; Zhao, 2024). From a pedagogical standpoint, verb-noun collocations are less predictable than some other lexical combinations and are not always inferable from semantic transparency. Consequently, they may be unlikely to be acquired incidentally without targeted support, making them a theoretically and pedagogically justified focus for instructional intervention studies (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Sun & Park, 2023).

1.3. Form-focused instruction and collocation teaching

Form-focused instruction (FFI) has become a central concept in second language pedagogy because it aims to balance attention to linguistic form with

meaningful communication (Ellis, 2001; Gurzynski-Weiss, 2024; Loewen & Sato, 2017). In instructed second language acquisition (ISLA), scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to examine instructional effects in authentic classroom settings through theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous designs (Gurzynski-Weiss, 2024; Loewen & Sato, 2017; Peçenek, 2014; Sato & Csizér, 2021). Within this broad framework, two widely discussed orientations are Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Forms (FonFs) (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991).

FonF refers to pedagogical moves that draw learners' attention to language features as they arise during meaning-focused activity, thereby supporting noticing of form-meaning relationships without shifting the lesson into decontextualized form practice (Long, 1991; Ellis, 2001). In collocation teaching, FonF may involve briefly highlighting verb-noun combinations during reading, listening, speaking, or interaction when relevant learning opportunities emerge. In contrast, FonFs involves the explicit and systematic teaching of preselected items organized through a planned syllabus; instruction typically includes explanation, controlled practice, and repetition (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991; Peçenek, 2008). Applied to collocations, FonFs may include explicit presentation of collocation sets, translation-based tasks, matching activities, gap-filling, and drills targeting specific combinations (Laufer, 2005, 2006). Although both orientations have been shown to facilitate language learning, evidence about their relative effectiveness—especially for lexical items—remains mixed. A substantial body of work suggests that explicit instruction often yields stronger immediate gains for vocabulary-related learning, including formulaic language (Laufer, 2005, 2006, 2019; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). At the same time, FonF is argued to support learning by embedding attention to form within communicative contexts (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991). In collocation research specifically, systematic reviews and syntheses highlight both the pedagogical benefits of explicit instruction and the continuing question of how durable instructional effects are over time (Altamimi & Conklin, 2023; Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers & Demecheleer, 2006; Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023; Toomer, Elgort & Coxhead, 2024).

Traditional instruction in many EFL contexts, by contrast, continues to prioritize grammatical accuracy and discrete vocabulary items through teacher-centered explanation and translation-based practices, often with limited systematic attention to collocational patterning (Asadova, 2024; Çavdar, 2018; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2002; Nation, 2001; Semiyeva, 2025; Sipayung & Saragih, 2023). Under such conditions, learners may develop fragmented lexical knowledge lacking the combinatorial competence required for fluent language use, and studies using traditional instruction as a baseline often report modest gains in collocation development relative to more

form-focused approaches (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023; Szudarski, 2012).

1.4. Research gap and rationale

Despite broad agreement on the importance of collocations, research indicates that they continue to receive limited and unsystematic attention in EFL instruction and materials (El Majidi, 2025; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2002; Mahboob & Shah, 2025; Nesselhauf, 2003; Vassiljev et al., 2015; Zhao, 2024). Many studies focus on advanced learners or examine collocation learning in isolation, leaving lower proficiency and tertiary-level EFL contexts comparatively underexplored (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Bui, 2021; Laufer, 2005, 2006, 2019). In the Turkish EFL context, where exposure to English is largely classroom-based, instruction often prioritizes grammar and discrete vocabulary items, with limited planned attention to collocational patterns (Çavdar, 2018; Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2002; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003). Moreover, although research has examined FFI effects in vocabulary learning, direct comparisons of FonF and FonFs for collocation learning—particularly regarding the retention of instructional effects—remain relatively limited in authentic classroom contexts (Li & Lei, 2024; Szudarski, 2012; Usta & Alişah, 2025). Addressing this gap, the present study empirically compares FonF, FonFs, and traditional instruction in teaching verb-noun collocations to university-level EFL learners using a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design.

