

Collocation and the Non-native English Language Teacher

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Abstract: *There is a commonplace assumption that the more single form words a learner knows, the larger is the learner's vocabulary knowledge, and hence he/she is a good language user. As a result of this assumption, vocabulary teaching is too often associated with the provision of a single word synonym for a new word or words learners encounter during English lessons. This approach entertains only one aspect of vocabulary knowledge: the substitutability of one word for the other in a sentence because of meaning similarity. There is also another kind of vocabulary knowledge known as collocation — the way words are combined in permissible manners in the context of use. However, this aspect of vocabulary knowledge has usually been overlooked or at best been seen as marginal to English language courses. This paper argues that knowing words as independent synonymous, linguistic units does not guarantee learners' ability to collocate the words with the restricted range of possibilities. Hence, collocation is an important aspect of vocabulary knowledge that requires explicit training. Two questions are addressed in the present study: (1) Given two groups of content words (verb-noun and adjective-noun) that are very well familiar to non-native teachers of English, to what extent can they recognize the combinatory possibilities of these words, and form with them acceptable and meaningful English phrases? (2) Do the teachers combine the words to form unacceptable phrases in spite of their knowledge of the individual words? The results show that the subjects of the study have severely limited collocational knowledge. They have also manifested the inability to distinguish typical collocations from untypical ones. The results support the view that collocations need to be taught explicitly. Thus, teaching implications have been provided.*

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Introduction

The term 'collocation' is not used in the same way by all writers. Hence, the necessary first step is to arrive at what the term means to experts on language teaching:

Collocation refers to the restriction on how words can be used together, for example which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together. For example, in English the verb *perform* is used with *operation*, but not with *discussion*: *The doctor performed the operation. The committee performed a discussion.* instead we say: *The committee held/had a discussion.* *perform* is used with (collocates with) *operation*, and *hold* and *have* collocate with *discussion*. *high* collocates with *probability*, but not with *chance*: *a high probability but a good chance.* *do* collocates with *damage*, *duty*, and *wrong*, but not with *trouble*, *noise*, and *excuse*: *do a lot of damage do one's duty do wrong make trouble, make a lot of noise make an excuse* (Richards, Platt and Weber 1990:46).

McCarthy (1990:13) says "collocation is a marriage contract between words, and some words are more firmly married to each other than others." Crystal (1997:105) refers to 'collocation' as "the company lexemes (words) keep." These three definitions have a lot in common, and they form a framework from which collocation should be viewed for the purpose of the present study.

There is a commonplace assumption that the more single form words a learner knows, the larger is the learner's vocabulary knowledge, and thus he/she is a good language user. This assumption entertains only the paradigmatic relations of words -- the substitutability of one word for the other in a sentence because of similarity in meaning at the level of ideas. For example:

I gave Martha the ball.



passed



handed



-threw

Words in a sentence also have syntagmatic relations -- the relationship that words have with each other because they may occur together in a sentence.

For example:

I↔gave↔Martha↔the↔ball.

The co-occurrence of words in syntagmatic relations (i.e., collocation) is also an important area of vocabulary knowledge, since learners' lack of this knowledge leads to the formation of odd phrases and sentences which may block communication. However, as (Seal 1991; McCarthy 1990; Lewis 1997) point out, collocational acquisition by English language learners has usually been overlooked or at best been seen as marginal to English language courses.

Collocations relating to the co-occurrence of words are of two types (Benson 1985; Seal 1991; Lewis 1997). The first is grammatical -- where a content word frequently co-occurs with a function word (mainly prepositions). For example: reason + for; worried + about; believe + in. The second is lexical collocation which involves the combination of two content words. The two main categories of lexical collocation are (1) verb + noun, and (2) adjective + noun (Ibid.). For instance: spend + money; large + amount. Lexical collocation (verb + noun and adjective + noun) is the main focus of this paper.

