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

According to Jimmie Hill (Lewis, 2000, p64), “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 Issue 40) suggests that “the noun provides the most efficient focus for learning collocation” while Morgan Lewis (2000 p14) 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, their role in the expansion of a lower-level learner’s mental lexicon, 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, p36).

What is a collocation?

Collocation “is the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency”. (Lewis 1998, p8). There are many types of collocation but my focus is adjective-noun and verb-noun collocations. An example of verb-noun collocation is “have an experience” (but not “do an experience”) while an example of adjective-noun collocation is “blond hair” (but not “beige hair”) (McCarthy 1990, p12-13) Traditionally, vocabulary teaching has focussed on the word as the primary unit, from a “slot-and-filler” syntactic view of language. (Moon 2000, p40-42) 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)

Teaching collocation and learner issues that may arise

As Moon (2000 p 58) explains, “multi-word items are language-specific and they have particular sociocultural connotations and associations. Even where analogous multi-word items exist, they are unlikely to be exact counterparts, and there may be different constraints on their use.” In essence, unlike a concrete noun, for example, dog, collocations do not always allow a one-to-one mapping of concept and meaning from L2 - L1. A French learner of English learns that the English word “dog” refers to the same concept as “le chien” in French. A Spanish learner who translates “blue joke” into Spanish may find it meaningless until they realise that in Spanish, such jokes are referred to as “green”(Lewis 1997 p18). This idiomatic nature of many collocations is where much of their difficulty lies - “they are not fully predictable from their component words” (Lewis 2000)

Confusion also frequently arises where verb-noun collocations with delexical verbs are concerned. 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, 2000). These particular verb-noun collocations comprise a substantial amount of regularly used language, such as “have a bath” or “do the housework”. If learners store nouns and verbs separately in their lexicon, rather than chunked, this area of language becomes problematic. Thus, it is important for low level learners to accumulate an easily accessible...
and useable bank of these verb-noun collocations. The arbitrary nature of collocations makes this a difficult task.

Collocations may initially create difficulties for learners whose L1 syntax is different from English. For example, in Bahasa Indonesia, speakers always place the adjective after the noun, i.e. gadis pintar (literally ‘girl clever’) while in English it comes before. Thus, in their L1, Indonesians are accustomed to noun+adjective collocations but not adjective+noun collocations. In my experience, Indonesian lower level learners of English will at first invert the adjective and noun, as per their L1, before using the correct L2 syntax. Could this perhaps be avoided by helping learners notice collocation and teaching language in multiword chunks, to be broken down for analysis at a later stage? It is certainly true that “chunked expressions enable learners to reduce cognitive effort, to save processing time, and to have language available for immediate use.” (Shin, 2008) It is not just syntax that may cause initial problems for learners. For Japanese learners of English, another source of confusion may be that “the Japanese equivalent of many English adjectives are effectively nouns or verbs” (Swan, 2012) These learners, then, will also need extra guidance with learning to identify collocations.

Identifying collocations in texts, both spoken and written, is thus another obstacle that lies between learners and collocational competence. Jimmie Hill(1999) explains that if learners read or listen to each word “as if it were separate from every other word”, a lot of meaning will be lost. Thus, learners need to be taught to “chunk” input correctly, so that they become aware of the collocations that abound. Having students read aloud in class is something most teachers do at some point. If learners have not already heard the text correctly chunked, they will read word by word with no chunking. In production activities learners will then reproduce halting, unnatural-sounding sentences, due to the phenomenon known as “phonological chunking” (Lewis 1997). A word pronounced out of context sounds very different to that same word when spoken as part of an utterance: “the physical production of speech is planned over varying stretches, almost all longer than a single word” (ibid). Take the utterance “let’s go and see a film tonight”, which contains the verb-noun collocation “see a film”. If chunked correctly, the pronunciation is /siːˈfɪlm/, whereas if broken down into single words, it becomes /siː et film/. Correctly chunked language is typical of native-speaker English, so for learners living and learning in an English-speaking environment, being able to recognise these chunks is crucial to communicative competence. This is also relevant to learners preparing for an exam such as IELTS or F.C.E. Listening extracts contain connected speech, and for successful comprehension, learners require competent identification of chunks in utterances. If the ability is developed early on, this will ease the process.

The issue of chunking and collocation does not just apply to spoken English. Incorrect chunking affects learners’ ability to manipulate English in its written form too, as learners “cannot store items in their brain correctly if they have not identified them correctly. If they are not stored correctly, they cannot be retrieved”(Lewis 1997), making interpretation arduous. In fact, as Lewis(1993) suggests, “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.” Easy retrieval of chunks accelerates the reading process, which is usually slow for learners. In my experience, they frequently struggle in exams to process text fast enough to complete all questions in the prescribed time.
Fluency and reading speed are not all that suffer when students lack collocational competence. If a learner does not know a meaning-rich adjective-noun collocation, such as a “minor operation”, a longer paraphrase to convey that meaning is required, i.e. “an operation that was not serious”. As Hill (1999) explains, “when students do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say, they create longer utterances which increase the likelihood of further errors.” Accuracy, then, suffers too and the remedies offered are often misdirected. Producing written discourse in English would be easier for learners if they were able to access chunks of meaning-rich language from their mental lexicon. Indeed, “a major element of being able to use a word...involves mastering its collocational range and restrictions on that range” (Lewis 1993). From a transactional viewpoint, written discourse is subject to conventions and accidentally subverting these lexically can create difficulty for a learner. For exam candidates, where speed and accuracy are both paramount, ready-made chunks of language alleviate the need for creation of longer sentences to convey meaning, thus increasing speed and likelihood of accuracy.

