Is Collocation the Way to Language Proficiency?

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Many different approaches to language teaching have been in practice over the last decade in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second language) classrooms. These approaches include the structural approach with its focus on competence or rules of grammar and the communicative approach with emphasis on performance, or the appropriate use of language in specific contexts. However, in recent years, language teachers are beginning to realize that "the goal of language teaching is not just to teach abstract rules of competence, but also to get students to utilize these rules in comprehending and producing language successfully in appropriate contexts" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. xiii). Widdowson (1989) cautions against excessive reliance on any one approach as this would lead to over emphasis either on grammatical knowledge, or the ability to use language in different communicative settings. It has been suggested that the problem lies in the dichotomy between the two concepts of linguistic or syntactic competence, which accounts for all the grammatical sentences of a language, versus linguistic performance, which accounts for knowledge of whether an utterance is appropriate in a particular situation and context of use (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). However, there is a large linguistic area between these two extremes that is unaccounted for and has become the focus of interest among researchers and language teachers.

To bridge this gap, perhaps what is needed is an approach that does not rely heavily on either competence or performance, but one which provides a middle ground. To build a bridge between these two approaches, teachers have been paying serious attention to language acquisition studies as these focus on the process of language development, and specifically on how rules are learnt by first, second, and foreign language learners. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992, p. xv), examining the path of language acquisition "can be illuminating to language teachers, for along the way we find common patterns among all types of language acquirers." One such pattern is the way in which language learners "use a large number of unanalyzed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. xv). Ellis (2001) and Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000) suggest that language learners typically work with meaningful groupings of items called chunks when they segment language for reception

or production. Similarly Pawley and Syder (1983) claim that memorized clauses and clause sequences make up a large percentage of the coherent stretches of speech and writing, and that most of the language we use consists of familiar combinations, with the exception of a few new ones. A proliferation of terms are used in the literature to refer to this phenomenon of chunking, such as chunks, collocations, formulaic sequences, lexical phrases, lexico-grammatical units, multi-word units, phraseological units, prefabricated language, or prefabs. All these terms refer to word combinations that are either lexically or syntactically fixed to a certain extent (Nesselhauf, 2005), but for the sake of consistency, the term collocation will be employed in this paper to refer to such predictable phrases.

Although it is evident from research that both knowledge and the ability to use collocations are essential for language learners, there is a lack of attempt to incorporate collocations into language teaching materials and syllabi. If we accept the view that collocational knowledge is the basis of language learning and use, then we need to incorporate learning strategies that promote chunking in our language classrooms. In order to do so, this paper will provide a classification of lexical phrases and explore language-focused activities that can be used in ELT classrooms to promote chunking as a means of achieving native-like expression in academic writing.

Classification of Lexical Phrases

The term collocation has been used extensively in linguistics and language teaching to refer to relations between words in linear combinations. However, there are two specific ways of defining this word in the literature—the frequency-based approach and the phraseological approach. In the former, collocation is used to refer to frequent co-occurrences of words within a short space of each other (Sinclair, 1991) whereas in the latter, it is considered to be a combination of words that are fairly fixed with limited substitutability (Nesselhauf, 2004). In this paper, the term will be used in the second sense as combinations of two or more words that have some amount of restriction (e.g., jog someone's memory) and are syntactically related (e.g., verb + noun). A distinction will also be made between collocations and formulaic phrases like "How are you?" which are primarily pragmatic in their function.

An important point raised by Lewis (2000) in order to distinguish collocations from other types of word combinations is to classify different kinds of word combinations. In order to distinguish collocations from idioms, he suggests that collocations be considered under "the wider concept of idiomaticity" (Lewis, 2000, p. 130) and be analyzed on a cline of *variability* (ranging from fixed to variable) and semantic *transparency* (ranging from opaque to transparent). Based on these two factors, the following classification is proposed:

Table 1
Classification of Lexical Phrases

Type	Variability	Transparency	Example
Pure idioms	Fixed	Opaque—meaning cannot be derived from individual words	Hook, line, and sinker
Figurative idioms	Fairly, but not fixed	Less opaque—used in their non-literal and literal sense	In the dark
Restricted collocations	Some substitution is possible	Fairly transparent—One element used in a non-literal sense and the other in its normal meaning	Curry favour with
Free/open collocations	Variable, freely combinable	Transparent—all elements used in a literal sense	Awkward / critical / complicated / farcical situation

This classification is useful for language teachers as it enables them to decide which lexical phrases they should prioritize in their language classes given limited classroom time. For instance, some combinations such as idioms and figurative idioms are not easily guessable or fully generalisable and yet others which belong to the open category are so common that they might not be worth commenting on. On the basis of collocation strength, Hill's (2000) advice is to focus on medium-strength collocations rather than the strong or weak ones that fall at the extreme ends of the collocation spectrum. According to him, these collocations are the ones that should be the target of language learners as they "make up a large part of what we say and write" (Hill, 2000, p. 64). Therefore, working on the premise that medium-strength collocations are of prime importance in expanding language learners' collocational competency, activities suggested for classroom use will focus on restricted collocations. However, some activities that promote the use of transitional markers as well as idioms and figurative idioms will also be proposed.