1.5. Research questions

In line with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Focus on Form (FonF), Focus on Forms (FonFs), and traditional instruction differ in their effects on learners' overall verb-noun collocation achievement in an EFL context?
2. Do learners receiving FonF, FonFs, and traditional instruction differ in their overall verb-noun collocation achievement across the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The present study employed a quasi-experimental quantitative design. Given the constraints inherent in educational settings, such as the use of intact classes and the impracticality of individual random assignment, a quasi-experimental approach was adopted to ensure ecological validity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Accordingly, the study adopted a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest non-equivalent control group design, allowing for the comparison of learning gains across instructional approaches as well as the examination of retention over time. This design choice aligns with current methodological discussions in L2 instructional

research emphasizing the use of multiple measurement points to strengthen the validity of instructional effects (Nassaji, 2020). Three groups participated in the study: two experimental groups receiving different forms of FFI and one control group receiving traditional instruction.

2.2. Population and study group

The participants were 105 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in compulsory English courses at a state university in Türkiye during the 2018–2019 academic year. All participants were native speakers of Turkish learning English as a foreign language, aged between 18 and 22. They were drawn from three academic departments—Landscape Architecture, Mathematics, and Forest Engineering—and assigned to intact classes based on institutional scheduling constraints. Following random assignment at the class level, participants were divided into three groups: a Focus on Form (FonF) group ($n = 32$), a Focus on Forms (FonFs) group ($n = 40$), and a control group receiving traditional instruction ($n = 33$). Although individual random assignment was not possible, the groups were comparable in terms of age, educational background, and prior exposure to English. Pretest results indicated no statistically significant differences among the groups, supporting their initial equivalence.

2.3. Data collection instruments

Collocational knowledge was measured using a researcher-developed collocation achievement test administered as a pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest. In order to minimize test-retest effects, item order was modified in the delayed posttest. The verb-noun collocation achievement test used in the present study consisted of five sections, each including ten items, resulting in a total of 50 questions designed to assess learners' verb-noun collocation knowledge through different task formats. The sections included true-false items, multiple-choice questions, open-ended reading comprehension items, sentence completion tasks, and cloze test items. The instrument was developed in accordance with established principles of language assessment and was reviewed by experts in English language teaching and measurement and evaluation. Before the main implementation, the test was piloted with 61 university students to ensure clarity and appropriateness of the items. Reliability analyses indicated a high level of internal consistency for the overall test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .969$), with subscale reliability coefficients ranging from .794 to .944, indicating acceptable to high reliability across all sections.

2.4. Data collection procedure

Following institutional approval, the pretest was administered at the beginning of the semester. Instructional treatments were implemented over five weeks, after which the posttest was administered. A delayed posttest was conducted four weeks later to

examine retention. No additional instruction targeting the selected collocations was provided during the interval between the posttest and delayed posttest.

2.4.1. Instructional treatments

The instructional intervention lasted five weeks and was integrated into the regular English curriculum. All groups covered the same course content and units from the course textbook, differing only in the instructional approach used to address verb-noun collocations. Instructional materials were adapted in line with principles of materials adaptation (Tomlinson, 2012), and all treatments were implemented by the researcher.

2.4.2. Focus on form (FonF)

The FonF group received instruction characterized by incidental and reactive attention to form within meaning-focused activities, following Ellis (2001) and Ceyhan Gezmiş (2011). Instruction prioritized communication and comprehension, with attention to verb-noun collocations arising naturally during classroom interaction. Techniques included input enhancement, input flooding, consciousness-raising activities, interactional feedback, and output expansion tasks. Target collocations appearing in texts, tasks, or learner output were briefly highlighted and discussed without disrupting the communicative flow. For example, during communicative reading and discussion tasks, learners were encouraged to express their opinions about a topic, and when a target verb-noun collocation emerged (e.g., leave a message or post comments), the teacher briefly highlighted the expression and provided corrective feedback without interrupting the communicative flow. Learners were then prompted to reuse the collocation in subsequent interaction.

