

Collocations and the Practice of TESOL

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Abstract

Not long ago, collocation has emerged as a significant category of lexical patterning and it is soon becoming an established unit of description in language teaching courses and materials. For native speakers of English, this kind of knowledge is largely instinctive. Second language learners, on the other hand, need to put some effort to learn collocation in order to make their speech and writing sound much more natural and native-like. In fact, the pervasiveness of collocations and their arbitrary nature impose a challenge for both, learners and teachers. Even if most collocation learning might occur outside the classroom, formal study is needed, whether the learner is able to acquire collocations immediately or not. Educators and methodologists have set certain guidelines for teaching this important area of vocabulary. They have agreed on three things: first, the necessity of raising awareness of collocation among teachers and learners, second, the importance of selecting what collocations to teach, and third, the importance of providing simple categorization of collocation for the learners. As TESOL practitioners, we should list collocation competence as a teaching objective, and equip our students with the means to gain this kind of competence so that they can continue developing it after they leave the ESL class. This instructional article shed some light on current TESOL perspectives and practices in regard to teaching and learning collocations. The theoretical part focuses on collocation's definition, types, and features, and discusses the importance of collocations for the L2 learner. The practical part explores the difficulties collocation presents for the L2 learner, and provide teachers with some useful strategies and activities for teaching collocations.

Keywords: TESOL; collocations, L2 learners, grammar, literacy skills; syntax

Introduction

With the emergence of corpus linguistics and the availability of large computer-based corpora, we now have better understanding of English language patterns and frequencies, and how words are used. Linguists, who for a long time have been interested in how words combine as pairs in collocations, are able now to verify their intuition-based notions by analyzing actual attested language use in a large scale. Lewis (2000) states, "we now recognize that much of our 'vocabulary' consists of prefabricated chunks of different kinds. The single most important kind of chunk is collocation" (p. 8). Not long ago, collocation emerged as a significant category of lexical patterning and it soon became an established unit of description in language teaching courses and materials. Nation (1990) lists collocation in his eight types of word knowledge as he considers "knowing a word involves having some expectation of the words that it will collocate with" (p. 31). For native speakers of English, this kind of knowledge is largely intuitive. Second language learners, on the other hand, need to put in some effort to learn collocation in order to make their speech and writing sound much more natural and native-like. In fact, the pervasiveness of collocations and their arbitrary nature is a challenge for both learners and teachers.

This article aims to explore the realm of collocation, and shed some light on current TESOL perspectives and practices in regard to teaching and learning these words associates/partners. It is divided into two main parts: In the first part, I present current descriptions of collocation by discussing definitions,

listing types, and identifying some collocation features. The second part of the paper discusses some issues related to collocation and the L2 learner.

1- A Description of Collocation

A number of overlapping definitions of collocation exist, many of which have at their core some sense of “co-occurrence” of words. Father of the lexical approach, Michael Lewis, defines collocation as “the way in which words co-occur in natural text in statically significant ways” (Lewis, 2000, p.132). The natural aspect of language is also present in the definition offered by Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2002): “the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing” (p. vii). For example, in English it is not normal to say “long man” or “tall wall”. The ESL learner in any level knows the meanings of these four words, but knowing how to combine these words and put them in productive use takes a greater amount of competence.

Although linguists and researchers share a basic notion of what it makes a collocation – words occurrence in natural context, they differ as to what can be perceived as collocation. Their differences are manifested in their varied categorization of collocations. They are also manifested in the overlap, sometimes confusion, in the terminology they have used. Some frequently used terms are *free combinations*, *polywords*, *fixed phrases*, *phrasal constraints*, *sentence builders*, *prefabricated routines*, *clichés*, *idioms*, *lexical phrases*, and *multi-word units*. In a second read to the preceding cited definitions, we can see that the term “collocation” can incorporate all these lexical items. Thus, categorization of collocation is seen as central. Hill (2000) states that a collocation can consist of two or more words and contain the following elements:

1.	adjective + noun	<i>a huge profit</i>
2.	noun + noun	<i>a pocket calculator</i>
3.	verb + adjective + noun	<i>learn a foreign language</i>
4.	verb + adverb	<i>live dangerously</i>
5.	adverb + verb	<i>half understand</i>
6.	adverb + adjective	<i>completely soaked</i>
7.	verb + preposition + noun	<i>speak through an interpreter</i>

Another kind of categorization is offered by Carter (1998, p. 159) who analyzes collocations in terms of their collocational restriction, syntactic structure, and semantic opacity:

1. Collocational restriction:
From unrestricted collocation, e.g. *keep*: ‘keep a house, a diary, a shop, a hotel, pets, a job, a boat’, etc. to relatively restricted collocation, e.g. *stark naked*, *gin and tonic*, *cream tea*, etc.
2. Syntactic structure:
From flexible, e.g. *break somebody’s heart*, *heart-breaking*, *heart-broken*, *heart-breaker* to irregular, e.g. *to go it alone*, *the more the merrier*, *to hold true*, *to be running scared*.
3. Semantic opacity:
From transparent, e.g. *long time no see*, *honesty is the best policy* to opaque, e.g. *to kick the bucket*, *to be over the moon*, *to smell a rat*.

Conzett (2000, p.74) conceptualizes collocations on a continuum like the one below. On such a continuum, units made of freely-combining words like *friendly dog* or *old car* would not be treated as collocations, nor would fixed expressions and idioms like *throw in the towel*. She treats as collocations those items in the middle of the continuum, with stronger collocations to the right (e.g. *sibling rivalry*; *mitigating circumstances*), and weaker collocations to the left (e.g. *strong coffee*; *heavy smoker*).

Likewise, collocations included in Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2002) are those in the middle of the continuum. Free combinations such as *snice shoes* and the totally-fixed idioms such as *when it rains it pours* are excluded. Another, quite common, way of categorizing collocations is to split them up into lexical and grammatical collocation. Lexical collocation is a combination of two open class words (e.g. *an evasive answer*). Grammatical collocation is a combination of an open class word and a closed class word (e.g.

aware of). Today, rather than spending all their time describing and sorting expressions, TESOL practitioners and methodologists are concerned with helping teachers to make simple collocation categories for their students.

2- Collocations and the L2 Learner:

a- Importance of Collocation for The L2 Learner

Clearly, collocations are of crucial importance to the second language learner of English since no piece of spoken or written text is totally free of them. Collocation pervades even the most basic, frequent words in English which makes avoiding using them impossible. Thus, from a pedagogical point of view, the first evidence of collocation's importance is their amount in the mental lexicon. Hill (2000) states that "It is possible that up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression" (p. 53). Corpora concordances might be a good resource for calculating collocations' frequencies and exploring their usage.

A second reason why collocation is important is that it allows us to think more quickly and communicate more efficiently. Native speakers can only speak at the speed they do because they are retrieving readymade chunks (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Also, learning collocations helps the learner produce language at a much faster rate; because collocation allows us to name complex ideas quickly so that we can continue to manipulate the ideas without using all our brain space to focus on the form of words. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) point out that "the prefabricated speech has both the advantage of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and hearers) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it focused narrowly on individual words as they are produced" (p. 32).

In addition, Knowledge of collocation is essential because it affects the appropriateness of a word. Although *beautiful* and *handsome* share similar meanings, it is not appropriate to say *a beautiful man*, or *a handsome woman*! Lado (1956) and Richard (1976), (cited in Nation, 1990), made a list of register restraints which affect the appropriateness of word's usage. There are collocations that are more appropriate in speech than in writing, others might be old fashioned, colloquial or formal rather than neutral, slang, or impolite. Some are used for men only, some for women, and some for both. Some are limited to American rather than British usage. This means that the context in which a collocation is used is central.

