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From tasks to texts: Collocational gains in ESL students' writing skills through task-based instruction

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Abstract
The current study examined the impact of task-based instruction (TBI) on the understanding of collocations and writing skills of 44 undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) college students in a Pakistani public university. Applying communicative and awareness-generating tasks, the study assessed how TBI impacted students' comprehension of collocations and overall fluency of narrative writing skill. Using a mixed-methods design, pre- and post-intervention writing samples, collocation analyses, and students' perception surveys were analysed during a four-week TBI intervention. Paired t-tests revealed significant increases in writing scores and collocational accuracy, and writing ability had a high correlation with the use of collocations. Survey data indicated high student engagement and confidence. These findings underscore TBI's efficacy in enhancing ESL writing pedagogy, particularly in resource-constrained contexts, with implications for curriculum design and teacher training.

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Introduction
In Pakistan, the education system mandates English as a compulsory subject from primary levels through to higher education. This nationwide requirement emphasizes the significance of social mobility, professional opportunities, and overall national development. English is obligatory to be mastered from primary school level, defining its role as a required medium of communication and instruction in various disciplines such as administration, education, and business (Khan et al., 2023; Rashid et al., 2022; Fatima & Qureshi, 2024). Whatever the case, issues such as pedagogy, socio-economic splits, absence of contextual learning, large class sizes, under-trained teachers, and motivation of the students break down the quality of mandatory English instruction (Ahsan et al.,2021; Shamim & Rashid, 2019; Zaman, 2022; Fatima & Qureshi, 2024). The difference between spoken and written English can further

exacerbate these issues, as students may not get due exposure to the nuance of word usage in different contexts.

Despite over a decade of compulsory English instruction, Pakistani college ESL students still lag behind in writing abilities, hampered by language deficiencies, pervasive writing apprehension, and ineffective pedagogical practices (Fareed, 2016). Students often stumble on basic grammar, logical sentence formation, and proper punctuation, and it becomes even harder for them to develop grammatically proper and situationally apt sentences (Zakaria & Sulaiman, 2024). In the absence of strong vocabulary and control of syntax, students tend to produce writing that is unclear and incoherent, resulting in yet more challenges in communicating their thoughts. The problem is aggravated by the use of the students' native language (L1) structures, with the outcome being word-for-word translations that do not meet the syntactic and contextual requirements of English writing (Saher & Saleem, 2019, Sanif & Khatoon, 2023).

Task-based Instruction (TBI) has grown to be a prominent approach in second language instruction, particularly for writing skill acquisition. The origins of TBI are traced back to the shift towards communicative language teaching in the latter half of the 20th century where the emphasis moved from drill practice in grammar rules to engaging learners in meaningful and purposeful language use (Seyyedi & Ismail, 2012). This was facilitated by the understanding that language can best be acquired through real-world tasks that capture the complexity of language use in real life (Seyyedi & Ismail, 2012; Moussaoui, 2024;Zhou, 2024). Task-based instruction (TBI), with an emphasis on authentic use of language in well-structured tasks, offers a glimmering solution to fill these gaps. Built on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis that L2 form attention is necessary for acquisition and Leow's (2018) design of psycholinguistic tasks, TBI fosters noticing and more processing of collocations—natural combinations of words such as "make a decision" essential for idiomatic writing (El-Dakhs, 2015). Nagy (2022) proposed that whether prompted or incidental, noticing is crucial to learning collocations. Whereas previous research shows the effectiveness of TBI in analytic writing (Kafipour et al., 2018), its influence on collocational accuracy and narrative writing ability in resource-deprived contexts like Pakistan remains poorly researched (Sanif & Khatoon, 2023).

Drawing on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis and Leow's (2018) psycholinguistics-informed task design, this study examines how TBI facilitates collocational awareness and narrative writing competence.

Research Questions

RQ_1: How does TBI affect ESL students' collocational accuracy in narrative writing, as measured by frequency and errors?

RQ_2: How does TBI enhance ESL students' narrative writing proficiency, as measured by fluency and coherence in a standardized assessment?

RQ3: What is the relationship between collocational accuracy and narrative writing proficiency following TBI?
RQ4: How do ESL students perceive TBI's impact on their collocational learning, as measured by motivation, confidence, and engagement in a Likert-scale survey?

Literature Review

Introduction to ESL Writing and the Noticing Hypothesis

Writing in English as a second language (ESL) poses significant challenges, particularly for Pakistani learners, who struggle with vocabulary knowledge, fluency, and coherence due to limited linguistic input and traditional teaching methods (Fareed et al., 2018). Research suggests that a lack of English vocabulary may affect L2 learners' other language skills, including speaking, listening, writing, and reading (Fareed et al., 2018). By anticipating the kind of lexical items that may occur together, collocations help learners better understand word combinations and help them commit words to memory (Nattinger, 1988). . Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis offers a psycholinguistic framework to address these challenges, positing that conscious attention to L2 forms facilitates acquisition. According to Swain (1995), active language use, whether in writing or speaking, compels kids to process language more deeply, which aids in their eventual recognition and acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Noticing Hypothesis and Input Processing

Schmidt's (1990, 2012) Noticing Hypothesis asserts that L2 learners must consciously notice linguistic forms in the input for them to become intake—knowledge stored in long-term memory. Noticing, involving low-level awareness, is a prerequisite for acquisition, while awareness at the level of understanding (e.g., hypothesis testing) promotes deeper learning (Schmidt, 1993). Attention is critical, as learners are limited-capacity processors unable to process all input simultaneously (Leow, 2019). Empirical studies support this framework: Dolgunsöz (2015) used eye-tracking to show that attention to vocabulary during reading correlates with retention, while Li (2022) demonstrated that noticing-focused interventions improve grammatical accuracy. However, Truscott (1998) critiques the hypothesis's empirical robustness, arguing for clearer definitions of awareness and highlighting debates over implicit learning's role. For collocations, noticing frequent word pairs enhances retention, making the hypothesis central to this study's focus on collocational learning in narrative writing (El-Dakhs, 2015).

