

Teaching Collocations in EFL Classroom

Nasrin S. Altuwairesh

Department of English Language and Translation
College of Languages and Translation
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in vocabulary items consisting of more than a single word in the field of English language teaching (ELT) (Nation & Meara, 2002, p. 36; Schmitt, 2000, p. 96). Researchers in the area came to notice that language is produced by native speakers as '*chunks*' rather than single words (Schmitt, 2000, p. 42; Read, 2000, p.20). This entails that if language instructors wish English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to attain native-like proficiency, they should be trained on the use of chunks of language and equipped with a large number of them. Such multiple-word items, Schmitt (2000) explains, constitute a rather high percentage of the English language and are drawing more attention. Thus, these chunks of language are worth spending time on in any language course. The purpose of the following paper is two-fold: on the one hand, the researcher intends to get ELT instructors aware of the concept of collocations and its significance, for those who are not already aware of this aspect of language. On the other hand, the researcher aims at suggesting ways to help learners develop collocational knowledge.

Keywords: collocations, formulaic language, language chunks, multiple-word items, vocabulary

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Introduction

So what do researchers mean by *chunks* of language? The word speaks for itself, for the word 'chunks' entails that there is a number of words somehow related and function as single units of the language. Moon (1997) says that there is no set of terms or categories that can be labelled as chunks. Yet, Moon further explains that these multi-word items have some degree of "institutionalization, fixedness, and non-compositionality" which distinguishes them from "other kinds of strings" (p. 44). Thornbury (2002) believes that for teaching purposes, idioms, collocations and phrasal verbs are among the most essential chunks of language.

Not having a good repertoire of such language chunks may result in lack of fluency. Students usually tend to take notes of single words and direct their efforts towards studying such words by heart. They also tend to communicate on a word-by-word basis, which consequently hinders their fluency. As language teachers, helping students make maximum use of this 'phenomenon' of language, as well as the time and effort spent on teaching collocations will be rewarding once done properly.

Therefore, in this paper, the researcher attempts first to shed light on what is meant by collocations, then argue for the importance of teaching collocations in any language course. Finally, some suggestions for teaching collocations will be given. The teaching techniques mentioned here can be used in any language skills course, not only a vocabulary course.

1. Language Chunks: Definition

Chunks of language have been defined and labeled by researchers in remarkably various ways. Wray (2000) coins the term *formulaic language*, which according to her is used "to encompass the wide range of phenomena variously labeled" (p. 465). She in fact identifies around 50 terms used in the literature to describe "aspects of formulaicity". On the other hand, Cowie (2009) distinguishes between *set phrases* and *set sentences*, which are obviously both chunks of language, while Nation (2001) uses the term *collocation* to describe both. Nation and Meara (2002) describe such "language units" as *multi-word units*. They further identify other labels used to describe more or less the same concept, including *pre-formulated language*, *formulas*, and *lexical phrases* (p.36).

This disagreement among researchers regarding terminology extends further to what belongs under this category of language. In fact, there is no agreement on what exactly formulaic language is, although most linguists accept its presence in language (Wray, 2008). Nation (2001) also comments on this particular issue by saying that "a major problem in the study of collocations is determining in a consistent way what should be classified as a collocation" (p.317).

Many researchers consider collocations and idioms two ends of the same continuum, with collocations on one end, pure idioms on the other end, and figurative idioms in between (Cowie, 2009, p. 52; Wray, 2008, p. 10). Wray (2008) describes the two ends as "the contentious and the uncontentious," with pure idioms existing on the latter end and collocations on the former (p. 10). Hence, the discrepancy among researchers arises in the area of what constitutes collocations,

in particular, though many consider idioms to be part of collocations. Schmitt (2000) defines idioms as “multiword lexemes that have frozen collocation” (p. 78). Carter (1998) also defines them as “fixed collocations” (p. 66). Nesselhauf (2003) also states that “the line between collocations and idioms . . . is not rigid” (p. 227). All of this suggests that many researchers treat idioms as one type of collocation which has a rather rigid structure.

Researchers have adopted a number of criteria in order to decide whether a string of words is regarded as a collocation or not. One is that the words frequently co-occur together and the other is that there is some degree of semantic opaqueness or as Cowie puts it, ‘an element of figurativeness’ (Nation, 2001, p. 317; Cowie, 2009). This element of figurativeness draws the line between collocations and idioms. All components of an idiom, researchers explain, have some degree of figurativeness or restriction, while in a collocation there is only one item that has a figurative sense (Cowie, 2009, p. 51; Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 226). Schmitt (2000) also states that besides words co-occurring together, “there must also be an element of exclusiveness” (p. 77). He gives the example of *blonde*, which is restricted to nouns like *lady*, *woman*, *hair*, as opposed to *nice*, which can occur with any noun associated with pleasantness. Therefore, the former example is said to collocate strongly, while the latter forms weak collocates (Schmitt, 2000).

