

## **COLLOCATION-CENTRED APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY**

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### **Abstract:**

The present article is based on the assumption that vocabulary acquisition and proficiency in English – or any other language, for that matter – is largely conditioned by acquiring a sound knowledge of collocation patterns, as well as adequate collocation practice activities. From beginner to proficiency level, collocation should constitute the primary focus of any vocabulary development programme. The author presents a range of collocation-centred teaching techniques and learning strategies, meant at raising awareness of word association or and at building sound collocation habits, which constitute the basis of lexical proficiency and appropriacy.

### **Key-words:**

Vocabulary, collocation, patterns, appropriacy, practice activities

### **Introduction**

Foreign students' ability to speak and write English both accurately and fluently is related to a large extent to their mastery of vocabulary, especially of collocation. Most language mistakes arise from the wrong association between words, i.e. collocation, which is one of the most difficult areas of language learning at all levels.

While native speakers collocate naturally and automatically, non-native speakers have to learn and practice word association systematically before they are able to sense what sounds right and what does not. What they need is awareness-raising exercises, which set them thinking about correct collocations when they do reading or listening activities or when they look up words in the dictionary, intensive classroom practice and

extensive reading (outside the classroom). In other words, they need sustained **exposure to collocation**.

Collocation errors are sometimes caused by interference from their own language (first language interference), when students collocate according to the rules of their mother tongue, e.g. *make a photo, give an exam, put a question*. Knowing a word in a foreign language means knowing how and when to use it and which words it associates with. That is why collocation exposure and practice are at a premium, and the teacher should give students plenty of opportunities for practice.

#### **Collocation learning and practice activities**

From the earliest stages of language learning, students of English should be made aware that new lexical items are not to be learnt in isolation, but at phrase level, together with the various elements they collocate with. Of course, such learning habits can only be derived from good teaching – contextualised presentation techniques, collocation-focused practice activities, encouraging students to use adequate strategies for recording or storing vocabulary. Some useful strategies and activities are suggested below.

##### **a) Using dictionaries for learning, recording and checking collocations**

Good monolingual dictionaries always provide examples of word collocations. Student should be warned to pay attention to word combination, and never record words in isolations. They can be asked to look up and take notes of Verb + Noun collocations with frequently used verbs such as *do, make, get, take*, etc. It is useful to point out to our students that the lists of ‘synonyms’ often given in a bilingual dictionary or language thesaurus should not be taken at face value, since, apart from the inherent differences in meaning, these synonyms also appear in different contexts and collocate with particular words. Keeping record of the vocabulary they learn is useful so long as it focuses on collocations rather than on isolated

items. Thus students should be trained to pay attention to the most frequent collocation patterns:

- **Subject noun + verb:** The *earth revolves* round the sun.
- **Verb + object noun:** *take a photo, light a fire, strike a match*
- **Adjective + noun:** *light sleeper, heavy smoker, heavy traffic, utter disappointment*
- **Adjective/past participle + preposition:** *fond of, keen on, interested in, delighted at, concerned about*
- **Adverb + past participle** (used attributively): *smartly/badly/fashionably dressed, fully understood, hard-earned, deeply hurt*
- **Adverb + verb:** *sincerely hope, honestly believe, fully understand, absolutely love*
- **Verb + adverb:** *enjoy thoroughly, cry bitterly, eat heartily, work hard*
- **Verb + preposition:** *insist on, object to, approve of, sympathise with*

#### **Reading for collocation**

As reading represents the main form of exposure to collocation, texts used in classroom reading activities can also be exploited for collocation learning or reinforcement, as a follow-up exercise. Students will be asked to scan the text and take out any new collocations corresponding to the patterns presented above. Thus, reading specifically for collocation can be an extremely productive vocabulary development technique. In addition, students should also be encouraged to pay attention to collocations and even pause to write them down when reading outside the classroom.

