

Collocations in English

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Abstract

Collocations can be defined as a series of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance. In the English language, collocation refers to a natural combination of words that are closely affiliated with each other. Some examples are "pay attention", "fast food", "make an effort", and "powerful engine". Collocation means a natural combination of words; it refers to the way English words are closely associated with each other.

Learning collocations is an important part of learning the vocabulary of a language. Some collocations are fixed, or very strong, for example (take a photo), where no word other than take collocates with photo to give the same meaning. Some collocations are more open, where several different words may be used to give a similar meaning, for example(keep to / stick to the rules).

In recent years collocations have emerged as an important category of lexical usage and have been recently viewed as an established unit of description in language teaching courses and materials.

It is evident that the arbitrary nature of collocations are ideally related to independent language learning and that there is a need to understand and develop knowledge of the meaning and denotations of collocations in everyday life situations.

1-Definition of collocations

Many years ago, J.R. Firth defined collocation as ('the company words keep - their relationships with other words or the ways through which words combine with each other in predictable ways').

When we think of the number of words in English, the number of potential combinations runs into many millions. So, the first and most important fact about the nature of collocation is the sheer number of individual collocations which exist in English.

Past assessments of the number of individual words known by an educated English language learner is insignificant when compared with the total number of items words, expressions, idioms, and collocations - which exist in the mental lexicon of the typical educated native speaker.

This fact of the size of the mental lexicon must dominate all our methodological thinking. When we believe that grammar was the basis of all language learning, it was quite comforting to know that we had discovered all the English tenses and they could be summarized on half a dozen pages of a grammar book. Grammar in its assumed finiteness was a superficially attractive basis for our syllabus. The complete lexicon of English, on the other hand, is enormous. The mental lexicon of any individual is huge, consisting as it does of a vast repertoire of learned phrases of varying degrees of fixedness. Within the mental lexicon, collocation is the most powerful force in the creation and comprehension of all naturally-occurring text.

2-Types of collocations

There are many different types of collocation. Here are some examples:

2.1.Adjectives and nouns:

Notice adjectives that are typically used with particular nouns:

Emma always wears red or yellow or some other bright color.

We had a brief chat about the exams but didn't have time to discuss them properly.

Unemployment is a major problem for the government at the moment.

Improving the health service is another key issue for government.

2.2.Nouns and verbs:

Notice how nouns and verbs often go together. The examples below are all to do with economics and business:

- *The economy boomed in the 1990s. [the economy was very strong]*
- *The company has grown and now employs 50 more people than last year.*
- *The company has expanded and now has branches in most major cities.*

- *The two companies merged in 2013 and now form one very large corporation. - The company launched the product in 2012. [introduced the product]*
- *The price increase poses a problem for us. [is a problem]*
- *The internet has created opportunities for our business. [brought new opportunities].*

2.3.Noun + noun:

There are a lot of collocations with the pattern (a ... of) as follows:

As Max read the lies about him, he felt a surge of anger. [literary: a sudden angry feeling]

Every parent feels a sense of pride when their child does well or wins something.

I felt a pang of nostalgia when I saw the old photos of the village where I grew up.

Verbs and expressions with prepositions:

Some verbs collocate with particular prepositional expressions:

As Jack went on stage to receive his gold medal for the judo competition you could see his parents swelling with pride. [looking extremely proud]

I was filled with horror when I read the newspaper report of the explosion.

When she spilt juice on her new skirt the little girl burst into tears. [suddenly started crying]

2.4.Verbs and adverbs:

Some verbs have particular adverbs which regularly collocate with them:

She pulled steadily on the rope and helped him to safety. [pulled firmly and evenly]

He placed the beautiful vase gently on the window ledge.

'I love you and want to marry you,' Dylan whispered softly to Madison.

She smiled proudly as she looked at the photos of her new grandson.

2.5Adverbs and adjectives:

Adjectives often have particular adverbs which regularly collocate with them:

They are happily married.

I am fully aware that there are serious problems. [I know well]

Harry was blissfully unaware that he was in danger. [Harry had no idea at all, often used about something unpleasant].

3-Collocations , idioms and phrasal verbs

Even during the height of structuralism, we knew that the lexicon was complicated. Apart from individual words, we were keenly aware that multi- word expressions were important. We identified phrasal verbs and idioms as two important areas for students. The rest we labelled ‘idiomatic usage’. It is only recently through the rise of corpus linguistics that the extent of the fixedness of much language has been more widely recognised. We know that fixed expressions range from the totally fixed (An apple a day keeps the doctor away), through the semi-fixed (What I’m saying/suggesting/proposing is...), to the fairly loose yet still predictable (go on holiday). In one sense all collocation is idiomatic and all idioms and phrasal verbs are collocations – predictable combinations of different kinds. So, how can we use these terms most usefully?

It seems sensible to continue using those terms and categories which language teachers have found useful in the past idioms and phrasal verbs – while introducing the term collocation to name and categorise that language which has previously been ignored or undervalued. Let us look more closely at each of these three categories.

