

# THAT IS WHAT YOU SAY – SOME IDEAS FOR TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS

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***Summary** - This article describes classroom activities used in teaching collocations to the students of business English. The activities outlined relate to raising students' awareness of collocations, as well as their practising, storing and testing. ESP students need their own content language, which explains the lexical focus of ESP training, integrating target language learning and content learning. Since words are very rarely used alone, it is important to learn the natural and precise ways in which words combine and form word partnerships in a given context. Lexical approach has been recognized as effective in meeting the needs of business English students, with collocations at the forefront of meaningful business language instruction.*

***Key words:** business english, collocations, esp, lexical*

## INTRODUCTION

Instead of the traditional division of language into grammar and vocabulary, the lexical approach focuses on the multi-word prefabricated chunks which produce coherent texts when they are combined. Michael Lewis identifies four types of lexis: words, collocations, fixed expressions and semi-fixed expressions (Lewis, 1997). This article will concentrate on different ways of raising the students' awareness of collocations, as well as practising, storing and testing collocations in content-based instruction.

Words form partnerships and even those that are not fully fixed can be completed in only a certain number of ways. The lexical approach emphasizes combinations which are not only possible, but highly likely, placing the emphasis on probable rather than possible English (Lewis, 1997). This puts a completely different perspective on the eternal student question: Can I say this? The question is

not whether something is theoretically possible, but whether you would actually use it in the given context.

Collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency (Lewis, 1997, 25). Since words are not normally used alone, but together with other words with which they collocate, the importance of learning collocations instead of single vocabulary units is obvious. Breaking down the language

too far might make it easier for your students to learn it in the short term. However, this will definitely be counterproductive in the long-term language acquisition. For more advanced students collocations are of vital importance for moving off the intermediate plateau.

### ACTIVITIES TO RAISE STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF COLLOCATIONS

It is important to train students to notice collocations in a text because this promotes language learning in a way that it makes them think bigger than the word. This can be done as a reading or listening activity. We can ask our students to read or listen to a text and underline or make notes of the chunks they can identify. Depending on the students' level we can ask them to look specifically for verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + noun or preposition + noun collocations.

When introducing this activity you can do it in a more guided way to facilitate the process. First you can ask your students to underline all the nouns in the text, then to underline the verbs which are used before the nouns and finally to underline the whole phrase. A follow-up activity can be a set of gapped phrases taken from the text, which the students have to complete by scanning the text e.g.:

*Everyone in business has been told that success is all about attracting and retaining customers. It sounds reassuringly simple and achievable. But, in reality, words of wisdom are soon forgotten. Once companies have attracted customers they often overlook the second half of the equation. In the excitement of beating off the competition, negotiating prices, securing orders, and delivering the product, managers tend to become carried away. They forget what they regard as the humdrum side of business – ensuring that a customer remains a customer. (Cotton, 2001:25)*

1. What is more difficult: to \_\_\_\_\_ or to \_\_\_\_\_ customers?
2. The company has just \_\_\_\_\_ an order to supply the army.
3. Bigger customers can \_\_\_\_\_ better prices from suppliers.
4. The manufacturer \_\_\_\_\_ the product on time and on budget.
5. We need a strategy to \_\_\_\_\_ the competition.

To encourage student independence have your students do dictionary work to find certain collocations, using *Oxford collocations dictionary for students of English* or the *LTP dictionary of selected collocations*. This can be done for any core vocabulary item or as an introduction into a new topic. The first time they do this activity give each group a different entry e.g. *economy, business, product, job, industry, market, price* and ask them to look up all the words their key word collocates with. Next time you do this, your students can choose the words themselves and explore their collocational fields.

To help students realise that collocations are not always formed in the same way in English as in their native language, give students phrases in their mother tongue and equivalent phrases in English and ask them to match the phrases. This will help your students avoid the negative transfer from their mother tongue.

- |                     |                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. meet a deadline  | _____ osnovati kompaniju         |
| 2. raise capital    | _____ dati narudžbu              |
| 3. place an order   | _____ završiti u roku            |
| 4. set up a company | _____ uvesti proizvod na tržište |
| 5. launch a product | _____ prikupiti kapital          |

### PRACTISING COLLOCATIONS

In the course of business language training collocations should be taught as individual words, i.e. words should be presented and practiced together with their collocational fields in a particular context.

As a warming-up activity to a specific topic we can ask our students to brainstorm collocations with the key word in question. For instance, we can ask them to think of all the verbs that collocate with the noun *money* or all the words that can precede or follow the word *market* e.g.:

earn	
invest	
save	
spend	<b>money</b>
launder	
deposit	
withdraw	

bear/bull		share
black		leader
free		research
niche	<b>market</b>	value

domestic	sector
global	player
job	price
mass	segment

This can be done as a group activity with a time limit. When the time is up groups swap their lists and analyse them in order to eliminate the combinations that don't work. This adds a competitive edge to the activity. Needless to say, the analysis and elimination of wrong combinations is as useful to the learning process as the actual listing of collocations, if not even more so.

