Helping Spanish Speakers Better Understand and Use Verb-Noun Collocations in English[1]

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Abstract

There are potentially great benefits to be reaped from raising our students' awareness of collocations when we teach English. Collocations are words which naturally appear together in a language, for example, *"benefits"* are *"reaped"* (not *"harvested"*) and *"awareness"* is *"raised"* (not *"lifted"*) in English. Using collocations with more confidence and accuracy has been named as the one key element that can move students forward from their intermediate plateau (Morgan Lewis, 2000). The following article is a guide to what an EFL teacher might like to know about collocations in order to begin to incorporate raising awareness of collocations into their lessons. It examines the different definitions authors have attempted to give collocations, as well as the different types of collocations that exist and which types are most important to focus on in our teaching. The article also includes some common problems which students (especially Spanish speakers) tend to encounter with collocations. Suggestions are provided as to how the problems may be solved using activities and specific practical ideas for teachers and students.

Resumen

Existen potencialmente grandes beneficios de concientizar a nuestros estudiantes sobre las "collocations" (colocaciones, unidades fraseológicas) cuando enseñamos inglés. El uso de colocaciones con más confianza y precisión ha sido señalado como el elemento clave que puede ayudar a los alumnos a continuar progresando en el aprendizaje del idioma. El presente artículo es una guía de lo que un profesor de EFL necesita saber sobre colocaciones para comenzar a incorporar la enseñanza de estas en sus clases. Examina las diferentes definiciones que los autores han intentado dar de las colocaciones, así como los diferentes tipos de colocaciones que existen y los tipos en los que es más importante centrarse en nuestra enseñanza. El artículo también incluye algunos problemas comunes que los estudiantes (especialmente hispanohablantes) tienden a encontrar con colocaciones y algunas sugerencias para ayudarles a superar estos problemas usando actividades e ideas prácticas y específicas para profesores y estudiantes.

Introduction

There are potentially great benefits to be reaped from raising our students' awareness of collocations when we teach English. Collocations are words which naturally appear together in a language, for example, *"benefits"* are *"reaped"* (not *"harvested"*) and *"awareness"* is *"raised"* (not *"lifted"*) in English. Using collocations with more confidence and accuracy has been named as the one key element that can move students forward from their intermediate plateau (Morgan Lewis, 2000).

Below the author aims to provide an overview of collocations focusing on what an EFL teacher might like to know about them in order to begin to incorporate awareness raising of collocations into their lessons. After examining the different definitions authors have attempted to give collocations, some common problems which students (especially Spanish speakers) tend to encounter with collocations are explored and some suggestions for how to help them overcome these problems are provided. Finally,

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a description is given of useful classroom activities and specific practical ideas for teachers and students to try in order to improve collocational competence.

What is a "Collocation"?

Writers often disagree on what should count as a collocation. Some authors give a broad definition. For example, Frith, who first drew attention to collocations, simply says they are "the company words keep" (as cited in Hill, 2000, p. 48). Thornbury (2006) also gives a similarly broad definition saying that "if two words collocate, then they frequently occur together" (p. 34).

The trouble with such definitions is that many other things end up being subsumed by them. Concerning these definitions, idioms (e.g., "*too many cooks spoil the broth"*), fixed expressions (e.g., "*How are you?"),* phrasal verbs (e.g., "*speak up"*) and dependent prepositions (e.g., "*interested in"*) would count as collocations. One tends to agree with Woolard (2000) that these broad definitions are unhelpful, and what we need is a definition useful to learners, what he calls a "pedagogic definition" (p. 29).

Woolard (2000) restricts the term "collocation" to relationships between nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs only. While this gives students a clear pattern to look for, I am hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace the definition he expounds which is "co-occurences of words which I think my students will not expect to find together" (Woolard, 2000, p. 32), since a collocation does not stop being a collocation just because some students expect it. I understand that this is the *principle* upon which Woolard (2000) suggests we choose which collocations to teach in our lessons, and it works for that purpose, but that does not necessarily make it an adequate *definition* of what a collocation is.