4-Idioms

An idiom is an expression which is relatively fixed and allows little or no change. It is often metaphorical:

He put the cat among the pigeons;

Don’t count your chickens.

Not all idioms are as pictorial as these two examples. We could think of catch the bus or fired with enthusiasm as idioms because of the inherently metaphorical use of catch and fire. The native speaker has no problem with the idea that both fish and buses can be caught or that non- physical things can be on fire. If the same verbs are not used in the learners’ L1, it is probable that they will have a problem with the English idiomatic use.

We need to broaden our concept of idiom to include much more metaphorical usage, which is frequently hardly even recognized as idiomatic by native speakers.

5-Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs contain a verb plus one or more particles: make up a story, put the light out. The meaning may or may not be obvious from the individual words. Again, learners may have no trouble with the literal put the cat out but cannot relate that to put the light out. Some teachers consider get on (in get on the bus) as a phrasal verb. Others think of it as verb plus preposition. The distinction is not helpful for the classroom where the emphasis is on the phrase as a whole rather than any analysis of it. Arguments aside, the category of phrasal verb is a useful one for both teachers and learners to identify certain items which they are trying to teach and learn.

6-Collocations

As mentioned above, in a sense, all collocations are idiomatic and all phrasal verbs and idioms are collocations or contain collocations, but rather than spending all our time describing and sorting expressions, the real issue for the methodologist is to try to help teachers to make simple categories which will help their students see some order and organization in the lexicon. ELT has always recognized two types of multi-word item where the patterns have been clear idioms and phrasal verbs. It is time to introduce our students to one more category of language as it really is – collocation.

A collocation is a predictable combination of words , for example; (get lost, make up for lost time, speak your mind).

Some combinations may be very highly predictable from one of the component words – foot the bill, mineral water, spring to mind.

Some ‘strong’ collocations have the status of idioms – shrug your shoulders – they are not guessable and are non-generative. Some may be so common that they hardly seem worth remarking upon – a big flat, a nice car, have lunch. (As just mentioned, however, native speakers must be careful, because an item which seems unremarkable to them might be a problem to a learner. Because of their L1, some learners may find eat lunch or take lunch a more obvious choice than have lunch.)

Teachers will find it useful to draw their learners' attention to collocations of different kinds. I suggest that the following, in particular, will be of interest:

Adjective + noun

A huge profit

Noun + noun

A pocket calculator

Verb + adverb

Live dangerously

Adverb + adjective

Completely soaked

Verb + preposition + noun

Speak through an interpreter

Collocations can, in fact, be much longer. For example: adverb + verb + article + adjective + noun + preposition + noun =

seriously affect the political situation in Bosnia.

The term 'collocation' should help bring all these chunks of language to students' attention as single choices.

7-Collocations and grammar

It is always an oversimplification to divide language up into categories when all the elements of natural language use are interdependent. So, idioms have a grammar and can be minimally variable to fit the speaker's purpose:

Don't He

She's just

Let the cat out of the bag.

If only you hadn't

Why did you

Collocations, too, cannot be separated from the grammatical context in which they occur. There are two important pedagogical considerations here.

Firstly, it is important that teachers are aware of this. The simple collocation brush your teeth is for native speakers predominantly used in the dentist's surgery and in the home when speaking to children or other family members. One of the most common structures in which it will occur is Have you brushed your teeth yet? a parent teaching a child habits of personal hygiene usually at bedtime.

One can imagine a husband saying to his wife: I'll be with you in a minute. I'm just going to brush my teeth. I imagine few husbands would

ask their wives the question that they would ask their young children. We can speculate that sentences such as the following will be rarer than the present perfect and going to uses above:

I brushed my teeth... I'm brushing my teeth... I'd brushed my teeth....

Secondly, when the child hears the parent asking Have you brushed your teeth? Something else is going on. The child is hearing the present perfect in a natural context. For perhaps ten years of childhood a parent may ask the question. Children may never use the question themselves until they are parents themselves. What the children have been exposed to is an archetypical example of the present perfect without knowing anything explicit about English tense names.

It is clear that the acquisition of generalizable grammar rules must be partly related to the acquisition of lexical chunks containing the grammar in question. Perhaps the inability of our students to acquire some important grammatical areas is based on the implausibility of many of the examples to which we expose them in current EFL grammar books and textbooks . When we know that native speakers learn language in lexical chunks, it is not unreasonable to assume that learning certain chunks containing these structures will help learners in their acquisition of English grammar patterns as well. [This is another plea to teachers to encourage learners to notice and record language in a linguistic environment in which it naturally occurs.

8- Why collocations are important ?

