

Two Words Are Better than One

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This action research study investigated student perceptions of studying collocations. Collocations are sets of two or more words that are frequently used together and often have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words within the collocation. After two semesters of studying individual words from the General Service List (West, 1953), students felt they understood the target vocabulary but were unable to use it in conversations. A review of the literature revealed several proposals that a focus on collocations would improve fluency. The following semester 42 beginner second-year Japanese university students studied 120 highly frequent verb + noun collocations instead of individual words. The teacher researcher gave the students 15 collocations per week. The students wrote a Japanese translation and a sentence for each collocation. This was similar to the procedure used for the individual words the previous semester. At the end of the semester, the participants completed a questionnaire about their perceptions of the new approach. The results indicated that studying collocations was more useful than studying individual words in the participants' opinion.

長期間にわたって実施したこの実践研究では、コロケーション学習を学生がどう受けとめているかについて調べた。コロケーションとは、頻繁に一緒に使われる1~2語から成る語句であり、構成している個々の単語からは意味が自明ではない意味を持っている。General Service List (West, 1953) から抜粋した英単語を2学期間学んだ後、学生は学習語彙を理解したと感じたが、会話でそれらの単語を使うことができなかった。この文献の書評には、コロケーションに焦点をあてることによって会話を上達させるいくつかの提案がなされている。そこで、次の学期には、42人の初級レベルの日本人大学2年生を対象に、単語の代わりに120組の頻出コロケーション(動詞+名詞)を学習させた。教師兼研究者は毎週15組のコロケーションを学生に提示し、学生はそのコロケーションの日本語訳と、それをういた文章を書いた。この指導手順は前学期に単語だけで指導したときの手順と同じであった。学期終了時に、被験者にこの新しい学習法について思うところを書いてもらった。結果は、学生達は単語を学ぶよりコロケーションを学ぶ方が役に立つと考えていることを示唆していた。

THE INSPIRATION for this action research study came after two semesters of teaching words from the General Service List (West, 1953) to beginner university students.

Despite devoting a considerable amount of class and homework time to a vocabulary component of a communicative English class, the students' productive abilities with the taught words did not seem to improve as much as expected. I had hoped the receptive vocabulary activities, which did not require a large amount of class time and were suitable for large groups of students, would lead to improvements in productive ability.

This situation presented a problem: It was hard to justify this component of the classes if the students did not improve their active vocabularies, and extending it was not possible because



there was not enough class time available. A new approach was needed that would not place unreasonable demands on class time, and that could be the basis for weekly homework assignments. It was decided that this section of the class would now focus on medium strength (explained later) verb + noun collocations. I believed that by targeting verb + noun collocations (e.g., take a bus), the students would be better able to use the targeted language in conversations as opposed to individual words.

After a semester of vocabulary study using collocations, students completed a questionnaire to determine how they felt about this new approach. I expected that the students would feel more able to productively use the targeted vocabulary because collocations, as opposed to individual words which they studied the previous semester, represent a larger portion of an utterance.

What is a Collocation?

Collocation is a term that has a wide range of definitions. To their credit, researchers, in previously written papers, have done an excellent job of explicitly stating the definition as it relates to their research. A thorough summary of the commonly used definitions is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few alternatives are discussed prior to establishing a working definition for this paper.

A common approach is to view the term from a statistical perspective. Durrant states, “Collocations are sets of two or more words which appear together more frequently than their individual frequencies would lead us to expect” (Durrant, 2009, p. 158). This view is commonly held by corpus linguists such as Stubbs (1995) and Hoey (2005). Durrant (2009) and Shin and Nation (2008) have used this definition as the basis for creating collocation lists. Durrant (2009) created a list for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) while Shin and Nation (2008) focused on

the highest frequency collocations in spoken English. Durrant’s study (2009) produced a list of 1000 two-word collocations in which 763 were “grammatical”: meaning that one of the words was non-lexical, such as prepositions, determiners, modal verbs, etc.

