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The effect of language awareness approach on intermediate learners' use of collocations in essay writing

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning increasingly highlights formulaic sequences, particularly collocations, which are essential but persistently difficult for language learners. Traditional instruction often overlooks collocational use in writing, and existing language awareness research focuses mainly on grammar and passive vocabulary gains, with limited evidence regarding metalanguage's role in collocation use. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates the effect of the Language Awareness Approach on intermediate learners' use of collocations in essay writing, as well as their perspectives toward this approach. Adopting a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, the study employed quasi-experimental design, with two classes comprising 50 students assigned as an experimental group and a control group. Pre- and post-tests were used to assess changes in collocational performance, while questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were then employed so that learners' perspectives on the approach can be captured. The quantitative results revealed that although both groups improved, the experimental group demonstrated clearer gains in the accuracy and variety of lexical collocations. Qualitative findings revealed strong affective, cognitive, and social engagement, with these dimensions reinforcing each other. Two further patterns refined the picture: the value of metalanguage was conditional rather than categorical, and learners' reliance on teacher guidance suggests that the approach functions as guided rather than autonomous discovery. From the findings, implications for learners, teachers and syllabus designers, together with theoretical contributions to metalanguage and language awareness, are proposed.

Keywords: *Collocations, engagement, language awareness approach, metalinguistic awareness*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is a topic of interest for researchers and teachers in the field of English language teaching (Coady & Huckin, 1996; Khoii & Sharififar, 2013). Krashen (1982) refers to the importance of vocabulary acquisition and argues that it is as important as grammar acquisition. One cannot communicate using a second language (L2) without knowing a range of words that express different meanings and that is why vocabulary teaching is important to L2 learners (McCarthy, 1990).

Vocabulary knowledge encompasses not only individual word meanings but also phrases or chunks of several words that convey a particular meaning (Lessard-Clouston, 2013). The most studied category of formulaic sequences in applied linguistics is collocation (Gablasova et al, 2017; McEnery et al., 2019; Aybek, 2025). Collocations, i.e., words that habitually co-occur in texts, are ubiquitous in language and thus crucial for second language learners to master (Van, 2022).

The ability to use collocations accurately by EFL learners is a major indicator of foreignness (Bui, 2021; Daneshfard & Saadat, 2025). In terms of written language, collocations allow learners to express their written ideas naturally and concisely as native speakers (McCarthy, 2017). As Gledhill (2000) aptly notes, "it is impossible for a writer to be fluent without a thorough knowledge of the phraseology of the particular field he or she is writing in." However, L2 learners from different backgrounds, including those at advanced level, continue to struggle with collocations (Nesselhauf, 2003; Du et al., 2022). Research indicates that learners often develop receptive before productive knowledge and that the ability to recall collocations does not equate to the ability to use them fluently (Lee, 2025). This highlights the need to investigate effective pedagogical approaches to developing learners' collocation proficiency.

One such instructional approach is the Language Awareness Approach. The Language Awareness Approach emphasizes explicit instruction, metalinguistic awareness, and language deep processing. This deeper cognitive engagement helps learners internalize vocabulary more effectively than rote memorization techniques typically used in other approaches. Language awareness refers to the development in of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter, 2003). Empirical studies, such as those by Robinson (1996), Leow (1997), and Rosa and O'Neill (1999), supported the idea that greater levels of awareness can lead to increased L2 acquisition. Within this perspective, vocabulary learning is framed as deep processing rather than rote memorization: learners are encouraged to analyse word forms, explore form-meaning connections, and relate new items to known words and languages.

Secondly, the concept of engagement has also attracted considerable attention in language awareness research. Nakamura (2025) frames engagement as a foundational concept in English language teaching that describes the quality and depth of learner involvement in language learning activities, not just attendance or participation, but how fully learners invest cognitively and affectively in tasks. Engagement is typically conceptualized as multidimensional, comprising behavioural/social, emotional/affective, and cognitive dimensions that dynamically interact during classroom activities and across longer timescales (Zhang, 2020; Maru & Pajow, 2021; Sulis, 2022).

Previous attempts to develop L2 learners' collocational competence have drawn on several pedagogical frameworks, notably the intercollocability approach and the corpus-informed or data-driven learning (DDL) approach. The intercollocability approach, grounded in the notion of collocation clusters, helps learners distinguish conventional collocations from impossible combinations within a shared semantic cluster (e.g., tell the truth versus *say the truth) (Cowie, 1994; Wu, 2021). While this approach sharpens learners' discrimination between acceptable and unacceptable combinations, it tends to treat collocational knowledge as a product to be recognised rather than a process to be engaged with, and offers limited scaffolding for the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions involved in moving from recognition to productive use. Meanwhile, the corpus-informed

approach, most commonly realised through DDL, engages learners directly with concordance lines to induce patterns of co-occurrence from authentic data (Wu, 2021). Although empirical studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in improving both receptive and productive collocational knowledge, concordance lines are often truncated or decontextualised, imposing a substantial cognitive and interpretive burden on learners, particularly those at lower proficiency levels who may not yet possess the analytical skills needed to derive generalisations from raw corpus output (Boulton & Cobb, 2017). DDL is also typically framed as a largely learner-driven enterprise, which risks underspecifying the mediating role of the teacher and the part played by collaborative interaction in the development of metalinguistic understanding. Against this backdrop, the Language Awareness Approach offers a more pedagogically balanced alternative. Rather than positioning collocations as discrete items to be discriminated (as in the intercollocability approach) or as patterns to be self-discovered from corpus data (as in DDL), the Language Awareness Approach is particularly well-suited to intermediate learners, whose productive collocational development depends not only on exposure to patterns but also on the affective, cognitive, and social engagement that scaffolded awareness-raising tasks are designed to elicit. It is on this basis that the Language Awareness Approach is adopted in the present study.

Although the approach has been extensively researched and developed, most of the research focuses on the teaching of grammar (Bourke, 2008), and very few studies have explored their efficacy in the area of vocabulary acquisition. In addition, while numerous studies investigating the effectiveness of collocation teaching have been carried out, most of them have only focused on the effectiveness of methods for enhancing learners' passive knowledge of collocations through incidental learning (Van, 2022; Yuan & Tang, 2025). Less attention has been paid to whether such instructional approaches enable L2 learners to use the acquired knowledge of collocation in their written production, as requiring learners to actively produce collocations in context is generally considered more demanding but arguably a more valid indicator of collocational competence (Ding et al, 2025). Another important gap concerns the role of metalanguage, which is an inherent part of the Language Awareness Approach but remains under-theorised in relation to collocational use in L2 writing. While prior research has examined teachers' and learners' metalinguistic knowledge (Andrews, 2003; Berry, 2004; Fortune & Thorpe, 2001), it has largely treated metalanguage as declarative knowledge rather than a pedagogical tool shaped by its use in instruction. Moreover, the debate over whether metalanguage facilitates or hinders L2 learning (Alderson et al., 1997) has often been framed in binary terms, with limited attention to the conditions under which it may be effective. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence on whether, and under what conditions, metalanguage supports learners' productive use of collocations. The present study addresses this gap by examining collocational performance in essay writing following instruction in which metalanguage was gradually introduced and embedded in collaborative awareness-raising tasks. Finally, although engagement has become a major focus in L2 research, much research has focused on general language achievement, single tasks, or informal learning (Hiver et al., 2021; Sulis, 2022; Tong & Singh, 2025), rather than on engagement, specifically its mediating role between the approach and collocation use in essay writing. At the same time, some studies show that explicit or awareness-raising instruction can substantially improve learning, but these works rarely consider how such pedagogies influence learners' level and quality of engagement (Khatoon et al., 2023).