Review of Collocational Research

In the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, 'collocation' is an important aspect of vocabulary knowledge and the use of words. As far as the present researcher knows, however, nothing has been done on this topic in the Ethiopian context. Even in contexts outside Ethiopia, this dimension to word knowledge and use has been largely ignored until very recently (McCarthy, 1990; Seal, 1991; Lewis, 1997). Hence, works on collocation and collocational research outputs are scant in comparison with literature on other aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning (ibid.).

Foreign sources that are available (e.g., McCarthy, 1990; Harmer, 1991; Seal, 1991) indicate that, among other things, word meaning and use are governed by collocation – that is which words go with each other. For instance, Harmer (1991) illustrates the above points thus: It is not enough to know only the lexical meaning of the word 'sprained'. In order to use the word, "we need to know that whereas we can say 'sprained ankle', 'sprained wrist', we cannot say 'sprained thigh' or 'sprained rib'. We can have a *headache*, *stomachache*, or *earache*, but we cannot have a *throatache*, or a *legache*" (p. 157).

Words can collocate with different degree of frequency and acceptability. "Most typically, this feature is associated with verb-noun and adjective-noun pairs" (Lewis 1997:256).

As Nattinger and DeCarrio (1992) point out, in verb-noun and adjective-noun pairs, collocation is not equally powerful in both directions. For example, the noun *story* strongly suggests the verb collocate *tell*, whereas the verb *tell* weakly suggests the noun *story*. Similarly, the adjective *rancid* strongly suggests the noun collocate *butter*, whereas the noun *butter* only weakly suggests the adjective *rancid*, and the verb *raise* strongly suggests a noun collocate (e.g., to *raise capital*). In these examples, the noun, the adjective and the verb are the 'key' words. Therefore, the teaching of collocation should primarily emphasize verb-noun and adjective-noun pairs, since they

are of high frequency and also because they carry the most information content as can be seen from the above examples.

The teaching of collocations in English also need to include (a) grammatical collocation (verb + preposition); (b) multiple word collocations; (c) collocations in idioms; and (d) collocations in colloquial idioms (Benson, 1985; Lewis, 1997). Nevertheless, these are not the main focus of the present study, since in the Ethiopian context the teaching of English is mainly for academic purpose, and since high frequency collocates (verb-noun, adjective-noun) contain the most information content crucial for academic studies, they deserve primary emphasis.

Several studies have found that learners of English cannot acquire collocations well through ordinary language experience, and suggest that there is a need for collocations to be taught explicitly.

McCarthy (1990) and Seal (1991) propose that for any given word, a native speaker also knows a range of other words which can collocate with it. Thus, the knowledge of collocational appropriacy is part of the native speaker's competence. But a foreign learner of English has to acquire it through planned, systematic and explicit training.

Cowie (1992) found that a large number of familiar collocations such as "make proposals", or "call for action" appear in newspapers. A foreign learner of English must know them for receptive and productive language competence. Verstraten (1992), Bahns and Eldaw (1993) argue that, even for advanced students, collocations present a major problem in the production of correct English. These authors indicate the need for providing collocational information in learners' dictionaries.

Lewis (1993) cites recent research that has found that native speakers of a language use a large number of fixed and prepatterned phrases when they are engaged in the routines of normal spoken interaction. He also emphasizes that all languages use a wide range

of expressions including collocations. He then proposes that "de-contextualized vocabulary learning is a fully legitimate strategy" (pp.194-195).

The Study

From experience, it appears that collocations have not been taught explicitly in educational establishments in Ethiopia. This study, therefore, argues in favour of teaching collocations explicitly in a planned and systematic manner. The rationale behind this argument is inherent in the characteristics of collocations, the problems these characteristics create for foreign learners of English, and the role collocations play in language learning.

