

# Teaching Collocations

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In this paper I give a brief explanation of *collocation* and describe the potential benefits of an increased focus on collocations. This is followed by many sample activities and exercises. While the majority of the activities may be more suitable for students of an intermediate or higher level of English proficiency, materials and exercises that can be used for beginner level students are also included. Collocation exercises for reading, writing, and speaking classes are provided. I also describe how the use of computer concordances, collocation dictionaries, and vocabulary notebooks can help develop collocational competence.

本論文では、最初に「コロケーション」について簡単な説明を行い、コロケーションに焦点をあてることによってもたらされる効果について記述する。次に、多くの実例を用いた、アクティビティと演習を示す。大部分のアクティビティは、英語力が中級もしくは上級の学習者に適しているかもしれないが、いくつかのアクティビティは、初級レベルの学習者にも活用できる教材と演習問題になっている。またリーディングやライティング、スピーキングクラスのための、コロケーション演習問題についても説明する。コロケーション能力を発達させることに役立つ、コンピューターコンコーダンスやコロケーション辞書、単語帳の使い方についても述べる。

**S** ECOND LANGUAGE vocabulary acquisition has been widely researched (Nation, 2001, 2008; Schmitt, 2000), and language teachers commonly use vocabulary activities as part of their lessons. As a university language teacher in Japan, I have also used vocabulary exercises as a key component in my classes, both as an activity and as a means for student assessment. However, due to a lack of improvement in spoken fluency using the targeted words, I have since shifted my focus to teaching collocations.

The term *collocation* has many definitions. These definitions tend to fall into two groups: statistical and phraseological. Durrant (2009) offered the following statistical definition: “Collocations are sets of two or more words which appear together more frequently than their individual frequencies would lead us to expect” (p. 158). This definition is consistent with how corpus linguists view collocations and collocation research. However, another group of definitions emphasizes how collocations are stored and used by native speakers. Wray (2000), for example, used the following definition for collocation: “A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (p. 465).



## Why Teach Collocations?

There is some debate about the practicality of teaching collocations. The size of the mental lexicon (the number of *chunks* of language a native speaker has stored and is able to use) and the belief that mistakes in collocation usage have a limited effect on comprehension are two reasons against a collocation focus in the classroom. Hill (2000) stated that learning collocations is challenging due to the enormous size of the mental lexicon. Bahns (1993) also stated that, due to the great number, teaching lexical collocations is a challenging task. Woolard (2000) suggested that comprehension is not hindered to a great degree by speakers using inappropriate word combinations. While there is some truth to both of these arguments, others (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Conzett, 2000; Handl, 2009; Hill, 2000; Jiang, 2009; Lewis, 1994; Reppen, 2010) stated that the potential benefits of teaching collocations outweigh the difficulties.

Perhaps the most recognizable benefit is that learners will sound more native like. Collocation knowledge “allows us to say and write things like a native speaker” (Nation, 2008, p. 117). To illustrate, a great deal of language that would be considered to be grammatically accurate is in reality not used. Woolard (2000) gave an example: “Biochemists are making research into the causes of AIDS” (p. 30). This sentence is grammatically accurate in tense, aspect, and subject and verb agreement, but native speakers would not use the verb *make*, but would use *do* instead. Because of the incorrect verb usage, the reader or listener would know a native speaker did not produce the sentence. Word choice mistakes also interfere with comprehension. We are able to understand quickly spoken language because we do not focus on the individual words but on chunks of language that we can often predict. Written texts with collocation errors are difficult to read, and take additional processing time to understand the intended meaning (Hyland, 2003). Spoken language with collocation errors can hamper comprehension even further

as speakers do not have the luxury of time to review what they have heard.

Another benefit concerns low-level speakers. Nation (2008) stated that learning multiword units (a term he prefers although he also states it would be possible to use *collocation*), “allows beginner learners to make productive use of the language without having to know a lot of vocabulary or grammar” (p. 118). He used survival vocabulary (travel English) to illustrate this point. This idea of productive use is one of the strongest reasons to focus on collocations as opposed to individual words. While Nation is referring to complete phrases (e.g., *Where is the bathroom?*), it is reasonable to assume that by learning word combinations, especially verb-plus-noun collocations, low-level students will have an easier time expressing themselves. Students who study lists of individual words are often unable to use them productively in conversations or in written texts (Morgan Lewis, 2000; Woolard, 2000).

