

Collocations in the vocabulary English teaching as a foreign language

Las colocaciones en la enseñanza del vocabulario del idioma inglés como lengua extranjera

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The teaching of a foreign language entails, among other things, dealing with the system of the language, i.e. the cultural, grammatical, lexical and phonological subsystems. In practice, most foreign language lessons dedicate extensive treatment to grammar and pronunciation, while vocabulary and the culture intrinsic to the language are often neglected. It is thought that with making clear the meaning of words and explaining some cultural concepts, it is enough for the learner.

However, both culture and vocabulary are very closely related aspects in any language. Culture is expressed through language, and no expression of language can occur without words. It is through words that the culture of a language is transmitted from generation to generation. Therefore, learning vocabulary is also learning culture. At the same time, vocabulary is also connected with the other subsystems. Grammar would be empty without words, and word forms are governed by grammatical function. As a whole, all the subsystems together configure any language.

Derived from studies in computational linguistics, text, and discourse analysis, English language teaching (ELT) today is focusing its attention on the teaching of vocabulary from a different perspective. Dictionary makers, for example, are not only dedicating attention to a word's function, pronunciation and basic meaning,

but to other important aspects related to words such as their multiple meanings, synonymy, connotations, register, and how the word collocates with others as well.

This paper is aimed at raising English as a foreign language teachers' awareness on the need to take into consideration collocation patterns when dealing with new and known vocabulary in the classroom. The authors will argue the significance of teaching English collocations through examples and how this will further enhance the students' potential to communicate effectively.

COLLOCATIONS

From the linguistic point of view, collocations are defined as «a combination of words in a language that happens very often, and more frequently than would happen by chance».1 In

other words, a collocation is an expression consisting of two or more words that correspond to some conventional way of saying things. The words together can mean more than their sum of parts (e.g. *The New York Times*, *USB port*). As a result, there may be valid and invalid collocations.

It is Firth who is widely regarded as the father of collocation and the developer of a lexical and the most traditional approach to this phenomenon. Advocates of the lexical approach claim that the meaning of a word is determined by the co-occurring words. Consequently, lexis is considered to be independent and separable from grammar. Thus, a part of the meaning of a word is the fact that it collocates with another word.2 However, those combinations are often strictly limited, e.g. *make an omelette* but *do your homework*, while both the verbs *do* and *make* have only one Spanish equivalent *hacer*. One of the Firth's revolutionary concepts was to perceive lexical relations as syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic ones.

McCarthy and O'Dell state that «words are used with each other (or collocate) in fairly fixed ways in English», and exemplify this point by means of the word *fair*. *Fair* is synonymous with *light*, *blonde*, *pale*, *colourless* and *bleached*. Therefore, it is possible to describe *hair* as *fair*, *light*, *blonde* or *bleached*; but not as *pale* or *colourless*. *Skin*, for example, can be *fair*, *light* and *pale*, but cannot be described as *blonde*, *colourless* or *bleached*. *Colourless* would be a perfect quality of a gas or liquid.3

Collocations usually cannot be translated into other languages word by word. A phrase can be a collocation even if it is not consecutive (e.g.: *ram something down someone's throat*). The typical criteria for collocations are non-compositionality, non-substitutability and non-modifiability.

A phrase is compositional if the meaning can be predicted from the meaning of the parts (e.g.: *new products*). It is non-compositional if the meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of the parts (e.g.: *hot dog*, *desktop publishing*, *soft skills*). Collocations are not necessarily fully compositional in that there is usually an element of meaning added to the combination (e.g.: *strong tea*, *soft drink*). Idioms are the most extreme examples of non-compositionality (e. g. *a kick in the teeth* for someone, *to draw the line* at something)

Near-synonyms cannot substitute for the components of a collocation; for example, though *shout*, *scream*, *call* and *bawl* are synonymous, it is not possible *to bawl for help*, whereas *for help* collocates perfectly well with the other three verbs. At the same time, many collocations cannot be freely modified with additional lexical

material or through grammatical transformations; for example, it is possible to say *hot chilli sauce* but not *hotter chilli sauce*. By the same token, one can say *brother-in-law*, but not *brother-in-laws*.

In addition, collocations can be divided into different linguistic subclasses. Among them, it is possible to find light verbs with little semantic content like *make* and *do* in *make a mistake* and *do the homework*; verb particle constructions or phrasal verbs like *go down*, but not *go apart*; proper nouns such as *Noam Chomsky* and terminological expressions that refer to concepts and objects in technical domains like *congestive heart failure* and *personality trends*.

