LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS:
ISSUES IN TEACHING AND WAYS TO RAISE AWARENESS

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Abstract:
Vocabulary knowledge is considered essential in using a foreign language either in spoken or written forms. Therefore, it is common to hear language learners referring to their poor vocabulary knowledge when they fail to produce enough content in writing or speaking. As it is estimated that there are almost 20,000 million words in English, they mention it as a reason for their misuse of words, phrases and collocations. It is too ambitious to aim language learners to learn that many words to communicate effectively in English, yet because language is phrasal in its nature, awareness and knowledge of collocations, i.e. words that occur together, may help learners comprehend written and spoken discourse (Wray, 2002). This article focuses on the nature and formation of collocations and the issues in learning and teaching collocations especially in foreign language settings. In an attempt to raise awareness of collocations, some practical ideas are also suggested.

Keywords: lexical collocations, vocabulary teaching, vocabulary teaching ideas, collocations in English, issues in vocabulary teaching

1. Introduction

In the history of language teaching pedagogy, different types of syllabuses -each favoring certain approaches, methods and techniques have been utilized. With the introduction of *Lexical Approach* by Dave Willis in 1990 and the popularization of it by Michael Lewis in 1993, lexis, a neglected area in language teaching, received attention from researchers, curriculum designers, textbook writers, teachers and others involved in language teaching. Since then, there has been a growing interest in exploring the contribution of lexical knowledge to different skills such as reading and listening comprehension and spoken fluency (Nation, 1990; Hilton, 2008; Stæhr, 2008), the results

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of which has supported the Lewis's assertion that "lexis is the core or heart of language" (1993: 89).

The definition of vocabulary, "the words in the language", by Ur (2012) poses two main difficult questions: "How many words are there in English?" and "How many words / How much vocabulary does an EFL/ESL learner need to know for successful communication?" Although there is no single answer to provide for both questions, it is estimated that there are roughly one million words in English and a well-educated native speaker knows 20,000 words, as stated by Nation (2006). Aiming this number for ESL/EFL learners would be too ambitious. Yet, because language is phrasal in its nature, studying collocations, words that occur together, may help learners comprehend written and spoken discourse (Wray, 2002). According to Halliday (cited in Vasilyevic, 2014), the knowledge of collocations decreases the processing load of both speakers and listeners of the language.

Benson et al (1986) and Lewis (2000) put collocations into two categories: *lexical collocations* and *grammatical collocations*. In this article, the focus will be on lexical collocations because many learners fail to communicate ideas due to misuse of collocations because they put emphasis on grammatical accuracy rather than using appropriate vocabulary accurately.

2. Analysis

Collocations are mostly accepted as a sub-category of formulaic sequences (Henriksen, 2013) and defined as "*words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggest*" by Lewis (2000, p.29). When speakers of English produce language, they basically follow two principles (Sinclair, 1991): open choice and idiom. The former strains no limits on speakers and any grammatically correct word fits the slot. The latter, however, has limited possibilities, i.e. they choose a word that is meant to fit in that slot because of the idiomatic use given for the situation. Collocations, making an important percentage of written and spoken language, help speakers make accurate choices. Therefore, as Firth (1957) stated long ago, "*You shall know a word by the company it keeps.*" (cited in Vasiljevic, 2014). Later, Lewis (2000) and Nation (1990) provide support to this remark by stating that knowing a word includes knowing its collocations.

As stated above, there are two main categories of collocations. In very broad terms, grammatical collocations include prepositions/infinitives/clauses together with a lexical item such as *in conclusion* or *useful for/to* (Nuccorini, 2003). Lexical collocations will be dealt in detail in this article.

2.1 Lexical Collocations
Lexical collocations consist of different variations of adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs such as *come naturally* (V+Adv), *prison sentence* (N_1+N_2), and *great excitement* (Adj+N), and they do not usually contain prepositions/infinitives/clauses unlike grammatical collocations.

2.1.1 Form

Different categorizations of lexical collocations regarding their formation may be found in the related literature. For example, Lewis (2000) gives a list of twenty different types of collocations ranging from Adj+N combinations to incomplete fixed phrases, including grammatical collocations, which may not be possible to discuss in detail here. Therefore, the following list based on the categorizations suggested by Benson et al (1986) and Hill (2000) may be given in parallel to the definition provided above.

