



## Does Explicit Instruction Drive Improvement in Writing and Collocation?

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**Submission History:**

Submitted: May 14, 2024

Revised: June 8, 2024

Accepted: June 22, 2024



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### Abstract

Explicit Instruction is an educational approach known for its structured and systematic method of teaching, which enhances various academic skills. While its impact on writing skills has been extensively explored, its potential benefits for young students in developing writing proficiency and collocation awareness have garnered interest. This study aims to determine the extent to which Explicit Instruction can improve students' awareness of collocations and writing skills among 25 young students of MTs Darussalam Amping Parak, West Sumatera, Indonesia. Data were collected from writing tasks, tests, observational checklists, and field notes as all participants underwent an Explicit Instruction intervention over two cycles. The findings show that during the first cycle, the average collocation test score was 53.64, with no students meeting the minimum achievement criteria, though this was an improvement from the pre-cycle average of 36.8. In the second cycle, the average score rose to 75.84, with 11 students surpassing the score of 75. For the writing test, the first cycle's average score was 69.96, with 9 students meeting the minimum standard, up from a pre-cycle average of 55.73. By the second cycle, the average writing test score increased to 82.37, with 20 students passing the minimum standard. These results indicate that Explicit Instruction can enhance students' awareness of collocations and improve their writing skills, suggesting that this instructional method is effective for young students and could be integrated into their writing curriculum to foster better writing proficiency.

**Keywords:** Explicit Instruction, writing skill, awareness, collocation.

### INTRODUCTION

Among the four main language skills, writing is particularly challenging for EFL students. These challenges include poor writing abilities, difficulty translating ideas into a foreign language, and issues with sentence structure and organization (Özdemir, 2023). Students must possess a variety of abilities to effectively use written language, including communicating ideas, organizing them coherently, accurately employing rhetorical devices, and correctly applying grammar, as written texts often diverge from spoken language (Le et al., 2022). To effectively communicate with readers, EFL students need to use language

elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and writing mechanics (Kurniasih et al., 2024). Writing serves as a mental pathway, converting vague ideas into tangible words and strengthening the bond between the writer and the reader (Prastyawan & Jamilah, 2024). In other words, when students write, they are not merely putting their ideas into written form but are utilizing essential skills.

In the EFL context, learners often tend to learn words separately rather than in combinations. Because vocabulary instruction frequently focuses on single-word items, learners may face challenges when using collocations (Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021). They are not accustomed to enriching their vocabulary with word combinations. Additionally, numerous mistakes arise from differences between languages, where a lack of alignment between the native and secondary language can result in expressions that do not sound natural (Snoder, 2018). For example, the phrase "make a bed" might be incorrectly translated as "membuat tempat tidur" if learners translate each word directly from Indonesian. Similarly, the phrase "minum obat" might be translated as "drink a medicine" instead of the correct "take a medicine." Consequently, learners are often unaware of proper collocations.

Collocation is crucial for developing good writing skills. Collocations are sets of words or phrases that frequently appear together (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017). Lexical collocations, which consist of two or more content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), are more common in writing than grammatical collocations, which combine content words with function words like prepositions (Blau & Lewis, 2002). Learning lexical collocations is essential for learners to minimize errors in their written work. These word combinations sound natural to native speakers, but English language learners must make an extra effort to learn them because they are often unpredictable. Learning collocations offers several benefits for productive skills (Demir, 2018). Firstly, collocations help learners improve their lexical knowledge and overall language ability. Secondly, the brain functions more efficiently when using chunks and formulaic expressions, although overcoming the influence of the first language remains a significant challenge. Lastly, mastering collocations can help learners achieve native-like writing abilities.

Special attention should be given not only to the possible meanings each word has but also to the meanings when the word is combined with others. The choice of which words can go together in collocations is extremely arbitrary (Trng & Thao, 2021). Collocations cannot always be made by following formulas or rules, and they are not always grammatically predictable (Sipayung & Saragih, 2023). Therefore, it is not just about understanding individual words but also about how to combine them correctly. While this comes naturally to native speakers who use the language effortlessly, it can be a troublesome aspect of the language for EFL learners. Choosing the right collocations to express meaning in both spoken and written forms can be challenging for English language learners (ELLs) in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. One reason is that the importance of collocations is often overlooked in many educational contexts (ALAmro, 2015; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2021). In the Indonesian context, for example, most instructional resources in junior and senior high schools focus on teaching grammar and individual words, rather than word combinations. Students are not adequately taught how to use collocations in their tasks, and teachers often do not introduce students to

collocations. As a result, most students struggle to use effective word combinations in their writing.

