

The Significance of Collocational Knowledge for Learners of English and Teaching Implications

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the issue of collocational knowledge in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning and some implications for English language teaching. By drawing the due attention to collocations in English and certain barriers EFL learners might encounter, the paper encourages the discussion of some possible solutions.

Keywords: *collocations, English learning, teaching strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

When decoding a sentence, language learners turn to two aspects of language: grammatical rules and meanings of words. According to Lyons (1981), grammatical regulations and lexemes are in a syntagmatic relation. That is to say, the two language constructions work together in deciding the meaningfulness of a sentence. David Wilkins (1972: 111) stresses the significance of word learning in this way: "While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Lewis (1993: 8) reckons the dichotomy of grammar and vocabulary is over-simplistic since the two aspects could be integrated in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) where "...grammar is seen as a set of sentence frames with slots, into which appropriate 'vocabulary' or words can be fitted". Lexis is the basis of fluent language use. Words facilitate language production and in using language vocabulary increases. Nation (2001) suggests that knowing a word involves knowing its form, meaning and use. Learners need to consider what generative rules a word should follow when in use and "what other words or types of words occur with this one" (Nation 2001: 26). Words are not in isolation. Nattinger and DeCarrior (1992) point out that language is learned through chunks, lexical terms as they call them. Lexical terms are the smallest language units which carry syntactic messages. Language users commit these prewired structures to memory as contextual phrases or longer chunks of

speech for retrieval (Nattinger 1998). Due attention should be paid to the larger structure of language instead of individual words when producing discourse. Not only in English, chunking exists in all languages. Native speakers have access to a huge amount of naturally stored lexical phrases in their memory for future use. These chunks are used as whole phrases and play a significant role in native accuracy and fluency in language use. Lewis (2000) categorizes these chunks as idioms, phrasal verbs and collocations, among which collocations have gained much attention since 1980s (Lewis 1993, 1997, 2000; Sinclair 1991, 2003; Nation 2001).

This paper firstly covers key concepts of collocations. Then it looks at the significance of collocational knowledge for learners of English. Lastly, it discusses how teachers can help learners with their collocational knowledge. Some examples will be elicited from an English teaching context in China.

II. COLLOCATION

It is not an easy job to define the collocation and people have been trying to pin down this term from different angles and contexts. One of the original attempts was made by Palmer who regards collocations as "items whose meaning is not obvious from their parts" (Palmer 1933 in Firth 1957, summarized in Nation 2001: 317). Firth suggests, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps!" (1957: 11). Either Palmer or Firth's definition is rather tight and narrow but has pointed to the de-lexicalised feature of collocations. In other words, many common English words don't carry much meaning themselves, such as *make, take, get, put or keep* and they tend to combine with other words to bear content (Lewis 1993). These words exist in chunking to form idiomatic meanings and the meaning of each individual word is weakened.

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Take the following two sentences as an example: *I need to take a break; He is making preparations for his trip to Germany.* In these two examples, *take* and *make* are given more content when they are combined to other words. These deserve learners' special attention since they are words of high frequent use in English and their combinability with other words is strong. Learning de-lexicalised words in chunks or word families may help learners to produce natural language.

Collocations refer to words going together and what decides their partnerships has drawn attention. Sinclair (1991) looks at corpora (data analyzed by computer programs) studies and proposes two principles to account for contextual meanings of words: the open-choice principle and the idiom principle. Sinclair redeems that the idiom principle is of much help for collocation studying. The open-choice principle explains the creativity of language in the way words co-occur by following grammatical rules. For example, the word of nice can be combined to a good number of words such as *weather, person, food, picture, offer* and there is not much restriction in these combinations. While the idiom principle underlines the fact that individual words are used in groups and the partnerships re-occur. There are greater constraints and limitations in the context. For example, *common errors* and *do laundry* sound more probably than *ordinary errors* and *go laundry* to native English speakers.

