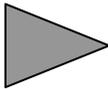


Languages for Specific
Purposes (LSP) – from Theory
to Practice

THE TEACHING OF COLLOCATES – SOME PROPOSALS

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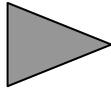


Introduction

The emphasis of the present article is placed on the main issues related to the teaching of collocates. Firstly, the theoretical concept of collocation is briefly reviewed, as well as the ‘lexical approach’; then, certain pedagogical implications are discussed, while the final section is devoted to presenting a variety of both existing and original tasks meant to enhance students’ awareness of the importance of collocations and to diversify the teaching/testing of vocabulary.

The topic has become even more challenging after the analysis of our second year students’ results in a recent English Proficiency Test at upper intermediate level revealed serious deficiency as far as their knowledge of lexis is concerned. Thus, figures show that in the Vocabulary section only 54.3% of the candidates obtained the pass score. This is a matter of concern for the teaching staff of our department, with implications as far as the future syllabus and teaching materials are concerned. It seems therefore only reasonable to try to develop new ways of intensifying the

teaching of lexical items and of identifying new ways of doing this. In what follows, an attempt is made to present some interesting teaching/learning suggestions provided by research in the area of collocations.



Defining collocations – main theoretical views

The term ‘collocation’ has been defined in various ways in the literature. Thus, *The Collins Cobuild Dictionary* (1987) provides the following explanations:

- *Collocation* – the way that some words occur regularly whenever another word is used
- *Collocate* – of a particular word is another word which often occurs with that word
- *To collocate* – if two or more words collocate, they often occur together.

Quite similarly, another lexicographic source, *The Longman Advanced American Dictionary* (quoted on-line 2002), mentions that a collocation is «the way in which some words are often used together». According to it, a collocation is a particular combination of words used in this way ; for instance "commit a crime" is a typical collocation in English. Although the number of words in a collocation ranges from two to maximum seven, the most common patterns of collocation are of the type:

- verb + noun** (fly a kite)
- **adjective + noun** (a light snowfall)
- **adverb + verb** (to boldly go)
- **adverb + adjective** (totally different)
- **adjective + preposition** (similar to)
- **noun + noun** (a collocation dictionary)

It seems that there are certain points which call for more refined clarification. The literature provides many views, and collocations are divided according to different criteria, demonstrating that the concept is not an easy one to grasp.

Thus, Darian (2001) divides collocations, seen as the frequent appearance of certain words with certain other words, into *natural* and *arbitrary*. The former are those that the learner can logically infer from the text (e.g., *to make a decision*) and the latter are those that he cannot fully understand (e.g., *to meet* [someone's] *demands*).

Lewis (1993), a researcher who can be rightfully considered as the father of the so-called 'lexical approach', which stresses the possibilities of developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations, maintains that 'language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar'. He sees collocations as word partnerships (e.g., community service, absolutely convinced), while later in his activity, Lewis (1997) clarifies his viewpoint when he writes that "within the lexical approach, special attention is directed to collocations and expressions that include institutionalized utterances and sentence frames and heads." Instead of words, he emphasizes, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic, ways.

Furthermore, collocation is the readily observable phenomenon whereby "certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency". It is not determined by logic or frequency, but is arbitrary, decided only by linguistic convention. He exemplifies the types of collocations: some collocations are fully fixed, such as "to catch a cold," "rancid butter," and "drug addict", while others are more or less fixed and can be completed in a relatively small number of ways, as in the following example: blood / close / distant / near(est) relative.

Hill's division of collocations (2000) provides a detailed classification of collocations into the following categories:

- Unique collocations. E.g. *foot the bill; shrug your shoulders*. These are unique because *foot* (as a verb) and *shrug* are not used with any other nouns.
- Strong collocations. *Trenchant criticism, rancid butter*. There are other things that can be trenchant or rancid, but very few.
- Weak collocations. *A tall woman, a red shirt, an expensive car, a loud noise*. These combinations are entirely predictable to most students and not worth focussing on.
- Medium-strength collocations. *Hold a conversation, a major operation, expensive tastes, a loud shirt*.

Hill argues that it is the medium-strength collocations which are most important for the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

The term's origins are attributed to J. R. Firth and to M. A. K. Halliday. Some of the earliest titles in the bibliography on collocations go back as far as Palmer (1933), Firth (1957), West (1963), Brown (1974) and Alexander (1978).