Several writers (e.g., Carter et al, 1988; McCarthy 1990; Crystal 1997) characterize collocations as follows:

- Collocations should not be confused with 'association of ideas.' The co-occurrence of words may have nothing to do with 'ideas.' Native speakers of English say, for example, *green with jealousy* (not blue, red, etc.), though there is nothing literally 'green' about 'jealousy,' and coffee with milk is usually referred to as *white coffee*, though the colour is brown.
- Collocations vary from language to language. In English the words *strong* and *weak* collocate with the word *coffee*, whereas in Amharic coffee is either *fat* or *thin*.
- The more fixed a collocation is, the more native speakers think of it as an 'idiom' -- a pattern to be learned as a whole, but not as the 'sum of its parts', since an idiom functions as a single unit whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts (e.g., *green with jealousy*).
- Some collocations are perfectly usual or unmarked (e.g., do homework); some are unusual or marked but still acceptable

(e.g., work homework), and some are considered very highly marked or unacceptable (e.g., make homework). Therefore, the knowledge of collocation is a question of typicality and statements about it can never be absolute.

- Some collocations are easily predictable (e.g., 'tell' with 'story' 'blond' with 'hair'). Others are much less so: *letter* collocates with a wide range of words, such as *alphabet* and *spelling*, and (in another sense) *box*, *post* and *write*. Yet other words are so widely used that they have no predictable collocates at all (e.g., get, have, the).
- Collocations do not lend themselves to some kind of logical deduction. Words may collocate simply because the combination reflects a common real world state of affairs. For instance, 'pass' and 'salt' collocate because people often want other people to pass them the salt while they are at the dining table.

Too often in teaching and learning vocabulary, teachers and students look for and deal with only the new words in texts. However, a close examination of the characteristics of collocations mentioned above reveals that this approach to vocabulary teaching and learning has little to contribute to collocational knowledge. It is rather a misidentification of the constituent chunks of the text in a way that is pedagogically unhelpful for vocabulary development. It is also evident from the characteristics that common sense, logic and L1 knowledge of collocations cannot be of much help for a learner of English to distinguish typical collocations from untypical ones. Thus, even when the learner knows individual words, the way they combine to communicate ideas can represent a major source of difficulty.

In spite of the learning difficulties discussed so far, the knowledge of collocation plays important roles in language learning. In order to express ideas, a foreign language learner needs to know whether the words available to him/her collocate and with what degree of frequency. Such knowledge can facilitate the learner's ability to

produce correct language, since when selecting words, the learner will be aware of the restricted range of combinatory possibilities (i.e., differentiating typical collocations from untypical ones). Knowledge of collocation is also useful in language comprehension as the meaning of a word has a great deal to do with the other words with which it commonly co-occurs. This association assists the learner to form expectations about what sorts of information can follow from what has preceded, and so the learner is often able to guess the meaning after hearing only the first part of familiar collocations. In addition, the association can aid the learner in defining the semantic area of a word, since every acceptable collocation is considered to be one step towards understanding the concept of a word, and in helping the student infer meaning from context. The fact that collocations teach students expectations about which sorts of language can follow from what has preceded has an added benefit for language production in that students will not have to reconstruct the language each time they want to say something but instead can use these collocations as pre-packaged phrases. These pre-packaged phrases will lead to fluency in speaking and writing, for they relieve the learners of concentrating on each individual word by allowing them to focus attention on the larger structure of the discourse and on the social aspects of the interaction. The points raised so far in relation to the importance of collocations in language learning, demonstrate that people comprehend and produce language in chunks, not in bits and pieces.

Two questions are addressed in the present study: (1) Given two groups of content words (verb-noun and adjective-noun) that are very well familiar to non-native teachers of English, to what extent can they recognize the combinatory possibilities of these words, and form with them acceptable and meaningful English phrases? (2) Do the teachers combine the words to form unacceptable phrases in spite of their knowledge of the individual words?

Methods

To answer the above research questions, two sets of exercises were designed (see, appendix). These exercises focused on lexical collocation involving the co-occurrence of content words (verb + noun, and adjective + noun). The first exercise consisted of ten verbs and twenty-six nouns, while the second comprised ten adjectives and twenty-two nouns. Both exercises were matching type.