Wollard (2000) believes it is better to restrict the use of the term to relationships between nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The Shin and Nation (2008) study also contained collocations where the meaning could be determined by the individual words that composed it (e.g., last night, very much). Other definitions of collocation have chosen to de-emphasize grammatical collocations and collocations where the meaning is easily understood from the individual lexical components. While both of these undertakings were valuable from a frequency perspective, they can be criticized from the standpoint of their pragmatic limitations. As Hill points out, “Frequency alone should not be the over-riding parameter...Another item may be highly frequent in native speaker English but may be unsuitable for learners” (2000, p. 65). Shin and Nation (2008) also state:

Although frequency in the language is an important criterion for selecting what to focus on, it is only one of several important criteria like learner need, range of use (for example in both spoken and written use), difficulty, teachability, and suitability for the age and background of the learners (p. 345-346).

Another set of descriptions of this term illustrates the importance of collocations for second language learners. Sinclair defines collocations as “semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices for the speaker” (1987, p. 320). This point of collocations being single choices is also made by Wray (2000). An additional definition is provided by Dzierzanowska (1988 cited in Martyńska, 2004): “Words that make up a collocation do not combine with each other at random. Collocation cannot

be invented by a second language user. Native speakers use them instinctively” (1998, p. 4). These three characterizations emphasize the challenges, and also the usefulness, of studying collocations.

The final group of terms introduced here add the requirement that semantics and word type should be considered when determining what qualifies as a collocation. Nesselhauf states, “Use a phraseological rather than a frequency based definition. This definition denotes a type of word combination rather than a co-occurrence of words in a certain span” (2003, p. 224). Teubert adds the following to previous definitions, “They have to have a meaning of their own, a meaning that is not obvious from the meaning of the parts they are composed of” (2004, p. 173). Collocations having an easily understood meaning from the words which they are composed of (e.g., old man) are referred to as transparent collocations. It stands to reason students would have more trouble producing non-transparent collocations than transparent collocations.

From the explanations above, it is clear that *collocation* can be characterized in many ways. For this paper, collocations will be defined as a set of two or more words that frequently occur together, that represent a single choice in a native speaker’s mental lexicon, and whose meaning cannot be easily determined by the individual words themselves.

Why Study Collocations?

The proposed benefits of studying collocations will be described in the following paragraphs; however, the practicality of studying collocations is subject to debate. Two reasons against a collocation focus are the size of the mental lexicon and the belief that collocation usage mistakes have a limited effect on comprehension. Hill (2000), while suggesting an emphasis on collocations as opposed to grammar in language classrooms, states

that the size of the phrasal mental lexicon is enormous, thus making the learning of collocations a challenging task. Conzett (2000) and Woolard (2000) suggest that mistakes resulting from an inappropriate word combination do not hinder comprehension to a great degree. While there is some truth to both of these arguments, others (Conzett, 2000; Hill, 2000; Jiang, 2009; Lewis, 1994) state that the potential benefits of teaching collocations outweigh the difficulties.

Collocation study allows students to use what they already know. Woolard emphasizes this by saying that “learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations” (2000, p. 31). If students are unaware of how the words fit together, they will continue to struggle in listening and reading, and more so in speaking and writing.

Another benefit, which is particularly relevant to this paper, deals with low-level speakers. Nation states that learning multi-word units “allows beginner learners to be able to make productive use of the language without having to know a lot of vocabulary or grammar” (Nation, 2008). He uses the example of survival vocabulary often found in travel phrase books to illustrate this point. This aspect of “productive use” is one of the strongest reasons to focus on collocations as opposed to individual words. While Nation was referring to complete phrases (Where is the bathroom?), it is reasonable to assume that by learning word combinations, especially verb + noun collocations, low-level students will find it easier to express themselves. Students who learn lists of individual words, regardless of how carefully selected they may be, are often unable to use them in conversations or in written texts.

