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A Brief Explanation of Collocations

A collocation is a sequence of words that occur together, often in a specific order, as established by linguistic convention; that is, the co-occurrence of words or terms in a collocation is not determined purely by a language's grammar, but also by patterns of usage and native speaker expectations of idiomaticity (Taiwo, 2004). Thus, while there is principle no reason why *forth and back* should be ungrammatical in English, linguistic convention demands *back and forth* instead (see Zimmerman 2009, p. 38). J.R. Firth's well-known aphorism that "you know a word by the company it keeps" (Taiwo 2004, citing Firth 1957) is often cited when discussing collocations because it captures the essence of collocation—that words do not exist in isolation but rather tend to cluster around some words while avoiding others. So, while *wars* and *rashes* can both *break out* in English, only the latter can *show up*. Similarly, even though a *rash* might be considered an *unwanted guest*, only *rashes* can break out (at least when *break out* means *appear*), even though both often show up with *show up* in English.

Some Considerations for Teaching Collocations

Learners struggle to master collocations, which exist in all known languages (Zimmerman 2004, p. 37), primarily because they are unpredictable and often idiomatic in nature (i.e., their meaning cannot be deduced solely from the meanings of their component parts). As multi-word units, collocations may also pose syntactic challenges to learners as well. For example, phrasal verbs are difficult to learn not only because they are often polysemous and semantically unpredictable, but also because they are syntactically complex (for instance, it is impossible for learners to know whether a given phrasal verb is separable or non-separable based on the phrasal verb's appearance alone; learners can only acquire the grammar of a phrasal verb through exposure or explicit instruction). Collocations can also be difficult because certain types

of collocations, such as lexical phrases and idioms, may be fixed (as in *over the hill* but not **over the mountain, *above the hill* or **over the high hill*) or variable (as in many metaphor-based collocations, such as *kill time/a few hours/a whole day*) (see Zimmerman 2004, pp. 40-41), and again there is no way for learners to determine which collocations permit variation until they actually encounter them in actual usage. In fact, researchers have demonstrated that most English language learners cannot combine words correctly to form acceptable collections without having been previously exposed to them, either through listening or reading (Taiwo, 2001). Consequently, it is important for teachers to help students identify not only the collocations themselves, but also their inner workings (i.e., which collocations are fixed and which are variable; how collocations pattern based on metaphor, connotation and animacy; the required sequence for ordered pairs, and so forth).

In order to be maximally effective, teachers must appreciate the significance of collocations and understand that the acquisition of collocations is crucial for learners' social competence (Taiwo, 2004). Melka (1998, citing Lennon, 1991) has aptly noted that "language must not only be grammatical, it must also be appropriate." Consequently, teachers must take care to address appropriacy in addition to grammaticality when teaching all aspects of language, including collocations. In addition, teachers should be aware that language transfer is a common source of collocational errors for English language learners of all linguacultural backgrounds, as learners tend to unconsciously use collocations from their native language (a form of calquing) until they either become or are made explicitly aware of collocational differences between L1 and L2 (Zimmerman, 2004; Taiwo, 2004). Thus, it is common for Spanish-speaking *learners* to say **dream with* instead of *dream of*, **take a coffee* instead of *drink/have a cup of coffee*, or **use a hat* instead of *wear a hat* as they apply the collocational patterns of their native language to

English. Accordingly, teachers need to emphasize differences in the collocational patterns of students' native language(s) and the target language in order to help them minimize collocational errors (Taiwo, 2004).

<div align="center">**Evaluation of Teaching Activities**</div>

I found Zimmerman's *Collocational Opposites* (p. 48) to be a thoughtful and effective activity for teaching collocations. Not only does this activity help learners appreciate the importance of polysemy in English, but it also leads them to a more profound understanding of vocabulary by clarifying that a word may have multiple antonyms depending on its collocate. Through this activity, learners can deepen their understanding of a seemingly-simple word like *simple* itself to find that although *meals*, *tasks* and *solutions* can all be *simple* in English, they cannot all be *fancy*. Interesting, however, *meals*, *tasks* and *solutions* can all be both *complex* and *complicated* (the presumed "correct" opposites for *task* and *solution*, respectively). This probably unintended complication illustrates how important it is for teachers to be well-prepared, even when using what appears to be a straightforward exercise. When faced with these collocational pairs, learners may well ask why we can talk about a *fancy meal* but not a *fancy task* or a *fancy solution* while at the same time, *complex* can collocate with all three nouns (one key to the explanation is that *complex* and *fancy* both work for meal, but they do not mean the same thing and that both are acceptable because *simple* has more than one meaning).

In order to make optimal use of this activity, the teacher should take time to explore how similar terms collocate in the learners' native languages so that they develop an awareness of the relevant collocational differences between L1 and L2, a fundamental pedagogical principle identified by both Zimmerman (2004) and Taiwo (2004). The activity could also be enhanced by expanding the semantic classes involved beyond adjective + noun. As Stockdale (2005) points

out, acquiring noun + verb collocations is critical to learners' communicative effectiveness, yet such structures are often underrepresented in ESL textbooks (Stockdale goes on to note that "all too often, [nouns] are introduced in the impersonal construction," thereby limiting opportunities for students to be exposed to subject + object collocations). This type of expanded activity could help students learn that we *drive cars* but *push lawnmowers* and *fly planes* in English.

The collocation activity from Dixson (2004) is somewhat shallow compared to that of Zimmerman. However, I selected this activity not because of its quality, but because it is typical of the types of activities that appear in many commercially-available ESL texts (the work in which this activity appears, *Essential Idioms in English: Phrasal Verbs and Collocations*, is published by textbook juggernaut Pearson Education and widely used at private language schools in the United States). The activity begins with a brief explanation of collocations, followed by a few collocations with the verbs *take* and *break*. A definition (e.g., *take care*: *pay close attention to make sure something bad, like an accident, doesn't happen*) and example sentence are provided for each collocation. The activity ends with a fill-in-the-blank exercise which consists of a two-paragraph story with each of the blanks pre-populated with the first word of each collocation. An appendix to the activity lists the Spanish, French and Portuguese equivalents of each collocation presented in the lesson. This activity's greatest weakness is that it requires a low level of engagement on the part of the learner, who must merely select from a limited number of options (even though the activity format is fill-in-the-blank, it is essentially a multiple-choice exercise and requires no real production on the part of the student). This format may well improve the learner's receptive vocabulary skills, which according to Folse (2009) can be a good "first start" for lower level students, but may not be adequate to meet the learning needs of more advanced students. On the other hand, the activity presents useful, high-frequency collocations

involving polysemous verbs followed by nouns and noun phrases, thus satisfying Stockdale's

concerns regarding the dearth of noun + verb collocates in ESL texts.

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