It has been suggested that studying collocations can help students learn grammar. By learning chunks of language containing certain grammatical structures, the learner will be better able to acquire that grammatical pattern (Hill, 2000; Michael Lewis, 2000). It has been argued that a strict focus on grammar instruction has led to many of the word combination errors mentioned earlier (Hill, 2000; Morgan Lewis, 2000; Woolard, 2000). This problem occurs because learning grammar is often seen as a simple substitution exercise in which different word types can be placed into the correct slot. A better approach may be to teach appropriate word combinations from a lexical perspective and have students come to their own conclusions about the syntax of a language.

In addition to grammar, receptive and productive fluency should improve (Conzett, 2000; Hill, 2000; Morgan Lewis, 2000). If students are taught that collocations are multiword units stored as single items in the mental lexicon, they 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.

Furthermore, collocation study allows students to use language they already know. Woolard (2000) emphasized that “learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations” (p. 31). The first 1000 words of the General Service List (GSL) account for a surprisingly high percentage (according to Nation, 2001: 84.3 % for conversation, 82.3% for fiction, 75.6% for newspapers, and 73.5% for academic texts) of the written and spoken language in English. If students are not aware of how the words fit together, they will continue to struggle in listening and reading and more so in speaking and writing.

While these reasons all sound convincing, there is a need to support them with more research. Collocation research has been limited to short studies mostly dealing with advanced level students (Durrant, 2009; Jiang, 2009; Wray, 2000). 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.

## Activities

In the remainder of this paper I will introduce and explain activities for teaching collocations. The activities are divided into five groups: reading activities, collocation dictionary activities, writing activities, speaking activities, and general activities. The majority of the activities can be used with students of different proficiency levels.

## Collocation Reading Activities

### Speed-Reading and Collocation

This activity comes from Jiang’s (2009) study that investigated consciousness-raising tasks for collocations. The students read a passage of 400 to 800 words and record their reading time. They then answer several comprehension questions about the passage. For homework, they answer questions based on collocations used in the text. In section one of the homework, the students write down expressions, phrases, and collocations from the text that they notice and want to learn. Section two has exercises in which students use collocations from the text in different contexts. Section three features questions geared towards enhancing and expanding the students’ collocation awareness. An example of a task in this section is taking a collocation from a reading, such as *bad dream* and having the students compile a list of other common collocates for the noun *dream*. The final section is done in the following class. The students retell the story with a partner using the expressions, phrases, and collocations from section one as a guide. This series of tasks does not require much class time, but the preparation (finding a suitable text and writing questions for sections two and three) is time consuming. It can also be used with students of different levels by choosing an easier or more difficult text.

### Reconstructing the Content

In this activity from Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000), students read a short text and then write 15 words from the text on a sheet of paper. They should choose words that will give another group the best possible chance to reconstruct the text. Students can be encouraged to write down some two- or three-word collocations as well as individual words. The students then exchange papers with another group. Using the words and collocations as a framework, the students try to retell what they have read.

### Phrase Match

For this activity, the teacher chooses several collocations from a reading. The collocations are divided into two parts. The students match the parts of the collocation (without looking back at the original text). See Figure 1 for an example.

1. long past	a. open
2. drove down a side	b. midnight
3. metal bar to force	c. street

Figure 1. Phrase Match

### How Was It Used?

In this activity, teachers choose several collocations they would like their students to learn from a reading passage. For each of these collocations, one word is written on the board and the students try to remember how it was used.

Example:

- From a reading: *For centuries hotels have been thinking of different and novel ways to attract guests.*
- On the board, write *novel*.
- Students try to remember that *novel* was used with the noun *ways*.

### Collocation Dictionary Activities

#### 5-1 Boxes

These exercises work well with verb + noun, adjective + noun, adverb + verb, and adverb + adjective collocations. Choose a word the students are familiar with but may not be able to use

productively. The students use a collocation dictionary to find five collocates for the given word.

For example, consider the noun *moment* (see Figure 2).

