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THE ROLE OF COLLOCATIONS IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines collocations as an important component of lexical competence and their role in developing English vocabulary among learners of English as a foreign language. Drawing on established linguistic theories and selected empirical studies, it explains how collocational knowledge contributes to vocabulary depth, considers possible first-language influence on Uzbek-speaking learners, and offers practical recommendations for teaching collocations.

KEYWORDS

Collocation, lexical competence, vocabulary acquisition, lexical approach, L1 transfer, collocational awareness, EFL.

Introduction

Vocabulary has long been recognised as the foundation of communicative competence. D. A. Wilkins memorably observed that without grammar very little can be conveyed, while without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed at all [17, p. 111]. Yet for many decades vocabulary teaching in foreign-language classrooms was reduced to the memorisation of isolated words and their dictionary equivalents. Learners who followed this path often accumulated an impressive passive lexicon but remained unable to use it naturally: they could recognise the words “decision”, “mistake” and “rain” but produced combinations such as “do a mistake” or “strong rain” which though grammatically correct, sound foreign to a native ear.

The reason for this gap lies in the phenomenon of collocation – the tendency of words to co-occur with certain other words more often than chance would predict. Over the last three decades corpus linguistics and the lexical approach have shown that a large proportion of natural discourse is built from such prefabricated combinations. Consequently, the question is no longer whether collocations should be taught, but how they contribute to vocabulary development and how they can be taught most effectively.

J.R.Firth argued that aspects of a word’s meaning are revealed by the company it keeps [4]. J. Sinclair later used corpus-based research to explain how language relies not only on choosing individual words freely but also on familiar, partly prefabricated combinations [9]. These perspectives help explain why knowing a word involves knowing how it commonly combines with other words.

Collocations are often divided into grammatical and lexical types [1]. Grammatical collocations combine a word with a grammatical element often a preposition: “depend on”, “afraid of” and “interested in”. Lexical collocations combine content words, for example, verb + noun (“make a decision”, “take medicine”), adjective + noun (“heavy rain”, “strong coffee”), noun + verb (“the alarm rings”) and adverb + adjective (“bitterly cold”).

Collocations differ in strength. Some combinations are strongly associated while others allow a wider range of partners. They should also be distinguished from idioms. The meaning of “heavy rain” is relatively transparent, whereas an idiom’s meaning may not be inferred from its individual words. Because collocations often seem understandable, learners may overlook them during reading and then struggle to reproduce them accurately in speech or writing.

Vocabulary knowledge has both breadth—the number of words a learner knows—and depth, or how well each word is known. Nation includes collocations among the essential aspects of knowing a word, together with its form, meaning, grammatical behavior and use [7]. For example, knowing “argument” also involves knowing common combinations such as “have”, “win” or “settle an argument”.

The Lexical Approach associated with M. Lewis places word combinations at the centre of language learning [6]. Collocations support vocabulary development in several ways. Firstly, combinations can be stored and retrieved as meaningful chunks helping learners communicate more fluently. Secondly, they clarify differences between near-synonyms: English speakers say “strong tea” but “powerful engine”. Thirdly, accurate collocations make speech and writing sound more natural even when the grammar is already correct.

It is useful to distinguish receptive and productive knowledge. Receptive knowledge allows learners to understand a collocation when they encounter it; productive knowledge enables them to recall and use it independently. Learners may understand “take a photo” while still producing an incorrect combination. Therefore, collocations need active practice, not exposure alone. Frequent verbs such as “make”, “do”, “take” and “have” can be particularly challenging because their choice often depends on the noun with which they combine [8].

Kacafirkova and colleagues conducted a twelve-week intervention with 39 upper-intermediate learners at Charles University in Prague [5]. One group received explicit instruction and systematic revision of collocations, while a comparison group focused on individual word meanings. The collocation-teaching group achieved stronger results in collocational knowledge. This finding supports teaching word partnerships directly rather than assuming learners will acquire them automatically.