Pair work, role-play, and guided interaction were used to encourage meaningful use of collocations. Although curricular constraints limited the systematic application of all FonF techniques, core instructional principles were maintained throughout the intervention.

2.4.3. Focus on forms (FonFs)

The FonFs group received explicit and systematic instruction in verb-noun collocations in line with Ellis's (2001) framework. Collocations were preselected and taught through explanation, practice, and repetition. Instructional activities included explicit presentation of collocation lists, translation exercises, matching tasks, gap-filling activities, and controlled production exercises. To illustrate the explicit instructional procedures used in this condition, a typical FonFs activity involved presenting a set of target verb-noun collocations followed by controlled practice tasks. For example, learners completed matching and sentence completion exercises in which they selected the appropriate verb to form correct collocations (e.g., take a break, spend time). The teacher provided immediate feedback and encouraged

repetition to reinforce accurate form–meaning associations. Furthermore, learners received clear explanations of acceptable collocational combinations and were encouraged to practice and memorize target forms. While some procedures overlapped with techniques used in traditional instruction, the defining feature of FonFs was the systematic and explicit focus on collocations, which was absent in the control condition.

2.4.4. Traditional instruction (Control group)

The control group received traditional instruction reflecting prevailing practices identified during the preliminary phase. Vocabulary instruction focused primarily on individual words presented with their Turkish equivalents, with no systematic or explicit attention to verb–noun collocations. Instruction was largely teacher-centered and textbook-driven, emphasizing grammar explanations, reading comprehension, and discrete vocabulary items. Any attention to collocations occurred incidentally and was neither planned nor reinforced.

2.4.5. Target collocations

The instructional focus was limited to verb–noun collocations selected based on frequency, pedagogical relevance, and curricular alignment. An initial pool of 79 verb–noun collocations was identified from five units of the course textbook. This list was cross-checked against established collocation resources, including English Collocations in Use and major collocation dictionaries, and further validated using corpus data. Following expert review, the final set was reduced to 48 target collocations, which formed the basis of instruction and assessment.

2.5. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 25. Normality assumptions were not met, as indicated by the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests; therefore, non-parametric statistical procedures were employed. Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to examine group differences at each testing point, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted for within-group comparisons. When significant results were obtained, post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels were performed. Effect sizes were calculated using $r = z / \sqrt{N}$ (Fritz, Morris, & Richler, 2012), with benchmarks following Cohen (1988). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

2.6. Ethical principles

The study was conducted in accordance with publication ethics. The study was conducted in 2019 when ethics committee approval was not required. However, the necessary approval for the current study was obtained: Düzce University Rectorate, Department of Personnel Affairs, Academic Affairs Office, 14.11.2018-E65405

2.7. Data availability

The dataset used in this study was originally collected during the 2018–2019 academic year as part of the author’s doctoral research. Although the data were collected several years prior to publication, the dataset remains analytically and pedagogically relevant because the instructional design, research procedures, and assessment framework reflect stable instructional practices in tertiary EFL contexts. The delayed reporting of the findings is primarily related to the study’s origin as a doctoral dissertation and the subsequent process of preparing the data for publication in article format.

The data were securely stored in password-protected digital storage in accordance with institutional data management practices. No personal identifiers were included in the dataset. For the purposes of the present publication, the dataset was re-examined and re-analyzed to ensure consistency with current reporting standards and transparency requirements. The selection of this dataset was based on its methodological rigor, completeness, and continued relevance to ongoing discussions in form-focused instruction and collocation learning.

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

3. Findings

The quantitative findings are presented in relation to the two research questions and are based on participants’ overall verb–noun collocation achievement scores obtained from the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest. Preliminary normality checks using the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests indicated that the data did not meet the assumptions of normal distribution; accordingly, non-parametric statistical procedures were employed. All statistical analyses were conducted at the .05 significance level.