Adjectives	Noun
<i>Big</i>	moment
<i>Last possible</i>	
<i>Embarrassing</i>	
<i>Right</i>	
<i>Happiest</i>	

Figure 2. 5-1 Box

Note. Student answers are in italics.

### Find a Better Word

In this activity from Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000), students use a collocation dictionary to find an alternative word combination. This exercise is geared more towards expanding a student's productive vocabulary than correcting mistakes. For instance, a student might use the noun phrase *new idea* when writing a paragraph. While this collocation is easily comprehensible and accurate, a teacher might want the student to use a more descriptive adjective, such as *innovative idea*.

### Really Useful Words

Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000) compiled a list of 47 nouns (see Figure 3) that they felt are problematic for English language learners. They postulated that the reason these nouns were troublesome for learners is that their meanings are largely dependent on the adjective used with the noun. As a result, incidental exposure is unlikely to lead to uptake of these words. A more beneficial approach is to explicitly teach adjective + noun collo-

cations for these words. Using a collocation dictionary, a teacher can choose one of the nouns and write five or six common collocations on the board. The students can then discuss an example of each from their lives.

Example:

- With a partner discuss an experience you have had that can be described by one of the following collocations: *an embarrassing situation, a bewildering situation, a tricky situation, a unique situation, an extraordinary situation, a tense situation.*

account	change	discussion	issue
action	circumstance	effect	manner
answer	condition	feature	method
approach	consequences	idea	move
argument	decision	information	performance
behaviour	difference	interest	plan
policy	reason	state	use
position	relationship	story	view
problem	result	style	vision
programme	scheme	system	way
project	situation	theme	work
question	solution	theory	

**Figure 3. Problematic but Really Useful Words: 47 nouns whose meanings depend on the adjectives used with them**

*Note.* List from Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000).

### The Collocation Game

This activity from Hill, Lewis and Lewis (2000) can be used as a review or as a way of introducing new collocations to students.

For the description, I have used one adjective + noun collocation and one verb + noun collocation, but this game also works with other kinds of collocations. First, choose a noun that has many adjective collocates. Tell the students that all the adjectives collocate with the same noun. Read out five or six adjectives (one at a time) for the noun. The students write down the adjectives as they listen. When they think they know the answer, they stand up or raise their hands. Ask the students to not shout out their guesses to allow the others a chance to come up with the correct answer as more adjectives are read. The teacher should start by reading general collocates (adjectives which can be used with many nouns) and finish with stronger collocates (adjectives which strongly suggest the presence of a particular noun). For example, for the noun *future* the adjective list might start with *bright* and finish with *foreseeable*. Two examples are given in Figure 4. It helps to have the students copy the empty, numbered chart into a notebook beforehand.

Game 1 – Adjectives	Game 2 - Verbs
1. <i>plain</i>	1. <i>collect</i>
2. <i>dark</i>	2. <i>provide</i>
3. <i>white</i>	3. <i>volunteer</i>
4. <i>bitter</i>	4. <i>conceal</i>
5. <i>milk</i>	5. <i>gather</i>
6. <i>bar of</i>	6. <i>withhold</i>
Answer (noun): <i>chocolate</i>	Answer (noun): <i>information</i>

**Figure 4. The Collocation Game**

*Note.* Teacher reads collocates one by one. Students write them on the chart and try to guess the answer.

## Collocate Writing Activities

### Essay Preparation

This activity from Hill, Lewis, and Lewis (2000) is a useful prewriting exercise for essays and paragraphs. Ask the students to write four or five nouns associated with a topic (the teacher could also give the students the nouns). Using a collocation dictionary, students choose some common word combinations for the nouns. The teacher can help the students choose the most useful collocations. For instance, if the topic of an opinion essay is prisons or crime, four suitable nouns might be: *prison*, *criminal*, *crime*, *sentence*. The students can then write several collocations for each noun.

Example:

- go to / send somebody to / sentence somebody to / (7) years in *prison*
- born / dangerous / hardened *criminal*
- death / heavy / life / severe / (3)-year *sentence*
- prevent / crack down on / petty / violent *crime*

### Editing Symbols

Using writing produced in class is an excellent way of targeting collocations that are especially useful for your students. If you use editing symbols to help the students understand their mistakes in writing classes, it is useful to have a symbol that highlights a collocation error. When correcting a piece of writing, instead of a *wrong word* symbol, underline the whole mis-collocation and have the students find a more suitable word combination.

