

# Collocation in English

**Mohammed Salman .Mansour**  
College of Arts-Fateh Univ.

## Introduction

It is evident that vocabulary building is the cornerstone of the process of first language acquisition without which no communication can be achieved. It is also evident that knowledge of lexical items with their syntactic-semantic combinations, is a prerequisite for effective communication which reflects the native speaker's overall competence .This is based ,to a large extent, on the language user's acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated lexical items(Lewis:2001,15).

As for foreign learners of English, it is a matter of highest importance to learn vocabulary items in context and in combination with other words, i.e, in collocations. This co-occurrence of words in chunks rather than isolated fragments enhances vocabulary building and activates the process of language learning. It follows from this that better understanding of language means giving much more attention to collocation in all teaching-learning situations (Ibid,10).But ,unfortunately ,the current situation contradicts such a tendency since most of the teaching-learning strategies have proved lack of success. The strategies are faulty not only because each word is usually associated with its mother tongue equivalent, but also because

---



each word is linguistically and situationally isolated. Lexical items are not learnable as isolated fragments but in chunks which fall into categories like collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs or proverbs.

Firth (cited in Hill: 2001, 48) sees that collocation refers "to the company words keep-their relationships with other words". Such words that occur together and form single semantic units are spontaneously associated with one another in the mind of native speakers. A certain noun habitually occurs with a certain adjective (hard labour strong tea ,heavy smoker); a verb with a noun (do favour, pay attention, commit suicide), an adverb with an adjective (extremely hard, highly imaginative, vitally important); or a noun with a noun (election campaign, death penalty, brain drain).

It is true that having a good knowledge of collocation is an indication of the foreign learner's competence of English which is clearly reflected in natural and fluent use of the language. Conversely, having poor knowledge of collocation reflects the learner's linguistic and communicative incompetence. Lack of collocational awareness is largely responsible for a variety of errors most of which are not grammatical or as Lewis (2002, 172) puts it : "...many grammar mistakes are caused by vocabulary deficiency , and particularly by lack of collocational power."

### ***The Problem***

Experience and research have shown that foreign learners of English face many problems in the combinatory use of lexical items, i.e, in the area of collocation. Below are some examples extracted from students' written tasks and examination papers which shed some light on the nature of mistakes committed in this respect:

---

1. Don't do any mistake.
2. The student made his homework.
3. He is trying to make his better.
4. It was a shiny idea.

Excluding the students weak linguistic background which is responsible for a wide range of errors, the problem could be attributed to two basic reasons. In the first place, the method of teaching and the teaching-learning strategies, in most cases, depend on single-word meaning solely by means of synonyms or native symbols equivalents.

Adopting such a treatment often neglects the combinatory use of words and the collocational nature of lexis which constitute the most effective mechanisms for efficient vocabulary building. Being in a situation like this ,learners tend to use short-cuts by resorting to translation the outcome of which is erroneous collocations .In the second place, it may happen that the medium of instruction is through English but no sufficient exposure and teaching load are allocated to the collocational combinations of lexical items.

Students instructed by such methods will, undoubtedly, suffer from lack of collocational awareness which is thought to be the main reason of the problem .This lack of awareness will lead to faulty combinations of words specially those of an apparently similar meaning but which are distinctive in terms of their collocational force and restriction .For instance ,the words "thick" and "dense" are synonymous in the sense that we can talk about "thick fog" and "dense fog", but we cannot talk about "dense hair" .The latter combination does not sound correct or habitual in spite of the fact that it can be easily understood .This is due to collocational restrictions because "dense" does not collocate with "hair", instead we have to use "thick"( see Hill & Lewis:1999,95,102 and LTD Dictionary of

Selected Collocations:1999,95,102). A learner without adequate knowledge of the collocational nature of lexis will violate the collocational restrictions and commit a series of mistakes .Experience in this area of language learning can be gained through constant and sufficient exposure to lexical items in natural linguistic contexts .It is a kind of exposure depending on deductive-inductive treatment that will ultimately lead to develop in the learners a sense of collocational awareness which should be cultivated from the early stages of foreign language learning.

### *Importance of collocation*

As it was mentioned earlier, collocation plays an important role in vocabulary building due to the fact that English is full of collocational pairs and chunks which are fundamental to all language use .Building an effective vocabulary on the part of the learner depends ,among other things ,on remembering and storing collocations. According to Hill and Lewis ,one of the best ways to build the foreign learner's vocabulary is to remember collocations rather than single words .Mc McCarthy (1990,13) believes that knowledge of collocational appropriacy is part of the native speaker's competence ,and can be problematic even for the advanced learners who often make inappropriate or unacceptable collocations.

It has been psycholinguistically proved that the human brain tends to acquire and store language in chunks rather than individual words. An important pedagogical implication is that it is more effective for us to remember and use phrases and lexical items as chunks rather than dealing with them as separate or isolated words.