De la Vina, Kim and Chamorro studied 68 advanced Spanish learners who read an academic text containing target collocations [2]. Their findings indicated that collocations can be learned incidentally through reading. Whether learners read silently or listened while reading did not make a significant difference in the reported outcome, while prior vocabulary knowledge and the similarity between first-language and English combinations supported recall. Reading is therefore useful, but learners may also need explicit attention to combinations that do not translate directly.

A review by Tian and Amirulloh found that learners’ first languages can influence their recognition and use of English collocations [11]. Earlier research on advanced learners likewise identified first-language influence as a source of collocational errors [8]. Such findings suggest that teachers should anticipate literal translation and compare English combinations with learners’ familiar language patterns.

Textbook analysis by Eid and Al-Jamal also suggests that collocations may not receive sufficient systematic attention in some EFL materials [3]. Meanwhile, corpus-based resources can help teachers identify frequent and useful combinations for instruction [10]. However, the studies reviewed have limitations: some use small samples or focus on advanced learners, so their findings cannot automatically be generalised to all learner groups, particularly Uzbek-speaking beginners.

Overall, the research supports three cautious conclusions: collocations may be acquired through both direct teaching and exposure; explicit practice with revision can improve collocational knowledge; and combinations that differ from those in the learner's first language may require additional attention.

Uzbek and English do not always combine words in the same way. As a result, word-for-word translation may lead to expressions that are understandable but unnatural in English. Examples for classroom discussion include:

• "do a mistake" → "make a mistake";
• "drink medicine" → "take medicine";
• "strong rain" → "heavy rain";
• "depend from" → "depend on";
• "give an exam" (when referring to taking it) → "take/sit an exam".

Not all combinations differ across languages. For example, "strong tea" and "do homework" correspond closely to common Uzbek expressions. The examples above are illustrative contrastive observations, not results of a controlled study of Uzbek-speaking learners. The role of Uzbek or Russian language transfer should therefore be tested empirically rather than assumed in every case.

Potential errors can be grouped into four types: incorrect verbs in verb–noun combinations, incorrect adjectives in adjective–noun combinations, incorrect prepositions, and literal translation of whole phrases. This classification can help teachers design targeted exercises. A future study could collect learner writing or speaking samples, identify recurring collocational errors, and compare them by type and frequency.

Teachers can integrate collocations into vocabulary lessons through the following practices:

Raise awareness. Highlight word partnerships in reading texts and ask learners to record whole combinations rather than isolated words.

Teach words with partners. Introduce vocabulary through common combinations such as "make progress", "pay attention" and "meet a deadline". Use matching, gap-fill and "odd-one-out" tasks.

Combine exposure with focused practice. Use extensive reading and reading-while-listening alongside explicit instruction and spaced revision.

Compare languages. Discuss English–Uzbek combinations that do not correspond word for word, while treating proposed transfer effects as hypotheses unless supported by learner data.

Use reference tools and assess use. Consult collocation dictionaries and corpora, and include collocation-focused gap-fill and correction tasks in vocabulary assessment.

A practical lesson can follow four stages: learners first encounter collocations in a text, then identify and compare them, practise them through structured tasks, and finally use them in short spoken or written activities. Reviewing the same combinations at spaced intervals can support long-term retention [13].

CONCLUSION

Collocations are an important part of English vocabulary knowledge because knowing a word includes knowing its usual partners. They contribute to fluency, precision and natural language use. The reviewed research indicates that collocations can be learned through exposure as well as deliberate instruction, and that explicit practice with revision can be beneficial. First-language influence is also a relevant consideration, although the specific difficulties of Uzbek-speaking learners require further empirical investigation.

For classroom practice, vocabulary should be presented not only as isolated words but also as useful combinations. Teachers can raise collocational awareness, compare English and Uzbek expressions, use dictionaries and corpora, and assess learners' ability to produce natural word partnerships. Further research could identify the collocations most frequently misused by Uzbek-speaking university students and evaluate teaching materials designed to address these difficulties.

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