COLLOCATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Rezumat: Fenomenul colocaţiilor reprezintă o adevărată piatră de încercare pentru cei ce doresc să cunoască limba engleză. Prezentul articol evidenţiază caracteristicile specifice ale fenomenului în limba engleză şi pune accent, în special, pe abilităţile de recunoaştere şi de utilizare a colocaţiilor în procesul de studiere a limbii engleze de către studenţi.

Cuvinte-cheie: colocaţie, achiziţie, conştientizare, îmbinare de cuvinte, structură folosită frecvent, verb de utilizare frecventă, formulă, compatibilitate, transfer incorect, problemă interlingvală.

Abstract: Collocations are one of the main challenges English learners have to face. The given article touches upon the specific characteristics of the phenomenon and stresses, particularly, the abilities to identify and use collocations in the process of the English language acquisition.

Keywords: collocation, acquisition, awareness, word combination, frequently used pattern, high-utility verb, chunk, compatibility, negative transfer, intralingual problem.

The present article is primarily concerned with the general concept of collocation, its applicability and usefulness in the process of teaching foreign languages as well as the problems collocations may cause for learners.

Learning a foreign language used to be predominantly associated with learning its grammatical structures, lexis being restricted to the area large enough to present these structures. The disproportional emphasis on grammar and neglect of vocabulary and collocation in EFL learning lead students to be unable to produce sentences in communication, i.e. the significance of vocabulary in the learning process was played down while the function of grammar was regarded superior. It was Lewis (1994:25), who made the pivotal role of lexis the basics of any language highly respectable. As „collocation is an important organizing principle in the vocabulary" (McCarthy, 1990:18), focusing on collocation acquisition is an appropriate perspective to enrich vocabulary and also enable students to produce naturally sounding sentences from the early stage. Thus this comment clearly emphasizes that we should explore an effective way of teaching vocabulary through concentrating on collocation patterns.

It takes years of exposure to the language for its native speakers to get the competence sufficient to acquire acceptable collocational knowledge. As that competence of collocational knowledge belongs to native speaker's intuition, it may be natural for EFL learners that this area remains tricky and unmanageable. Even very advanced learners not being equipped with native-like competence often make inappropriate or unacceptable collocations. (McCarthy, 1990:24) Thus, collocations emerge as the most tangible marker of non-nativeness, „a foreign accent in writing". (Waller, 1993: 224)

Our argument here is targeted at teaching students whose language is Romanian or Russian and aged 18 to 20. Their levels of general English are assessed as being from high-beginning to lower-intermediate. Like many other aspects of EFL learning, collocational problems can be seen as interlingual. However, after examining a good number of students' written texts, we can say that only those students who have reached the upper-intermediate level seem to have clear-cut collocational problems. Collocational problems seem to be related to students' attempts to creatively express their thoughts by using their own words in English. While students remain at the elementary level, their texts are written mostly copying lesson materials: there are a few collocational problems and likewise there is very little creativeness.

We usually learn the meaning of single words. But words are seldom used alone and the way they combine with other words is important. Many different word combinations are possible, but some are much more probable than others. Some pairs of words occur together very rarely but other pairs occur together so often that when you see one word, you strongly expect that the other word may be there too. These special combinations are called collocations and they occur in all languages. (Hill, Lewis, 1997:6) They are understood as word combinations such as *bitterly cold* or *commit murder*, that is phrases which are more restricted than free combinations *very cold* and less restricted than idioms *get the cold shoulder*. Besides the traditional classification of collocations according to their structure Lewis(1998:212) proposes the following categories for collocations:

- Strong: A large number of collocations are strong or very strong. For example, we most commonly talk of *rancid butter*, but that does not mean that other things cannot be rancid.
- Weak: These are words which co-occur with a greater than random frequency. Many things can be long or short, cheap or expensive, good or bad. However, some things are more predictable, which could be called collocations; for example, *white wine* or *red wine*.
- Medium strength: These are words that go together with a greater frequency than weak collocations. Some examples are: *hold a meeting*; *carry out a study*.

