

## **Teaching Collocations to EFL Students**

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### **Abstract**

The topic of this article is teaching collocations to university EFL students. It focuses on different techniques and activities that are used to present collocations to English learners, and provides historical background of collocation studies and interpretations. In addition to that, the systematization and the categorization of collocations types are provided in this article. The activities proposed are based on and inspired by Michael Lewis's (1993) Lexical Approach which emphasizes the importance of vocabulary acquisition to language learners. Collocations are an important part of vocabulary, according to this approach, and they are regarded, as one of the important elements that language teacher should focus on in the language classroom.

**Key words:** collocations, vocabulary, Lexical Approach, English language teaching, EFL

## **Introduction**

The main topic of this article is teaching collocations, which is a relatively recent concept in second language learning. It consists of different techniques and activities which aim at raising both learners' and teachers' awareness of their existence and at the same time importance of relatively fixed word combinations. Koya (2005) states that interest in teaching and developing its vocabulary increased from 1980's. However more attention has been given to this concept lately due to Lexical Approach to second language teaching, the term being described by Lewis in the early 1990s. Collocation is "the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency" (Lewis 1997, p.8). This approach, is an alternative to grammar base approaches, and draws attention to the significance of lexis, or words, or word combinations in language acquisition. Nation (2001), argues "Language knowledge is collocational knowledge". Hence to speak English naturally and fluently learners need to pay attention to them.

The aim of this article is to clarify the importance of teaching collocation in classrooms, to present the different ways collocations can be taught, and to give some feedback on the implementation of techniques and activities designed to teach collocations in English language classroom.

## **Collocations**

The study of collocations as a part of vocabulary study was neglected in the past because the focus of language studies for a long time was mainly on grammatical structures, "mastery of the grammatical system is a prerequisite for effective communication" (Lewis, 1993, p.133). Sinclair (1991) points out, it is obvious that words do not appear at random in texts, and people cannot produce natural sentences simply by operating on the principle of grammar.

Palmer (1933) first coined the term "collocations" "in its modern linguistic sense. He defined collocations as "succession of two or more words that may best be

learned as if it were single word” (Cowie 1999, p.54). Collocations can be also defined as the restrictions on how words can be used together, for example, which prepositions and verbs are used together, or which nouns appear with particular verbs (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992). “Although collocations can be classified in any different ways, the most common classification is the one into grammatical and lexical collocations” (Begagic, 2014, p.47).

British linguists, mostly Halliday and Sinclair, maintain that lexical theory is needed to complement grammatical theory, and that grammatical description does not account for all the patterns in a language. In the 1970s and 1980s, the communicative and natural approaches, changed the focus of language studies. The interest increased in the 1990s. The focus was on vocabulary development which resulted in more interesting vocabulary teaching because learning such rich activities are needed to help learners acquire, practice and get better knowledge of the lexical parts of the language. Chung (2018) states how interesting vocabulary activities can help to cultivate an interest in learning.

Lewis insisted that his Lexical Approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching, “as language clearly consists not only of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks” (Lewis, 1997, p.3). According to Lewis chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and have an important role in facilitating language production, being the key to communication and to native-like fluency. The Lexical Approach is important because it includes not only the single words but also the word combinations that we store in our mental lexicons. The basic principle is: “Language is grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar” (Lewis 1993, p.89). In other words, lexis is essential in creating meaning, while grammar plays a less important or secondary organizational role. If teachers follow this rule then the conclusion is that teachers should spend more time helping English learners develop and understand collocations, and less time on teaching grammar. Wilkins (1972, pp. 111–112) wrote “. . . while without gram-

mar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”.

As the awareness and importance of the role of collocations in language teaching developed, progress in the field was made such as computer based studies of language. It is one of many tools and techniques that can help teachers to facilitate the language learning process and improve the learners' language competencies. The introduction of language corpora and corpus analysis techniques into language research made it possible to conduct studies that involved a large amount of data involving freely produced language, a large variety of language samples, and cross-corpora comparisons. Software packages like WordSmith Tools- Lexically.net provide tools for calculating frequencies of words specified by researchers in a corpus. (Laurance, 2013).

Two main views can be identified in the study of collocations:

1) “Frequency-based approach” or “distributional” which draws on quantitative evidence about word co-occurrence in corpora (Granger & Paquot, 2008; Nesselhauf, 2005; Paquot & Granger, 2012). Among main representatives are J.R. Firth, M.A.K. Halliday and J. Sinclair.