To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does Language Awareness Approach affect intermediate learners' use of collocations in essay writing?
2. How does Language Awareness Approach promote intermediate learners' level of engagement in developing use of collocations in essay writing?

The answers to these two questions would make this study both theoretically and practically significant. Theoretically, it contributes to L2 learning research by providing empirical evidence on how language awareness, particularly explicit noticing, deep processing, and metalinguistic awareness, supports collocation acquisition and use. From a practical perspective, the findings offer implications for curriculum design in Vietnam, encouraging the integration of the approach into vocabulary and writing instruction. For learners, this approach promotes active noticing of authentic language patterns, leading to improved collocational accuracy and greater learner autonomy. In a broader sense, the study contributes to the improvement of language education in Vietnam by providing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening lexical instruction. As academic writing becomes increasingly important for students' academic success and future professional opportunities, enhancing learners' ability to use collocations accurately and fluently has significant educational and societal relevance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Awareness Approach in Second Language Acquisition

A key feature of a Language Awareness Approach is that learners 'discover language for themselves' (Bolitho et al., 2003). Tomlinson (1994) views Language Awareness as something dynamic and intuitive, which is gradually developed internally by the learner. Similarly, Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995) emphasize its role as helping to develop a healthy spirit of enquiry.

Wright and Bolitho (1993) and Borg (1994) outline five main features of the Language Awareness Approach. Firstly, it involves an ongoing investigation of language as a dynamic phenomenon rather than awareness of a fixed body of established facts. The second feature highlights the centrality of analytical dialogue. Swain (2006) employs the term languaging, which naturally involves the use of metalanguage, either as formal terminology, or as informal ways of talking about language structure (Alderson et al., 1997; Berry, 2004). Riehl (2021) defines metalinguistic awareness as "the ability to pay attention to the structural features of language and language properties and to the functions of language". The third feature underscores the significance of engaging learners in discussion and explicit reflection on language. Fourthly, it aims to develop not only the learners' knowledge about and understanding of language but also their learning skills, thus promoting learner independence. Finally, learners are involved on both a cognitive and affective level.

In terms of the second feature, the pedagogical value of metalanguage, however, remains contested. On one side, several scholars have expressed reservations about the contribution of metalanguage to L2 development. Alderson et al. (1997) reported only modest correlations between learners' metalinguistic knowledge and their general L2 proficiency. Robinson et al. (2013) similarly cautioned that heightened conscious attention to form does not automatically yield acquisition, particularly when terminology is taught in isolation from meaningful use. Roehr-Brackin (2018) advances a more nuanced position, arguing that metalinguistic awareness should not be conflated with explicit metalinguistic knowledge; it is the analytic disposition toward language, rather than the vocabulary of grammatical labels, that appears to matter most for learning. On the other side, a growing body of research documents clear benefits when metalanguage is embedded in reflective, task-based work. Berry (2004) contended that a shared analytical vocabulary enables learners to articulate linguistic observations more precisely and collaborate more effectively on form-focused tasks. Consistent with this view, Siekman et al. (2025) and Ghanmi and Navracsics (2025) report positive associations between metalinguistic awareness and literacy development and lexical diversity, while Riehl (2021) found significant correlations between learners' metalinguistic awareness and writing ability in both L1 and L2. Taken together, this unresolved debate, rather than a settled consensus, is what motivates the

present study's interest in how learners actually experience metalanguage during awareness-raising activities.

An important yet under-theorised dimension in collocation research concerns the role of metalanguage in supporting learners' productive use of collocations. Research on metalinguistic knowledge has raised concerns that explicit terminology may impose additional cognitive load, potentially diverting attention away from meaning construction during language use (Alderson et al., 1997; Robinson et al., 2013). This tension is especially relevant for collocations, which are often acquired and processed as holistic units rather than analytically decomposed structures. From a usage-based perspective, excessive reliance on explicit analysis may even conflict with the gradual, implicit entrenchment of collocational patterns through exposure (Ellis, 2002). Therefore, the present study adopts a view of metalanguage as a form of scaffolded mediation that bridges input and output. Rather than treating it as an end in itself, metalanguage is operationalised as a means to support learners' engagement with authentic language data, enabling them to notice patterns, articulate hypotheses, and refine their lexical choices during writing. By explicitly examining learners' perspectives alongside their written performance, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on whether and how metalanguage facilitates, or potentially constrains, the productive use of collocations in L2 writing, thereby addressing a gap that remains insufficiently explored in existing research.

Engagement with language

Christenson et al. (2012) underscored the crucial role of engagement for learning: "Student engagement drives learning; it requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple contextual influences; and can be achieved for all learners." If we can understand engagement better, we are better equipped for investigating how to engage all learners.

Svalberg (2007) proposed the notion of engagement with language (EWL) as a cumulative process of knowledge creation to create a more developed sense of language awareness. She characterized EWL as a recurring process in which language is the object and medium and language awareness is the resource and outcome. From this perspective, learners' language awareness grows as their level of engagement increases. It is on this basis that Svalberg (2009) advanced a broadened conceptualisation of engagement with language as follows:

- Affective engagement: the engaged individual has a positive, purposeful, willing, and autonomous disposition towards the object (language, the language and/or what it represents).
- Cognitive engagement: the engaged individual is alert, pays focused attention and constructs their own knowledge.
- Social engagement: the engaged individual is interactive and initiating.

Increasingly, researchers acknowledge the need to take account of the interdependence of these different facets of human experience (Larsen-Freeman, 2014). These multiple dimensions are demonstrated to be overlapping and interdependent, not isolated independent constructs (Christenson et al., 2012). Engagement should, therefore, be seen as a multidimensional construct.

Despite these positive relationships, these dimensions can compete against each other. A case illustrating strong affective engagement with language but limited social EWL is that of "Mia", reported in Svalberg and Askham (2015). Her diary entries revealed that she participated willingly in language analysis tasks and considered listening to her peers a useful way to verify her understanding. However, her social EWL remained minimal, as she contributed infrequently during group work, and her turns were typically brief.

Overall, analysis of engagement allows us to include an emphasis both on attention (the cognitive dimension) and on the affective, and social dimensions that support effective learning. Recognizing engagement as multidimensional means that the study benefitted from exploring its multidimensionality in the language learning context.

