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STUDENTS' COLLOCATIONAL COMPETENCE

Recent developments in corpus linguistics have forced the methodologists to change their view of language. They consider it is time for a re-valuation of many of the accepted ideas about teaching and learning. One of them is the idea on collocation.

In this paper we wish to demonstrate that lexis is one of the central organizing principles of the syllabus and concentrate on some important issues of its implications for teaching and learning English.

Not long ago we were encouraged to think of grammar as the bones of the language and vocabulary as the flesh. The current view is that language consists largely of prefabricated 'chunks' of lexis. The key feature to the formation of these chunks is collocation.

Even if the word 'collocation' is new to students, the concept is not. We have all heard the question. *Can you say X?* and had to give the reply, *'Well, no, not really. It's not just English. We don't say it.'* The reason why we don't say it is usually to do with collocation.

What is collocation? Collocation is 'what goes together with what.' It is a habitual combination of two or more words which occur in predictable combination: *'Strong coffee'* is a typical collocation in English but *'powerful coffee'* is not. We can say: *'Strong collocates with coffee but 'powerful' does not.*

Any analysis of naturally-occurring text shows how densely collocations occur. Every text has 7 out of 10 words occurring in some kind of collocation which has serious consequences for its comprehension. Learners may know a lot of words but their collocational competence may be very limited. This would explain why learners with even 'good vocabularies' have problems.

The English language teaching world has always recognized two types of collocations: idioms and phrasal verbs. Simple examples of collocations might be: *make a mistake* (verb + noun), *heavy traffic* (adjective + noun), *totally misunderstood* (adverb + noun), *extremely generous* (adverb + adjective), *guilty of* (adjective + preposition), *management program* (noun + noun).

Another classification includes: 1. unique collocation: *leg space* (meaning the distance between two seats in, for example, a plane); 2. strong collocation (words occur frequently in a particular combination): *move to tears*; 3. weak collocations (words occur with a greater than random frequency): *white wine, red hair*; 4. medium-strength collocation (they make up the most part of what we say): *hold a conversation, make a mistake* etc.

Collocation is the key to fluency. Native speakers can speak at a relatively fast speed because they are calling on a vast repertoire of readymade language in their mental lexicons. Similarly, their reading and listening comprehension is 'quick' because they are constantly recognizing 'chunks' of language.

Any analysis of non-native speakers' speech or writing shows that the lack of collocational competencies is one of the most obvious weaknesses. When students do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say, they create longer utterances often with errors. Their stress and intonation can be difficult for the listener.

Many teachers are trying to incorporate lexical ideas into their teaching. Their role is changing from language practisers to language providers. They are using different strategies for vocabulary learning at different stages of learning. Students need to become 'collectors of lexis'. Conventional dictionaries cannot give all the necessary information about collocation but bilingual ones can.

Greater emphasis on lexis means less on grammar. Considering language in 'large chunks' also means that grammar and vocabulary merge into one another. No doubt, students should constantly increase their collocational competence.