Some other linguists focus on the co-occurrence quality and degree of fixedness of collocations. Carter and McCarthy (1988: 163) define a collocation as "an aspect of lexical cohesion which embraces a 'relationship' between lexical items that regularly co-occur" and reckon collocations are related to "the left to right unfolding of language" (1988: 32) such as *abide by, gain access to* and *be absorbed in*. The left part of a collocation determines what follows it on the right and thus a partnership of words is formed. According to Schmidt (2000), this folding involves different degrees of restraint. Cowie and Howarth (1995) propose four levels of complexity of collocations from allowing no variation to a greater degree of freedom for words to go together. The collocation exhibits "the tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse" (Schmidt 2000: 76). Some partnerships are stronger and some others are weaker. For example, *blonde* goes exclusively with *hair*. However, *brown* and *hair* are in a weaker partnership since *brown* can form partnerships with other words such as *shoes* or *bread*. Lewis (1993) points out, like words, collocations are arbitrary and conventional. Students tend to ask an English teacher questions like why he/she says *take it seriously* instead of *take it severely*. It is a hard question to answer since word choices are not based on rationality. "...unit acquires its value simply in opposition to what precedes or to what follows, or to both (Saussure 1983: 121). The choice of words is arbitrary and follows no rules.

Therefore, it's impossible to explain why certain words go together and certain words do not. The best learning strategy would be to store these collocations in memory. Nation (2001) proposes ten scales for classifying lexical items as collocations such as the frequency of co-occurrence and adjacency. These criteria focus on the closeness and grammaticalness of words in chunks. Similarly, Cowie and Howarth (1996) argue that seeing collocations as fixed combinations of words is problematic. Typical collocations are not like fixed idioms in which word partnerships are unbreakable. For example, in the idiom *kick the bucket, pail* cannot be used to replace *bucket*. In another idiom *comparing apples and oranges, comparing apples and pears* cannot mean the same, which would not make sense. Instead, the probability for two or more words to co-occur in collocations varies and Cowie and Howarth (1996) define collations as prefabricated word combinations which are fixed to a certain degree.

To summarize, a collocation refers to a multi-word unit in which several word items exist in an abstract partnership. The main features of a collocation include the recurrent co-occurring of words in a given context and the varying fixedness of word partnerships. Collocations appear in discourse with frequency and arbitrariness. Benson et. al (1986) and Bahns (1993) classify collocations into two types: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. The major difference between these two categories lies in the fact that a dominant word, be it a noun, verb, adjective, exists in a grammatical collocation and this dominant word combines with a functional word, preposition mainly, to form a grammatical relation. While the words combined in a lexical collocation stay equal to each other in creating a semantic or pragmatic meaning of this chunk. For discussing purpose, the present paper focuses on lexical collocations which involve two or more semantically meaningful words going together. The words in a collocation all carry meanings and play a part in determining what the combination means. Hill (2000) suggests seven different kinds of collocations as reference for EFL teachers and learners: adjective + noun (heavy traffic); noun + noun (leadership qualities); verb + adjective + noun (obtain a satisfying result); verb + adverb (discuss heatedly); adverb + verb (almost die); adverb + adjective (absolutely fine); verb + preposition + noun (succeed with his help). Attention to these categories may help EFL learners raise their consciousness of collocations and store them in memory for future use.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

Memorizing individual words is one of the most popular strategies adopted by students in EFL learning. However, a sole focus on individual words may lead to

the isolation of vocabulary knowledge. For example, the author's students who learn English in China produce phrases such as *eat soup, make advantage of, many population and increase English*, etc. Those expressions are grammatically correct but native speakers might frown upon them. The collocations used by these students sound foreign or strange to native English speakers and may cause communicative problems between two sides. Accuracy and fluency of language use come from word associations like collocations (McCarthy & O'Dell 2008). By acquiring these chunks, learners could widen their vocabulary range and enhance their language creativity. They are able to experiment with various ways to express the same meaning. For example, the sentence *He was successful* works in communication but learners have other options as well such as *He obtained/achieved/accomplished success*. EFL learners are able to add variety to their language use and learn to be idiomatic in the target language. The significance of collocations in language learning is undeniable but lines need to be drawn between acquisition of collocations for native speakers and EFL learners; between input and output.

