

## TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH COLLOCATIONS

**Elona Mazari**

<sup>1</sup>English Lecturer at “Aleksander Moisiu”University, Peshkopi (elonamazari@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper has explored the attitude of teachers and students toward collocation teaching and learning. It examined the familiarity that students have with collocations and the frequency of their usage. A special focus was given to the techniques that teachers use while teaching collocations and the reasons why students do not usually sound natural while speaking or writing. This paper also examined whether teachers give more priority to the teaching of grammar or vocabulary. It was made use of both qualitative (structured written interviews, direct observation and lesson plan) and quantitative (tests) data instruments. For this study, there were tested 100 students of “Nazmi Rushiti” High School, Peshkopia and two English teachers were being interviewed. A random sampling was used for selecting the participants. The lesson plan was applied on a tenth grade class. The observation process was done in more than three classes, thus observing 100 students every day for two months. It resulted from the investigation that high school students are to some extent familiar with collocations. They are able to express ideas in their own words but mostly they do not sound native like. This is due to the lack of enough exposure and awareness toward collocations. As far as the techniques that teachers use while teaching collocations resulted that teachers do not use the most suitable techniques possible. While dealing with new texts they don't always make their students notice collocation patterns. They have the tendency to translate words from English to Albanian language or provide definitions for unfamiliar words. They even don't make use of a variety of exercises to test collocation knowledge. Therefore students make a lot of errors but the reasons why they do not sound natural when they speak English vary. They usually think in Albanian when they say or write something in English. Beside this they do not read other books except from the school ones and therefore are not exposed to different kinds of collocations. They also confuse the structure of formation of collocations because they have not registered them in their mental lexicon. They even get difficulties in distinguishing a collocation from a fixed phrase. Their teachers provide them very rarely with authentic materials. From the investigation also resulted that teachers give more priority to grammar rather than vocabulary. The vocabulary is less emphasized and as a matter of fact it isn't explained in the best way possible. Students are usually given lists of words to learn by heart and therefore new words are learnt out of context. What it is more; words are learnt separated for each other and not in chunks. Therefore I suggest that Albanian teachers should adapt more suitable techniques to teach collocations and give them the importance that they have.

**Key words:** *Collocation teaching, collocation errors, collocation exercises, learning strategies of collocations, importance of collocations*

## **Introduction**

The lexicon in Second Language Acquisition has had a growing significance over the past few decades. Actually it is considered to be the most significant and difficult language component for learners to acquire a language successfully. Vocabulary acquisition and expansion should be a must for every EFL learner. Vocabulary is central to communication; therefore vocabulary acquisition is fundamental for successful language learning. One of the best options to teach vocabulary is through the explanations of collocations in different texts such as fiction text, newspaper article, song, course book text, fairy tale, classical poem for children and financial report.

## **Aims of the study:**

This paper aims to investigate the familiarity with collocations on the part of the students and whether teachers use the best methods and techniques to teach collocations. It is interesting to examine written texts of different genres from collocation point of view. Such texts provide students with different kind of information and different kind of collocation patterns. Thus the paper aims to study whether and how are English text explained, how is Vocabulary absorbed.

Research topics:

Collocations in a fiction text

### A horse and two goats by R.K Narayan

Muni was a very poor shepherd. He lived in a small village in the south of India and he only had two goats. Every day he took them outside the village to the edge of the main road. He should sit underneath a statue of a horse and a warrior, watching the horses and lorries go past. One day, Muni was sitting under the statue when a large yellow car stopped near him. A red-faced man got out.

This text was taken from “Opportunities” book, intermediate level. The language seems to be very easy but the teacher has to make students notice some collocations used in it. Poor shepherd or small village might be simple chunks but noticing, recognizing them gives more chance to memorize and use them in a natural context. But the teacher could provide even nouns that collocate with the noun shepherd such as; shepherd boy, shepherd dog, shepherd check/plaid, shepherd’s crook. Asking students to divide collocations into groups helps them to recognize patterns correctly.