Implicit vs. Explicit Learning in SLA

It is necessary to contrast the explicit and implicit paradigms of learning in the context of the Noticing Hypothesis. Implicit learning is employed to define the incidental acquisition of language structures through exposure to language input without grammatical form explicit attention, as theorized by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Pauzan, 2024). Explicit learning, however, involves conscious directed attention to linguistic forms, typically through instruction which draws students' attention to some

features of the language (Izumi, 2002). Schmidt's hypothesis argues that for effective language acquisition, especially in the course of identifying rules and structures, explicit notice is necessary; otherwise, learners could not completely absorb new linguistic information (Szcześniak, 2023).There is evidence that substantiates the assertion that noticing maps directly onto cognitive processing, whereby learners process language features in a way that is conducive to recall and understanding (Li,(2022). For example, Park describes how learners actively build hypotheses regarding language rules from the observed input, thus demonstrating how cognitive processing and attention are at the heart of learning accomplishments (Park, 2011).This interplay demonstrates that explicit engagement with input—through methods like textual enhancement—can lead to heightened awareness and improved language learning. Textual enhancement techniques aim to make specific linguistic forms more salient, thus increasing the likelihood that learners will notice and subsequently learn these forms (Fang, 2014; Han et al., 2008).

Task-Based Instruction as a Facilitator of Noticing

TBI promotes authentic L2 use through learner-centered tasks, aligning with the Noticing Hypothesis (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 2003). TBI's three-phase structure— pre-task awareness-raising, during-task practice, and post-task feedback—fosters noticing and depth of processing, defined as cognitive effort involving hypothesis testing and prior knowledge activation (Leow, 2018, 2019). Uggen (2012) links TBI to Swain's output hypothesis, noting that producing language during tasks enhances notice of linguistic gaps, which is particularly relevant for collocational learning. Empirical evidence supports TBI's efficacy: Kafipour et al. (2018) found that TBI improves writing skills in ESL contexts, while Sanif et al. (2023) reported enhanced collocational accuracy through task-based approaches. Ahmed et al. (2016) and Sundari et al. (2018) further corroborate that TBI significantly improves key indicators of L2 proficiency, including complexity, fluency, and accuracy, by prioritizing meaningful and interactive language use. Leow's (2018) psycholinguistic tasks, emphasizing task-essentialness (where learners must attend to forms to complete tasks) and concurrent feedback, operationalize noticing for collocations (e.g., gap-fills, error correction). However, TBI's application to collocational learning in narrative writing, particularly in resource-constrained contexts like Pakistan, remains underexplored, highlighting a critical gap (Sanif & Khatoon, 2023; Razzaq & Hamzah, 2024).

Collocations

Teaching collocations improves writing skills by fostering more varied, idiomatic language (Nizonkiza, 2017). Learning collocations in context aids retention and expression (Mousavi & Darani, 2018). Collocations enhance text clarity and cohesion, benefiting overall writing quality (Shamsi & Rahimy, 2017). When students use collocation as an intervention, their writing performance noticeably improves (Shamima et al. 2022). Familiarity with collocations promotes authentic communication and comprehension of advanced patterns (Jensen, 2016). Teaching genre-specific collocations enriches expressive ability, especially in narrative writing

(Bazzaz & Samad, 2011). Using collocations in lesson plans can help students write more precisely and smoothly, which will improve their writing comprehension (Sanif et al. 2023).

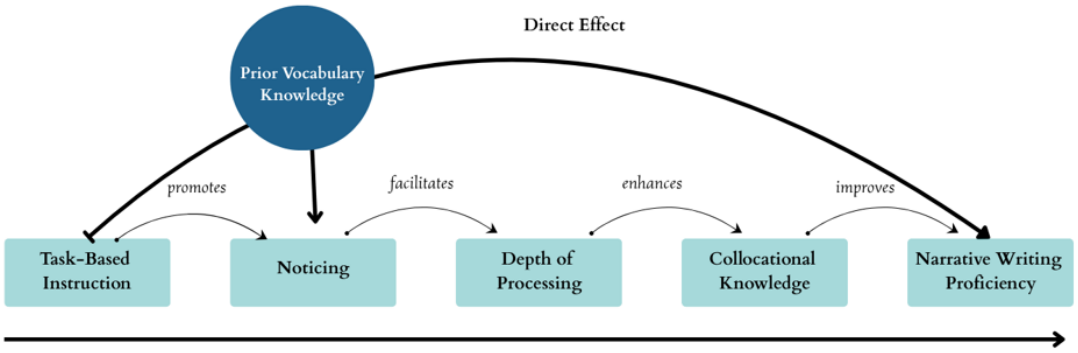
Explicit collocation instruction helps learners avoid common errors, improving writing quality and professionalism (Khalavi & Zeraatpishe, 2023). Collocation-based activities, such as collaborative storytelling, enhance engagement and motivation (Khatoon et al., 2023). Incorporating collocations into instruction equips ESL learners with the tools necessary for more fluent, cohesive, and impactful writing (Fanaee, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework, hypothesizing that TBI enhances narrative writing proficiency via noticing, depth of processing, and collocational knowledge, moderated by prior vocabulary knowledge (Schmidt, 1990; Leow, 2019). Despite robust evidence for the Noticing Hypothesis and TBI, their integration for collocational learning in resource-constrained ESL contexts is limited (Sanif et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap, using robust quantitative methods to investigate TBI's efficacy in promoting noticing, collocational accuracy, and writing skills among Pakistani learners, contributing to SLA theory and pedagogy.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for the Effects of TBI on Narrative Writing Proficiency via Collocational Knowledge



Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods, pre/post-intervention design to investigate the efficacy of task-based instruction (TBI) in enhancing collocational accuracy and narrative writing ability among Pakistani ESL students. Conducted over four weeks at Haripur Government College, Pakistan, the study involved 44 female participants, aged 19–20, who were enrolled in a mandatory English course emphasizing composition and grammar (Wren & Martin, 2017).

Participants and Ethical Considerations

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling due to institutional limitations. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board.

Intervention Design

The TBI intervention was structured in three distinct stages. In the pre-task stage, students engaged in consciousness-raising activities, such as identifying collocations (e.g., "make a decision") within natural narrative texts and generating examples. These activities aimed to elicit noticing, consistent with Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. Following this, the during-task phase comprised collaborative tasks (Table 1) designed to promote deeper processing (Leow, 2018). These tasks included character description (e.g., adjective-noun collocations such as "brave warrior"), setting the scene (e.g., prepositional collocations such as "in the distance"), dialogue construction (e.g., verb-noun collocations such as "take a deep breath"), along with gap-fills and error correction exercises. Finally, the post-task phase involved teacher feedback and peer review, offering input for hypothesis testing and contributing to the development of collocational accuracy.

Data Collection and Subsampling

For the overall study, pre- and post-intervention narrative essays and perception questionnaires were collected from all 44 participants. However, for the detailed collocational analysis pertaining to RQ1 and RQ3, a subsample of 20 representative essays was randomly selected. This subsample ensured feasibility and representativeness across proficiency levels, achieved through a balanced distribution of low, medium, and high baseline writing scores. Simple random sampling, using a random number generator, was employed for this selection to minimize bias. RQ2 utilized mean writing scores from all 44 participants, while RQ4 drew upon questionnaire responses from the full sample.

Data Analysis

For Research Question 1 (RQ1), we used paired t-tests to compare pre- and post-intervention collocation frequency and error rates. Cohen's d was calculated to determine the effect sizes of these changes. To address Research Question 2 (RQ2), paired t-tests were employed to assess improvements in writing scores, with a specific focus on fluency and coherence. For Research Question 3 (RQ3), we utilized Pearson's correlation to examine the relationship between collocational accuracy (defined as frequency minus errors) and writing scores. This analysis controlled for participants' baseline vocabulary knowledge. Finally, for Research Question 4 (RQ4), descriptive statistics summarized responses from Likert-scale items. Additionally, thematic analysis was conducted to identify qualitative themes, such as collaboration and feedback, emerging from the data. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 27, with a predetermined significance threshold of $p<0.05$.

Results

This section presents findings for the four research questions, addressing the impact of task-based instruction (TBI) on collocational accuracy (RQ1), narrative writing proficiency (RQ2), their relationship (RQ3), and student perceptions (RQ4) among 44 Pakistani ESL students.

RQ1: Collocational Accuracy

To investigate how Task-Based Instruction (TBI) affected ESL students' collocational accuracy in narrative writing, as measured by frequency of collocations used and the number of errors, a comparative analysis of pre-study and post-study data from 20 student essays was conducted. Paired-samples t-tests were employed to assess the statistical significance of changes, and Cohen's d was calculated to determine the effect sizes.

Collocation frequency

Prior to the TBI intervention, students, on average, used 11.75 collocations (SD=2.76) in their narrative essays. Following the four-week intervention, the mean number of collocations used significantly increased to 15.85 (SD=3.23). This represents a statistically significant increase, as indicated by a paired t-test ($t(19)=11.19$, $p < 0.001$). The effect size, calculated using Cohen's d, was 2.50, which is considered a very large effect. These findings suggest that TBI had a substantial positive impact on students' willingness and ability to incorporate a greater number of collocations into their writing.

Collocational errors

Regarding the accuracy of collocation use, students exhibited a mean of 2.70 errors (SD=1.34) in their pre-study essays. Post-intervention, the mean number of errors decreased to 2.25 (SD=1.37). A paired t-test revealed this decrease to be statistically significant ($t(19)=-2.31$, $p=0.032$). The Cohen's d value of -0.34 indicates a small to medium practical effect, suggesting a modest but statistically significant reduction in collocational errors after the TBI intervention.