To address these challenges, Explicit Instruction is regarded as an effective teaching strategy for improving students' collocation use and writing skills. Explicit Instruction offers several benefits (Archer & Hughes, 2010). This approach is crucial for teaching content that students could not otherwise discover, such as the construction of an essay. Explicit Instruction is also helpful when discovery may be inaccurate, inadequate, incomplete, or inefficient. The Three-Part Explicit Lesson Model provides a structured method for lesson planning and delivery, which includes the opening, the body, and the closing of the lesson (Archer & Hughes, 2010). The lesson begins with the teacher setting the stage, engaging students, introducing the lesson's purpose, and assessing their prior knowledge and skills. The core instruction phase follows, divided into three segments: "I do it," "We do it," and "You do it." In this phase, the teacher first demonstrates the skill or concept through modeling, then practices it collaboratively with the class, and finally allows students to practice independently. This structured approach facilitates a gradual release of responsibility, supporting students with prompts and scaffolding to ensure high success rates. The lesson concludes by reinforcing learning and providing closure, promoting self-directed learning and skill mastery.

While several studies highlight the benefits of Explicit Instruction in various educational contexts. For instance, Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022) focused on explicit teaching of conjunctions in paragraph writing among first-year EFL students, showing a positive impact on writing performance. Mohammed (2022) investigated the effectiveness of explicit instruction on English syllable structure, demonstrating significant improvements in students' linguistic skills. Zhang et al. (2023) examined the use of Explicit Instruction for teaching stance metalanguage, revealing enhanced awareness and positive effects on students' academic writing beliefs. However, more research is needed on the effects of Explicit Instruction at different educational levels, such as middle school students, and its impact on specific areas like vocabulary development.

Word choice is crucial for conveying a writer's message clearly to readers (Reynolds & Teng, 2021). If students lack an understanding of how words combine, they will face challenges not only in listening and reading but also in speaking and writing (Antle, 2013). Learning collocations helps learners improve their language proficiency and communication skills by making them more aware of which words tend to go together and how they are used in different contexts. Considering the potential of Explicit Instruction, the present study implemented this strategy to improve students' awareness of collocations and develop their writing skills. The research questions formulated for this study are: To what extent does Explicit Instruction improve EFL students' awareness of collocations, and how does Explicit Instruction enhance EFL students' writing skills?

## METHOD

The study design was classroom action research. According to Gay et al. (2012), the purpose of action research is to provide teacher-researchers with a strategy for resolving daily issues in schools, thereby enhancing both student learning and teacher effectiveness. This study aimed to improve students' awareness of collocations and writing skills through

Explicit Instruction. The research was conducted at MTs Darussalam Amping Parak, located in the Sutera sub-district, Pesisir Selatan district, West Sumatera province. The participants were 25 ninth-grade students (class IX B) and one collaborator, who was also the English teacher at the school.

The study was conducted over two months and consisted of two cycles. Each cycle followed four steps: planning, taking action, observing, and evaluating/reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014). Throughout each cycle, all students received Explicit Instruction intervention during each session, focusing on collocations and writing skills. The first cycle's learning material covered functional text of labels, while the second cycle focused on procedural text. Prior to the intervention, participants completed a pretest to assess their initial proficiency in collocations and writing monologue texts of labels

During the implementation phase, the collaborator observed students' responses, participation, and achievement throughout the teaching and learning process, recording real-time information in observation checklists and field notes. The results from these instruments were discussed by the researcher and collaborator to address problems and weaknesses identified in the first cycle. This phase was crucial, allowing the researcher and collaborator to review activities, determine their effectiveness, and decide on possible revisions for the next action research cycle if no improvement in students' achievement was observed. After collecting all quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher and collaborator analyzed and interpreted the findings to reflect on the lessons learned. This process involved comparing actual outcomes with initial expectations and examining any unexpected results, taking a few days to thoroughly consider the findings and experiences of the previous cycle before moving on to the next one.