Perhaps Parrott (2010) comes closest to a useful working definition when he says that collocations are "two-word combinations where there is a restricted choice of which words can precede or follow which" (p. 125), as well as being restricted to the word classes Woolard (2000) mentions. This works because it excludes those grammatical patterns which are best dealt with under different guises, e.g., phrasal verbs and dependent prepositions. It also manages to capture the essence of what collocations are as long as we do not take it to mean that the two words making up the collocation must always be adjacent, as this is not true. Halliday and Sinclair (as cited in Carter & McCarthy, 1988) give various examples of the two parts of the collocation being separated such as: *"They **collect** many things, but chiefly **stamps**"* (p. 34).

Therefore, a pedagogically useful definition of collocations could be: two-word combinations involving adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs where there is a restricted choice of which words can precede and follow which, but the two words need not necessarily be adjacent. Some examples of collocations thus defined are:

- **Adjective + noun:** "pleasant surprise"
- **Adverb + verb:** "thoroughly enjoy",
- **adverb + adjective**: "completely satisfied"
- **adjective + noun**: "excruciating pain"
- **noun + noun**: "a bunch of roses"
- **verb + noun**: "commit suicide"

Why are Collocations Important?

Collocations deserve our attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), even at higher levels, often have difficulty using collocations naturally, which means that even though they are communicating their message, they can sound stilted and decidedly "foreign". Laufer and Waldman (2011), who studied collocational competence at three proficiency levels, found that even students identified as 'very advanced learners', who were very competent in other morphosyntactic aspects of English, often made errors in using appropriate collocations.

We have all heard students say: "I made my homework" or "I did a mistake". Sometimes mistakes in collocations can also obscure meaning and hinder communication. If we compare "We got some fast food" and "We got some quick food", the message received is not the same. In addition, low collocational competence can considerably affect students' performance in the speaking and writing components of international exams such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), where the correct use of collocations is part of the marking rubric of performance criteria for the higher grades.

Moreover, collocations are taking on a much more central role in teaching and learning, partly because of the influence of the "Lexical Approach" and partly because we now know that linguistic competence includes storing and retrieving language in chunks. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 70% of natural speech is made up of two-to-five word collocations (Hill, 2000) so using collocations correctly allows students to manipulate ready-made prefabricated chunks of language, which increases efficiency, precision and accuracy in communication. Finally, Morgan Lewis (2000) states that learning to use collocations accurately is what can give intermediate students the breakthrough they need to overcome the intermediate plateau, so clearly collocations are a very important area to raise students' awareness.

Owing to their utility for EFL students, in the following section, I will focus on verb-noun collocations such as "He **paid** her a **compliment**", where the noun is the object (direct or indirect) of the verb.

Verb-Noun Collocations

Verb-noun collocations can follow the simple form of verb + noun (e.g., *"treat patients")* where the verb and noun are adjacent, and in that order. They are possible in all tenses ("*We treated patients*", *"We had treated patients"* etc.), in interrogative forms *("Did you treat patients?"*) and negative forms (*"He didn't treat any patients*"). In passive constructions, the noun will precede the verb (e.g., *"Patients were treated at the scene").* As mentioned above, the two parts need not be adjacent, in fact, they are often separated by an article *"repair the damage"* or an adjective describing the noun *"take a short break",* or by other parts of the sentence as in the example above *"He paid her a compliment".*

Verb-noun collocations can be categorized into weak and strong. Unique collocations are at the strongest end of the spectrum. They are collocations where at least one of the pair of words only occurs along with the other one, e.g., *"to **shrug** your shoulders" or "to **foot** the bill".* McCarthy, O'Keeffe, and Walsh (2010) define strong collocations to be the ones where at least one of the words combines only with a small number of

other words, e.g., *"**adjourn** a meeting" or "**cast** a shadow".* These tend to be lower frequency and should therefore be taught at higher levels. Weak collocations are words which can combine with hundreds of other words, e.g., *"read the newspaper"* and are, therefore, "not very interesting from a teaching point of view" according to Hill (2000, p. 64). Many writers, therefore, including Hill (ibid.), urge us to teach the medium strength collocations because these are the chunks that make up most of what we say and write and are, consequently, the most useful for our students, e.g. *"fail an exam", "pay attention"* or *"reach a compromise".*

However, I am not entirely convinced that the strength of a collocation is the only criteria by which to select collocations to teach students. Some of the most useful collocations for students (e.g., *"make a mistake", "make the bed", "see the point", "get a new phone", "expect a baby", "take a break")* would actually fall under the definition of a weak collocation thus defined, because both words have so many possible collocates. This is especially true for collocations made up of delexicalized verbs *(e.g., make, get, do* – see section below), as both parts of the collocation may have hundreds of other collocates, but this does not mean that students should not be made aware of which combinations are possible and which are not. Instead, it might be more helpful to select collocations for attention based on what we predict our students will have trouble with, perhaps owing to differences from students' first language (L1) or level of idiomaticity.

