What do advanced ESL\EFL students' need to know to overcome 'collocational' hurdles?

Silvana Neshkovska

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Silvana Neshkovska[1] Ph.D

St. Kliment Ohridski University – Bitola, Macedonia, Faculty of Education

silvana.neskovska@uklo.edu.mk

Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of collocations. More specifically, it investigates the role collocations play in achieving a native-like level of English language proficiency, and the essentials that advanced students of English should know to be able to overcome 'collocational' hurdles.

The paper proposes that advanced EFL\ESL students be provided with a solid theoretical background to be able to understand the concept of collocation, as this, in turn, can considerably alleviate the process of collocation reception and production. Based on a thorough literature review, the paper highlights aspects of collocations that should necessarily be brought to students' attention since the true mastery of English is unconceivable without a proper collocational competence. In that respect, first, different definitions of collocations are discussed; then, the most distinctive features of collocations which help in distinguishing collocations from similar phraseological expressions are presented; and, finally, the focus is placed on the different types of collocations. In addition, the paper lays out a selection of useful 'tools' and practices such as

regular and well-organized note taking (students' collocation glossaries); consulting collocation dictionaries, electronic language corpora and concordances, all of which are essential for advanced students of English to approximate native-like proficiency.

Keywords: *English collocations, advanced ESL\EFL students, types of collocations*

The English language is probably one of the world's richest languages in terms of vocabulary, and collocations surely present a huge chunk of its vocabulary pool. Thus, Hill (2000) notes that collocations comprise as much as 80% of any written text in English. This means that in order to use the language in a more native-like way, ESL and EFL learners must acquire adequate collocational competence. Research has shown that learners' command of collocations influences their performance when it comes to their different language skills and components (Jaefarpour & Koosha, 2006). In other words, using collocations in listening, speaking, reading or writing helps learners "think more quickly and communicate more efficiently" (Hill, 2000). Collocational competence also functions as a benchmark used to distinguish the different levels of competence among advanced language learners (Zhang, 1993 in Chang, 2011). Language learners who are at a more advanced level of proficiency are expected to be able to recognize and use more collocations in the target language than learners at a lower level.

Despite this widely accepted importance of collocational competence, students in general seem to experience serious difficulties when it comes to collocations. Researchers have come to the conclusion that students very frequently are unable to place a word in the right combination with other words (Ellis, 1996; Chang, 2011), and that the most common errors in

learners' performance are, in fact, collocation errors (Faghih & Sharafi, 2006). This indicates that this specific segment of the EFL\ESL teaching practice has not received its due attention (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995 in Chang, 2011) in comparison to grammar and vocabulary, for instance. EFL\ESL students learn new words in isolation without considering their interaction with other words and the context in which they are used (Chang, 2011). They remain unaware of the interrelationship existing among words since they have not been instructed to notice the relationships among different lexical items. Thus, they end up producing syntactically correct, but collocationally inappropriate sentences.

One possible explication why collocations are not adequately treated in the teaching practice is, perhaps, related to the fact that, English textbooks chiefly present new vocabulary in isolation and pay scant attention to collocations in general (Wang and Good 2007). Given that, in most cases, the textbook is the main resource used in class, many teachers are enticed to follow closely this teaching resource, and as a result they unconsciously fall into the trap of neglecting collocations, partly or completely.

Having detected this issue, a lot of scholars strongly advocate for teaching practice which places more emphasis on words that demonstrate frequent co-occurrence with other words, i.e. collocations (Lewis, 1997; Bahns, 1993; Lewis, 2000). These are, in fact, the proponents of the so-called Lexical Approach[i] to language teaching, according to which a combination of words commonly found together should be recognized and processed as a unit so that second and/or foreign language learners can make the production fluent and without semantic mistakes. Collocational competence, in their view, is one of the main hallmarks of an advanced language user.