This action research utilized data collection methods that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches, akin to mixed methods research (Creswell, 2015). Quantitative data included the progression of students' collocational knowledge and writing skills, presented as scores and percentages, obtained from tasks and tests on collocations and writing. Students completed a cloze-selection task in a multiple-choice format for the collocation test and wrote sentences corresponding to provided pictures for the writing tests. Writing tasks were collected from each meeting, while the test was administered at the end of each cycle. Qualitative data were gathered through observation checklists and field notes, documenting real situations and information during the teaching and learning process, completed by the research collaborator.

After participants completed the collocation test, the researcher analyzed the data by categorizing errors into three levels: high, medium, and low, based on Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Boonraksa & Naisena, 2021). The error levels were calculated as follows: 80 – 100 indicated a low level of collocation errors, 60 – 79 indicated a medium level, and 1 – 59 indicated a high level. The writing test was scored using an analytical scoring method developed by Weigle (2002) which rated scripts on five aspects of writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Each aspect was weighted differently: content (30 points), language use (25 points), organization and mechanics (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), and mechanics (5 points). However, due to the students' level, the researcher combined the vocabulary components.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In the implementation phase of this study, the researchers utilized the Explicit Instruction strategy across two cycles, each comprising four sessions, to enhance students' awareness of collocations and their writing skills. The collaborator observed students' responses, participation, and achievement throughout the teaching and learning process, recording real-time information in observation checklists and field notes. The improvement of students' awareness on collocation through Explicit Instruction for each cycle depicted in the table below. The table below presented the comparison from pre-cycle, cycle 1 and cycle 2.

**Table 1.** The results of students' collocation test

| Meeting/Cycle | Categorization Criteria |                    |                 | Average Score |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|
|               | High-level error        | Medium-level error | Low-level error |               |
| Pre-cycle     | 96%                     | 4%                 | 0%              | 36.8          |
| Cycle 1       | 60%                     | 40%                | 0%              | 53.64         |
| Cycle 2       | 4%                      | 52%                | 44%             | 75.84         |

The table above illustrates the significant differences in students' collocation error percentages across the cycles. The pre-test results revealed that 96% of students had high-level collocation errors, and only 4% were categorized as having medium-level collocation errors. After the Explicit Instruction intervention in cycle 1, the percentage of students with high-level collocation errors decreased to 60%, while those with medium-level errors increased to 40%. However, no students achieved a low level of collocation errors in this cycle. In cycle 2, the number of students with high-level collocation errors drastically decreased to 4%. Conversely, the percentage of students with medium-level collocation errors increased to 52%, and the percentage of students with low-level collocation errors rose to 44%, up from 0% in the previous cycle.

The researcher also compared the students' collocation test scores to the standard minimum criteria of achievement. In cycle 1, the results were not satisfactory, with an average score of 53.64, up from 36.8 in the pre-cycle. In terms of collocation error levels, 15 students were categorized as having high-level errors, and 10 students were categorized as having medium-level errors. No students achieved the low-level error category in cycle 1, and none reached the standard minimum criteria of 75. The collocation test results fell short of the research target, which aimed for 75% of the students to meet or exceed the standard minimum criteria.

In cycle 2, there was an improvement in students' achievement, with the average score rising to 75.84 from 53.64 in cycle 1. In this cycle, 13 students were categorized as having medium-level errors, 11 students as having low-level errors, and only 1 student as having high-level errors. Additionally, 11 students passed the standard minimum score of 75, while 14 students scored below 75. This performance was a significant improvement compared to cycle 1, where no students reached the score of 75. The writing test scores also showed significant improvement after the Explicit Instruction intervention. The results from the pre-cycle to cycle 2 are depicted in the following table:

**Table 2.** The results of students' writing test



| Meeting/<br>Cycle | Component of Writing |                              |            |         | Average<br>Score |
|-------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|------------|---------|------------------|
|                   | Content              | Organization and<br>Mechanic | Vocabulary | Grammar |                  |
| Pre-cycle         | 70.67                | 69.2                         | 41.12      | 41.92   | 55.73            |
| Cycle 1           | 72.93                | 81.12                        | 53.4       | 72.32   | 69.96            |
| Cycle 2           | 81.33                | 87.2                         | 75.84      | 85.12   | 82.37            |

