

Why^{and} How to Teach Collocations

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION HAS ALWAYS BEEN RECOGNIZED, although, at times, vocabulary was treated as separate from grammar and skills. However, the communicative and natural approach emphasized the importance of vocabulary development, which resulted in more interest in vocabulary teaching.

It is accepted that choosing our words carefully in certain situations is more important than choosing grammatical structures (Harmer 1991). We cannot use structures correctly if we do not have enough vocabulary knowledge. Although many techniques and approaches, such as word families and key words, have been employed in teaching vocabulary, I suspect that none of them has interested language teachers more than Michael Lewis's *Lexical Approach*, which argues that language consists of chunks that produce coherent texts when they are combined (Lewis 1998). This article explains what is meant by collocation and why it is important and useful in English language teaching.

Types of collocations and their importance

In his approach to teaching vocabulary, Lewis puts heavy emphasis on collocations. Collocation describes the relationship between words that often appear together. They include structural patterns that resemble traditional grammar and combinations of words that simply go together. Therefore, idioms like *take a break*, and word combinations like *get on a bus* are considered collocations.

Collocations fall into different categories. For example, Hill (2000) states that a collocation can consist of two or more words and contain the following elements:

1. adjective + noun
a huge profit
2. noun + noun
a pocket calculator
3. verb + adjective + noun
learn a foreign language
4. verb + adverb
live dangerously
5. adverb + verb
half understand
6. adverb + adjective
completely soaked
7. verb + preposition + noun
speak through an interpreter

Some collocations are longer; for example, adverb + verb + adjective + noun + preposition + noun as in *seriously affect the political situation in (Northern Ireland)*, described by Lewis as a semi-fixed expression.

Lewis (1998) proposes the following categories for collocations:

1. Strong: A large number of collocations are strong or very strong. For example, we most commonly talk of *rancid butter*, but that does not mean that other things cannot be rancid.
2. Weak: These are words which co-occur with a greater than random frequency. Many things can be long or short, cheap or expensive, good or bad. However, some things are more predictable, which could be called collocation; for example, *white wine* or *red wine*.
3. Medium strength: These are words that go together with a greater frequency than weak collocations. Some examples are: *hold a meeting*; *carry out a study*.

The context in which a collocation is used is important. Certain collocations or expressions are appropriate for certain contexts. Factors such as a difference in status or a social distance between the speaker and the hearer can affect the choice of collocational phrases. For example, we would not greet our boss by saying "How's it going?"; however, it is all right to greet a friend that way. This example suggests that knowledge of connotation and formality is important in deciding which collocation to use.

Collocations are important to language learners. When learners use collocations, they will be better understood. Native speakers unconsciously predict what is going to be said based on the use of phrases. If a non-native speaker uses frequently-used patterns (collocations), it will be easier for native speakers to guess what the non-native speaker is saying and may help compensate for other language issues, such as pronunciation. When learners write and speak, if they use collocations central to their topic, their readers are more likely to understand their message.

Learners' difficulties with collocations

From my experiences as a student and language teacher, I can say that many cultures, including the Turkish culture, encourage rote learning, where students memorise lists of words in isolation. Learners I have taught tended to write Turkish equivalents of single words; when students saw the words in phrases, they could not understand them.

Such surface level knowledge inhibits meaningful learning and creates collocation-related problems such as the following:

1. Learners may have intralingual problems. For example, instead of *many thanks*, they might incorrectly use *several thanks*.
2. Learners may make negative transfer from their mother tongue. For example, some Turkish learners tend to say *become lovers* instead of *fall in love*.
3. Learners may look for general rules for collocations that do not work for all col-

locations. For example, they might over-generalize rules of collocation, for example, the use of prepositions in phrasal verbs. They could think that put *off your coat* is the opposite of *put on your coat*.

4. When students learn words through definitions or in isolation, their chances of using appropriate collocations or remembering the words decrease.
5. Students may fail to make sense of an idiom. To illustrate, the English idiom *It is raining cats and dogs* does not make sense to Turkish learners of English because this idiom does not exist in their culture. To communicate the same idea, Turkish learners would say *It is raining out of the glass*, which does not make sense in English.
6. When students read texts, they may not recognize collocations as meaningful phrases, which would inhibit their understanding of the text.

Teaching collocations

Hill (2000) asserts that when teaching collocation, teachers need to pay close attention to pronunciation, intonation, stress, and grammar. He lists topics to consider when teaching collocations:

1. Make students aware of collocations. Students need to know that learning collocations is crucial for learning English, and noticing collocations is an important stage in learning.
2. Teaching individual collocations. We should present collocations as we would present individual words. At higher levels, when students learn less common vocabulary items, they need to be made aware that some words are used in a very restricted number of collocations. Students also need to know how to use new vocabulary items, which makes it necessary to know about their collocational field and contexts in which they are used.
3. Storing collocations. Students need to have an organized vocabulary journal to record collocations. They can organize their journals in different ways: grammatically, by common key word, by topic,

etc. They can also make use of tables or spider-grams, which work well with visual learners. For example, students can record certain collocations under headings such as *have/take/do* or *make*.

