"TAMING" COLLOCATIONS IN THE EFL/ESL ARENA

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Abstract

A significant proportion of the lexicon of the English language is 'occupied' by collocations, i.e. by combinations of words that tend to occur together (collocate) regularly. Their presence is vital in both oral and written discourse as they make discourse sound natural, native-like, colorful, versatile as well as easy to understand. Nevertheless, their highly arbitrary nature often makes them extremely challenging especially for EFL/ESL students.The aim of the paper is to contribute to the efforts directed at raising EFL/ESL teachers and students' awareness of the importance of teaching/learning collocations. More precisely, the paper makes an attempt to provide an overview of the best practices that have so far been reported by researchers and teachers when it comes to overcoming 'collocational' hurdles in and out of the classroom. In that respect, the paper, underlines some useful teaching strategies and both receptive and productive tasks and activities that have been proven to be conducive to mastering collocations, ranging from using dictionaries and electronic corpora for checking and decoding collocations, to exploiting various reading activities for collocations learning, recording collocations, etc.

Keywords: English collocations, teaching strategies/activities

1.Introduction

Collocations, i.e. word combinations that always occur together, 'occupy' a great portion of the lexicon of the English language. Mastering collocations is a must for EFL/ESL students, particularly for those majoring in English, as they are expected to approximate natural, native-speaker command of the English language.

Handling collocations in English is far from a simple and straightforward undertaking. Analyses of EFL\ESL students' oral and written output suggest that there is a serious lack of collocational competence even on the part of advanced EFL/ESL (Hill, 2000). Research into this issue shows that there are lot of reasons why this is the case. In part, the arbitrary nature of collocations is 'blamed' for students' failure to achieve a complete mastery over collocations (e.g. although *effort* and *exertion* are synonymous, one can *make an effort* but cannot *make an exertion). Also, in the process of language teaching and learning, collocations, compared to grammar and vocabulary, have always been placed in a subordinate position (Hodne, 2009).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that EFL/ESL students (especially those majoring in English) can gain a lot from acquiring as many collocations as they possibly can. Research has proven that collocations have a serious impact on speakers' fluency, writing coherent texts, comprehension while reading and listening, etc. (Men, 2018; Hunston & Francis, 2000; Lewis, 1997; Hill, 2000; Lackman, 2011; Bzour, 2006; Mahmoud, 2005; etc).

The aim of the paper is to contribute to the efforts directed at raising EFL/ESL teachers and students' awareness of the importance of teaching and learning collocations respectively. More precisely, the paper makes an attempt to provide an overview of the best practices reported by researchers and teachers that

could be utilized for overcoming 'collocational' hurdles inside and outside of the classroom. In that respect, the paper, underlines some useful awareness-raising strategies as well as receptive and productive tasks, activities and exercises aimed at practicing collocations both inside and outside the classroom.

The first section of the paper briefly defines the concept of collocation and underlines the potential benefits they EFL/ESL students gain from mastering collocations; the second section offers an overview of some useful classroom practices utilized not only for awareness raising, i.e. training students to start noticing these specific linguistic patterns, but also for acquiring ('taming') collocations and putting them to actual use. Finally, the last section provides some relevant concluding remarks.

2.What are collocations and why are they so vital for EFL/ESL learners?

Generally speaking, collocations are treated as word combinations, i.e. words that regularly co-occur together (e.g. *take a photo, make a mistake, by surprise*, etc.). Nevertheless, a comprehensive literature overview reveals that the term collocation is very often treated as an 'umbrella' term, covering a lot of different kinds of phraseological expressions such as: idioms, fixed and semi-fixed phrases, compounds, free combinations, phrasal verbs, etc. In this particular study, we take a rather narrow approach to the concept by excluding many of the above mentioned and focusing only on what Cowie (1981) termed 'restricted collocations' (e.g. *perform a task*). Restricted collocations, unlike idioms have a transparent meaning and each of the component parts of the combination contributes to the composition of the general meaning of the expression. Moreover, restricted collocations, unlike free combinations (e.g. *drink tea/ coffee, juice, beer*, etc.) allow for some substitution of their integral elements, but there are arbitrary limitations on substitution (e.g. you can also say *do a task*, but not **make a task*).

