

The lexical approach :

An emphasis on collocations

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Abstract

In this article, the lexical approach is discussed. Then teaching collocations as a way to apply the lexical approach in the classroom is recommended. Finally, a method of teaching collocations and some sample exercises are presented.

Introduction

It seems that the lexical approach is not popular among teachers of English in Thailand. This has resulted in vocabulary negligence and in particular, an unawareness of the importance of collocation in language learning. It is probably because the Thai teachers are more familiar with the grammar-translation methodology since they probably have the traditional mindset that "mastery of the grammatical system is a prerequisite for effective communication" (Olga, 2001). Later, they have been overwhelmed with the idea of the communicative approach. Lewis (2000) explained that the communicative approach concerns the expression and communication of meanings.

With such an emphasis, fluency is obviously considered of more importance than accuracy. Students seem to be more proficient in two skills, i.e. speaking and listening, despite the fact that the approach itself emphasizes all the four skills. Students may be able to speak and communicate well, but the effectiveness of vocabulary and grammar used is still questionable. With the recent campaign for the lexical approach, EFL personnel have increased their attention in collocations. However, in Thailand this is probably not the case since the number of action or classroom research on collocation is very limited.

Introducing collocation at the earliest possible stage is ideal. Hill (2000) states that “collocation should play an important part in our teaching from lesson one” (p. 60). We have to accept the fact that collocation has been an undervalued aspect of productive vocabulary, despite its significance in EFL learning (Wei, 1999). Collocation should be focused on in every single stage of a learner’s academic path, from the primary to university levels. Also, it should be highlighted when teaching any English skill such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating.

It is now time to strongly encourage the teaching of collocations or word partnerships in all English courses at all levels since “adherence to the collocational conventions of a foreign language contributes greatly to one’s idiomaticity and nativelikeness, and not doing so announces one’s foreignness” (James, 1998, p. 152).

This article stresses the necessity for teaching English collocations and suggestions on how to teach collocations are later presented. Finally, sample collocation exercises are given.

What is the lexical approach?

In this section, the definition of the lexical approach and the historical background are briefly discussed as overview.

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). There were a number of objections to the lexical approach at the beginning; however, over time, a lot of researchers have come out in favor and the lexical approach has found its way into the classroom.

The principle of the lexical approach is to “allow learners to experience language items in natural contexts and to learn from their experience. The approach relies crucially on the concept of the learners’ corpus” (Willis, 1994, p. viii) . It focuses on “developing learners’ proficiency with words and word combinations. It is based on the idea that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to produce lexical phrases as chunks and that these chunks become the raw data by which learners perceive patterns of language traditionally thought of as grammar” (Lewis, 1993, p. 95).

In sum, the lexical approach gives more importance to vocabulary than grammar. One way to apply the lexical approach in the classroom is to focus on collocations.

What is collocation?

Under this topic, collocation, which is an important element of the lexical approach, is highlighted. The definition and classification of collocations are briefly discussed.

Lewis (2000) defines collocation as “the way in which words co-occur in natural text in statistically significant ways” (p. 132). For Nattinger and DeCarrio (1997), collocations are defined as “strings of specific lexical items that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance, such as *rancid butter* and *curry favor*” (p.36). While for James (1998), collocations are “the other words any particular word normally keeps company with” (p. 152).

Collocations can be classified in many ways. For example, Baker (1997) divides collocations into lexical collocations, collocations that involve content words, e.g. *strong coffee*, and grammatical collocations, collocations that involve grammatical structure, e.g. *turn on the radio*. According to Wei (1999, p. 5), collocations are categorized into 1) lexical collocations, e.g. *a major difference*; 2) grammatical collocations, e.g. *aware of* (grammatical collocation that contains a preposition), *have someone do something* and *have something done* (grammatical collocation that involves a grammatical structure) and 3) idiomatic expressions, e.g. *kick the bucket*. Meanwhile, Hill (2000) suggests four kinds of

collocations: 1) unique collocations e.g. *foot the bill*, 2) strong collocations e.g. *moved to tears*; 3) weak collocations e.g. *a good weekend* and lastly 4) medium-strength collocations, e.g. *do the laundry*.

In brief, collocation is the way one word frequently or always comes together with another word or words for no specific reasons. These co-occurrences or word partnerships are observed because of their regular co-appearances and they are mainly classified as lexical, grammatical and idiomatic.

Why should collocations be focused on in EFL/ESL classroom teaching?

In this part, the reasons why collocations should be taught are suggested and related literature is given to support those reasons.

Collocation is arbitrary and unpredictable, (Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1986; Lewis, 1997; Woolard, 2000; Lewis, 1997). For example, it is correct to say *to make the bed* but not *to do the bed*; *to turn on* but not *to open the light*; *sales volume* but not *sales amount*; *bread and butter* but not *butter and bread*; *to shrug one's shoulders* but not *to shrug one's arms*, etc. Obviously, it is hard for EFL learners to cope with and to produce collocations effectively if collocations are not focused on and practiced.