More important than the term itself is certainly the debate over what is really troublesome for learners when faced with what another author, Ketko (2000), calls ‘multiword chunks’. She quotes Widdowson (1989: 128-37), who pointed out that “knowledge of multiword chunks and how to select and use them in appropriate contexts is a sign of communicative competence.”

As stated by Howarth and Nesi (1997), at present there is a growing acknowledgement in English Language Teaching (ELT), that appropriate and efficient linguistic performance involves knowledge of a considerable number of conventional collocations and other word combinations. These represent what could be termed ‘phraseological competence’. So far, they remark, there has not been a principled approach to teaching collocations; however, the availability of specialist corpora and increasingly sophisticated off-the-shelf software will enable researchers and teachers to conduct well-focused searches of relevant texts and provide learners with authentic data to work from. Moreover, ELT dictionaries pay increasing attention to collocation as a significant factor in learners’ ability to use words, although so far relatively little has been done to assist teachers in exploiting resources for useful classroom activities, while published materials have generally proved disappointing in this regard.

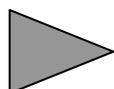
What seems to be the problem? The two authors quote Allerton (1984), who referred to the language learners’ well-known dilemma when they are told by the native speaker that a particular sentence is perfectly good English; still no native speakers would ever use it. The answer could be, according to IRET (1993), that learners tend to form combinations by guesswork or based on the analogy of their mother tongue. It is typical for learners to make the error of assuming that, according to Pawley & Syder (1983), “an element in the expression may be varied according to a phrase structure or transformational rule of some generality, when in fact the variation (if any) allowed in nativelike usage is much more restricted.”

On the same problem, McKeown and Radev (1997) have some valuable insights. Thus, for them collocations are a lexical phenomenon that has both linguistic and lexicographic status, but also utility for statistical natural language paradigms. They cover word pairs and phrases that are commonly used in language, but for which no general syntactic or semantic rules apply. Because of their widespread use, a speaker of the language cannot achieve fluency without incorporating them in speech.

On the other hand, McKeown and Radev point out that, since collocations escape characterization, they have long been the object of linguistic and lexicographic study in an effort to both define them and include them in dictionaries of the language. Benson *et al.* (1997) for instance define eight types of grammatical collocations (phrases consisting of a dominant word and a preposition or a grammatical structure – *angry at, fond of*) and seven types of lexical collocations, seen as combinations between a noun and a verb or an adjective – *do homework, strong tea*.

As it is impossible to conclude on this topic, Viegas' position will be adopted here (1994), when she maintains that, along the temporal paradigm, there have been three main approaches to the study of collocations, namely, lexicographic, statistical and linguistic. One generally accepted thesis is that there is no single definition for what a collocation is, but rather, that "*collocational behavior* emerges from a theory of what the range of connections and relations between lexical items can be."

Consequently, the main research lines in the field should concentrate, according to Howarth and Nesi (1997), on aspects such as the description of collocation, on implications for second language acquisition, with examples of learners developing competence, as well as on developing materials for the teaching of collocations, including ways of exploiting published materials and other collocational resources, such as dictionaries, concordancers, corpora and the Internet.



The lexical approach - an overview

A sketchy summary of the main principles underlying the 'lexical approach' is necessary, as it has received much interest in recent years, as an alternative to grammar-based approaches. According to Moudraia (2001), the lexical approach to second language teaching is based on the idea that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or "chunks," and that these chunks become the raw data by which learners perceive patterns of language traditionally thought of as grammar.

For Lewis, who generated this approach (1993), one of the central organizing principles of any meaning-centered syllabus should be lexis. As the author of the review shows, the lexical approach concentrates on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations.

Similarly, Kranz (1997) reviews another of Lewis' books on the lexical approach, viz. *Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice* – published in 1997, showing that this new approach is understood as a serious attempt to implement a re-evaluation of the individual teacher and the profession, as it develops many of the fundamental principles advanced by proponents of Communicative Approaches. The most important difference, he states, is “the increased understanding of the nature of lexis in naturally occurring language and its potential contribution to language pedagogy.”

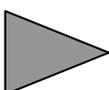
Such a theoretical approach has been widely and enthusiastically adopted in their current practice by ELT practitioners teaching students at all levels, particularly intermediate and above. However, a word of caution is necessary. The best advice, as it appears in most papers on the topic, points to the adoption of a moderate attitude, eclectically combining methods and means, thus avoiding any exaggeration. In the American literature, Moudraia (2001) warned that implementing a lexical approach in the classroom should not lead to radical methodological changes. Rather, it should involve a change in the teacher's mentality. Most important, the language activities consistent with a lexical approach must be directed toward naturally occurring language and toward raising learners' awareness of the lexical nature of language. In the UK, Kranz (1997) approached Lewis' views with the same moderation and selectivity. Teachers should never take a doctrinaire approach, whether their methods are audio-lingual, structured, communicative, or lexical. A little well-chosen variety is better than dogmatic adherence to any set of principles – he justifiedly argues.