Also, as to the internal (syntactic) structure of collocations, it is important to note that not all collocations "come in the same packaging". There seems to be a general consensus among researchers that there are two major types of collocations: lexical (composed only of content words: noun + verb; adjective + noun, adverb + adjective, etc.) and grammatical (composed of content words and a preposition/clause: preposition + noun, adjective + preposition, verb + to inf. clause/that clause etc.) (Benson et al., 1986).

The significance of collocational knowledge for L2 learners has been widely recognized by numerous scholars (Men, 2018; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Lewis, 1997; Hill, 2000; Lackman, 2011; Bzour, 2006; Mahmoud, 2005; etc.). Almost all these scholars at one point or another concede that collocational knowledge and competence are essential for reaching a full mastery of the foreign language, i.e. for approximating a near native-like proficiency in L2. Thus, for instance, Bzour (2006) points out that collocations are a significant indicator of one's competence in a language; whereas Mahmoud (2005) describes acquiring and being able to produce correct collocations as an "advanced level of proficiency in a language". Lackman (2011) claims that L2 learners acquire native-like quality by mastering collocations successfully based on the argument that both native speakers and intermediate language learners have on average up to 2000 words in their lexicon, but what differentiates them is the knowledge of how to combine these words. The conclusion that he reaches is that the main way to bring learners up to native speaker level is not by teaching them more words, but by teaching them to combine words they probably already know.

With this in mind, the question that inevitably arises next is "How do collocations help EFL/ESL learners achieve near native-like proficiency?"

Primarily, learners' fluency seem collocation-dependent to a great extent. Namely, as Lewis (1997, 2006) explains "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity". Ellis (2005) accepts this same line of reasoning and claims that fluency occurs because native speakers have a store of prefabricated and memorized lexical phrases, which they use skillfully in relevant situations with abnormal rate of articulation (in Ghazali, 2006). Hill (2000) supports this claim and states that collocations are "an important key to fluency" and that "the density of unrecognized collocations is what makes the listening and reading in a foreign language difficult and not the density of new words". In fact, what Hill (ibid) suggests is that collocational competence allows students not only to speak more fluently but also to read more widely, and understand more quickly. Similarly, a very recent study conducted by Men (2018) underlines that knowing a wide range of multiword units not only facilitates native-like production, but also contributes to efficient comprehension on the part of L2 learners. Hunston and Francis (2000) in that respect argue that storing a large number of multiword units in the mental lexicon is beneficial for enhancing both the reading and listening efficiency of L2 students. They further stress that knowledge of phraseological patterns helps L2 learners understand, i.e. reconstruct the meanings even when they mishear some words in speech. Sarikas (2006) also deems that collocations help people communicate their thoughts and ideas much more effectively and effortlessly both in writing and speech (in Sughair, 2007).

In addition, Lackman (2011) notes that solid collocational knowledge helps in clarifying the meaning of a particular word. For example, students will have no problem with the most literal meaning of the collocation catch a ball, but collocations like catch a bus, catch a cold and catch your name reveal the true diversity of the meaning of the verb 'catch'.

Howarth (1998) (in Zaabalawi and Gould, 2017) also looked into the benefits of mastering collocations and came to the realization that the use of collocations helps learners produce clearer and more precise messages in academic writing. What this means is that collocations are, in fact, a major factor in achieving coherence in a given text or discourse. Hatim & Mason (1997) (in Bzour, 2006) also defend this position by claiming that "the more frequent the collocational pattern, the more cohesive the resulting text will be". In line with this is also Lewis' (1997) statement that "language consists of chunks that produce coherent texts when they are combined".

All of the above-mentioned researches, manifestly confirm the contention that collocations indeed help in approximating a near native-like proficiency by improving significantly all language skills: speaking (fluency), writing (cohesion), listening and reading (comprehension), and even vocabulary (distinguishing among the different meanings of individual words).

3.Useful practices for 'taming' collocations

Despite all the previously discussed benefits of learning and teaching collocations in the context of EFL/ESL, it still seems that the teaching practice when it comes to collocations is considerably lagging behind teaching grammar and vocabulary. Students' oral or written output, which is usually full of unacceptable collocations, or unnecessarily long sentences, presents a very clear indication of that. This proves that collocation is one of the most difficult areas of language learning at all levels, and that most language mistakes learners make arise from wrong associations between words (Stanescu, 2014).

In this section, we offer an overview of some valuable findings and insights presented in studies which have dealt with the issue of teaching and learning collocations. More specifically, the accent is placed on the most meritorious practices that scholars recommend for successful "taming of collocations" in the ESL/EFL context.