Zimmerman (1998,16-17) refers to Nattinger and De Carrico who have analyzed extensive samples of actual language to demonstrate a central role for phrases and multi-word chunks .They assert that pragmatic competence is determined by the learner's ability to assess and adapt prefabricated chunks of language .To Morgan Lewis (2001,15)these should not be looked upon as merely words that go together but as combinations that have immediate force and sanctioned meanings which are situationally evocative.

The study of collocation is very important for many reasons:

1. Without studying collocation we are ignoring a large set of items which express complex ideas very simply and yet precisely.
2. "The fewer collocations learners are able to use ,the more they have to use longer expressions with much more grammaticalisation to communicate something a native speaker would express with a precise lexical phrase and correspondingly little grammar"(Ibid,16). Thus, the use of collocation leads to economy and reduces redundancy.
3. The study is important because the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to language use(Hill,2001:53). Having good mastery over collocations helps to develop in the foreign language user highest potentiality of self-expression.
4. Another important point raised by Hill is that learning certain chunks containing grammatical structures will undoubtedly help learners in their acquisition of English grammatical patterns as well .This means that having good command of collocational competence will lead, in the long run ,to grammatical accuracy.

5. Knowledge of collocation provides the language learner with the unique opportunity to expand and organize his own lexicon in a very efficient way (Morgan Lewis, 2001:

20). This knowledge promotes creativity and allows to think more quickly and communicate more efficiently by calling on a vast repertoire of ready-made language immediately available from our mental lexicons (Hill, 2001:54).

6. Collocation helps language learners to find the finer semantic distinctions among words which look apparently similar in meaning. Take, for instance, the verbs 'say, tell, speak'. It is only through the combinatory use (collocation) of these verbs that we can tell the difference existing among them. Notice the examples below (Ibid, 61):

1. To tell you the truth, I was not expecting it.
2. Can I speak to Mr. Smith, please?
3. Shall we say ten pounds?

7. Focusing attention on this missing ring (at least in most currently used language courses), will give this linguistic phenomenon its due role which has been traditionally overshadowed, and which has been only recently strengthened.

8. Finally and most importantly, "...language proficiency within science, medicine, and commerce will be determined to a large extent by the students' mastery of common collocations particular to each field" (Woolard, 2001:31).

### ***Treatment of collocation***

Due to the important role collocation plays in the process of vocabulary building which constitutes an important part of the learners' overall language competence, special attention should be paid to the treatment of this linguistic phenomenon. According to Jane Conzett (2001, 72) the treatment lies in

explicit presentation of the different types of collocations, which have usually been ignored or at least been seen as marginal in many language courses.

Michael Lewis claims that collocational phrases are central to language use and should be central to language teaching Bahns and Eldaw (1998,282) argue that "for advanced students, collocations present a major problem in the production of correct English". Nation and Newton(1998,282) have found out that collocational phrases are not learned well through ordinary language exposure and suggest that there is a need for them to be learnt explicitly This explicit learning can be achieved only through constant and conscious exposure to the language which is highly important to acquire collocational knowledge.

Learning by deduction proves to be very effective because" some items appear to be taught more effectively if we utilize the students' power of reasoning rather than depend exclusively on pattern practice and memorization"(Allen,1974:84).Learning by deduction is most useful for mature learners, who are already prepared mentally and linguistically to be involved into the more complicated aspects of language in which collocation plays an important role.

This method of treatment copes with modern trends in foreign language teaching which emphasize the role of explicit rule-learning, a concept which has arisen from the recognition that learning a language involves internalizing the rules .This tendency gave rise to the " cognitive-code method"(Ibid,66) and the up-to-date "Lexical Approach "which represented a revolt against the stimulus-response models(depend- ing on pattern practice drills), and encouraged deliberate teaching as an aid to learning.



By his Lexical Approach ,Michael Lewis(2002,35) is suggesting a significantly different method of second or foreign language teaching, a method which considers pedagogical chunking as a frequent classroom activity .This approach draws attention to the important fact that students should be aware of the partnerships and combinations when dealing with new vocabulary .In this respect, he considers the recognition, generation and effective recording of collocations as essential elements of the Lexical Approach..

Concerning the recording of collocations ,Morgan Lewis (2001,13-14) thinks that "asking students to systematically record the collocations of words newly or previously met will widen their understanding of what words mean and how they are used" Conscious and active introduction of these collocations in the classroom helps to recycle half-known words and accelerate their learning and gives more time and attention to the new ones.