As EFL teachers, we all frequently observe students' collocational errors. Students produce errors such as *speak a story, new bread, eat water, do a mistake, go to swimming* or for more advanced learners errors such as *emerge new branches, in the occasion of, emphasize on*, etc. (Boonyasaquan, 2006). Plausible explanations to account for the errors are suggested by a number of researchers (Baker, 1992; Farghal and Obiedat, 1995; Huang, 2001; Boonyasaquan, 2006). Collocational awareness has been raised.

Ying and Hendricks (2004) point out in their research that EFL learners have poor mastery of collocations for two reasons. First, collocations in general do not cause comprehension problems. A collocation consists of word partners. Each "lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent" (Cruse, 1987, p. 40). Therefore, it is possible for learners to guess the meaning such as *a quick glance, it rains heavily*, etc. The second reason is that some collocations are very difficult for the learners, particularly, unique collocations or idiomatic expressions. They are very confusing for the learners, such as *a withering glance, it rains cats and dogs*, etc. The mother-tongue interference also influences their understanding and production of collocations. It is, therefore, necessary for teachers to raise awareness and teach collocations so as to enable EFL/ESL learners to master the language.

Collocation, despite being earnestly introduced about ten years ago, is quite a new issue for teachers themselves so a number of teachers have little or no knowledge about this. When a teacher teaches new vocabulary, s/he does not realize the necessity to introduce a chunk, not a single word, so as to let learners register from the very beginning the word being taught and its word partner/s (Conzett, 2000). For example, if a teacher wishes to teach the word *homework*, s/he should introduce *to do homework* as a chunk instead of letting students register in their memory only the single word, *homework*. As a result, it is possible that students may be confused whether a collocate of *homework* is *to do* or *to make*.

However, teachers should make a good judgement in choosing which collocations to be taught since a great number of collocations generally appear in each class. Teachers should not teach passive or unclear collocations. Rather, they should choose to teach only active and clear ones. Passive idioms and dead metaphors, such as *to put the cat among the pigeons*, etc., are not necessary for the EFL learners' daily life and should probably not be focused on in classroom teaching. Hill (2000) suggests that teachers should teach what he categorizes as *medium-strength* collocations such as *strong coffee, to attend a course, deeply appreciate*, etc. Meanwhile, it is suggested that teachers should stop

including idiom exercises in their teaching and Farghal and Obiedat (1995) support this idea by saying that “common collocations like *fast color*, *rough sea* and *weak tea* are communicatively more useful to L2 learners than idioms like *pull one’s socks up*, *kicked the bucket*, and *bury the hatchet*” (p. 3).

To sum up, the first and foremost point that EFL teachers should have in mind when teaching new vocabulary is to introduce a new word together with its frequent co-occurrence/s or its collocate/s. Also, teachers are recommended to focus only on active collocations.

Suggestions on how to teach collocations

As mentioned earlier, collocations should be included when teaching all English skills. General suggestions on teaching collocations are as follows:

- First of all, convince learners of the usefulness of including collocations in their communication since it is natural for learners of a foreign/second language to want to be like a native speaker. “Native-like proficiency of a language depends crucially on knowledge of a stock of prefabricated units” (Cowie, 1996, p. 389). Therefore, EFL learners should have a number of collocations in

stock to communicate fluently and accurately.

- Encourage learners to notice and be regularly aware of collocations whenever they learn English. The habit can be formed by making them notice and record language patterns and collocations. Regular awareness raising activities should help students improve their collocational competence, and even fluency (Islam, 2006). The collocation awareness-raising process (CAR) proposed by Ying and Hendricks (2004) suggests four steps in teaching collocations. First, make students understand what collocations are. Second, raise collocation awareness by introducing materials for target collocations. Third, teach the students the steps of noticing and noting collocations, followed by the step of incorporating the learnt collocations in tasks. Lastly, examine and give feedback on students’ work.
- Be selective about what collocations to teach. Make sure that they are active and appropriate for learners at different stages (Hill, 2000). Do not confuse students with idioms that are too passive or difficult chunks.

- Encourage learners to guess the meaning of an unknown word from the context first and later show how useful a dictionary is. Encourage them to look up difficult word and pay attention to the examples provided in a dictionary, particularly a collocation dictionary such as *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*, to allow learners to register the new vocabulary together with the collocate/s at the same time. Also, observe and record other useful collocations of the word/s, not just a single one (Islam, 2006).
- Repeat and recycle the collocations already learnt every now and then in class activities to help learners register those learnt in their memory. “The same thing twice activates collocations” (Hill, Lewis & Lewis, 2000, p.90).
- Have students’ work corrected by their friend. Peer correction is recommended since it is a means to get feedback and instant reinforcement (Wei, 1999).
- Work in groups help fostering learning interdependence, especially in vocabulary work. Learners can exchange knowledge and ask others to explain unknown items. Group work is a motivating factor, which involves trying to remember details together, explaining impressions and building good memories (Moudraia, 2006).
- Encourage learners to reinforce learnt collocations by having a variety of activities including task-based activities.
- Advanced learners should work with language corpuses accessible on the Internet such as the British National Corpus <<http://thetis.bl.uk/BNCbib>>, COBUILD Bank of English <<http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk>> (Islam, 2006) or the on-line Collins Cobuild Concordancer and Collocations Sampler <<http://titania.cobulid.colloins.co.uk/form.html>>

How to introduce English collocations

I. Collocations in a reading and writing class

Reading and writing are frequently introduced in the same course. When teaching reading, a simple way to make students aware of collocations is to ask them to observe collocations they find in the text. Make a list of collocations. Group similar collocations and add any relevant ones that are active and useful in further study. Then, use the learnt collocations in writing. Teachers should give a topic or writing prompt that is

relevant to the reading so as to reinforce those collocations.