Collocational restriction is a linguistic term used in morphology. The term refers to the fact that in certain two-word phrases the meaning of an individual word is restricted to that particular phrase. For instance: the adjective *dry* can only mean 'not sweet' in combination with the noun *wine*. Other illustrative examples are *white wine*, *white coffee*, *white noise* and *white man*. All four instances of *white* are idiomatic because in combination with certain nouns the meaning of *white* changes. In none of the examples does *white* have its usual meaning. Instead, in the examples above it means 'yellowish', 'brownish', 'containing many frequencies with about equal amplitude', and 'pinkish' or 'pale brown', respectively.

Another clarifying illustration in reference to collocations is that *bad* has always been taught as the antonym of *good* as in *good/bad news*. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to talk about a *bad performance*. *Poor performance* is the correct collocation. Instead of *bad*, the following expressions meaning *bad* are used *an unpleasant/a foul/a disgusting smell*, *appalling/dreadful/severe weather*, *an appalling/a frightening/a traumatic experience*, *poor/weak eyesight*, *in difficult/appalling working conditions*.

In reference to collocations, many educated speakers of English would not be aware of the concept; however, they would very likely tell if a two-word phrase form a common expression. Therefore, awareness of language expressions is an essential point in learning correct collocations. If the expression is heard often, the words become 'glued' together in our minds. '**Crystal clear**', '**middle management**', '**nuclear family**' and '**cosmetic surgery**' are examples of collocated pairs of words. Some words are often found together because they make up a compound noun, for example '**riding boots**' or '**motor cyclist**'.

Examples of other well-collocated phrases could be: a person can be '**locked in mortal combat**', meaning involved in a serious fight, or '**bright eyed and bushy tailed**', meaning fresh and ready to go; '**red in the face**', meaning 'embarrassed', or '**blue in the face**' meaning 'angry'. It is not a common expression for someone to be '**yellow in the face**' or '**green in the face**' however. Therefore '**red**' and '**blue**' collocate with '**in the face**', but '**yellow in the face**' or '**green in the face**' are very probably mistakes.

Experts in ELT point out that the correct use of collocations by the learner is a sign of growth and maturity in the use of the foreign language. The following exercise⁴ further illustrates how a group of synonyms usually taught at basic level can enrich the advanced learner's command of the English language. Which adjectives collocate with which nouns?:

	Man	Woman	Girl	Thing
<i>Handsome</i>				
<i>Pretty</i>				
<i>Beautiful</i>				
<i>Good-looking</i>				
<i>Attractive</i>				
<i>Lovely</i>				

Another possible exercise to teach collocational restrictions is the following:

strong tea	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	play (it) safe	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
powerful tea	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	play secure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
tall trees	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	come true	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
high trees	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	come real	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
happy ending	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	buy time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
glad ending	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	purchase time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

In sum, lexical errors can lead to confusion, but that is not exactly the same as collocational errors, most of which will be comprehensible. Claims that collocation learning offers the learner with prefabricated lexical items for specific functions could seem a bit excessive. The case for making collocation so central a part of language learning does not take into account the learning aims, needs of many students and teaching programmes. It places the native speaker right at the centre, though for many programmes and students the aim is not to reach that level, but simply to communicate in a way that they can be understood. In such cases, there is no driving need to combine words in exactly the same way as native speakers.

One criticism of grammar based methods is that pragmatics suggests that perfection is not necessary. The same could equally apply to collocation. Random lists of arbitrary pairings and groupings do not in themselves constitute the missing link in language teaching. However, an awareness of the issue, and knowledge of how checks can be made through dictionaries, internet searches and concordance searches are all very useful tools. Encouraging students to expose themselves as widely as possible to written and oral texts as a way of meeting as many collocations as possible will also help.

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According to DeCI²

TECHNICAL EDUCATION; LEARNING.
ENSEÑANZA TÉCNICA; APRENDIZAJE.

¹BIREME. Descriptores en Ciencias de la Salud (DeCS). Sao Paulo: BIREME, 2004. Available from: <http://decs.bvs.br/E/homepagee.htm>

²Díaz del Campo S. Propuesta de términos para la indización en Ciencias de la Información. Descriptores en Ciencias de la Información (DeCI). Available from: <http://cis.sld.cu/E/tesauro.pdf>

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[*From Paul Gunashekar's advanced grammar lesson \(Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages University -Hyderabad, India\).](#)