By learning chunks of language containing certain grammatical structures, the learner will be better able to acquire the target grammatical pattern (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 2000). A strict focus on grammar instruction has led to word combination errors. This

occurs because grammar is often seen as a simple substitution exercise where different word types can be slotted into the correct slot. A better approach would be to teach appropriate word combinations from a lexical perspective and have the students come to their own conclusions about the semantics and syntax of a language.

In addition to grammar, it stands to reason that fluency, both in productive and receptive situations, should improve as well. Collocations are multi-word units stored as single items in our mental lexicon. Therefore, students should be able to string longer sequences of words together when producing language and also have an easier time identifying these chunks of language when listening or reading.

While these reasons all sound convincing, there is a need to support them with more research. Longitudinal studies focusing on different proficiency levels should provide a clearer picture of the potential benefits. The claims of improvements in grammar and fluency, in particular, need to be researched.

Research Issues

The goal of this research was to determine how the students felt about studying collocations. The students had all studied individual lexical items in the previous semester under similar conditions (amount of time spent in class, quantity of homework etc.) and would use this experience as a comparison.

The following research questions were investigated:

- What are beginner Japanese university student perceptions in regards to studying collocations?
- Will the students feel capable of using the collocations in conversation?
- In the students' opinion, is the productive task of writing sentences helpful?

- From the students' perspective, how many collocations should be targeted each week?

Methods

Participants

The students in this study were all beginner Japanese university students (TOEIC scores 210 - 425) from a private university in Japan. The participants were in their second year and were all science majors. Every participant had taken two communicative English classes from the teacher researcher the previous year.

In total, 41 students out of a possible 42 chose to participate. As mentioned above, the participants' ESL proficiency was low, but they were willing to engage in classroom activities.

Procedures

The research was carried out during the students' communicative English class that met once a week. The collocation treatment (which will be described in the following paragraph) was presented to the students as part of their normal class work. The previous year, the students spent a similar amount of class time and did a similar amount of homework in the vocabulary component of their communicative English class. This previous experience, which focused on individual words taken from the first 500 words on the GSL, was used as a comparison. At the beginning of the semester, the students were told that they would be focusing on collocations as opposed to the previous semester in which they studied individual words. The term *collocation* was described as a verb + noun word combination that often appear together.

The treatment consisted of giving the students 15 collocations (e.g., catch a bus) a week. Their homework was to write a Japanese translation for each collocation and a sentence using

the given collocation. The following week a small activity using the previous week's collocations was given to the students; typical activities included matching the verb and noun components of the collocations, completing a cloze activity, or having the students exchange vocabulary books and quiz each other. The students then wrote the next week's collocations into their vocabulary notebooks. The total class time each week for this process was approximately 15 minutes. Every week the teacher researcher collected the notebooks at the end of class and corrected the students' sentences.

The corrections consisted of reading the students' sentences, and identifying the type of errors present (missing words, verb mistake, spelling, wrong word choice, etc.). Each kind of error was assigned a symbol, which would then be written (in red) on the sentences. For each sentence containing an error, the students had to rewrite the sentence and try to correct any errors present. If the student was unable to correct the error in this second attempt, the teacher researcher would write the correct sentence. Occasionally, class time was available to have the students work in pairs and help each other with error correction.

This routine was repeated for four weeks and then 30 to 40 minutes of the following week's class was dedicated to review. During the next week's class, the first 60 collocations were tested. The test lasted 20 minutes and consisted of three sections: matching verb and noun components, a cloze activity, and writing sentences. The test sections were similar to the class activities and homework. This whole procedure was repeated for the second half of the semester. The sequence of activities described above was identical to the previous year with the only difference being that the students studied collocations as opposed to individual words from the first 500 words on the GSL.

