

THE ROLE OF COLLOCATIONS IN EXPANDING EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY

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**Rezumat:** Îmbogățirea vocabularului studenților într-o limbă străină presupune învățarea lexicului într-un context lingvistic, și nu învățarea separată a cuvintelor. În articol abordăm problema rolului locuțiilor în vederea îmbunătățirii abilităților de comunicare verbală în limba străină, precum și rolul profesorului în dezvoltarea autonomiei în învățare a studenților.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** context, îmbogățirea vocabularului, locuțiune, autonomie în învățare.

Learning a new language involves, among other things, learning vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Undoubtedly, the role of vocabulary in language learning cannot be underestimated. As has been emphasized by Wilkins, '[w]ithout grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed' [2, p. 115]. The great majority of students equate vocabulary with separate words. If we think about the great number of words a language contains, a language lexicon may be seen as a chaos, which seems difficult for a learner to deal with. In fact, to many students, vocabulary learning seems to be a disorganized process of learning thousands of different words. The question which arises is: What is the best way to teach vocabulary so that learners do not get drowned in the 'apparent chaos of the lexicon?' [2, p.115]. Drowning into the 'chaos of the lexicon' can be avoided if teachers provide ways of organizing lexis. One way to organize the vocabulary we teach is by thematic linking, e.g. teaching words dealing with travelling, with holidays etc. Although this method provides some kind of systematization, it does not seem to be the best solution. A drawback of learning words this way is that students will find it difficult to use the new words since little information is given on how to join them in a sentence. A much better approach is to teach words that occur together, drawing students' attention to the word grammar as well.

Since vocabulary does not come in isolated units, but is organized in different kinds of prefabricated chunks (e.g. *take photos, by the way, take the bus*), developing students' ability to 'chunk' language successfully is a central element of language teaching. This idea lies at the heart of the Lexical Approach, developed in the 1990s by M. Lewis. The Lexical Approach gives particular importance to vocabulary, including lexical chunks, to language use and acquisition. One of the lexical chunks is collocation. As Lewis (1993) explains, 'collocations describe the way individual words co-occur with others' [2, p. 93]. They provide 'the most powerful organizational principle for language teaching' [2, p. 119].

**Why should collocations be taught?**

An answer to the question as to why it is important to teach collocations is provided by Lewis (2008), who points out that 'raising learners' awareness of collocation may be one very efficient way of increasing their communicative power – that is, the ability to say more of what they want to say with the limited language resources at their disposal' [3, p. 33].

An important idea about learning vocabulary is provided by Woolard (2000), who notes that 'learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations' [4, p. 31]. Thus, communicative competence does not depend on the number of words an EFL learner knows, but rather on how collocationally competent with those words the learner is. Thus, a learner with a vocabulary of 2,000 words and a good collocational competence will speak English better than a learner knowing the same number of words but who is not collocationally competent.

A question that should be discussed with students at the very beginning of the language learning process is 'What does it mean to know a word'? Students should be made aware that knowing the translation of a word or being able to explain a word does not mean to 'know' it. We 'know' a word when we are able to use it, when we know some words that tend to co-occur with it, i.e. when we know at least something about its collocational field. Collocations are important in vocabulary learning because the meaning of a word has a great deal to do with the words with which it commonly

associates. Hill (2000) draws the teachers' attention to the fact that a new word (particularly a noun) should never be taught alone, without providing students with a few common collocations in which the given word occurs. This refers to teaching beginner, intermediate, and advanced students alike. For example, when teaching the word 'breakfast' to beginners, the following collocations may be offered: *have breakfast, have something for breakfast, a big breakfast*. It is important to place these collocations in sentences in a natural way so that students understand how to use them. For example: *I usually have tea and a sandwich for breakfast. What about you, Ann?* At the intermediate level, other collocations will be added, such as *a hearty breakfast, a light breakfast, continental breakfast*.

#### **What is the teacher's role in helping students learn collocations?**

As Woolard (2000) points out, the arbitrary nature of collocations changes the teacher's role from 'teaching' to 'telling'. Since there is no need to explain why words collocate in certain ways, learning collocations is perfectly suitable for independent work, the teacher's role being that of a 'learning manager' [4, p. 46]. Teachers can facilitate expanding students' vocabulary by helping them develop independent language learning skills. As Woolard (2000) notes, 'a primary aim of teaching must be to raise the students' awareness of their increasing responsibility for, and power over, their own learning' [4, p. 46].