Nowadays, analyzing language statistically by means of large computer-based corpora has contributed immensely to raising an even greater awareness of the role collocations play in language learning and usage. In fact, it seems that with this newest trend of corpus analysis a realization has been reached that in a way "every word has its own grammar … (and) …'knowing a word' involves knowing its grammar – the patterns in which it is regularly used" (Lewis, 2000). One might assume that, due to this fresh surge of salience attached to collocations, they have finally received the attention they deserve in the teaching process. Unfortunately, practice shows that this segment of EFL/ESL teaching and learning is still pretty much legging behind the other segments of language teaching (Hodne, 2009).

The aim of the paper is, in fact, in line with what the advocates of the Lexical Approach propose – an increased emphasis on collocations in teaching EFL\ESL. Namely, the paper at hand aims at making a contribution to sensitizing both EFL/ESL students and teachers of the pertinence of collocations especially in approximating native-like fluency and 'idiomaticity' of expression. Our position, however, is that true mastery of collocations, particularly in the case of the advanced students of English, should be based on providing students with a solid theoretical background about the nature of collocations. In that respect, the paper, drawing on the existing literature on collocations, discusses several vital aspects of collocations that students should be familiarized with: the most relevant definitions of collocations, the distinctive features of collocations and the different types of collocations.

In parallel with the theoretical background EFL\ESL, the paper proposes a selection of useful 'tools' and practices that students can use in their endeavor to 'conquer' collocations –

students' collocation glossaries, specialized collocation dictionaries, electronic corpora and concordances.

In the following sections, first, we discuss the selected aspects of collocations in some detail; and then, we present a brief overview of the suggested useful 'tools' and practices for successful acquisition and retention of collocations.

Defining collocations

Raising advanced EFL\ESL students' awareness of collocations should obligatorily start with students grasping what the term collocation means.

Literature abounds with various definitions of the term collocation, which implies that "there is no commonly accepted definition of collocation" (Pecina, 2009). Nevertheless, the term "collocation" is derived from the Latin word 'collocare' which means putting or placing things together. Palmer (1931) was probably the first scholar to have used it to denote "units of words that are more than single words" (in Gyllstad, 2007). In fact, the term 'collocation' rose to prominence in linguistics almost two decades later, thanks to Firth's (1957) insistence that the term should be part of the technical terminology of linguistics, and that special attention should be paid to words and the company they keep with other words – "you shall know a word by the company it keeps". This in turn gave rise to the so-called Lexical Approach in language teaching, which, as mentioned previously, ascribes central importance to the different combinations that words enter into (Walsh, 2005).

Since the emergence of the Lexical Approach, a lot of scholars, tempted to unveil the nature of collocations, have tried to define this linguistic phenomenon. Lewis (2000), for instance, defines collocation as "the way in which words co-

occur in natural text in statistically significant ways". For Nattinger and DeCarrio (1997), collocations are "strings of specific lexical items that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance".

A thorough analysis of the existing definitions of the term collocation shows that there are two sets of scholars with somewhat distinct approaches to defining the term collocation (Trinh, 2002).

The first set of scholars tends to define collocations simply as ***a co-occurrence of words*** (Trinh, 2002).

"*Collocations are words combining or coming together in a way characteristic of language (e.g. strong tea, heavy drinker, by accident, etc.)*" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 1974 in Trinh, 2002).
"*Collocations consist basically of two or three lexical words, usually linked by grammatical words*" (Newmark, 1981 in Trinh, 2002).
"*Collocation is two or more words that go 'happily' or naturally with each other*" (Newmark, 1988 in Trinh, 2002).

The second set of scholars depicts 'collocation' as a ***habitual co-occurrence of words*** (Trinh, 2002).

"*Collocation is a group of words that occurs repeatedly in a language*" (Benson, 1985; Carter, 1987 in Trinh, 2002).
"*Collocation is the way that some words occur regularly whenever another word is used*" (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1987 in Trinh, 2002).
"*Collocation is the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items*" (Crystal, 1986 in Trinh, 2002).