A. *Collocations for native speakers of English and EFL Learners*

Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that native speakers' fluency is based on the pre-fabricated sequences in their brain. It is noted that these ready-for-use chunks make social discourse convenient. Native speakers assimilate collocations while learning to control their environment and language acquisition takes place naturally. EFL learners face more specific tasks (business English, academic English, etc.) and tend to focus on the language material (Wray 2002). Native Language users store collocations in their memory as chunks without attempting to pull them apart. However, EFL learners tend to build up collocations from individual words, which is time-consuming and leads to the foreignness in their speaking and writing.

To sound like native speakers seems to be a reasonable goal for EFL learners but its practicality calls for careful examining. Collocations are intuitive and serve as an important mark for nativeness. Collocations, especially restricted ones, prove to be most problematic even for advanced English learners. (Nesselhauf 2003). The term of "native-like selection" was first put forward by Pawley and Syder (1983) and as they describe it, "...he selects a sentence that is natural and idiomatic from among the range of grammatically correct paraphrases, many of which are non-native like or highly marked usages" (1983:191). Native speakers form the intuition about collocations through lexicalization and productivity which require repeated exposure to language chunks in a native

environment. According to Foster (2001) and Siyanova & Schmidt (2008), native speakers depend on their intuitive judgment of word choice which is based on what they have previously committed to their memory in their daily life. Word choices of EFL learners are rule-based. Even though they produce a great number of grammatically appropriate collocations, their fluency does not seem to match that of native speakers. Without adequate exposure to collocations in the target language, EFL learners produce 'foreign' and unnatural expressions such as *inhale cigarette, thick tea or fierce discussion* which sound odd to a native ear.

A close look at native like selections reveals that to sound like a native speaker is almost an impossible task for EFL learners since word chunks like collocations are both the input and product of one's native language. However, many English learners, as far as I know, do not want to sound like native speakers. Instead, they are fine with them sounding Chinese, Korean or Indian and consider that to be a way of retaining their cultural identity within the community. There are other cases as well. For EFL learners who desire to integrate into the English speaking community and who study English for a Special Purpose (ESP) such as hotel English, medical English, a wide scope of collocations in English deserve attention. Collocational knowledge is significant to those types of EFL learners and is of help with their accurate and fluent language use.

B. *Input and output*

Michael Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000) focuses on a lexical approach and its teaching implementations and this approach has directed people's attention to an innovative sphere of language teaching. He prioritizes lexis teaching and claims that grammar rules can naturally reveal themselves from word chunks. Therefore, there is no need to do explicit teaching of grammar. However, based on my own teaching experience, most often, learners do not learn what teachers teach. Even though this new idea sounds attempting and seems to be offering a shortcut to success in language learning, it is noticeable that native and foreign languages are processed in different ways (Wray 2002). Whatever happens in the first language such as massive exposure and everyday practice in real life situation does not happen for EFL learning which mainly takes place in classrooms.

Many students of mine try to memorize lexical phrases or idiomatic sentences off vocabulary books. At the beginning, they feel satisfied with their vocabulary increase. However, when the students have to speak or write English in natural discourse, problems arise. Those isolated chunks they have memorized are either out of place or forgotten in language production. Some examples are listed as below.

1. a) *Because of he was hungry, he rob money.

b) He stole money because he was hungry.

2. a) *This program is sweeping new grave was bitter tear and visit outing laughter is a distinctive holiday.

b) People sweep tombs, shed tears and do outings on this day. It is a special festival.

3. a) *We should take part in some social practice during the university, and learn their own professional.

b) We should take part in some social activities during the time in university and develop some professional skills.

4. a) *This makes college students confusion and bewilderment.

b) College students get confused and bewildered.