Collocation in the ELT Classroom

Until recently, ELT methodology has focused on a grammar-based structural syllabus, with its obsession on grammar rules and grammatical correctness. However, it is apparent from past and present research that there needs to be a shift to a lexical approach in language learning. It is common knowledge that the writing and speech of ESL and EFL students is rife with awkward expressions or what we have termed miscollocations or deviations. Therefore, the starting point should be to build on students' knowledge of lexis and to extend it to contextualized usage.

According to some practitioners, collocation should be given the same status in language teaching as other aspects of language and should be incorporated into the syllabus right form the beginning for all levels of language learners (Hill, 2000). The activities described in this section have been used successfully with students to build on their collocational competence.

Classroom Activities

The four activities in this section involve describing advertisements, giving instructions, using transitional devises, and explaining idioms. They expose students to collocations ranging from open to fairly fixed and fixed expressions. The first two activities are particularly useful in practicing noun phrase, verb-noun, and prepositional phrase collocations, the third activity helps students to include transitional phrases at appropriate places in a text for better coherence, and the fourth activity enables them to expand the use of language from its literal sense to a higher metaphorical level of usage.

Advertisements

In this activity, collocation problems related to various noun phrase deviations can be handled all at once, simply because the net is cast wide to capture all the possible vocabulary inspired by the advertisement. The typical deviations in the noun phrase category range from those related to the number of the noun, use of determiners, choice of nouns, compound nouns and noun complementation, and prepositional phrases.

The first type of deviation is related to the number of the collocating nouns. Most of these mis-collocations are due to a lack of concord between the determiners and the head nouns of the phrases (e.g., *every members of our family* instead of *every member of our family*), and in frozen expressions (e.g., *one of the most important festival* instead of *one of the most important festivals*). Other mistakes related to determiners include those instances when an article or a pronoun is either superfluous or missing (e.g., *in modern world* instead of *in the modern world*). The second category of deviations concern the use of non-existent noun forms in the case of nouns functioning as head nouns and modifiers (e.g., *every ethnic has its own culture* instead of *every race has its*

own culture; some men secretaries instead of *some male secretaries*). As for compound nouns, students either concoct incorrect noun compounds to replace simple nouns (e.g., *Chinese old data* instead of *Chinese calendar*), or use a simple noun in a context where a compound would have been more appropriate (e.g., *in the social* instead of *in the social arena*). In the category of noun complementation, the errors could be due to the the post-modification (e.g., *I proud* of *I am Chinese* instead of *I am proud that I am a Chinese*). In addition, errors also result due to an inappropriate or missing preposition or subordinator in the prepositional phrases and clauses respectively (e.g., *the most important meaning for mid-autumn festival* instead of *the most important meaning of the mid-autumn festival*). Finally, the order of words in noun phrases and prepositional phrases could also lead to some awkward collocations (e.g., *the most important two values* instead of *the two most important values*).

In this activity, the immediate aims are for the learner to be introduced to new vocabulary, experiment with newly acquired vocabulary, and practice the use of old as well as new vocabulary in appropriate lexical phrases. The activity begins with the teacher showing an advertisement to the class. All students are asked to note down as many descriptive words and phrases as possible on a piece of paper, in about three minutes. At the end of the three minutes, the teacher moves on to another advertisement. The students are then asked to choose one of the advertisements from which to make a presentation using the descriptive words and phrases which they and their classmates have generated.