Collocations in Second Language Acquisition

Sinclair (1991) defines collocations as 'items that occur physically together or have strong chances of being mentioned together'. This reflects a frequency-based approach. According to Sinclair, collocation is the occurrence of two or more words within a short span in a text, and only combinations of items that appear with some defined level of frequency can be treated as collocations. In contrast, scholars with a phraseological approach regard collocations as phraseological units - word combinations in a particular grammatical pattern. A syntactic relation of some kind between elements of a combination, according to them, is an essential requirement (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Cowie, 1994; Nesselhauf, 2005). In this study, collocations were identified through a two-stage procedure, in which a frequency-based approach served as the primary means of selection, while phraseological criteria were applied at a secondary stage.

In some studies (Durrant & Schmitt, 2009; Nguyen & Webb, 2017), the Mutual Information (MI) score and T-score are frequently used as statistical measures to identify the significant co-occurrence of words in a particular combination. The T-score typically identifies collocations which are frequent in use, whereas MI identifies collocations which are typically not very frequent, but display a particularly strong bonding when they co-occur (e.g., commit suicide, resist temptation). Alternatively, in some other more recent studies (Gablasova et al., 2017; Khoja, 2019; Cao & Deignan, 2019), logDice has been used on the grounds that it operates on a standardized scale with a fixed value (Rychlý, 2008), a feature that neither the MI-score nor T-score possesses (Hunston, 2002). LogDice also gives prominence to exclusive combinations without highlighting rare combinations, which makes it preferable to the MI-score (Gablasova et al., 2016). Following Cao and Deignan (2019), the present study adopts a logDice score of 4 or higher is taken as significant and combinations that meet this threshold will be considered collocations. The use of 4.0 preserves comparability with Cao and Deignan (2019), whose three-step extraction procedure the present study adopts, and whose study similarly examined collocational use in L2 writing.

Beyond the broad acknowledgement of collocation's importance, recent decades have witnessed a substantial reconceptualization of the construct through corpus-based and usage-based perspectives, both of which inform the theoretical orientation of the present study. From a corpus-based standpoint, collocations are understood not merely as lexical co-occurrences but as statistically attested patterns (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 2001). The growing accessibility of large reference corpora such as the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, together with association measures including Mutual Information, t-score, and LogDice, has allowed researchers to operationalize collocational strength with greater precision and to move beyond intuition-based judgements of typicality (Gablasova et al., 2017; McEnery, 2019). Drawing on these tools, learner-corpus research has consistently shown that L2 writers' collocational repertoires differ systematically from those of proficient users: intermediate learners tend to over rely on high-frequency, semantically transparent combinations while underusing more restricted, idiomatic ones, and they frequently produce pairings that are grammatically possible yet phraseologically atypical (Paquot & Granger, 2012) Complementing this corpus-based work, usage-based approaches conceptualize collocations as conventionalized form-meaning pairings that emerge through repeated exposure to and processing of authentic input (Bybee, 2010; Ellis, 2002). Within this paradigm, collocational knowledge is not a fixed set of memorised items but a dynamic, probabilistic system shaped by frequency, salience, and contextualised use. Repeated encounters with specific word combinations strengthen associative links, leading to the entrenchment of formulaic sequences in the mental lexicon (Ellis et al., 2008).

Empirical studies on Language Awareness Approach in writing and collocational development

A growing body of research highlights the important role of language awareness in second language development, particularly in writing and vocabulary acquisition. Studies by Haryanti et al. (2022) and Riehl (2021) demonstrate that language awareness significantly contributes to learners' writing achievement, both directly and indirectly. In the area of collocational knowledge, research by Alqaed (2022) and Isaee and Barjesteh (2025) shows that explicit awareness-raising and feedback are more effective than implicit approaches in improving learners' knowledge and retention of lexical collocations, although Huang et al. (2024) notes that increased conscious knowledge does not always lead to better overall learning outcomes. Additionally, Du et al. (2022) finds that heightened awareness of lexical patterning enhances learners' productive use of more native-like and varied collocations. Another important line of research focuses on collaborative dialogue, particularly through Language-Related Episodes, as introduced by Swain and Lapkin (1998), which involve learners reflecting on and discussing their language use. Subsequent studies by Fortune and Thorp (2001), Basterrechea and Leeser (2019), and Zhang and Crawford (2021) confirm that collaborative interaction promotes deeper engagement, improves linguistic accuracy, and expands vocabulary use. However, Kaivanpanah and Miri (2017) emphasize that the quality of interaction is more important than quantity, as cognitively demanding episodes involving negotiation and justification lead to deeper processing and more effective vocabulary learning, especially in open-ended tasks.

Empirical studies on Language Awareness Approach and learner engagement

A central theme in research on learner engagement and task design is the interaction between different dimensions of engagement. Darr (2012) conceptualizes engagement as behavioural, cognitive, and affective, while Svalberg and Askham (2020) extend this framework by showing that awareness-raising tasks can actively promote cognitive, affective, and social engagement. Task design also plays a key role in shaping engagement. Johnson and Tabari (2025) highlight that appropriate cognitive task complexity enhances engagement, whereas excessive demands may cause overload. Similarly, Ainley et al. (2006) and Guariento and Morley (2001) show that tasks perceived as purposeful and relevant increase motivation and effort. These dimensions are interconnected, particularly through social interaction, with Svalberg and Askham (2020) and Johnson and Tabari (2025) demonstrating that collaboration supports both cognitive and social engagement. However, challenges remain, as teachers may struggle with task design, managing cognitive demands, and facilitating effective group work, which can influence overall engagement (Svalberg & Askham, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

The study was conducted using a mixed-methods research design, and particularly an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The approach was chosen because the quantitative data and results provide an initial, general picture of the research problem, which then requires further analysis through qualitative data collection to refine, extend, and explain this overall picture (Creswell, 2012).

In the first stage of the research, a quasi-experimental design was employed to examine the effect of the Language Awareness Approach on learners' use of collocations in essay writing (Cohen et al., 2007). Although experimental designs are considered optimal for establishing casual relationships (Creswell, 2012), random assignment was not feasible in this L2 instruction context because the participants belonged to two intact classes (Dörnyei, 2007). Therefore, a pre-test post-test non-equivalent group design was employed. Following the post-test, a close-ended questionnaire was administered to collect quantitative data on learners' perceptions of the approach. In the second stage, semi-

structured interviews were conducted to compile in-depth qualitative data about learners' various perspectives on the approach and to further elaborate on the quantitative findings.

Research objectives

Convenience sampling was employed to select participants for this study. This approach was chosen because the participants were students at the language center where the researcher was teaching, making them readily accessible. Participants in this research were students of the two IELTS preparation courses I was in charge of. Each class included 25 non-English major students at an intermediate level, so with two classes, a total of 50 students participating in the study. One class was assigned to the experimental group (EG) and the other served as the control group (CG). Those taking part in the study were undergraduates studying at different universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and their ages ranged from 18 to 20. All learners completed an IELTS placement test at the language center, assessing the four macroskills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Students with band scores between 4.0 and 4.5 were placed into two classes, ensuring a homogeneous level of English proficiency. Their goal was to achieve an IELTS score of 6.0–6.5, which was required for graduation.

Measuring instruments

To answer the two research questions, pre-test, post-test, a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed as the study's instruments. The following section explores these instruments in detail.

