

From “nervous system” to “operating system”: Fostering collocational competence in ESP settings

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1 Introduction: The notion of collocations

Originally, much of second-language acquisition research focused on the assimilation of grammar and phonology, while vocabulary development was overlooked and treated as the “Cinderella of foreign language learning” (Beheydt, 1987, p. 55). Since the 1970s, vocabulary development has moved into a more central position of interest, and it has been argued (cf. Lewis 1993) that choosing the right words in certain situations is more important than choosing the right grammatical structure, thus putting lexis at “the core or heart of language” (Lewis, 1993, p. 89).

The acquisition of an extensive, specialized vocabulary is particularly important in the field of ESP at the tertiary level. ESP pedagogy places the student’s needs at center stage, and the main goal is to enable learners to master a sizeable portion of the specialized vocabulary needed to communicate effectively in their particular field of study. Since language is phrasal in its nature, this specialized vocabulary tends to occur in multi-word units, i.e. lexical items that are composed of more than one word. One such type of multi-word unit is the collocation, a term introduced by J.R. Firth in the 1950s.

There is no unified consensus on how to define the term collocation in lexicology, and addressing all of them would go beyond the scope of this article, but a distinction can be made between two main conceptual approaches: the frequency-based approach and the phraseological approach. The frequency-based approach identifies collocations as two (or more) units of words or lexical items that co-occur “with a probability greater than chance” (Halliday, 1966, p.156), while the phraseological approach follows a syntactic and semantic tradition that identifies collocations as word combinations with various degrees of fixedness, regardless of their frequency.

A number of researchers have provided a definition combining the two aforementioned approaches (Nation, 2001; Laufer & Waldmann, 2011; Wolter & Gyllenstadt, 2011). Nation (2001), for example, defines collocations as “a group of words that belong together, either because they commonly occur together [...] or because the meaning of the group is not obvious from the meaning of the parts” (p. 317). This means that for the language learner to truly know a lexical item, the relationship it forms with other words in a certain situational context must also be understood (e.g. catch a cold, catch someone’s attention), or as Firth (1957, p. 179) famously put it “You shall know a word by the company it keeps”. In other words, knowing the meaning of individual components of a collocation is not the same as knowing the collocation, and even the most advanced learners often have difficulties with choosing the correct verb, such as “make” and “do” (e.g. to do homework, not to make homework). The definition of collocation adopted in this article, which is in line with Nation (2001) and Laufer & Waldmann (2011) and Wolter & Gyllenstadt (2011), combines the two aforementioned approaches and views collocations as multi-word units that occur frequently with limited room for substitution. However, not all word combinations that form meaningful chunks are considered collocations, and we differentiate collocations from pure idioms, such as *to kick the bucket*, or free word combinations, such as *to buy a car*.

2 The importance of collocations in ESP

A mastery of a specific professional language, in our case from the fields of medicine and IT, is viewed as an essential asset in today’s professional world, and most institutes of tertiary education have been moving away from “General English Courses” towards ESP courses (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008).

Achieving lexical competence in specific contexts involves the daunting task of achieving collocational competence, i.e. having “a sufficiently large and significant phrasal mental lexicon” (Lewis, 2000, p. 177) that is readily available for receptive and productive language use. In fact, it has been argued that collocation knowledge, especially in an ESP setting, is an indicator of communicative competence and that it can push learners’ language proficiency beyond the intermediate plateau to a native-like advanced level (Lewis, 2000). As collocations are omnipresent in the English language, Nation (2001) goes further and argues that the stored sequences of words are the basis of language learning, knowledge and use (p. 321). Fluent speakers of English automatically use collocations as pre-packaged building blocks that tell the listener about what can follow from what has preceded. Non-native

speakers often lack this automation and native-like selection of words and are not aware of lexical restrictions because collocations are often arbitrary and unpredictable, which means non-native speakers have to reconstruct language every time. For example, the verb “*to perform*” collocates with *operation*, *experiment*, *analysis*, *task*, but does not work with *interview*.

3 Why collocations are problematic with non-native speakers

While the importance of developing collocational competence has been increasingly recognized by researchers in the past two decades, most intermediate learners of English lack these skills and therefore often fail to reach the fluency of advanced users of English. Collocational systems in scientific terminology are particularly complex and generally represent a significant challenge to non-native speakers of English, even at very advanced levels of language proficiency. Studies have shown that even students at more advanced levels of proficiency tend to produce fewer collocations than native speakers in both oral and written tasks (Laufer & Waldmann, 2011). There are several explanations for learners’ difficulties in the production and processing of collocations and the resulting shortcomings in language reception and production.

3.1 Lack of awareness

One of the main reasons for poor collocation *knowledge* is that most learners are not aware of the importance of collocations. They lack the language sensitivity and metacognitive skills to identify important collocations in texts or to use them actively themselves. Vocabulary learning is still often equated with memorizing long lists of decontextualized vocabulary consisting of single lexical items rather than chunks, and many teachers still prefer classical vocabulary teaching techniques (e.g. mother tongue translation, definition, synonyms and antonyms) and fail to focus on collocations and phrasal elements. Thus, many students have not learned which words collocate with others and therefore cannot recognize collocations as meaningful phrases.