The table 2 highlights the differences in average scores from the pre-test, test 1, and test 2. Initially, students achieved an average score of 55.73 on the writing test in the pre-cycle. After receiving Explicit Instruction, the score increased to 69.96 in cycle 1. However, since these results did not meet the standard minimum criteria of achievement, the researcher decided to continue the treatment into cycle 2. By the end of cycle 2, the average score rose to 82.37, indicating significant progress and improvement in writing skills through the Explicit Instruction strategy. Comparing the students' writing scores with the standard minimum criteria of achievement, the results of cycle 1 were still unsatisfactory, with an average score of 69.96, up from 55.73 in the pre-test. The scores for each writing indicator were as follows: content (72.93), organization and mechanics (81.12), vocabulary (53.4), and grammar (72.32). Only the "organization" indicator met the standard minimum criteria of 75. The lowest score was in "vocabulary" as students made errors in word choice, spelling, and punctuation.

Out of 25 students who took the writing test, only 9 passed the score of 75, while 15 scored below 75. These results indicated that the research target, which required 75% of students to meet the standard minimum criteria, was not met. Consequently, the researcher decided to continue the treatment in cycle 2 to achieve better results in both the collocation and writing tests. In cycle 2, the writing test results showed significant improvement. The average score increased from 69.96 to 82.37. All writing test indicators surpassed the score of 75, with the highest score in "organization and mechanics" (87.2), followed by "grammar" (85.12), "content" (81.33), and "vocabulary" (75.84). Moreover, out of 25 students, 20 passed the score of 75, while 5 scored below 75. This result met the research target of having 75% of students pass the standard minimum criteria of achievement. It can be concluded that the research was successful, as the students' writing skills improved significantly. Although their awareness of collocations did not show as significant an improvement, their average score surpassed the standard minimum achievement of 75.

The Explicit Instruction intervention was implemented over four sessions. The intervention involved the teacher demonstrating collocations and writing a monologue label, followed by guided practice with the class, and concluding with independent practice by the students. This approach facilitates a gradual transfer of responsibility, supported by prompts and scaffolding to ensure student success. As the results from the first cycle were not satisfactory, the researcher proceeded with a second cycle, replicating the same steps as in the first cycle for another four sessions.

In the implementation phase of the study, the researchers utilized the Explicit Instruction strategy across two cycles, each comprising four sessions, to enhance students' awareness of collocations and their writing skills. In the first cycle, Explicit Instruction was employed to introduce and explain the material about labels through interactive slides. The

researcher demonstrated collocations and writing monologue labels with step-by-step guidance, followed by collaborative practice, leading to the students gradually writing their own texts. At the end of each cycle, tests were administered to measure the students' progress in collocations and writing skills.

The second cycle focused on writing procedural texts, where students were provided with picture series. The researcher asked the students to create sentences corresponding to the pictures. During this cycle, the researcher also enriched the students' collocational knowledge to aid them in writing the texts. The academic performance of students, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, empirically supports the effectiveness of Explicit Instruction in enhancing students' awareness of collocations and writing skills. For the collocation test, the data indicates a substantial increase in the students' average scores from the pre-test to test 2, rising from 36.8 to 75.84, thereby exceeding the mastery threshold of 75. Similarly, for the writing test, the data reveals a significant improvement in the students' average scores from the pre-test to test 2, increasing from 55.73 to 82.37, also surpassing the mastery threshold of 75. This improvement aligns with the positive feedback provided by students during observations conducted by the collaborator.

The evidence from various studies strongly supports the effectiveness of Explicit Instruction in improving students' writing skills across different contexts and proficiency levels. Multiple studies from [Chaleila & Khalaila \(2020\)](#), [Alawerdy & Alalwi \(2022\)](#), and [Trang & Barrot \(2023\)](#) demonstrates substantial improvements in students' writing performance, accuracy, and error reduction by providing explicit feedback and correction strategies, which enabled students to identify and rectify their mistakes, leading to a noticeable decrease in the frequency of errors in their writing. By breaking down the writing process into manageable steps and providing clear instructions, students were able to produce higher quality writing pieces. Targeted explicit teaching significantly impacts the syntactic complexity of student writing ([Bychkovska, 2021](#)).

