

The Importance of Raising Awareness of Collocational Knowledge in ESL/EFL Classrooms

Mohammad ALAmro

Abstract—The most crucial aspect that is closely related to vocabulary and the one that needs to be emphasized and investigated more than it has been up until now, is the ability to combine words that co-occur frequently in the language. Pedagogically, collocation is one of the error-provoking aspects in foreign language learning. This is indicative of the dire need to provide L2 learners with tools to help them improve their collocational knowledge. This paper pinpoints the role that collocations play in the English language. Furthermore, it presents pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL learners.

Keywords—Collocation, pedagogy, vocabulary knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the basic components of all languages is its lexicon. The coinage of new words never ends in languages, and neither does our acquisition of these words. Reference [1] puts it rightly, “a person is unlikely to ever run out of words to learn”. Vocabulary is so important that, without words, communication is difficult and cannot happen in a meaningful way. Some well-known scholars, among them Wilkins, argued that without vocabulary nothing can be grasped, but with grammatical errors, little could be comprehended [2].

Vocabulary knowledge demands more than just knowing the basic meanings of the words, which could be useless if the learners restrict themselves to only this facet of knowledge. Reference [3] shows this distinction in the word knowledge framework (see Table I), which makes it more methodologically oriented and more practical than Richards’ model and other models [4]. At the most general term, Nation’s model is classified according to three aspects of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning and use. Each aspect of this knowledge, dealing with receptive and productive knowledge in a form of questions, is further divided into groupings. Form includes spoken, written, and word parts. Meaning involves form and meaning, concept and referents, and associations. Use is composed of grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. Nevertheless, these facets of knowledge should be treated with caution. This framework is regarded as “an idealized account, rather than a realistic description of what native speakers know about most of the words” [5].

Mohammad ALAmro is with the Institute of Public Administration, Riyadh, 11141, Saudi Arabia (phone: 966550788988; fax: 96611-47656; e-mail: alamrom@gmail.com).

II. WORD KNOWLEDGE

Our knowledge of how degrees of knowledge are acquired is still unclear and builds upon “fragmentary studies” [3]. Certainly, acquiring all types of word knowledge is not “a by-product” of answering these questions, but rather it is the result of a “gradual process” that L2 learners go through during their vocabulary acquisition [6]. There is plenty of evidence indicating that ESL/EFL learners usually start with knowing the meaning of the words, synonyms, antonyms and move from that to recognize word formation and then later collocational usage [7], [8].

TABLE I
VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE			
Form	Spoken	R	What does the word sound like?
		P	How is the word pronounced?
	Written	R	What does the word look like?
		P	How is the word written and spelled?
	Word parts	R	What parts are recognizable in this word?
		P	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	Form and meaning	R	What meaning does this word form signal?
		P	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	Concepts referents	R	What is included in the concept?
		P	What items can the concept refer to?
	Associations	R	What other words does this make us think of?
		P	What other words could we use instead of this one?
Use	Grammatical functions	R	In what patterns does the word occur?
		P	In what patterns must we use this word?
	Collocations	R	What word or types of words occur with this one?
		P	What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	Constraints on use (register, frequency)	R	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word?
		P	Where, when, and how often can we use this word?

Collocation constitutes a fundamental component of second language acquisition in general and word knowledge taxonomies in particular. Reference [9] comments, “The meaning of a word has a great deal to do with which it commonly associates”. The word collocation has been identified as co-occurrence since 1950. Collocation has been chiefly a “recognized field of activity” among European, yet neglected among Americans [10]. Additionally, it has been used in a variety of terms (prefabricated routines and patterns, sentence builders, formulaic speech, combinations of lexical terms, etc.) or under superordinate term “phraseology” [11], [12].

Collocation was also treated from different perspectives. Attempts conducted by linguists to describe the English collocation phenomenon have focused on three distinctive approaches: the lexical composition approach, the semantic approach, and the structural approach [12], [13].