After having worked on a text, students can be given a gapped version of it to get another chance to work on key collocations, e.g.:

Struggling telecoms equipment maker Marconi today **took a giant step** towards recovery as it announced the early **repayment** of 669.5m **of debt** following its restructuring last year. The money was paid well ahead of the 2008 deadline set by creditors, and will save Marconi 55.8m in **annual interest charges**. 'The early paydown of all of our **restructuring debt** is an excellent achievement,' Mark Parton, The Marconi chief executive, said. 'We have emerged with a **strong balance sheet** and can now fully **focus our efforts** on growing our business.' (Dubicka, 2006, 64)

The gaps can be devised by the teacher or this can be turned into a student generated activity where students in pairs or groups decide on the gaps in the text to give to another pair or group, especially if you are teaching advanced students.

The well-known *odd one out* activity can be implemented for practising collocations. Students must decide which word does not collocate with the given verb or noun, as in the following example:

- make:** an appointment, a profit, money, **business**, a business trip  
**the competition:** undercut, outsell, take on, beat off, **beat up**

Students can be asked to write a set of common verbs like *make, do, have* and *get* as headings of four columns. Nouns that are dictated should be written into the appropriate column. Again, for higher level students, this can be a student generated activity, with groups preparing dictations and then dictating to each other, e.g.:

<b>MAKE</b>	<b>DO</b>	<b>HAVE</b>	<b>GET</b>
A LIVING	BUSINESS	A MEETING	TO WORK
A FORTUNE	A JOB	A WORD	INTO TROUBLE

If a noun suggests an extended process, you can ask your students to put the verbs in a logical order, e.g.:

#### NEGOTIATIONS

enter into, conduct, break off, resume, complete

## THE CONTRACT

draw up, breach, terminate, negotiate, renew (Powell, 2000, 89)

## STORING COLLOCATIONS

In our experience, the best way to record collocations is by topic, since the focus in business language training is on content. Ideally, all students would keep a record of the lexis studied, but it doesn't work that way. What is a more realistic approach is distributing different topics among students, so that they become responsible for a certain topic. Each student produces a record of collocations for their topic, which is then discussed and when approved of, distributed to the other students. By the end of the course students have lists of collocations for every topic covered, which they can use while preparing for the exam.

## TESTING COLLOCATIONS

Fixed word partnerships, as other multi-word expressions, lend themselves easily to different ways of testing, like for instance matching two lists of words to make collocations and then using some of them in the text or sentences that follow, e.g.:

1. corporate	<u>7</u> ratio
2. sole	<u>5</u> structure
3. competitive	<u>10</u> takeover
4. leveraged	<u>8</u> diligence
5. cost	<u>9</u> assets
6. pre-tax	<u>1</u> culture
7. debt	<u>2</u> trader
8. due	<u>4</u> buyout
9. intangible	<u>3</u> advantage
10. hostile	<u>6</u> profits

1. This machine carries the competitive advantage of using less power than all the others on the market.
2. Intangible assets such as information, image and people are the main drivers of business today.
3. Can they transform the company's corporate culture from overstuffed public administration to profit-minded entrepreneurship?
4. The acquisition is subject to due diligence review by the central bank.
5. The falling share price makes the company vulnerable to a hostile takeover.

Another way of testing collocations is using a four-option completion exercise, either to complete isolated sentences or whole texts, e.g.:

1. Bryson Ltd is a company with a proven track record.

A shown      B demonstrated      C proven      D displayed

(Brook\_Hart, 2007:16)

### Advice for organising meetings

Prepare an agenda and 1 set objectives for the meeting. Share this information with the other attendees well in advance and invite them to add agenda 2 items in the days or weeks before the meeting. If it's not possible to 3 circulate the agenda in advance, at least review it at the start of your meeting...

1. A set              B form              C ascertain              D ensure

2. A things          B lists              C items              D bullets

3. A send            B circulate          C pass              D post

(Brook-Hart,2007:13)

## CONCLUSION

An overall conclusion that we have reached is that implementing the lexical approach in our teaching and especially focusing on collocations rather than single words has given our students confidence to master the language skills in business English. Although fixed words partnerships seem to restrict our students in their learning process, they present safe havens with which they can't go wrong, and help them on their way of becoming independent users of business English, regardless of whether they have to read, write or speak it. When students use collocations central to their topic, they will be better understood and their message is more likely to get across.

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