

Collocation in English Teaching and Learning

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Abstract—The purpose of learning a word is to put it in actual use. It is far from being enough to know just the meaning of a word, for we have to take into consideration the immediate context in which a word is used, i.e. the words preceding and following the word in question. Both the grammatical and lexical patterns are critical to the identification of a word in a certain sense. This paper is devoted to the elaboration on the concept of collocation, the importance of collocation and how to learn collocation.

Index Terms—collocation, colligation, association, context, English teaching and learning

I. INTRODUCTION

For an intermediate learner of a foreign or second language, vocabulary has always been a bottleneck impeding his progress. At this stage, the traditional way of memorizing the meaning and pronunciation of a new word is far from meeting the need of the learner. With the expansion of the size of vocabulary, many problems arise concerning the proper use of a word in context, among which is collocation. However, students of English are more concerned about how to expand their vocabulary, that is, to increase the number of words they can remember. They pay no attention to or ignore the depth of their understanding of the word. How to deepen the understanding of the word is a problem facing them. Collocation is one of the most important aspects of knowing a word. That is to say, in order to deepen the understanding of a word, students of English must know its collocation. The paper is intended to first define collocation, and then inquire into the importance of collocation and finally provide some suggestions for the learning of collocation.

II. WHAT IS COLLOCATION?

The idea of collocation was first put forward by J. R. Firth in 1957. Although the word is used widely, people's opinions are divided when it comes to the meaning of collocation. Robins (2000, p.64) argues that collocation is "the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences." Robins' understanding of collocation agrees with Firth's and Halliday and Hasan's. In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.317) argue that collocation, a means of cohesion, is "the co-occurrence of lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another, because they tend to occur in similar environments." For example, the word *doctor* implies such words as *nurse*, *medicine*, *symptom*, *hospital*, etc. The *night* is closely related with *darkness*. Collocation, in this sense, is overlapped with the so-called semantic field. Words occurring in collocation or in the same semantic field exist as a group fit in a given situation. But the presence of one word does not necessarily lead to the occurrence of others in the group.

A distinction is often made between colligation and collocation. F. de Saussure (2001, P.121) called "relations based on linear character of languages" or "(c) ombinations based on sequentiality" syntagmatic relations. These relations are then specified as colligation, the grammatical patterns concerning certain head words, like "V to do, V doing and V that", and collocation, the regular company that a word keeps (Nation 2004, p.32), such as *strong wind* and *heavy rain*. We can see that collocation is the habitual co-occurrence of certain words in a certain grammatical pattern—colligation. In other words, colligation concerns the grammatical patterns required by certain words or types of words while collocation focuses on lexical items repeatedly co-occurring in company in the frame of certain grammatical patterns. For example, the verb *enjoy* can be used in "V+ Doing" and "V + Noun" patterns. The selection of verbs and nouns in these two patterns are not at random. We can say *enjoy a diner*, *enjoy a good income* and *enjoy one's life*, etc. but not **enjoy death*, and **enjoy crime*. In this distinction, the meaning of collocation is in a certain sense identical to Nation's definition of collocation. Nation (2004, P.32) regards collocation as "words that often occur together" or the company a word keeps. In corpus linguistics and computational linguistics, collocation defines a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance. Being sub-type of phraseme, collocation is also a term in phraseology. A good case in point of a phraseological collocation is the expression *strong tea*. While the same meaning could be conveyed by the roughly equivalent **powerful tea*, this expression is considered not idiomatic or even

incorrect by English speakers. By contrast, the corresponding expression for computer, *powerful computer* is preferred over **strong computer*.

Obviously, collocation is a kind of syntagmatic relation, but not all syntagmatic relations are called collocation. In order to better understand collocation, we have to make a distinction on the one hand between free combinations and collocation and on the other between collocation and idiom. Free combinations refer to the temporarily-made phrases based on certain grammatical rules to express certain ideas. For example, *buy a book* where *buy* can be replaced by *sell*, *select*, etc. and *book* by *ticket*, *pen*, etc. is a free combination. The combination is grammatically acceptable and semantically clear. The combination of *buy* and *book* is accidental depending on the meaning the speaker wants to express. That is, there is very weak or actually no obvious mutual restriction and mutual expectation between the two words *buy* and *book*.