The context in which a collocation is used is significant. Certain collocations or expressions are appro priate for certain contexts as they reveal various meanings of a word**.** For instance, the collocates of *bright* (*stars*, *red*, *future*, etc.) show that this word has the meanings „full of light", „strong in colour", and „full of hope for success or happiness", besides the „intelligent" meaning like in *bright student*. Many collocations have immediate pragmatic force or are situationally evocative. For example, it is hard to think in which situation someone might say: *This is a corner*. But if we say *This is a dangerous corner*, it immediately suggests a corner where lots of accidents have happened, *routine check-up*, *disperse the crowd*, and *widely available* which can suggest, respectively, a visit to the doctor, a police action after an incident, and talking about a new product. And even factors such as a difference in status or a social distance between the speaker and the hearer can affect the choice of collocational phrases. For example, we would not greet our boss by saying „*How's it going*?" however, it is all right to greet a friend that way. This example suggests that knowledge of connotation and formality is also important in deciding which collocation to use. (Lewis, 2000:15)

When learners use collocations, they are better understood. Native speakers unconsciously predict what is going to be said based on the use of phrases. If a non-native speaker uses frequently-used patterns (collocations), it will be easier for the native speakers to guess what the non-native speaker is saying and may help compensate for other language issues, such as pronunciation. When learners write and speak, if they use collocations central to their topic, their readers are more likely to understand their message.

From our experience we concluded that the Moldovan and Russian cultures have encouraged rote learning, where students memorize lists of words in isolation. The learners we have taught tended to write equivalents of single words but when seeing the words in phrases, could not understand them. When reading texts, they did not recognize collocations as meaningful phrases, which inhibited their understanding of the text. Such surface level knowledge prevents meaningful learning and creates collocation-related problems that result in making negative transfer from their mother tongue. For example, some learners tend to say *become lovers* instead of *fall in love*. Learners may also have intralingual problems and they might incorrectly use *several thanks* instead of *many thanks*. Learning words through definitions or in isolation the students' chances of using appropriate collocations or remembering the words decrease. Moreover, they may look for general rules for collocations that do not work for all collocations. For example, they might overgeneralize rules of collocation, for example, the use of prepositions in phrasal verbs. They could think that *put off your coat* is the opposite of *put on your coat*.

Analyzing the types of collocational errors made by advanced learners of English we found that errors in the use of verbs mostly involve semantically general verbs such as *make*, *put*, *get*. Apparently, these „high-utility" verbs (Kallkvist, 1998:73), which are simple, frequent and easy to learn, are often overused by learners. The most common type of error was that of overextension which resulted in awkward collocations, pointing to the unawareness of usage restrictions on the part of the students. The reason for that seems to be the fact that general verbs such as *make* or *get*, are highly polysemous. Highly frequent verbs being very polysemous, the restrictions on their use, which are not predictable from their meaning, may be perceived as rather arbitrary by learners. We also found that the learners misuse transitive verbs more often, which is not all that surprising, given that intransitive verbs are not usually followed by a direct object, so fewer collocational restrictions apply to them. Advanced students of English made errors by selecting collocations which are unacceptable in English; more importantly, they also failed to mark a large number of acceptable collocations, despite their familiarity with the individual lexical items in question. (Channel, 1980:117) This shows how learners fail to realize the potential compatibility of words they know well, because they use them in a limited number of collocations of which they are sure.

Lexical collocations are essential to English learners when they want to speak or write naturally. However, the results of tests in collocational competence leave no doubt that they are not acquired by memorizing vocabulary and must be specifically taught.