Table 1: Types of Lexical Collocations

Form	Explanation	Example
V+N/pronoun/ prepositional phrase	• Usually intransitive verbs • Verbs denote creation (C) or activation (A) • Arbitrary and non-predictable	*set a record* (C) *fly a kite* (A)
V+N	• Verb denoting eradication (E) and/or nullification (N)	*reject an appeal* (E/N)
Adj+N	• more than one adjective may collocate with the same noun	*strong tea* *best/warm/kind regards*
N+V	• verb names an action characteristic of the person or thing designated by the noun	*adjectives modify*

Form		Example
N¹+of+N²	• indicate the larger group to which a single member belongs to • indicate the small unit of something larger	*a bouquet of flowers* *a piece of advice*
Adv+Adj **V+Adv** **Adv+V**		*deeply absorbed* *appreciate sincerely* *totally misunderstand*
V+Adj+N		*learn an foreign language*
N¹+N²		*wedding ceremony*

* Examples are mostly taken from Benson et al (1986) and Hill (2000).

2.1.2 Meaning and Use

Native speakers of English are able to produce language effortlessly usually with a high degree of fluency due to their storage of memorized sequences and lexicalized sentence stems (Pawley and Syder, 1983). In other words, collocational knowledge having powerful links between words and the mind help them produce language fluently and accurately. In this sense, as Robin (2000) states, free combinations of words are easy to make because words occurring together reveal the meaning of it as in *dark night* (cited in

Duan and Qin, 2012). However, the meaning of a collocation is not easily realized as in the examples of *powerful motorcar* and *strong coffee*. This brings out the discussion on *opacity* and *clarity/transparency* of collocations (McCarthy, 1990), which indicates the degree of predictability of the meaning of a collocation. When a collocation is *opaque*, the meaning conveyed may not be deduced for the meaning of separate words that occur together in that collocation as in the example *talk turkey* provided by McCarthy. *Talk turkey* means "to discuss something honestly and directly" (Cambridge Dictionary), which is not revealed by the meaning of individual words in it, hence unpredictable and idiomatic. However, *talk politics* is transparent because the elements in the collocation are used in their literal sense, hence predictable.

2.1.3 Collocational strength
Hill (2000) discusses four different collocations regarding collocational strength:
- In *unique collocations*, verbs do not collocate with other nouns as in *foot the bill* and *shrug one's shoulders*.
- In *strong collocations*, one element is incomplete without the other one because it collocates only a small number of nouns as in *rancid meat/butter* or *trenchant criticism*. They are not unique, but *rancid* or *trenchant* would be incomplete without their collocates.
- *Weak collocations* are transparent and predictable because words collocate with each other in a random sense. The adjective *big*, for example, collocates with many words such as *car, decision, mistake, failure* or *boy.*
- *Medium strength collocations*, such as *have a barbecue, make a mistake* and *do homework*, are the ones neither strong nor weak, which makes up a large part of our spoken and written discourse.

2.1.4 Negative or positive connotation
One important note about collocations is about the positive or negative connotations they carry because "words have distinctive semantic profiles or "prosodies" (Stubbs, 1995, p.1), which makes semantic relations between the node –the focus item in a collocation and its collocates. He gives the word *cause* as an example of unpleasant, i.e. negative, connotation using data from his analysis of corpora: *Cause* mainly collocates with words indicating *problems, trouble, damage, death, pain and disease.* On the other hand, the word *provide* collocates with words having positive connotations like *aid, assistance, help, support and food.*

2.1.5 De-lexicalised verbs
De-lexicalised verbs, such as *do, make, get, keep, make, take, have* and *give*, are crucial in determining the meaning and use of collocations because these verbs have little or no meaning outside their context of particular use (Lewis, 1997), as in *make money, take time, get arrested.*

2.1.6 Pronunciation

Liberman and Sproat (1992) discuss the stress placement in N_1-N_2 compounds and Adj+N. It is stated that main stress is usually on the left in N_1-N_2 collocations as in *green house*, i.e. *green* being crucial information. In 25% of N_1-N_2 collocations, on the other hand, the stress is on the right when it indicates what something is made of, place where something is found, the time when something is found and the like. *Chicken soup, garage door* and *summer palace* may be given as examples (Nakov, 2013).

It is also worth mentioning that depending on the message to be conveyed in a sentence, the content words in a sentence are stressed in connected speech (Scrivener, 2005), so speakers may place the stress on different words in the same sentence depending on their message.

E.g. Give me the black *book.* / Give *me* the black book.