These examples illustrate that students are conscious of using collocations but natural output does not happen though students have memorized a good number of words or chunks. Large amount of input does not promise quality output. If there is no real life use keeping company with the newly learned collocations and no attention is paid to grammatical rules, collocations will remain as meaningless strings of words.

IV. WAYS TO HELP EFL LEARNERS WITH THEIR COLLOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Collocations are arbitrary and conventional (Benson et, al 1986) and they are acquired and produced in natural discourse. Native speakers are most often incapable of explaining why they say *terribly sorry* instead of *badly sorry*. Collocations are of great help to EFL learners especially in terms of differentiating synonyms. For example, Chinese students often get confused with English words like *see*, *look* and *watch* since they are translated into the same word in Chinese: kan. They would produce phrases such as *see TV*, *look me*, *watch flower*. Therefore only telling them the meaning of each individual word is not as helpful as putting the words into collocations: *see a flower*; *look at me*; *watch TV*. The feasibility of classroom

collocation teaching is questionable since living in the target language environment and massive language use are both required to predict learners' native use of collocations (Foster 2009). However, teachers still have an important role to play in helping learners, especially advanced learners, to improve their collocational knowledge. Several strategies are suggested as the following.

A. Consciousness raising and strategies

Word associations deserve both EFL teachers' and learners' attention. Learners benefit from building up links between a new word with its probable combinations with other words. For example, *abysmal* is associated with *poverty* or *ignorance*; *sweat* goes with *profusely*; a football *match* naturally finds links to a *close* or a *seesaw*. Therefore, it is important for learners to notice collocations and try to get familiar with them at every recurrence. Webb & Kagimoto (2011), Webb, Newton & Chang (2013) and Peters (2014) note that adult EFL learners benefit from being aware of collocations and fluency-oriented repetitive encounter of the same collocations. Explicit learning stabilizes language knowledge. Noticing itself does not guarantee success in collocation learning. Laborious efforts have to be made to record the new knowledge and put it into practical use. However, learners cannot go over the board either (Lewis 2000). Not every collocation calls for equal amount of attention. Only word combinations of high frequency in real life situations deserve the priority. Some learning strategies are suggested as the following to enhance learners' consciousness of collocational knowledge.

Learners are provided with authentic reading or listening materials which match their English level. Teachers can encourage students to spot and underline/write down the collocations in the material. No dictionaries are used at this stage of learning. Student try to guess the meaning of these collocations based on contextual clues. Extensive reading and listening ensures adequate input of authentic information and teachers remind students to focus on collocations in the material. The following task is a proper exercise for noting collocations in the context.

Finding collocations

You can expand your collocation vocabulary by training yourself to notice collocations whenever you read. Note the collocations in these three examples of texts from different sources – a newspaper feature, a film review and a website for London tourists.

As a newly qualified teacher at a comprehensive school in Wiltshire, every day Joe faces the challenge of gaining the respect of a class of 15-year-olds. Joe, 26, admits it is a tough challenge but thinks he is winning the battle. Joe, who teaches English and media studies and coaches a school football team, will qualify fully in July, pending the results¹ of his lesson assessments. With this milestone passed², and the increased financial stability it will bring, Joe will turn his thoughts to buying his first home.

¹ (formal) as long as he achieves successful results

² major life event behind him

Fig. 1. Task. (McCarthy & O'Dell 2008:14)

There are many activities which can be adopted to consolidate students' memory of collocations such as error correction cloze; matching phrases; beginning of a sentence on the left, ending of a sentence on the right; true or false judgment; completing sentences; learning collocations in groups (situational collocations such as collocations to describe the weather, business, or travel); the same word in different collocations; oral English v.s. written English newspaper (formal v.s. Informal); repetition recycling (for tasks see Appendix A). As to speaking and writing, teachers can design activities to help students revise and retrieve newly learned collocations through replacing; complete sentences; choosing correct adverbs; writing/oral tasks: writing/making up new sentences with given collocations (for tasks see Appendix B).