2) “Phraseological approach” which focuses on establishing the semantic relationship between two (or more) words and the degree of noncompositionality of their meaning (Gablasova, Brezina, & McEnry, 2017). Main representatives are A.P. Cowrie and F.J. Hausmann.

### **Types of collocations**

Lewis (1997) suggests that collocation is not decided by logic or frequency, but it is arbitrary, decided only by linguistic convention. This means that there are no certain rules or any logic for them. Some collocations are fully fixed, such as *catch a cold or drug addict*, while others are more or less fixed and can be completed in a small number of ways such as:

· *Blood/close/near relative or*

· *Badly/bitterly/deeply/seriously/severely hurt*

Lewis (1997) proposes the following categories for collocations:

1. Strong: A large number of collocations are strong or very strong, and they are combinations that frequently occur together, for example we talk mostly about *rancid butter*, but other things can be described as rancid as well such as *rancid breath*.
2. Weak: These are words which co-occur with a greater than random frequency, or combined with a lot of different words, for example many things can be long (*long coastline or long friendship*) or short (*short vacation or short memory*), good (*good news or good time*) or bad (*bad fish or a bad cough*), cheap (*cheap tickets or feeling cheap*) or expensive (*an expensive hobby or expensive shops*). However some things are more predictable than others which than could be called collocations such as, *white wine or red wine*, etc.
3. Medium strength: These are words that go together with a greater frequency than weak collocations but not as limited in combinability as strong collocations such as *hold a meeting, carry out a study, make a mistake*.

Hill (1999) states that:

Unique collocations, denotes word combination which is not usually found in combination with any other word for example with the word foot when used as a verb in the collocation *foot the bill*, since we cannot say for example foot the invoice etc. Similarly, we *shrug the shoulders*, but we do not shrug anything else.

### **Importance of Teaching Collocations**

There are many strong arguments for the focus on teaching collocations in the language classroom. Collocation is an important aspect in vocabulary acquisition and knowledge of collocations is a good indication of general EFL proficiency. By comparison with native speakers, language learners overuse some collocations, for example, collocations constructed with core verbs (be, have, make, etc.) or particular amplifiers (very, completely, highly, strongly),

whereas they do not use other native like collocations (Altenberg & Granger, 2001; De Cock, Granger, Leech, & McEnery, 1998; Granger, 1998; Howarth, 1996; Laufer, 2010).

According to Lewis (1993) the reason we should teach collocations is that “Collocation...provides the most powerful organization principle for language teaching...In many cases collocation is a principal characteristic by which words may be located or even defined.” (p.119). Also, the vast majority of written and spoken language is composed of a relatively small number of high frequency words (Nation, 2001), so focusing on these very common items seems likely to be helpful for learners. The other very important reason for teaching collocations to students is to increase their efficiency when using English, which leads to increased fluency. As Hill (1999) argued that: “Collocation is the key to fluency.”

He further explains that:

Native speakers can only speak at a relatively fast speed because they are calling on a vast repertoire of ready-made language in their mental lexicons. Similarly their reading and listening comprehension is “quick” because they are consistently recognizing “chunks” of language. The main difference between native speakers and non-native speakers is that native speakers have met more examples of the language. It is this that enables them to process and produce language at a much faster rate than the average student. (Hill 1999, p.5)

The common way for students to learn English vocabulary or any other foreign language is by writing down the translation of the word. However this is not always the best way since many words change their meaning in combination with other words thus they are not always translated in the same way. One way to overcome this is to focus more on lexical chunks/blocks rather than a single

word because that make the process of learning English time saving and more beneficial. If students memorize lexical chunks rather than individual words, it will enable students to quickly and easily use the appropriate phrase rather than to try to construct it one word at a time. Therefore students' speech becomes more fluent, in addition to that, it will become more accurate, as it takes less time to think of the right expression or word. It will provide alternative and richer ways to express themselves and it will give students more confidence. The increased efficiency and fluency of a non-native speaker is beneficial to both native and non-native speakers. Native speakers will most likely predict what is going to be said based on common phrasing patterns even if the pronunciation is not as good. On the other hand familiarity with collocations should increase a non-native speaker's efficiency as a listener or a speaker.

Increased efficiency and fluency facilitate better communication between native and non-native speakers. Hill (2000, p.53) estimates that "collocations are found in up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression".