Adjective + noun = poor shepherd, small village, large yellow car, a red-faced man.

Verb + adverb = sit underneath, stopped near.

Noun + preposition = edge of

But the process of recognizing collocations should go further. The teacher could ask students to find other words that collocate with the nouns or verbs provided in the text. The students themselves have to construct sentences or short paragraphs using these collocations in real context. She could even ask the students to summarize the text using collocations that are similar in meaning with those of the text. The language used in fiction is very powerful and it comprises of a large number of collocations. It helps to develop students’ fluency and accuracy while using the foreign language. Thus, it should be given priority to such texts and from time to time they should be presented and analyzed carefully in the class. But they should be selected in accordance with the student’s level of English and their interests and needs. At elementary level it is generally advised fairy tales whereas for advanced levels short stories would be very useful.

## Collocations in a newspaper article

Newspaper article from BBC; “IMF ‘downplayed risk of financial crisis

An investigation of the International Monetary Fund concluded that the institution downplayed the risks faced by the world economy before the 2008 financial crisis. The enquiry was carried out by the IMF’s Independent Evaluation office. The report includes some striking criticism of the IMF’s performance ahead of the crisis. The agency provided few clear warnings about the risks.

The factual texts like this provide a high percentage of words which occur in fixed expressions or collocations. This is completely typical of such texts. Collocation is either so commonplace that is unremarkable or so inherent in text that it should have a central place in all teaching. These texts are obviously more suited to the EFL classroom than the extracts taken from fiction. The language is very contextual and realistic. Exposure to such language should be a must for EFL students because it has some common currency. Looking at the collocations used in this passage of this newspaper article we can distinguish some interesting collocations such as:

Downplayed the risk, financial crisis  
faced by, striking criticism  
world economy, clear warnings etc.

The teacher should educate the students with the habit of checking unknown words not in isolation but in combination with other words. It would be ideal if students would construct a sentence for each new collocation they come across in a particular text. Besides this, providing other collocates for some words would be very helpful for students. For instance:

Striking/ severe/fierce/heavy criticism

World/ booming/ stagnant/ global/ local/ ailing/ developed economy

Newspaper articles provide students with information from different fields such as; politics, economy, international sphere, culture, sports. A newspaper article includes a system of interrelated lexical, phrase logical and grammatical means serving the purpose of informing, instructing and in addition of entertaining the reader. As a result of this diversity of purposes newspapers contain not only strictly international, but also evaluative material – comments and views of the new writers, especially characteristics of editorials and feature editorials. Thus the powerfulness of language is guaranteed. Exposure to these authentic materials helps students to become more native like speakers. Advanced students have to read periodically these kinds of newspaper articles and with the passing of time their language will become more natural and more fluent.

## Collocations in a song

I believe that one of the best ways to teach collocations is using songs. There are very beneficial for a variety of reasons; they are authentic materials, they can teach culture and history, they contain repetitions and repetitions enhance learning, they help to teach vocabulary, collocations and pronunciation and finally they are fun and they can easily energize the unmotivated. In his book “Music and learning” Chris Boyd Brewer explains, “The intentional use of music in the classroom will set the scene and learning atmosphere to emphasize our teaching and learning activities”. Implementing the use of familiar or easy-to-learn songs is a great way to introduce the principles of speaking, hearing and understanding the English language. Songs contain lyrics that are easy for students to follow and memorize

and therefore easy to learn and understand. Songs feature many valuable elements to learning a language. They contain words to help the students build vocabulary, which is especially helpful to non- native speakers. Through listening to and performing songs students are introduced to grammar, idioms and collocations that increase comprehension and widen their understanding of how English is used. But the subject matter of the songs should generally be relatable to the students and if possible address real- life situations. While dealing with listening sections teachers should provide their students with written copies so that they can see how words are combined. When you have finished the listening activity, the best way to record the vocabulary learnt is to write down the full collocation in a dictionary like form and a contextualized example next to it. Below is provided a song entitled “Every breath you take” by Sting.