The other distinction between collocation and idiom should be clarified. Idioms are fixed expressions with frozen meanings, thus fixed collocations, whereas collocations are mostly compositional in that the meaning can be calculated by putting the meanings of its component words together. Just as Sinclair (1991, p.110) says, "The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-pre-structured phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments." An example of an idiom is *of course*, which operates effectively as a single word like "anyway" or "somehow". So we can regard idiom as a special case of collocation, which will be left out of discussion in this paper.

To summarize, collocation refers to the frequent co-occurrence and mutual expectation of some words which appear more often than by chance. In this sense, collocation can be called restricted combination, which exists between free combination and idiom and has semantic transparency. We will use this as the working definition for the present paper.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLOCATION

Collocation is an important aspect in vocabulary acquisition. Free combinations are easy to acquire because they come from the structure of extra-linguistic reality such as *dark night* and *blue sky*, etc. They are "manifestly related to the referential and substantial meaning of the words concerned" (Robins 2000, p.56). However, there are no motivations for most collocations. The same conceptual meaning can be realized by different words, so people talk of *a powerful motorcar*, but of *strong coffee*; and of *rancid butter*, but of *addled egg*. This inexplicability of collocation calls for more attention of both teachers and learners of English. For a teacher of English, collocation should be an indispensable part of vocabulary teaching; idiomatic collocations of a new word should be given to the students. As a learner of English, it is necessary for him to realize the importance of collocation in word acquisition and pay more attention to the proper use of collocation.

Richard (1985, p.183) summarizes what is meant by mastering a word: 1) knowing the frequency of the word in oral and written language; 2) knowing the grammatical patterns of the word; 3) knowing its associated network with other words. Among these three criteria, the latter two have something to do with our discussion. Among these three criteria, 2) is about colligation and 3) collocation. It is difficult or impossible in most cases to have such a thorough knowledge of a word. But these criteria are important in that they point out the importance of deepening the understanding of a word. So far as collocation is concerned, its importance in English teaching and learning is manifested in the following aspects.

Collocation is a universal linguistic phenomenon. Words are always used together. They always present themselves in collocation. It is no exaggeration to say that none of the natural languages is free of collocation. In fact, "words seldom occur in isolation" (Wallace 1982, p.30). Collocation is not only a necessary element of language but also an outstanding feature that makes language specific and correct. Therefore, to learn English well learners should attach much importance to collocation. Wallace (1982, p.27) in *Teaching Vocabulary* emphasizes that to know a word in a target language "may mean the ability to use it with the words it correctly goes with, i.e. in the correct collocation...." Indeed, among many items of a word listed in dictionaries, the usage containing collocation information is very valuable and helpful. The aim of learning a new word is to put it in practical use and to make sentences. It is explicitly suggested in the introduction of *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2003, p.vii) that "for the student, choosing the right collocation will make his speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like, even when basic intelligibility does not seem to be at issue". There is a big difference between writing and speaking in English and writing and speaking in good English. The difference is to a great extent decided by the knowledge of and command of collocations. In a sense, the publication of the specialized dictionary itself clearly demonstrates the importance of collocation in English learning. To conclude, to use good (idiomatic) English, learners of English must learn collocation.

Collocation also provides a good way to memorize new words. Taylor is quoted by Nation (2004, p.38) when giving the reasons for studying words in collocation, "words which are naturally associated in context are learnt more easily than those not so associated; vocabulary is best learned in context; context alone is insufficient without deliberate association...." The context and the deliberate association including collocations provide connections that help learners to deeply understand a word's meaning and furthermore to add it to his or her current vocabulary. While giving a clue to memorize new words the method to learn words by collocations also instructs learners to use right words in right time and place. In contrast, without any awareness of collocation, learners will make up something not native or even

unacceptable. Chinese learners of English, who want to express “达到目的” in English, may find out words which respectively mean “达到” and “目的” and combine them into expressions like *reach/ arrive... aim/ purpose/ object. Some very funny Chinglish expressions such as *talk love (谈恋爱), *find an object (找对象), *eat medicine (吃药), *pay time (花时间) are just coined in this way.