3.1. Effectiveness of instructional approaches in teaching verb–noun collocations

The first research question examined the instructional impact of FonF, FonFs, and traditional instruction on learners’ verb–noun collocation achievement. To address the first research question regarding the instructional impact within each group, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted to compare pretest and posttest scores. Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to examine significant differences between the three groups at each testing point (pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest). When significant results were obtained, post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels were performed to identify specific group differences. The Z-values reported in the effect size table (See Table 1) were derived directly from these analyses. Effect size values were calculated for each instructional condition based on learners’ overall

achievement scores. Effect sizes for non-parametric tests were calculated using the formula $r = z / \sqrt{N}$, as recommended by Fritz et al. (2012). Interpretation of effect size magnitude followed Cohen's (1988) conventional benchmarks for correlation-type coefficients ($r \approx .10$ = small, $r \approx .30$ = medium, $r \geq .50$ = large). The effect size results for the three instructional conditions are presented (See Table 1).

Table 1. Effect sizes of instructional approaches on overall verb-noun collocation achievement

Group	Z	N	r
Focus on Form (FonF)	-4.27	32	.76
Focus on Forms (FonFs)	-5.43	40	.86
Traditional instruction (Control)	-2.25	33	.39

Although all groups showed some degree of improvement, the FonFs group produced the largest effect size ($r = .86$), indicating a strong instructional impact on learners' verb-noun collocation learning. The FonF group also demonstrated a large effect ($r = .76$), suggesting substantial learning gains, though to a slightly lesser extent. In contrast, the control group demonstrated a considerably smaller effect size ($r = .39$), corresponding to a medium instructional impact. Overall, these results indicate that both form-focused instructional approaches were substantially more effective than traditional instruction, with FonFs showing the strongest overall effect (See Table 1).

3.2. Group differences across pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest

The second research question investigated whether statistically significant differences existed among the experimental and control groups across the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine significant differences between the three groups at each testing point. When significant results were obtained, post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels were performed to identify specific group differences. Descriptive statistics and overall group comparison results are presented (See Table 2).

Table 2. Group differences in overall verb-noun collocation achievement across pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest

Test Occasion	Group	N	Mean	SD	P
Pretest	FonF	32	26.06	12.24	.102
	FonFs	40	20.15	6.18	
	Control	33	22.06	7.83	
Posttest	FonF	32	40.22	17.21	< .001
	FonFs	40	36.20	11.52	
	Control	33	24.24	8.66	
Delayed Posttest	FonF	32	31.50	13.55	.085
	FonFs	40	28.60	9.87	
	Control	33	25.58	10.71	

3.2.1. Pretest comparisons

A Kruskal-Wallis test conducted on pretest scores revealed no statistically significant differences among the three groups ($H(2) = 4.56$, $p = .102$), indicating that the groups were comparable in their initial verb-

noun collocation knowledge prior to instruction (See Table 2).

3.2.2. Posttest comparisons

Posttest results revealed a statistically significant difference among the groups ($H(2) = 28.40, p < .001$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels showed that both the FonF and FonFs groups significantly outperformed the control group. However, the difference between the two experimental groups did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$) (See Table 2). These findings suggest that form-focused instructional approaches were associated with significantly greater short-term gains in collocation learning compared to traditional instruction.

3.2.3. Delayed posttest comparisons

To examine the durability of instructional effects, delayed posttest scores were analyzed four weeks after instruction. The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal statistically significant differences among the groups ($H(2) = 4.93, p = .085$). Within-group comparisons between posttest and delayed posttest scores, conducted using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, also indicated no statistically significant changes over time ($p > .05$) (See Table 2). Although slight score decreases were observed from the posttest to the delayed posttest, none reached statistical significance. Overall, these findings suggest that while the form-focused approaches produced clear short-term gains, no instructional approach demonstrated a statistically significant advantage in terms of long-term retention under the present conditions.

3.3. Summary of results

Addressing the first research question, both FonF and FonFs were more effective than traditional instruction in teaching verb-noun collocations, with FonFs yielding a numerically larger instructional effect size. Regarding the second research question, statistically significant group differences emerged at the posttest, with both experimental groups outperforming the control group. No significant differences were observed at the pretest or delayed posttest. These findings provide a clear empirical basis for the discussion of instructional effectiveness, retention, and theoretical implications in the following section.

