LSA 1 Background Essay: Helping Lower Level Learners develop an Awareness of medium-strength verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations.

Introduction

According to Jimmie Hill (Lewis, 2000:64), “The main learning load for all language users is not at the strong or weak ends of the collocational spectrum, but in the middle - those many thousands of collocations which make up a large part of what we say and write.” George Woollard (ETP 2005:48) suggests that “the noun provides the most efficient focus for learning collocation” while Morgan Lewis (2000:14) asserts that “students would improve dramatically if they...simply learned to use the words they already knew in the huge number of collocations of which these words are parts.” I am intrigued by these claims and will therefore explore the nature and pedagogical implications of this area of lexis, through an analysis of verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations, teaching issues that may arise in various contexts and possible solutions to these. Introducing this area of language into the classroom effectively should enable me to facilitate lower level learners’ progress beyond the production of sentences that are “grammatically possible” but not “lexically sanctioned” (Lewis 1997:36), for example - said by an Indonesian learner of mine - “I've lost contact with him since we finished our study at college” instead of “…left college”

Analysis of collocation and learner issues that may arise

Strength and Frequency: Issues of medium-strength verb-noun collocations (identification, misguided storage, miscollocation and avoidance)

Collocation “is the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency”. (Lewis 1997:8). Collocations, of all types, abound in spoken and written language. Indeed, Lewis (2000) lists twenty types, such as phrasal verbs, binomials, fixed phrases and various combinations of word types, including, of course, my focus:

1) adjective-noun, e.g. “blonde hair” but not “beige hair”: although both describe colours, there are “restrictions on what words they may combine with” (McCarthy 1990:12)

2) verb-noun e.g. “do nothing” but not “make nothing”. “There is no reason why it should be do rather than make, it just is!” (Woollard 2005:48).

Lewis(2000:63-64) explains that collocations can be plotted along a cline, from unique to weak. A weak collocation is made up of words that collocate freely with other words, e.g. “good day”, “good trip” and the many other combinations using “good”, while a strong collocation sets up an expectation i.e. I say “rancid”, you think “butter” and would struggle to think of another collocate other than, perhaps, “gravy”. The stronger the collocation, the stronger the expectation. Strength becomes uniqueness when there is no flexibility, for example, “we shrugged our
shoulders but no other part of our anatomy.” Words may be weak in some collocations e.g. “good day” but stronger in others e.g. “it’ll take you a good hour.”

It is important to recognise, with regards to collocation, that frequency is not necessarily an indicator of strength - “good day” occurs frequently in spoken language but it is a weak collocation, while “blithering idiot” may not often be heard but is almost strong enough to be considered a polyword - and that words which collocate do not necessarily collocate (Lewis,1997). Thus, if teachers do not take responsibility for helping learners become aware of those words which do collocate with useful strength and frequency, such as those nouns, described by Lewis (1997:28), that “suggest a field of potential collocates”, learners will struggle with identification of useful collocations. This is because at lower levels, learners have not had enough exposure to language to be able to notice such features as collocation, without explicit help and, as Lewis (2000:163) explains, “noticing examples of language in context is central to the acquisition of language.” Even with explicit help, however, this “natural input” - the “examples of language in context” - is insufficient, as it contains no “negative evidence” and so “when a learner’s state of L2 knowledge leads her to overuse... [a feature of language]... there is nothing in the input that tells her not to use it.”(Lewis 1998:54), in this case resulting in miscollocation.

A swathe of medium strength verb-noun collocations which often cause lower level learners difficulties are those that use delexical verbs. Delexical verbs, such as “make” and “have” carry “very little meaning: the main meaning which they serve to convey is usually carried by their object” (O’Dell[Schmidt&McCarthy]2000:271). These particular verb-noun collocations comprise a substantial amount of regularly used language, such as “have a bath” or “do the housework” which learners first encounter at elementary level. If these learners store nouns and verbs separately in their lexicon, rather than chunked, this area of language becomes problematic. For example, in the case of a pre-intermediate adult learner in Indonesia, who said, “I make the housework every day.” Lower level learners face a high processing load when trying to produce any language, which is increased by misguided storage of lexis. Attempting to select a noun and a verb stored separately in their lexicon makes error likely, as there are no rules for choosing which verb to put with a given noun.