But advocating explicit(deductive) treatment does not mean that the role of implicit (inductive)treatment is to be eliminated .Along with explicit description a variety of carefully designed drills and tasks are to be introduced to the learners. Paulston and Bruder (1976,3) believe that the two methods are not mutually exclusive but are complementary. It is suggested that a combination of deduction and induction will achieve the desired effect .A successful lesson should consist of introducing explicit remarks about the collocations being tackled ,together with a series of drills from a mechanical to a communicative level in order to direct the students' attention to the issue and give them optimum practice in language production.

As for beginners, Rivers and Temperly (1978,275) see that " inductive treatment is very appropriate for young learners who have not yet developed fully their ability to think in abstractions..."This type of treatment is also appropriate in that it helps learners to be acquainted with a variety of collocations by process of induction based on drilling and observation of language in use .Commenting on the point, Michael Lewis advocates the early implicit(unconscious) introduction of collocations in the syllabus . He believes that this early introduction ,in the first few weeks of learning English ,,"increases the possibilities for natural-talk(input) , and makes the L2 learning closer to the natural exposure of L1 learning"(Lewis,2002:50).

As a starting point for introducing the notion of collocation to learners ,it is important to focus on the arbitrary nature that characterizes and governs collocational combinations .As Woolard (2001,30) puts it :'"There is no reason why ,for instance ,to say 'make a decision' rather than 'do a decision'" In other words ,we need to make our students aware that this is the way we say things in English.

The arbitrary nature of collocation ideally suits independent learning ; the need to provide students with skills to enable them to develop their knowledge of collocation independently of the teacher whose role is limited to monitoring, supervising and encouraging them to discover for themselves the useful collocations they meet(Ibid,28).This strategy is very much in line with modern trends in language teaching , when there is a shift from simply teaching the language to helping learners develop their learning skills independently .It also matches modern technology which has made it accessible for learners to develop their skills through CD-Rom and the internet .But the strategy of independent study should not be understood as underestimating the role of

---

the teacher, the teacher does have a role .His role is to raise his students' awareness ; to direct their attention to useful collocations and help them memorize them more than just trying to improve their grammar.

An important strategy of the explicit treatment of collocation is awareness raising .This can be achieved by drawing the students' attention to the different types of collocations .It is a practical strategy, in this respect, to divide collocations into different groups .The criterion of this categorization is basically syntactic depending on the word class of the particular collocation. For ease and practicality, collocations can be divided into the following categories:

- 1.Adjective+Noun ( huge profit ;hard currency; black market; warm reception; strong tea ;net weight )
- 2.Noun+Noun (brain drain ;state university ; application form; traffic jam conspiracy theory ; interest rate)
- 3.Noun+Verb ( cats mew ; trees rustle ;zeal diminished ;balance shifted ; epidemic broke out / spread ;necessity arises)
- 4.Verb+Adverb ( examine thoroughly ;serve devotedly/faithfully ;consider seriously/carefully/wrongly ;wash carefully/thoroughly; climb steadily ;write beautifully/legibly/clearly )
- 5.Verb+Adjective (fall ill/asleep; come right/true ;go wrong/mad; feel sick/bad/fine grow old/dark/rich ;look sad/mad/sick)
- 6.Adverb+Adjective ( dreadfully/thoroughly ashamed ;absolutely/completely/total authentic; deeply conscious ;bitterly cold; completely/totally extremely/ fairly confident )
- 7.Verb+Noun (exert effort ;teach a lesson ;shake hands ;form a cabinet ; pay attention/ visit ;commit/murder/suicide/mistake

8. Collocations with Prepositions : This can be subdivided into:

- a) Noun+ Preposition ( pride in ; fulfillment of ; claim for ; addiction to ; need for ; lack of )
- b) Preposition+ Noun ( by accident ; in demand ; on alert ; in advance ; in touch ; at one's service )
- c) Adjective+ Preposition ( confident about ; aware of ; responsible for ; proud of ; fond of ; interested in )
- d) Verb+ Preposition ( classify/divide into ; charge with ; accuse of ; blame for ; object to ; compete with )

It is quite often to find a longer sequence of collocations .This happens when words from different categories combine forming complex collocational phrases(Woolard& Hill,2001:32,36,51) as in these two examples:

- 1.Many people hold strong views on smoking.
- 2.This will seriously affect the political situation in Iraq.

To summarize and to ensure effective implementation of the insights mentioned above ,the writer suggests a consistent strategy that can be adopted by teachers .(See Hill ,et al(2001,98-99) and Lewis(2001,23). The strategy proceeds as follows:

- 1.Pointing out a collocational combination from the text.
- 2.Assigning its category ( adjective +noun; verb+ adverb ,etc.)
- 3.Writing it on the board and asking the students to record it in their notebooks.
- 4.Encouraging students to provide collocations they already know.
- 5.Selecting some other new ones that are related to each category.
- 6.Providing sufficient exercises and activities to enhance teaching.

