

# The Impact of Length of Study Abroad on Collocational Knowledge: The Case of Saudi Students in Australia

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## Abstract

This study investigates the impact that study in Australia has on the lexical knowledge of Saudi Arabian students. It focuses on: 1) the effects that the length of study in Australia has on the acquisition of lexical collocations, as reflected by lexical knowledge tests, and 2) whether there is a significant gender difference in the acquisition of lexical collocation knowledge. The results indicate that there is a positive correlation between the length of stay in Australia and the knowledge of lexical collocation, since the overall mean scores of the entire sample increased with the number of the years spent in Australia. Participants who stayed for one year had the lowest mean score of 7.39, whereas those with the longest length of stay of four years had the highest mean score of 8.76. Participants staying for two or three years had minimal improvements, with mean scores of 7.64 and 7.68 respectively. The results indicate that there was only a slight difference between male and female participants in their knowledge of lexical collocations, with overall mean scores of 7.56 and 8.35 out of 12 respectively.

**Keywords:** Collocation, Lexical knowledge, Study abroad, Saudi Arabia, Australia

## 1. Introduction

Collocations are an important, integral aspect of second and foreign language learning and teaching, hence researchers have paid considerable attention to the topic in recent decades. According to Nation (2001), the term collocation means “a group of words that belong together, either because they commonly occur together like *take a chance*, or because the meaning of the group is not obvious from the meaning of the parts, as with *by the way* or *to take someone in* (trick them)” (p.317). Moreover, Zhang (1993) defined lexical collocation as a sub-type of collocation where one word co-occurs with one or more other components as the only readily-available lexical choices in a combination. The verb commit for example, is the lexical item that recurrently co-occurs with a number of nouns such as **suicide**, **murder**, and **adultery**.

Undoubtedly, collocational knowledge plays an important role for non-native speakers in the accuracy and effectiveness of their written and spoken communications, and in the clarity of the message being conveyed. As a result, mastering collocations is at the top of the list of challenges facing second and foreign language learners who have to deal with a great number of collocations throughout the learning process.

Despite students receiving explicit instruction in collocations, Gobert (2007) finds that her advanced Arabic-speaking learners of English suffer from a lack of collocational knowledge. She attributes this to the minimal resemblance between the first and second language context, as her study finds that this type of lexical knowledge is acquired rather than learned. Following this assertion, the context of the target language must be assessed as a crucial factor that could potentially have a positive effect on the acquisition of collocations, and consequently reflects on the accuracy of the learners' communication skills at different levels. Gobert's explanation raises a critical point. If this type of knowledge is acquired rather than learned, international students learning English as a second language in English speaking countries such as Australia, the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom, should have a distinct advantage. This explains why low proficiency students in such contexts subsequently have a better collocational knowledge than even advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) who remain in their home countries (cf. Carrol 1967, Milton & Meara 1995, Lafford 2006, and Alsakran 2011).

## 2. Review of Literature

Carroll (1967) finds that the strongest predictor for a high level of language proficiency is the time spent in the target-language country. Milton and Meara (1995) come to similar conclusions and find that exchange programs are highly beneficial to students and contribute to improved language ability, with English learning nearly five times more effective during the exchange period compared with time spent enrolled in classes in the home countries. More recently, Lafford (2006) reiterates the importance of study abroad and how it is the most conducive environment for acquiring a second language.