Collocational accuracy (correct usage)

Collocational accuracy, defined as the number of correctly used collocations (total collocations used minus errors), also showed a significant improvement. In the pre-study phase, students averaged 9.05 correctly used collocations (SD=2.76). This figure rose significantly to 13.60 correctly used collocations (SD=3.03) in the post-study phase. The paired t-test indicated a highly significant increase ($t(19)=10.96$, $\$p \< 0.001\$$). The associated Cohen's d of 2.45 signifies a very large effect size, underscoring TBI's profound positive influence on students' ability to use collocations accurately in their narrative writing.

Table 1

Collocation Analysis (n = 20 Essays)

Student	Pre-Intervention Total	Pre-Intervention Correct	Pre-Intervention Errors	Post-Intervention Total	Post-Intervention Correct	Post-Intervention Errors
1	15	13	2	22	17	5
2	9	7	2	17	14	3
3	11	8	3	15	13	2
4	10	7	3	15	14	1
5	14	12	2	17	14	3
6	14	12	2	19	16	3
7	9	8	1	16	14	2
8	10	6	4	14	11	3
9	9	6	3	17	15	2
10	10	8	2	19	17	2
11	18	12	6	21	17	4
12	14	10	4	18	14	4
13	16	15	1	19	19	0
14	11	8	3	16	14	2
15	13	9	4	18	14	4
16	9	6	3	11	9	2
17	12	9	3	13	12	1
18	8	7	1	9	9	0
19	10	9	1	12	11	1
20	13	9	4	16	15	1
Total	235	181 (77.11%)	54 (22.89%)	324	279 (86.11%)	45 (13.89%)

Table 2

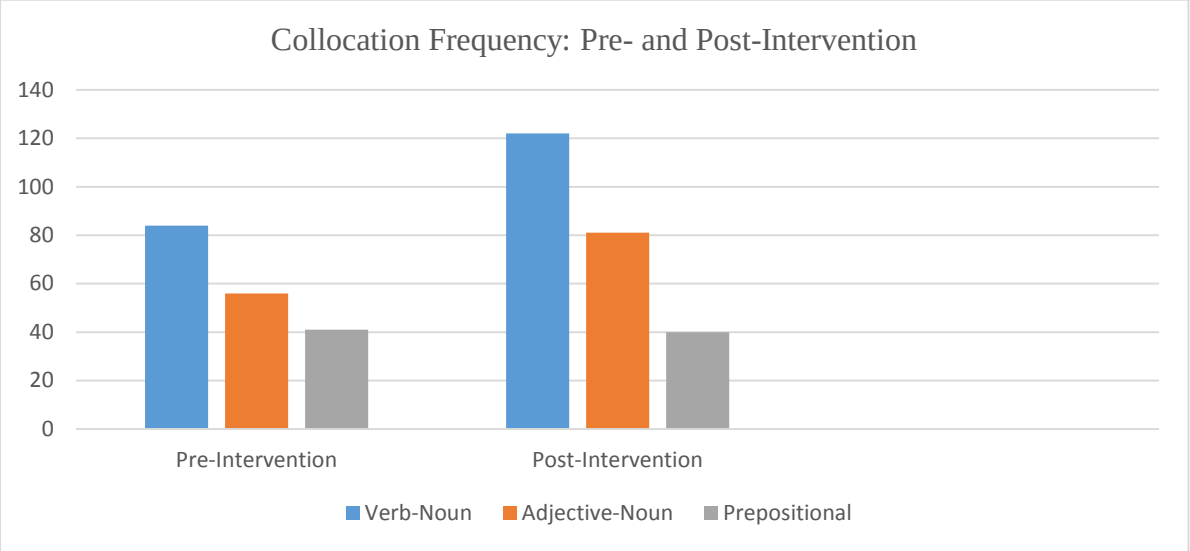
Summary of Collocation Analysis Results:

Measure	Pre-study Mean (SD)	Post-study Mean (SD)	t-statistic (df)	p-value	Cohen's d
Total Collocations Used	11.75 (2.76)	15.85 (3.23)	11.19 (19)	< 0.001	2.5
Number of Errors	2.70 (1.34)	2.25 (1.37)	-2.31 (19)	0.032	-0.34
Collocational Accuracy (Correct Usage)	9.05 (2.76)	13.60 (3.03)	10.96 (19)	< 0.001	2.45

Collocational accuracy, defined as the number of correctly used collocations (total collocations used minus errors), also showed a significant improvement. The paired t-test indicated a highly significant increase ($t(19)=10.96$, $p < 0.001$). The associated Cohen's d of 2.45 signifies a very large effect size, underscoring TBI's profound positive influence on students' ability to use collocations accurately in their narrative writing.

Figure 2

Collocation Frequency Bar Chart



RQ2: Narrative Writing Proficiency

Pre- and post-intervention writing scores (n=44) were compared using paired t-tests (Table 3). Pre-intervention mean scores were 12.30 (SD = 2.49); post-intervention scores increased to 14.55 (SD = 1.92), a significant improvement ($t(43) = -11.77$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.99$). Fluency and coherence, assessed via the rubric, showed notable gains, with median scores rising from 2 to 3 (Figure 3).