The pre- and post-tests were administered to both the EG and CG to compare and contrast their performance at the first class meeting (Week 1) and after the treatment at the 20th class meeting (Week 10). The participants were asked to write a 250-word essay to examine their use of collocations. The writing test was based on the format of writing task 2 in the IELTS, the academic module, and although the purposes of these tests are different, they share the same test specifications with the same format and proficiency level, which makes the process of test administration be in congruence with the research design.

Figure 1

The Pre-Test

ACADEMIC WRITING TEST

You should spend about 60 minutes on this task

Write about the following topic

The obesity rate among children is increasing in many parts of the world.

Why is this happening?

What can be done about it?

Give reasons for your answer, and include any relevant examples from your knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words

Figure 2

The Post-Test

ACADEMIC WRITING TEST

You should spend about 60 minutes on this task

Write about the following topic

Fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and natural gas, are the main sources of energy for many countries. However, because of the importance of environmental protection, some nations are moving towards renewable energy such as solar power and wind power.

Do the advantages of using renewable energy sources outweigh the disadvantages?

Give reasons for your answer, and include any relevant examples from your knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words

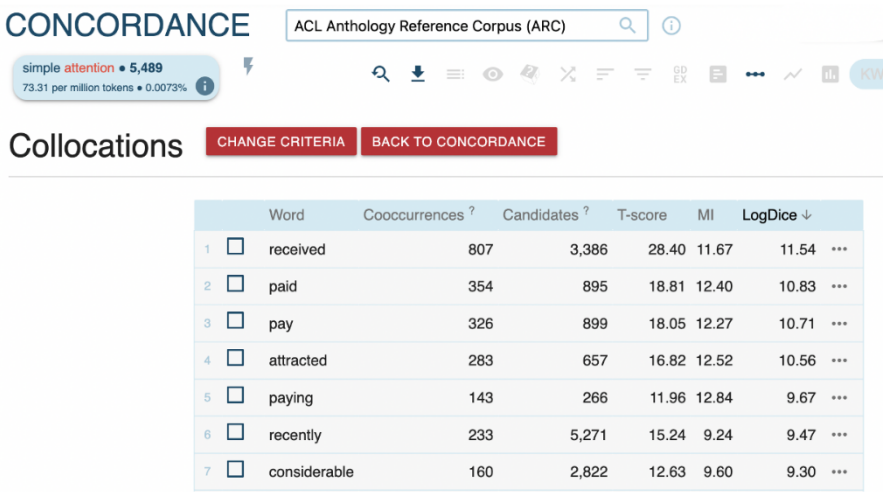
The assessment of students' written texts was based on their use of lexical collocations, focusing on both the formal accuracy of the combinations and the appropriateness of the form-meaning relationship. The extraction and analysis of collocations followed a systematic three-step procedure, based on Cao (2018), with her study conducted to examine the effect of an online collocation dictionary on advanced learners' use of collocations in L2 writing. The first step involved extracting all lexical combinations that corresponded to the target grammatical patterns, including *V+N, V+N, Adj+N, Adv+V (V+Adv), Adv+Adj, N+N, N + of + N* (Benson et al., 1997). This process was carried out sentence by sentence for every written text.

Corpus-Informed Language Awareness

The second step focused on assessing the conventionality of the extracted combinations, that is, the degree to which they are acceptable and attested in authentic language use. Each combination was then checked against the British National Corpus (BNC) using the Sketch Engine software. Combinations that appeared at least five times in the BNC were considered conventional (Nesselhauf, 2003) and thus processed in the next stage, which aims to distinguish collocations from free combinations, while combinations not attested in the corpus were treated as collocational errors. The final step aimed to determine which of the acceptable, or conventional combinations were strong collocations, distinguishing them from free combinations. To this end, the LogDice score was consulted, as it provides a standardized measure of collocational strength that accounts for exclusivity rather than raw frequency alone (Gablasova et al., 2017; Khoja, 2019, Cao & Deignan, 2019). When a combination recorded a LogDice score above 4.0, it was classified as a strong collocation, whereas scores below this threshold indicated a free combination. The two figures below illustrate examples of the use of collocation sorting function Sketch Engine (Kilgariff, 2004) to look for collocation candidates for the noun attention and free combinations.

Figure 3

Examples of Collocations Identified Through Sketch Engine



	Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	T-score	MI	LogDice
1	received	807	3,386	28.40	11.67	11.54
2	paid	354	895	18.81	12.40	10.83
3	pay	326	899	18.05	12.27	10.71
4	attracted	283	657	16.82	12.52	10.56
5	paying	143	266	11.96	12.84	9.67
6	recently	233	5,271	15.24	9.24	9.47
7	considerable	160	2,822	12.63	9.60	9.30

Figure 4

Examples of Free Combinations Identified Through Sketch Engine

	Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	T-score	MI	LogDice
901	starting	4	6,093	1.78	3.16	3.50
902	captures	3	3,205	1.60	3.67	3.50
903	valuable	3	3,206	1.60	3.67	3.50
904	prior	6	11,918	2.09	2.78	3.50

All of these essays across both groups and both testing points were then coded independently by a second rater with a firm background in applied linguistics and familiarity with corpus-based collocation analysis. Prior to independent coding, the two raters discussed the operational criteria, worked through sample texts together, and refined the coding protocol until a shared understanding was reached. Inter-rater agreement was then calculated using Cohen's kappa for the binary categorisation of combinations into collocations, free combinations, and collocational errors. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and where consensus could not be reached, the combination was re-checked against the BNC and the LogDice threshold before a final decision was made. Such inter-rater reliability strengthens the transparency and replicability of the coding procedure and is in line with recommendations for corpus-informed collocation research (Gablasova et al., 2017).

With regard to the process of treating collocations that did not meet the frequency threshold of five, additional verification needed conducting with the assistance of native speakers to assess the degree of acceptability, following a procedure suggested in Cao's (2018) study. This is because the BNC corpus, in general, includes a wide range of texts from different registers and language domains, so it evidently did not include all acceptable combinations. However, the reliance on panels of native speakers for judgement was not feasible in the present study, and as a result chatGPT was employed. Although the use of ChatGPT to assess the acceptability of low-frequency or unattested combinations was intended to address the limitations of a corpus-only approach, the rigor of this procedure

is rendered questionable. One concern relates to how prompts should be designed to elicit reliable responses, which raises concerns over replicability and transparency. In other words, acceptability judgements that are not grounded in clearly operationalized criteria may be difficult for other researchers to reproduce, and how such judgements are elicited and interpreted is not clear. Given these considerations, collocational combinations were evaluated solely on the basis of corpus evidence drawn from the BNC.

To address the second research question about to what extent Language Awareness Approach promoted engagement in developing collocation use in essay writing, the likert-scale questionnaire was administered to the EG. The questionnaire includes 12 close-ended sentences designed using a 4-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire items were grouped into five clusters to reflect the key dimensions of engagement with language identified by Svalberg's (2009) and Nakamura (2025). Group 1 (items 1-4) concerns affective engagement, focusing on learners' levels of interest, enjoyment, confidence, and emotional readiness when interacting with the tasks, in line with the view that affective involvement promotes deeper processing of language. Group 2 (items 5-8) examines learners' cognitive engagement with the awareness-raising activities, particularly their attention, noticing, and analytical processing during the lessons. Group 3 (items 9-12) addresses social engagement, exploring the extent to which learners interacted, collaborated, and negotiated meaning with peers.