One particular recommendation that presents itself as noteworthy and recurring in all of the studies we have consulted, is that the enriching of students' repertoire of collocations can only be achieved by means of extensive exposure (Zaabalabi & Gould, 2017; Stanescu, 2014, etc.). In other words, teachers cannot expect their students to make steady and significant progress in this respect if they do not continually expose them to collocations. Exposure to collocation is of extreme importance as it leads to a natural inclination to use collocations appropriately in subsequent novel settings (Zaabalabi & Gould, 2017). Sustained exposure to collocations can be materialized merely by means of frequent awareness-raising activities, intensive classroom practice as well as extensive out of the classroom reading (Stanescu, 2014). The awareness-raising activities make students aware of the concept of collocation, but what must immediately ensue is practice activities that will enable students not only to memorize collocations but also to use them when a need arises for that. In fact, this complete intertwinement between the awareness-raising activities, on the one hand, and the practice activities, on the other hand, is actually rather self-evident in many of the good practices presented in the remaining part of this paper.

Another relevant point to be made here is that the compilation of awareness-raising and practice activities should not realized in isolation from what happens in the actual classroom (Deveci, 2004). Quite on the contrary, they should be integrated in the regular classroom activities simply as that will alleviate the acquisition of collocations and later on ensure retention in students' long-term memory.

What follows is an overview of some of the most useful practices for collocation acquisition which encompass: a) using students' English textbooks as sources of collocation; b) students compiling their own collocation notebooks/glossaries; c) consulting different types of dictionaries, especially collocation dictionaries d) exploring electronic corpora and concordancing, as well as e) doing specific collocation-related activities and tasks both in class and outside the classroom.

a) Using students' English textbooks as sources of collocations

Even though few textbooks for ESL/EFL students address collocations properly, still these textbooks can serve as an excellent starting point and a source of collocations, if used adequately by teachers (Golovina, 2014; Walsh, 2005, etc.). Namely, despite the evident lack of explicit mention of collocations and exercises on collocations in the textbooks, teachers should make it their habit to constantly draw students' attention to collocational patterns that exist in the texts they deal with (Walsh, 2005) and elicit or provide a few common collocations when offering clarification of vocabulary items used in the text (Morgan Lewis in Michael Lewis, 2000).

At the beginning, it is the teachers' task to come up with lists of useful collocations, but later on as their students become increasingly more active and engaged, they can also come up with their own lists of collocations, done independently or together with their classmates (Golovina, 2014; Morgan Lewis in Michael Lewis, 2000).

However, as Hill (2000) warns, it would be an act of sheer madness to try to bring to students' attention all the collocations from the texts in their textbook. Hill (2000) insists that a selection must be made as over-exploitation of any one aspect will simply kill students' interest. In other words, class time should be

spent on a few useful collocations and students should be encouraged to study the rest themselves at home. Thus, Golovina (2014), purposes that alongside with the classroom activities students need to increase their collocational competence by acquiring new expressions on their own through independent reading. This practically means that they should continue their search of collocations in whatever material they read and come across independently of what they do in class. For Woolard (2000) it is essential for students of English to get into the habit of exploring texts outside the classroom and noting collocations, crucial for their particular needs.

b) Compiling collocation notebooks/glossaries

Looking for collocations and noticing them in textbooks and other texts does not guarantee retention and acquisition of collocations. Subsequent and repetitive encounters (repetitions) with collocations are needed if one aims at memorizing and using collocations. One simple tool that can be used for this purpose is recording collocations, or more precisely, keeping a collocation notebook/glossary (Hill, 2000; Woolard, 2000; Shammas, 2013). This implies that teachers should mandatorily train their students to compile their own collocation glossaries.

In addition, in order for the collocation glossaries to be truly useful in revising and memorizing collocations (Hill, 2000), teachers should also train students to manage, i.e. organize their glossaries adequately. Thus, teachers can instruct students to arrange collocation glossaries: 1) grammatically: sections such as noun + noun, adjective + noun, verb + noun, adverb + adjective; 2) by common key word: collocations with do, make, get, up, speak etc.; 3) by topics: collocations to talk about holidays, travel, work, etc. (Hill, 2000). Moreover, students can organize their notebooks alphabetically, devoting two or three pages to each letter; some pages can be devoted to situations (e.g. at the bank); functions (e.g. complaining), etc. (Woolard, 2000).

