

Teaching collocations effectively with the aid of L1

Keywords

collocations, native-speaker competence, L1 interference, language acquisition, effective teaching methods

The acquisition of collocations is an essential part of native-like competency in English usage yet is not so easy for learners. The use of collocations by non-native English speakers tends to be negatively influenced by their L1. Interference from the learners' L1 could be mitigated by showing them the differences between the collocations in the target language and the equivalents in their own language. This article discusses concrete methods of teaching collocations effectively with the aid of learners' L1 after briefly reviewing literature on collocations, collocations and language acquisition, and the use of learners' L1 in language teaching.

学習者にとって、コロケーションは母語話者のような言語能力を習得するのに不可欠だが、それほど容易ではない。非母語話者は、コロケーションの使用に第1言語のマイナスの影響を受けやすい。しかし、このような母語干渉は、学習者に目標言語のコロケーションと第1言語における同等のコロケーションとの違いを示すことによって、緩和することができる。本論では、コロケーション、コロケーションと言語習得、言語教育における学習者の第1言語使用に関する先行研究を概説し、さらに、第1言語を補助的に使ってコロケーションを効果的に教える具体的な方法を議論する。

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Combining words appropriately in a target language is one of the most difficult tasks for foreign/second language learners. By contrast, native speakers have extensive knowledge about which words should be used together, and they can accurately form the combinations of diverse words. Such knowledge is one of the vital competencies of native speakers (Jeon, 2009). These combinations of words are referred to as “collocations” (Jeon, 2009, p. 39).

The proper use of collocations is crucial to sound like a native speaker (Ellis, 1996), yet it is not so easy for non-native speakers of a target language (Vasiljevic, 2008). Therefore, they should be taught systematically. However, “it is largely unclear how and which collocations should be taught” (Jeon, 2009, p. 40). Errors in vocabulary use can be caused by the differences between learners' L1 and target language (Bennui, 2008). For example, native Japanese speakers tend to use the most direct and the most frequently used translations of Japanese equivalents when they collocate English words, although different combinations of words may be preferred in English usage. It is therefore helpful for learners to be aware of the causes of possible errors while learning collocations.

This article discusses efficient methods through systematic L1 aids for teaching problematic collocations, which are likely to cause learners to make errors due to the differences between their L1 and target language.

Definition of collocations

Jeon (2009, p. 41) classifies word combinations into two categories: “free combination” and “collocation”. Although both retain their literal meaning, they differ. An example of a free combination is *like an apple*. In this combination, there is no semantic restriction between *like* and *apple* (Jeon, 2009). In contrast, an example of a collocation is *strong tea*: There is some

arbitrary semantic restriction between strong and tea. Native speakers of English do not say *powerful tea*, although *strong* and *powerful* are synonymous (Jeon, 2009). In most other situations, these words can be used interchangeably, but not to describe tea. Idioms are also groups of words that function as single units, but their meanings are not clear from their separate parts unlike collocations and free combinations: An example of an idiom is *hit the roof*. Although collocations have been defined in diverse ways, these definitions are beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed in detail, as the objective of this article is to demonstrate how collocations can be effectively taught in the classroom.

Collocations and language acquisition

It is essential to use collocations accurately in order to produce language with native-like accuracy (Ellis, 1996) or near-native competency (McCarthy, 1990). Even advanced ESL/EFL learners tend to have trouble with collocations (Gitsaki, 1996). Learners in EFL settings typically lack exposure to the target language and consequently, they "are often not aware of the differences in collocational restrictions between the L1 and the L2" (Vasiljevic, 2008, p. 3). The gap between L1 and L2 interferes with learners' acquisition of collocations in the target language and might "even lead to lexical fossilization" (Vasiljevic, 2008, p. 3). Another difficulty in learning collocations is that "learners' knowledge of collocations does not expand in parallel with their knowledge of general vocabulary" (Gitsaki, 1996, p. 6).

Because of their relative transparency in meaning, collocations offer L2 learners little difficulty in terms of comprehension. However, collocations are more problematic when they are used in productive skills, such as speaking and writing, than in receptive skills, such as listening and reading. Even if learners can manage to guess the meanings of collocations in receptive processes, they might not be able to use them properly in reproducing the language. Thus, producing collocations requires pedagogical treatment.

Use of L1 in L2 teaching

The use of students' L1 in language teaching has been controversial. Views against using L1 can

be classified into the following three categories (Miles, 2004). First, the learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximum exposure to the L2). Second, successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and L2. Third, "Students should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use" (Cook, 2001, p. 412).

In contrast, views supporting the use of L1 to teach L2 posit that it helps learners understand the meaning of new words, saves time, and avoids ambiguity in explanations (Allen, 1948); helps learners pay attention to the differences between the L1 and L2 (Politzer, 1958); assists learners with low-level language competency to feel secure; and contributes to the enhancement of accuracy and clarity of students' understanding (Duff, 1989; Sheen, 1993). Finally, Prodromou (2002) claims that it is important to contrast L1 with L2 because it helps students understand how their L1 might be negatively interfering with their acquisition, especially when learning collocations.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the use of an L1 is helpful as long as sufficient exposure to the target language is provided and the importance of its use is confirmed. It is especially helpful when students face language difficulties caused by the differences between their L1 and L2, when accuracy is a primary focus, and when the time for learning the target language is limited. The use of an L1 can clarify problems, avoid ambiguity, save time, and consequently reduce students' frustration.