One way to ensure reliability in quantitative research is through the internal consistency among the items (Cohen et al., 2017). To test for this, this study employed Cronbach's Alpha, also referred to as alpha coefficient of reliability. The results of the 12 responses from the students in the pilot study were collected and analyzed using SPSS version 27. The Cronbach's Alpha values for the questionnaire can be found in Table 3.3 below. As can be seen from Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha value for each construct was higher than 0.7, indicating a high level of reliability (Cohen et al., 2017). As such, there is strong evidence to conclude that the questionnaire is a reliable instrument that can be used to measure how the development of collocation use in essay writing was supported through affective, cognitive, and social engagement.

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha Values of The Pilot Questionnaire

Construct of learners' engagement with the Language Awareness Approach	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items	Items
Affective engagement	0.869	4	1 2 3 4
Cognitive engagement	0.724	4	5 6 7 8
Social engagement	0.719	4	9 10 11 12

Semi-structured interviews were finally used after the questionnaire data so as to triangulate the data with the questionnaires, giving the participants the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect that might help the researcher to understand the effect the intervention has on the participants.

The assessment of students' written texts was based on their use of lexical collocations, focusing on both the formal accuracy of the combinations and the appropriateness of the form-meaning relationship. The extraction and analysis of collocations followed a systematic three-step procedure based on Cao (2018), with her study conducted to examine the effect of an online collocation dictionary on advanced learner'' use of collocations in L2 writing. The first step involved extracting all lexical combinations that corresponded to the target grammatical patterns, including *V+N, V+N, Adj+N, Adv+V (V+Adv), Adv+Adj, N+N, N + of + N* (Benson et al., 1997). This process was carried out

sentence by sentence for every written text. The second step focused on assessing the conventionality of the extracted combinations, that is, the degree to which they are acceptable and attested in authentic language use. Each combination was then checked against the British National Corpus (BNC) using the Sketch Engine software. Combinations that appeared at least five times in the BNC were considered conventional (Nesselhauf, 2003) and thus processed in the next stage, which aims to distinguish collocations from free combinations, while combinations not attested in the corpus were treated as collocational errors. The final step aimed to determine which of the acceptable, or conventional combinations were strong collocations, distinguishing them from free combinations. To this end, the LogDice score was consulted, as it provides a standardized measure of collocational strength that accounts for exclusivity rather than raw frequency alone (Gablasova et al., 2016; Khoja, 2019, Cao & Deignan, 2019). When a combination recorded a LogDice score above 4.0 was classified as a strong collocation, whereas scores below this threshold indicated a free combination. The two figures below illustrate examples of the use of collocation sorting function Sketch Engine (Kilgariff, 2004) to look for collocation candidates for the noun attention and free combinations.

To address the second research question about learners' perspectives on the effect of the Language Awareness Approach on their use of collocations in essay writing, the EG was administered a Likert-scale questionnaire. The questionnaire includes 20 close-ended sentences, which are rated a 4-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire items were grouped into five clusters to reflect the key dimensions of engagement with language identified by Svalberg (2009) and Nakamura (2025). Group 1 (items 1-4) concerns affective engagement, focusing on learners' levels of interest, enjoyment, confidence, and emotional readiness when interacting with the tasks, in line with the view that affective involvement promotes deeper processing of language. Group 2 (items 5-8) examines learners' cognitive engagement with the awareness-raising activities, particularly their attention, noticing, and analytical processing during the lessons. Group 3 (items 9-12) addresses social engagement, exploring the extent to which learners interacted, collaborated, and negotiated meaning with peers. Group 4 (items 13-15) targets learners' perspectives towards language, including their developing sensitivity to language patterns and their attitudes toward reflecting on language forms and functions. Group 5 (items 16-20) investigates learners' perspectives on language learning, especially their beliefs about the usefulness of the approach, its impact on their learning behaviours, and their commitment to applying these activities in the future.

Semi-structured interviews were finally used after the questionnaire data to triangulate the data with the questionnaires, giving the participants the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect that might help the researcher to understand the effect the intervention has on the participants.

Data collection procedure

Following an overview of the course objectives and requirements, I introduced the purpose of the research and the procedures involved At the first class meeting, students were asked to write a 350-word essay on one assigned topic within 60 minutes at the outset. These initial writing texts served as the baseline data for identifying the types of collocations that learners were able to use accurately and those with which they experienced difficulty and for comparing with their use of collocations in the second set of essays.

With regard to instructional procedure in the EG, there are generally 12 steps that help students gradually develop awareness of the potential pragmatic value of particular linguistic features (Tomlinson, 1994). The first procedures are usually experiential rather than analytical and aim to involve the learners in affective interaction with a potentially engaging text, so as to be able to achieve their own mental representation of the text, and to articulate their personal responses to it. Then the learners were asked to focus on a particular feature of the text, to work with others to identify instances of this feature, and

to make discoveries and articulate generalizations about its use. They were then encouraged to test their generalizations by searching for other instances in other texts. Ongoing research was then encouraged, which involved seeking further instances and reconsidering the generalizations which had been made. Throughout the process, the potential of interactive collaboration between the learner and other learners, between the learners and the teacher, and between the learners and proficient users of the language were maximized.

During the intervention period for the EG, students were required to produce one paragraph or essay approximately every two weeks, following the two essay types prescribed in the course textbook. These writing tasks were intended to provide regular opportunities for learners to apply collocational knowledge and awareness developed through the language awareness activities. All written assignments were collected and reviewed, and before returning their papers, I allocated a certain amount of time during a suitable point in the lesson to provide whole-class feedback on their writing.

As planned, students were asked to do the second in-class writing in the last session on the 11th week. The second essay was also written in 60 minutes about one given topic. After all the participants had completed their writings, they completed the online questionnaires designed to measure their perspectives on the activities during class meetings. Online questionnaires administered via Google Forms were chosen as the most direct and efficient method for gathering participants' immediate responses. To secure sufficient participants for the subsequent interviews, I invited volunteers at the end of the questionnaire phase and arranged the interview schedule immediately after collecting all responses.

In this research, the interviews were conducted a few days after the writing task at the end of the course. Based on their post-test scores, I invited five students for the interview, including 2 students with high scores, 2 students with an average score and 2 students with low scores, to gain a broader range of views. There were around 12 approximately questions in each interview, and the interviewer flexibly asked follow-up questions corresponding to the answers of the interviewees to gain deeper insight into their perceptions. The questions used in the interviews were in Vietnamese so that they felt most comfortable and confident with their answers.