Idiomaticity

The meaning of verb-noun collocations can go from transparent to opaque depending on the level of idiomaticity involved. Transparent collocations are ones students are likely to comprehend immediately simply by knowing the meanings of the words involved (e.g., *"express disappointment").* Other collocations may seem completely transparent to a native speaker, but are actually idiomatic and thus, more opaque to the learner whose L1 does not use that combination (e.g., "take sides", *"catch fire" or "draw a conclusion" or "draw attention to").* The most opaque collocations are those verb-noun combinations which form idioms. There are, in fact, many idioms of the form verb + article + noun (e.g. *"take the biscuit"* or *"hit the sack").* Students are unlikely to be able to work out their meaning just from knowing the meaning of the words involved. Therefore, teachers need to be able to recognise the level of idiomaticity of a particular collocation and focus attention on ensuring students understand common idiomatic collocations.

Delexicalized Verbs

Delexicalized verbs (*e.g,, get, put, make, do, have*) are verbs which carry little meaning on their own, taking on meaning when combined into collocations. The verb *"make"* takes on quite different meanings and would be expressed with quite different synonyms in English and equivalents in Spanish in the following combinations: *"**make** a point, **make** the bed, **make** a fuss".* According to wordreference.com, the equivalents are: ***decir** algo importante (**say** something important), **tender** la cama (**tend** (to) the bed), **montar** un alboroto (**mount** a fuss).* Because of this, Morgan Lewis (as cited in Woolard, 2000) states that the more delexicalized a word is, the more important it is to teach it to students within a collocation.

Pronunciation

Placing nuclear (tonic) stress appropriately has been found to be vitally important to intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000) and is thus part of the "*lingua franca* core": a list of pronunciation features learners need to master in order to be able to communicate effectively in English in various contexts. Therefore, drawing students' attention to prominence in chunks like collocations is good practice. Often both the verb and the noun are prominent, because they often both carry meaning. We say *"She kept her promise",* because both the fact that she kept it as well as what she kept is important information. In longer sentences, it tends to be the noun that is prominent rather than the verb and collocations form natural chunks, thereby defining where pauses should occur in spoken English. The following is an example of this*: "The language school was not a success, so we had to cut our losses || to avoid bankruptcy."*

Issues for Teaching and Learning

In this section, I would like to look at some of the most common problems faced by students and teachers when dealing with collocations and in the following section I suggest some ways of dealing with these issues.

Problems Noticing and Recording Collocations

Research tells us that what is not noticed does not become intake (Michael Lewis, 2000). In other words, in order to acquire new language, students must first notice it. Sometimes, neither teachers nor students recognize collocations as new and so learning opportunities are missed. I have learned from experience, that dealing with new vocabulary in a text by simply asking *"Are there any words you don't know?"* is not adequate if we want to ensure that students actually notice and record collocations. Similarly, teaching new vocabulary by choosing single words from a text and writing them on the board for students to note down without their collocates means that opportunities are often missed to raise awareness of common collocations. Furthermore, if collocations in a text are made up of words the teacher assumes the students already know (e.g., *"balance the books")*, this may go entirely unnoticed as a new and useful collocation, so it is not recorded and, therefore, is not available for students to incorporate into their active vocabulary.

