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WHY ARE COLLOCATIONS SO IMPORTANT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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Recent developments in linguistics have forced the methodologists to change their view of language. They consider it is time for a re-valuation of many of the accepted ideas about teaching and learning. One of them is the idea on collocation.

In this paper we wish to demonstrate that lexis is one of the central organizing principles of the syllabus and concentrate on some important issues of its implications for teaching and learning English.

Not long ago we were encouraged to think of grammar as the bones of the language and vocabulary as the flesh. The current view is that language consists largely of prefabricated 'chunks' of lexis. The key feature to the formation of these chunks is collocation.

What is collocation? According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary collocation noun [countable] is a combination of words in a language that happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance. 'Resounding success' and 'crying shame' are English collocations. Collocation noun [uncountable] denotes the fact of two or more words often being used together, in a way that happens more frequently than would happen by chance: 'Advanced students need to be aware of the importance of collocation'.

J.R. Firth (an English linguist of the 1950s) is often quoted having said "you know a word by the company it keeps". So, collocation is 'what goes together with what.' It is a habitual combination of two or more words which occur in predictable combination: 'Strong coffee' is a typical collocation in English but 'powerful coffee' is not. We can say: 'Strong' collocates with coffee but 'powerful' does not. Any analysis of naturally-occurring text shows how densely collocations occur.

Every text has words occurring in some kind of collocation which has serious consequences for its comprehension. Learners may know a lot of words but their collocational competence may be very limited. This would explain why learners with even 'good vocabularies' have problems.

The English language teaching world has always recognized two types of collocations: idioms and phrasal verbs. Simple examples of collocations might be: make a mistake (verb + noun), heavy traffic (adjective + noun), totally misunderstood (adverb + noun), extremely generous (adverb + adjective), guilty of (adjective + preposition), management program (noun + noun). Another classification includes: 1. unique collocation: leg space (meaning the distance between two seats in, for example, a plane); 2. strong collocation (words occur frequently in a particular combination): move to tears; 3. weak collocations (words occur with a greater than random frequency): white wine, red hair; 4. medium-strength collocation (they make up the most part of what we say): hold a conversation, make a mistake etc.

Collocation is the key to fluency. Native speakers can speak at a relatively fast speed because they are calling on a vast repertoire of readymade language in their mental lexicons. Similarly, their reading and listening comprehension is 'quick' because they are constantly recognizing 'chunks' of language.

Any analysis of non-native speakers' speech or writing shows that the lack of collocational competencies is one of the most obvious weaknesses. When students do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say, they create longer utterances often with errors. Their stress and intonation can be difficult for the listener. Many

teachers are trying to incorporate lexical ideas into their teaching. They are using different strategies for vocabulary learning at different stages of learning. Students need to become 'collectors of lexis'.

Conventional dictionaries cannot give all the necessary information about collocation but bilingual ones can. Greater emphasis on lexis means less on grammar. Considering language in 'large chunks' also means that grammar and vocabulary merge into one another. No doubt, students should constantly increase their collocational competence.

Many people learning English studied numerous hours to learn thousands of vocabulary words. They understand the meaning of the word by learning it from a dictionary, but in the end, they still have a problem using the word in a sentence. How do I use that word? Am I using this word correctly? What are example sentences with that word? These are all common questions when we study vocabulary.

There are several ways of approaching this common problem with collocations. One is to say that learners must simply learn each new collocation as they encounter them. To do this, vocabulary notebook strategies are important, and a good rule of thumb is when you learn a new word, write down not just its meaning or translation, but also its common collocations (e.g. have an accident, go for/take a stroll). Another way to approach the problem of these common, everyday collocations is to group together the collocations of individual verbs: make often collocates with something that has a result (make a cake, a mistake, a plan, a list). Do often collocates with activities and emphasises actions (do the shopping, business, exercise, research). Get often collocates with adjectives that indicate that something has changed (get better, get old, get ready, get tired). By grouping the collocations together, learners can develop a better 'feel' for what is appropriate.

In addition, in the language class, we should (a) raise learners' awareness of collocation (e.g. by asking them to think of their own language or other language(s) they know) and (b) give learners repeated exposure to typical collocations in spoken and written texts. Good teaching materials take collocation seriously and offer examples and practice in using collocations. If we teach vocabulary but don't pay attention to collocation, we are giving learners an incomplete picture of how the language works.

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