At the beginning of the course, students in the CG were likewise informed of the study's purpose and procedures. Participation of the study was voluntary, and all students present agreed to take part. As with the EG, each student completed an initial 250-word in-class essay within a sixty-minute timeframe, using one assigned topic. After collecting the first written texts, the writing lessons for the CG were delivered following a traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) format. Unlike the exploratory and inductive procedures implemented in the EG, instruction in the CG relied on explicit explanation of target collocations, controlled identification tasks, and guided practice activities. Throughout the intervention period, students were assigned periodic short writing tasks in accordance with the course syllabus. No awareness-raising tasks, portfolio work, or discovery-based activities were incorporated for this group. In the final session, students completed the second in-class essay, again within a sixty-minute limit.

Data analysis procedure

The Wilcoxon signed-rank was used to to examine the within-group effect of the intervention. Specifically, it measures whether learners in each group show a statistically significant improvement in collocation use from the pre-test to the post-test. In contrast, the Mann-Whitney U test investigates the between-group effect by comparing the performance of the EG and CG. In order to analyze the Likert-scale data obtained from the questionnaire, the mean score ranges corresponding to the four response options needed to be established. The resulting interpretation ranges are presented as follows: 1.00 to 1.75 represents Strongly disagree, 1.76 to 2.51 represents Disagree, 2.52 to 3.27 represents Agree, and 3.28 to 4.00

represents Strongly agree. Conversely, qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews underwent thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's framework, the analysis proceeded through familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing the final report. An inductive, data-driven approach was adopted to stay close to participants' meanings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the key findings of the study and is organized around the main research questions. The first research question examines the effect of Language Awareness Approach on intermediate learners' use of collocations in essay writing, while the second research question deals with the learners' perspectives on the effect of the approach on their use of collocations in essay writing.

Learners' use of collocations in essay writing

A comparison of the types of lexical combinations produced in the two sets of essays shows meaningful shifts in learners' collocational behaviour across the treatment period. In the EG, the total number of collocations increased from 479 in the pre-test to 553 in the post-test. Simultaneously, free combinations also increased (from 317 to 408), and most importantly, the number of collocational errors in the EG decreased from 110 to 86, demonstrating that learners not only used more collocations overall but also used them with increased precision. In contrast, the CG displayed a different pattern. While the total number of collocations also rose substantially (from 551 to 667), free combinations decreased (from 396 to 366), and collocational errors dropped from 90 to 71. Although the CG showed improvement, the simultaneous increase in collocation use and decrease in errors was less proportional than in the EG. The EG's essays showed a more favorable balance, with a greater use of collocations accompanied by a sharper reduction in erroneous combinations.

Table 2

Overall Distribution of The Number of Extracted Lexical Combinations

	EG - Pre-test	EG - Post-test
Collocations	479	553
Free combinations	317	408
Errors	110	86

	CG, - Pre-test	CG - Post-test
Collocations	551	667
Free combinations	396	366
Errors	90	71

Within-group comparison

To measure the degree of improvement in learners' use of collocations, the number of collocations used in the pre-test and post-test of each group were subjected to the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. Table 2 shows that the EG demonstrated a clear improvement in their use of collocations from pre-test to post-test. Specifically, 16 students showed higher

post-test results compared to results, while only 7 showed declines and 2 remained unchanged. The higher sum of positive ranks (213.50) relative to negative ranks (62.50) further indicates that the overall direction of change was strongly positive. This improvement was confirmed to be statistically significant ($Z = -2.300$, $p = .021 < .05$), suggesting that the Language Awareness Approach was associated with a meaningful effect on improving learners' collocational performance.

Meanwhile, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for the CG indicate a modest improvement in learners' use of collocations from pre-test to post-test. As shown in Table 3, the improvement did not reach statistical significance, as reflected in the p-value of .063, which exceeds the .05 threshold. This indicates that although there may have been a positive trend, the evidence is insufficient to conclude that a reliable improvement occurred in the CG over the treatment period.

Table 3

Results of The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests of the EG

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
posttest-pretest	Negative Ranks	7[a]	8.93	62.50
	Positive Ranks	16[b]	13.34	213.50
	Ties	2[c]		
	Total	25		

a. posttest < pretest
b. posttest > pretest
c. posttest = pretest

Test Statistics[a]

	posttest- pretest
Z	-2.300[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.021

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
b. Based on negative ranks

Table 4
Results of The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests of The CG

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
posttest-pretest	Negative Ranks	9[a]	10.39	93.50
	Positive Ranks	16[b]	14.47	231.50
	Ties	0[c]		
	Total	25		

d. posttest < pretest
e. posttest > pretest
f. posttest = pretest

Test Statistics[a]

	posttest- pretest
Z	-1.859[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.063

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
b. Based on negative ranks

Between-group comparison

To determine whether the EG and CG differed significantly in their post-test collocational performance, the number of collocations used in post-test was subjected to the Mann-Whitney U Test. As shown in Table 5, the EG obtained a higher mean rank (28.82) than the CG (22.18), and the sum of ranks also favoured the EG (720.50) over the CG (554.50). However, this difference did not reach statistical significance, as evidenced by the Mann-Whitney U value of 229.50 and a p-value of .107, which exceeds the conventional .05 threshold. This suggests that while there was a numerical tendency favouring the EG, the evidence is insufficient to conclude that the Language Awareness Approach led to significantly better collocational performance compared to the CG.

Table 5
Mann-Whitney U Test of The Post-Test

Ranks

	Participant	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
posttest	EG	25	28.82	720.50
	CG	25	22.18	554.50
	Total	50		

Test Statistics[a]

	posttest
Mann-Whitney U	229.500
Wilcoxon W	554.500
Z	-1.613
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.107

a: Grouping Variable: participant

Based on these aforementioned results, it was within reason to conclude that the Language Awareness Approach has produced a positive effect on the EG's use of collocations in essay writing. Conversely, the limited improvement in the CG's use of collocations in essay writing could partially be attributed to the lack of exposure to the Language Awareness Approach. These findings were in line with those of Alaqed (2022), whose study results revealed a clear divergence in performance between the two groups. The EG which received awareness-raising instruction demonstrated significant and sustained improvement in both their awareness and knowledge of lexical collocations. In contrast, the CG, taught through the traditional approach, showed no statistically significant gains in any area. Similar findings were also reported by Isaee and Barjesteh (2025), who found that awareness-raising tasks significantly enhanced Iranian EFL learners' recall and retention of collocations, and Du et al. (2022), whose findings indicate that instructional approaches that promote learners' awareness of lexical co-occurrence patterns can play an important role in developing collocational performance.

Two possible explanations are put forward to account for this increase in learners' use of collocations in essay writing. First, previous research shows that there exists a positive correlation between learners' metalinguistic awareness and their ability to notice and internalize target linguistic features. Specifically, it was found that when learners are guided to consciously attend to patterns of authentic language use, they are more likely to "notice the gap" between their own production and proficient users' output, which in turn facilitates deeper cognitive processing and long-term acquisition (Pienemann, 1985; Schmidt, 1992; Tomlinson, 1994; Watson, 2025). This aligns with the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1992), as well as the study conducted by Badger (2018) and Chan (2025), where noticing the gap between learners' current collocation use and native-like usage increases the salience of target combinations. In the current study, the instructional procedures were designed to foreground collocations through explicit consciousness-raising tasks such as comparing learner and native-like production, identifying collocational patterns in reading texts, analysing examples, and reconstructing lexical combinations. These activities operationalise the cognitive process of noticing by directing learners' attention to the form-meaning relationships embedded in authentic input.

