



The Role of Collocations in Second Language Acquisition

Dr. E. Brijesh, Lecturer in English, Government Degree College, Medak, Telangana

Abstract:

This article reviews the role of collocations in SLA, since collocational knowledge is considered one important aspect of language knowledge, in general, and an aspect of word knowledge, in particular. The article is divided into two sections: the first section starts with giving many definitions of collocation. The second section reviews the role of collocation in SLA. It starts with stating that collocational knowledge is a main part of language learning in the sense that a great extent of our speech and writing comes in an associative phenomenon, as Sinclair (1991) calls it "idiom principle". Therefore, when collocations are acquired, they help the learners in many acquisitional aspects. They help learning vocabulary, in developing communicative competence and fluency through using ready-made chunks, which collocations are one aspect of these chunks.

Key words: Language, Acquisition, collocation

Defining collocation

It would be desirable to begin with a clear and unambiguous definition of collocation. Even a brief look at vast literature on the subject, however, reveals that forming a precise definition is difficult. There are both conflicting definitions and conflicting terminologies, "Regrettably collocation is a term which is used and understood in many different ways", (Bann, 1993:57).

The following quotations present a different view on the concept of collocation, variously defining it as a lexical, grammatical or research phenomenon, but all containing a focus on the co-occurrence of words.

"You shall know a word by the company it keeps" (Firth, 1957:179). "We may use the term 'node' to refer to an item whose collocates we are studying, and we may define a 'span' as the number of lexical items on each side of a node that we consider relevant to the node. Items in the environment set by the span we will call collocates" (Sinclair, 1966:415).

"... the study of lexical patterns...", (Brown, 1974:1).

"A sequence of words that occurs more than once in identical... and which is grammatically well structured", (Kjellmer, 1991:101).

"... the meaning of a word has a great deal to do with the words with which it commonly associates



",(Nattinger,1988:77). "... a recurrent co-occurrence of words", (Clear, 1993:277). "...the way individual words co-occur with others", (Lewis, 1993:93).

" Collocates are words which occur in the neighborhood of your search word", (Scott 1997). "Collocations are a lexical phenomenon that has linguistic and lexicographic status as well as utility for statistical natural language paradigms. ... but for which no general syntactic or semantic rules apply", (McKeown & Radev, 2000:507). Nesselhauf (2003) adds a certain aspect to collocations in his definition "Collocation is a phraseological phenomenon, in which the restrictions on word co-occurrence is neither syntactic nor semantic, but arbitrary restriction", (224). In this definition, he considers collocation as a type of word combination. He also denotes that there is a wide accepted defining criterion which distinguishes collocations from other types of word combinations,"... but only the most accepted defining criterion for collocations is the arbitrary restrictions on substitutability", Nesselhauf (2003; 224-225). This means that the restriction on the substitutability of the elements of collocation is not due to their semantic properties, but it is to some degree arbitrary. For example; in the combination reach a decision, the word decision can be substituted by a number

of nouns denoting a particular aim, (OALD¹) such as conclusion, verdict, compromise, or goal but not, for example; by aim. This restriction does not depend on semantic properties, but it is arbitrary.

Thus, whilst it can be seen that the definitions of collocation are somewhat varied, there is still a common core of agreement to be found. They all focus on the co-occurrence of words.

The Role of Collocations in Language Acquisition

As a matter of fact, the area of collocation has not received the attention it deserves in the foreign language classroom in spite of the growing evidence to suggest its value in language acquisition, (Al-khanji & Hussein, 1999). In this section, it is important to review its role in language learning; in fluency and pronunciation.

2.1 Language Knowledge is Collocational Knowledge

Collocational knowledge, it is argued, is the basis of language learning, knowledge and use, Nation,(2001). This is because the stored sequences of words in the mental lexicon are used for this purpose. Ellis (1997) argues that a lot of language learning can be accounted for by associations between sequentially observed language items. That is, without the need to refer to underlying rules. Therefore, by having these chunks of



language in the long-term memory, language receptive and productive knowledge are made effective. Ellis (1997) shows that the more the units of language come in associative connection at the syntactic and lexical levels, the greater the resultant language for providing insights into the grammatical system of the language. With reference to the second language, he also confirms that "... the mastery of fixed phrases is as basic to second language acquisition as it is to learning the first language", Ellis (1997:127). For him, collocations or sequential lexical patterns become the building blocks for large "chunks" of the language.

In addition to the above evidence, the native speaker's mental lexicon consists of combinations of words that customarily co-occur. The occurrence of one of the words in such a combination can be said to predict the occurrence of others. Therefore, "these ready-made phrases are an important part of our linguistic-make-up", Kjellmer (1991: 115). To confirm this view, Kjellmer (1991) indicates that the collocations extracted from a large corpus of English would have been more representative of the collocational repertoire of an average 1 speaker of English, who strings together lexical items to a greater extent than a list of collocations from a one-million

word corpus would suggest, Kjellmer (ibid:117). Many studies have thrown light on the role of pre-constructed (routines) and semi-pre-constructed (collocations) phrases in both first and second language acquisition. These studies found out the existence of such types of phrases in language. This existence, in turn, reflects the way language is acquired by the human brain, Ellis (1985:167-9) points out that pre-constructed and semi-pre-constructed phrases are found in the speech of classroom and non-classroom learning, child and adult, first and second language learning. He considers them as mechanisms of acquisition and production. With reference to acquisition, he states that when the learner is faced with input, he/she identifies a number of commonly occurring whole utterances and uses the 'pattern memorization' strategy. And in the case of production, the learners use the strategy of 'pattern imitation' when they imitate deliberately the whole utterance or parts of utterances used in the speech of interlocutors. Later on, some of the memorized patterns stay as they are to perform their particular functions, while others are analyzed into smaller parts when the learner's syntactic skills develop.