3. Issues

3.1. L1 Interference

L1 interference has a negative impact on developing collocational knowledge because EFL learners tend to transfer from L1 to L2 as reported in many studies (Henriksen, 2013; Lewis, 1997). They look for L1 equivalent of L2 words they face, hence unnatural and inaccurate language production, which makes it hard for native speakers to understand them. For example, for Turkish learners, the words *make* and *do* are mostly problematic because their Turkish equivalent is the same: *yapmak*. Therefore, EFL learners tend to use them interchangeably thinking that they serve the same aim, as in **make homework, * do mistakes*. Similarly, *break* means *kırmak* in Turkish, i.e. literally putting something into pieces, and collocations like *breaking news, break a rule* or *break time* are confusing to them. Although advanced learners are found to be less affected by L1 interference (Henriksen, 2013), this problem might be well observed at higher levels as well.

3.2. Lack of collocational awareness

EFL learners do not recognize the importance of collocational knowledge (Jiang, 2009; Laufer, 2005) because they consider words as separate single units; therefore, they do not store them as collocations (Lewis, 2000). This, however, affects language production and comprehension negatively because they cannot recall them as collocations, hence lack of fluency and probably intelligibility. For example, Turkish learners may not learn *mother tongue* as a collocation and try to invent collocations saying **main language*.

3.3. Lack of Dictionary Skills

With the advancements in technology, it is now hard to see learners with printed dictionaries in the classroom, but some applications or websites to look up unknown words on their smart phones. Yet, they still require dictionary skills for appropriate and accurate use of vocabulary. It might be fictional, but there still exist some learners having looked up the Turkish word *at* to express *makarnayı suya at*, and found L2

equivalent *horse* and written **horse the macaroni* instead of *add pasta (into the boiling water)* as native speakers would do when giving a recipe. However, the Turkish word *at* is the imperative of *atmak* which means *put* or *add* in the given sentence above. Yet, *horse* is the animal we ride on. Lack of dictionary skills also affects their pronunciation because they are not aware of how dictionaries would help them, which is true for many learners.

4. Suggestions for Teaching

Activity 1
Aim: To raise their awareness of how their L1 interferes with L2 collocational use
Procedure: In small groups, students work collaboratively to come up with collocations English with the words given in Turkish (appendix 1). Then, teacher leads them to the website / application of *ozdic* and/or *clickivo* to check their answers using their smartphones. Finally, teacher directs their attention to different verbs used to mean *yapmak* in English. As a follow up, students ask and answer questions with the collocations in the given structures and do a mingling activity (appendix 2).
Evaluation: Raising students' awareness on collocations may prevent L1 interference. As the verb *yapmak* in Turkish, which means *do* or *make* in English, is used in many situations, this negative transfer from L1 to L2 causes collocational problems (Scrivener 2005; Slezak, 2015). It negatively affects their accuracy in English and leads to the misconception that the verbs *do* and *make* will fit into any slot. Also, this might be the first step of a systematic approach to teaching collocations because it may act as a reference point in the future collocational studies. Finally, having them use collocations in a productive and freerer activity helps them internalize the newly studied collocations, which may also prevent negative L1 transfer as they use them fixed lexical chunks that they may later recall easily.

Activity 2
Aim: To draw students' attention to the frequent use of collocations
Procedure: Students work individually to find out Adj+N and V+N combinations in the given text (appendix 2). Then, they cross out them all in the text to see the portion that collocations take up. After clarifying meaning, form and use, students in pairs will write nine of the collocations on the bingo card given and talk about their generation by using them (appendix 3). The first student using all collocations is the winner.
Evaluation: This activity helps students realize that collocations are widely used in English. Knowing them help understand written or spoken language easily because they take up a large part storing collocations as single items in their mental lexicon so that they can retrieve them easily when required (Hill,2000; Lewis, 2000). This may also prevent possible mistakes, increase accuracy and fluency because they will use accurate combinations, retrieve them easily and speak free from long hesitations looking for words to express ideas.

Activity 3

Aim: To improve students' dictionary and vocabulary study skills

Procedure: Teacher introduces two different dictionaries and/or applications (appendix 4) by making a demo. Then, students work together to identify problems in the given handout (appendix 5) and rewrite it by using the dictionaries. After they finish, they check the reproduced texts and identify the collocations used. They check their pronunciation and practise them by reading the texts aloud.

Evaluation: This activity might be useful in raising students' awareness about lack of dictionary skills and realize mistakes they make as a result of this. They will learn and practise how to benefit from dictionaries in terms of spelling, part of speech, pronunciation, collocations, synonyms and antonyms. Also, they will realize that they have to be more careful and make educated choices when looking up a word in a dictionary as in the example given above: *horse the macaroni.* Last but not least, this activity will be fun and engaging, helping students realize how important it is to know dictionary skills.