The assumption that words in a collocation occur frequently together led researchers to suggest that they are stored, and therefore called upon, as a single unit in the mind. Evidence from corpus analysis and psycholinguistics as well support this belief (Schmitt, 2000, p. 79; Wray, 2008, p. 196; Nunan, 1999, p. 103; Carter, 1998, p.66). By analyzing large amounts of corpora, researchers gained “new insights into how words are distributed in a language” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 468). It is basically corpus analysis that, according to Nation and Meara (2002), “brought extended lexical patterning into the light” (p. 36). Furthermore, language produced by aphasics, old people who have started to lose memory, as well as other types of individuals suffering from communication disorders, proves that the mind stores words as strings rather than single items (Schmitt, 2000, p. 79; Wray, 2008, p. 196). There is also “social evidence” which emerges from studying the language of children acquiring their mother tongue and the language of adults while interacting with one another (Cowie, 1988, p. 13).

The major turning-point in this particular area took place in the early 1990s when Sinclair first introduced the *idiom principle*, which he says is illustrated by collocation (1991, p.115). He defines the idiom principle by saying that “a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments” (p.110). “The widespread and pervasive nature of the idiom principle,” Nation (2001) states, “is used as a justification for the study of groups of words” (p. 324).

To sum up, the researcher would rather adopt the definition proposed by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992). They state that collocations are “strings of words that seem to have a certain mutual expectancy, or a greater-than-chance likelihood that they will co-occur in any text” (p.21). The reason for choosing this particular definition is that it seems broad enough to occupy all types of chunks of language, and it, nevertheless, limits such strings of words to “mutual expectancy.”

2. *Why Teach Collocations*

There are many strong arguments for the focus on teaching collocations in the language classroom. One is that collocational knowledge accounts for native-like proficiency, which most language learners strive for. Collocations are in fact, as Pawley and Syder (1983) describe them, “the normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourse” (p. 208). These “*building blocks*,” once learners are equipped with, lead to “native-like selection” (Pawley & Syder, 1983), reduce the stress and time of processing language each time the learner uses it (Lewis, 2002, p. 121; Read, 2000, p. 233; Thornbury, 2002, p. 114) and help learners achieve fluency in speaking and writing (Schmitt, 2000, p. 42; Nattinger, 1988, p. 77; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 32).

Focus on teaching grammar might help learners gain accuracy and produce grammatically correct sentences, yet they may not always “sound native-like” (Nation, 2001, p. 323). “Gaining full command of a new language,” Wray (2000) emphasizes “requires the learner to become sensitive to the native speakers' preferences” (p.463). It is definitely such preferences language instructors are after when focusing on collocations, as they help learners sound natural when using the language.

The use of collocations, researchers state, helps reduce processing time, and hence leads to speed when communicating. This point, in particular, has been claimed by Nation (2001) to be the main advantage of chunking (p.320). Nattinger (1988) has further described collocations as “pre-packaged building blocks” (p.75). This analogy the author presents throws light on two essential characteristics of collocations; one is that they are packed up, stored in the mind as single units and ready for the language user to draw on whenever needed. They are also building blocks which gives a sense that they provide the language user with a solid base to stand on when using the language, hence they enhance his/her confidence and fluency.

With the use of collocations, Nattinger (1988) explains, “students will not have to go about reconstructing the language each time they want to say something” (p. 75). Being stored in the mind as single items allows for “more efficient retrieval.” Furthermore, collocations, being large units of discourse, enable the interlocutors to “direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse” (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 32). Learners need collocations and idiomatic expressions mainly for communication, and, as Wray (2005) explains, lack of them “can impede communication” (p. 58). These building blocks can also be said to bridge the gap between grammar and vocabulary. Scrivener (2005) argues that collocations and chunks “occupy an intermediate zone between vocabulary and grammar” (p.227).

McCarthy (1990) defines collocation as “a marriage contract between words,” symbolizing the strong relationship words hold between each other, and stressing the fact that it definitely is “an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language” (p.12). Hence, it is not enough to know the meaning, part of speech, usage and spelling of a word. To use it properly, one should also be familiar with what Firth calls “the company it keeps” (cited in Kennedy, 2003, p. 468). This means that to gain good command of the language, learners must look into collocational knowledge, which is in fact “one important aspect of vocabulary knowledge” (Nation, 2001, p.328).

Another important fact is that language is full of collocations and, as Cowie (2009) clarifies, “much of the language we use . . . is ready-made” (p. 49). Researchers agree that collocational knowledge is part of the native-speakers’ competence (McCarthy, 1990; Nesselhauf, 2003). This accounts for what Carter (1998) calls “collocational mismatches,” which, according to him, “are frequent in the language production of second language learners” (pp.73-74). This problem L2 learners face might be due to the element of unpredictability, whether grammatical or lexical, which is characteristic of collocations. According to Nation (2001), it is this element of unpredictability that “provides some of the justification for giving collocations special attention in a vocabulary course” (p.325). This also might be the reason why collocations are difficult to learn by non-native speakers.