4. Discussion

This study explored the relative effectiveness of FonF, FonFs, and traditional instruction in teaching verb-noun collocations in an EFL context, while also examining how well instructional gains were maintained over time. The discussion that follows addresses the two research questions by interpreting the findings in light of existing research on FFI and collocation learning.

4.1. Instructional effectiveness in teaching verb-noun collocations

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that both FonF and FonFs were more effective than traditional instruction in promoting

learners' verb-noun collocation learning. Although FonFs showed a numerically larger effect size, the difference between the two experimental conditions did not reach statistical significance. This pattern aligns with previous research demonstrating that explicit attention to lexical form-meaning relationships facilitates vocabulary development in instructed second language acquisition. (Boers, 2021; Ellis, 2001; Laufer, 2005, 2006, 2019; Nation, 2001; Peters, 2019). Verb-noun collocations are known to pose persistent challenges for EFL learners, largely due to their partially arbitrary nature and limited cross-linguistic transparency (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Leonard, Joseph, & Daller, 2024; Nesselhauf, 2003; Semiyeva, 2025; Toomer et al., 2024; Usta & Alişah, 2025; Zhao, 2024). Because such combinations are unlikely to be acquired through exposure alone, they often require systematic instructional support. In this respect, the superior performance of the FonFs group is consistent with evidence showing that explicit, planned, and repeated engagement with target forms enhances the acquisition of complex lexical units (Li & Lei, 2024). By increasing the salience of verb-noun collocations through structured input and controlled practice, FonFs instruction supports the development of more stable form-meaning associations, particularly for collocations characterized by high arbitrariness or low semantic transparency (Sun & Park, 2023; Szudarski, 2012; Usta & Alişah, 2025). This finding is consistent with accounts of intentional vocabulary learning, which emphasize the role of elaboration and rehearsal in establishing durable lexical representations (Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer, 2005; Nation, 2001). Moreover, intentional instructional tasks encourage deeper cognitive processing, facilitating a shift from reliance on the "open choice principle" toward more native-like, holistic processing of lexical combinations (Aghajani & Abbaszadeh, 2018; Moghadam & Pourmohammadi, 2023).

Although FonF instruction also resulted in substantial learning gains, its impact was comparatively weaker than that of FonFs. This difference can be attributed to the incidental and reactive nature of FonF, in which attention to form is typically triggered by immediate communicative needs rather than systematic instructional planning (Long, 1991; Ellis, 2001). Recent research suggests that such reactive interventions may lack the instructional intensity necessary to stabilize form-meaning associations in complex lexical units (Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023). Compared with the structured engagement characteristic of FonFs, the brief and uneven noticing opportunities inherent in FonF may generate insufficient involvement load to ensure productive mastery or to counteract cross-linguistic interference (Ding et al., 2024; Szudarski, 2012; Usta & Alişah, 2025). From a cognitive perspective, such limited engagement may restrict opportunities for elaboration and rehearsal, which are central to long-term lexical development (Hulstijn, 2001; Nation, 2001). Evidence from meta-analytic research in instructed SLA further

supports this interpretation, indicating that explicit and pre-planned FFI tends to yield larger effects on average (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010; Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023). This advantage is commonly attributed to higher levels of intentionality and involvement load, which promote more robust form-meaning associations than reactive instructional approaches (Ding et al., 2024; Szudarski, 2012; Usta & Alişah, 2025). At the same time, the large effect size observed for FonF instruction in the present study underscores its pedagogical value. Integrating attention to form within communicative activities can meaningfully support collocational development, particularly when learners are encouraged to both process and produce target forms in context. This finding aligns with research highlighting the potential of FonF to foster lexical development without undermining communicative goals (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Long, 2015; Semiyeva, 2025; Toomer et al., 2024; Zhao, 2024). The effectiveness of FonF may therefore be enhanced when learners are provided with sufficient instructional time and opportunities for repeated engagement, potentially through corpus-informed or data-driven approaches which promote noticing and learner autonomy (Boulton & Cobb, 2017).