It is worth mentioning, here, that teachers are warned of the dangers of including huge numbers of collocations at one time because this may prove to be counterproductive. It is left for the teacher to decide the amount of collocations and, this certainly depends on the level of his students and the time available.

### **Conclusion**

Since experience and research have shown that collocation represents a serious problem for foreign language learners, the whole issue has to be handled with much seriousness and attention. A very important feature in this treatment is the awareness that overall language competence is not solely determined by the learner's ability to produce grammatical and meaningful sentences, but whether the sentences sound natural, spontaneous and native-like. This cannot be achieved without good collocational knowledge. It follows from this that collocational competence should be the focus of attention without neglecting linguistic competence.

Due to the important role which the notion of collocation plays in language learning, its teaching should be a top priority in every language course. The method of treatment and the techniques that follow vary in relation to the level of the learners; is it elementary, intermediate or advanced?

Regarding the level of learners, it has been found that implicit-inductive treatment is to be adopted when dealing with elementary levels. The suggested method depends on induction and habit-formation through repetition and memorization of the commonest collocations. It is psycholinguistically believed that the more drills learners are exposed to, the better their performance and the less errors they will commit. As for intermediate and advanced learners another method should be

---

followed ,one which depends on explicit-deductive treatment .A method which aims at making students fully aware of the notion they are dealing with .It provides advanced learners with some conscious insight into their look at the language material they have already learned so as to help them get discriminating control over the data they will be called upon to handle as the exposure to collocation increases.

It is suggested that collocation should be dealt with independently as an entity which is divided into categories such as, verb+ noun collocations, adjective +noun collocations and so on .This type of independent treatment ,the researcher believes, will make it easier and more practical for students to form an overall syntactic-semantic characterization of the phenomenon by getting them directly and systematically involved in it .This is an implication for textbooks writers to take this type of treatment into consideration when compiling or writing their language courses.

Another important suggestion is that teachers should encourage, what Lewis(2001,18)calls "a student cent red exploration approach to language". This can be done by directing the students' attention to pointing out and recording in their notebooks useful collocations which they might come across while reading a text .The teacher should also highlight his students' power of observation so as to create in them a sense of collocational awareness which is the correct step to acquire collocational competence.

Even in the absence of collocationally-oriented textbooks, teachers can make use of the currently-used ones by re-examining them not only for new vocabulary but also for collocation .This exploration should aim at directing the students' attention to collocations in different contexts.

In order to foster independent language learning, it is advisable that advanced learners be encouraged to consult collocation dictionaries so as to broaden their collocational knowledge. Outstanding dictionaries in this respect are: BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English, LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations and Advanced Reader's Collocation Searcher.

To conclude with, it is hoped that this paper has shed some light on the notion of collocation in English with which most advanced language learners, and even some teachers are not acquainted. It is anticipated that this work will be useful for all those interested in language teaching and learning through the exposition that has been made.

### References

- Allen, J.P.B (1974). "Pedagogic Grammar." In J.P.B Allen & S. Pit Corder (eds.). *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics. Vol.3, London: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, Jimmie & Michael Lewis (eds.) (1999). *Dictionary of Selected Collocations*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publication.
- Hill, Jimmie (2001). *Revising Priorities*. In Michael Lewis (ed.). *Teaching Collocation*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publication.
- Hill, Jimmie, Morgan & Michael Lewis (2001). *Classroom Strategies, Activities and Exercises*. In Michael Lewis (ed.). *Teaching Collocation*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publication.
- Conzett, Jane (2001). *Integrating Collocation into a Reading & Writing Course*. In Michael Lewis (ed.). *Teaching Collocation*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publication.
- Lewis, Michael (2002). *Implementing the Lexical Approach*. Boston: Heinle, Thomson Corporation.
- Lewis, Michael (1998). *Pedagogic Implications of the Lexical Approach*. In Coady and Huckin. *Teaching Vocabulary in Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, Morgan (2001). *There is Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory*. In Michael Lewis. *Teaching Collocation*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publication.
- McCarthy, Michael (1990). *Language Teaching. A Scheme for Teacher Education, Vocabulary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Collocation in English

---

- Paulston ,Christina C.B.& Bruder M.N.(1976).Teaching English as a Second Lang- age : Techniques and Procedures.: Winthrop Publisher, Inc.
- Rivers, Wilga M.& Mary S. Temperly(1978).A Practical Guide to the Teaching ofEnglish as a Second or Foreign Language. New York : OxfordUniversity Press.
- Woolard ,George(2001).Collocation –Encouraging Learner Independence .In Michael Lewis(ed.) Teaching Collocation .Hove, England :LanguageTeaching Publication.
- Zimmerman,C.B.(1998).Historical Trends in Second Language Vocabulary Instruc-tion .In James Coady& Thomas Huckin .Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition .Cambridge :Cambridge University Press.