The description of advertisements lends itself best to noun phrase collocations with pre-modifiers and noun complementation (e.g., *A unique wine funnel with a soft pour spout that allows wine to gently flow down the sides of the decanter*). Students are encouraged to come up with their own unique descriptions of the visuals in advertisements. For instance, they are shown an advertisement of a watch with the caption "*a philosophy of life*" as an example and then encouraged to come up with similar noun phrases such as "*a timeless masterpiece*," "*a thing of beauty*," "*a beautifully crafted timepiece*," and others. Another advertisement that works well in the classroom is a picture-caption advertisement of a sports car with the captions "*Sets you wild with passion*," "*Brings you high on exhilaration*," and "*Captivates your heart*." Students are asked to tag on different phrases to the verbs "*Sets you . . .* , *Brings you . . .* , and *Captivates your . . .*" The other advantage of advertisements is that the text tends to be repetitive in terms of grammatical structures. This repetition provides alternative ways of putting words together in different noun phrase collocations, highlighting the notion of creativity and structure in language use. For instance, in an advertisement on yoga, students are exposed to different combinations of the phrase *Yoga classes—remedial*

classes, *prenatal classes*, and *teenage classes*. Using these phrases as a springboard, students are usually able to produce similar ones without much difficulty.

Advertisements are a good resource for language games and especially useful for generating collocations. They not only provide the right visual input but also a wide range of lexical phrases that students can use as a basis for experimenting with their own versions.

Giving Instructions

The most common errors related to verb-noun collocations involve the use of inappropriate verbs, incorrect phrasal verbs, incorrect prepositions in phrasal verbs, and incorrect forms in multi-word verbs. The most common verb-noun mis-collocations involve delexicalized or grammaticalized verbs such as *have*, *make*, *take*, *give*, *get,* and *do*. As the usage of these verbs is wide and sometimes vague, they are known to be a source of confusion, especially among new and intermediate ESL and EFL learners. They are either used interchangeably or used in place of another verb (e.g., *get knowledge* instead of *gain knowledge*). Students also encounter difficulties with lexical verbs, often making inappropriate verb choices (e.g., *meet problems* instead of *encounter* problems). As for phrasal verbs, the deviations are usually due to the use of an incorrect phrasal verb (e.g., *grow up early* instead of *get up early*), the use of a phrasal verb in place of a simple verb (e.g., *heroines showed up in the world*, instead of *heroines surfaced/appeared in the world of*) and/or the use of an incorrect particle or lexical verb (e.g., *put your respect to* instead of *pay your respect to*). Another common error related to verbs happens in multi-word verb phrases (with adjectives and adverbs) where the elements are either deleted completely (e.g., *can clever* instead of *can be clever*) or the form of one of the elements is incorrect (e.g., *should be treat kindly* instead of *should be treated kindly*).

The students in this activity are asked to give verbal instructions to the class on how to find a particular destination on campus. The topic requires many expressions of location (e.g., *turn into the door adjacent to the main entrance*), spatial relationships (e.g., *walk through the covered car park*), and direction (e.g., *take the second right turn*). Hence, the students practice the use of verb-noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and phrasal verbs that are specifically related to their pragmatic needs.

Transitional Markers

Although the students conscientiously use transitional markers to link clauses/sentences within paragraphs as well as beyond paragraphs in their essays and presentations, these markers are often deviant in nature. This is not surprising as transitional markers are relatively fixed and allow little or no change. Along the cline of collocational strength, these word combinations are considered to be unique or strong

collocations. Due to their fixedness and/or nonliteralness, any tampering with transitional markers leads to unidiomatic expressions.

A task to practice the use of transitional markers that works well is to ask students to share recipes of their favorite dishes with their classmates. They are given some time to write up the recipes paying particular attention to the procedure involved. They are then asked to share the procedure in chronological sequence with their classmates who are in turn instructed to note down the steps involved. In their description of the steps, students spontaneously use transitional markers like "After chopping the vegetables, rinse them in cold water." Another alternative task is to ask students to describe the process involved in registering for subjects using the university registration system. As this involves many steps that have to be followed in a particular sequence to successfully enroll for subjects, students have to use transitional/sequence markers correctly to convey the steps in the right order (e.g., *The first step involves accessing the registration system by entering your user name and pin code. In the next step, you have to select the course that you would like to enroll into. After this, you are required to indicate your priority for the course whether first, second, or third. Finally, . . .*).

The activity can be altered to include other procedures and processes that students are familiar with. These activities could range from describing the working of familiar objects to carrying out simple everyday tasks.

Idioms

Idioms and clichés include the use of awkward expressions such as metaphors that seem awkward when rendered in English. While some of these expressions are clearly forms of existing expressions in English, others seem to be inventions or literal translations from students' native languages. Yet others are circumlocutions as students do not have at their disposal ready-made expressions that would be more appropriate in those contexts of use. In contrast to the above activities that encourage different combinations of restricted lexical phrases, this activity focuses on actual idiomatic expressions, (e.g., *to have one's back against the wall*). Each student is given one expression and asked to explain it to the class or at least attempt to guess its meaning. Through this process of explaining or guessing, the degree of the semantic transparency of the idiom becomes obvious to the learner. This highlights the need for the language user to observe the idiosyncratic behavior of idioms in that some are pure idioms, which means they cannot vary in their structure and meaning, while others are figurative idioms whose form and meaning can be slightly varied depending on the context. After the meaning of the idiom has been established, the student is asked to give a personal example to illustrate it. The focus of the activity now broadens to include other expressions, thus expanding the learning experience.