##### *a. Teaching students how to make full use of English-English dictionaries.*

Dictionaries play a central role in language learning. Unfortunately, EFL students seem to underuse this resource, consulting it mainly when coming across unknown words. They treat dictionaries as a resource which answers the question 'What does X mean?'. However, knowing a word involves much more than being able to establish a one-to-one relationship between words in L1 and L2. It also involves 'mastering its collocational range and restrictions on that range' [2, p. 119]. This is exactly the information that English-English dictionaries provide. A good English-English dictionary offers examples which demonstrate the use of a word. These examples are likely to contain useful collocations containing that word. In fact, a good English-English dictionary has been referred to as 'the native speaker on your desk' [2, p. 132]. As Lewis (1993) explains, it is a resource which can be consulted to answer *Can you say ...?* questions. As such, a dictionary is not only a decoding device, but also an encoding one, which helps students compose their own text. Students may be unaware of it, and for that reason, they need teachers' guidance in making better use of dictionaries. A useful exercise is to ask students to find the collocates of a word rather than its meaning.

Apart from English-English dictionaries, collocation dictionaries are an invaluable resource to help students develop their knowledge of collocations. With their help, students can considerably enrich their vocabulary. Using dictionaries to learn collocations needs to become an automatic habit for students.

##### *b. Developing students' ability to identify collocations in the language they hear/read.*

An important part of vocabulary learning is making students aware of collocations. A good idea would be to start by focusing on mis-collocations students use. These can easily be found in students' essays. Woolard (2000) recommends focusing on *noun-verb, adjective+noun* mis-collocations to start with. He also mentions 'make and do' collocations as a useful way to introduce the notion of collocation to learners. An important thing is to emphasize that the relation between words in a collocation is arbitrary. It is just the way things are said in English. It would be impossible to explain why in English they *make progress* rather than *do progress*.

Woolard (2000) suggests that at first students need to spend time identifying the basic grammar categories of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. They will use this knowledge to search for collocations. This can be done through traditional exercises in sentence analysis.

The second stage is to draw the students' attention to the major role of the noun. Since nouns tend to be the focus of information in a text, they are the most suitable headwords for collocation searches. Woolard (2000) suggests the following several steps when searching for collocations:

1. Isolate key nouns in the text;
2. Look for (unexpected) verb collocates;
3. Look for (unexpected) adjective collocates;
4. Look for (unexpected) adverb collocates.

Developing students' ability to notice collocations in a text serves as the basis for the development of their independent learning strategies. The result of students' work can be monitored by asking students to report to the class on interesting collocations they have encountered.

c. Recording the new vocabulary so that words are not dealt with separately.

Students tend to record new words in vocabulary notebooks which, as a rule, are organized as lists of new words and their translation and transcription. Lewis (1993) criticized this model as ‘inaccessible and inefficient’ (p. 187). If the aim of keeping a vocabulary notebook is to help learners expand their vocabulary, it should contain more information about the word than just its translation and transcription. It is useful to include information about the word grammar.

e.g. enjoy + v-ing e.g. *He enjoys reading.*

weather (U) e.g. *We had such nice weather last summer.*

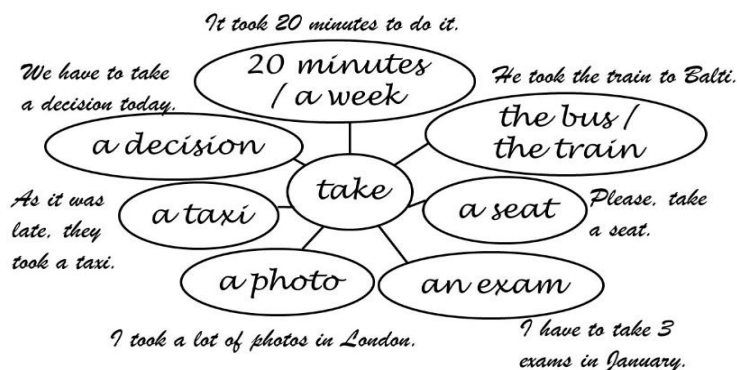
In addition, since certain words often appear together, a good technique would be to record their co-text. This will help students learn the linguistic environment in which words may occur and as such they will be able to make these words part of their active vocabulary.