Low Productive Collocational Competence

In line with most other aspects of L2 competence, productive or procedural knowledge of collocations is even lower than students' ability to recognize them (Durrant & Schmitt, 2010). While teaching adults in an FCE (Cambridge First Certificate in English) exam preparation class in Ecuador, I found that not using collocations made students' speech and writing more complicated than it needed to be, because it made them go a very long way round in communicating a simple idea for which we have ready-made collocations. For example, when writing a discursive essay about luxury products, one student wrote that we should *"make a situation that everybody who wants one has one"* but this would have been much better expressed as *"meet demand".* In terms of exam classes, this lack of knowledge of collocations can affect students' grades, since collocational competence is in the assessment criteria for accessing higher bands in the Speaking and Writing test of most international exams. Not using the appropriate

collocations also opens the door for more grammatical errors than if the students had simply used the formulaic sequences or chunks which native speakers would have used.

L1 Interference

A number of studies (e.g., Yamashita & Jiang, 2010) have looked at the influence of L1 transfer on L2 collocational use, showing that many students tend to rely on using L1 translation equivalents. When teaching general English to young adults in Ecuador, I often found that even higher level learners would make mistakes with collocations because they were translating directly from Spanish. As an example, they would say "***lose*** *time"* instead of "***waste*** *time"* as a direct translation from "***perder el*** *tiempo*". Perhaps partly owing to the considerable Latinate vocabulary overlap between the two languages, Spanish students tend to overgeneralize how much they can transfer directly into English. These types of mistakes can also become fossilized because they are uttered regularly by students (and even by some non-native teachers) so students get used to hearing the wrong collocation, and so it can sound correct to them.

Low Collocational Competence with Delexicalized Verbs

While teaching lower intermediate students at a university in Ecuador, both my students and I would get a little frustrated when trying to work out why one noun should take *make* and another *do,* or why we do not "*make* a break" but "*take"* one instead. Even when students know the two most common possible translations of "hacer" (to make), not having a generative rule to decide between them often led to guess-work, and wrong guesses produced sentences such as *"make research", or "do a complaint".*

Suggestions for Teaching

Embedding Collocation Work into Every Lesson

In order to begin to solve these problems, it is essential to raise students' awareness of collocations, and in order to do so, I firmly believe that, like pronunciation work, collocation work ought to be embedded into every lesson. Durrant and Schmitt (2010) argue that the reason that even advanced learners have low collocational competence is primarily because L2 learners do not get sufficient exposure to naturally occurring collocations in varied contexts and co-texts to be able to recognize, process, and remember them.

This, therefore, suggests firstly, that we should be exposing our students to varied input including authentic texts rich in collocations and secondly, that whenever new lexis is written on the board, especially nouns, these should be presented with their most common collocates so that students go away knowing exactly how to use them. When working from a text, instead of asking "Are there any words you don't know?", we could ask "What is the verb before "*opportunity*"? and then "What other verbs collocate with "*opportunity"*? Then add vertically on the board "*grab*, *take*, *make the most of"* etc.

The words which make up collocations occur together, so it is important they do not get separated in the classroom. This way, students walk away with a prefabricated chunk of language ready to use, instead of a single word, which they may then combine incorrectly with any other words. Once students are used to having collocations pointed out to them, they get better at noticing them themselves, and we can ask broader

questions, e.g., "Do you notice any word combinations we can note down?" (Morgan Lewis, 2000, p. 18).

A number of studies (e.g., Wood, 2010, Jiang & Nekraskova, 2010) show that mastery of "formulaic sequences" (i.e., chunks or bundles of words like collocations), is an essential part of communicative competence. Jiang and Nekraskova (2010) found that both native and non-native speakers responded to the formulaic sequences much quicker and more accurately than to non-formulaic sequences. Therefore, raising our students' awareness of collocations as chunks will also allow them to read more quickly and process speech quicker when listening, because recognising chunks is much more efficient than processing word for word (Wood, 2010).

Lexical Notebooks

To encourage students to record collocations effectively, I recommend introducing your students to Lexical Notebooks. These are special vocabulary notebooks where students note chunks of language rather than single words. These can be organised in various ways: around topics or by headwords (e.g. verbs which collocate with "*criticism*"). When recording examples, students should be encouraged to write whole sentences and note them in exactly the form they find them without "cleaning them up". The example *"He's following in his father's footsteps"* is preferable to *"to follow in somebody's footsteps"* (Morgan Lewis, 2000, p. 19). Silva (2015) recommends that students note down new collocations during the lesson, and fill out their Lexical Notebooks at home using a good learner's dictionary or a collocation dictionary, noting a definition in English. Examples of entries can be found on Silva's blog (http://www.ihlondon.com/blog/posts/2015/lexical-notebooks-and-why-you-should-use-one).