However, if students are asked to write an essay that does not follow a reading, the teacher may give a list of suggested collocations to the students.

Example:

The following passage would be for students with some pre-knowledge of collocations. For beginners, the approach will be different.

Underline all the collocations found in this passage. Group the collocations of similar patterns and include other relevant active collocations.

How the World Moves

Ben Wilson **takes a train** from his home in Manhattan. **On the train**, he usually **makes phone calls** or **works on his computer**. Then he **takes a taxi** from the train station to his office. He doesn't **have time** to walk.

Pierre and Arlette Gigot **get up** at five-thirty, and **take two buses** to their jobs in Paris. They don't talk much **on the bus**. Arlette often sleeps, and Pierre reads the newspaper.

Ming Li **takes a ferry** across Victoria Harbor every morning to her job in Hong Kong. **It takes** about **ten minutes**, and Ming **enjoys the boat ride**. She **listens to music**, relaxes, and **looks at the view**. "It's a wonderful way to get to work," she says. (Blackwell, Naber and Manin, 2005, p. 7)

Group the collocations found in the passage and add some more. For example:

to take a train

to take a taxi

to take a bus

to take a ferry

to take a boat

on the train

on the bus

on the ferry

to get up

to have a shower/bath

to have breakfast/lunch/dinner

to have seafood/ Japanese food

to go to school

to do homework

to watch TV

to listen to music

to listen to the radio

For more advanced learners, advanced grammatical collocations can be added. For example:

It takes ten minutes.

The lesson takes an hour.

It takes about an hour to fly to Chiangmai
from Bangkok.

How long does it take to go to Chiangmai?

It's a wonderful way.

- It's a good way.
- It's a wonderful day.
- It's a good weekend.
- to enjoy the boat ride
- to enjoy the views/scenery
- to enjoy the music
- to enjoy her/himself, themselves
- to work on the computer
- to connect to the Internet
- to browse/search/access the website
- to download the information

Note: Teachers have to decide which collocations are appropriate according to the students' level of proficiency.

Writing Task:

- Write an essay on “Your Daily Routine Activities.” Use as many collocations already learnt as possible. Or,
- Suppose you went to Hua Hin last weekend. Write an essay of about 80 words, telling us about your trip there; for example, how you went there, how long it took, what you did to pass time, what you could not do but you wanted to do, what you liked/disliked most, etc.

II. Give a variety of collocation exercises to the students to challenge their ability.

- a) *Fill in the blank with one possible answer*
1. We go to school (on) foot.
 2. I _____ breakfast at 7 o'clock.
 3. I _____ a bath in the evening.
 4. He often _____ phone calls to his girlfriend.
 5. We never forget to _____ homework.
- b) *Match the collocates in column B with the word in column A that is a good collocation. (N.B. The difficulty of collocations depends on the level of students.)*

Column A	Column B	
<u>(green)</u>	1. business	a. brand
_____	2. company	b. balance
_____	3. sheet	c. green
_____	4. image	d. insider
_____	5. trading	e. multinational

- c) *Give as many collocates as possible to the given items.*
1. clothes *(e.g. beautiful, cheap, shabby, tight, fashionable, etc.)*
 2. yellow *(e.g. creamy, light, dark, pale, soft, golden, lemon, etc.)*
 3. cheap _____

4. glad _____ 4. booming stagnant
5. go _____ global local ailing developed

d) Complete each of the following sentences using *do*, *make* or *have*. Make sure to use correct grammar.

1. He is *(doing)* research in chemistry.
2. I always _____ an argument with my brother.
3. The big flood _____ serious damage to the environment.
4. They _____ desperate attempt to find survivors of the Tsunami.
5. She _____ an appointment to see a doctor.

e) Choose the best node for all the collocates in each line. The nodes are given in the box below.

- (e.g. eggs) 1. boiled fried poached
scrambled soft-boiled
_____ 2. primary vocational part-time
formal compulsory
_____ 3. temporary administrative
professional senior teaching

staff	eggs	customers	fish
education	trade	economy	

In conclusion, this article elaborates the necessity to teach collocations to EFL/ESL students. It is recommended that collocations whenever possible in classroom should be taught from the earliest to the advanced stages of language learning. Teachers should try to raise collocational awareness to the learners, making them observe appropriate collocations, motivate them to register new vocabulary and its word partner/s, instead of recording only a single new word. The teachers should also try to give a variety of exercises and activities to reinforce the collocational knowledge. Collocations are virtually essential to make the learners communicate efficiently or even to master the English language.

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