B. Role of first language (L1)

Including myself, many English teachers have noticed that students tend to do word-for-word translation but in reality the complete L1/L2 (second language, here equivalent to foreign language) equivalents are limited. For example, *lao* in Chinese means "old" and is used to build up words: *lao ren* (old people); *lao shi* (teachers); *lao dian* (traditional shops); *lao mei* (the youngest sister). From the above examples we can see that L1 and L2 only equate in the first example: *lao ren* (old people). However, the difference in meaning range lends EFL learners to over-generalization. Chinese students, for example, tend to overuse the word of old. In communicative classrooms, students are encouraged to think in English and to stay away from their first language as far as possible. However, it is irrational to expect L2 learners to forget about their mother tongue and L1 transference is unavoidable in the classroom of foreign language teaching and learning. English learners naturally turn to their native language when trying to fill up the information gap. Especially in speaking activities, EFL learners desire to make their ideas understood in a situation where prompt reactions are expected.

Lewis (1997) suggests the role of L1 is not always negative. As an English teacher, I have found that when the teaching content is handled with a reference to students' L1, it is easier for students to relate the new knowledge to their general world knowledge and develop the interest in learning. The function of L1 in foreign language learning is often interpreted as a kind of interference or an obstacle but it is a misunderstanding. When teachers choose what collocations to teach in class and design classroom activities, reference to students' L1 should be made in order to raise students' consciousness of L1/L2 differences. With this awareness being raised, learners can avoid producing "the L1 equivalent" (Nesselhauf 2003: 239). If the teacher and students are all L1 speakers, unmatchable collocations between L1 and L2

are obvious for the teacher to notice and thus correction and explanation can be made. (Lewis 1993). Zheng (2011) conducts a study of L1 influence over L2 and suggests that L1 can be misleading when it does not overlap with L2 but L1 can also be facilitating in providing general and transferable resources for L2 understanding and stabilizing. Therefore, explicit teaching is required here. Proper and focused classroom instructions are able to help students understand L1/L2 similarities and differences. Students notice the gap between L1 and L2 and they work on it by paying attention to native expressions. (See "Table I")

TABLE I. EXERCISES OF CHINESE COLLOCATIONS

Task. Try to translate the following Chinese phrases into English. Notice: some translations are equivalent to Chinese and some are not.	
1. zuo zuoye (do homework)	2. zuo zhunbei (make preparations)
3. zuo fan (cook a meal)	4. zuo laoshi (to be a teacher)
5. da ren (hit someone)	6. da che (take a taxi)
7. da youxi (play games)	8. da shui (fetch some water)

Zuo means "do" and *da* means "hit" in Chinese. There are both equivalence and mismatch in those phrases. From the above exercises, students will develop a sense of L1 and L2 similarities and differences. A contrastive view of language learning is beneficial and inspiring for learners and it should help teachers concentrate on lexical items or collocations which bear no equivalence to L1 (Bahns 1993).

C. Learning references

Besides textbooks and teaching materials, English teachers can encourage students to turn to corpora for clarification and reference. "Corpora or corpuses are simply large collections or databases of language, incorporating stretches of discourse ranging from a few words to entire books" (Schmidt 2000:68). English language users are able to search for data of collocational knowledge in different types of written materials.

Some of the earliest corpora development took place in the 1900s such as Brown University Corpus and Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus with the focus on British English. Sinclair (1991) outlines the changes taking place in language study as the computer-based data or corpus is growing in size and its availability to teachers, learners and researchers in EFL. Prior to the application of corpora, people evaluate collocations by turning to historical dictionaries and thesaurus. Those traditional dictionaries provide discrete meanings of a word without guiding readers to apply each word meaning in real life situation. The thesaurus works in a different path but not being too helpful either. Words sharing the same meaning are categorized into large and abstract groups but no justifications or discrimination

are made among those words which are similar in meaning. These two ways of judgment for collocations are still being adopted by EFL learners in many places including China where I work as an English teacher. Sinclair (1991) introduces his study of corpus which takes advantage of large samples of authentic written English materials (books, magazines, newspapers and other written sources) to provide EFL learners and teachers with reliable sources for concordances and collocations of English words. Frequencies of word use are clearly shown in the corpus. For example, if you want to find out what words usually co-occur with *keep*, you just type the word *keep* and a long list of keep in phrasal verbs is presented on the computer.

