

Collocation

Language and lexis

In the past, we were encouraged to think of grammar as the bones of the language and vocabulary as the flesh to be added. We now know that language consists largely of pre-fabricated chunks of lexis. That 'skeleton image' has been consigned proverbially to the cupboard. A central feature of lexis is collocation. The work of John Sinclair, Dave Willis, Ron Carter, Michael McCarthy, Michael Lewis, and many others, have all contributed to the way we today think about lexis and what it means for language learning.

What is collocation?

Collocation is a feature of all languages. At its simplest, according to Rutherford, collocation is 'what goes together with what'. I like to define it as 'the way words occur together in predictable ways.' We are not surprised if we hear someone speak of *an utter disaster* or if we read of a *shady deal*. Although we are familiar with the use of *shady* with nouns like *place*, or *corner*, we are not surprised by its metaphorical use with *deal*. Language is intrinsically metaphorical. Knowing the word *shady* involves knowing the range of words it can collocate with. Corpus linguistics has taught us the importance of looking at natural language in large enough quantities to see recurring patterns of lexis.

Is this new?

Of course not! Even if the word 'collocation' is new to students and to some teachers, the problem is as old as language learning itself. How often do students ask *Can you say X?* - If we can say both *It's nice to get out into the open/fresh air*, why can't we say *I need a breath of open air?* And if we can say *an open-air restaurant*, why not then *a fresh-air restaurant?* We have all smiled at the menu with *cow tail soup* or the student who talked about *silly cow disease*. We are familiar with the concept of communicative competence, but perhaps we should add the concept of collocational competence to our thinking. Any analysis of students' speech or writing shows a lack of this collocational competence. Lack of competence in this area forces students into grammatical mistakes because they create longer utterances because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say. A student could easily invent the cumbersome *his disability is forever* because they lack the adj + noun collocation, *he has a permanent disability*. Analysis of students' essay writing often shows a serious lack of collocational competence with the English 'de-lexicalised' verbs: *get, put, make, do, bring, take*. Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocates of a key word that is central to what they are writing about.

Different kinds of collocation

A collocation can be made up of two or more words:

verb + noun --> *make a mistake*

adv + verb --> *totally misunderstand*

adj + prep --> *guilty of ... ing*

adj + noun --> *heavy traffic*

adv + adj --> *extremely generous*

noun + noun --> *a ceasefire agreement*

Unique collocations

It is useful to think of collocation on a cline from probably unique / fixed / strong to flexible/weak. I say 'probably' unique advisedly since all native speakers know that as soon as they say that X does not exist, they find it said or written within 24 hours! I have often given the example *leg room* (meaning the distance between two seats in, for example, a plane) in talks and maintained that *leg space* was not possible. I have recently learned that the correct technical term in the airline industry is, in fact, *leg space*.

Collocation as shorthand

Collocation is the key to fluency. This cannot be over-emphasised. Much current fluency teaching concentrates on getting students talking. This is futile if students haven't had enough input in chunks, which they can call on when needed. What happens in such lessons is that students are merely exposed to the low-quality output of other students. We need to place a much greater emphasis on good-quality written and spoken input at lower levels than is currently the case. Native speakers can only speak at the speed they speak because they are calling on a vast repertoire of ready-made language in their mental lexicons. Similarly, they can listen at the speed of speech and read quickly because they are constantly recognising used chunks'. [...] The more exposure students have to good quality input and the more awareness they develop of the lexical nature of language, the more they will recognise and eventually produce longer chunks themselves. Fluency is a natural consequence of a larger and more phrasal mental lexicon.

The pronunciation pay-off

Because students create most of what they say from the individual words they know, their pronunciation, stress, and intonation, can be difficult for the listener. The great added bonus to knowing a large number of collocations and other longer expressions is that we learn the stress pattern as a whole when we meet the item. The more longer lexical items students know, the better their stress and intonation will be. The more and bigger the lexical items students know, the more brain-space they have to think about the content of what they are saying. [...] The reason students find unseen reading so difficult is because they don't recognise the chunks. They read every word as if it were separate from every other word. During silent reading students may be chunking totally wrongly. And mis-chunking matters. Students cannot store items in their brain correctly if they have not identified them correctly. They cannot then retrieve them. Correctly understood, and stored lexical items should be available for immediate use.

Collocation and meaning

Every word has a collocational field i.e. that range of other words with which it collocates. Very often the difference between words of similar meaning is defined partly by their different collocational fields.

(Adapted from 'Collocational competence' by Jimmie Hill, ETP, April 1999, issue 11.)