Peters (1983) carried out studies on both first and second language acquisition. She states that there are two approaches to language acquisition. The first one is "the gestalt approach" in which children attempt to use whole prefabricated utterances in the appropriate contexts and the second approach is the "analytic one-word at a time approach" in which children construct sentences from 'scratch'. Hence, the collocational and the open-choice principles are responsible for language acquisition.

With respect to the role of collocations in developing vocabulary, Laufer (1988) maintains that collocations represent a crucial aspect in the vocabulary knowledge of learners. They can help the learner to retrieve one element of the collocation when the other element is heard or noticed. For examples: when the adjectives blonde, addled, sour etc. are heard the learner can retrieve the noun hair, eggs, milk; when hearing the word intense, speakers are aware that it is combined with either pressure, heat, light, or feeling. So retrieving words from memory helps in consolidating acquisition.

2.2 Collocation as a Fluency Strategy

Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that the clausal length units of language chunks stored in the memory are responsible for fluency achieved by language users,

because they can choose the most appropriate expressions from others (i.e. native-like selection) to produce language fluently (native-like fluency). They also indicate that the native-like selection is the process of applying grammar rules in production. The result is a number of grammatically correct ways of saying the same thing. But not all of these correct ways are native-like selection. For examples, all the following are grammatically correct.

- 1 Please close the window.
- 2 I desire that the window be closed.
- 3 The closing of the window would be greatly satisfying.
- 4 The window should be closed, please.

But not all are native like selection, Nation (2001:323).

These grammatically correct sentences are not all native-like selection, because native-like selection means selecting the most appropriate expressions from a number of grammatically correct expressions, Nation (ibid). Therefore, he (ibid) asserts that "all fluent and appropriate language use requires collocational knowledge" (p. 318). Furthermore, Howarth (1998) suggests that collocations play an essential role in the learning of L2 and assist ESL/EFL students towards speaking more like native speakers.



Pawley and Syder (1983: 203) divide the stored sequences into two types, "memorized sequences" and "lexicalized sentence stems". The first type is considered as one predictable and transparent (i.e. substituted and understood from the meaning of the parts), while the second type is totally not predictable from their parts, "They behave as minimal units for syntactic purposes and they are a social institution", Nation (2001: 324). The lexicalized sentences items in the English speaker's mental lexicon are the large part; therefore they play an important role in fluency.

Brown (1974) indicates that a learner can develop his/ her oral proficiency, listening comprehension, and reading speed, through enhancing collocational knowledge. She also argues that collocations can be acquired and used in the learner's speech and writing through observation them in new words and reading materials.

Similarly, Nattinger (1980: 341) states that language production comprises "piercing together the ready-made units appropriate for particular situations and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations". Furthermore, Nattinger (1988) asserts that collocations are helpful in improving comprehension for the word combinations that aid learners

in committing words to memory, as well as allowing learners to predict what kind of lexical items could occur together.

Therefore, in order to develop fluency in the second and/or foreign language learner, at least 1 collocational sequences need to be encountered many times in the language classroom at; teaching materials, and also to be taught explicitly.

2.3 Collocations and Communicative Competence

Collocations play an important role in developing communicative competence, "knowledge of not only if something is formally possible in a language, but also whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a particular speech community", Richard and Schmidt (2011: 99).

Yorio (1980: 438) claims that conventionalized language forms, including collocations, "make communication more orderly because they are regulatory in nature" Likewise, Channell (1981) indicates that knowledge of collocations is a very effective way of heightening their communicative competence. Additionally, Cowie (1988) maintains that lexical phrases and collocations serve communicative needs and allow learners to reuse and produce the institutionalized units, And Lewis (2000) affirms that learning chunks or strings of words aid language learners in



improving their communicative competencies better than merely learning words in isolation.

2.4 Collocations and Pronunciation

The great added importance to knowing a large number of collocations and other longer expressions is that we learn the stress pattern as a whole when we meet them, Hill (2000). The longer lexical items learners know, the better their stress and intonation will be,

2.5 Conclusion

This article has reviewed the role of collocations in SLA. It has started with giving a number of definitions for collocations. Then it explained its role in four language areas. First, it has noted that a great deal of language knowledge is a collocational knowledge, in the sense that a great deal of our speech and writing consists, in addition to grammatical rules, a ready-made two or three word expressions, that always come together. Second, collocational knowledge helps in enhancing fluency in speech, through using ready-made expressions in true. Third, collocations play an important role in communicative competence to make our speech more orderly, through using the appropriate collocations in appropriate social situations. Finally, when learners recognize collocations they will be able to use the correct stress and intonation,

hence collocations help in developing pronunciation.

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