Other scholars who have analyzed the proposed definitions of collocations have identified two distinct approaches to

defining the term: frequency-based and phraseological approach (Cowie, 1994; Nesselhauf, 2005; Gyllstad, 2007, etc.). The frequency-based approach is predominantly advocated by scholars working within the fields of Corpus Linguistics and Computational Linguistics. Within this approach collocations are intrinsically connected to frequency and statistics. More precisely, collocations are seen as units consisting of co-occurring words at a certain distance from each other, and a distinction is often made between frequently and infrequently co-occurring words (Nesselhauf, 2005). The technical terms within this approach are: 'node' for the main element in the collocation, 'collocates' for the other words that combine with the main word, and 'span' – the number of collocates that accompany the node (Gyllstad, 2007). The phraseological approach, on the other hand, has been largely inspired by the Russian phraseology, and is more tightly linked to the fields of lexicography and language pedagogy (Gyllstad, 2007). The phraseological approach emphasizes the relation between lexical and syntactic patterning in collocations and attempts to tell collocations apart from free combinations of words, on the one hand, and from other lexical restriction phenomena, on the other hand. The point that unites researchers in the phraseological tradition is the treatment of collocation as a word combination, displaying various degrees of fixedness (Nesselhauf, 2005).

In summary, the literature review reveals that a lot of discussions have been raised about the term collocation, and numerous attempts have been made at defining this term. As a consequence, there is not one unanimously accepted definition or approach to delineating this linguistic phenomenon, but in essence, all definitions rest on the fact that collocations are recurring combinations of words.

Distinctive properties of collocations: collocations vs. other types of phrases

Apart from defining collocations many researchers have been tempted to uncover their distinctive properties, as that, in turn, can lead to making a clear distinction between collocations and the rest of the co-occurrence relationships that exist among words. Because of that, familiarizing advanced EFL/ESL students with the distinctive features of collocations, as opposed to those of the other similar types of phraseological expressions, is deemed an imperative.

This section provides an overview of significant studies which discuss this specific issue (Baker, 1992; Fernandez, 2009; McKeown and Radev, 2000, Gramley and Patzold, 1992).

The first criterion that a word combination has to meet in order to qualify as a collocation is meaning (Gramley and Patzold, 1992). Namely, in the case of collocations "each lexeme makes an independent contribution to the meaning of the whole collocation". In other words, their meaning is compositional, i.e. can be predicted from the meaning of the parts they are composed of (Fernandez, 2009). In fact, not all collocations are necessarily fully compositional – there is usually an element of meaning added to the combination (e.g. *strong tea, soft drink*). Still, compared to idioms collocations are compositional and idioms are the most extreme examples of non-compositionality since the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be deduced on the basis of the meanings of the lexical components they are made of (e.g. *to bury the hatchet* – to become friendly again, *the long and the short of it* – the basic facts about a situation) (Fernandez, 2009; Baker, 1992).

Another criterion for recognizing collocation is related to word classes (Gramley and Patzold, 1992). The component parts of a collocation normally belong to different word classes

(e.g. *demand-meet* (n-v), *hopes high* (n-adj.) and *apologies-profusely* (v-adv), etc.). This property clearly distinguishes collocations from compound nouns (e.g. *car park* (n-n), *university library* (n-n), etc.).

The criterion which seems to be particularly helpful in differentiating between free combination and collocations is range (Gramley and Patzold, 1992). Lexemes that belong to the core vocabulary of English are typically found in free combinations (e.g. *cheep, expensive, fast, great, new, nice, old, round, slow, small, square, young, buy, get, go,* etc.). The number of combinations formed with these is enormous. The number of lexemes (or collocates) that occur together with the node is what is meant by the range of a lexeme. The range of lexemes in collocations is significantly smaller than that of lexemes in free combinations.