Successful communication requires recognition of meaning conveyed by collocation within input and use of the appropriate chunks to convey those meanings in written or spoken output. The noun alone is insufficient. Adjective-noun and verb-noun collocations are the first step towards collocational competence, identified as a necessary element of communicative competence. The next question is how to address the learner difficulties identified and facilitate the awareness-raising of adjective-noun and verb-noun collocation at lower levels.

**Practical teaching solutions to the above issues**

The first step in helping lower level learners become aware of collocation is helping them adapt to identifying nouns, verbs and adjectives. Knowledge of these basic labels and the word types inferred is a vital starting point, especially for learners whose L1 expresses concepts using different word types, as in the example of the Japanese learners.

- **English Vocabulary in Use Elementary** (McCarthy and O’Dell) echoes this in unit 1, Talking about Language. Activity 1.3 requires learners to categorise a set of words into nouns, verbs and adjectives. Although the lexis is decontextualised, the value in this activity is in the discussion that can take place once the learners have attempted it. If any learners have wrongly categorised words due to L1 interference (for example, translating an adjective into L1, using a monolingual dictionary, and retrieving a verb), the teacher can guide them to the realisation that conceptualisation in English and the L1 differ. Subsequently, when similar differences arise as collocations are met, learners will be aware of it, due to the established mental framework.

Once learners are familiar with different word types in English, the task of building up their mental lexicon can begin.

- **New Cutting Edge Elementary** (Cunningham and Moor) is a useful coursebook to extract activities from, as its approach to vocabulary embraces collocation, encouraging teachers to increase their awareness and develop this in learners too. The vocabulary and speaking activity in Unit 3 presents the language of daily routines, most of it in lexical chunks. A recognition activity is followed by one that requires deeper processing, as learners must place the chunks around a clock in reflection of their daily routine.
Production activities using these chunks follow. Activities like this are valuable because they can be used to train learners to record and use vocabulary in chunks, which is one of the first steps in learning how to chunk input language successfully. Further, there are five collocations using the delexical verb “have” and one with “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. Introducing delexical verbs in collocation sensitises learners to their existence without overwhelming and confusing them with decontextualised quantity - as commonly occurs in exercises involving “make” and “do”. This approach, if sustained, may be a means to avoiding the confusion mentioned earlier.

Once learners are familiar with chunks of language and the concept of recording and using each collocation as a single item, sensitising them to collocation in text can begin. As discussed, this is crucial if learners are to “obtain maximum benefits from the input to which they are exposed.” (Lewis 1993).

**New Cutting Edge Elementary** (Cunningham and Moor) Module 5 introduces learners to this skill by embedding a collocation identification exercise into the vocabulary and reading section. Having identified various modes of transport and completed a gap-fill, which they check by listening, learners are given a choice of two collocations for each noun and must use the text to circle the correct one. The combination of reading and listening via the checking component of the previous exercise begins the process of sensitising learners to phonological chunking, while the collocation exercise itself raises learners’ awareness of text consisting of chunks. Any text can be used in this manner, provided the text is at the correct level for the learners. If similar activities are lacking, teachers can create supplementary material in order to ensure that learners “obtain maximum benefit” (Lewis 1993) from a text. See below for examples.

The techniques introduced in the activity above must be developed in subsequent lessons, if learners are to avoid fluency, accuracy and timing issues in exams and develop communicative competency, as discussed earlier. Lewis (1997, 2000) outlines several useful activities for this:

- **“The sound shape of a chunk”** Drilling word stress is something commonly done in the EFL classroom, but fewer teachers apply stress patterns to chunks. This activity requires matching chunks of language with stress patterns. Lewis’s example consists of 6 decontextualised chunks and stress patterns for matching. A teacher could contextualise this activity by specifying identification of a similar number of pre-selected chunks within a text - perhaps by giving learners a set of nouns for focus - and then providing the stress patterns to be matched with the chunks. Later on, once learners are accustomed to this activity type, and their competence increases, they can select chunks, write out stress patterns and swap these with a partner, testing each other. Collaborative activities could also be developed. Thus, while this activity may initially be teacher-centred, ultimately it could be useful as a tool to increase autonomy in development of the mental lexicon, as well as cultivating collocational competence.

- **“Find the noun, find the collocate”** Another good use of text, encouraging learners to read fluidly rather than concentrating on every word separately, this activity requires learners to read a text, identifying nouns under a timelimit to ensure they cannot read every word. In the next reading, without a timelimit, they identify verb collocates for each
noun where applicable. Lewis suggests that learners call out the collocations and, if correct, the teacher writes these on an overhead transparency. Learners can record a few of the more useful collocations generated in their lexical notebooks, to be reviewed in later lessons. This activity can be applied equally effectively to adjective-noun collocations.

**To further sensitise learners to the meaning-rich area of adjective-noun collocation**, Lewis recommends giving them 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. Later, process writing can be used, with both adjective-noun and verb-noun collocations being included in the brainstorming element, giving learners a base of language chunks to use in their discourse. This technique will be effective when learners face exam questions or real-world tasks, in activating their - hopefully - fully connected mental lexicon.

This kind of learner training, if sustained, will lead to learners’ ability to chunk, store and retrieve language effectively, that is to collocational competence, giving them a huge advantage both transactionally in an English-speaking environment and under exam conditions anywhere in the world.

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