Another advantage of collocational knowledge is related to reading. The reason students find unseen texts (not previously read or studied) so difficult is because they do not recognize the chunks – they read every word as if it were separate from every other word. That is also likely to happen in silent reading. When students read texts, they may not recognize collocations as meaningful phrases, which would inhibit their understanding of a certain text.

Moreover, students' lack of collocation knowledge, as displayed in their speech and writing, forces them to create longer utterances because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say. Unfortunately, these longer utterances are not without grammatical mistakes. What often happens is that teachers find themselves correcting the grammar mistakes without realizing that it is not a matter of faulty grammar but a lack of collocation. Especially when it comes to production, using collocations enriches the language and makes it more precise. A student who chooses the best collocation will express himself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something quite precise. Compare for example these following sentences:

1. *We don't have enough things so that every person who wants one can have one.*
2. *We don't have "sufficient supplies" to "meet the demand".*

Both sentences share the same general meaning, but clearly the second one communicates the speaker's idea naturally, economically and more precisely.

b- Why Are Collocations Difficult for The L2 Learner?

Hill (2000) points out that "even if the word 'collocation' is new to students and to some teachers, the problem of collocation errors is as old as language learning itself." He brings in the following example: "If

we can say both *it's nice to get out into the open air* and *it's nice to get out in the fresh air*, why can't we say *I need a breath of open air*? And if we can say *an open-air restaurant*, why not then *a fresh-air restaurant*?" (p. 49). This problem reflects the arbitrary and non-predictable nature of collocations. Unfortunately, as Smadja (1989, cited in Wei, 1999), explains: "Many wording choices in English sentences cannot be accounted for on semantic or syntactic grounds; they can only be expressed in terms of relations between words that usually occur together." That's why many L2 learners cannot cope with collocations easily, and it is considered a major difficulty for them.

From my experience as a student and as an English language teacher, I can say that the Arab-Gulf culture, like many other cultures, encourages rote learning, where students memorize lists of words in isolation. In a study which investigated the collocational knowledge of Gulf Arab advanced learners, Gobert (2007) found that students, even if they have been taught words as chunks, tend to use decontextualized vocabulary strategies to understand the collocation. Learners I taught tended to write Arabic equivalents of single words; when students saw the words in phrases, they could not understand them. Such surface level knowledge inhibits meaningful learning and creates collocation-related problems. I have experienced that when students learn words through definitions or in isolation, their chances of using appropriate collocations or remembering the words decline. Carter (1998) states that "Collocational mismatches are frequent in the language productions of second-language learners since learners never encounter a word or combinations of words with sufficient frequency to demarcate its range or narrow the items down to its more fixed partnerships." (p. 73). For example, the L2 learner is taught that *amicable* is a synonym of *friendly*, but then he/she is told that *amicable divorce* is acceptable but **friendly divorce* is not.

In addition, second language learners are very likely to make mistakes because of their mother-tongue interference. For example, some Arab-Gulf learners tend to say *eat lunch* instead of *have lunch*. Also, they may look for general rules for collocations that do not work for all collocations. For example, they might overgeneralize the use of prepositions in phrasal verbs. They could think that *put off your coat* is the opposite of *put on your coat*, because they had learnt that *turn on* is the opposite of *turn off*.

c- Collocation: Teachable or Only Learnable?

Whether collocation should be taught at all is part of the debate over teaching vocabulary and vocabulary acquisition. According to Schmitt (2000), the second language learner acquires vocabulary through two main processes: explicit learning and incidental learning. Explicit learning involves a focused study of words, while incidental learning happens when one's attention is focused on the use of language, rather than the learning itself. Obviously, collocations are too numerous for all of them to be taught all in the classroom. A person will need to learn many of them incidentally outside the instructional context. However, explicit learning is probably necessary to reach a vocabulary size that enables incidental learning from reading authentic texts by native speakers, for example. According to Nation (1990), a systematic and principled approach to teaching vocabulary is needed by both the teacher and the learner, because many learners' difficulties in both receptive and productive language are due to an inadequate use of vocabulary. He thinks that "giving attention to vocabulary is unavoidable. Even the most formal or communicative-based approaches to language teaching must deal with needed vocabulary in one way or another" (p. 2).