5. Conclusion

Thinking about and searching for learner problems and possible solutions gives teachers the opportunity to reconsider their teaching and question their way of dealing with collocations in the classroom, realizing that holding a systematic approach to teaching collocations, training students in the use of dictionaries, and help students practise, learn, store, recall and use them would prove better outcomes. As Scrivener (2005) stated, collocations should not be an add-on. It deserves to be dealt in its own right.

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Appendix 1

Write collocations in English for the given words below.

Turkish	English
1. kaza yapmak	
2. anlaşma yapmak	
3. konuşma / sunum yapmak	
4. görüşme yapmak	
5. hatasız yapmak	
6. plan yapmak	
7. film yapmak	
8. alışveriş yapmak	
9. yasa yapmak	
10. şaka yapmak	
11. spor yapmak	
12. banyo yapmak	

Check your answers using *ozdic* or *clickivo*.
* A different set of collocations might be prepared for different languages such as *hacer* in Spanish which is used to mean *do* or *make* as well.

Appendix 2

Read the text and make a list of all Adjective + *Noun* and *Verb* + *Noun* combinations.

Sam is generation Y: she was born in the 1990s and was brought up in a world of social media, technological progress and globalization. Sam has a university education, a good standard of living and a busy social life. But she is miserable. According to research, unhappiness is felt more often by this generation than the previous one.

Some of the reasons may seem obvious: for example unemployment and expensive housing are causing pressure for people. Nowadays each graduate level job (meaning it requires university education) is chased by over 100 people and millennials are much less likely to have their own home than earlier generations. However, these are not new problems. Young people have faced such issues for a long time. Instead

recent research suggest suggests alternative reasons: the first is that generation Y expect more from life than their parents did and are disappointed when they don't get it. While generation X hoped for a secure job, generation Y expect the job to be interesting as well as secure. Secondly, generation Y have been told to believe in themselves, that they deserve success quickly. In the past, years of hard work was seen as normal while generation Y believe they should have a management level job within a few years of starting work.

It is these differences between expectations and real life that makes generation / less happy than their parents. So how can someone in the Y generation be happy? The best way is not to give up dreams but to understand that no job is perfect and any kind of success will probably only to be achieved by years of hard work.

(Text taken from Speakout 2nd Editon – Intermediate – Workbook – Pearson Publishing)

Appendix 3

Write *nine* of the collocations on the bingo card.
Work in pairs and talk about your generation.
Cross out the collocations you use.
The student using all the collocations is the winner!

Bingo Card

Appendix 4

www.dictionary.com

A website and an application that helps learners get quick access to definitions with possible collocations, pronunciation, synonyms and antonyms as well as sample sentences. It also provides games, quizzes, news and the like that may attract students' attention for self-study.

Sample entry and a shot from the first page

English Dictionary – Offline

It includes more than 170000 words, 180000 senses and 49000 sample sentences as well as a "Hang on, man" game and a flashcard system to facilitate learning. It also includes grammar lessons.

Appendix 5

Each group is given one part of the text.

Group 1

Hasan was a very heavy headed boy. His father was a middle situationed man. To make his son read in good schools he took everything to eye. His mother was a house woman. Every job used to come from her hand. This woman made her hair a brush for her son. When Hasan became sick, she cried her two eyes two fountains.

Group 2

When Hasan finished lycee he wanted to be a tooth doctor, and he entered the university exams and won Tootherness School. In the school, he meeted to each other with Jale. Hasan was hit to Jale in first look but Jale was not hit to him in the first look. However, her blood boiled to him.

Group 3

Jale's father was a money-father. He turned the corner many years ago. He wanted to make her marry to Abdurrahim. Abdurrahim finished first school and didn't read later. He started to turn dirty jobs when he was a crazy blooded man. He was his mother's eye. He said, "HIK" and fell from his father's nose. When she saw Jale, he put eye to her.

Group 4

To be able to see Jale, Hasan's inside was eating his inside. Finally, together they went to a park. Abdurrahim saw them and his eyes turned. He couldn't control himself. He wanted to send them to the village with wood, but he collected himself. He decided to leave them head to head. At that moment, the devil poked him. He fit to the devil, pulled his gun and fired. Then, the mirrorless came. They took all of them under eye. So this job finished in the black arm.

(Text taken and adapted from
http://www.ae.metu.edu.tr/~cengiz/stories/frame1/karakol.html)

* These texts include a lot of wrong uses of lexical collocations caused by direct translation from Turkish to English. For example, in text 1 there is the sentence "Every job used to come from her hand." (Elinden her iş gelirdi.), which could be perfectly expressed by stating "He was a very talented man." For other languages, different text might be created by using learners' own sentences with mistakes. Alternatively, instead of texts, learners may be given a set of different sentences including such mistakes that learners can work on together to spot them.