COLLOCATIONS IN ENGLISH

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No noticing, no acquisition.
(Thornbury, 1997)

ABSTRACT
When learning English words, it is useful to also learn the words they often occur with. This combination of words that work together is known under the name of collocation. Learning collocations is an important part of acquiring the vocabulary of a language. A collocation refers to clusters of words that often go together throughout written and spoken English and form a common expression. An understanding of collocation is vital for all learners, and especially for those on advanced level courses. We will try to take a closer look at the typology of collocations, at their relation to good speaking and writing and at the task of the students to learn and master them. The more often a student sees or hears an expression, the more likely it is to become a part of their active language repertoire.

Keywords:
Occurrence, associations, clusters, patterns, pre-assembled word combinations decoding, encoding, typologies

If we are to define collocations, the simplest would be: “collocation means a natural combination of words that work together for fluent and natural English”. Along years there were lots of definitions of and approaches to collocations.

First brought up by Palmer and later introduced to the field of theoretical linguistics by Firth [1], the most commonly shared definition of collocations is: the tendency of one word to co-occur with one or more other words in a particular domain.

As early as 1933, Palmer simply states: “Each [collocation] ... must or should be learnt, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts”[2]. It is well-recognized that collocations are a crucial part of language usage and it is collocational proficiency that differentiates native and non-native speakers, but there is not much that we can do as classroom teachers.

It is time to start looking into whether the acquisition of collocations may or may not affect each of EFL/ESL learners’ language skill areas, including writing, speaking, reading, and listening in the new era of computer-mediated communication. In addition, the development of computers, the Internet, and many e-learning materials have shaped EFL/ESL education dramatically. Learning to use English “computer-mediated appropriately” is becoming important. Furthermore, the pressure on test takers to conduct timed, computer – or Internet-based
“speed writing” is increasing. New English proficiency exams-TOEFL for example- are now asking students to take an instant writing test online.

Lexical collocations are word-associations where one word recurrently co-occurs with one or more other words as the only or one of few possible lexical choices. These combinations of words are natural to native speakers, but students of English have to make a special effort to learn them as simple guessing is not enough. Some collocations are fixed, or very strong, and easier to remember as make an effort where no word other than make collocates with effort to give a similar meaning. Others are more often, where several different words may be used for a similar meaning, for example make/work out/outline a plan.

Sometimes, a pair of words may not be absolutely wrong, and people will understand what you want to say, but it is not the natural collocation. I did a few mistakes can be understood by a native, but a fluent speaker of English would say I made a few mistakes.

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<th>Types of Collocations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb + noun</td>
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<td>Adjective + noun</td>
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<td>Verb + adjective + noun</td>
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<td>Adverb + adjective + noun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjective + preposition</td>
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<td>Noun + noun (also known as compound nouns)</td>
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Why is collocation important for advanced learners?

According to Hill “students with good ideas often lose marks because they do not know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about”[4]. As a result, they use more words to define or discuss an issue, increasing the chance of further errors. He cites the example: “His disability will continue until he dies” rather than “He has a permanent disability”[5].

There is no magic formula for correcting these mistakes. Collocations have to be acquired both through direct study and large amounts of quality input. The very concept of collocations is often not easy for learners. The essentially simple idea that word choice is seriously limited by what comes before and after, “is perhaps the aspect of the lexical system and the hardest therefore for learners to acquire”[6].
Observations in the areas of theoretical and applied linguistics have identified lexis, as having a major role in determining language patterns, a position more traditionally reserved for grammar. These patterns or collocation often determine the meaning of the lexical items themselves, and these pre-assembled word combinations are employed throughout language to make communication more efficient.

Choices about how collocation should be treated in the classroom need to be made, but often relying on intuition fails to create an accurate picture of the extent that collocations exist in the real world.

There are two ways in which we can find collocations: either by trying to notice them whenever we read or listen to anything in English or look them up in a good learner’s dictionary.

Such a dictionary will give information on the most common collocations. CD-Rom versions of dictionaries are useful as you can search for a lot more information and quicker. A good dictionary will also tell you if a collocation is formal or informal.

Learning collocations is necessary because they can:

- give you the most natural way to say something; *smoking is strictly forbidden* is more natural than *smoking is strongly forbidden*;
- give you alternative ways of saying something, which may be more expressive or more precise: instead of repeating *It was very cold and very dark*, we can say: *It was bitterly cold and pitch dark*;
- improve your writing style, for example instead of *poverty causes crimes* you can write *poverty breeds crimes* as they can make your text better [7].

Using the word “grammar” in a lexically centered sense, Michael Lewis observes that “every word has its own grammar... (and)... ‘knowing a word’ involves knowing its grammar – the patterns in which it is regularly used”. The language learner should recognize these combinations and/or “chunks” as an important part of the mental lexicon [8].