Kranz (1997) has summed up the pedagogical implications of the approach, of which the following are the most relevant. Firstly, the grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid. Next, it is collocation which is used as the organizing principle. Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language. The introduction of the lexical approach in class should not mean a radicalisation of its principles; on the contrary, he shows that, “if introduced with thought and sensitivity, its introduction will be almost invisible, involving perhaps 20 ... small changes in every lesson, each in itself unremarkable, but the cumulative effect will be more effective teaching and more efficient learning.”

As Graney (2000) shows, an advantage of the lexical approach, if appropriately applied in the teaching/learning process, is that it encourages learner independence. As there are many more collocations than words, since many words occur in several different collocations, “the task of achieving proficiency in a second language is even greater than was thought when vocabulary acquisition was thought of in terms of learning words.”

Learner independence is emphasized, too, because of the vast amount of learning needed for proficiency in acquiring the collocations. Lewis, it is pointed out, argues that collocations provide a more practical and less general approach to language teaching syllabus design than grammar, because grammar provides only the most general rules of the language. “Collocational patterns account for some of the variability not captured in the rules, plus providing guidance for language use which may be grammatically correct, but not acceptable, the ‘we don’t say it that way’ situations which arise in the classroom.”

To conclude at this point, if applied moderately, the lexical approach can be a suitable option for moving away from the grammar-based syllabus because it presents a balanced approach to teaching language structure that will yield more accurate production.



Pedagogical implications – the underlying structure in collocation tasks design

In her work, Ketko (2000) mentions a series of pedagogical considerations teachers should be aware of in applying the lexical approach in their classes. They are not selected and listed here in a prioritized order, as it is their combination which can ensure success in applying the approach. One point is that it is important to raise the learner’s awareness of the use of multiword chunks in the language classroom. Learners need to acquire not only a wide repertoire of multiword chunks, but also the ability to make native-like selections in the use and language manipulation of such chunks. To do this, “learners should be exposed to spontaneous native speakers’ (NS) discourse so that they can see how and when chunks are manipulated and used by NSs. This can be achieved by the use of authentic teaching materials.”

Moreover, learners should be made aware of the close relationship and integration of grammar and lexis. They need to learn commonly used multiword chunks for fluency, and they also need to know and use grammar, which is regulative in function, in order to adapt a lexical chunk to a particular context. Therefore, vocabulary learning should not be limited to the learning of single-word definition and usage. Instead, learners should be taught the various aspects of a word, such as its common collocations and related grammatical patterns. The more de-lexicalized a word is, the more important it is to teach the word in different contexts, showing its most common collocations, and different usage, etc.

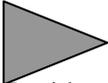
Lewis' advice is that teachers should not assume that their students are noticing collocations and recording them for themselves. They are unable to do this unless they are trained to. After a short period of time, students begin to ask the teacher about collocations in texts – whether they are worth recording – and they also ask for extras because that is what they have learned to expect from the teachers, in their new role as facilitators.

A specialised site of the University of Columbia English Language Institute (2002) also lists useful advice in teaching collocations. It has been noted by researchers that learners need to meet a word/phrase about seven times, in seven different contexts, in order to acquire it. This suggests that vocabulary acquisition is a gradual process. The importance of context is underlined, because it provides a great deal of information about meaning and usage. Learners should learn how to use English learners' dictionaries, Internet resources, concordancers and corpora.

Equally, they should be encouraged to keep 'Lexical Notebooks', in which they should record the chunks (as opposed to individual words) they encounter. If they translate these into their first language, they should be encouraged to translate whole phrases, not word-for-word.

Collocations associated with a situation students may want to talk or write about will be more easily remembered and will stimulate students to ask questions about ideas they want to express. New expressions should be reviewed by having students use them in a familiar context (recalling/summarizing the input from which they came).

