
The Importance of Collocations in Teaching of Vocabulary

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Abstract

Collocations are very important part of knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English. J. R. Firth, the father of collocation, first developed a lexical and the most traditional approach, claiming that the meaning of a word is determined by the co-occurring words, and consequently, lexis is independent and separable from grammar. Teachers and students of English should pay more attention to collocations and be aware of the importance of collocations in the acquisition of a word. While teaching of vocabulary of a foreign language like English, the cultural, grammatical, lexical and phonological subsystems should be considered.

Keywords: Collocations, Language Acquisition, Teaching of Vocabulary

Introduction

While teaching of vocabulary of a foreign language like English, the teacher has to consider the cultural, grammatical, lexical and phonological subsystems intrinsic to the language. According to Morra & Camba (2009), vocabulary learning is one of the critical elements both of acquisition of one's native language and of learning a foreign language. In ELT, teachers focus on the teaching of vocabulary from a different perspective and pay attention to a word's function, pronunciation and basic meaning. English teachers should have awareness on the need to take into consideration collocation patterns when dealing with new and known vocabulary in the classroom.

Rationale

Collocational knowledge is part of native speakers' competence, and can be problems for learners in cases where collocability is language-specific and is not solely determined by universal semantic restrictions (McCarthy, 1990).

There is surely need for an understanding of and a concern with collocation by teachers and students (Carter and McCarthy, 1988).

Collocations' are usually described as "sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur [i.e. occur together]" (Cruse 1986:40). Examples of English collocations are: 'thick eyebrows', 'sour milk', 'to collect stamps', 'to commit suicide', '+to reject a proposal'.

Learners of English are more concerned about how to expand their vocabulary in order to increase the number of words they can remember. Learning collocations is inevitable part of vocabulary acquisition. They should know the use and importance of collocations in language acquisition. By learning collocation, they are able to:

- Improve language use
- Use native like expressions
- Express their ideas with greater power
- Improve writing sophistication
- Further develop their language proficiency

Study the following expressions (collocations)

many thanks	(several thanks -unacceptable)
strong coffee	(powerful coffee -unacceptable)
strong wind	(heavy wind-unacceptable)
heavy rain	(strong rain -unacceptable)
powerful computer	(strong computer-unacceptable)
tall trees	(high trees -unacceptable)

The above expressions tell us that collocation is the way words combine in a language to produce natural sounding speech and writing, or a collocation is an expression consisting of two or more words that correspond to some conventional way of saying things.

Background Study

First brought up by Palmer (1933) and later introduced to the field of theoretical linguistics by Firth (1957), the definition of collocations most commonly shared is: the tendency of one word to co-occur with one or more other words in a particular domain (Aghbar, 1990; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Gitsaki, 1999; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003).

The term 'collocation' has its origin in the Latin verb 'collocare' which means *to set in order/to arrange*. J. R. Firth (1957) is considered the father of collocation who first developed a lexical and the most traditional approach, claiming that the meaning of a word is determined by the co-occurring words, and consequently, lexis is independent and separable from grammar.

"You shall know a word by the company it keeps"- (Firth 1968:11). This is one of the most common quotations used when scholars attempt to define collocation. Firth brought the term to the linguistic arena in his paper „A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955“ in which he frequently alluded to 'the collocational level' of meaning. He believed that we obtain the meaning of a word or a text through a 'mutually congruent series of levels' (Firth 1968:30), these levels being contexts of situation, syntax, phonology, phonetics, and collocation.

In Cohesion in English, Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.317) argue that collocation, a means of cohesion, is "the co-occurrence of lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another, because they tend to occur in similar environments."

The term collocation, according to Cruse, refers to "sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent.

Learning collocations is one of the numerous approaches and techniques to teaching and learning vocabulary. It is a widely accepted idea that collocations are very important part of knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English in order to speak or write fluently and accurately (Jaén, 2007).

Importance of Collocations

Learners should know the importance of collocations for the language acquisition and communicative competence. James Carl (1998) stated that using collocations correctly "contributes greatly to one's idiomaticity and nativelikeness." Lewis stated that "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items." Sonaiya (1988) went even further, saying that "lexical errors are more serious because effective communication depends on the choice of words."

According to Applied linguistics scholars, 'A key element of natural fluency in English is mastery of collocations in both their oral and written forms.' Collocations are a class of idiomatic expression, containing two or more words that commonly, and for arbitrary reasons, occurring together as a standard unit of meaning, such as 'heavy rain' but not strong rain and 'many

thanks' but not several thanks. Collocations are important since they make English language sound natural and native-like.

Approaches to the Study of Collocations

To the study of collocations, for the last six decades there have been three main approaches, such as: the lexical composition approach, the semantic approach, and the structural approach, focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon of collocation.

- *The Lexical Composition Approach:* The lexical composition approach regards lexical analysis as independent from grammar and considers lexis an autonomous entity, choosing its own collocations which can be enumerated and classified in lexical sets, such as: *Spick and Span, Rancid Butter, Fast Food, Black Coffee*
- *The Semantic Approach:* The semantic approach tries to find semantic features based on the meaning of lexical units that would enable the prediction of their collocations. For example, one can *'pay attention or a visit'* but not *'pay a greeting or welcome'*, and in the same way *'die'* and *'pass away'* have the same meaning. *'Pass away'* refers to human beings, but the word, die is used to all living beings- persons, animals, plants.
- *The Structural Approach:* The structural approach tries to establish patterns of collocations that include grammatical and lexical words alike. In a group of word forms like *'drinks', 'drinker'* and *'drinking'* Mitchell abstracts the common elements of each word form and labels that as *'root'*, e.g. /drink, and the associations of different roots, e.g. /drink- and / heav-, as *'collocations'*, e.g. *'heavy drinker', 'drink heavily'* (Mitchell 1971:51). The relationship between *'collocation'* and *'colligation'* is one of generality: *'colligations'* are the generalized classes of associations and *'collocations'* are their particular members (Mitchell 1971:53). And here are some other examples: *command devotion, give a loud laugh, take off, take away, sit down, etc.*