Every breath you ...take... , ....make...  
 Every move you ...make..., ...take...  
 Every bond you ...fake..., ...break...  
 Every ...stop..., ... step... you take  
 I'll be ...watching..., ...watch...you  
 Every ...simple..., ...single... day

The teacher distributes the lyrics of the song to the students and asks them to circle the verbs that sound more natural to each line. The students might be very familiar with the lyrics and they might accomplish the task required to them on the spur of the moment. The atmosphere created in the classroom becomes more comfortable and students feel capable of doing something. Anyway the teacher should type the record so that students can listen to the tape and check their answers. After that she explains some of the typical collocations used in this song and even provides example for all of them. Asking students to find other songs with collocations makes vocabulary acquisition more meaningful and enjoyable.

#### Collocations in EFL coursebook texts

EFL coursebook texts are texts of the type teachers are used to dealing with every day in class. I did a short examination of texts in Opportunities and it was easy to identify the following collocations which teachers could usefully draw to learners’ attention:

Extra – curricular activities	have a bath
Sound interesting	have my own business
Taste good	have an accident
Variety shows	have a career
Advertising game	have a good time

Raising student’s awareness to notice such collocations in every text in the coursebook should be a priority to every English teacher. Speaking from the perspective of a student I can say that we were never taught to learn the words in chunks but in isolation. It is a pity but it is the pure truth.Chan and Liou (2005) explained that teaching of collocations in English foreign language classes did not get enough attention; as result, students learning English as a foreign language are weak in collocation use. Rather than teaching vocabulary as single lexical items which causes a lexical incompetence on the part of learners, students must be made aware of the necessity of acquiring collocations (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995; Fan, 2009). Now I do understand what would have been the scope of vocabulary of words I would have acquired if I would have learned them as collocational patters. I strongly believe that a foreign language is learnt through lexis and not sticking strictly to some grammatical rules.

But lexis should be taught in context, by providing realistic and authentic examples. Students should work through more and more exercises on collocation provided in the texts in the coursebook. Thus they become more and more sensitive as to whether two words are possible collocates or not. Such sensitivity is particularly important for their own production.

### Collocations in a fairy tale

Fairy tales are powerful tools of storytelling. They develop and activate imagination and creativity. They can be read over and over and allow completely different teaching aims related to the ages and maturity of students. They teach skills such as creative and productive thinking and creative problem solving to pupils of all ages. If a teacher is creative himself, he can teach nearly any content or process through fairy tales using the familiar to teach the unfamiliar. Mostly students are equal in what they know about fairy tales so that no one is advantaged of prior knowledge and anyone can participate in class activities. On the one hand fairy tales are wonderful; on the other hand they can teach new reading, writing and thinking skills and processes. Since receptive and productive skills depend on registration of mental lexicon and mental lexicon is properly registered in the form of chunks and collocations; fairy tales are helpful tools to teach them.

### The three little pigs

Once upon a time there were three little pigs, which left their mummy and daddy to see the world.

All summer long, they roamed through the woods and over the plains, playing games and having fun. None were happier than the three little pigs, and they easily made friends with everyone. Wherever they went, they were given a warm welcome, but as summer drew to a close, they realized that folk were drifting back to their usual jobs, and preparing for winter. Autumn came and it began to rain. The three little pigs started to feel they needed a real home. Sadly they knew that the fun was over now and they must set to work like the others, or they'd be left in the cold and rain, with no roof over their heads. They talked about what to do, but each decided for himself. The laziest little pig said he'd build a straw hut. "It will only take a day," he said. The others disagreed. "It's too fragile," they said disapprovingly, but he refused to listen. Not quite so lazy, the second little pig went in search of planks of seasoned wood.