Most researchers agree upon the classification of collocation. Collocations fall into two types: lexical and grammatical collocations. Grammatical collocations encompass a lexical word (noun, verb, adjective, and adverb) plus a preposition. Examples are reason for, account for, rely on, afraid of and so on. Lexical collocations, on the other hand, do not include grammatical lexemes, but only lexical combinations. Examples are [1], [9], [14]:

- Verb + noun (spend money).
- Adjective + noun (rancid butter).
- Verb + adverb (laugh loudly).
- Adjective + adverb (deeply absorbed).
- Noun + noun (radio station).
- Adverb + adjective (extremely inconvenient).
- Noun + verb (the fog closed in).

However, collocations are no longer associated to pairs [9], [12], [15]-[17]. They can occur between words and phrases. Reference [17] suggests that a lexical item might allow restrictions on word choice several words away (e.g. On the other hand, how do you do? As a result of, a short time ago, etc.).

III. COLLOCATIONS IN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITIONS

The majority of linguists have acknowledged the existence and the influence of collocations on first and second language acquisition. Linguists studying children of first language acquisition have recognized that formulaic language, including collocations, are stored in memory as whole chunks in the early stages, and later as children get older fixed expressions are segmented into phrases or word pairs [18]. Reference [18] examined 30 children aged 20 months and found out that compound words are learned as unanalyzed wholes, without being aware of their separate component parts or grammar. These formulas are memorized as unanalyzed wholes because it is the sole thing that the child can do at a particular age, but once analysis is possible, when her grammar and mental lexicon improve, they are broken down and incorporated into her mental lexicon.

Among the proponents of memorizing formulaic language holistically in first language acquisition are Peters and Bolinger [19]. They all examined child language acquisition and discovered that children pass through a stage where they use a large number of formulas that are analyzed later and reused creatively in novel utterances. They claim that the collocations, words, and morphemes all remain in the mental lexicon.

In the field of second language acquisition, the case of acquiring/ learning collocations is different since two different phases of life are involved: childhood and adulthood. Each phase mirrors inextricable mixture of biological, social, intellectual, and emotional factors. Very young children are at

an advantage over the adults. Putting the biological factor aside, children are adept at acquiring collocations and formulaic language in general [18]. They have been said to approach the formulaic language and perform the psycholinguistic learning strategy in the same way as first language learners [18]. Nonetheless, formulaic language by post- childhood language learners is viewed from different perspective. Major Scholars believe that there is flimsy evidence of adult second language learners' progression "from using formulaic sequences, as an aid to initial communication, through a process of segmentation, to native like abilities" [18]. Adult second language learners, according to [18], begin with small units and then try to put them together, whereas first language learners start with large units, and break them down whenever segmentation is possible (they never segment them any more than necessary). Phrases and clauses as well as individual words are what the adult second language learners come across in their input, but only individual words that attract their attention, ignoring how these words are glued up with their companions. They, for instance, segment the collocation "major catastrophe" and memorize each word individually (e.g. the word "major" means big and the word "catastrophe" means "disaster"), excluding the fact that these combinations come together and therefore should be learned and memorized holistically. Consequently, they may look for any pairing that carries the same meaning when the need arises in the future to recollect this collocation and express the idea e.g. "large catastrophe" and thus they produce miscollocation. In contrast, native speakers are cognizant that "major catastrophe" is the idiomatic way to speak about a terrible disaster, storing this word combinability as a whole in their memory. Given all this, it is not astonishing that native speakers have many advantages over their counterparts [18], [20]. Reference [15], on the other hand, takes a different path. They claimed that adult second language learners manipulate formulaic language as input for their analysis later

Regardless of the different views that formulaic language held in adult naturalistic learners, formulaic language still plays a crucial role in language acquisition.

