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An exploratory study of collocational use by ESL students – A task based approach

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Abstract

Collocation is an aspect of language generally considered arbitrary by nature and problematic to L2 learners who need collocational competence for effective communication. This study attempts, from the perspective of L2 learners, to have a deeper understanding of collocational use and some of the problems involved, by adopting a task based approach, using two highly comparable corpora based on the writing of Hong Kong ESL and native-speaker British students. Results of the study indicate that the performance of the Hong Kong students in collocational use might be adversely affected by their L1, L2 as well as their inadequacy in the lexis and grammar of the target language. Findings of the study suggest the need for a broader view of collocational knowledge and a pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of this aspect of L2. The implications for teaching English in general and English vocabulary in particular are also discussed in detail.
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1. Introduction

Bolinger's view that 'language does not expect us to build everything starting with lumber, nails and blueprint, but provides us with an incredibly large number of prefabs' (Bolinger, 1976, p. 1) has been gaining growing acceptance. Prefabs of this kind refer to language units such as words, collocations and idioms. The argument further developed from this view is that 'as they (idioms) loosen up, they gradually fade into the background of phrases that can be generated by rule (p. 5)'. That is to say, units of language may be viewed along a continuum of idiomaticity, ranging from units completely free to those totally fixed in terms of syntax and from units which are transparent to those which are obscure in terms of meaning.

This idiomatic view of language has been supported by findings of studies on language processing (Becker, 1975; Pawley and Syder, 1983) and corpus studies (Sinclair, 1987; Renouf and Sinclair, 1991; Altenberg, 1998). Indeed, the use of prefabs in text is so pervasive that Sinclair (1987) put forward the 'idiom principle' to

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explain the way in which meaning arises from text. By idiom principle is meant 'a language user has available to him a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments' (p. 320). Indeed, there are tens and thousands of language units of various degrees of fixity and transparency along the continuum of idiomaticity discussed above and these units are becoming more and more important in language and language teaching.

1.1. Collocation

The term collocation has been labeled in a variety of ways e.g. prefabs, multi-word units etc. and defined in different manners in both linguistics and language teaching. The only consensus, as Nesselhauf (2005, p. 11) pointed out, is that collocation refers to 'some kind of syntagmatic relation of words'.

Gitsaki (1999), in this regard, reviewed in meticulousness the three main approaches to collocations: lexical, semantic and structural. The lexical approach was based on the idea of word meaning at the lexical level first proposed by Firth (1957). One often quoted example is that one of the meanings of 'night' is its collocability with 'dark', and one of the meanings of 'dark' is its collocability with 'night' (p. 196). Halliday et al. (1964) explained collocation as the tendency of a lexical item to co-occur with one or more words. Sinclair (1966, p. 411) focused on the likelihood of co-occurrence but admitted that 'there are virtually no impossible collocations, but some are more likely than others'. Sinclair (1991, p. 170) went on to define collocation as 'the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text' and distinguished the 'significant' (i.e. frequent) collocations from the 'casual' (i.e. infrequent) ones. Collocation has thus become a merely statistical matter. Unlike the lexical approach, the semantic approach perceived the meaning of a lexical item as the semantic properties of that item. That is to say, it is the semantic properties of a lexical item that determine its collocates (Chomsky, 1965; Lyons, 1977; Katz and Fodor, 1963; Lehrer, 1974; Cruse, 1986). This approach, as Gitsaki (1999, p. 15) commented, cannot explain the large number of idiosyncratic co-occurrences that are arbitrarily restricted.

While the lexical and semantic approaches focused only on lexical words, the structural approach took into consideration both lexical and grammatical collocations. The BBI Combinatory Dictionary (Benson et al., 1997) defined collocation as words which 'regularly combine with certain other words or grammatical constructions.' Eight categories of grammatical collocations and seven categories of lexical collocations were identified. Grammatical collocations consist of 'a dominant word – noun, adjective/participle, verb – and a preposition or a grammatical construction', and lexical collocations have structures such as 'verb + noun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, noun + noun, adverb + adjective, adverb + verb'. The structural approach is by comparison more pedagogical as it takes into account collocation of not only lexical but also lexical and grammatical words.

1.2. Collocations and L2 learners

The importance of collocational knowledge in L2 competence is beyond dispute. It enables the learners to speak more fluently, makes their speech more understandable and helps them write or sound more native-like (Pawley and Syder, 1983; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Wray, 2002). However, learners' problems with L2 collocational use have been repeatedly reported regardless of their level of language proficiency, for examples, Fan (1991) on secondary students, Biskup (1992) on advanced learners, and Farghal and Obiedat (1995) on university students. One of the difficulties lies in the idiosyncratic nature of collocational use. For example, while 'strong' has the same meaning as 'powerful' in 'a strong/powerful argument', 'powerful' collocates with 'car' but 'strong' collocates with 'tea' (Halliday, 1966, p. 160). Another difficulty arises from the fact that collocational use may be markedly different among languages. Wray (2002) observed that 'in English you *run* a business, but in German you *lead* it... In English you *smoke* a cigarette, but in Hindi you *drink* it... In English you lie *in* the sun, but in Russian you lie *on* it (p. 73)'. Similar to the learning of many other aspects of L2, the biggest problem is the lack of exposure to the target language. Whereas native speakers acquire the knowledge of collocation subconsciously and gradually as they grow up in their speech community, most learners, especially those who learn the L2 only in the classroom environment, do not have this opportunity.