It is widely claimed that fairy tales are just for kids but it is no more so. The tendency has started to change. They are used at advanced classes for teaching grammar or vocabulary. The above fairy tale is more suitable for advanced levels since the vocabulary is a bit difficult for pupils of elementary level. The wide range of collocations found in it enforces the idea that these lexical items have a tremendous power to widen our vocabulary. Besides the message or moral it conveys students should be taught the way the words are combined with one another. Let's analyze some of the collocations used in this fairy tale:

Leave mom and dad/leave the house/leave the country/ leave for good ( for ever)

All summer long/ all day long/all night long/

Play games/ play chess/ play a trick to sb/ play football/ play the piano/

Have fun/have breakfast/ have a shower/

Make friends/ make a mistake/ make a phone call/

Draw to a close/ draw to an end/ draw the line/ in a really enormous breath

Give a warm welcome/ give a hug/ give a shoot/

Realize that/ understand that/ notice that/ claim that/  
Set to work/set sth going/ set sb thinking/  
Straw hut /hat/ boss/ man/ mat/ mattress/ poll/ vote/  
Season wood/ pine wood/ saw wood/ touch wood/

This fairy tale comprises of a rich and powerful vocabulary which is more suitable for advanced learners. Firstly the teacher might ask students to underline the most typical collocations and then she might provide other examples of the known collocations. Thus students learn from known collocations, unknown ones. It is advisable that the teacher asks students to create sentences with the known and unknown collocations or she might ask them to summarize this fairy tale using the collocations already explained.

#### Collocations in a classic poem for children

Above the bright blue sky

Albert Midlane

There's a Friend for little children

Above the bright blue sky,

A Friend who never changes

Whose love will never die;

Our earthly friends may fail us,

And change with changing years,

This Friend is always worthy

Of that dear name he bears.

As it was stated above even elementary learners should be taught to learn words in chunks. It is not necessary for them to learn the term “collocation” but they should know how to put words together. Some scholars claim that poetries have a simple and structured language; therefore it is easier for pupils to acquire this simple and flat language. They could be asked to learn the poetry by rote or create sentences with collocations which have to be retrieved by the poetry from the teacher. Pupils might create simple sentences with collocations used in this poetry such as:

Little children = My grandfather loves little children.

Bright sky = The bright sky reminds me the wonderful days I used to spend when I lived in my village.

Blue sky = Blue sky is a symbol of clarity.

Earthly friends = Our earthly friends may be always near us.

Changing years = People change with changing years.

Dear name = I saw a film entitled “Dear Name” last week.

#### Collocations in a financial report

Modest Growth Pickup in 2013, Projects IMF

Global growth will strengthen gradually in 2013, says the IMF in an update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO), as the constraints on economic activity start to ease this year. But the recovery is slow, and the report stressed that policies must address downside risks to bolster growth.

Policy actions have lowered acute crisis risks in the euro area and the United States, the report noted. Japan’s stimulus plans will help boost growth in the near term, pulling the country out of a short-lived recession.

The language of financial reports is very rich in collocations. Generally speaking students of advanced level don't fully understand the content of a financial report due to a different number of reasons. Firstly they come up with a number of unknown words and thus they have difficulty in understanding the message the report conveys. Secondly when they read they do not pay attention to the words that go together but read them separately from one another. This is one of the reasons why the meaning of a sentence goes unnoticed. Students should not look at the words separately but in combination with one another. They should check out the meaning of words but grab the meaning of sentences. The words in bold are all collocations. An effective way to learn them is by completing different kind of exercises.

Research questions:

This paper was focused on these research topics:

1. Is vocabulary absorbed better through collocation teaching?
2. Are the students familiar and aware of the importance of collocations?
3. Do the teachers adopt the appropriate techniques to teach collocation?

Research methods:

In this paper it was made use of both qualitative (structured written interviews, direct observation and lesson plan) and quantitative (tests) data instruments.