Overall, there is no doubt that English native speakers do not carry individual single words in their minds and are cognizant of the appropriate word combinabilities and are able to use them appropriately in language production. Additionally, they possess an enormous number of collocations which are estimated to be in the thousands [21] and different native speakers might differ in their inventories of collocations depending on the nature of their experiences as well as their educational background. Conversely, non-natives do not share all these hallmarks, and they need time and exposure to glean all this knowledge.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLOCATION

Despite the fact that collocations were treated inadequately and in some cases in an incomplete fashion, collocations were regarded as being of first-rate importance. This growing interest increased noticeably during the last two decades. For a long time, linguists and teachers focus was on individual

words and their basic meanings. The emphasis of vocabulary textbooks was on memorizing word lists, followed by gap-filing exercises. This resulted in poor results with regard to rich vocabulary knowledge. As the researchers and teachers acknowledged that vocabulary knowledge entails more than comprehending word meaning, and realized that focusing on this aspect of knowledge might not produce competent learners, suggestions were proposed to encompass the examination of the syntagmatic relations between lexical items. The shift of interest in collocations is evident in the introduction of the new approach "lexical approach" [22], which places collocation in an important role in the syllabus [23].

Presently, collocations are widely acknowledged in many distinct fields: second language research, descriptive linguistics in which collocations obtained a higher profile, lexicography, corpus linguistics, artificial intelligence, discourse analysis, and second language pedagogy [13], [10].

Several volumes and articles discussed elaborately the significant role that collocation possesses. Many linguists and language teachers have seen it as an important aspect of vocabulary development [12], [24], language fluency, communicative competence and language performance in general [21], [25], [15], style and usage [12], clarity [26], the development of writing quality [27]-[29] and sentence generation [30]. To put it rightly, collocations are "the building blocks of language" [12]. Collocation was also characterized as a tool for gluing words in a coherent way or an effective device to achieve cohesion [12]. Along the same lines, [3] shows the significance of collocations to language acquisition and production. He looked at language knowledge as collocational knowledge without which language learning progress could be impaired. Memorizing chunks and collocations and having command over them, as implied by Ellis, is the basis of learning. Additionally, he contends that speaking natively occurs through using frequent and familiar collocations [31].

Collocations are pervasive in language use, and their worth is enhanced by the frequency with which they occur in both spoken and written language. They make a large proportion of any discourse. Reference [32] demonstrates that collocations constituted 34% of English native speakers' academic writing, while idioms and frozen constructions were 5%. The ubiquity of collocation entails that second language learners must have control over them.

Among the advocates for the significance of collocations and the calling for the inclusion of collocations in second/foreign language learning was Hornby [12]. Brown [24] was also among the few pioneers who advocated teaching collocations. He alleged that collocational knowledge improved listening and reading comprehension as well as reading speed. Along the same lines, [21] shows that through collocations L2 learners achieve native-like selection and fluency. English native speakers "do not speak or write as if language were one huge substitution table with vocabulary items merely filling slots in grammatical structures" [33]. They know that the following example (I wish to be wedded to

you) is grammatically impeccable, yet a less standard usage, compared to "I want to marry you", which is more natural. Similarly, native speakers listen at the speed of speech, and speak and read quickly because they rely on a large repertoire of ready-made constructions, available from their mental dictionary. These word combinations allow them to process the language as chunks, rather than word by word. Conversely, non-native speakers usually face difficulties in the English language because of the density of unrecognized collocations, which prevented them from the perception and production of these combinations at a faster rate [33]. Actually, failing to have native-like selection and fluency can generate at best misunderstanding and at worst mocking smiles and disrespect. Thus, L2 learners need to learn collocations to bridge the gap between natives and non-native usage [18].

Addressing ESL/EFL learners in general, linguists and teachers insist that collocations are a crucial aspect to those learners and should occupy a better place than their current position, as their mastery of this knowledge can enable native-like comprehension and fluency. Furthermore, they recommend that collocations be taught from the beginning rather than postponed to a later stage, where a lexical error might become fossilized [12], [15], [14].