Hence, teaching collocations to students is important as it will make it easier for non-native speakers to improve not only their vocabulary and speaking but also writing performance "Mere practice of particular word combinations - will result in improved performance." (Zaabalawi&Gould, 2017, p.21) Apart from these benefits, students when familiar with collocations will be less likely to translate literally. Literal translation of phrase and students' failure to use the correct collocations, even if their utterance is grammatically and contextually correct, will lead to their English still sounding unnatural and 'foreign' to the extent that they may not be understood at all. According to Gledhill (2000, p.5), "it is impossible for a writer to be fluent without a thorough knowledge of the phraseology of the particular field he or she is writing in."

## **Different types of collocations**

According to Benson, Benson & Ilson (1986) grammatical collocations fall into several different types. Some of the most common types are:

1) adverb+adjective collocations

Absolutely terrified

Deeply concerned

2) adjective+noun collocations

Native speaker

Heavy rain

3) noun+noun collocations

Comfort zone

Credit card

4) noun+verb collocations

Thunder rumbled

Rumors spread

5) verb+noun collocations

Commit a crime

Make mistakes

6) verb+preposition collocations

Agree with

Participate in

7) adverb+adverb collocation

All alone

Right now

8) adverb+verb collocations

Strongly agree

Completely forgot



### **Activities to teach collocations**

In order to teach collocations, firstly teachers should make students be aware of their existence. Collocations exist in students' native language, therefore the concept will be easily understood. Intensive and extensive listening and reading should be encouraged in order to expose student to those forms. For example to teach English collocations to Japanese learners through the use of movies. (Furuhi, 2011)

More exposure to collocation has no or only a slight effect, Collocations are largely transparent and therefore easily understood, so that learners probably often do not realize that they are expressions that have to be learnt. The starting point for teaching collocations should therefore be to make learners more aware of the phenomenon. It is essential that learners recognize that there are combinations that are neither freely combinable nor largely opaque and fixed (such as idioms) but there are nevertheless arbitrary to some degree and therefore have to be learnt. (Nesselhauf, 2005, p.252).

Teaching collocations should be present at all levels of learning. It is essential to start teaching collocations at elementary level for it is then that students are taught how to learn. Some collocations in the students' native language can be translated directly into English and consequently they will be easier to learn. Therefore, more attention should be given to collocations that are different in the two languages pointing out those differences to students. This should be done whether students use collocations correctly or not, and examples should be provided. Once students are made aware of collocations, they need to be trained on the identification of collocations in different texts. In this regard, students must be trained to identify useful collocations in oral or written texts.

For example: Learners should underline chunks they can find in the text.

I met Ryoko five years ago. We became friends immediately, because we had so much in common. She has a very outgoing personality and she is very patient. We don't keep in touch regularly these days, because she has a very demanding job and my young children keep me busy too. I would say she is one of my closest friends, even though I don't see her often.

Fusco (2014) and Deveci (2004) give more ideas on how to present collocations to EFL students:

1. Learners should underline chunks they can find in a text. It is helpful for students to get different kinds of chunks to look for. For lower levels, it is better to restrict students to noun + noun, adjective + noun, or verb + noun collocations because more complex chunks would confuse them.

2. Small extracts from the concordances published by Cobuild can be used to explore the possible environments of a word. However, ready-made concordances would be more suitable for higher levels because they do not include enough context for lower level students to understand the meaning without help. Ready-made concordances may also include too many unknown words for lower-level students. Teachers who want to use concordances with lower levels should write their own, bearing in mind their students' level of grammar and lexis.

3. After reading a text, students can be given a set of incomplete phrases taken from the text and asked to complete them by scanning the text again. This can be done at any level.

For example, intermediate students have read a text on time management. Some possible incomplete phrases from the text could be: *[on] time; [in] time; [on] the dot; [at] times; [from] time [to] time*. These phrases focus on a preposition + noun collocation.

4. After they have seen certain collocations in a text, students can be asked to find pairs of collocations arranged randomly.

If students have read a text on traffic, a possible matching activity could be:

- |            |                |
|------------|----------------|
| 1. traffic | a. traffic     |
| 2. heavy   | b. warden      |
| 3. rush    | c. trafficking |
| 4. drug    | d. jam         |
| 5. traffic | e. hour        |

5. It is useful for learners to find certain collocations in the dictionary by themselves because they will memorize them faster. They can use dictionaries of collocations such as the *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* and *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations*. *These can be useful in drawing students' attention to collocations.*

6. Give students phrases in their native language and equivalent phrases in English, and ask students to match the phrases. This activity will help students see that collocational ideas are not always formed in the same way in English.