Milton and Meara (1995) investigate the development of English L2 vocabulary among European exchange students in the UK. In their study, fifty-three exchange students from different language backgrounds participated, including 26 Germans, 16 French, 8 Spaniards and 3 Italians. Using Eurocenters Vocabulary Size Test (EVST, Meara and Jones: 1990), students' vocabulary levels were tested at the beginning of the exchange program and then again six months later. In addition, the researchers also devised a questionnaire which elicited information about factors that have contributed to the improvement of students' vocabulary, (e.g. L1, starting age, number of years studying English, and social interaction). Data obtained from both tests were analyzed to determine the differences between students' entry and final scores on EVST. The results indicated that the overall scores of the whole group, "showed a sizable improvement between the entry and the final test after six months" (p.22). The researchers maintain that the difference was an increase in vocabulary of 1326 words and represented an annual growth of about 2650 words. However, individual vocabulary acquired varied considerably, "with some subjects more than doubling their vocabulary total, while others show much more modest levels of growth" (p.23). The researchers went further and calculated the participants' vocabulary growth before visiting the UK and compared it with the growth during the six month exchange period. They found a highly significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) with an average growth rate four times larger during their studies abroad as compared to the average growth rate at home. Milton and Meara (1995:31) conclude that exchange programs are beneficial to students and contribute to improved language ability, with English learning nearly five times more effective during the exchange period compared with time spent enrolled in classes in the home countries. They estimate a vocabulary acquisition rate of 2500 words per year.

Gobert (2007) looks into the lexical collocational knowledge of advanced Arabic-speaking English learners and investigates why these students lack the lexical resources needed to produce multi-word chunks of native language in their English as second language (ESL) writing. Twenty-nine advanced female students participated in her study, and her results indicated that despite receiving explicit instruction in collocations, the students lacked collocational knowledge. Gobert maintains that, "(a) possible explanation for this (lack of collocational knowledge) is that this type of lexical knowledge is acquired rather than learned" (p. 49).

The impact on English language proficiency during one semester of study at a university was the focus of a study carried out by Storch and Hill in Australia in 2008. The researchers compared the scores of a sample of forty international students, predominantly from Southeast Asia. Scores were the result of a diagnostic English language test on reading and writing at the beginning and end of their first semester at the University of Melbourne. The authors conclude that, "for the majority of these students, studying in an English-medium university and being immersed in the L2 did lead to language improvement, even after just one semester" (p.04.1). The authors also point out the possibility that other factors contributed to this improvement, such as language support and the immediate living environment (e.g. accommodation, friends, and language used at home).

More recently, Alsakran (2011) examines the productive and receptive knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations of advanced Arabic-speaking learners of English and whether the ESL vs. EFL environment influences the acquisition of these collocations. The researcher concludes that "the language environment had an effect on the acquisition of collocations, as manifested by the ESL participants' better performance" (p.73). The results of the study, in fact, reveal that the learning environment had a strong effect on the acquisition of L2 collocations. The ESL learners scored significantly higher than the EFL learners.

The most current study of Saudi Arabian students was undertaken by Amed (2011), where she conducted qualitative research with 60 students participating in a unique program tailored to their specific needs while enrolled in foundational and undergraduate course at the University of Sydney. The study parallels previous literature in showing that students studying in an English-speaking environment enjoy enhanced language acquisition. However, Amed's findings go further to propose additional factors enhancing students' performance in the Australian setting. Students who had travelled to an English-speaking country prior to their study, and those whose families exposed them to English in their home environment were more likely to be successful in the program. The majority of the students had studied English in Saudi Arabia, but they claimed that most of their teachers were non-native English speakers, the mode of teaching was didactic, and there was less focus on communicative teaching and learning practices. From the students in the Saudi program, there were two diverse groups that highlighted significant findings that correlated to their English scores and overall success in the program. Students who only befriended other Saudi students in and out of the learning environment were negatively impacted in their language acquisition. By contrast, students who were open to making friends with native speakers, particularly in settings outside of the classroom, enjoyed a dramatic benefit in their academic performance. This included their accommodation environment. Homestay was most advantageous to enhancing language immersion. Amed's study goes further to demonstrate the need for native English-speaking contact as a crucial factor for students, yet it further cautions the cross-cultural factors may be a barrier if the students or native speakers are reluctant to integrate.