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The majority of literature studies show a consensus over the subjects' lack of collocational knowledge. Additionally, the subjects' mental vocabulary size is shown to be better than their collocational knowledge. This lack of knowledge, results from the neglect of the lexical approach in the foreign language learning context. Vocabulary is given attention over collocations and language teachers tend to teach words individually, rather than collocationally. Undoubtedly, the negligence of teaching collocations in the classroom leads learners to focus on individual words, throwing away all the important information on the words, namely, their partners. Additionally, the reliance on synonymy in dictionaries to obtain the meanings of particular words created the wrong thought that conceptual equivalence entails distributional equivalence [34]. Inadequate proficiency in recognizing and producing collocations raises the need for a more constructive instructional focus on the field of collocations. Lexicon, especially collocation, should not be relegated to a minor position, but it should be brought to the forefront of language teaching. ESL/EFL learners need to observe the restrictions on the co-occurrences of words, and the fact that words do not join haphazardly.

Teaching collocations to ESL/EFL learners is important, and thus it is necessary to include them in the curriculum because they are essential tools for the development of writing quality. ESL/EFL teachers need to capitalize on collocations in the classroom to help learners sensitize the idiosyncratic nature of collocation and catch the subtle distinctions among them, e.g. "powerful car", "*strong car", "pay attention", and "*do attention". This sanitization could help learners develop

a sense of the importance of collocations and thus eventually lead to sharpening their lexical competence.

ESL/EFL learners have no means of telling which words collocate with which unless they are exposed to them or taught to them in the classroom. It will be difficult to assume that mere exposure to collocations is enough to facilitate acquisition. A mixture of approaches (explicit and implicit approaches) is crucial to yield a productive learning environment. Additionally, making learners aware of the importance of collocations and the need for developing strategies for their acquisition is important. Teachers can teach learners to take note of every collocation they come across and try to use it either in spoken or written languages. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers spend time on explaining meanings, rather than explaining how words collocate. Taking a few minutes to provide the collocations of the newly introduced words could shorten the process of building up meaning. Delaying the introduction might affect the process of evolving and deepening understanding of these words so it is essential to present a reasonable number of collocations at the moment a word is introduced [14].

Increasing awareness of collocations could also be done by encouraging learners to read extensively. It is well established that vocabulary knowledge is directly related to the amount of reading consumed by learners [3]. Furthermore, one way to improve students' collocational knowledge is to draw their attention towards making a greater use of English collocational dictionaries whenever they need to find out about a particular collocation or they are unsure about how to use particular words. Teachers also could use workbooks and sufficient materials containing exercises to enhance the acquisition of collocations. Collocational exercises, such as "collocational grids" and "brainstorming" where they are given a word and they are asked to list all the words they can collocate with it, could be utilized in the classroom to consolidate word knowledge. An advantage that might work for EFL teachers, who teach learners sharing the same language, is that they could use workbooks presenting a variety of collocations with a special emphasis on collocations that showed a divergence with the English language. Reference [35] recommends that teachers need to focus on collocations that have no equivalence in the first language. By doing so, teachers can shorten the laborious process of attaining collocational competence.

To sum up, teachers should go beyond incidental treatment of collocations and help learners become consciously aware of the tendency of words to collocate with each other.