According to Hill, collocational competence is said to provide an efficiency of effort, or fluency in terms of both decoding and encoding language in that it allows learners to process and produce these chunks at a faster rate as well as convey more easily complex ideas that are often expressed lexically [9].

Students often fail to get high scores at tests as they cannot pass a certain “thread” that separates natives from non-natives.

Thus, “the intermediate plateau” [10] has been identified as a prolonged stage in interlanguage development where learners can deploy approximated “open principle” language to communicative ends, but appear stuck in terms of improving fluency because of their not possessing an awareness of, or perhaps an appropriate level of acquisition of collocation as “The Oxford Collocations dictionary for students of English” defines it, “the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing”.

Many advanced students tend to have a number of distinguishing, mostly negative characteristics. First, they often lack motivation, especially if not working towards an external examination. This is compounded by the fact that they know, or feel they know, English grammar, having recycled the major structures countless times in previous years. In addition, they usually possess a good enough active vocabulary to get by in most everyday speaking situations, and thus they do not see the necessity for acquiring a lot of new items.

Similarly, they see little need to improve their writing skills and new vocabulary or ways of expressing themselves seem of only passing interest.

If the teachers do not take measures to change this situation, most of the learners of English in class, will continue producing both spoken and written language containing unnatural-sounding elements which grate on listener or reader, as words that do not
usually co-occur together are thrown up unexpectedly. For example “in the shell of a nut” (instead of in a nutshell) and “I have overtaken the fear of driving” (instead of “I have overcome the fear of driving”) are examples from students. If the reader (or listener) is confused, then the writer or speaker is likely to be at best frustrated or at worst completely misunderstood.

On the other hand, the language teacher that attempts to focus on collocation and to present collocation out of context in an item-by-item fashion carries false expectations and does not give the learner an accurate picture of the extent that collocation permeates language so it is better to draw the learners’ attention to patterns that exist in texts they have already dealt with. Still, a question needs to be asked: Which collocations should be focused on?

We will start by examining how some authors have made that choice. It is noted by Wollard [11] that words with high lexical content will have less collocational partners than superordinates of the same word, and thus more attention needs to be given to words with a wider collocational range. An implication could be that while these unique collocations may be easy to identify for the teacher as restricted, they may also be easier for the learner to identify as bound because of their relative rarity in input. Within these collocations made from frequent and perhaps core words, Wollard suggests attention be given primarily to “unexpected collocations”.

Along the same lines, Hill (2000) suggests primary attention be given to “medium-strength collocations”, those made up of common words (he gives the example of choices of delexical verbs, e.g. “do, have, make, take, put”, to verbalize nouns) because, “the main thrust of classroom vocabulary teaching at intermediate level and above should be to increase students’ collocational competence with their basic vocabulary…”. By expanding the definition of collocation to include fixed expressions and using texts that learners have already had contact with, to focus on the specific types of collocation found most common in language, learners would get a more accurate picture of the patterning in language determined by lexis.

Still, time constraints make any item-by-item approach unrewarding since applying a “collocationist” view to language reveals that “there are many more – tens of thousands of more – individual items to be learned than language teaching has ever recognized” [12]. Instead, the goal of activities meant to teach collocation should be that of a “consciousness-raising” aimed at “sensitizing learners to the general difficulties involved (which) may help them to understand (these principles) in the future”, and encouraging learners to notice all such patterns in input rather than making an attempt to present just a few specific instances out of the tens of thousands that exist, with the false expectation that learners will remember and use them.

In their book English collocations in use, McCarthy and O’Dell selected a number of collocations according to their relation to certain topics such as Weather and Business, concepts such as Time or Change, and functions such as Liking and disliking not only for the students to learn them but also to have fun. This should be the tactics used by the language teachers in their endeavor to help students have a better control of English.

Developing an awareness of collocation as an important level of language is necessary because of its efficient meaning-creating function and abundance in language. Consciousness-raising activities based on texts students have come in contact with, will provide valuable clues to be used in further input as the process of acquisition advances. Rosamund Moon calls just looking at words “dangerously isolationist” [13], and goes on saying that “words are again and again shown not to operate as independent and interchangeable parts of the lexicon, but as parts of a lexical system” (ibid. p. 42).

An understanding of collocation is vital
for all learners, but for those on advanced level courses, it is essential that they are not only aware of the variety and sheer density of this feature of the language. The goal of both teachers and students should be that of finding the proper procedure to actively acquire more and more collocations both within and outside the formal teaching situation. It is only by doing this that the students will be able to leave the “intermediate plateau” behind.

References

[10] Lewis, Morgan, *There is nothing as practical as a good theory*. In: “Teaching Collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach”, Michael Lewis (Ed.), Heinle, Boston, 2000, p. 43