In addition to the three abovementioned criteria, there are other criteria that need to be mentioned here: fixedness, substitutability, additions, deletions and displacement (Gramley and Patzold, 1992). Collocations show various degrees of fixedness. For instance, in some collocations the adverbs are not formally marked by the –ly morpheme (e.g. *swear-blind; drunk-blind; forget-clean; naked-stark*, etc.). Similarly, Baker (1992) draws a line between idioms and collocations in relation to fixedness and states that while the form of idioms is invariable in all cases (e.g. *to bury the hatchet*), in the case of collocations "the relationship can hold between all or several of their various forms, combined in any grammatically acceptable order" (e.g. *to achieve aims, aims having been achieved, achievable aims, the achievement of an aim*). With substitutability, lexemes can sometimes be replaced by close synonyms (e.g. *hardened criminal* vs. *confirmed criminal)*. Additions are most often pre-or post- modifying nouns (e.g. *to meet still rising world demand)*. Deletions are also possible in collocation (e.g. *I have not got the*

faintest (*idea*)). As for displacement, personal pronouns may replace the actual collocation items (e.g. '*Instead of banishing or shunning clichés, haven't we got to meet them imaginatively*').

Another property of collocations which deserves special attention is arbitrariness (McKeown and Radev, 2006). In other words, collocations are typically characterized as arbitrary, language- (and dialect-) specific, recurrent in context, and common in technical language. The notion of arbitrariness refers to the fact that substituting a synonym for one of the words in a collocation may result in an infelicitous lexical combination. Thus, for example, a phrase such as *make an effort* is acceptable, but *make an exertion* is not, despite the fact that these two are treated as synonyms[ii]. That near-synonyms cannot substitute for the components of a collocation can be illustrated with the following example –*shout, scream, call* and *bawl* are synonymous, but unlike *shout, scream, call* which collocate with *for help*, *bawl* does not (*bawl for help)(Fernandez, 2009).

On the basis of the literature overview regarding the distinguishing features of collocations presented above, it can be inferred that it is vital to make advanced ESL\EFL aware of the fact that "collocations border on free combinations, on the one hand, and on compounds and idioms, on the other" (Grimm, 2009), and to enable students to distinguish among these similar, but still different phraseological expressions. Students' attention should also be drawn to the fact that this 'mission' is not always simple and straightforward, as the boundary line among the different types of phrases is not clear-cut in all cases. Namely, sometimes there is an evident overlap between 'free combinations' and 'collocations', as well as a grey area between 'collocations' and 'idioms' (Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1986).

Types of collocations

Many scholars who have analyzed collocations noticed that there are different types of collocations which can be classified in many different ways (Benson, Benson, and Ilson, 1986; Baker 1992; Hill, 2000; Sughair, 2007; Sinclair, 1991, etc.). Raising advanced EFL\ESL students' awareness of the different types of collocational patterns is of paramount importance as it will assist students' recognition of collocations in actual contexts, and, eventually, will lead to their acquisition and retention in students' long-term memory.

This section present several major classifications of collocations based on different criteria.

Register is strongly connected to collocations and in that respect collocations can be classified as *common collocations*, which are used in everyday language (e.g. *to catch the train; to give somebody a call*), and *register-specific collocations,* which are used in specialized subject fields (e.g. *readme file, proxy server,* and *dummy object*, all of which are examples of IT-specific collocations) (Sinclair, 1991; Sughair, 2007).

On the basis of the degree of restriction or occurrence, there are strong and weak collocations (Lewis, 1997; Hasan, 2004). Examples of strong collocations are: *rancid butter*, *addled eggs*, *ulterior motives* and *harbor grudges*. In the case of strong collocations knowledge of the meaning of the collocator (or collocate) does not necessarily enable non-native users of English to associate them with the right base or node. On the other hand, weak collocations are 'more predictable'(e.g. *good boy, white shirt, white wine,* etc.).