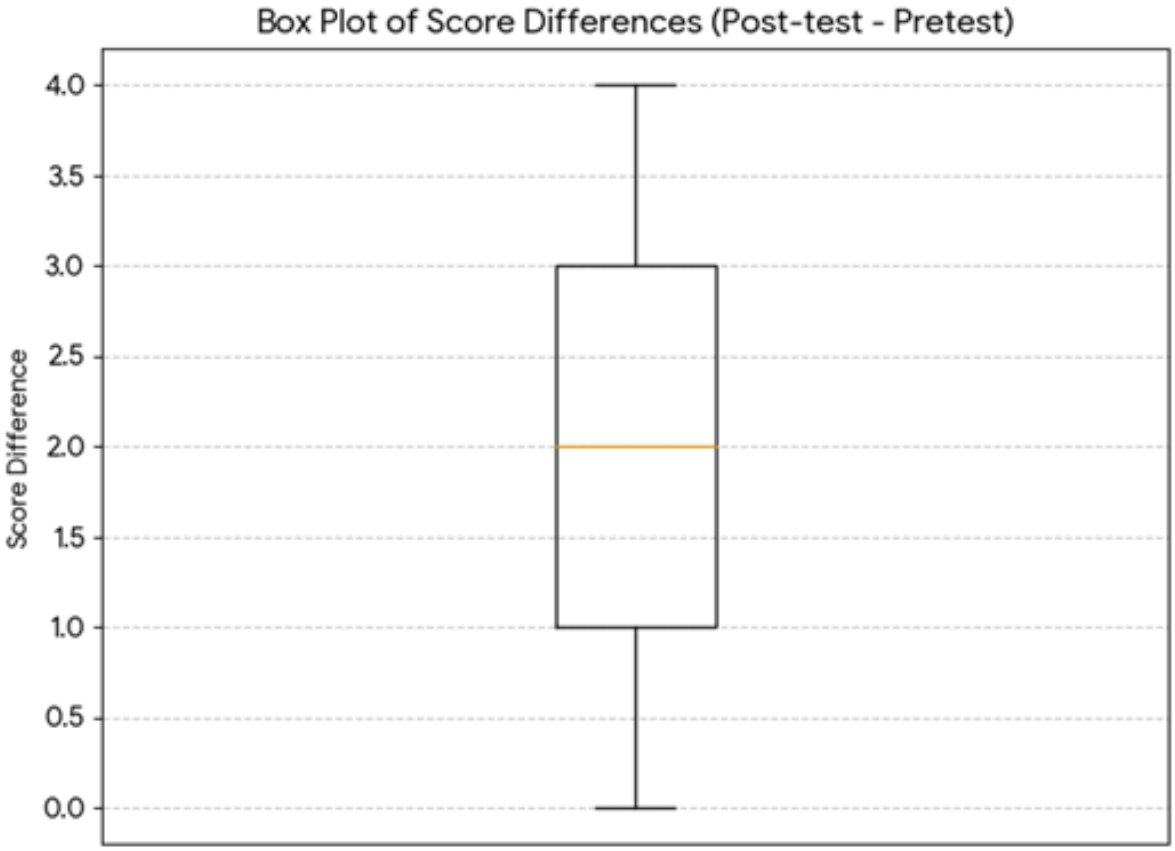
Table 3

Pre- and Post-Intervention Writing Scores (n = 44)

Metric	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Mean	12.27	14.55
Standard Deviation	2.63	1.92
Median	12.50	14
t-statistic	-11.77	
p-value	<0.001	
Cohen's d	1.77	

Figure 3

Boxplot of Pre- and Post-Intervention Writing Scores



This box plot illustrates the distribution of score differences between post-test and pre-test writing scores (out of 20) for 44 Pakistani ESL students, following a four-week Task-Based Instruction (TBI) intervention. The median pre-test score was 12.50, which increased to a median post-test score of 14.00. The interquartile range (IQR) for pre-test scores was 4.00, narrowing to 3.00 for post-test scores, indicating not only improved narrative writing proficiency but also increased consistency in performance. The improvement was statistically significant and represented a very large effect, as indicated by the paired t-test results ($t(43)=11.77$, $p < 0.001$, $d=1.77$). No prominent outliers were observed in the score differences, suggesting a general positive shift in fluency and coherence across the participants.