The Collocation List

In total, 120 collocations were covered over the course of this study. All of the collocations were of the verb + noun variety; it was thought that by using this type of collocations the students would be better able to write sentences and use the collocations in productive ways. The use of only verb + noun collocations also provides a clear definition of what a collocation is for the students (Woolard, 2000).

The collocation list is almost entirely comprised of medium-strength collocations, which have the following characteristics:

- They account for a large part of what we say and write.
- They are more restrictive than freely combining words (old house) but less restrictive than words where you strongly expect a second word based upon the presence of the first word (foreseeable future).
- They contain individual words with which most learners are familiar.
- Each collocation can be stored in a learner's mental lexicon as a single item.
- Learners, especially beginners, are often unfamiliar with the specific combination.

Hill (2000) and Conzett (2000) recommend targeting this type of collocation because these collocations are highly frequent and potentially problematic for students.

The individual words that made up the collocations largely came from the first 1000 words on the GSL (84.4%). In addition, I tried to focus on collocations where the meaning was not obvious from the individual words (e.g., take a chance). A certain amount of judgment was used when choosing the collocations; I tried to include useful collocations in regard to the students' interests and future needs, while also choosing collocations that had an unclear meaning and were highly frequent.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the semester. The questionnaire contained five statements to which the students expressed their level of agreement using a Likert scale. The questionnaire was anonymous and the students were encouraged to answer the questions honestly. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Due to the students' proficiency level in English, it was decided that all parts would be accompanied by a Japanese translation. The term *collocation* was likely unfamiliar to the students, so the questionnaire provided an explanation as well as an example. The translation was done by a Japanese English teacher and was checked by another member of the faculty. Both were confident that the students would not have any trouble understanding the term *collocation*, the instructions for the questionnaire, or how to respond to each question.

Results

Table 1 shows the results for four of the statements from the survey. A total of 41 students completed the survey. The students indicated the degree to which they agreed with the following statements. A Likert scale was used and a point value was assigned to each response (strongly agree – 5 points, agree – 4 points, neutral – 3 points, disagree – 2 points, strongly disagree – 1 point). The four statements are:

1. Studying collocations has been useful.
2. I am able to use the collocations we studied in conversations.
3. Studying collocations is more helpful than studying individual words.
4. Writing sentences using the collocations was helpful.

Table 1. Student Perceptions of Studying Collocations

Question	Likert		Positive Responses (%)		Neutral	Negative Responses (%)	
	Mean	Std-Dev	5	4	3	2	1
1	3.44	0.84	7.3	41.5	41.5	7.3	2.4
2	2.90	0.77	0.0	22.0	48.8	26.8	2.4
3	3.54	0.78	4.9	53.7	34.1	4.9	2.4
4	3.73	0.78	12.2	53.7	31.7	0.0	2.4

Table 2 shows the results for the fifth statement, which states:

5. Each week we studied 15 collocations. That was ...

Table 2. Student Perceptions in Regard to the Number of Collocations Covered in Each Class

Question	Negative responses		Positive responses	Negative responses	
	Way too many	Too many	Just about right	Not enough	Not nearly enough
5	2.4%	12.2%	85.4%	0%	0%

Discussion

The first research question asked about student perceptions in regard to studying collocations. The first and third statements from the questionnaire addressed this research question. The first item, "Studying collocations has been useful" resulted in a mean of 3.44 with 41.5% of the participants agreeing with the statement. The results for the third statement had a slightly higher mean (3.54) with the largest group of students (53.7%) agreeing. These numbers, while not being overwhelming, do indicate a positive perception of the treatment.

The second statement on the questionnaire (being able to use collocations in conversations) addressed the second research question. The mean of 2.9 with only 22% of the participants agreeing (no one strongly agreed) suggests that alterations have to be made in the treatment if the goal is to have students make productive use of collocations in spoken discourse. However, it is important to remember that the original motivation for this study was that students were unable to use the individual words in conversations, and thus, a mean of 2.9 might be considered in a more positive light. It is also worth noting that no class time was spent on conversation activities focusing on these collocations.