If the examples are jotted down in large enough chunks, certain grammar mistakes are eliminated and the language is more memorable because students are more likely to remember the context and situation the example came from. Filling out the notebooks at home is excellent revision for students, and using English paraphrasing rather than translations helps students begin to think in English and, therefore, make faster progress. This might also encourage them to stop transferring collocations from L1. Collocations can then be recycled during subsequent lessons to encourage proceduralization (actively being able to retrieve and use the chunks in spontaneous communication).

Contrastive Analysis

Yamashita and Jiang (2010) found that it is difficult to acquire incongruent collocations (collocations which do not translate directly between the two languages) even with a considerable amount of exposure to L2. Therefore, simply exposing students to English collocations is not enough for them to acquire productive collocational competence. It is also necessary to specifically and overtly draw students' attention to the differences in collocations between their L1 and English through contrastive analysis.

In order to mitigate the effects of L1 interference, in my experience of working with monolingual groups of Spanish L1 learners, I have found contrastive analysis helpful in drawing attention to similarities and differences in collocations between English and

Spanish. To help students become more accurate when using collocations different from L1, I would focus especially on ones where one or both languages use collocations which are to some degree idiomatic. An example of this is a Spanish L1 student might say *"to **make** somebody a visit"* as a direct translation from "*hacerle una visita a alguien*", but in English we would say *"to **pay** somebody a visit",* or they might say "**pass** time" instead of "***spend** time"*, since in Spanish the collocation is "***pasar** el tiempo".* So when teaching collocations to monolingual groups, I would try to pre-empt such problems by concept checking what is not possible as well as what is. If students consistently displayed instances of erroneous transfer (like the instances above), I would ask them to note down the incorrect version and cross it out with one clear line so it is still legible, clearly signalling that the collocation is not possible in English. Then I ask them to write the correct collocations underneath.

This technique is most useful when the teacher is certain of the natural collocation in Spanish and its equivalent natural translation in English. If so, it can help avoid typical errors from becoming fossilised, especially in a monolingual situation where students might assume that the collocation is possible simply because they hear it so often from other Spanish L1 speakers.

Special Focus on Delexicalized Verbs

To encourage students to become more accurate with using collocations involving delexicalized verbs, the teacher can have common delexicalized verbs (e.g., *do, make, take, have*) on cards of one colour and a larger number of possible collocate nouns (e.g., *a break, the bed, a baby, your homework*) on pieces of card of another colour. Ask students to decide which combinations are possible and which are not, and to order the cards accordingly. If one noun collocates with more than one verb, they should visually represent this in their ordering. Encourage students to take a photo of the right pairings and write up in their lexical notebook any that they initially got wrong.

This activity can draw students' attention to the unnatural collocations they may be producing and, therefore, encourage more accurate production. The cards students placed incorrectly could be recycled periodically, until they are more confident and more cards can be added.

Conclusion

Helping EFL students to become aware of how to use collocations accurately in communication is an important area of English language teaching and learning and it is perhaps somewhat neglected in some classrooms (Hashemi, Azizinezhad & Dravishi, 2012). Teaching lexis in collocational chunks rather than as isolated words fits well with what we now know about the importance of mastering formulaic sequences in proficient language use (Wood, 2010). Therefore, in order to help our students improve their communicative competence at every level, it is essential we embed collocation work in every lesson in the same way we embed pronunciation.

This can be done by raising awareness of the existence of collocations and how common they are. Using authentic texts rich in naturally occurring, medium strength collocations, and/or examples which are different to the word combinations that express the same ideas in the students' first language can be particularly helpful. Explicitly contrasting the English collocations with their L1 equivalents can go a long

way to avoid students transferring collocations from their first language which do not work in English. It is important to encourage students, through the use of lexical notebooks, to develop a systematic way of writing collocations down. Finally, providing students with frequent opportunities to practice collocations in class by regularly revisiting collocations from previous lessons can help students incorporate them into their active repertoire of linguistic devices, which can in turn considerably improve students' level of competence in all four skills.

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