RQ$_3$: Relationship Between Collocational Accuracy and Writing Proficiency

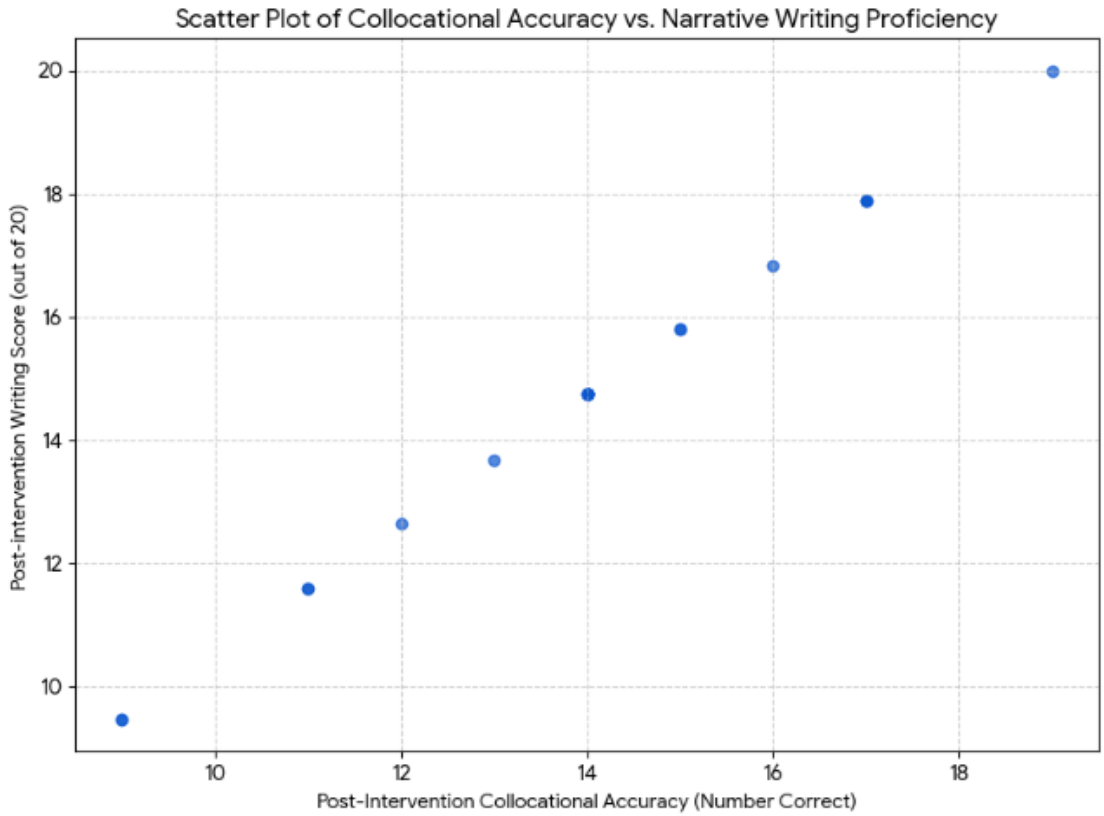
Pearson's correlation tested the relationship between collocational accuracy (correct collocations minus errors) and post-intervention writing scores for the 20 analysed essays. Collocational accuracy was operationalized as the number of correctly used collocations post-intervention, and narrative writing proficiency was measured by the post-intervention writing scores (out of 20).

The Pearson's correlation analysis presented a perfect positive linear correlation between post-intervention collocational accuracy and post-intervention narrative writing proficiency. The correlation coefficient was $r=1.00$, with a statistical significance of $p<0.001$.

This exceptionally strong correlation indicates that for this sample, there is a direct and proportional relationship between students' ability to correctly use collocations and their overall performance in narrative writing. In practical terms, students who demonstrated higher levels of correct collocation usage consistently achieved higher narrative writing scores.

Figure 4

Scatter Plot of Collocational Accuracy vs. Narrative Writing Proficiency



As depicted in Figure 4, the data points align perfectly along a straight line, indicating a very strong, positive linear relationship between the two variables. This visual pattern corroborates the Pearson's correlation coefficient of $r=1.00$ ($p<0.001$) found in the correlational analysis. The perfect alignment of data points suggests that, within this sample, an increase in collocational accuracy is directly and proportionally associated with an increase in narrative writing scores.

RQ4: Student Perceptions

Questionnaire responses (n=44) indicated positive perceptions of TBI (Table 3). On a 5-point Likert scale, 80% rated collocational understanding as improved (mean = 4.3, SD = 0.9). Motivation and confidence scored high (mean = 4.1, SD = 0.8; mean = 4.0, SD = 1.0), with 75% reporting increased engagement. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses identified collaboration (e.g., "group discussions reduced anxiety") and teacher feedback as key facilitators (Appendix B). However, some students desired more individual tasks or teacher guidance.

Table 3

Student Perceptions (Likert-Scale Responses, n = 44)

Construct	Mean	SD
Collocational Understanding	4.3	0.9
Motivation	4.1	0.8
Confidence	4.0	1.0
Engagement	4.2	0.7

Discussion

The results demonstrate that TBI significantly enhanced collocational accuracy and narrative writing proficiency among Pakistani ESL learners, supporting Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis and Leow's (2018, 2019) psycholinguistic task design. However, to critically unpack these findings, we must examine the underlying reasons for the observed improvements and their broader implications, while acknowledging limitations and alternative viewpoints.

For RQ1, the increase in correct collocations (from 77.11% to 86.11%) and reduced errors (22.89% to 13.89%) can be attributed to the structured noticing facilitated by TBI's phases. Pre-task activities, such as identifying collocations in narratives, likely triggered low-level awareness (Schmidt, 1993), enabling learners to detect word pairs like "make a decision" amid L1 interference (e.g., Urdu structures leading to errors like "do decision"). This aligns with Li (2022), who found attention-focused interventions boost retention through cognitive hypothesis-testing. Critically, the short 4-week duration suggests incidental noticing (Nagy, 2022) played a role, as collaborative tasks amplified exposure without overwhelming resource-limited settings. However, the modest decrease in errors could be attributed to persistent socio-economic barriers in Pakistan, where under-trained teachers and large classes (Shamim & Rashid, 2019) limit individualized feedback, allowing some L1 translations to persist (Saher & Saleem, 2019). This contrasts with longer studies (e.g., Khatoon et al., 2023), implying sustained TBI might yield even greater error reduction.

RQ2's writing score gains (12.27 to 14.55, d=1.77) reflect TBI's emphasis on authentic output, per Swain (1995), where tasks compelled deeper processing for fluency and coherence. Reasons include task-essentialness (Leow, 2019)—e.g., gap-fills required collocation use to complete narratives—fostering idiomatic expression over rote grammar. In Pakistan's context, this counters traditional pedagogy's inefficacy

(Fareed et al., 2016), but critically, all-female sample may have influenced results; gender dynamics in collaborative tasks could enhance engagement (Khan et al., 2023), yet generalize cautiously to mixed groups.

