

## The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary through Collocation

A. Lecturer Nada Mohsin Taher Aboghunaim

University of Kufa, College of Education, English Department

[nadam.taher@uokufa.edu.iq](mailto:nadam.taher@uokufa.edu.iq)

### الخلاصة

تعتبر المفردات جزء مهم لكل من تعلم اللغة الاجنبية واكتساب اللغة على الرغم من انه في وقت ما قد اهمل تعليم المفردات. وهذا بسبب انه جوهر تعلم اللغة كان يعتمد على النحو والصوت.

تهدف الدراسة الى التركيز على اهمية المفردات وتعلمها من خلال طريقة حديثة نسبيا وهي المتلازمات اللفظية. وقد تم اختيار المتلازمات لان اللغة مليئة بالمتلازمات اللفظية. اضافة الى ذلك يسلط البحث على اهمية تدريس المتلازمات اللفظية في صفوف طلاب اللغة الاجنبية لانها تساعد الطلاب في الوصول الى الكفاءة التواصلية وليصبحوا طبيعيين اكثر كمتحدثي اللغة الام. اخيرا, يؤكد البحث على انه يجب تعليم المتلازمات اللفظية واعطاء الاهمية لها في الصف.

### Abstract

Vocabulary is regarded an essential part of both learning foreign language and acquisition of native language even though it has been neglected at times. This is because the core of language learning in EFL classes was based on grammar and pronunciation.

This present study aims at focusing on the importance of vocabulary teaching in language learning through relatively new technique namely collocation. Collocation has been chosen since language is full of collocation. Moreover, This paper highlights the significance of teaching collocation in EFL classes since it helps learners reach communicative competence and be more natural like native speakers. Finally, it stresses that collocation should be taught and attach more importance to it in class.

**Key words: vocabulary, collocation, EFL class**

### Introduction

Firth is considered the father of collocation and the developer of the most traditional approach. In practice, most foreign language teachers pay more attention to grammar and pronunciation rather than vocabulary in their classes. Even though vocabulary has been neglected at times, nowadays teachers and practitioners pay more attention to the teaching of

# The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary through Collocation

Nada Mohsin Taher Aboghunaim

---

vocabulary from a different perspective. Dictionary makers, for instance, dedicating attention to both word functions, pronunciation and connotations and collocations. ELT experts indicate that when learners utilize collocation correctly is a sign of maturity and a high level of proficiency.(Fernandez, ٢٠٠٩)

This paper investigates the importance of collocation and it encourages teachers to deal with collocation particularly when they teach new and known vocabulary in the classroom and raise learners' awareness through internet, concordance, dictionaries, etc.

## Literature review

McCarthy (١٩٩٠) considers collocation as an essential principle to organize vocabulary in a language. Thus, collocation is regarded as a central aspect of learning vocabulary since languages are full of collocation. Collocation is regarded one of the binding forces between the words of a language. McCarthy describes this relationship as ' a marriage contract between words' (p. ١٢). He adds that there are three kinds of relationship between words. The first one is strong relation (unmarked). It is known as this because the item, such as blonde, collocated only with hair. The second relation is that when two items are felt to be unusual such as large problem. Finally, it is when two items are highly marked or unacceptable, for example major man. It can be worth noting that learners, even in advanced level, cannot make an appropriate collocation since knowledge of collocation is part of native speakers' competence. (McCarthy (١٩٩٠)

Gairns & Redman (١٩٨٦, p. ٣٧) define the term collocation as 'two items co-occur, or are used together frequently'.

Collocation may occur because either co-occurrence reflects real world state, for instance (pass salt please), or native speakers choose two items to say together, for example, a lion roars rather than a lion bellows.

The most popular collocation could occur in one of these kinds:

- ١- Subject (noun) + verb (e.g.' the earth revolves around the sun') rather than  
\*'the earth circulates around the sun'.

- ٢- Verb + object (noun) (e.g. 'she bites her nails') rather than \*' she eats her nails'.
- ٣- Adjective + noun (e.g. 'a loud noise') is entirely different from ' a big noise'.
- ٤- Adverb+ past participle (e.g. 'fully insured'). (p. ٣٧)

To identify the limits of items, the use of collocational grids is a useful method. Amazingly, it can be seen from the grid that the word (beautiful) can be collocated with woman, child but not a man whereas (charming) can be used with a woman, a child and a man, while (attractive) can co-occurs with a woman, a man but not a child. (ibid)

According to Carter & McCarthy (١٩٨٨), co-occurrence has two major properties. It can occur either over sentence boundaries (i.e. there is a gap between two items), or independent of grammatical kind. Below are two examples:

- a. They collect stamps.
  - They collect many things, but chiefly stamps.
- b. He argued strongly
  - The strength of his argument. (pp. ٣٤-٣٥)

Further, McCarthy (١٩٩٠) states that collocational relationship can be either syntagmatic or paradigmatic relations. In other words, when the relation of words occur horizontally (i.e. from left to right) in one box, it is called syntagmatic. An example of this relation is

'The application was submitted (application+submitted)