Strategies/Techniques - Suggested

Collocations should be considered in the teaching of vocabulary or language acquisition. It is the responsibility of English teachers to give importance to the teaching of collocations while

teaching vocabulary. The teachers should get the students to pay attention to the new word used in the exact context and to encourage them to try to remember the collocation the word appears in. Learners have to realize that the learning materials written in native language is very important. Teachers should encourage learners to listen to or read genuine English written by native speakers. Immersion in native idiomatic English is helpful for developing good sense of English, especially in case of collocation.

English as a second or foreign language, learners ought to learn and acquire new vocabulary in order to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. So, learners should be aware of the different vocabulary learning strategies such as: The conventional memorization techniques, bilingual vocabulary lists or other traditional vocabulary learning techniques. In addition, teachers and students have to use the modern vocabulary teaching techniques like collocational vocabulary learning, which is a type of widely-accepted modern technique. Mc Carten (2007) validates this suggestion about vocabulary instruction through collocation. He utters that while vocabulary can be taught and practiced intentionally through collocation technique at higher levels, it can furthermore be used even at the elementary level presenting the idea of words and expressions that are used together without using the term of collocation itself.

In order to situate collocations within the area of vocabulary teaching, I will take the concept of „word“ as a point of departure (see Carter & McCarthy 1988). Nation (1990:31) proposes a list of the different aspects of knowledge needed, as presented in the below table. The R and P stand respectively for receptive (listening and reading) and productive (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) knowledge:

Form	Spoken form	R	What does the word sound like?
		P	How is the word pronounced?
	Written form	R	What does the word look like?
		P	How is the word written and spelled?
Position	Grammatical Patterns	R	In what patterns does the word occur?
		P	In what patterns must we use the word?
	Collocations	R	What words or types of words can be expected before or after the word?
		P	What words or types of words must we use with this word?
Function	Frequency	R	How common is the word?
		P	How often should the word be used?
	Appropriateness	R	Where would we expect to meet this word?
		P	Where can this word be used?
Meaning	Concept	R	What does the word mean?
		P	What word should be used to express this meaning?
	Associations	R	What other words does this word make us think of?
		P	What other words could we use instead of this one?

The above table shows what is involved in knowing a word (Nation 1990:31). Nation uses the four general classification criteria drawing from George (1983): ‘form’, ‘position’, ‘function’, and ‘meaning’. Nattinger affirms that the meaning of a word is closely related to the word’s associations and argues that ‘the whole notion of collocations is extremely important for acquiring vocabulary and has yet to be exploited to its full potential’ (1988:70). According to the table, collocations, as well as all other aspects of a word, can be taught in relation to both receptive and productive knowledge (Nattinger 1988:75).

Students are advised to make use of the rich resources of excellent dictionaries of collocations available in the Internet. Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English can meet the needs of students and teachers.

Types of Collocations

According to Benson, Benson and Ilson [1997], collocations are defined as specified, identifiable, non-idiomatic, recurrent combinations. In their dictionary they are divided into two groups such as: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations.

Grammatical collocations consist of the main word (a noun, an adjective, a verb) plus a preposition or ‘to+infinitive’ or ‘that-clause’ and characterized by 8 basic types of collocations shown in the below table:

Type of Collocation	Description/Structure	Examples of Collocations
G1	noun + preposition	<i>blockade against, apathy towards</i>
G2	noun + to-infinitive	<i>He was a fool to do it.</i> <i>They felt a need to do it.</i>
G3	noun + that-clause	<i>We reached an agreement that she would represent us in court.</i> <i>He took an oath that he would do his duty.</i>
G4	preposition + noun	<i>by accident, in agony</i>
G5	adjective + preposition	<i>fond of children, hungry for news</i>

G6	adjective + <i>to</i> -infinitive	<i>It was necessary to work.</i> <i>It's nice to be here.</i>
G7	adjective + <i>that</i> -clause	<i>She was afraid that she would fail.</i> <i>It was imperative that I be here.</i>
G8	verb + <i>to</i> -infinitive verb + bare infinitive (19 different verb patterns in English)	<i>They began to speak.</i> <i>We must work.</i>



Lexical collocations do not contain prepositions, infinitives or relative clauses but consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. The Lexical collocations are described her in the table as 7 types:

Type of Collocation	Description/Structure	Examples of Collocations
L1	verb (which means creation/action) + noun/pronoun/prepositional phrase	<i>come to an agreement, launch a missile</i>
L2	verb (which means eradication /cancellation) + noun	<i>reject an appeal, crush resistance</i>
L3	adjective + noun, or noun used in an attributive way + noun	<i>strong tea, a crushing defeat, house arrest, land reform</i>
L4	noun + verb naming the activity which is performed by a designate of this noun	<i>bombs explode, bees sting</i>
L5	quantifier + noun	<i>a swarm of bees, a piece of advice</i>
L6	adverb + adjective	<i>hopelessly addicted, sound asleep</i>
L7	verb + adverb	<i>argue heatedly, apologize humbly</i>

Conclusion

Collocations play an important role in Teaching of Vocabulary in English. The teachers of English have to consider the cultural, grammatical, lexical and phonological subsystems while teaching of vocabulary of a foreign language like English. Teachers and students of English should pay more attention to collocations and be aware of the importance of collocations in the

acquisition of a word. Students can make use of the rich resources of excellent dictionaries of collocations available in the Internet.

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