LEXICAL PRIMING AND COLLOCATION COMPETENCE: ENHANCING ACADEMIC REGISTER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

` This paper investigates the intersection of Hoey’s theory of lexical priming and collocation competence as a foundational framework for enhancing the academic register of second language (L2) learners in higher education. Traditional pedagogical approaches often isolate vocabulary acquisition from syntactic environments, resulting in grammatically correct but idiomatically unnatural academic prose. By examining how words are systematically primed for specific collocational, collocational-syntactic, and textual environments, this study argues for an explicit, corpus-informed pedagogical paradigm. The paper outlines the cognitive mechanism of priming, analyzes the frequent collocational deficits in undergraduate writing, and proposes an integrated instructional model designed to foster advanced sociolinguistic and stylistic competence in university settings.

Keywords: Lexical Priming, Collocation Competence, Academic Register, Higher Education, Corpus Linguistics, L2 Pedagogy.

1. Introduction. In higher education, mastering the academic register is one of the most formidable challenges for second language (L2) undergraduate and postgraduate students. Academic discourse demands not merely grammatical precision, but a sophisticated adherence to stylistic norms, precision in lexical selection, and institutionalized formulas. Quite frequently, university instructors encounter student writing that is grammatically flawless yet sounds profoundly unidiomatic or awkward to a native scholar. This discrepancy often stems from a lack of collocation competence—the ability to recognize and produce conventionalized word

combinations. To understand and remedy this pedagogical gap, Michael Hoey (2005) introduced the psycholinguistic theory of *Lexical Priming*. Hoey posits that as language users encounter words in specific contexts, they are "primed" to use them with particular collocates, grammatical structures, and semantic domains. In an academic environment, professional scholars possess highly specialized primings that dictate their choices of phrasing. Conversely, L2 students often lack these target-like primings, instead relying on literal translations or general register vocabulary. This article explores how understanding lexical priming can transform collocation pedagogy, thereby elevating the academic register of university students to a professional, native-like standard.Michael Hoey's theory of lexical priming fundamentally flips the traditional view of grammar and vocabulary. Instead of viewing grammar as a rigid set of rules into which vocabulary slots are dropped, lexical priming suggests that the lexicon *contains* its own grammar. Every time an individual encounters a word, their brain records:

1. **Collocation:** Which words frequently appear next to or near it.
2. **Colligation:** Which grammatical structures or word classes it prefers to pair with.
3. **Semantic Association:** The semantic fields (e.g., negative, scientific, abstract) it belongs to.

For instance, in academic English, the verb *to conduct* is highly primed to collocate with nouns like *research*, *study*, *survey*, or *analysis*. While a student might grammatically write *"make research,"* the academic register rejects this due to improper priming. Therefore, collocation competence is not just a vocabulary asset; it is the cognitive manifestation of cumulative lexical primings that align with the expectations of a specific discourse community.mThe transition from general English to academic English requires a major recalibration of a student's lexical inventory.

Research indicates that L2 academic writing often suffers from three primary collocational deficits:

3.1. Overuse of High-Frequency General Verbs

L2 students frequently rely on broad verbs such as *do*, *make*, *get*, or *have*. In essays, phrases like *"do an experiment"* or *"get good results"* weaken the academic tone. A student primed with an academic register would instead utilize *"perform/conduct an experiment"* and *"obtain/yield favorable results"*.

3.2. Delexicalization and Misconstrued Noun-Noun Combinations

Academic register relies heavily on nominalization and noun phrases. Students struggle with abstract noun collocations, frequently substituting correct prepositions or adjectives (e.g., writing *"strong argument"* instead of *"compelling argument"*, or *"deep impact"* instead of *"profound impact"*).

3.3. Underuse of Metadiscourse Formulas

Professional academic papers are structured using highly predictable lexical bundles (e.g., *"The evidence suggests that..."*, *"Contrary to previous findings..."*, *"Conscious efforts must be made to..."*). L2 writers often lack these macro-structural primings, leading to disjointed argumentation.To overcome these deficits, higher education institutions must move away from rote vocabulary memorization and embrace corpus-informed, explicit collocation instruction.

Phase	Strategy	Pedagogical Action	Cognitive Objective
1. Exposure	Corpus Concordancing	Students use tools like Sketch Engine or COCA to analyze real-world academic texts.	Exposing students to authentic collocational frequencies.
2. Deconstruction	Colligation Mapping	Instructors highlight the grammatical constraints of target academic nouns.	Re-priming the word within its specific syntactic slot.

3. Production	Scaffolded Writing	Students replace general phrasings in essays with specialized academic bundles.	Activating the primed bundles in productive writing.

By utilizing Data-Driven Learning (DDL), students become language detectives. Instead of asking a teacher if a phrase is correct, they consult an academic corpus to see if the word is primed to exist in that specific combination within the university register.

Conclusion. Achieving proficiency in the academic register is a prerequisite for scholarly success in higher education. Michael Hoey's theory of lexical priming provides an elegant cognitive explanation for why L2 students struggle to sound genuinely "academic"—their mental lexicons lack the complex web of sub-conscious constraints that native scholars possess. By shifting pedagogy toward explicit collocation instruction and leveraging corpus linguistics, university educators can actively accelerate the priming process. Ultimately, fostering collocation competence bridges the gap between basic communicative fluency and advanced academic literacy, empowering students to contribute meaningfully to global scientific discourse.

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