[Landrieu et al. \(2023\)](#) also highlight the additional benefits of combining Explicit Instruction with collaborative activities, noting that Explicit Instruction offers clear guidelines and models, while collaborative activities allow students to practice these skills in a supportive setting. This blend leads to improved writing quality as students see practical applications of what they have learned. The combination not only enhances writing performance but also boosts students' self-efficacy. The collaborative approach fosters a supportive learning environment where students feel more confident and capable in their writing abilities. [Stratton \(2023\)](#) reveals a general preference for Explicit Instruction among students, noting that it reduces anxiety and increases confidence. Students reported feeling more in control and less anxious when they understood the rules and structures of the target language, which Explicit Instruction effectively provides. This preference for Explicit Instruction suggests a positive classroom atmosphere where students feel supported and understood, fostering mutual respect and cooperation between students and teachers.

Through step-by-step guidance, Explicit Instruction teaches students how to construct their arguments, playing a crucial role in enhancing critical thinking skills essential for effective argumentation ([Granado-Peinado et al., 2023](#)). Students engage in guided exercises where they practice identifying and constructing arguments under the supervision of the teacher. These exercises are designed to reinforce the principles of effective

argumentation and provide immediate feedback. By focusing on argument identification and structure, Explicit Instruction helps students develop the ability to construct and analyze arguments more effectively.

Explicit Instruction often involves teaching words within the context of sentences and paragraphs, helping students understand how words function in different contexts. This targeted approach ensures that students acquire new vocabulary in a structured and systematic manner, significantly improving their lexical knowledge and engagement (Tahir et al., 2021). The study indicates that students not only expand their vocabulary but also become more enthusiastic and engaged in the learning process through dynamic and interactive instructional techniques. To write well, students must consider the appropriate vocabulary for their writing. They require assistance with writing mechanics, including vocabulary and sentence structure, which adds complexity to their ability to generate cohesive texts (Kusumaningrum & Pratiwi, 2024). Teaching collocations is essential for students to understand lexis and improve how they convey ideas in their writing (Khonamri et al., 2020). Through Explicit Instruction, teachers provide opportunities for students to practice using collocations in their writing tasks, reinforcing their understanding of how words co-occur.

However, Yuvayapan & Yükselir (2021) highlighted the discrepancy between learners' knowledge of collocation concepts and their ability to produce accurate collocations in their writing due to L1 interference. This underscores the importance of automating collocation knowledge through extensive practice and exposure to diverse language contexts. Teachers should design writing tasks that specifically focus on incorporating collocations and provide scaffolding support to help learners overcome L1 interference and develop more natural and proficient collocational usage.

The findings suggest that implementing the Explicit Instruction strategy increased students' awareness of collocations and led them to incorporate more collocations into their writing. Language awareness (LA) encompasses not only grammatical forms but also lexis, language's connection to societies and cultures, people's attitudes towards languages, and how languages can be taught and learned (Svalberg, 2016). By increasing students' awareness of the languages around them, LA can positively impact their attitudes toward languages (Makarova et al., 2023). In the context of writing, using appropriate collocations indicates that students are familiar with the nuances of the language and understand how words naturally come together. When students use collocations effectively, it demonstrates their understanding of individual words and their awareness of how these words form meaningful combinations.

## CONCLUSION

This classroom action research demonstrates that the Explicit Instruction (EI) strategy significantly enhances students' collocation awareness and writing skills. Quantitative data from students' tasks and test results show a marked improvement in the number of students meeting the achievement criteria in each cycle. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating collocational knowledge into language teaching, particularly in vocabulary and grammar instruction. By integrating collocation activities into their lessons, teachers can help students express their ideas more naturally and achieve



higher proficiency levels. While this study confirms the effectiveness of EI, future research should explore additional factors such as student characteristics, instructional methods, and learning environments. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the long-term impact of EI on language learning outcomes across different proficiency levels and contexts, ultimately informing the development of more effective instructional approaches for language education.

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