These difficulties with delexical verbs in verb-noun collocation can be further exacerbated by lack of equivalence in a learner’s L1. As an example, Czech has one word, “dělat”, that means both “make” and “do” (Swan 2012). Swan(ibid) describes a study of Czech learners, which discovered that “a major group of lexical errors comprises misuse of words due to the fact that a Czech word has several equivalents in English” - as with “dělat”. A learner translating from Czech to English, word for word, with no awareness of collocation, is in great danger of repeatedly miscollating “make” and “do” e.g. “I keep doing this mistake.” Meanwhile, in Chinese no equivalents exist at all, so Chinese learners of English may avoid using delexical verbs wherever possible.(Ibid) Thus, instead of “I had breakfast this morning”, they would use the more formal “I breakfasted this morning.” As Shin
(ELTJ 2008) points out, “This unnatural language use is problematical for learners in EFL contexts where the focus is on grammar. They may produce grammatically correct sentences, but many of them may not sound native-like” - as with the Indonesian speaker mentioned in the introduction to this essay.

If these difficulties are not targeted at lower levels, they will persist even as the learner's language abilities improve, fossilizing and becoming an obstacle to communicative competence, especially in English-speaking countries where delexical verb-noun collocations are a feature of everyday communication. Thus, “the more delexicalised a word is, and the wider its collocational range, the more important it is to meet, aquire and record it in context” (Lewis 1997). After all, “chunked expressions enable learners to reduce cognitive effort, to save processing time, and to have language available for immediate use.” (Shin, ELTJ 2008:340)

**Adjective-noun collocations: the issues of decontextualisation, storage and “opposites”**

As seen above, context is a useful tool for acquisition of words with wide collocational range. However, traditionally, vocabulary teaching has focussed on the word as the primary unit, from a “slot-and-filler” syntactic view of language. (Moon 2000) This approach “would explain why learners with even ‘good vocabularies’ still have problems. They may know a lot of words, but typically their collocational competence is very limited.” (Hill, 1999:5)

With lower level learners, this lack of competence is very much in evidence in the area of adjective-noun collocation - and context, once again, is an issue. The problem with adjectives is that they are often taught as oppositional pairs e.g. “light vs heavy”, but teachers need to recognise the dangers of over-simplification: The opposite of an adjective is, in fact, dependent on the noun it is describing. Thus, a room can be “light” but not “heavy” - the opposite here would instead be “dark”, whereas when there is a traffic jam on the motorway, we would not say there is “dark” traffic but “heavy traffic”. This dependence emphasises the importance of cultivating an awareness of adjective-noun collocation in learners.

Swan (2012:78) quotes Ringbom in saying “The learner tends to assume that the system of L2 is more or less the same as in his L1 until he has discovered that it is not.” Lists of decontextualised adjectives in L2 will not allow a learner to discover how far equivalence with L1 stretches and incorrectly applied rules of adjective usage from L1 may persist. For example, in Bahasa Indonesia, speakers always place the adjective after the noun, i.e. “gadis pintar”, literally ‘girl clever’, while in English the adjective precedes, so Indonesian learners are accustomed to noun+adjective collocations but not adjective+noun collocations. In my experience, Indonesian lower level learners of English will initially invert adjective and noun, as per their L1, before using the correct L2 syntax after enough exposures to the correct form. While the above example is a syntactical issue, it demonstrates that if learners do not learn language in multi-word units, then the cognitive load is increased, as instead of learning a simple lexical chunk e.g. “clever girl”, the low-
level learner must instead wait to grapple with complex grammatical rules of adjective syntax before reliably producing such an item. Whereas, “correctly understood and stored, lexical items should be available for immediate use” (Hill, [Lewis, 2000]:56).

It should also be noted that the issue of lack of “negative evidence” in natural input, as described above (see section one) is equally applicable to adjective-noun collocations.

**Practical teaching solutions afore-mentioned issues**

Lewis (1993:120) comments that “learning to identify collocations and the underlying patterns which individual examples exemplify is one aspect of helping students to obtain maximum benefits from the input to which they are exposed.”

**Activity: New Cutting Egde Elementary (Cunningham and Moor) unit 3 p31** (see appendix A)

**Aim:** Encouraging useful storage of medium-strength verb noun collocations, thereby avoiding miscollocation and avoidance.