### 3. The Present Study

The present study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research method. A multiple-choice Collocation Test (CT) was utilized to measure participants' lexical knowledge. Prior to the CT, a demographic questionnaire was administered to collect information about the participants, such as their gender and the length of their stay in Australia. The participants' responses to the CT were scored and analyzed to answer the following research questions:

***Q1. Are there any differences in the knowledge of lexical collocation among the participants of the study with regards to different lengths of stay in Australia?***

**Q2. Are there any differences in the knowledge of lexical collocation among male and female participants of the study?**

**3.1 The context of the study and participants**

This study was conducted in Australia with one hundred and twenty-four male and female (M.92, F.32) student participants. All of the participants were Saudi nationals with Arabic as their mother tongue. They were enrolled in different Australian institutions/schools following different programs in different states across the country. The duration of study in Australia ranged from one to four years. Consequently, the participants were divided into four groups.

**3.2 Collocation Test**

The collocation test (CT) administered in this study was adapted from Gobert's 2007 study. It is a single-page multiple-choice test with twelve items. Each item has four answers, one right answer and three distractors (see Appendix 1). As this test was used previously in a different context, it was given to three native speakers of Australian English to check for its validity as a tool for assessing learners' collocational knowledge in the Australian context. All three respondents gave correct answers to all of the test items.

**3.3 Scoring**

The following scoring policy was used: one point was given to each correct answer, while zero was given for each incorrect answer and for items where no response was recorded.

**3.4 Data Analysis**

Using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program, the t-test was used in the quantitative analysis of the data obtained from the collocation test. Based on the two main questions of the study, the data analysis dealt with each question and reported on the participants' overall knowledge of lexical collocation according to the two variables: length of stay in Australia and gender.

**4. Summary of the results**

Results obtained from the collocational knowledge test administered in this study on both the male and female participants, with different lengths of stay in Australia, indicated that there was only a slight difference between male and female participants in their knowledge of lexical collocations, with mean scores of 7.56 and 8.35 out of 12 respectively. More importantly, the results showed evidence that there was a positive correlation between the length of stay in Australia and the knowledge of lexical collocation as the overall mean scores of the whole sample increased as the number of the years spent in Australia increased. Participants with a one-year length of stay have the lowest mean score of 7.39, whereas those with the longest length of stay (i.e. four years) have the highest mean score of 8.76. Participants with two-year and three-year lengths of stay have only shown minimal improvements with mean scores of 7.64 and 7.68 respectively.

**The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:**

Female participants outperformed male participants slightly, as shown by their overall mean scores. See table 1 below.

Table1. Gender and Knowledge of Lexical Collocation

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Female	32	8.35	2.11606
Male	92	7.56	2.31223

There was a huge gain in the first year (62%) in comparison to assumed low knowledge at the time of arrival in Australia.

The difference between groups showed only minimal variations within the second and the third year in contrast with a huge gain in the fourth year. See table 2 below.

Table 2. Length of Stay in Australia and Knowledge of Lexical Collocation

Length of stay in Australia	N	Mean	SD
One year	23	7.39	2.42598
Two years	39	7.64	2.34506
Three years	41	7.68	2.20725
Four years	21	8.76	2.09535
Total	124	7.8	2.29166

#### 4.1 Discussion

The overall objective of this study was to examine the lexical collocational knowledge of male and female Saudi students and the effect lengths of study and stay in Australia played on the acquisition of this knowledge. The results of this study, similar to results from previous studies (Alaskan 2011, Amed 2011, Milton and Meara 1995, and Storch and Hill 2008), support the positive effect of the ESL context and the important role it plays in the acquisition of collocations. The results showed that the length of time spent abroad can improve learners' lexical collocational knowledge in a way that is not achievable in the home country. It was found that even participants with a minimum period of stay in Australia have a high level of lexical collocational knowledge with a mean score of 7.39 (62%). Advanced participants in similar studies in EFL contexts were incapable of reaching the gain of 50% in their collocational test (Alaskan 2011, Gobert 2007, and Shehata 2008). Clearly, the results of this study indicate that a one-year stay in Australia has a strong effect when compared with results of studies from an EFL contexts. This in turns shows that ESL environments foster the acquisition of collocation. This is because learners have the chance to engage intensively with native speakers on a daily basis in a wide range of activities and practices. In contrast, learners in EFL contexts are disadvantaged in this respect. It was also noticed that the growth in participants' overall mean scores increased as the number of years spent in Australia increased. However, the difference in growth was minimal, about one percent, between groups during the first three years (62%, 63.6%, and 64%) respectively. Participants with the longest period of stay, four years, have the highest mean score of 8.76 (73%). The difference between the first and fourth year group is the only significant difference with (11%) difference (see figure 1 below).