4.2. Limited impact of traditional instruction

The relatively modest gains observed in the control group align with evidence suggesting that incidental exposure through meaning-focused activities without systematic attention to form often leads to weaker learning outcomes than explicit instructional approaches (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2002; Li & Lei, 2024; Norris & Ortega, 2000). As Szudarski (2012) points out, Meaning-Focused Instruction tends to enhance collocational knowledge only when it is complemented by explicit FonFs. This tendency is further supported by recent meta-analyses showing that explicit or deductive approaches generally yield larger effect sizes than implicit instruction (Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern can be interpreted in light of the noticing hypothesis and principles of grammatical consciousness-raising (Sun & Park, 2023). In the absence of explicit intervention, adult learners often fail to notice collocations in the input (Durrant, 2014) and instead process language according to the open choice principle, treating lexical items as independent units rather than as recurring combinations (Goulart, 2019). This issue is compounded by the fact that instructional materials frequently position collocations as peripheral rather than central components of vocabulary instruction (Nesselhauf, 2003; Vassiljev et al., 2015). Under such conditions, exposure through textbooks alone is unlikely to foster robust collocational learning. Without the intentionality and high involvement load associated with explicit instructional focus, learners are therefore less likely to internalize recurring lexical patterns in a durable way

(Ding et al., 2024; Szudarski, 2012). This aligns with the view that vocabulary knowledge involves not only knowing individual word meanings but also knowing how words conventionally combine, a dimension that rarely develops through incidental exposure alone (Nation, 2001; Laufer, 2005).

4.3. Retention effects and instructional sustainability

With respect to research question 2, the significant gains observed at the posttest were not maintained at the delayed posttest. This finding suggests that initial learning gains may not be sustained without continued exposure and practice. In input-limited EFL contexts, newly acquired collocations remain vulnerable to attrition unless learners are provided with repeated opportunities for meaningful use and reinforcement. (Li & Lei, 2024). One likely explanation concerns the limited opportunities learners had to engage with the target collocations after the instructional period. In many EFL contexts, learners encounter a scarcity of meaningful input beyond the classroom, which can hinder the consolidation of newly learned lexical associations (Usta & Alişah, 2025). As highlighted in recent syntheses, collocational knowledge is inherently fragile and requires sustained, repeated exposure to move beyond initial noticing toward more stable learning (Sun & Park, 2023; Ding et al., 2024). In the absence of continued productive use or sustained input, newly formed lexical links remain particularly vulnerable to attrition (Li & Lei, 2024; Nation, 2001; Szudarski, 2012). As Hulstijn (2001) argues, lexical knowledge acquired without sufficient elaboration and rehearsal is especially susceptible to attrition, particularly in input-poor learning environments.

Instructional intensity may also have contributed to this pattern. Although the intervention was effective in facilitating initial learning, it may not have provided the distributed practice necessary for more durable retention (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2007). Meta-analytic research indicates that sustained engagement and systematic recycling are critical for maintaining collocational knowledge over time (Li & Lei, 2024). Without ongoing intentional practice, lexical associations developed through instruction are likely to weaken, especially in input-poor learning environments (Szudarski, 2012; Usta & Alişah, 2025). In addition, learner-internal factors may have influenced retention outcomes. Variables such as cognitive load, motivation, and individual differences in memory are known to mediate vocabulary learning and long-term maintenance (Hulstijn, 2001; Nation, 2001). As the delayed posttest coincided with the end of the academic term, reduced learner engagement and increased academic demands may have further contributed to attrition. Given the fragile nature of newly acquired collocational knowledge, sustained intentionality and a high level of involvement appear essential for maintaining instructional gains over time (Ding et al., 2024; Sun & Park, 2023).