Although fixed phrases like idioms, clichés, and transitional markers form a small part of the lexicon, they are still worth exploring in language classes, especially with intermediate and advanced learners of the language. While idioms and clichés are at the higher end of the idiomaticity scale, other collocations also exhibit some degree of idiomaticity and operate on the same principle (Fernando, 1996; Sinclair, 1991).

It is apparent that collocations, whether strong, medium, or weak in terms of collocational strength, should be learnt in chunks rather than as single items. From the learner's point of view, it is easier to split a collocation into its separate parts rather than to put words together to form a natural collocation. Therefore, the message to language teachers should be to reassess their teaching methodology and to shift from a grammar-based approach to a lexical-based one with focus on collocational competence. With this aim in mind, this sections practical activities to incorporate the teaching of collocation into language courses so that students are able to progress from the intermediate plateau to higher levels of language proficiency.

Classroom Processes

Although classroom activities can vary from describing advertisements, giving directions, sharing recipes and telling stories to expand on idioms, there are some processes that are common to all these activities. The processes involved include identifying key phrases, brainstorming for different collocational phrases, and recording collocations in lexical notebooks for independent learning outside the classroom.

1. Identifying: The first step in any collocational approach should be to teach students to consciously look for collocations in speech or writing, making nouns their pivotal search clues. In our experience, most foreign students are already aware of the basic grammar categories of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb so they should not have a problem identifying nouns. The next step would be for them to select verb, adjective, and adverb collocates of the nouns in texts and to simultaneously make a list of collocations according to whether they are *verb* + *noun*, *adjective* + *noun* or *adverb* + *noun* collocations.
2. Brainstorming: Once the list is ready, the students should be encouraged to come up with their own collocations. Filming classroom sessions would be useful as additional learning benefits can be derived through replaying the activities and commenting on the use of phrases. The learning of new words can be reinforced, collocational mistakes can be highlighted and students can experiment with different collocational combinations. Through teacher feedback, the use of collocations can be extended and the different collocation

problems can be categorized and corrected accordingly. Another benefit is that the teacher can draw on the context of use as it is available on record. This context is usually of great interest to the learner because the learner has generated the vocabulary with the help of classmates, making the learning more relevant.

3. Recording: To promote independent learning outside the classroom, students can also be encouraged to keep lexical notebooks to record the meanings of words, examples of usage, examples of verb and adjective collocates, significant grammatical patterns, and their favorite expressions. Woolward (2000) recommends the following pattern for lexical entries.

CRITICISM

- **Pronunciation** + **translation:**
- **Definition:** To express disapproval of something or somebody
- **Contextual Usage:** The government has received a lot of criticism for increasing taxes.
- **Verbs:** receive, come in for . . .
- **Adjectives:** heavy, severe, fierce . . .
- **Grammatical Patterns:** criticism for raising taxes, criticism for its plan, criticism over the decision (to spend . . .)
- **Favourite Expressions:** come under heavy criticism for not providing . . . , the same criticism has been leveled at . . . .

Another alternative suggested by Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000) for lexical entries is to use a 5-1 box of the kind reproduced below.

apply for a be out of a find a hunt for a resign from a	job

These entries are meant to enable students to build on their repertoire of phrases and also provide them with alternatives when engaged in conversations. Having a data bank of such entries will not only speed up their communication but also boost their level of confidence.

Through these processes, much learning can take place because language learners are encouraged to use the vocabulary they have learnt while still acquiring more vocabulary from their classmates. These are opportunities to experiment with lexical expressions that they have come across. At the same time provides more examples of phrases that collocate with a particular word.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to propose useful classroom activities and processes that help ESL and EFL students improve their collocational competency. From past research, it is evident that the size of our mental lexicon is enormous and a large extent of what we say, hear, read, or write can be found in some form of fixed expression. If we accept that native speakers are able to speak, listen, and write at the speed they do because of the vast repertoire of ready-made language in their mental lexicon, then we need to incorporate chunking in our ELT classrooms. To achieve native-like proficiency, it is not enough for students to learn more words but to learn more collocations of these words. A student who has a rich vocabulary will only be able to function in a limited way, but one who is able to use these words in different combinations will be able to function more competently in different communicative situations.

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