



Teaching Collocations Using Modern Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This article considers about using collocations with the help of modern technologies in EFL teaching. There are different opinions of scholars are analyzed and generalized in this field as well. This paper is aimed on the one hand, to get ELT instructors aware of the concept of collocations and its significance, for those who are not already aware of this aspect of language. On the other hand, the suggesting ways to help learners develop collocational knowledge.

Keywords:

concept of collocations, collocational knowledge, collocational competence, language proficiency, mutual expectancy, flexibility and restriction.

The notion of collocation has increasingly drawn researchers' attention in the field of second language learning as more scholars noted that 'language knowledge is collocational knowledge' (Nation, 2001, p. 318) by nature. Nation (2001) also argued that 'all fluent and appropriate language use required collocational knowledge' (p. 318), and native-like fluency would be enhanced through the increase in collocational competence. In addition, Conzett (2000) reported that collocational knowledge would help productive and accurate use of vocabulary. Collocational knowledge thus plays a crucial role in promoting target language proficiency.

Nattinger and De Carrico (1992) defined collocation as 'a string of specific lexical items that co-occur with mutual expectancy' (p. 36) and the meaning of a collocation can be inferred from the component parts. However, a collocation would be regarded as less appropriate when one of its components is replaced by another word even though collocations are less fixed than idioms. Due to its dual qualities of flexibility and restriction,

collocation use becomes a prominent problem to EFL writers. Farghal and Obiedat (1995) examined EFL students' collocation performance and found that EFL learners were incompetent in collocations. In Nesselhauf's exploratory study (2003), advanced German learners of English were found to have difficulty in using proper collocations in free writing.

Collocations are word combinations essential for achieving fluency in a given language. Considerable emphasis should therefore be placed on teaching collocations as a part of vocabulary instruction in language teaching. However, there is no current consensus on how best to teach collocations, and few studies have addressed the issue. This quasi-experimental study investigated the effectiveness of online tools for learning English adjective-noun collocations compared to learning collocations via traditional activities

The ability to use certain syntactic constructions correctly is the key to mastering the language. Therefore, we consider it expedient to give students definitions of the main grammatical categories of syntax in order

to form a solid theoretical base. Having mastered the necessary material, the student can easily fill it with the necessary lexical content.

From a language learning point of view, researchers proposed that collocational competence is one of the factors contributing to the differences between language competence of native speakers and that of second language learners (e.g. Shei, 2000).

There are many strong arguments for the focus on teaching collocations in the language classroom. One is that collocational knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency, which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact, as Pawley and Syder (1983) describe them, "the normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourse" (p. 208). These "building blocks," once learners are equipped with, lead to "native-like selection" (Pawley & Syder, 1983), reduce the stress and time of processing language each time the learner uses it (Lewis, 2002, p. 121; Read, 2000, p. 233; Thornbury, 2002, p. 114) and help learners achieve fluency in speaking and writing (Schmitt, 2000, p. 42; Nattinger, 1988, p. 77; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 32).

Improving students' collocational competence can help EFL learners cross their 'intermediate plateau' and become advanced learners (Lewis, 2000). Zhang (1993) conducted empirical studies and reported that the more proficient ESL writers used collocations more accurately and produced collocations more diversely than the less proficient writers did. Liu (2000) also found that good EFL writers of Chinese speakers in used collocations more properly and frequently than poor EFL writers. Therefore, it is agreed that equipping students with needed collocational knowledge would enable them to achieve native-like fluency and accuracy in language production.

Nesselhauf (2003) analyzed 32 essays written by advanced German learners of English in terms of their use of verb-noun (V-N) collocation. Among all the miscollocation types, the one occurring most frequently is the wrong choice of verbs (24/65).

Also Nesselhauf observed the great influence of learners' L1 on verb-noun

collocations, and she noticed that non-congruent word combinations attributed to learners' L1 and L2 are far more difficult for learners to acquire. She suggested that the teaching of verb-noun collocations should focus on the verbs and that 'some semantically possible but collocationally impossible combinations with verbs should be highlighted, especially those that are possible in the learners' L1' (p. 239). Moreover, based on the analysis of miscollocations in EFL learners' writing, it was found that the V-N collocation is the most prevalent lexical collocation error (Liu, 1999, 2002). Liu (2002) examined learners' essays collected in the English Learner Corpus (English TLC) from a web-based writing environment. She indicated that 87% of lexical miscollocations (233/265) were attributed to the misuse of V-N collocation; the result further revealed that 96% (224/233) of these V-N miscollocations were due to misuse of verb collocates. As for the reasons behind the use of miscollocations, 56% (131/233) of these missed V-N collocations are semantically related with respect to their lexical relations in Word Net such as synonym, hypernym, troponym, and 38% (88/233) of them are traceable to L1 interference. It can be concluded that the V-N collocation is found to be particularly difficult for learners to acquire, and the misuse of verb collocate is worthy further investigation. In addition, learners' L1 can be a vital factor which interferes with their use of collocations.

Researchers have adopted a number of criteria in order to decide whether a string of words is regarded as a collocation or not. One is that the words frequently co-occur together and the other is that there is some degree of semantic opaqueness or as Cowie puts it, 'an element of figurativeness' (Nation, 2001, p. 317; Cowie, 2009). This element of figurativeness draws the line between collocations and idioms. All components of an idiom, researchers explain, have some degree of figurativeness or restriction, while in a collocation there is only one item that has a figurative sense (Cowie, 2009, p. 51; Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 226). Schmitt (2000) also states that besides words co-occurring together, "there must also be an

element of exclusiveness" (p. 77). He gives the example of blonde, which is restricted to nouns like lady, woman, hair, as opposed to nice, which can occur with any noun associated with pleasantness. Therefore, the former example is said to collocate strongly, while the latter forms weak collocates (Schmitt, 2000).

The assumption that words in a collocation occur frequently together led researchers to suggest that they are stored, and therefore called upon, as a single unit in the mind. Evidence from corpus analysis and psycholinguistics as well support this belief (Schmitt, 2000, p. 79; Wray, 2008, p. 196; Nunan, 1999, p. 103; Carter, 1998, p.66). By analyzing large amounts of corpora, researchers gained "new insights into how words are distributed in a language" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 468). It is basically corpus analysis that, according to Nation and Meara (2002), "brought extended lexical patterning into the light" (p. 36). Furthermore, language produced by aphasics, old people who have started to lose memory, as well as other types of individuals suffering from communication disorders, proves that the mind stores words as strings rather than single items (Schmitt, 2000, p. 79; Wray, 2008, p. 196). There is also "social evidence" which emerges from studying the language of children acquiring their mother tongue and the language of adults while interacting with one another (Cowie, 1988, p. 13).

We can conclude from the above given analysis, the use of collocations, helps reduce processing time, and hence leads to speed when communicating. This point, in particular, has been claimed by Nation (2001) to be the main advantage of chunking (p.320). Nattinger (1988) has further described collocations as "pre-packaged building blocks" (p.75). This analogy the author presents throws light on two essential characteristics of collocations; one is that they are packed up, stored in the mind as single units and ready for the language user to draw on whenever needed. They are also building blocks which gives a sense that they provide the language user with a solid base to stand on when using the language, hence they enhance his/her confidence and fluency.

To conclude, the significance and abundance of collocations in the English language is a phenomenon worthy of notice. Thus, language teachers wishing for their learners to achieve native-like proficiency should invest class time in teaching collocations and ensuring their students are well-exposed to them. The paper aimed at getting language instructors aware of this phenomenon of language and presenting a variety of ways to assist learners acquire collocational knowledge.

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