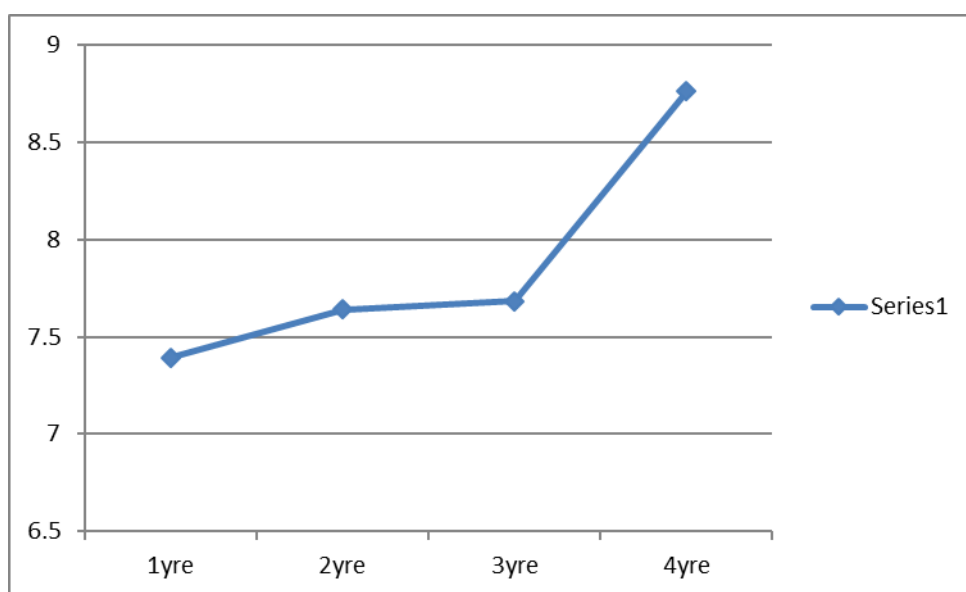


Figure1. Annual Growth of Participants' Collocational Knowledge

As shown in the chart above, one might suggest that such knowledge is hard to increase when reaching a certain percentage at the onset of living abroad and requires a number of years to show significant growths even within an ESL environment. While it is evident that participants acquired reasonable collocational knowledge, even with a minimal period of stay (3-12 months), the increase of annual growth of one percent in the second and third year is unimpressive and discouraging. In the same vein, Willis et al (1977, cited in Milton and Meara, 1995:24) note that 'poor' learners improved most at the outset of the exchange period (in the ESL context), while 'good' learners could even regress. This might be the case with our subjects, as they came to Australia with poor English, hence with poor collocational knowledge, and they showed excellent gain as indicated by their mean score (7.39, (62%)) even within the first year of their stay in Australia. Willis et al attribute the slow or no-progress of good learners to the ceiling effect which is when learners reach a point they cannot progress beyond or just show slow growth after that. Similarly, it could be argued here that participants might have been near the top of the ceiling point from the very beginning, so this may explain their slow growth after the first year.

The positive effect of the first year and the slow annual progress in subsequent years, after students reach a certain point beyond which benefit is minimal, lead to the proposal that it is better for learners to move to the ESL context in early stages of their language learning when they have minimal proficiency. Milton and Meara (1995: 31) notice that the lack of progress for some students in the exchange program is due to the fact that their level is already good. Consequently, bringing students at relatively low stages of L2 competency will not only accelerate the acquisition of different aspects of the language, collocation being one aspect, but also will minimize the cost of study compared to the longer periods of time in the EFL context to get students to reach high levels of proficiency. Lafford (2006) maintains the same view about the benefits of studying abroad through student exchange programs. She further states that:

Indeed, for many years American language instructors and university administrators believed that participating in a "junior year abroad" experience and living with host families from the target culture would not only

broaden students' cultural horizons, but would also help them to become 'fluent' speakers of the language, with more improvement in their target language (L2) pronunciation, grammar (morpho-syntactic) usage, vocabulary knowledge and discursive abilities than those learners who stayed at home and acquired the target language in the classroom (p. 1).

