



Bridging the gap between ESP vocabulary acquisition and collocational competence

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in multi-word lexical units, particularly collocations—both receptive (recognition and understanding) and productive (appropriate use)—contributes significantly to overall language proficiency, fluency and the attainment of native-like competence. Developing this type of collocational competence is particularly complex within English for Specific Purposes (ESP), notably technical English, where learners must become accustomed to highly frequent, field-specific lexical bundles. This paper is a follow-up of our previous studies on our ESP students' technical English vocabulary acquisition and collocational competence conducted at the University of Split, in the academic years 2022/2023 and 2024/2025, now supplemented by an analysis on students' opinions on the topic. Quantitative and qualitative studies were conducted on both students' technical English vocabulary acquisition and collocational competence trying to establish their overall level, determine factors affecting them and discern any hypothesized similarities and differences between them at the receptive and productive level. Findings from the studies, despite highlighting certain extralinguistic factors as significant contributors to students' enhanced performance, reveal their rather low overall score in both competences at both levels, and thus explicitly and primarily call for more systematic, explicit and targeted instruction of overall ESP vocabulary and collocations. Practical implications arising from them include integrating explicit overall vocabulary and collocation teaching into ESP syllabi (moving learners from receptive to productive use), using discipline-specific corpora, contextualized learning and repeated and focused productive practice, teaching learning strategies explicitly and training learners to recognize and use lexical chunks and incorporating formative assessments aiming at both reception and production.

Keywords: ESP; collocational competence; receptive collocational competence; productive collocational competence; ESP vocabulary acquisition