Collocation is important for many reasons:

A-The lexicon is not arbitrary

The first and most obvious reason why collocation is important is because the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to all language use. The lexicon is not arbitrary. We do not speak or write as if language were one huge substitution table with vocabulary items merely filling slots in grammatical structures. To an important extent vocabulary choice is predictable. When a speaker thinks of drinking, he may use a common verb such as have. The listener's expectations predict a large number of possibilities: tea, coffee, milk, mineral water, orange juice, even tequila sunrise, but there would be no expectations of engine oil, shampoo, sulphuric acid. The latter liquids are drunk by accident, but linguistically they are not 'probable' in the way that the former are. Looking at a rarer verb-enhance the choice of objects is limited to a relatively small number of nouns or noun patterns, eg his reputation, the standing of the company.

If the verb is do, the choice is far greater, but still limited, e.g. his best, the honorable thing, but not a mistake. So, the very definition of collocation – the way words combine – gives it a status which we cannot deny.

B-Predictability

The very predictability of the collocation examples in the previous paragraph gives us another clue as to why collocation is an important pedagogical issue. The present simple is important in classrooms because we can predict its use to an extent which helps learners. In a similar way, there are patterns to collocations which can make learning easier. There are parts of the lexicon which are organised and patterned, and classrooms are, by definition, places where learning is encouraged by using the most efficient means known to teachers and where learners need to be encouraged to notice predictable patterning.

C-The size of the phrasal mental lexicon

Collocation is important because this area of predictability is, as we have seen, enormous. Two, three, four and even five-word collocations make up a huge percentage of all naturally-occurring text, spoken or written. Estimates vary, but it is possible that up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression.

D-The role of memory

We know collocations because we have met them. We then retrieve them from our mental lexicon just as we pull a telephone number or address from our memory.

ELT has not given sufficient thought to this idea. Linguists now give a much greater importance to memorised, familiar, and idiomatic language. There was a reaction against these ideas during the sixties and seventies when methodologists reacted against any suggestion that learning by heart had any place in L2 learning. Phrase-books, which had played an important part in language learning for centuries, were scorned in favour of the all-powerful grammatical model of language learning.

Every native speaker parent knows how children love to hear the same rhymes and stories night after night to the extent that they can say the rhymes and tell the stories themselves. As adults we all have a huge store of memorised text in our heads, ranging from poetry, addresses, telephone numbers, proverbs, idioms, sayings, clichés, to catchphrases, advertising slogans and jokes. Most often we have made no attempt to learn these items; knowing them is simply part of what we mean by being a native

speaker. How do I know lead on Macduff, coughs and sneezes spread diseases, flavour of the month, free gratis and for nothing, each and every one of us, Don't forget the fruit gums Mum, and even That's the way the cookie crumbles? I may never use them. Indeed, I may be allergic to anyone who does use them! The fact of the matter (itself a good example of a fixed phrase) is that every native speaker has a vast store of these obviously fixed expressions. We have a much bigger store of collocations, ready for use when required.

As language teachers, it is obvious that we have underestimated the role of memory in language learning. Not enough research is available to us at present to make useful statements about how memory can be influenced. We do know, however, that the most crucial element in a learner's acquisition of a lexical item is the number of times it is heard or read in a context where it is at least partially understood. We also know it is more important to hear or read an item than to use it. Communicative methodology mistakenly assumed that early production was all important. What is obvious is that what the language learners are exposed to from the earliest stages is crucial. Good quality input should lead to good quality retrieval. Impoverished input will lead to impoverished retrieval.

9-Teaching collocations

In order to teach collocation we have to give it the same kind of status in our methodology as other aspects of language such as pronunciation, intonation, stress, and grammar. We have to see it as being as central to language acquisition as those other aspects of language which we have long recognised. 50 years ago nobody in the medical world had heard of DNA.

Today it is central to much medical research. The same is true of lexis in general and collocation in particular. Collocation is not an added bonus which we pay attention to once students have become sufficiently advanced. Collocation should play an important part in our teaching from lesson one.

10-Teaching individual collocations

In the same way that we teach individual words – vocabulary – we need to teach collocations. Rather than wait for students to meet common collocations for themselves, we need to present them in context just as we would present individual words. Here are some examples: have a bath, make friends, fall in love.

At a higher level, when students are learning less common vocabulary, we must be aware that some words are used in a very restricted number of collocations. There is no point in knowing the meaning of the words impetuous or initiative unless you also know the collocations: impetuous behaviour, which means (take the initiative).

Consider the following individual collocations:

Go on the car ferry

A roll-on roll-off ferry

Take the ferry from (Liverpool) to (Belfast).

This idea that knowing the meaning of a word is useless unless you also know something of how the word is used is relatively new in ELT. Until very recently, dictionaries were seen only as decoding devices, designed to help students understand the meaning of words they were not sure of. They were not seen as encoding or ‘productive’ – helping students to compose their own text. It is probably asking too much of any one dictionary that it does both. It is definitely worth emphasizing to students that they do not really ‘know’ or ‘own’ a word unless they also know how that word is used, which means knowing something about its collocational field. There are many pairs or groups of words such as date/appointment/meeting or broad/wide where the difference between the words is only clear from a knowledge of their different collocational fields.

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