However, it should be mentioned here that the minor annual growth of participants' lexical collocational knowledge does not mean that students failed to improve in other linguistic and cultural aspects as a result of benefits encountered from their stay in Australia.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that living in Australia, studying in English medium schools, and being in constant contact with native speakers were conducive to improvements in participants' collocational knowledge. The effect was evident even within the first year of stay. Participants with a maximum of a one-year stay reached a mean score equal to 62% in their collocational knowledge test. Studies have shown that even advanced learners with several years of EFL learning experience did not reach this level. This, in turn, should be taken as evidence to advocate the importance of the ESL context and the way in which learners benefit from their stay and study in the L2 environment. Storch and Hill (2008) point out that even after just one semester, studying at an Australian university and being immersed in the second language did indeed lead to language improvement.

The fact that not all students can afford to study and live within the L2 environment means that home countries must devise native-like experiences and opportunities for EFL learners that assimilate ESL contexts and provide them with a rich exposure to the target language. In addition, collocations should be incorporated into text books and effectively taught in the classroom.

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## Appendix 1

### Collocational Survey

#### Dear participant,

This survey is designed to collect data on your collocational knowledge and the time you have spent in different Australian institutions and/or in Australia in general. For the purpose of this research, the emphasis will be on what you **currently** know, not on what you should know. Please remember that there are no grades for this test or any fail-pass grading. Answers and information provided here will be only used for the purpose of this research and will be kept confidential. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

**Thank you**

**Part 1: about the participant**

Please complete the following:

Sex:

Age:

1. Please indicate which of the following English proficiency tests you have taken? Please give details.

Type of test	score	Date
TOFEL		
IELTS		

2. If you have not already taken any proficiency test, what do you think your level of proficiency would be? A. Advanced B. Intermediate C. Beginner

- For how long have you been in Australia? \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months
- Which course are you following? \_\_\_\_\_
- When did it begin? Month \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_
- Institution (school) \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 2: Collocational Test** (adapted from Gobert's study 2007)

Circle the best answer.

- If you want to \_\_\_\_\_ success in life, you have to work hard.  
a. receive      b. get      c. earn      d. achieve
- He was homesick, and he \_\_\_\_\_ all his family and friends.  
b. wanted      b. lacked      c. missed      d. desired
- I wanted to put my new stereo together, but I couldn't make \_\_\_\_\_ of instructions.  
c. reality      b. knowing      c. sense      d. understanding
- If I breathe in, I get a sharp \_\_\_\_\_ in my chest.  
d. hurt      b. pain      c. ache      d. wound
- The \_\_\_\_\_ of living always goes up. It never goes down.  
e. cost      b. value      c. price      d. expense
- He was \_\_\_\_\_ child. He didn't have any brothers or sisters.  
f. an alone      b. a unique      c. an only      d. an individual
- You look worried. What's on your \_\_\_\_\_.  
g. brain      b. mind      c. head      d. thoughts.
- If you park your car in the wrong place, you have to pay a \_\_\_\_\_.  
h. fine      b. ticket      c. bill      d. fee
- This hotel really tries hard to look after its \_\_\_\_\_.  
i. clients      b. patients      c. customers      d. guests
- I got some holiday \_\_\_\_\_ from the travel agents.  
j. brochures      b. catalogues      c. manuals      d. leaflets
- On my salary it's difficult to make ends \_\_\_\_\_.  
k. touch      b. meet      c. together      d. join
- This steak is really \_\_\_\_\_. I can't eat it.  
l. tough      b. strong      c. hard      d. difficult