**Procedure:**

This is a prime example of an activity which takes on board Lewis’s comment above: Here, a selection of everyday **verb-noun collocations** are embedded in the context of the daily routine. Five of these collocations use the delexical verb “have” and another uses “get” so learners are introduced to this type of verb-noun collocation with a manageable number of examples strongly rooted in their context - that of daily routines. A recognition activity is followed by one that requires deeper processing - learners must personalise this language by placing the items around a clock in a reflection of their own daily routine. Production activities, spoken and written, again personalising the target items, follow on.

**Evaluation:**

Activities like this are valuable because they can be used to teach learners to record and use vocabulary in chunks, which is one of the first steps in learning how to chunk and store input language successfully. The sequence of activities, in providing repeated encounters with these contextualised verb-noun collocations, encourages depth of processing of these chunked items. If teachers then apply the principle of expanding rehearsal (increasing the gap between recycling) to this language, the end result will be that verb and noun are not stored separately, avoiding the problems identified in section 1. In my experience, learners become able to describe their or somebody else’s daily routine using easily accessible lexical items without worrying about the grammatical structure, hence reducing their processing load and minimising scope for miscollocation. Additionally, a learner
who has consciously stored these items in chunks, and been given focussed recycling opportunities, does not feel the need to avoid using them in favour of less appropriate language (e.g. “I breakfast at” for “I have breakfast at”)

**Activity:** “Find the noun, find the collocate” (See Appendix B)

**Aim:** Identification and awareness of verb-noun collocations in the target language:

**Procedure:**

This activity requires learners to scan a text, identifying nouns under a timelimit to ensure that they cannot read every word. In the next reading, without a timelimit, learners try to identify verb collocates for each noun. Lewis (2000) suggests that learners call out the collocations and, if correct, the teacher writes these on an overhead transparency. Incorrect collocations can be written on a separate section of the transparency or the whiteboard and crossed out.

**Evaluation:**

It is important that the teacher does not choose an over-complicated text when doing this activity with low-level learners. The key to the activity is that when learners call out incorrect collocations, thereby testing their own hypothesis of the L2, as well as the degree of equivalence to their L1, the teacher is then able to give them the “negative evidence” required to develop their awareness of the target language. The teacher can draw learners’ attention to the more useful collocations - combinations of verb and noun that collocate, with reasonable frequency, rather than just co-occur in text.

It is important for learners to:

a) record a few of the more useful collocations generated, in their lexical notebooks, to be reviewed in later lessons, again using the expanding rehearsal principle so that these can be internalised.

b) make a note of the miscollocations that they, as individuals, suggested, as a reminder of the evidence gained about the target language. In my experience, this negative evidence can be a useful reference when it comes to later production activities when learners may feel tempted to transfer incorrectly from L1.

This activity can, of course, be applied equally effectively to adjective-noun collocations.

**Activity:** Adjective-noun collocation tables (See Appendix C)
Aim: Targeting incorrect adjective-noun collocation arising from decontextualisation and oversimplification of “opposites” by developing awareness of adjective-noun collocation.

Procedure:

Lewis recommends giving learners columns of adjectives and collocating nouns separated by an empty column. Learners complete the table with opposites that collocate with the nouns in question. Using a single adjective such as “light”, whose opposite varies according to the noun, highlights the importance of adjective-noun collocation. These tables can then be stuck into learners’ vocabulary notebooks and replace the lists of decontextualised adjectives and opposites with L1 translation that lower level learners are prone to creating and relying upon. Learners can also be encouraged to think about how their L1 translates the different meanings of any given polysemic adjective, “light”, for example. At lower levels, games can subsequently be used as a fun way to recycle this vocabulary. E.g. a learner calls out an adjective-noun collocate and another learner responds with the correct opposite as the adjective is anchored to the noun.

Evaluation:

This is a simple activity but one that can easily be used alongside compulsory coursebook material to sensitise learners to adjective-noun collocation. It will help learners become accustomed to recording language in chunks, in this case, adjective-noun chunks, which will greatly increase the effectiveness of vocabulary storage and subsequent retrieval. Thus, in future production activities, lower level learners’ processing load will be eased by their access to these chunked items and more accurate language will be produced.

Conclusion

Investigating this area of lexis has enriched my knowledge both of the way collocations work and the importance of this awareness in terms of effective facilitation of learning in the ELT classroom.

Word count: 2500

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