The content words in the two exercises were chosen for three reasons. Firstly, the words have high frequency of occurrence in spoken or written English according to available word frequency lists (e.g., Thorndike and Lorge 1959; West 1965; Kucera and Francis 1967; Hofland and Johansson 1982). Hence, non-native teachers of English could access the meanings of the individual words with little or no difficulty. Secondly, the words in the two exercises were tried on a group of fourth year students studying English language for first degree at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University. None of them found the words difficult in terms of their lexical meanings as independent linguistic units. Thirdly, the selected words could collocate with different degrees of frequency and acceptability provided that a non-native speaker of English has developed the feel of the co-occurrence of words in English.

Before administering the exercises to the subjects of this study, both exercises were done by two native speakers of English -- a British, specialist in English language teaching at Lancaster University, and an American professor of history at Michigan State University. This was necessary because (a) the knowledge of collocational appropriacy is better judged by native speakers, since it is part of their communicative competence; (b) it was felt appropriate to avoid any bias toward British or American English. The two native speakers were also consulted on the clarity of the instructions to the two exercises, and they did not have any qualms on this issue.

Finally, the two exercises were administered to 19 second year students in the TEFL Master's Programme at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University. Although a large sample size would be preferable to represent the population, the research data obtained from the 19 students in the TEFL Master's Programme can show the magnitude of the problem relating to the topic of the research and the need to solve the problem. The reasons are as follows:

- The students were not hand-picked – they formed a 'natural' group. Thus, there was no bias in the selection of the sample.
- Among other applicants for admission to the TEFL Master's Programme, the 19 students secured admission after having passed competitive entrance examination on listening, speaking, reading and writing. The group, therefore, belonged to the category of English language teachers in Ethiopia considered to be of higher qualification.
- Their English language teaching experience ranges from two to fifteen years.
- They came to the University for further studies from different regions in the country.

The first exercise required the students to match the selected verbs with the selected nouns to form as many collocates as possible which produce acceptable English phrases. In the second exercise, the students were instructed to match the selected adjectives with the selected nouns in order to generate as many collocates as possible to make acceptable English phrases. The students were also told not to collocate the words in both exercises by guessing. The exercises contained examples to show the students what to do and how to do them. The exercises were done during class hour in the presence of

the researcher, and no question was raised concerning the instructions to the exercises. Although no time limit was set, all the students finished doing the exercises in forty minutes.

Results and Discussions

The 19 students' performance in the two exercises was assessed on the basis of the number of acceptable collocates proposed by the two native speakers of English. The number of collocates they proposed for the first exercise is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Verbs, Number of Nouns, Verb-Noun Collocates Proposed by the Two Native Speakers

Verbs	No. of Nouns	Average No. of Acceptable Verb-Noun Collocates
arrange	26	13
do		8
give		12
make		11
pick		6
play		4
receive		12
save		5
solve		3
work		6
Total	26	80

The students' performance in the first exercise is given in Table 2.

The comparison between the average number of acceptable verb-noun collocates in Tables 1 and 2 shows that the students' knowledge of collocation is severely limited with regard to the sample of verbs and nouns under consideration in spite of the words' high frequency of occurrence in English, and their high level of familiarity to the students as separate linguistic items.

The students were not able to distinguish acceptable collocates from unacceptable ones in that they produced 54 unacceptable collocates while matching the verbs and the nouns in the first exercise. These inappropriate collocates relate to the students' limited collocational knowledge more than anything else.

Table 2: Verbs, Number of Nouns, Acceptable and Unacceptable Verb-Noun Collocates by the 19 Students

Verbs	No. of Nouns	Average No. of Acceptable Verb-Noun Collocates	Unacceptable Collocates for All Verbs
arrange	26	3	54
do		4	
give		6	
make		5	
pick		2	
play		2	
receive		3	
save		2	
solve		2	
work		2	
Total	26	31	54

The results of the second exercise which deals with adjective-noun collocates are displayed in Tables 3 and 4.

As can be seen from the comparison of the average number of acceptable adjective-noun collocates in Tables 3 and 4, the students' collocational knowledge is seriously limited for the selected sample of adjectives and nouns regardless of the high frequency of occurrence of these words in English, and their familiarity to the students as independent linguistic units. Moreover, the students made 47 unacceptable adjective-noun collocates when they did the second exercise. This is another demonstration that the students have not

'fully' developed the competence for differentiating typical collocates from untypical ones, even when combining familiar words.