The fourth questionnaire item assessed the students' feelings towards the productive task of writing sentences. The results (a mean of 3.73 and 65.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing) were surprising. During the treatment, the students generally did the homework assignments, but with varying degrees of effort. It was thought beforehand that this questionnaire item would not elicit positive responses. The students' response to this statement indicates that the productive task of writing sentences is worthwhile, especially considering the students wrote the sentences at home and only a small amount of class time was required.

The final questionnaire item yielded the most positive responses with 85.4% of the participants feeling that 15 collocations per week is a suitable amount. Considering the students are not English majors, and the fact that they were required to both write and revise sentences, the teacher researcher also feels 15 collocations per week is a reasonable number for beginner students.

Observations

From the teacher researcher's perspective, the alternative approach to the vocabulary component was a success. The stu-

dents were more engaged in the activities and put more effort into their homework.

It was also noticed that the students seldom copied sentences from their dictionaries; this was a common problem during the semesters when individual words were taught from the GSL. To illustrate this I have included an example sentence from a student's vocabulary book for the word *problem*:

Daydreaming can help solve problems, trigger creativity, and inspire great works of art and science.

This sentence was well above the student's level and was obviously copied.

The student sentences for the collocations were original and full of mistakes, which provided an excellent opportunity for revision. For comparison, here is a student example sentence for the collocation *get lost*:

I got lost my keys.

In this sentence the student likely understood the word *lost*, but misunderstood the collocation's meaning.

The peer correcting exercises were also worthwhile. The students would work in pairs. For approximately five minutes they would focus on one of the student's vocabulary books and correct the sentences with mistakes using the red editing symbols (described in the procedures section of this paper) as a guide. They would then spend five minutes on the other student's vocabulary book. The students were surprisingly open to the experience and provided excellent feedback to one another. I felt this additional exposure helped them retain the targeted collocations. This was also a good opportunity to discuss errors the students were unable to correct themselves.

One weakness in the treatment was that the students often made mistakes when writing the meaning of the collocations (as

seen in the student example sentence in this section). Having the students do a simple matching exercise with the Japanese definitions and the week's collocations would solve this problem.

The second weakness was that the students were reluctant to change the verb tenses in the collocations. This led to some unnatural sentences such as "I take a break" instead of "I am taking a break" or "I took a break". The students might have believed they had to use the collocation in the same tense (simple present) as it was given to them on the weekly collocation list. Having the students write one alternative verb tense (simple past, simple future, present perfect, etc.) in their vocabulary books might be enough encouragement to get the students to use a wider range of verb tenses in their sentences.

Conclusion

I feel this alternative approach to vocabulary instruction has a great deal of potential. The results showed the students had a positive impression of the experience. From a pedagogical perspective, in the future, it would be important to ensure the students have a clear understanding of the meaning of the targeted collocations, perhaps by using a matching exercise as described above. It may also be necessary to include speaking activities using the targeted collocations if the students' productive knowledge is to improve.

From a research perspective, there are several experimental design criticisms that could be made. The questionnaire would have been more valuable had it given the students the opportunity to expand on their answers through open-ended questions. It would have also been useful to get some initial feedback from the students on their previous experiences studying vocabulary. In addition, the participants compared a learning experience from their first year of university with their second. Ideally, there would have been two randomly assigned groups from the

same year subjected to different treatments. However, given the nature of action research, this was not possible. Despite these criticisms, I am confident that this alternative approach was more effective and enjoyable for both the teacher and students. The students were more engaged in the activities and put more effort into their work.

This study touched upon many areas that will be explored further. Future research will look at speaking tests as a means of measuring productive knowledge of collocations, the efficiency of productive and receptive tasks for learning collocations, as well as different forms of assessment including formative and summative.

Bio Data

Joshua Brook Antle is a Lecturer at Hokkaido University of Education in Sapporo. His main research interests are collocations and extensive listening.

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