Over a decade later, Sinclair (2003) reports the development in data-based English corpora and draws people's attention to the growth in both amount of data available and varieties of word combinations. The second new feature makes it harder to generalize word usages, which is normal since language keeps changing and modifying itself. "...it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to find phrases which are absolutely fixed (Stubbs 2001: 243). The application of intuition and empirical collection of collocational data employed by pre-corpora linguists are losing their market in language teaching and learning. Schmidt (2000) introduces three important corpora with large data base: the COBUILD Bank of English Corpus; the Cambridge International Corpus (CIC), and the British National Corpus (BNC). Some other popular corpora are LLC, Longman, Lourvain, COLT, WIKI, TIME, ICE-GB. With a great size of samples, these corpora are able to supply authentic and reasonable sources for language users to test and clarify their confusions of collocations and word frequencies. Corpus serves as an effective and safe learning tool for EFL participants and its popularity can be predicted in this information era where people's dependency on computer technologies is growing. The following is a task of corpora use. (See "Table II")

TABLE II. EXERCISES OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS

Task: Try to find out at least ten different collocations for *access* by using BNC.

However, reservations are kept about corpus using as well. Liu (2010) argues that data analysis does not suit students of young age or lower English proficiency since the corpus will overload learners with information and cause confusion. Compared with the complexity of applying corpora in improving collocational knowledge, I have found search engines such as Google to be convenient and helpful since tons of authentic materials of English are in the database for reference. Learners just type in a word in the search bar, probable

associations between this word and other words will be displayed.

In addition, teachers may provide students with advice as to effective dictionary use. Bilingual dictionaries do not focus on lexical phrases and often cause negative L1 transference (over-generalizing). Readers' attention is drawn to isolated meanings of individual words instead of different contexts for word using. In contrast, mono-dictionaries (English/English dictionaries) are useful classroom resources which provide multi-meanings of a word with good collocational examples. A good dictionary should present words in phrases or chunks. When students look up a new word in the dictionary, the teacher reminds them to look beyond the word itself and be aware of probable associations between this word with other words. Thus, students will be better off learning word families instead of isolated words. The following is a task for students with the aim of encouraging mono-dictionary use. (See "Table III")

TABLE III. EXERCISES OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS

Task. Look up the following words in an English/English dictionary. Try to write down at least three meanings of each word. For each meaning, an example of collocation is required.
 1. position 2. plant 3. point 4. power

V. CONCLUSION

Even though a consensus has not been reached about the definition of a collocation, the significant role it plays in reducing vocabulary memory load for EFL learners and helping learners develop a good sense of native or comprehensible English is obvious. However, both teachers and students should be aware of the differences between native English speakers and EFL learners in storing and producing collocations. It is advisable for EFL learners to accept the limitations and set a realistic goal for language competence. After all, in the era of 'world Englishes', most EFL learners would find it satisfactory as long as their English is understood. Acquisition of vocabulary involves both "comprehension and production" (Nattinger 1998:62). With the help from English teachers, EFL learners are expected to apply various strategies to notice, understand and store collocations. The main learning focus should be on the high-frequency word forms; the central usages of a word form and typical combinations with other words (Sinclair & Renouf 1998). Then they retrieve what they have committed to their memory and put the word chunks into appropriate use in real life situations. Explicit teaching and learning are required to achieve the productive goal in EFL and the role of L1 needs to be directed toward being facilitative of L2 learning. For communicative purposes, fluency comes first. Teachers should help students, especially advanced learners to raise their consciousness of collocations when they are exposed to the target

language, acquire vocabulary in chunks and apply them in practice within the frame of grammar.

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