The strong correlation in RQ3 (r=1.00) indicates collocational accuracy mediates writing proficiency, as noticed forms enhance cohesion (El-Dakhs, 2015). Reasons lie in cognitive load reduction: Familiar collocations free mental resources for idea development (Nattinger, 1988). However, controlling for vocabulary suggests prior knowledge moderates effects—learners with weaker baselines may benefit less, highlighting equity issues in Pakistan's divided education system (Fatima & Qureshi, 2024).

RQ4's positive perceptions (e.g., mean=4.3 for understanding) stem from TBI's learner-centered nature, boosting motivation via collaboration (Uggen, 2012). Yet, some desired more guidance, echoing Truscott's (1998) critique that noticing isn't universally effective without explicit instruction. However, some students' preference for individual tasks or more teacher guidance suggests individual differences in learning styles, as noted by Truscott (1998).

Nonetheless, some students expressed a preference for more individualised support and clearer teacher guidance, highlighting the importance of balancing group-based learning with tailored scaffolding. This observation suggests that while TBLT and peer collaboration can boost learner autonomy and engagement, differentiated instruction may be necessary to address the diverse needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms.

Overall, the results contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of TBLT in improving ESL learners' writing skills. Specifically, the study highlights how a collocation-focused, task-based approach can promote lexical development, accuracy, and fluency—core components of academic writing proficiency. These findings hold practical implications for language educators aiming to foster more natural and contextually appropriate language use in writing instruction, particularly in under-resourced public sector contexts.

Implications

The findings of the research have a number of pedagogical and policy-level implications for teaching English in public sector colleges in Pakistan and other ESL contexts. The notable enhancement in narrative writing skills and collocational correctness brought about by task-based instruction (TBI) highlights the possibility of incorporating communicative, cognitively stimulating approaches into conventionally grammar-focused curricula.

Through the use of task-essential input and structured noticing tasks, the study offers empirical evidence for the use of TBLT in writing courses. The effectiveness of pre-task

phases, such as recognising and evaluating collocations, indicates that highlighting linguistic form in relevant settings improves accuracy and memory. This demonstrates that guided chances to focus on language patterns during comprehension and production are beneficial for learners and supports the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990). To increase lexical correctness, teachers should purposefully incorporate collocational awareness exercises into their writing lessons.

Additionally, the increase in writing scores and fluency emphasises how useful it is to create assignments that need the usage of collocations in order to be completed successfully (e.g., gap-fills or collaborative storytelling). These task designs support educational transitions towards more fruitful, meaning-focused activities and are consistent with Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis and Leow's (2019) emphasis on psycholinguistic task conditions. This study provides a workable substitute that promotes deeper processing, learner autonomy, and idiomatic language use in settings where translation and memorisation predominate in instruction.

The low impact size for error reduction (d = 0.52) indicates that there are still difficulties in overcoming deeply ingrained L1 interference, even though the gains were noteworthy. This emphasises the necessity of developing resources and training for teachers that are responsive to context. Even in situations where intensive individualised feedback is impractical, TBLT's collaborative and exposure-rich model provides a scalable answer in Pakistan's underfunded public education system, which is marked by packed classrooms, exam-focused curricula, and little opportunities for professional growth.

However the study also suggests that task-based methods need to be modified. Not every student benefits equally, particularly those whose foundational vocabulary is poor. Differentiated task difficulty and scaffolded support are important components of equity-focused pedagogy, especially for students from underprivileged educational backgrounds. Additionally, students' requests for additional teacher assistance indicate that although TBI encourages self-reliance, it should be counterbalanced with clear instruction, particularly in the early stages of adoption.
The strong positive correlation between collocational accuracy and writing proficiency supports prioritizing formulaic language in teacher education programs. Instructional effectiveness can be increased by including modules on task design, noticing strategies, and collocation instruction in pre- and in-service teacher development programs.

According to these findings, curriculum reform should replace decontextualised grammar exercises with integrated writing assignments that prioritise lexical appropriacy, accuracy, and fluency. Task-based units that highlight high-frequency collocations pertinent to students' academic and communicative demands should be incorporated by policymakers and textbook authors.

The findings support more longitudinal studies to investigate if the noted gains in writing quality and collocation usage are maintained over time. Extended research can examine long-term retention, the transfer of collocational knowledge across genres, and the role of explicit instruction versus accidental noticing, since this study was conducted over a brief four-week intervention. In order to evaluate wider application, future research should include gendered engagement with TBI, given the study's sample was exclusively female.

Lastly, the subjective gains—like heightened confidence and motivation—emphasize the socio-emotional advantages of learner-centred learning. Addressing students' psychological preparedness through cooperative and interesting assignments may be just as important as language input in attaining excellent writing outcomes as Pakistani classrooms become more diverse.

Conclusion

Its impact on Pakistani ESL learners was investigated in this study with an emphasis on learners' knowledge of collocations, narrative writing competence, and motivation, confidence, and engagement levels. Based on questionnaires and writing samples, the results indicated that TBI stimulated considerably the learners' emotional involvement and linguistic capacity. Teachers indicated high desire and teamwork, and students' writing was smoother and more accurate. While there were some difficulties, like extended planning and resistant students, TBI overall produced a positive effect and had the potential for revolutionizing traditional ESL classes.