Having such a high status in the language, language instructors can no longer afford to neglect this essential part of language learning. The teaching of chunks, as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) state “promotes motivation” (p.114), which is reason enough to focus on them in the language classroom.

3. *Teaching Collocations*

Two challenges a language instructor has to address is the vast number of collocations existing in the language and the fact that there is no best way to teach collocations (Schmitt, 2000, p. 88). “Collocation,” Schmitt says, “is an advanced type of vocabulary knowledge that is difficult to know how to teach” (p.89). Hence, one basic question to ask, having known that the language is full of collocations, is which ones are language instructors supposed to focus on (Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 223; Schmitt, 2000, p. 81). Researchers have proposed some criteria against which language instructors should base their selection. This includes: “frequency” (Nation, 2001, p. 325; Moon, 1997, p. 61), “congruence and restriction” (Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 238). Schmitt (2000) also emphasizes the importance of congruence by suggesting the necessity of addressing “only the collocations with no direct translation equivalents” (p. 81).

One fact to be considered in this respect is that native speakers tend to internalize chunks of language without even being aware of it, simply by frequent exposure to words that collocate together. On the contrary, L2 learners, even at advanced levels, have a lot of difficulty using and mastering collocations (Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 237; Wray, 2000, p. 468). Wray (2005) believes that the main reason for this is insufficient exposure to the language (p.57). However, foreign language learners must be made aware of this phenomenon. In fact “consciousness-raising” along with “frequent exposure” are considered by many researchers to be the main steps in teaching collocations (Lewis, 2002, p. 121; Thornbury, 2002, p. 116).

According to Nesselhauf (2003), the problems L2 learners usually have are with the production of collocations rather than comprehension (p.224). However, Nation (2001) believes that when teaching learners receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, the teacher must focus on “the predictability of the meaning” of collocations. This entails the focus on two particular aspects “semantic opaqueness and uniqueness of meaning” (p.325). These aspects, according to Nation, are what cause the learning burden and should be taken into consideration in listening and reading courses. However, when dealing with productive skills, the focus should depend on

“the predictability of form”. This means that the focus in speaking and writing classes should shift to “the co-occurrence of its members” (p.328).

In vocabulary courses, the language instructor can provide basic training on the use of concordances as an aid to teaching collocations. Then, once a vocabulary lesson is delivered, the instructor could choose a group of words from those presented in the lesson and provide concordances on them. The students' task is to study the concordances and come up with the most frequent collocations for each node. There is also the use of WORDLES which might be useful in this respect. WORDLES are word clouds made from authentic texts. They “encourage focus on collocation and chunking” and are also “fun and visually attractive” as opposed to concordances (Harrison, 2009).

Students might be asked to jot down the collocations in their notebooks and also memorize them. Nation (2001) clarifies that “the memorization of unanalyzed chunks is an important strategy” (p. 336). This leads to another technique suggested by Lewis (2002), which is the use of “lexical notebooks”. He states that “the concept of a lexical notebook needs to replace the traditional vocabulary book” (p. 49). In these notebooks, students are advised to include “words, strong collocations, and fully fixed expressions with L1 equivalents” (Lewis, 2002, p. 76). Students should also be encouraged to keep a collocation dictionary, or even an ordinary one that highlights collocation, and refer to it whenever needed.

In regards to similarities between L1 and L2, Bahns suggests that “we limit instruction to nontransferable collocates” (cited in Schmitt, 2000, p. 89). It is the ones that have no equivalents in the learners' mother tongue that will cause learners problems. Hence, they are among the group of collocations language instructors should focus on. Nation (2001) states that “where collocations are similar between the first and second language, the learning burden will be lighter” (p. 56). This entails that such collocations might even be internalized by L2 learners unconsciously, though I believe drawing their attention to the similarity might help more in making the collocation part of their active knowledge.

Kennedy (2003) also suggests encouraging autonomous learning of collocations, particularly through reading (p.484). Many researchers suggest the use of grids for teaching collocations (Schmitt, 2000, p. 88, Nation, 2001, p. 336). Lewis' two books *Teaching Collocation* and *Implementing the Lexical Approach* are full of practical ways of teaching collocation. One way suggested by Woolard (2000) is keeping, as a language instructor, a record of mis-collocations which can be used in class at appropriate times (p. 30). Nation (2001) also suggests some activities like matching collocates and finding collocates, in which the students either use the dictionary or draw on their own knowledge of both L1 and L2 (p. 106).

Conclusion

To conclude, the significance and abundance of collocations and chunks in the English language is a phenomenon worthy of notice. Thus, language teachers wishing for their learners to achieve native-like proficiency should invest class time in teaching collocations and ensuring their students are well-exposed to them. The paper aimed at getting language instructors aware of

this phenomenon of language and presenting a variety of ways to assist learners acquire collocational knowledge.

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About the Author

Nasrin Altuwairesh is Assistant Professor of TESOL at the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She holds a PhD in Education/ TESOL from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. Her research interests focus on language learning and teaching, teaching EFL listening in particular.

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