Similarly, taking into consideration the number of collocates that combine with the node, Sughair (2007) in his classification of collocations distinguishes between open, restricted and bound collocations. In open collocations the node can cluster

with a large range of other words (e.g. *catch bus/train/cold/ fire, etc.*), whereas in restricted collocations the node collocates with a limited and fixed number of words (e.g. *commit murder/crime/embezzlement*). Bound collocations are those in which the node is "uniquely selective" of its collocate (e.g. *to shrug one's shoulders*).

The actual lexical structure of collocations serves as a basis for yet another very important classification of collocations. According to this classification, collocations in English can be classified as lexical and grammatical (Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1997; Bahns, 1993). Grammatical collocations are phrases consisting of a dominant word (noun, verb, adjective) and a preposition or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause; whereas lexical collocations are phrases that typically consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs only. Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) in their BBI Dictionary list the grammatical collocations as follows:

1. Noun + preposition (*hostility between*);
2. Noun + to + infinitive (*pleasure to do it*);
3. Noun + that + clause (*an oath that he would do his duty*);
4. Preposition + noun combination (*at anchor*);
5. Adjective + preposition combination that occurs in the predicate (*angry at everyone*);
6. Predicate adjectives + to + infinitive (*it was necessary for him to work*);
7. Adjective + that + clause (*it was imperative that I be there*);
8. Nineteen English verb patterns.

Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) also put forth seven major types of lexical collocations:

1. Verb + noun/pronoun or prepositional phrase (*set a record*);
2. Verb + noun (*squander a fortune*);

3. Adjective + noun (*pitched battle*);
4. Noun + verb (of action) (*blizzards rage*);
5. Noun + of + noun (*a bouquet of flowers*);
6. Adverb + adjective (*strictly accurate*);
7. Verb + adverb (*apologize humbly*).

Although, the classification above is quite comprehensive, Rabeh (2010), who does not distinguish between grammatical and lexical collocations, enumerates the same types of collocations but also adds the following: adjective + adjective (e.g. *healthy and well*), adverb + adverb (e.g. *secretly and publically)*, noun + noun (e.g. *nerve cell*), as-as collocations (e.g. *as strong as a lion*), parts of countable noun (e.g. *a bouquet of flowers*); and parts of uncountable nouns (e.g. *an article of clothing*).

Of all the above listed types of grammatical and lexical collocations in English, research shows that verb + noun, noun + of + noun, adjective + noun, and noun + noun are the most prevalent ones (Witten & Franken, 2010 in Shammas, 2013).

To sum up, there are different types of collocations and training advanced EFL/ESL students to recognize them is crucial in alleviating both the process of reception and production of collocations.

Useful 'tools' and practices

Apart from providing students with a solid theoretical background, students need to be trained to make conscious efforts to learn and actively use, in their oral and written output, as many collocations as possible. In that context, systematic and well-organized note-taking (Hill, 2000; Woolard, 2000; Shammas, 2013) must be set as a priority. In addition, training students to regularly consult collocation dictionaries

(McIntosh et al. 2009; Hill & Lewis, 1997; Benson et al., 1986), electronic corpora and concordances (Woolard , 2000; Jaefarpour and Koosha, 2006), is also highly recommended by EFL\ESL researchers.

Taking note of collocations in a special collocation glossary is particularly useful for repeating and recycling collocations already learnt every now and then to help learners register and retain them in their memory (Hill, 2000). In order for the glossaries to serve their purpose efficiently, students should be directed to arrange their collocation glossaries: 1) grammatically: sections such as noun + noun, adjective + noun, verb + noun, adverb + adjective; 2) by common key word: collocations with *do, make, get, up, speak* etc.; 3) by topic: collocations to talk about *holidays, travel, work*, etc. (Hill, 2000), 4) alphabetically, devoting two or three pages to each letter; 5) by situation (*at the bank*); 6) by functions (*complaining, apologizing*), etc. (Woolard, 2000).