3.2 Open-choice principle

Instead of operating on the idiom principle, learners have a tendency to function on the open-choice principle by combining words that do not always go together, thereby falling into the trap of “deceptive incompatibility” (Laufer & Waldmann, 2011, p. 44). Many students are not aware of collocational restrictions and assume, for example, that if one can earn money and respect, one can also earn experience, which seems possible from a semantic point of view, although collocationally they are not compatible. Thus, knowledge of collocations is not the same as knowing their individual components, and although learners are often familiar with the meaning of the individual components of a collocation, they have difficulty in making the correct combinations, which ultimately results in simplified and trivial expressions.

3.3 Literal translation

Many collocations are semantically transparent, and while students may understand the meaning of individual components of the collocation, they fail to produce the same collocation correctly independently (Nation, 2001). This results in “foreign” utterances caused by wrong direct translations from one’s mother tongue when students cannot think of the right collocation. For example, German-speaking learners of English can easily understand the collocation “to have a baby”, but when applying it independently, they often say “to get a baby” instead and fail to understand the lack of translational equivalence.

3.4 Retrieval

Students’ ability to retrieve the correct collocation from memory is impaired when they have not stored them as such in their memory. Moreover, their receptive language skills often differ from their productive skills. When students comprehend a collocation, they wrongly assume that they will be able to use the collocation in language production as well. As a consequence, this insufficient collocational competence results in the production of unnecessarily long phrases, which increases the risk of producing errors. For example, students who do not know the collocation “life expectancy” have to come up with something along the lines of “the number of years a person is expected to live”, i.e. a much longer phrase that increases the likelihood of producing errors.

4 Teaching collocations and best practice examples

As we have seen in the previous section, if students want to leave the intermediate plateau and achieve native-like fluency, collocational competence is indispensable. To this end, well-planned, teacher-led guidance is essential to enhance students' language sensitivity and promote deep-level processing of collocations. This task is certainly daunting for many teachers, and they may neglect the explicit teaching of collocations for a variety of reasons. They may be subject to limited class time, have curriculum constraints or simply do not have appropriate material to teach collocations. Or they may simply be overwhelmed by the sheer number of collocations in the English language. The Oxford Dictionary for Students of English (2009) includes about 250,000 word combinations, and that list is far from complete. Even the most determined teacher will only be able to cover a small fraction of them. With curricular constraints and limited class time, teachers have to carefully select the collocations they want to include in their course. The most commonly applied criterion for collocation selection in class is the frequency of use in a specific field. The acquisition of the most frequent collocations also increases the students' motivation, since they are learning the terms most relevant in their specific fields of study.

Teachers should draw students' attention even to seemingly "easy" collocations, such as "to keep fit" or "to update software", and point out the words with which they frequently occur. Students' tendency to overlook chunks means they often do not see the technicality of a collocation. For example, a collocation such as "infectious disease" may not appear technical at first sight, assuming the learner understands the individual words. However, left to their own devices, learners are likely to produce "infectious sickness" or "infectious illness", as the three words are interchangeable in many non-collocational contexts.

In order to support students, the following learning tasks may be useful for teaching collocations in various ESP settings. These techniques can be applied in a variety of fields to help improve language proficiency by fostering enhanced skills in vocabulary acquisition and retention.

4.1 Grouping collocates in semantic groups

In this activity, learners are asked to group collocations, such as *a gnawing pain*, *a stabbing pain*, *a tingling sensation*, in one of the following three groups: *mild*, *severe*, *very severe*.

Learners are required to examine the exact definition of each collocation.

4.2 Procedure reconstruction

Before watching a video describing a specific procedure (*e.g. coronary angiogram procedure*), the teacher pre-teaches the most important collocations and writes them on the board (*e.g. X-ray table, to fasten safety straps, to give a sedative, blood pressure cuff, blood clots, to insert the catheter, to thread the catheter, etc.*). After watching the video, students are asked to re-construct the procedure in pairs.

4.3 Matching collocations

Learners are given a set of sentence halves they have to match to make sense.

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| 1) <i>After the treatment was explained to him, the patient signed the informed</i> | <i>a) impaired body functions.</i> |
| 2) <i>The patient requires attention soon or risks seriously</i> | <i>b) consent form and he was then given anti-tetanus immunoglobulin.</i> |

Other activities may include gap-filling exercises, error correction, brainstorming collocates, or finding the odd one out in a list of words.

5 Conclusions

One of the greatest lexical challenges for ESP learners is the acquisition of collocations. To this end, it is essential for teachers to develop effective teaching strategies to raise student's awareness of the importance of collocations. Language instruction should focus on equipping students with the skills necessary to learn collocations both inside and outside the classroom. In addition to raising students' awareness, the explicit teaching of collocations should also focus on providing multiple encounters with target collocations to consolidate collocational competence and increase overall language proficiency.

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