Most English words are polysemous, i.e. having more than one meaning. This is the inevitable result of the development of English words and the requirement of the economy principle of language. As a result, difficulty arises when it comes to the exact meaning of a word in a given context. It is pointed out in *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2003, p.vii) that “the precise meaning in any context is determined by that context: by the words that surround the combine with the core word---by collocation.” For example, *handsome* can be used in different contexts. *A handsome man* is a good-looking man; *a handsome woman* is a physically strong woman; *a handsome reward* is a large amount of reward; *a handsome present* is a generous present. Only one meaning of *handsome* can be realized by the specific collocates in a given context. However, the common practice of students is to memorize the meaning of a word independent of any context and then apply the meaning whenever the word appears. This is the cause of some students’ feeling that although they know all the words in a simple sentence, they cannot make sense of it. For example, all the words in the sentence “She is my immediate neighbor” are familiar to some students but they can’t make sense of the sentence, for they don’t know the meaning of *immediate* in the collocation *immediate neighbor*. So the best way to memorize the different meanings of a word is to memorize its separate meaning in different collocations. A case may be made here that mastering a word means mastering all of its meanings. Since the different meanings of a word are decided by the context it appears in, memorizing its different collocations also means memorizing its different meanings.

IV. CAUSES OF CHINESE STUDENTS’ COLLOCATION ERRORS

The errors in the learner language may contain errors, which reflect the gaps between the learner’s knowledge of the target language and the idiomatic target language. Errors are systematic and predictable, resulting in the construction of some kind of rule, which is different from that of the target language. Mis-collocations are among the common errors in the speech of Chinese learners of English. Then what are the causes of these errors?

While the native English speakers intuitively make the correct collocation, based on a life-time experience of hearing and reading the words in fixed combinations, the Chinese learners of English have no choice but to learn the correct collocation by resorting to rote learning. The problem for the Chinese learners of English is that there are no collocation rules that can be learned. They have more limited experience and may frequently collocate words in a way that sounds odd to the native speaker. I am of the opinion that the collocation errors of Chinese students are mainly caused by L1 interference and overgeneralization.

1. L1 interference.

These errors result from learners’ attempt to make use of their L1 knowledge. When Chinese students of English are not competent enough, they try to make use of Chinese patterns or rules which leads to collocation errors in English writing. Chinese is more economical in vocabulary in that it makes use of the same word (character) to express many different meanings where English employs separate words. The following chart shows this difference:

Chinese expressions	Equivalent English expressions	Chinese expressions	Equivalent English expressions
图书馆	library	啤酒	beer
展览馆	exhibition hall	葡萄酒	wine
照相馆	photo studio	白酒	liquor
大使馆	embassy	鸡尾酒	cocktail
体育馆	gymnasium	烈酒	spirits
博物馆	museum	香槟酒	champagne

As a result, such phrases are often made by Chinese students of English, even by the intermediate learners, as *learn knowledge, *learn to speak and *learn the example. The correct expressions should be *pursue knowledge*, *learn to speak English* and *follow the example*. They make such mistakes because the English words *pursue*, *learn* and *follow* have the same equivalent “学习” in Chinese. In the same way, the Chinese expression “打开” is equivalent to *turn on in turn on the TV*, *open in open the box*, *answer in answer the door*, *loose in loosen the tie*, *unfold in unfold the letter* and *discover in discover the secrets*, etc. Influenced by the way Chinese uses a general term to express many different meanings, Chinese students of English transfer this habit into making wrong English collocations. We will now cite another example to show this influence. Pu Jianzhong (2003, P. 160) examined the collocational behavior of the English verb *catch* in the grammatical pattern “V+n” in CLEC, BROWN and LOB and found that *catch chance is a collocation specific to Chinese students’ English and don’t actually appear in the two corpora of native speakers. Obviously, this collocation is made based on the Chinese expression “抓住机会”, in which “抓住” is equivalent to *catch* and “机会” is *chance*. *Catch chance is made by Chinese students by simply adding *catch* and *chance* together without considering the problem of collocation.