## Collocation Speaking Activities

### 4 / 3 / 2

This speaking activity was created by Nation (1989) to enhance fluency. In the first step, a student answers a question (or series of questions) about a particular topic, trying to speak for 4 minutes continuously. During this step only, a partner can help by asking questions if the student cannot think of something to say. The students then change partners and repeat their previous answer; however, this time the student tries to say everything from their previous answer in only 3 minutes. The students change partners again for the final step. They again repeat their original answers, but they have only 2 minutes to do so. In the final step, the students should sound more fluent than their current speaking ability. This exercise is challenging, but teachers can provide scaffolding by doing a collocation-building exercise prior to the speaking stage. This can be done as homework or in class. For instance, if the speaking topic is *pets*, have the students compile a list of adjective, verb and noun collocates for the noun *pet* (see Figure 5). This should help the students to express their thoughts as well as provide ideas as to how they can extend their answers.

Example:

1. With a partner, find collocations for the word *pet*. You can also think of a specific pet such as a dog or cat.
2. Speaking topic:
  - » Have you ever had a pet?
  - » If yes, tell you partner as much as you can about your pet. Try to talk for 4 minutes.
  - » If no, would you ever want a pet? Why or why not? Try to talk for 4 minutes.

Type	Collocate part 1	Collocate part 2
Adjective	<i>Domestic, family, house, household, beloved, abandoned, unwanted, lost, virtual</i>	pet
Verb	<i>Have, keep, own, feed, bring in, let out, let in, take care of, train, walk (dog), give (pet) water, keep (pet) under control, mistreat</i>	pet
Noun	pet	shop, store, dog, owner, sitter, food, hair, allergy

**Figure 5. 4 / 3 / 2 Activity (Homework or in Class)**

Note. Word given to students was *pet*. Possible student answers are in italics.

### Role-Plays

Another activity for reviewing previously taught collocations is to have the students create role-plays using one or more of the targeted collocations. The collocations could come from a reading used in a previous class.

### Describe Pictures or Picture Sequences

Students can also use collocations to describe pictures or strip stories. This activity works well if several theme-based collocations (travel, daily routine, etc.) are taught beforehand.

### Shadowing and Tracking

This is a fairly well known activity, which can be adapted to emphasize collocation use. For this activity, the teacher records

spontaneous speech from a native speaker before the class. The recording can be based on a particular theme, context, or function. The teacher plays the recording for the class, drawing students' attention to aspects of the recording, such as pauses, repair phenomena, and collocations. The students then make a transcription. Then they follow their transcriptions and shadow the recording. In the next step, tracking, the students repeat what was said a few syllables after the recording, without using their transcriptions. Finally they record a version of their own and submit it to the teacher for feedback.

## General Collocation Activities

### Collocation Notebooks

Having the students keep a collocation notebook can be a worthwhile practice. The students can treat the targeted collocations as they would individual words by writing definitions, translations, and sentences. The notebook can be organized alphabetically, around a theme, or by the type of collocation (adjective + noun). An alternative would be to use a traditional vocabulary book but include a section where students write common collocations for the words.

### Corpora and Concordancers

A corpus can be used to find out if there are any instances of a particular word combination. We can also use a corpus to find out the most common collocates for a particular word. A concordancer can find examples of how a word or collocation has been used. It is difficult to understand collocation usage simply by relying on intuition.



## Collocation Lists

There are several collocation lists available. Durrant (2009) compiled a list of 1000 two-word highly frequent collocations for EAP. Shin and Nation (2008) made a list of the most frequent collocations in spoken English. I have created a list of 120 collocations using delexicalized verbs (Antle, 2012). This list is available at: <https://sites.google.com/a/joshuaantle.com/collocationdictionary/home>

## Conclusion

Collocation activities can be incorporated into most classes. As with individual lexical items, it is important to consider our students' needs, level, and motivation when choosing what to focus on. It is important to be selective. Raising student awareness of collocations can also help our students understand how and when a word can be used. The activities described in this paper will help teachers plan lessons with a greater collocation focus.

## Bio Data

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