While paradigmatic relation occurs when alternatives can be chosen vertically. A good example of this is

The plan                      rejected

The scheme   was   accepted

The application              submitted   (p. ١٦)

### **Pedagogical implication**

## The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary through Collocation

Nada Mohsin Taher Aboghunaim

---

It should be clear that many studies confirm the importance of teaching vocabulary in collocation. Nation (١٩٩٠) indicates that teaching vocabulary in collocation is very important part of learning new words and it is regarded a reaction against teaching vocabulary in isolation. Taylor (as cited in Nation, ١٩٩٠) presents the advantages of teaching vocabulary in collocation. First, students can learn vocabulary in collocation more easily than those are alone. Second, teaching vocabulary in context is considered efficient. Third, context with deliberate association is sufficient. Finally, vocabulary needs to be learned over grammatical competence due to its distinct feature of language. Nation suggests some techniques to teach this notion. Students are asked to put one word in a list of collocation by working in small groups, by consulting the dictionary or by searching the word in context. Moreover, teachers ask students to fill the blanks in a passage from two lists of words under the passage in order to make a suitable collocation.

Teachers, as Gairns & Redman (١٩٨٦) put, could teach learners collocation problems separately or as they encounter these problems because there are no specific rules of collocation and this type of vocabulary learning is dealt with an ad hoc. Teachers could teach their intermediate students how to revise items such as adjectives through collocation exercises. A teacher might deploy a task in which his students are asked to collocate words (light, heavy, weak, strong and mild) with drinks, things and cheese as below:

light

heavy

dish
------

mild

strong

weak

Teachers would recognize the problems after students would discuss in pairs or groups which type of dish they prefer. This task is a good one as it would reflect the problems in using collocation. (ibid)

Sokmen (١٩٩٧) offers methods to teach collocation. They suggest that learners can teach collocation through helping students raise awareness by recording collocations. Also, teachers can encourage learners to use index cards for matching halves of collocation. Further, they could guide students to write new words in a sentence and then they create

alternatives to the words as a productive skill activity. Lewis (as cited in Schmitt & McCarthy, ١٩٩٧) assumes that it is necessary to teach students groups of words as chunks rather than isolated words such as 'the (adjective) thing to do'. (p. ٢٥٤)

In terms of a survey conducts, Dickinson (٢٠٠٨) claims that the need for teaching collocation comes from that most ELT coursebooks do not provide obvious materials on collocation. In addition, teachers need to know the types of collocation in order to help learners raise awareness of this term. Therefore, teachers can use language corpora because it is one of the valuable resources. Teachers should be aware of the problems that are caused by L١ interference. Gairns & Redman (١٩٨٦) offer examples (p. ٨) to point out this issue. When students are asked to cross out the wrong answer in the groups below:

He lost	his wallet so he went to the police
	the bus so he was late (*)
	his way so he got very upset.

The error is being made by students is mother tongue interference. Students may not choose the second option because they directly translate it and find it suitable. The importance of teaching collocation to foreign language lies in the fact that linguists, such as Sinclair, demonstrate that it is difficult and complex to produce language fluently and understand it sufficiently through word by word learning or highly depending on grammar.(Dickinson, ٢٠٠٨)

Derived from studies (Shei and Pain, ٢٠٠٠; Balci and Cakir, ٢٠١٢), they advise teachers to teach vocabulary through collocations rather than classical techniques since collocations enhance learners' retention of new vocabulary as well as acquisition language quickly and effectively.

## Conclusion

It was found that the importance of teaching vocabulary through collocation in EFL class is not only because it is one of the integral part of English language but also it enables learners to express themselves in English easily and correctly. The difference among languages led to incapability of choosing suitable related words while communicating in real life. EF learners

## The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary through Collocation

Nada Mohsin Taher Aboghunaim

---

seeks to be more natural when they learn English and this technique helps them to be more like native speakers. It was believed that collocation contributes not only to the development of vocabulary but also to the retention of new vocabulary items. Finally, collocation should be taught and not neglected.

### References

- Balci, O. & Calkir, A. (2012). Teaching vocabulary through collocations in EFL classes: the case of Turkey. *International journal of research studies in language learning*, 1 (1), 21-32.
- Carter, R. & McCarthy, M. (1998). *Lexis and structure*. In R. Carter & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary and language teaching* (pp. 18-38). London: Longman.
- Dickinson, N. P. (2008). Raising awareness of collocation in the Japanese EFL classroom. Centre for English language studies Postgraduate Programmes. The University of Birmingham.
- Fernandez, R.F., et al. (2009). Collocations in the vocabulary English teaching as a foreign language. *Acimed*, 19 (1), 1-5.
- Gairns, R. & Redman, S. (1996). *Working with words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCarthy, M. (1990). *Vocabulary*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- Shei, C. C. & Pain, H. (2000). An ESL writers' collocation aid. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 13(2), 167-182.
- Sokman, A. (1997). Current trends in teaching second language vocabulary. In N. Schmidt & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: description, acquisition, pedagogy* (pp. 237-257). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.