Table 3: Adjectives, Number of Nouns, Adjective-Noun Collocates Proposed by the Two Native Speakers

Adjectives	No. of Nouns	Average No. of Acceptable Adjective-Noun Collocates
big	22	14
difficult		9
forthcoming		3
good		15
great		14
heavy		7
light		10
powerful		5
spare		3
strong		6
Total	22	86

Table 4: Adjectives, Number of Nouns, Acceptable and Unacceptable Adjective-Noun Collocates by the 19 Students

Adjectives	No. of Nouns	Average No. of Acceptable Adjective-Noun Collocates	Unacceptable Collocates for All adjectives
big	22	5	47
difficult		3	
forthcoming		2	
good		8	
great		4	
heavy		4	
light		3	
powerful		1	
spare		2	
strong		3	
Total	22	35	47

Among other things, it is obvious that native speakers are superior to non-natives in their collocational knowledge. However, this paper

would like to suggest that the drawbacks manifested by the subjects of this study seem to be the result of not teaching and/or learning collocation, or teaching it on ad hoc basis in the Ethiopian context. Both are disadvantageous to the learner in view of the importance of collocational knowledge in spoken and written discourse. Collocational knowledge equips the non-native with pre-packed phrases, and these phrases facilitate communication because they reduce the search for words and how to combine the words to express ideas (an element of fluency). The knowledge is also useful for accuracy, since it alerts the non-native to combine the individual words one knows in a permissible manner during discourse.

Teaching Implications

The explicit teaching of "collocations" is necessary because "words cannot be learned without ... consciousness that it is a new word which is being learned" (Carter, 2001:44). Learners' conscious awareness of what constitutes meaningful chunk of linguistic elements provides them with a tool that enables learners to process information input more effectively. This in turn can facilitate language production-oral and/or written, and this ability is advantageous in academic context where receiving and transmitting information are essential. Thus, the recognition, generation and effective recording of collocations are crucial in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Therefore, English language teachers need to teach collocations in an explicit manner, and make sure that students are aware of word partnerships or collocation and that when recording new words, students record together and in sequence those words that regularly occur in exactly that grouping.

Textbooks on teaching English as a foreign language persist in presenting word lists individually (i.e., as single items). The move away from seeing vocabulary as lists of items to be learnt separately and towards the co-occurrence of words is an important contribution

to lexical competence which in turn leads to grammatical competence as well as discourse competence. Language teachers, therefore, can always find ways to improve a textbook. For instance, the teacher can have the students add the frequent collocates to the word lists in their textbooks. Thus, given the word "save" on a word list, students can be told to add "money", "time", "life", "energy" depending on the way the word is used in the text that follows, and/or as an extended activity geared to vocabulary development.

The teacher can also have students read various short texts in English from different printed materials and analyze them in terms of: (1) grammatical collocation -- which prepositions are used after particular verbs, adjectives and nouns; (2) lexical collocation -- which verbs are used with a particular noun, which adjectives are used with a particular noun, which nouns a particular adjective is used with and which adverbs are used with a particular verb.

Moreover, the teacher can design exercises which exclusively focus on collocations. These are mostly matching type. For example, from two lists, one of adjectives and another one of nouns, students are asked to decide which words could combine to form the most likely collocations. Such exercises are initially useful for reviewing students knowledge of collocations. They can also be used for feedback and for further teaching.

A few examples (adopted from Lewis, 1997) are given below to illustrate the type of practice proposed above:

Exercise Type 1

In each of the following, one word does NOT make a strong word partnership with the word in capitals; which is the odd word?

- HIGH season price opinion spirits house time priority
- MAIN point reason effect entrance speed road meal course

- NEW experience job food potatoes baby situation year
- LIGHT green lunch rain entertainment day work traffic

Exercise Type 2

Choose from these words four that make strong word partnerships in business English with each of the verbs below.

bill presentation invoice discount debt lunch
deal calculation mistake service message expenses

PAY

MAKE

GIVE

Use some of the word partnerships to say something about your own job.