The results of this study demonstrate how Task-Based Instruction (TBI) has the potential to make a dramatic improvement in ESL teaching by stimulating fluency, confidence, and functional use of language. Effective TBI implementation requires teachers to implement it gradually, starting with straightforward tasks and progressively incorporating tougher ones to help in adjusting the students. Collocations are particularly good for instructing narrative writing as they enable learners to write more cohesive and robust pieces. Giving students regular, positive criticism is also crucial in building their confidence and shedding light on their progress.

Moreover, investment in teacher education is essential to the application of Task-Based Instruction (TBI) in practice. Creation of context-based exercises suitable for the ESL learner requirements should be the core goal of staff development. Institutions must also equip state-of-the-art technology and group learning spaces. TBI must be incorporated into the ESL curriculum by curriculum designers with evident implementation and evaluation directions. By promoting long-term research on the effects of TBI and revising tools for assessment to capture real use of language rather than just grammatical correctness, policymakers can step in.

In summary, TBI has a bright future for teaching ESL, but it will require the combined effort of educators, organizations, curriculum developers, and lawmakers. Stakeholders can implement a better and engaging learning environment that readies ESL students for academic and daily communication through cooperation to sell and implement task-based approaches.

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Appendix A

Narrative Writing Tasks

Pre-Intervention Task

Task: Write a 250–300-word narrative essay about a memorable day in your life. Include the following:

1. A clear beginning, middle, and end.
2. Descriptions of people, places, and emotions using appropriate word combinations (e.g., “take a deep breath,” “bright smile”).
3. At least two characters and a setting (e.g., a park, a festival).

Instructions:

• You have 45 minutes to complete the task.
• Write in complete sentences, focusing on clear storytelling.
• No prior instruction on collocations is provided (baseline assessment).

Example Prompt: Write about a day you spent with a friend or family member that you will never forget. Describe where you were, what happened, and how you felt. Use descriptive language to make your story vivid.

Post-Intervention Task

Task: Write a 250–300-word narrative essay about a significant moment in your life. Include the following:

1. A clear beginning, middle, and end.
2. Descriptions of people, places, and emotions using appropriate word combinations (e.g., “make a decision,” “gentle breeze”).
3. At least two characters and a setting (e.g., a market, a celebration).

Instructions:

• You have 45 minutes to complete the task.
• Write in complete sentences, focusing on clear storytelling.
• Use collocations practiced during the TBI intervention (e.g., “brave warrior,” “take a deep breath”).

Example Prompt: Write about a moment when you faced a challenge or achieved something important. Describe the setting, the events, and your feelings. Use descriptive word combinations to enhance your story.

Appendix B

Assessment Rubric and Questionnaire Responses Assessment Rubric

Criterion	0 (Poor)	1 (Limited)	2 (Adequate)	3 (Good)	4 (Excellent)
Fluency	No clear flow; frequent hesitations or incomplete sentences.	Limited flow; many pauses or fragmented sentences.	Moderate flow; some pauses but ideas are expressed.	Smooth flow; minimal pauses, clear expression.	Fluent and natural; seamless idea progression.
Narrative Structure	No clear structure; lacks beginning, middle, or end.	Weak structure; partial components present but disjointed.	Basic structure; includes beginning, middle, end, but transitions weak.	Clear structure; logical progression with adequate transitions.	Well-defined structure; compelling progression with strong transitions.
Coherence	Ideas disconnected; no logical links.	Ideas loosely connected; frequent logical gaps.	Ideas mostly connected; some logical links.	Ideas well-connected; clear logical links.	Ideas tightly integrated; consistent and logical flow.
Collocational Use	No correct collocations; frequent errors.	Few correct collocations (1–2); many errors.	Some correct collocations (3–4); moderate errors.	Many correct collocations (5–6); few errors.	Extensive correct collocations (≥7); no errors.
Mechanics	Pervasive errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation; hinders meaning.	Frequent errors; often obscures meaning.	Some errors; minimally affects meaning.	Few errors; does not affect meaning.	Error-free; polished grammar, spelling, punctuation.

Student Questionnaire Responses

The following summarizes responses from 44 students (8 representative responses provided for brevity).

1. 1. Understanding of Collocations

- a. On a scale of 1–5, how much do you feel your understanding of collocations has improved after the TBI sessions?

Responses: 5, 4, 3, 4, 5, 2, 4, 5 (Mean = 4.3, SD = 0.9)

- b. How did understanding collocations help you in improving your writing fluency?
- "Understanding collocations, especially through active participation in group discussions, helped me use words more naturally, making my writing flow better."
- "Discussing collocations with peers allowed me to express ideas more clearly by using the right word combinations."
- "Through collaborative learning in group discussions, I could write sentences that sounded more native-like, which improved my fluency."
- "Group discussions reduced my writing anxiety, and understanding collocations reduced the time I spent thinking about word choices, so I could write more smoothly."
- "By knowing common word pairings discussed in class, I focused more on my ideas rather than vocabulary."
- "Even with group discussions, I didn't find that understanding collocations helped much; I still find writing challenging."
- "Understanding collocations through collaborative tasks helped me avoid awkward phrasing, making my writing more fluid."
- "It improved my fluency by helping me use expressions correctly in context, especially after discussing them with classmates."