It is also important to engage students in a variety of collocational activities that enhance both their receptive and productive knowledge of collocations. On the receptive front, gap-filling activities with words from a list/box can be adapted to introduce collocations. The example below from McCarthy et al. (2010) enhances the receptive knowledge of collocations.

Fill in the gaps with collocations from the box.

pay good interest/ set aside money / get an allowance

When Andrew was growing up, he was careful with his money. He \_\_\_\_\_ every week from his parents, and because he wanted to go to college, he \_\_\_\_\_ every month. He opened a savings account that \_\_\_\_\_, so his savings grew.

Another useful activity in this regard is “crossing odd words out” or what is sometimes known as “finding the intruder”. In this task, learners need to identify

the word that does not collocate with a target word. McCarthy et al. (2010) also provide the following example:

Cross out the food that is the least likely to go with the preparation.

- a. smoked cheese / turkey / bread / meat
- b. fried noodles / yogurt / chicken / potatoes

Matching word can be another effective way, as in the following example:

A.	B.
have	forces
do	time
traffic	notes
make	progress
annual	turnover
take	jam
waste	nothing
market	sympathy

**Words can be arranged** into groups that take the same collocations for example with city:

City: sprawling, rich history, steep, narrow streets, constant problem, tasty local food, etc.

Communication activities are an effective way to practice collocations. Students can conduct a survey among their classmates and follow up with a written or oral report. This is very useful when learning collocations which are covered by the same topic, an example can be a survey on sports where students are asked which sport activity and how often they *play*, *do*, or *go*. This type of activity is popular with students at lower level, whereas students at higher levels find them boring and time consuming. For a higher level learner the following activity can be used: students are given a topic and a list of collocations which they need to use to write an essay on the topic. As a more challenging and more

creative task, students can only be given a list of collocations without a topic and they should use their own ideas to write a story or an essay.

Scrivener, (1994) proposes three activities: quick choices, guess the collocation and chunk watching (p. 251)

**Quick choices** start with the teacher choosing two to three nouns, e.g. *food, cooking and meal* that have a number of possible confusing collocations. In this particular case, the list might include *fast, health, dog, baby, delicious, light, balanced, Italian, vegan, frozen, dog, etc.* Then the list is read item by item and students must indicate which three nouns at the beginning given by the teacher is the best collocate, or if the item goes with more than one word. Students can write their answers on a paper which is a quiet way of doing it, or it can be done by calling out their choice of words that is a noisy way, or by pointing at words written on wall notices or even by running to the right part of the room designated for a certain words.

**Guess the collocation** starts by dividing the class into four or more teams. In each team students are given a same word (e.g. *town*) and teams have to prepare a list of five common collocations (e.g. *constant problems, home, supermarkets, center, new, tasty food, etc.*). Each team has a different starter word. When all teams have completed the task, students read their lists out one item at a time and the other teams try to guess the original word. If the word is guessed immediately on the first clue, both teams get ten points. The scoring scheme encourages students to find the most likely and distinctive collocations.

**Chunk watching** is done in groups of three students, two of them face each other. The teacher gives them a topic to talk about for a few minutes. The third student just listens carefully and takes no part in their conversation, and takes notes of as many chunks as he/she can catch. At the end of the time, the listener shows his/her list to the speakers and they discuss it together.

There are many other activities or games such as quizzes, memory game, guessing game, etc. Teachers can choose the activities that suit their teach-

ing contexts best or make their own activities. While teaching collocations, repetition is very important for their memorization. It is also important to teach collocations that are active and appropriate for learners' needs (e.g., computer science, law or engineering). Learners will be more interested and motivated to learn relevant collocations to their field of study than general collocations or collocations related to other areas of specialization. El-Dakhs (2015) states that "It is not advisable to teach collocations that learners will rarely encounter in natural English."

## **Conclusion**

The main aim of this article is to show the importance of teaching vocabulary to EFL learners, and by no means denies the importance of grammar. It is showing that apart from the knowledge of grammar, that there are other important elements of language knowledge that contribute to the accuracy and fluency of speech. Collocation activities can be incorporated into most language classes and it is important to consider students' needs, level, and motivation when choosing what to focus on. Collocational competence in EFL environment deserves special attention from both researchers and language instructors.

Therefore more awareness should be raised regarding teaching collocations and stronger emphasis should be given on studying collocation in the process of curriculum development.

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