2. Overgeneralization

Besides L1 interference, learners tend to generalize the language knowledge acquired, that is, to formulate rules based on their learning experiences in order to apply these rules to new language materials. Or put it in another way, they tend to extend the use of a grammatical rule or linguistic item beyond its accepted uses. When it comes to collocation, they tend to generalize the use of a particular word in a right collocation to make wrong collocations. For example, *do harm to* is correct collocation; learners tend to generalize the use of *do* in this phrase to make new phrases like **do good to* and **do bad to*, which are actually illegitimate in English. In the same, based on **play computer* is made by analogy to *play the piano* or *play basketball*, etc.

In some cases, Chinese students make deviant collocations based on some correct collocations, neglecting restrictions and exceptions. For instance, based on the correct collocations *take measures* and *commit a crime*, Chinese students make **take some activities* and **commit a mistake*. Chinese make **commit a mistake* because they have generalized from the correct collocations of *commit*, such as *commit a murder*, *commit theft*, *commit suicide*, etc. that the words following *commit* all have negative connotations. In fact, not all nouns sharing negative connotations can be used together with *commit*. In the case of *mistake*, although it has a negative connotation, *make a mistake* is the correct collocation.

V. HOW TO TEACH AND LEARN COLLOCATION

From what has been mentioned above, we can see that collocation is a big problem in learners' interlanguage. This is probably because inadequate attention has been paid to the teaching of collocation in teaching practice. In order to improve the quality of interlanguage and enable the students to produce idiomatic English, teachers of English must attach sufficient importance to the teaching of collocation when teaching vocabulary. The teaching of a new word must be conducted in a given context (but not in isolation). The teacher should divert students' attention to the exact context the new word used in and encourage them to try to remember the collocation the word appears in. The teacher's emphasis is necessary for students to develop a good habit of memorizing words in collocation. The consciousness of the importance of collocation in the learning of a new word will enable students to find the proper collocation for every word they learn.

Now more and more teachers have realized the importance of teaching vocabulary, but as for how to teach vocabulary there are still different arguments. Some teachers hold the view that since vocabulary can be learnt through extensive listening and reading, we don't need to spend much time teaching vocabulary explicitly in class. This is a great misunderstanding. Explicit vocabulary teaching is important. Part of class should be devoted to the explicit teaching of vocabulary.

As for students of English, frequent experience of learning materials written in native language is very important. Students should be encouraged to listen to or read genuine English written by native speakers. Immersion in native idiomatic English is helpful for developing good sense of English, especially good sense of collocation.

So far as the concrete methods of learning collocation are concerned, students can make use of the rich resources of dictionaries and the Internet. Nowadays, there are many excellent dictionaries of collocation. A good case in point is *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. As it is mentioned in the preface of the dictionary, "no matter how convinced learners are in principle of the importance of collocation, it is difficult for them to put these principles into practice without the benefit of an up-to-date, corpus-based dictionary of collocation." The dictionary can meet the needs of students and teachers. Whenever you meet a difficulty in collocation, you can just look up the key word in the collocation in the dictionary. All its collocations are listed sequentially according to the frequency of each collocation. For example, "introduction of" is common use among Chinese students of English. Sometimes, we also meet "introduction to". Are the two collocations both correct? If so, what is the difference? Or is only one of them correct? To solve the problem, you can just look up "introduction" in the dictionary and find the answer.

Nowadays, there are many free corpora on the Internet. When you want to learn how to use a word, i.e. its collocation, you need to know what other words are commonly used with it. You can explore this kind of knowledge yourself here by entering the word you want to investigate and its part of speech. Choose whether you want to see words that appear to the left or to the right of that word and their part of speech. You can immediately get the answer. A good case in point is BNC (British National Corpus). We can easily get access to the corpus by searching for it through "baidu". The first item "Exploring Vocabulary: Collocation" is the program for exploring collocation. Still take "introduction" for example. Enter "introduction", choose its part of speech "noun" and choose the part of speech you want investigate after the key word "introduction", in this case "preposition", then all the sentences containing "introduction + preposition" pattern in the BNC appear on the screen. You can investigate the idiomatic collocation of "introduction" with prepositions based on the examples found.

In conclusion, correct and idiomatic use of words depends largely on the mastery of their typical collocational behavior. In order to learn new words well and deepen understanding, both students and teachers of English should pay more attention to collocation and be aware of the importance of collocation in the acquisition of a word. And students should make good use of collocation dictionaries and the resources on the Internet whenever they are not sure of the collocation a word should be in.

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