When teaching collocations, we cannot ignore reading and listening skills, which help learners notice collocations. Writing and speaking skills, on the other hand, give them the opportunity to practice collocations.

One can easily resort to teaching collocations in isolation as well. However, this kind of teaching is no better than teaching single words in isolation. Unless students are taught in context-based classes, collocations will not make sense to learners, and meaningful learning will probably not take place.

Activities to raise students' awareness of collocations

1. Ask learners to underline chunks they can find in a text. It is helpful to give them 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 learners 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 they have read a text, learners 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. Imagine that your 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, learners can be asked to find pairs of collocations arranged randomly. If the stu-

dents 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. To encourage student autonomy, have students do dictionary work to find certain collocations. Dictionaries of collocations on the market such as the *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* and *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations* can be of great help 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. More idiomatic collocations could be used with higher-level learners.

Activities to practice collocations

1. Learners of different levels can be given gapped texts to fill in with the correct collocation. The text could be topic based. For instance, if the topic is advertising, in an upper-intermediate class, a possible text, focused on verbs, could be:

As a tool of marketing, advertising generally [slows] down the flow of present customers away from the product and [speeds up] the flow of customers toward the advertised

product. But the overall purpose of advertising is to influence the level of product sales, and as a result, to [increase] profits for the manufacturer.

2. Learners can be given a text or some sentences that include collocational errors and asked to correct them using collocation dictionaries. For example:

While I am away, can you **have** [keep] an eye on my children?

I cannot **do** [make] up my mind. Should I buy this one or the one you suggest?

3. Intermediate and higher-level students can try to find synonyms which can collocate with certain words. For example, students can be asked to find the synonym for *wrong*, which is *false*; it collocates with *a false tooth*, or *false eyelashes*.

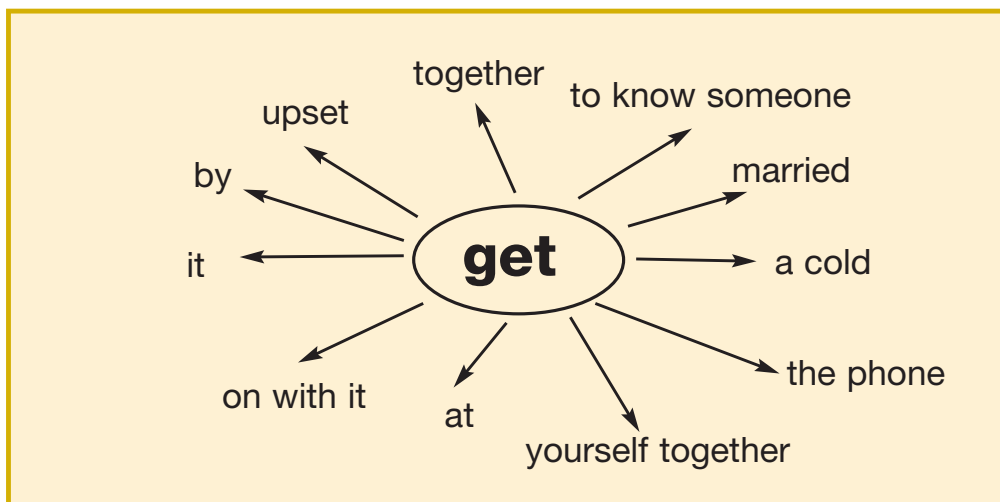
4. Students can be given several word combinations that collocate with certain verbs, but include a combination that does not belong. Students must identify which words do not collocate with the verb, as in the following example:

*miss: a chance, the point, **the school**, the train, an opportunity, the boat*

5. Students from different levels can create gap-fill or matching exercises for each other.

6. Intermediate and higher-level learners can summarize a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep learned words and expressions active. Dictagloss* text creation would also work.

7. A brainstorming activity can be done to let students revise collocations containing a



particular word. It makes students aware of the different constructions that a particular word can form. One example could be the words that go with the verb *get*, as shown in the diagram on the previous page.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, vocabulary teaching has gained more interest from English teachers and theorists who argue that, without a wide range of vocabulary, grammar does not help learners much. I am inclined to agree with them, although I believe that having a wide range of vocabulary per se is not adequate because a single word rarely stands alone. Therefore, language teachers need to make sure that their students know which word goes with which other word(s), and that necessitates teaching collocations. Doing so will help learners acquire the language more quickly and efficiently.

References

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* Dictagloss is a cooperative listening activity whose steps are 1- Reading the passage aloud to students and having them write down key words and phrases, 2- Rereading the passage to provide an additional opportunity to note key words and phrases, 3- Having students work in groups of four or five to reconstruct the passage, 4- Having each group compare their version with the original and correct any mistakes, 5- Having each group publish their final versions and display them in the classroom.