#### **b) Matching items**

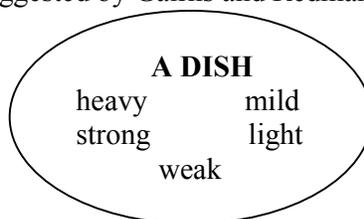
The two halves of different collocation patterns are put in two separate columns, in jumbled order. Students have to match the corresponding items. E.g.:

1. broaden	a. a screw	1	
2. soften	b. your hair	2	
3. straighten	c. your mind	3	
4. tighten	d. the blow	4	

A variation can be used particularly for collocations with DO and MAKE. The students are given a list of noun phrases to be put under the right heading. The exercise can be also done as a dictation, with students writing the nouns they hear under the DO or MAKE headings.

Odd man out

This exercise, involving crossing out the wrong items of a number of given choices, is suggested by Gairns and Redman (1992, 39).



**c) Collocation gap-fill**

The exercise consists of a set of gapped sentences focused on different collocation patterns.

E.g.: *She ..... a thick layer of jam on her toast. / I think we are all ..... agreement.*

**d) Collocation error correction**

Students have to correct collocation errors in sentences where the key element requiring a different collocation is underlined:

E.g.: The crime was *done* last night. / The result was an *extreme disappointment*.

**e) Sentence building (from given outline and key word)**

The students are required to build a sentence round a given word, most commonly a noun, by supplying subject, verb, adjective, preposition and object where applicable. The key words used as cues can be nouns which are part of verb phrase collocation model cases.

E.g.:

SUBJECT	VERB	ADJECTIVE	NOUN	PREPOSITION	OBJECT
			INVESTIGATION		
			RESEARCH		
			INQUIRY		

**f) Matching idioms and definitions**

Idioms represent fixed collocation patterns formed round a key verb or noun. Teaching and learning idioms can be organised round topic based vocabulary – clothes idioms, parts of the body idioms, etc. The students are given a set of sentences containing idioms and a list of definitions to be matched.

E.g.: *You're going to fail the exam if you **don't pull your socks up**.*  
(make an effort)

**g) Matching pairs**

The exercise is focused on symmetrical collocations of the type: *noun AND noun, adjective AND adjective, past participle AND past participle*. The students are given the elements to be paired up in separate lists of jumbled items. E.g.: *sick, head, bits, body, dead, bed, odds AND breakfast, tired, soul, buried, pieces, ends, shoulders*

**h) Collocation grids**

This is basically another matching exercise configured as a table containing a column of items with roughly similar meanings but different collocations and a row of items they can collocate with. The students have to decide on the associative possibilities of each item by marking the intersection point between items as a positive collocation match (Rudska *et al.*, in Gairns and Redman 1992, 38).

	woman	man	child	dog	bird	flower	weather	view	village
beautiful	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
lovely	+		+			+	+	+	+
pretty	+		+		+	+		+	+
charming	+	+	+						+
attractive	+	+							+
good-looking	+	+		+					
handsome	+	+							

**i) Find someone who**

The activity begins with a matching exercise, with two separate lists of items to be matched so as to obtain *adjective + noun* collocations, e.g. *light sleeper, heavy smoker, close friend*.

After checking the correct combinations, the students move round the class to find someone who: is *a light sleeper*, have *a heavy smoker* in their family, has *a close friend* of a different nationality, has had *a serious illness*, etc.

**j) Questionnaires (make vs. do)**

The questionnaire should consist of an answer sheet with questions on problematic collocations, such as *make* or *do* combinations. The main question is 'In your house, who *does/makes* things? The question prompts in the survey chart will include items such as *the shopping/the beds/the cooking/most of the decisions/the ironing/the most money/a mess* and the answer prompts can be *a man/a woman/either/you/your mother/father/brother/sister/wife*. Similar questionnaires can be devised in order to revise relevant vocabulary and collocations on such topics as personality traits, holidays and travel, leisure activities (Gairns and Redman, 168).

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