Using specialized collocation dictionaries is a very significant tool when it comes to mastering collocations. EFL\ESL students should be encouraged to look up words and their collocates on a regular basis both in class and outside the classroom. Teachers can come up with all sorts of activities based on the collocation dictionaries, such as seeking specific collocations and their meaning, but they can also use them as an integral and compulsory part of the reading, writing, listening and speaking activities. The Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (McIntosh et al. 2009), the LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations (Hill & Lewis, 1997), The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations (Benson et al., 1997) are amongst the most widely recommended collocation dictionaries by EFL\ESL researchers.

Finally, many researchers recommend that in order for advanced learners to acquire collocation patterning of words

they should work with language corpora, which are accessible on the Internet, such as: The British National Corpus, COBUILD Bank of English or the on-line Collins Cobuild Concordacer and Collocations Sampler, and The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Woolard, 2000; Jaefarpour and Koosha, 2006). Language corpora are extremely useful tools primarily because they include authentic (not pre-fabricated) language, and are enormous and versatile. The searching of collocates in language corpora is carried out by means of special concordancing technology which in turn provides students with a rich tapestry of examples of specific linguistic elements embedded in a variety of rhetorical contexts. It can also help students to construct meanings and usage patterns based on sentences or pieces of discourse collected from published or transcribed texts (Kolln, 2007). Concordances are advantageous as they turn students into researchers, i.e. language detectives, who hypothesize and test lexical or grammatical usage patterns (Johns, 1991) in the target language and, finally, come to conclusions independently of their teachers.

On the basis of the aforesaid, it can be inferred that compiling students' collocation glossaries, consulting collocation dictionaries, language corpora and concordances are vital but tools that should be brought to students' attention with regards to mastering collocations in English. Still, it is noteworthy to mention that these are by no means the only useful tools and practices in overcoming collocational hurdles, but any further pursuit of this topic here runs the risk of seriously straining the boundaries of the research article at hand.

Conclusion

Reaching mastery of the English language is impossible without a proper collocational competence. However, unfortunately, even advanced students of English very frequently seem to seriously backfire in that respect. This implies that serious improvements of the teaching process need to be made and collocations must receive the attention they deserve. The first step in that direction surely is to provide EFL\ESL students, particularly those who have reached or are about to reach advanced level, a solid theoretical foundation that will make the concept of collocation completely clear to them. In that respect we have selected several extremely important aspects of the concept of collocation, elaborated in various studies – definitions, properties and types of collocations. Secondly, students need to receive clear instructions as to how they should go about noticing, memorizing and actively using collocations not just in class but whenever they interact with the language outside the classroom. Students' collocation glossaries, collocation dictionaries, as well as language corpora and concordances, present extremely useful and widely recommended 'tools' for mastering collocations.

What this paper proposes is completely in line with what Ying and Hendricks (2004) call the collocation awareness-raising process (CAR) which, according to them, consists of four steps in teaching collocations - making students understand what collocations are; raising collocation awareness by introducing materials for target collocations; teaching students to notice and note collocations, followed by the step of incorporating the learnt collocations in tasks, and, lastly, giving feedback on students work.

Further support for what is proposed here is Lackman's study (2011), in which he underlines that it is impossible to

teach all collocations in English, and that the aim should be to raise students' awareness of the nature of collocations in general by instructing students to notice and analyze collocations whenever they encounter them. This cognitive process will, in turn, significantly aid the acquisition process itself, which, eventually will invariably result in students using collocations productively both in their oral and written output.

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[i] The Lexical Approach has emerged since 1993 when the term lexical approach was coined by Lewis (1993). Lewis posits his ideas that vocabulary should be the most important aspect in teaching English stating that language is grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar (Lewis, 1993, p. 95). In sum, the Lexical Approach gives more importance to vocabulary than grammar and one way to apply the lexical approach in the classroom is to focus on collocations.

[ii] Note that Gramley and Patzold (1992) claim that substitutability in collocations is sometimes possible.

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