

Teaching Collocations in a Creative Manner

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Abstract: Collocations are one of the most elusive aspect of the lexical system, thus one the hardest for learners to acquire. Even the slightest adjustment to the collocations by substituting one of its components for a synonym might turn the text into non-standard English. Teaching collocations is an essential part of teaching vocabulary, as they provide students with the most natural way of saying something, they can offer alternative ways of expressing an idea, helping avoid repetitions and they can improve the students' style in writing, giving a text more variety. The aim of this paper is to present several creative ways of teaching collocations, which make both the teaching and the learning process more entertaining and enjoyable, and provide students with sources of authentic and varied language.

Keywords: collocations, flashcards, videos, pelmanism, dictogloss.

1. Introduction

All languages emerge first as words, both historically and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and subsequent languages. Neither the coining, nor the acquisition of new words ever stops and we are continually learning new words or new meanings for old words. Learning the vocabulary of a second language presents the learner with numerous challenges, and in order to meet them, the learner has to acquire a critical mass of words for use in both understanding and producing a language and to develop strategies to remember words over time, and be able to recall them readily. In a text, word choice is heavily constrained by what comes before and after. This is probably the most elusive aspect of the lexical system, thus the hardest for learners to acquire. Even the slightest adjustment to the collocations by substituting one of its components for a synonym might turn the text into non-standard English. As Scott Thornbury points out, “the ability to deploy a wide range of lexical chunks both accurately and appropriately is probably what most distinguishes advanced learners from intermediate ones” (Thornbury 2002: 116).

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2. The importance of teaching collocations

A collocation is a pair or group of words that are often used together: "two words are collocates if they occur together with more than chance frequency, such that, when we see one, we can make a fairly safe bet that the other is in the neighbourhood", according to Thornbury (2002: 7). As Michael McCarthy points out, "these combinations sound natural to native speakers, but students of English have to make a special effort to learn them because they are often difficult to guess" (2008: 6). Some combinations simply do not sound right for native speakers. For example, the adjective 'fast' collocates with 'car', but not with 'glance'.

Learning collocations is a very important part of learning the vocabulary of a language. There are two types of collocations:

1. **fixed** collocations, or very strong ones, for example, 'to take a photo', where no other word collocates with 'photo', or 'to make an effort'
2. **open** collocations, where several different words may be used to give a similar meaning, for example, 'to keep/stick to the rules'

As far as their grammatical form is concerned, collocations can be formed by the following parts of speech:

1. adjective + noun: 'strong wind', 'formative years'
2. adverb + adjective: 'hopelessly addicted', 'completely useless'
3. verb + noun: 'make progress', 'do business'
4. adverb + verb: 'strongly suggest', 'honestly believe'
5. adjective + preposition: 'ashamed of', 'blamed for'

Learning collocations is an essential part of learning vocabulary because they can provide one with the most natural way of saying something (e.g. 'smoking is strictly forbidden' sounds more natural than 'smoking is strongly forbidden'), they can offer alternative ways of saying something, which can be more expressive or can help one avoid repetitions (e.g. instead of 'it was very cold and very dark', one can say 'it was bitterly cold and pitch dark'). Moreover, they can improve the style in writing, giving the text more variety, for example if one uses 'a substantial meal' instead of 'a big meal'.

Teachers must raise learners' awareness of collocation as early as possible. Students who meet words initially with their common collocates use them far more naturally, pronounce them better and have a greater amount of ready-made language at their disposal to aid fluency, allowing more time to focus on the message. Learning lexical strings first seems to enable students to extract the grammar themselves as they begin analysing acquired language (in Lewis 2000).

For advanced learners, especially if new to the concept, teachers need to use activities highlighting collocations. They should also stress the importance of learners actively seeking an increasingly large amount of exposure to primarily written but also spoken language outside the classroom, and noticing collocations within that material.

3. Creative ways of teaching collocations

3.1. Online flashcards sets

Flashcards can be used in a variety of ways both in the classroom and by students at home. Quizlet is a web tool where you can make flashcard sets of the collocations a teacher is preparing for the students. It saves time, and one can use sets that have already been created, such as the one on 'make/do' (<https://quizlet.com/63160248/makedo-business-collocations-flash-cards/>). There are several ways one can use these flashcard sets, as Quizlet has two games that can be played with any flashcard set, Scatter and Space Race, which are great for revising vocabulary. The former involves matching corresponding words/definitions in the quickest time possible. The class can be split into small groups and compete against each other.