Exercise Type 3

Complete the table with five adjectives and five verbs that form strong word partnerships with the noun VISIT.

Verb	Adjective	(Key Word)
_____	_____	VIST
_____	_____	
_____	_____	
_____	_____	
_____	_____	

Exercise Type 4

Fill in the middle column with an adjective that is opposite in meaning to the word in the first column, but makes a correct word partnership with the word in column three.

Column 1

helpful
efficient
careful
safe
light
light
light
light

Column 2

Column 3

suggestion
system
piece of work
choice
green
suitcase
rain
work

In exercise type 4, it is important for teachers to note that the idea of 'opposites' is invalid unless confined to collocational or contextual opposites. Frequently, teaching oversimplifies this idea that it becomes pedagogically unhelpfully.

Materials for students would obviously need to incorporate variety of collocational exercises with more examples. In order to help students learn collocations effectively and retain what they have learned, putting the collocations in the context of use, and then recycling them in production-based language learning tasks can be a useful pedagogical practice.

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money	Q	spend	0
change	a	change	1
to	b	to	2
give	c	give	3
take	d	take	4
risk	e	risk	5
city	f	city	6
receive	g	receive	7
save	h	save	8
work	i	work	9
energy	j		
track	k		
at night	l		
an accusation	m		
over-time	n		
an exercise	o		
time	p		
minute	q		
flowers	r		
grass	s		
plane	t		
decision	u		
olive	v		
olive	w		
right	x		
	y		
	z		

Appendix

Exercise A

Match the words on the left with those on the right on the basis of which word goes with which in order to form acceptable and meaningful English phrases. One word can combine with another word more than once. Consider all the possible combinations. Indicate your answers by writing the number on the left in the space provided in front of the words on the right. If you are not sure of what goes with what, please do not guess. That is, leave the blank spaces as they are, since you will not be evaluated on this exercise. The first one has been done for you.

0.	spend	_____ O _____	money
1.	arrange	a. _____	a difference
2.	do	b. _____	a puzzle
3.	give	c. _____	lectures
4.	make	d. _____	an excuse
5.	pick	e. _____	life
6.	play	f. _____	lessons
7.	receive	g. _____	a game
8.	save	h. _____	homework
9.	solve	i. _____	fruit
10.	work	j. _____	a meeting
		k. _____	a problem
		l. _____	energy
		m. _____	a trick
		n. _____	at night
		o. _____	an accusation
		p. _____	over-time
		q. _____	an exercise
		r. _____	time
		s. _____	presents
		t. _____	flowers
		u. _____	guests
		v. _____	plans
		w. _____	decisions
		x. _____	chairs
		y. _____	letters
		z. _____	right

Exercise B

Match the words on the left with those on the right on the basis of which word goes with which in order to form acceptable and meaningful English phrases. One word can combine with another word more than once. Consider all the possible combinations. Indicate your answers by writing the number on the left in the space provided in front of the words on the right. If you are not sure of what goes with what, please do not guess. That is, leave the blank spaces as they are, since you will not be evaluated on this exercise.

The first one has been done for you.

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|----------|---|-------------|
| 0. | major | _____ | O | problem |
| 1. | big | a. _____ | | traffic |
| 2. | difficult | b. _____ | | amount |
| 3. | forthcoming | c. _____ | | colour |
| 4. | good | d. _____ | | tea |
| 5. | great | e. _____ | | sleeper |
| 6. | heavy | f. _____ | | parts |
| 7. | light | g. _____ | | marriage |
| 8. | powerful | h. _____ | | exercise |
| 9. | spare | i. _____ | | celebration |
| 10. | strong | j. _____ | | event |
| | | k. _____ | | meal |
| | | l. _____ | | noise |
| | | m. _____ | | coffee |
| | | n. _____ | | load |
| | | o. _____ | | argument |
| | | p. _____ | | shame |
| | | q. _____ | | time |
| | | r. _____ | | car |
| | | s. _____ | | room |
| | | t. _____ | | rain |
| | | u. _____ | | question |
| | | v. _____ | | man |