4.4. Theoretical implications

The findings contribute to ongoing debates concerning the relative merits of FonF and FonFs in instructed SLA. Overall, the results support the view that FFI is essential for lexical development, particularly for structures unlikely to be acquired through exposure alone (Li & Lei, 2024; Sun & Park, 2023). Importantly, FonF and FonFs should not be regarded as competing approaches. Instead, their effectiveness depends on the linguistic target, instructional context, and practical constraints (Ding et al., 2024; Szudarski, 2012). Verb-noun collocations, due to their semi-fixed nature and limited semantic transparency, appear particularly amenable to explicit instruction (Li & Lei, 2024). From this perspective, explicit form-focused instruction supports the type of intentional learning processes—such as elaboration, rehearsal, and consolidation—that are central to the development of stable lexical knowledge (Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer, 2005; Nation, 2001). While this does not diminish the communicative value of FonF, it underscores the need to align instructional approaches with the complexity of the learning target. In EFL environments characterized by limited input and variable learner engagement, these findings underscore the theoretical necessity of a principled and context-sensitive application of form-focused pedagogy to support stable lexical development (Nation, 2001; Usta & Alişah, 2025).

4.5. Methodological considerations

A number of methodological considerations are important for understanding and interpreting the findings of this study. First, although the use of a quasi-experimental design with intact classes was unavoidable in the given educational context, it may have constrained internal validity, despite evidence of pretest equivalence across groups. Furthermore, while the five-week instructional period was sufficient to produce meaningful short-term gains, it may not have provided the repeated exposure and recycling necessary to support long-term retention. Moreover, the study was conducted within a single EFL context where opportunities for English use beyond the classroom were limited, which necessarily restricts the generalizability of the findings to other instructional settings. Finally, although the achievement test demonstrated high reliability and captured learners' overall verb-noun collocation knowledge, it did not include speaking or listening measures. Given the close relationship between collocational competence and oral fluency, future research would benefit from incorporating performance-based assessments. These considerations are particularly important when interpreting the delayed posttest results.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The present study investigated the effectiveness of FonF, FonFs, and traditional instruction in teaching verb-noun collocations to EFL learners. In response to the first research question, the findings suggest that both

form-focused approaches were more effective than traditional instruction in supporting learners' collocational learning at the posttest stage. Although FonFs showed a numerically larger immediate effect size, no statistically significant difference was found between FonF and FonFs, and neither approach demonstrated a significant advantage in long-term retention. With respect to the second research question, which addressed the sustainability of instructional effects over time, the results revealed significant group differences at the posttest stage, confirming that FFI leads to substantial short-term progress. However, these advantages were not maintained at a statistically significant level in the delayed posttest. This pattern does not undermine the value of FFI; rather, it highlights the inherent difficulty of sustaining collocational knowledge in input-poor EFL contexts. The findings suggest that a single instructional cycle, even when effective in promoting noticing and initial learning, is unlikely to be sufficient for long-term retention unless supported by continued exposure and engagement.

Taken together, the results indicate that while FFI, particularly FonFs, plays a crucial role in the development of collocational competence, it should be considered as part of an ongoing learning process rather than as a one-time pedagogical intervention. Verb-noun collocations, given their semi-fixed nature and limited semantic transparency, appear to benefit from explicit instructional support. However, without sustained practice, systematic recycling, and opportunities for meaningful use, instructional gains may remain vulnerable to attrition.

The study was conducted within several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Most notably, the five-week instructional period, though sufficient to produce measurable short-term gains, may not have provided for the depth of processing and repeated exposure necessary for durable learning. In addition, the instructional focus was limited to a specific set of delexical verb-noun collocations, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other types of formulaic language and to learners at different proficiency levels.

Building on these findings, future research may adopt longitudinal designs that incorporate extended instructional sequences, spaced practice, and systematic recycling to better capture the processes underlying collocational retention. Further studies could also examine the role of individual learner variables—such as working memory capacity, motivation, and engagement—in shaping the effectiveness of FonF and FonFs. From a pedagogical perspective, combining explicit instruction with richer, technology-enhanced input and opportunities for meaningful use offers a promising direction for supporting learners in moving beyond short-term gains toward more stable and functional collocational competence.

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