Teaching Collocations

This section discusses an efficient method to teach collocations with the aid of L1 using examples of English collocations and their Japanese equivalents. For further discussion and teaching ideas, I selected some problematic collocations from Verb + Noun combinations as examples.

In the following five examples, the English phrases require one of the verbs: *do*, *take*, *make*, or *play*.

- *take/have* a walk
- *do* one's homework
- *take* a trip
- *make* a telephone call
- *play* baseball

By contrast, their Japanese equivalents require only one verb: *suru*. This difference confuses Japanese learners of English. It should also be noted that the word order of the English language and that of the Japanese language differ and that, in Japanese, a particle *o* is required to combine a noun with a verb. To resolve these differences, I suggest that the teacher should have the learners make a list of Japanese collocations that contain the verb *suru*, have them find their English equivalents in a Japanese-English dictionary, and have them make a list for comparison between the two as follows:

Japanese	English
<u>shukudai</u> o suru	do one's <u>homework</u>
<u>ryokou</u> o suru	take a <u>trip</u>
<u>denwa</u> o suru	make a <u>telephone call</u>
<u>sampo</u> o suru	take/have a <u>walk</u>
<u>supotsu</u> o suru	play <u>sports</u>

English speakers are also likely to make errors while using the above collocations in Japanese because of similar language interference since the most frequently used translation of *take* is not *suru* but *toru*, of *make* is *tsukuru*, of *have* is *motsu*, and of *play* is *asobu*. However, they may have an advantage over Japanese learners of English because they only need to remember one Japanese verb for the four different English verbs, whereas Japanese learners must remember as many as three or four English verbs for only one Japanese equivalent.

Exercises

To establish these collocations more firmly in learners' memories and to equip them to use them accurately, the following exercises could be given to them. The order of the exercises could be changed whenever appropriate. It would be preferable to relate the sentences in the exercises to students' lives so that they would take more interest in them and retain them more vividly in their memory.

Translate the following English sentences into Japanese.

- How much homework do you have to do for Ms. Kagawa's class?
- I love playing baseball. I'm a big fan of the Yomiuri Giants.

- I took a walk along the Kawasaki River.
- I could not answer the call from my mother because I was busy with homework for Ms. Kaneda's class.
- I was doing my homework when Tomoko visited me.

The objective of the above translation exercise is to familiarize students with collocations in sentences with the aid of L1. The reason for having students translate English sentences into Japanese not vice versa is that the former is easier than the latter, and, therefore, more appropriate as the first exercise. As a matter of course, what is appropriate depends on the language level of students. Following this exercise, the teacher could provide some Japanese-English translation exercises or exercises without the use of L1 to maximize students' exposure to L2. If the teacher believes that the students have acquired sufficient understanding regarding the differences between the L1 and L2, he or she could skip this exercise and move on to other exercises that do not involve the use of students' L1, because the ultimate goal is to enable students to use collocations without any L1 intervention while they are communicating in L2.

The next exercise is designed to help students memorize the collocations.

Fill in the blanks with appropriate verbs from those you have just learned.

- I () a walk in Ritsurin Park yesterday.
- Mr. Sogo is going to () a trip to Canada this summer.
- I need to () a telephone call to get a job interview appointment.
- I could not () my homework because I had to work last night.
- I used to () soccer but now I never () it.

The objectives of the next exercise are to have the students recognize errors in collocation use and to enable them to be sensitive to the accurate use of collocations.

(3) Correct the grammatically incorrect part(s), if any.

- I really wanted to play a trip to Australia with my classmates last March, but I couldn't because I didn't have enough money.

- I hate Mr. Ozaki because he always gives us a lot of homework to make.
- Excuse me a second. I have to do a telephone call.
- Today we won't have a formal lecture. We are going to make a walk to Kokubunji Temple.
- Wow! It's very warm. Let's do soccer in Fujimori Park.

Once the students memorize the collocations correctly, the teacher should allow them to use the collocations on their own in sentence construction. He or she could simply ask the students to produce their own sentences with the collocations they have learned in the class.

Conclusion

Differences between L1 and L2 often cause confusion and difficulty for learners; differences in collocations, which are an essential component of native-like competency in language production, are no exception. To overcome this confusion and difficulty, teachers should explicitly present and explain the differences between the L1 collocations and their L2 counterparts to learners through their L1. This method enables those with low-level language competency to feel secure. Furthermore, it saves time, contributes to the enhancement of accuracy, and clarifies students' understanding.

I have tried out these exercises in my classes; some students commented that they were interesting and useful because they could clearly see the differences between Japanese and English collocations, which enabled them to use English ones correctly. However, these comments are merely anecdotal, and therefore, it is necessary to investigate more fully how students perceive the exercises by survey research such as questionnaires and interviews. It is also necessary to compare the teaching of collocations with and without the aid of students' L1 by pre- and post-tests in order to prove the effectiveness of the method suggested in this paper.

This article has presented only some of the examples of Verb + Noun combinations. The teaching method discussed and demonstrated in this article can also be adopted for other types of collocations: Noun + Verb, Adjective + Noun, Adverb + Verb, and so forth.

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