Second, language-related episodes involving cognitive conflict episodes are likely to lead to deeper processing and more effective collocational acquisition (Basterrechea & Leeser, 2019). When they were engaged in language awareness tasks and collaborative

dialogue, they experienced moments of negotiation and reflection. Open-ended tasks, especially writing, generated more meaningful episodes (Kaivanpanah & Miri, 2017), and by extension, greater vocabulary gains than controlled tasks. In the study, learners were engaged in essay writing, which, like composition tasks, required them to actively construct meaning and make lexical choices. Such tasks pushed learners to test hypotheses about collocations, thereby enhancing their productive use of language.

The Language Awareness Approach was associated with measurable improvement within the EG, but the evidence for its advantage over traditional PPP instruction remains suggestive rather than conclusive. Several features of the design constrain stronger claims, with the 11-week intervention without a delayed post-test making it hard to decide whether the gains reflect durable learning or short-term noticing effects that a more demanding assessment might dissolve.

How Language Awareness Approach promoted engagement in developing collocation use in essay writing

Affective engagement

The questionnaire results showed strong affective engagement, with most students reporting increased confidence, enjoyment, and motivation when learning collocations. This positive pattern was confirmed by the interview data, where all participants described a clear emotional shift from anxiety to enjoyment and confidence. For example, P1 explained that learning collocations had previously made her feel "*anxious*" and "*scared,*" but after the intervention, she reported "*enjoyed*" learning collocations this way. Similarly, P6 highlighted that the step-by-step activities reduced feelings of being "*overwhelmed*", and instead gave her a feeling of being "*confident*". Another major finding uncovered from the interviews is that four participants demonstrated a clear willingness to continue applying the activities introduced in the course, as commented by participant 1 "*Yes, I plan to continue using these techniques. Now when I read something, I try to pay more attention to how words go together, and I want to keep doing this. I also would love to look for collocations when I write essays so my writing sounds more natural.*" Such findings align closely with Svalberg and Askham (2020), who found that affective engagement was reflected in learners' generally positive attitudes toward the tasks, with most participants reporting that they enjoyed the problem-solving nature of the activities and found them motivating. By and large, this convergence can be inferred as evidence that Language Awareness Approach triggered willingness, curiosity, and autonomous engagement, which align with what Svalberg (2009) described affective engagement as a "positive, purposeful, willing and autonomous disposition" toward language. However, the fact that 32% of learners did not report confidence suggests that affective gains were unevenly distributed. This indicates that Language Awareness Approach may not automatically foster confidence for all learners, particularly those who struggle with vocabulary load or analytical demands. Therefore, the approach's effectiveness depends on task accessibility and learner readiness, echoing concerns raised in engagement research about cognitive overload diminishing affective involvement (Ainley et al., 2006).

Cognitive engagement

In terms of how learners engaged cognitively with collocation learning, the interviews offered detailed explanations for the strong agreement in one item in the questionnaire, where 96% of survey respondents improved their ability to build their own knowledge about English collocation. When asked to elaborate on any specific activities they learned during the course that helped them with this, they offered diverse responses, but these reflect core principles of the Language Awareness Approach: noticing, comparing, analysing, and evaluating language use. Moreover, while the questionnaire overwhelmingly reflected high engagement levels, the interviews added nuance by highlighting challenges

not fully captured in the survey. The following findings may explain why some survey respondents did not still feel confident using collocations in writing (item 1 in the questionnaire). One participant found that analysing texts to identify collocations independently was occasionally difficult and thus reduced their engagement level, which can be attributed to vocabulary load and cognitive effort. Participant 6 shared *"When I had to find collocations by myself in a text, I didn't always know which words went together. Sometimes the text had many new words, and I spent so much time trying to understand the meaning that I forgot to think about collocations."*

Another difficulty arises from the use of metalanguage. As the approach encourages learners to "*talk analytically about language*", one learner who lacks familiarity with this feels discouraged and less engaged during analytical tasks. However, for most learners, they treasured the use of such a language, stating that metalanguage provides a shared vocabulary for discussion during pair or group work. This shared terminology helps reduce ambiguity and allows discussions to focus more directly on language form and meaning, as shared by participant 3 *"At first I found it a little difficult, but later it became quite useful. When we worked in groups, instead of just saying a sentence that sounded strange, we could explain that the verb does not collocate with the noun. This made it easier for us to express our ideas to each other."* Participants also share that when teachers use simple, learner-friendly terms, coupled with introducing new terms slowly, giving clear examples, and repeating them in different tasks, metalanguage is no longer a problem. In the study, the interview findings challenge concerns raised over the cognitive burden of metalinguistic terminology. Students acknowledged initial difficulty, yet maintained that the analytic tasks helped rather than hindered their learning, particularly when terminology was introduced gradually and contextualised. Ultimately, what the data more accurately show is that the value of metalanguage is conditional on how it is introduced and what learners are subsequently asked to do with it. This suggests that the binary framing of the older debate - does metalanguage help or hinder? - is itself the wrong question. Metalanguage functions as a tool whose pedagogical value depends on at least three contextual variables: gradual introduction, contextualised modelling by the teacher, and the presence of peer interaction in which the terminology can be put to communicative use. Where any of these is absent, metalanguage may indeed function as the cognitive burden that earlier critics described. The finding that students valued shared terminology because it allowed them to move beyond saying a sentence "*sounds strange*" toward identifying that "*the verb does not collocate with the noun*" is therefore best understood not as proof that metalanguage works, but as evidence that metalanguage works when it is anchored to a communicative purpose that learners themselves recognise. This reframing has practical consequences: teaching terminology without designing tasks that require its use is unlikely to yield the benefits observed in this study. This implies that the disagreement in the literature is less about whether metalanguage works in principle than about whether teachers create the pedagogical conditions under which it can. The present study therefore contributes a conditional rather than a categorical claim: metalanguage supports collocational learning when it is treated as a tool to be inducted into, not as content to be acquired prior to use.

Social engagement

Survey results for items 9-12 showed strong endorsement of the social aspects of learning, particularly regarding peer collaboration and teacher interaction. The interviews corroborated these findings. Commenting on the impact of social interaction, all participants perceived peer interaction as a contributor to their improved collocational use. The survey results indicate that all learners valued activities that involved interaction with the teacher, as seen in 100% of responses indicating agreement (item 11). Interview findings align closely with this, as participants shared that teacher involvement, whether through explanations, modelling, or step-by-step worksheets, was a major contributor to learners' involvement. Three interviewees emphasised that clear instruction and structured guidance made

learning complex collocational concepts more engaging as well as manageable. Participant 4 commented "*The teacher's explanations helped me the most and contributed hugely to my engagement. … When the teacher interacted with me and explained why certain words go together, modeled with explanation, I finally understood and became more actively involved in learning.*" This sits in some tension with the canonical framing of the approach (Bolitho et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 1994), where learners are expected to "discover language for themselves." The present findings suggest that, at intermediate proficiency, autonomous discovery is more accurately understood as guided discovery, and that the productive cognitive work the approach claims to elicit may in fact be co-constructed between learners and teacher rather than internally generated. This is not a failure of the approach but a clarification of its mechanism: at lower proficiency levels, the noticing and hypothesis-formation that the framework foregrounds appear to be heavily mediated by teacher input, and pedagogical models that obscure this mediation risk overstating learner autonomy.