Hill (2000:53) asserts that when teaching collocations, teachers need to pay close attention to pronunciation, intonation, stress, and grammar. He lists topics to consider when teaching collocations:
1. Making students aware of collocations. Students need to know that learning collocations is crucial for learning English, and noticing collocations is an important stage in learning.
2. Teaching individual collocations. We should present collocations as we would present individual words. At higher levels, when students learn less common vocabulary items, they need to be made aware that some words are used in a very restricted number of collocations. Students also need to know how to use new vocabulary items, which makes it necessary to know about their collocational field and contexts in which they are used.
3. Storing collocations. Students need to have an organized vocabulary journal to record collocations. They can organize their journals in different ways: grammatically, by common key word, by topic, etc. They can also make use of tables or spider-grams, which work well with visual learners. For example, students can record certain collocations under headings such as *have/take/do* or *make*.

Thus, when teaching collocations, we cannot ignore reading and listening skills, which help learners notice collocations. Writing and speaking skills, on the other hand, give them the opportunity to practice collocations. One can easily resort to teaching collocations in isolation as well. However, this kind of teaching is no better than teaching single words in isolation. Unless students are taught in context-based classes, collocations will not make sense to learners, and meaningful learning will probably not take place.

It is advisable that a number of typical collocations be presented from the beginning of the second language acquisition. Many kinds of collocations, especially the „verb + noun" type, can be learned by students with intermediate vocabulary ability, for example: *fly a kite*, *walk a dog*, *set an alarm*, *break a code*, *withdraw an offer*, *fill a gap*, *stir up interest* (*in*), etc. If EFL learners are exposed early enough to large numbers of collocations, vocabulary usage may not become fixed or fossilized in their second language learning.

Since language in use is so flexible and the metaphorical, imaginative, and creative uses of language result in the constant formation of new lexical collocations, emphasis should be placed on lexical collocations with high frequency of co-occurrence rather than on those with figurative use. (Rudzka et al., 1981:6) In *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*, Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman point out that „it would be useful for ESL/EFL learners to have access to the significant collocates of all the lexical items they are expected to acquire and use." (1983:55) To avoid such difficulties, when possible, the teaching of collocations should be simplified by making interlingual comparison of lexical collocations. (Bahns, 1993:106) Those with direct Moldovan/Russian equivalence some+times do not have to be taught, for example *lose one's patience*, *logical/persuasive argument*, *offer/provide information*, etc.

We may also suggest teaching such useful types of collocations as with words that appear repeatedly in the exercises, with words that are already familiar to students but which expand the knowledge of the known word, related to chapter themes, when teaching infrequent words, collocations containing the infrequent word and a known word, frequent and strong in corpora, collocations of near synonyms to avoid using them interchangeably independent of context, non-congruent with the Romanian/Russian equivalent, evoking communicative situations, useful to talk on a certain topic, revealing various meanings of a word, conveying sociocultural aspects through examples of culturally-loaded collocations.

This does not mean that we should teach students all the collocations of English, but that awareness of collocations should be encouraged as a learning strategy. „To turn collocations into part of the input" (Woolard, 2000:32) is to provide students with texts including more common and stronger collocations. Teaching students to notice collocations in the language input they receive and to have a system to record them are some of the best learning strategies that teachers can equip learners with. „What is most important for teachers, more than worrying whether or not something is a collocation, is to shift their and their students' focus away from individual words to chunks of language. These chunks improve the fluency and accuracy of the English students produce." (Conzett, 2000:80) Students should be required to manipulate words in various ways, for example, by describing how they relate to other words and to their own familiar experiences. To promote and reinforce deep processing, activities should include much discussion of the words and require students to create justifications for the relationships and associations that they discover.

Over the last few years vocabulary teaching has gained more interest from English teachers who argue that without a wide range of vocabulary grammar does not help learners much. Collocation tends to be one of the most problematic and error-generating area of vocabulary, especially for EFL students. Having a wide range of vocabulary per se is not adequate because a single word rarely stands alone. Therefore, language teachers need to make sure that their students know which word goes with which other word(s), and that necessitates teaching collocations. Doing so will help learners acquire the language more quickly and efficiently. The richer in collocations the learner's lexicon is, the higher the precision, accuracy, coherence and authenticity of his/her speech are. The integration of collocations in vocabulary teaching is feasible and beneficial for learners. This is a perfect way to fluency and proficiency in the language as well as to greater language competence.

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