REFERENCES

- [1] N. Schmitt, *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [2] M. Lewis, *Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theories into Practice*. London: Language Teaching Practice, 1997.
- [3] P. Nation, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- [4] K. Krahne, "English language teaching methods," unpublished.
- [5] J. Read, *Assessing Vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [6] H. Andersen, "Teaching a vocabulary course: Research, theory, and pedagogy," Colorado: Colorado State University, 1999, Unpublished thesis.
- [7] S. ALshwairkh, "The depth of vocabulary knowledge and learning strategies of Saudi students in EFL context," Colorado: Colorado State University, 2002, unpublished thesis.
- [8] A. Batty, "The depth of vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning strategies of Japanese EFL junior college students," Colorado: Colorado State University, 2005, unpublished thesis.
- [9] Decarrico, J. "Vocabulary learning and teaching," In *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 2nd ed, M. Celce-Murcia, Ed. Heinle and Heinle Publishers, 2001, pp.285-299.
- [10] A. Cowie, "Phraseology," in *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, R. Asher and J. Simpson, Eds. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1994, pp.3168-3171.
- [11] G.Kennedy, "Collocations: Where grammar and vocabulary teaching meet," in *Language teaching methodology for the nineties*, S. Anivan Ed. Singapore: RELC, 1990, pp. 215-229.
- [12] C. Gitsaki, Second Language Lexical Acquisition: A Study of the Development of Collocational Knowledge. *International Scholars Publications*, 1999.
- [13] P. Howarth, *Phraseology in English Academic Writing some Implications for Language Learning and Dictionary Making*. Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996.
- [14] M. Lewis, *Teaching Collocation: Further Developments in the Lexical Approach*. London: Language Teaching Publications, 2000.
- [15] J. Nattinger, J. & J. Decarrico, *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- [16] J. Sinclair, *Corpus concordance collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- [17] W. Bonk, "Investigating collocational ability among ESL learners," Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i, 1995,unpublished thesis.
- [18] A. Wray, *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [19] M. Sugiura, "Collocational Knowledge of L2 Learners of English: A Case Study of Japanese Learners," In *English Corpus Linguistics in Japan*, T. Saito, J. Nakasura & S. Yamazaki. Eds. Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 2002, pp. 303-323.
- [20] S. Granger, "Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL writing: Collocations and formulae". In *Phraseology: Theory, analysis and applications*, A. Cowie Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998, pp. 145-160.
- [21] A. Pawley and F. Syder, "Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency," in *Language and communication*, J. Richard & R. Schmitt, Eds. New York: Longman, 1983, pp.191-226.
- [22] M. Lewis, *The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and Away Forward*. London: Language Teaching Publications, 1993.
- [23] C. Gitsaki, "Patterns in the development of English collocational knowledge: Some pedagogical implications," *Journal of Communication and International Studies*, vol. 4, Jan. 1997, pp. 43-54.
- [24] D. Brown, "Advanced vocabulary teaching: the problem of collocation," *RELJ Journal*, vol. 5, Feb. 1947, pp. 1-11.
- [25] C. Yorio, "Conventionalized language forms and the development of communicative competence," *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 14, Apr. 1980, pp. 433-442.
- [26] A. Cowie, & P. Howarth, "Phraseological competence and written proficiency," In *Language and Education*, G. Blue & R. Mitchell, Eds. British Association for Applied Linguistics, 1995, pp. 80-93.
- [27] X. Zhang, "English collocations and their effect on the writing of native and non-native college freshmen," Pennsylvania: Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1993, unpublished dissertation.
- [28] M. AL-Zahrani, "Knowledge of English lexical collocations among Saudi college students majoring in English at a Saudi university," Pennsylvania: Indian University of Pennsylvania. Unpublished dissertation. 1998.

- [29] J.Hsu, "Development of collocational proficiency in a workshop on English for general business purposes for Taiwanese college students," Pennsylvania: Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2002, unpublished dissertation.
- [30] K. Kita and H. Ogata, " Collocations In language learning: corpus-based automatic compilation of collocations and bilingual collocation concordance," *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, vol. 10 Mar. 1997, pp. 229-238.
- [31] N. Ellis, "Sequencing in SLA," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 18, 1996, pp. 91-126.
- [32] W. Bonk, "Testing ESL learners' knowledge of collocations," in *A focus on language test development*, T. Hudson and J. Brown, Eds. University of Hawai'i, 2001, pp. 113- 142.
- [33] J. Hill, "Revising priorities: from grammatical failure to collocational success," in *Teaching collocation: further developments in the lexical approach*, M. Lewis Ed. London: Language Teaching Publications, 2001, pp. 47-69.
- [34] A. Abu-Ssaydeh, "An Arabic English collocational dictionary," *Babel*, vol. 41, Jan. 1995, pp.12-23.
- [35] J. Bahns, and M. Eldaw, "Should we teach EFL students collocations?," *System*, vol. 21, Jan. 1993, pp.101-114.