Designing tasks focussed on collocations



Besides knowledge of the various approaches to defining collocations, their classification criteria and a basic framework of principles, one other significant element teachers should be aware of in designing tasks focussed on collocations is their treatment in most recent collocations dictionaries in electronic form. Thus, according to Howarth and Nesi (1997), eight different approaches have been identified, apparently chosen on the basis of the frequency and fixedness of the collocation, rather than due to a fixed editorial policy. They are as follows:

- the collocational group is given headword status
- the collocational group is listed as a subentry, possibly with a symbol to indicate that it is a compound or idiom
- collocational groups are defined within the main entry
- indication of collocational range is given in the definition
- typical collocates are printed in dark type within examples
- typical collocates occur within examples
- collocates are grouped in boxes
- sections outside the A-Z dictionary are set aside for the study of collocation.

Tasks can be classified from various perspectives. Actually, what matters more than describing a certain task is, I think, to show that there are certain paths to be followed, and certain attitudes to the teaching of collocations to be observed. Thus, in my opinion, one criterion could be that of the educational objectives aimed at, for example: increasing the learner's knowledge of lexis in its most 'natural' use, refining the oral and written communication of meaning and building up the learner's study independence by using the dictionary and other resources.

In teaching ESP, such tasks can be of much help to students in internalising the typical lexical combinations to be encountered more frequently in a certain domain (Computer Science, for instance). The same task pattern can be used, with modifications, at more than one level of proficiency.

I believe that, if the task focussed on collocations is logically and naturally integrated in the teaching cycle of a certain language (sub)skill, for instance Writing, then there are increased chances that the speed in internalising certain lexical chunks be shortened. Thus, students comprehend collocations in a context which is/should be at least similar to the authentic ones, if not totally authentic.

The variety of tasks which have been/can be created is impressive. Sampling from the task types suggested in the Oxford Dictionary of Collocations (2002), there are tasks which help learners turn ideas into words, but there are also tasks designed with a view to enlarging the lexical/phraseological competence of students in a certain domain, such as politics, criminal justice or education.

Examples of the kind of original tasks focussed on collocations, which I have designed and integrated in an *English for Professional Communication* coursebook unit on the ‘Writing of short documents (letters, memos and e-mail messages)’, are given below.

1.a) Choose the verb which collocates with the words in italics. Use appropriate forms.

1. All members of the staff are kindly invited to ... the Annual *Conference* on Human Rights, which opens July 5, 2005 in Baltimore.

(attend - frequent)

1.b) Look up in a dictionary the words which collocate with the verbs you have not used in Task Make sentences of your own using some of the collocations you have found.

2.a) Match the sentence halves in Lists ‘A’ and ‘B’ below, in order to obtain meaningful statements.

LIST ‘A’

(i) I would like to let you know that I am rather disappointed with the way in which the two secretaries recommended by your employment agency **perform**...

(ii) Therefore I would like to express my admiration for the thorough and timely manner in which you **do**...

(iii)

LIST ‘B’

(a) ...your kind invitation

(b) ... the daily tasks assigned by the Manager.

(c)

2.b) Now make a list of all the collocations you have found. Use them in sentences of your own.

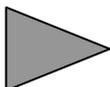
3) In the e-mail message below choose the word in brackets which collocates with the underlined one.

'Dear Bob

As you have asked me (*to come/get*) to your *rescue* concerning the *order* that you have so hurriedly (*placed/made*), here is my opinion....'

As can be seen, the range of tasks varies from more controlled types, through the teaching of collocations in small meaningful contexts, and through dictionary work, to integrating them in an authentic text. In almost all cases, a second part of the task has been provided, which can be assigned as homework and whose main role is to ensure that plenty of reinforcement opportunity should be given.

Similarly, in teaching an 'English for Science and Technology' (EST) module, the tasks which can be designed on the basis of the special 'Computers' page provided by the Oxford Dictionary of Collocations (2002), should make use of students' knowledge of the specific content (various operations performed on a computer, such as installing software or running several applications at the same time), as well as of their ability to use the on-line dictionary/ Internet/ corpora/ concordancer resources in order to find out the exact collocations connected with such operations. This type of task can be integrated well in the teaching of 'Technical Instructions Writing', for instance, or in teaching the basic technical translation requirements, which represents one important objective of an EST course.



Final remarks

In recent times it has become more and more obvious that these lexical 'chunks'/ collocates/ collocations play an important role in increasing the communicative competence of a learner. However, it has not become a matter of common practice for most teachers to introduce such tasks systematically, on a regular basis to students of English. Not many coursebooks currently in use have included such tasks, nor have researchers reached a common point of view on the concept of 'vocabulary teaching'. It is, therefore, expected that teachers assume the role of

researchers, investigate the various aspects involved in designing tasks focussed on collocations and share their findings with fellow members of the teaching community.

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