The multidimensionality of engagement

The findings reveal a dynamic relationship among affective, cognitive, and social engagement during the learning activities, with the three dimensions of engagement not operating independently but mutually supporting and strengthening the others in the learning process. First, affective engagement appeared to support cognitive engagement, as learners reported that interest and enjoyment increased their willingness to focus, analyse language patterns, and reflect on their linguistic choices. Secondly, cognitive engagement, particularly through the use of metalanguage, facilitated social engagement. Shared terminology enabled students to articulate their reasoning more clearly, exchange ideas, and discuss language features more effectively during pair or group work, leading to more meaningful classroom interaction. Thirdly, social interaction served as a scaffold for both cognitive and affective engagement. These results align with Baralt et al. (2016) who indicated that learners establishing a social relationship with peers are more likely to engage with and deploy attentional resources to a language task than those who have not. Contrary to previous research (Svalberg & Askham, 2015), the three dimensions do not compete with or negatively influence one another, but instead mutually support each other. However, their finding that the dimensions sometimes competed for learner resources was based on tasks of different design and a different learner population; it is therefore more accurate to argue that the relationship among engagement dimensions is itself task- and context-dependent. Where Svalberg and Askham's tasks may have forced learners to choose between, for example, attending to peers and attending to form, the present design appears to have aligned these demands. This reframing matters because it shifts the theoretical question from "do the dimensions compete or cooperate?" to "under what design conditions do they cooperate?"

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore the effect of the Language Awareness Approach on learners' use of collocations in essay writing, as well as how the approach promoted learner engagement. With reference to the first research question concerning the effect of the Language Awareness Approach on learners' use of collocations in essay writing, quantitative results from the pre- and post-tests, which were in the form of written essays, revealed that there was improvement in the use of collocations in both the EG and the CG, with the EG experiencing marked progress, whereas the CG exhibited only minimal, insignificant changes. Moreover, the study also found that although the EG outperformed the CG numerically, the variance in scores between the two groups was not large enough to conclude a statistically significant between-group effect. Taken together, while these findings suggest that the Language Awareness Approach may have contributed to improvements in learners' collocational performance, it is important to interpret this effect with caution. These results point to a tendency rather than a firm effect; the Language

Awareness Approach appears to support learners' collocational development, but the present data do not warrant the stronger claim that it produces gains reliably superior to those of conventional instruction.

As for the second research question regarding the promotion of engagement, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that learners perceived the approach as engaging across affective, cognitive, and social dimensions, indicating that the approach made learning collocations more enjoyable, meaningful, and collaborative. The findings reveal a dynamic relationship among affective, cognitive, and social engagement, with the three dimensions not operating independently but mutually reinforcing one another throughout the learning process. However, learners' positive responses were not uniform, as some participants reported difficulties related to vocabulary load and the use of metalanguage. This suggests that the effectiveness of the Language Awareness Approach is not automatic, but depends on factors such as task design, learner readiness, and the degree of instructional support. Similarly, while the approach is often associated with learner autonomy, the findings indicate that teacher guidance played a central role in supporting learners' engagement and understanding. These observations suggest that the approach may function more accurately as a form of guided discovery, particularly at the intermediate level.

IMPLICATIONS

Several implications can be put forward. For learners, the approach is a valuable framework that they can incorporate into their writing development and vocabulary learning routines, by building a richer lexical repertoire based on pattern recognition and deeper cognitive engagement. The strong willingness expressed by students to continue applying the approach beyond the course suggests that learners should view these activities as long-term learning practices rather than temporary techniques. By integrating noticing and reflection into their daily language practices, learners can continue improving their collocation use autonomously even after formal instruction ends. For teachers, effective implementation depends on careful scaffolding, explicit modelling, gradual introduction of metalanguage, and the integration of authentic texts with meaningful writing practice. Teachers should also normalise collaboration and treat errors as learning opportunities. For syllabus designers, the findings suggest that collocation-focused Language Awareness activities should be systematically embedded in writing syllabi, recycled across units, and sequenced from guided noticing to independent application, with increasing complexity to support long-term strategic language development. The strong indication that learners intend to continue applying Language Awareness Approach beyond the course suggests that syllabi should explicitly aim to foster long-term strategic behaviour, such as by including self-study guidelines, reflection prompts, and independent projects that encourage learners to notice collocations in their own reading or media consumption, and to expand personal collocation lists. In this way, the curriculum can help learners extend the benefits of the intervention into their future academic and everyday language use.

Beyond its pedagogical contributions, the study offers three theoretical implications that refine current understandings of language awareness and metalanguage in L2 collocation learning. First, the findings support a conditional rather than categorical account of metalanguage. The longstanding debate over whether metalinguistic terminology helps or hinders learners (Alderson et al., 1997; Berry, 2004) is reframed by the present data: metalanguage appeared to support collocational learning when it was gradually introduced, contextually modelled, and anchored to communicative tasks in which learners had reason to deploy it, but it risked becoming a cognitive burden when these conditions were absent. This suggests that the study extends existing theoretical frameworks by shifting the focus from whether metalanguage works to how and under what conditions it supports productive language use, particularly in the context of collocation use in writing. Second, the findings prompt a reconsideration of the canonical framing of the Language Awareness Approach, in which learners are expected to discover language for themselves (Bolitho et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 1994). At intermediate proficiency, the noticing and hypothesis-

formation of the framework foregrounds appeared to be heavily co-constructed between learners and teacher rather than internally generated. This is not a weakness of the approach but a clarification of its mechanism: what the theoretical literature labels as "autonomous discovery" may in practice function as guided discovery, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Pedagogical models that obscure this mediation risk overstating learner autonomy and underspecifying the teacher's role in the noticing process.

In terms of suggestions for future research, the present study examined collocational gains exclusively in the domain of academic writing. However, collocations are also fundamental to spoken fluency. Further studies could investigate whether and how the Language Awareness Approach can enhance learners' productive oral use of collocations, for example by comparing written and spoken task outcomes within the same learner cohort. A related question is whether gains are genre-sensitive: a comparative design across argumentative essays, reports, and summaries could test whether learners transfer collocational knowledge uniformly across written genres or whether the approach's benefits are bound to genre-specific collocational repertoires. Moreover, the current study was limited to a ten-week instructional period, which, although sufficient to indicate initial improvements, cannot capture the long-term development of collocational knowledge. Given the strong intention to future use expressed by participants, a longitudinal follow-up could empirically test whether stated intention translates into sustained practice and whether such practice contributes to long-term retention. Finally, given the conditional role of metalanguage identified in this study, future research could manipulate the mode of metalanguage introduction, for instance, comparing gradual, contextualised introduction against front-loaded explicit teaching, to test under which conditions metalinguistic terminology supports rather than burdens collocational learning.

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