Thus, recording formats could play a powerful role as a language learning technique. The framework of recording new vocabulary can be modified by adding information about word collocates. For example, for the word ‘explanation’ Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary provides the following collocations:

*Adjective + explanation: convincing, plausible, alternative, possible, simple, adequate*

*Verb + explanation: offer an explanation, provide an explanation, give an explanation*

It is important for students to record information about word collocates in their vocabulary notebooks and keep adding other collocates whenever they come across them in other sources. This can take the formats of collocation tables, mind-maps, word trees, etc. The recording format may be created individually and personalized so as to be helpful in the process of language learning. In fact, one of the methodological principles of the lexical approach, suggested by Lewis (1993), runs as follows: ‘Encourage physical recording which mirrors psychological recording. Avoid lists, and encourage non-linear formats where new language is stored with the co-text with which it most frequently occurs’ [2, p. 193]. An example of recording the verb ‘take’ in a vocabulary notebook is given below. As can be seen, it contains collocations with this verb as well as exemplifying sentences.



It is important to keep in mind that finding and recording collocations is not enough if we would like students to expand their vocabulary. We all know that learning vocabulary is an ongoing process. The new words and the collocations they form should be revisited and recycled [3]. It is important to encourage learners to look again and again through the words and collocations they have recorded and do something with them. A good way is to encourage students to use their vocabulary notebook whenever they have to write something. This will help students reduce the number of mistakes in their language production. At the same time, students will internalize the collocations recorded in their notebooks and make them part of their active vocabulary.

#### **Which collocations to teach?**

Hill (2000) suggests avoiding the temptation to teach every collocation which comes up in class. In order to choose which collocations to teach it is important to understand collocational strength, which ranges from weak to strong, having medium-strength collocations in the middle. Words forming weak collocations can combine with a lot of other words. For example, the adjective ‘good’ combines with the noun ‘book’, but also with ‘day’, ‘boy’, ‘essay’, ‘news’, ‘student’ and many others.

Usually, such word combinations are not difficult for students since they combine these words in a similar way in their native language. For that reason, they are not paid much attention to in the English classroom. At the other end, in a strong collocation the words are very closely associated with each other – the presence of one word means you strongly expect certain word(s) to be there. For example, the adjective ‘auburn’ only collocates with the nouns ‘curl’ and ‘hair’. Most collocations lie between these two poles – strong and weak. They are medium-strength collocations. As suggested by language educators, teachers should focus on medium-strength collocations, which make up a large part of what we say and write. Examples of medium-strength collocations are: *do a favour, take a photo, have breakfast, pass an exam* etc. The words that make up these collocations are easy to understand, but learners do not always know that they collocate and tend to transfer the verb used in their native language. This results in mis-collocations. Hill (2000) suggests increasing students’ collocational competence with their basic vocabulary, reiterating Woolard’s (2000) idea that ‘learning more vocabulary (...) is often learning familiar words in new combinations’ [4, p.31]. It is learning medium-strength collocations that has a great contribution to expanding students’ vocabulary.

#### **At what level of language proficiency should collocations be taught?**

As pointed out by Hill (2000), learners need to be introduced to collocations from lesson one. At elementary level words are learnt with a small number of collocates. For example, the word ‘breakfast’ will be learnt with the collocation ‘have breakfast’. At the intermediate level, other collocations will be added, such as ‘hearty breakfast’, ‘light breakfast’, ‘continental breakfast’. At this level, learners’ collocational competence will be increased with words they already know. Advanced learners will keep adding collocations to their mental lexicon, not necessarily with more difficult words. Rather than learn more obscure vocabulary, they need to learn the environment of the words they are familiar with. Being autonomous learners already, they should realize that learning a word in isolation is a waste of time.

#### **Conclusion**

Expanding students’ vocabulary in a foreign language does not necessarily mean learning new words, but rather learning familiar words in new combinations. As language educators, we have a role to play in helping students develop this skill. Our first aim is to help students see lexis as word partnerships rather than single words. Students need to learn from the very start that words appear in certain contexts and environments. By shifting the focus from individual words to collocations, students can improve their fluency and the accuracy of the language they produce. This will help them become more efficient learners. Convincing students that they know a word only if they know how it combines with other words in different contexts is also part of the teacher’s job.

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