Data analysis:

For this study, there were tested 100 students of "Nazmi Rushiti" High School, Peshkopia for their general knowledge on collocations and two English teachers were being interviewed about the way they teach collocations and the genres they use. A random sampling was used for selecting the participants. The lesson plan was applied on a tenth grade class. The observation process was done in more than three classes to see the techniques use for teaching and learning collocations through different texts, thus observing 100 students every day for two months.

Findings:

The findings of the two English teacher's interviews are:

- Teachers still keep teaching English by giving more priority to grammar rather than lexis.
- Students have not being taught collocation patterns from the elementary level and thus they find difficult to acquire a large number of collocations at once.
- Generally speaking the words are taught in isolation and not in chunks, as list of unknown words.
- Teachers do not bring to class specific texts to teach collocation patterns.
- Teachers stick closely to the curricula and do not adopt up to date techniques to teach collocations.

The findings of observation process:

Monitoring students' language level.

There were been observed pupils of tenth and eleventh grade. They were working with very professional and interesting textbooks; Blockbuster and Upstream. They were supposed to be intermediate level students but they lacked a lot to be in that staid. Only a few number of pupils had good listening and writing skills. Many of them find difficult to express themselves because they tend to think in Albanian before they construct a particular sentence. While dealing with reading sections they lack the ability to paraphrase what they read. They are almost never provided text of different genres to learn collocations.

### Monitoring students' collocation knowledge.

Their knowledge on collocations was almost inexistent. Some of them had never heard such a notion whereas others claimed that the vocabulary was taught to them in isolation, out of context. It was out of question the analysis of different types of text for the purpose of observing and learning of new collocations.

### Monitoring teachers' attitudes toward collocational teaching.

When dealing with reading passages teachers sometimes make their students notice some collocations but this process is occasionally done. When explaining new words they sometimes provide collocates for each of them. Even when they analyze a text they sometimes provide collocations for some words so it is not something that is always done. Since they sometimes make their students notice collocations they sometimes advice students to write collocates when they come across with new words or words that they already know. Thus they sometimes incorporate collocational exercises in their teaching process and they rarely incorporate them while testing students' performance in a particular semester. Generally speaking teachers pay always more attention to grammatical rules and not vocabulary teaching. They even stick to the traditional method of teaching vocabulary; teaching of new words in isolation and not in context.

### Monitoring students' collocation errors.

Students' common collocation errors are related to their lack of practice. They generally confuse the usages of the verbs do and make and the usages of the verbs take and get. Collocation errors are sometimes resulting from the use of synonyms and rarely from overgeneralizations. During the process of observation I noticed that students made grammatical collocation errors and not lexical ones. This is due to the fact that when they try to express themselves they create the syntactic structures as in their mother tongue; thus their collocation errors resulting from negative transfer from L2 to L1 are very common. Students tend also to make collocation errors resulting from ignorance of rule restrictions.

### Monitoring students writing assignments.

Students writing assignments consist of grammatical mistakes and therefore their language doesn't always sound natural and native-like. Logically the organization of ideas in paragraphs is not always coherent and organized. You can commonly find sentences constructed as they were Albanian ones. Despite the fact that teachers sometimes use the technique of Brainstorming to orient their students to write meaningfully, their writing assignments are not very natural.

### The findings of the tests:

The students tend to not use correctly some verbs instead of others or parts of speech instead of others. They never being tested for the vocabulary of texts they deal with in class for the collocation point of view.

### Conclusions:

- Students are almost unaware of the importance of collocations.
- They are being taught the words in isolation.



- They are almost never provided with extra fictional materials by their teachers.
- Teachers pay more attention to grammar rather than vocabulary

### **Recommendations:**

Teachers have to

- encourage their students to notice collocations in texts.
- teach vocabulary in context and not in isolation.
- They have to give more priority to vocabulary rather than grammar.
- They have to provide students with different authentic materials .
- They have to make use of different techniques, activities and exercises to teach and test collocation knowledge.
- They have to expose their students to collocation patterns since the elementary level.
- Adapting different types of texts in accordance with the content of the syllabus, the language level of students, the students' needs and preferences.

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