In this context, it is also worth noting that students should be instructed to record collocations in their notebooks as they find them, i.e. in their original format (Morgan Lewis in Michael Lewis, 2000). In other words, students should be discouraged from breaking collocations up; doing grammatical cleaning up; generalizing, as that may result in losing relevant information about how language is actually used.

Finally, Gozett (in Lewis, 2000) warns that while it is important that teachers direct learners' attention to the most useful collocations, they should also discourage students from recording every single collocation they come across. This means they must be especially discouraged from recording very weak items (e.g. nice house, good vacation), as well as some strong ones which are highly unusual.

c) Consulting traditional, and specialized collocation dictionaries

There are different types of dictionaries – traditional, electronic and specialized collocation dictionaries, and they can definitely be one of the most useful resources or tools in language teaching and learning when it comes to 'taming' collocations. Teachers should constantly encourage students to browse dictionaries for collocations both in class and outside the classroom.

Traditional dictionaries can be a very worthwhile source of information on collocation as a good dictionary usually includes one or two expressions or sentences demonstrating the use of a word, and these will probably contain one or two useful collocates of that word (Woolard, 2000). The following traditional dictionaries are normally recommended to be used by English language learners: the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary or the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (Fontelle, 1994).

Electronic dictionaries allow the contents of a dictionary to be accessed and searched via a personal computer, and because of that they are slowly but surely replacing traditional (book format) dictionaries. In fact their main advantage over the book format lies in their powerful and speedy search functions, which provide the learners with immediate responses to their searches (Woolard, 2000). Many of them are freely available on line which is an additional alleviating circumstance (Collins Free Online Dictionary37, English Oxford Living Dictionary[38], Macmillan Dictionary[39]). Now, there is even a comprehensive repository of most of the electronic dictionaries not just in English, but in all world languages, which can be easily accessed online - Lexilogos[40].

Apart from the traditional and electronic dictionaries, students should have access to good specialized collocation dictionaries. These dictionaries deal exclusively with co-text and provide a much more inclusive account of a word's collocates than the traditional and electronic dictionaries. The LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations (Hill & Lewis, 1997), the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English: A Guide to Word Combinations (Benson et al. 1986) and the Oxford collocations dictionary for students of English (McIntosh et al. 2009) are amongst the most widely recommended collocation dictionaries to be used in EFL\ESL context.

Provided that the students have access to some of these dictionaries, they can be used both in class and at home, and they can greatly improve students' search efforts for correct collocations and their meaning. Of course, a number of various activities and tasks can involve using a dictionary. Woolard (2000) recommends using a collocation dictionary particularly prior to doing a writing assignment.

d) Exploring electronic corpora and concordancing

The immense technological progress that has been made in the recent decades, among many other things, has brought about another very useful tool that can be exploited to master collocations – corpora and concordancing (Woolard, 2000).

Corpora are vast amounts of text stored on computers which are being constantly added to and updated and which provide a very solid basis for research into the use of English. Corpora are also immensely used in compiling modern dictionaries and teaching materials. A concordancer, on the other hand, is a relatively simple piece of computer software which allows a constructive search of a particular word or phrase in large amounts of text.

Students should be trained to use corpora and concordances, since simply by entering the word that they wish to investigate and choosing whether they wish to see the words that appear to the left or to the right of that word, within seconds, they get an insight into all possible collocations of that particular word. Corpora provide much richer sources of co-textual information than dictionaries, and that results into a more efficient exploration of the collocates of a particular word. Nowadays, there are many free corpora on the Internet. A good case in point is BNC (British National Corpus) as well as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The BNC contains 100 million words and it is mostly composed of texts written in British English in the 1980s and 1990s. The temporal aspect of these texts obviously presents a slight limitation, but given the richness of the corpus, its utilization can be invaluable for EFL/ESL students. COCA, on the other hand, is the largest and most recent corpus available online,

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[37]37 https://www.collinsdictionary.com/

[38] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/

[39] https://www.macmillandictionary.com/

[40] https://www.lexilogos.com/english/index.htm

comprising more than 400 million words. It is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts, all in American English; it is completely free of charge and is updated every six to nine months.

e) Specific activities and tasks suitable for practicing collocations

Some researchers, however, in attempting to illuminate the best possible ways in which collocations can be integrated in the EFL/ESL teaching and learning process are very specific and discuss the actual receptive and productive activities[41] and tasks which alleviate the process of acquiring collocations. In order not to overstep the boundaries of the present paper, here we will only present Stanescu (2014) and Lackman's (2011) lists of useful activities, both of which are quite inclusive and versatile.