3.2. Videos

Videos are a fantastic way of teaching and revising verb-noun collocations as they contain natural everyday actions. They make the language learning process more entertaining and enjoyable and provide a source of authentic and varied language, exposing students to natural expressions and the natural flow of speech. Videos are especially good for teaching common phrasal verbs like 'take out', 'pick up', 'put down' etc. Tim Robbio Warre shared on his blog an example of a lesson plan where a short video with the famous Mr. Bean can be used for teaching and practising collocations in a fun way (<http://freeenglishlessonplans.com/2014/11/21/mr-bean-packing-his-suitcase/>).

3.3. Pelmanism

This is a memory game which involves matching. Word pairs (or picture-word matches) are printed on individual cards which are placed face down in a random distribution. Players take turns to pick up a card and then search for its partner. If they locate the partner correctly, they keep the pair, and have another turn. If not, they lay the cards face down where they found them, and the next player has a turn. The player with the most pairs at the end of the game is the winner (in Thornbury 2002: 97).

3.4. Dictogloss

The teacher is reading a story to the students and while they are listening, they must focus on the collocations in the story and write them down. After listening twice, students must reconstruct the story in pairs. The teacher gives the students the original story with part of the collocation missing. Below is an example available online at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/fun-ways-teach-english-collocations>:

I met my ex-husband in 1995; we fell in love at first sight. We had a fantastic relationship for three happy years. Then, on our third anniversary, he proposed and we got married six months later. At first, everything was perfect; we both did the housework together; I did the washing-up and made the beds and he did the cooking and the shopping. He always made a mess when he did the cooking, but I didn't mind because the dinners were always delicious. Everything changed after a few years when he got a new job in Manchester; we made the decision to move there, so he wouldn't have to take the train to work every day. He started

working later and paying less attention to me. He stopped doing the housework, so I had to do everything. He made a lot of promises but then he would break them. He was very stressed and he started to go bald, he got very depressed about this and started getting drunk after work. I was getting very worried about him. He would always come home drunk and make a mess. Then, one day, while I was cleaning his clothes, something caught my attention. It was a lipstick stain on his shirt. I got very angry; he was keeping a secret from me! That night when he came home, I confronted him and he broke the news to me: he had been having an affair. It broke my heart. I kicked him out of the house and we got divorced two weeks later.

Text with gaps:

I met my ex-husband in 1995; we ____ in love at first sight. We ____ a fantastic relationship for three happy years. Then, on our third anniversary, he proposed and we ____ married six months later. At first, everything was perfect; we both ____ the housework together; I ____ the washing-up and ____ the beds and he ____ the cooking and the _____. He always ____ a mess when he ____ the cooking, but I didn't mind because the dinners were always delicious. Everything changed after a few years when he ____ a new job in Manchester; we ____ the decision to move there, so he wouldn't have to ____ the train to work every day. He started working later and ____ less attention to me. He stopped ____ the housework, so I had to ____ everything. He ____ a lot of ____ but then he would ____ them. He was very stressed and he started to ____ bald, he ____ very depressed about this and started ____ drunk after work. I was ____ very worried about him. He would always come home drunk and ____ a mess. Then, one day, while I was cleaning his clothes, something ____ my attention. It was a lipstick stain on his shirt. I ____ very angry; he was ____ a secret from me! That night when he ____ home, I confronted him and he ____ the news to me: he had been ____ an affair. It ____ my heart. I kicked him out of the house and we ____ divorced two weeks later.

4. Conclusion

Rosamund Moon calls just looking at words "dangerously isolationist" (1997: 40), and goes on to say that "words are again and again shown not to operate as independent and interchangeable parts of the lexicon, but as parts of a lexical system" (ibid: 42). An understanding of collocation is vital for all learners, and for those on advanced level courses, it is essential that they are not only aware of the variety and sheer density of this feature of the language but that they actively acquire more and more collocations both within and outside the formal teaching situation.

References

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Webography

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