However, when we think of teaching vocabulary, particularly collocation, we should keep in mind that teaching does not necessarily cause learning. The teaching process is conventionally built upon the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm, but we cannot guarantee that learning follows the same tidy model. Teachers might present certain language items and offer practice and assessment activities, but they do not have full control over what students are learning. Learners do not necessarily learn what we teach them. According to Lewis (2000), learning is not as organized, linear, and systematic as teaching. We should not expect a student to master items of language in the short term. He/she "may acquire it immediately, later or only partially" (p. 11). Lewis (2000) thinks that we should keep this idea in mind when teaching collocation. If a learner produces a sentence like **He's a strong smoker*, the teacher should not just supply the learner with the correct word *heavy* and move on. Rather, the teacher should use this opportunity to add to the learner's lexical bank. It will not take much time or explanation to add: *occasional*, *chain*, and *nonas* more collocates of *smoker*. Lewis (2000) notes that "adding collocation to your teaching by consciously

introducing one or two new words and re-activating other half-known words in this way increases the chance of acquisition taking place” (p.12).

d- How to Teach Collocation?

Even if most collocation learning might occur outside the classroom, formal study is needed, whether the learner is able to acquire collocations immediately or not. Educators and methodologists have set certain guidelines for teaching this important area of vocabulary. They have agreed on three things: first, the necessity of raising awareness of collocation among teachers and learners, second, the importance of selecting what collocations to teach, and third, the importance of providing a simple categorization of collocation for the learners.

Hill (2000) suggests that we should present collocations as we would present individual words. Collocations need to be presented in context just as we would present individual words. Nation (2001) agrees with him: “chunks can be most effectively memorized by following the same learning guidelines as for isolated words” (p. 343). Also, it is important to warn our L2 learners against literal translation of collocation’s meaning into their L1. Collocations’ meanings must be conveyed in their most natural, habitual contexts, typical of the target language.

There are many techniques, activities and exercises that can be used in teaching collocations. Lewis(2000) lists some useful classroom activities:

1. Don’t correct – collect: A learner’s collocation mistake is an ideal opportunity for feedback and providing additional collocations.
 2. Make learners be more precise: For example, if a student produces: *I was very disappointed*, a teacher should point out the options of: *bitterly/ deeply disappointed*.
 3. Don’t explain – explore: Rather than explaining the difference between two similar words like *wound* and *injury*, the teacher should give three or four contextualized examples of each word, to provide the appropriate collocational usage.
 4. If in doubt, point them out: Teachers should not assume that students are noticing collocations; they should point them out whenever possible.
 5. Essay preparation – use collocation: A useful pre-writing activity is to brainstorm the topic’s words and their collocates.
 6. Make the most of what students already know: Most of the time students know the words, but have not noticed their common collocations.
 7. Record and recycle: Encourage students to record collocations, in topic groups if possible. Invent ways to recycle collocations, such as domino-type games and matching the cards.
- (Summarized from Lewis, 2000, pp. 20 -26)

Furthermore, I think teachers should direct students’ attention to other collocation’s sources that will help them learn independently. An excellent resource for learning collocations is the dictionaries of collocations such as *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*. These provide co-textual information and a much more comprehensive account of a word’s collocates than the traditional dictionary.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of building teachers and L2 learners’ consciousness of how words work in combination with one another. As we have seen, learning the collocations of the English language is not a luxury; but a survival kit and a key to proficiency. “We are familiar with the concept of communicative competence, but we need to add the concept of collocational competence to our thinking” Hill (2000, p. 49). As TESOL practitioners, we should list collocation competence as a teaching objective, and equip our students with the means to gain this kind of competence so that they can continue developing it after they leave the ESL class.

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