Stanescu (2014) enumerates the following useful strategies and activities for teaching collocations:

Matching items – students should match the two halves of different collocations that are put in two separate columns in jumbled order. A variation of this exercise is when students are given a list of noun phrases to be put under the right heading (e.g. the verbs 'do' and 'make'). The exercises could be done as a dictation with students write down the nouns they hear under the right heading (e.g. 'do' or 'make'). Another variation of the exercise might include crossing out the wrong items of a number of given choices.

Collocation gap-fill – the exercise consists of a set of gapped sentences focused on different collocational patterns (e.g. *She …. a thick layer of jam on her coat./ I think we are all … agreement*).

Collocation error correction – the students have to correct 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*).

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.

Collocation grids - this is 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.

Lackman's (2011) list of useful activities for teaching collocations includes the following[42:]

Creating collocations using a Thesaurus – students look at the nature of a collocation and try to guess which similar words could be substituted using a thesaurus, thus producing more collocations.

Verb + Noun Hunt - while adjective + noun collocations are usually the most common, verb + noun are probably the most useful for students to learn, but they are usually more difficult to pick out because they are often split, with the noun coming well after the verb it collocates with.

Collocate search - students are given a list of keywords found in the text and they should find the words that go with them in that same text.

Collocations on a topic – this activity can be done before students write on a particular topic. However, it can also be used to precede a speaking activity, or it can be used on its own without a productive task

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[41] While the receptive activities are intended to enable students to recognize collocations and grasp their meaning; the productive activities require students to actually put their knowledge of collocations to use.
[42] A selection of the activities proposed by Lackman (2011) was made to avoid the unnecessary repetition of some of the activities that were previously discussed by Stanescu (2014).

following it. It does require a resource such as a collocations dictionary as the students will be trying to find collocations on a particular topic. For example, if the topic was movies, students would brainstorm words such as: actor, director, film, script, comedy, etc.

Reconstructing a text - this activity helps students to notice collocations and to select the most important ones. First the students read the text, then they select the ten most important collocations in the text, and finally they have to reconstruct the text using these collocations in writing or orally.

Gapped text - this activity is used to get students to notice those words which form collocations and to think about what kind of words normally collocate with them. A gapped text is given to the students and they are asked to fill in the gaps with appropriate words.

Collocations on walls - this is a text-based activity which gets students out of their seats and raises awareness of the different lexical structures of collocations. The teacher selects several collocation categories (e.g. noun + noun, adjective + noun, adverb + verb, verb + noun, etc.). Each category is written on the top of a sheet of paper and the papers are posted around the classroom. Students work in teams, usually of two or three, and compete against other teams in an attempt to add the most items to the sheets on the walls.

Understandably, all these activities proposed by Stanescu (2014) and Lackman (2011) can be used as a starting point as they can be further modified and adapted according to the actual teaching circumstances of each particular teacher (e.g. number of students, time available, resources, etc.). Nevertheless, the ideas that they all present can undoubtedly serve the purpose of making teaching and learning collocations a real challenge and fun for both EFL/ESL teachers and students.

4.Conclusion

Collocation is one of the most troublesome area for EFL/ESL learners, mainly due to the inadequate attention that has been paid to teaching collocations, as well as due to collocations' rather arbitrary and intricate nature.

Teachers of English must attach sufficient importance to teaching collocation and in doing that they should make sure not to tackle collocations in isolation but as an integral part of the regular classroom activities and homework assignments. Ample exposure to collocation can induce serious improvements in EFL/ESL students' language skills – speaking, writing, reading and listening. This, in the long run, is likely to contribute immensely to approximating near-native like proficiency in English, which is particularly important to English majors.

More precisely, continuous awareness-raising and practice activities must be put in place both in and out of the classroom. Fortunately, there exist a wide variety of resources that can be utilized to alleviate this process – the regular English textbooks, students' personal collocation glossaries, different types of dictionaries, corpora and concordancing and, last but not least, designing new or using the multitude of existing collocation-related exercises and tasks which had been reported by various ESL/EFL teachers and scholars to have already proven their usefulness in mastering collocations.

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