The Importance of Raising Collocational Awareness in the Vocabulary Development of Intermediate Level Learners of English

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing awareness of the significance of the lexicon in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, after a long period of neglect. In fact, vocabulary is considered to be the most significant – and the most difficult – language component for learners to acquire successfully. The analysis of a large number of corpora indicates that vocabulary errors not only outnumber grammatical errors, they are considered more serious by native speakers. While grammatical errors do not usually disrupt structural understanding and communication, lexical errors interfere with basic meaning resulting in a lack of understanding between the speaker and the listener (Gass and Selinker 2001:372). Vocabulary is central to communication; therefore, vocabulary acquisition is essential for successful language learning. Without words, it is impossible to use grammatical structures and language functions, so learners often consider vocabulary to be the source of all problems.

The Importance of the Lexicon

Intermediate students very often remain stuck at a certain level of language competence. First, they are familiar with the basic and most common grammatical structures. Second, they are able to communicate their ideas successfully and "survive" in most everyday conversational topics; their active vocabulary, however, often consists of a limited set of lexical items resulting in a rather poor and simplistic discourse. Therefore, teachers' aim should be to help learners create word-meaning awareness and encourage them to increase the size, accuracy and richness (expressiveness) of their active vocabulary.

In many current linguistic theories the lexicon assumes great import-ance. In his Minimalist Program (1995), Chomsky maintains that language learning is primarily lexical learning. According to Levelt, vocabulary is a crucial factor in sentence production: "The assumption that the lexicon is an essential mediator between conceptualisation and grammatical and phono-logical encoding will be called the *lexical hypothesis*" (Levelt 1989:181). In addition to helping production, the lexicon acquires significance in the comprehension of input as well.

Key Principles in the Lexical Approach

The Lexical Approach has been in the centre of interest since Michael Lewis published *The Lexical Approach* in 1993. This approach was born as an alternative to grammar-based approaches although it is not something totally new: it develops the basic principles in the communicative approaches to language learning. The most important difference is a shift in preference: in the lexical approach achieving proficiency depends to a great extent on words and their combinations. Lewis points out that words do not exist in isolation: it is not always possible to put any word in any place in a sentence, even if the result is a grammatical sentence. The choice of a vocabulary item often determines the following words and grammatical structure. As Lewis puts it: "language is grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar" (Lewis 1993:vi). In other words, lexis is essential in creating meaning; grammar plays a minor role. It is important to note that this approach distinguishes between *vocabulary* and *lexis*; the former is a set of individual words with fixed meanings whereas the latter includes word combinations that learners store in their mental lexicons. Lewis further argues that the traditional grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is not tenable as an important part of language consists of unanalysed "chunks". Therefore, teachers should help learners develop their stock of prefabricated phrases and spend less time on grammatical structures (ibid., 95). In short, collocation should become the organising principle in teaching.

The Role of Collocations in Vocabulary Acquisition

Knowing a word is definitely much more than simply knowing what it means. Nation lists eight elements, which are necessary to have complete knowledge of a word (1990:31):

1. spoken form
2. written form

3. grammatical behaviour
4. collocational behaviour
5. frequency
6. stylistic register constraints
7. conceptual meaning
8. word associations

In the Lexical Approach, collocational patterns form the core of word knowledge. According to Thornbury "the ability to deploy a wide range of lexical chunks both accurately and appropriately is probably what most distinguishes advanced learners from intermediate ones" (2002:116).

Morgan Lewis argues that increasing the learners' collocational competence is the way to improve their language as a whole:

> The reason so many students are not making any perceived progress is simply because they have not been trained to notice which words go with which. They may know quite a lot of individual words which they struggle to use, along with their grammatical knowledge, but they lack the ability to use those words in a range of collocations which pack more meaning into what they say or write. (Lewis 2000:14)

Learning collocations not only increases the mental lexicon but develops fluency as well. As Michael Lewis says, "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items, which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity" (1997:15).

An Overview of Research into Collocations

Collocation is not a new idea in the field of SLA. However, researchers have been able to formulate theories about the extent of collocational patterning only since the development of computerized collection and analysis of corpora. At the beginning of the 1990s two influential books appeared, Paul Nation's *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* (1990) and John Sinclair's *Corpus, Concordance, and Collocation* (1991), which stimulated research into vocabulary and more specifically into collocation. It was in 1993 that Michael Lewis put forth his theory and described a new approach to language learning and teaching: the Lexical Approach. This approach puts vocabulary acquisition and collocation in a central role in second language acquisition. Lewis's second book, *Implementing the Lexical Approach* (1997) contains practical activities that teachers applied in the classroom, and the most recent book edited and co-authored by Michael Lewis,

Teaching Collocation: Further Developments in the Lexical Approach
(2000) is an extension of the ideas developed in the previous two books
focusing on collocations, a key element in the approach.

In *Teaching Collocations* Hill claims that "it is possible that up to 70 %
of everything we say, hear, read or write is to be found in some form of fixed
expression" (2000:53). Underlining that collocation has an overriding
importance in language learning he further argues:

> A student with a vocabulary of 2,000 words will only be able
> to function in a fairly limited way. A different student with
> 2,000 words, but collocationally competent with those words,
> will also be far more communicatively competent. (ibid., 62)

He notes that learners lacking collocational competence often express
their ideas in longer, wordier sentences, which often contain several
grammatical errors. Although Morgan Lewis admits that it might not be easy
for teachers to change their attitude towards vocabulary teaching and
learning, he maintains that the teaching process does not have to be changed
radically to make room for collocations (2000:27). There are various
strategies and classroom activities to expand the learners' repertoire of
lexical chunks, which foster fluency and eventually enhance language
development.

Types of Lexical Units

Advocates of the lexical approach argue that in language there are set lexical
phrases, which cannot be combined without constraints. Akhmatova claims
as early as in 1974:

> It follows that word combination becomes free in the sense of
> not having any constraints imposed upon it when words are
> combined by *creative* or 'imaginative' speakers who are not
> content with merely reproducing the already existing
> complexes. Words are combined 'freely' only by people who
> strive for novelty and originality. It is mainly in fiction or other
> types of imaginative speaking and writing that we find word
> combinations that are really free. (cited in Gass and Selinker
> 2001:392)

SLA researchers use many different and overlapping terms to refer to
these fixed lexical units including *speech formulae* (Peters 1983), *lexicalised
stems* (Pawley & Syder 1983), *lexical phrases* (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992
and Schmitt 2000) or *prefabricated chunks* (Lewis 1993). In the Lexical
Approach a distinction is made between *lexical chunks* and *collocations*.

Lexical chunk is an umbrella term, which refers to any pair or group of words that usually appear together. Although collocation is included in this term, it is defined as a pair of lexical content words (as opposed to function words) commonly found together.

Lewis (1997) offers the following categorization of lexical units:

- words (*book*)
- polywords (*by the way*)
- collocations / word partnerships (*basic principle*)
- institutionalised utterances (*If I were you...* or *we'll see...*)
- sentence frames and heads (*that is not...as you think* or *The problem is...*)
- text frames (*Firstly...;Secondly...;Finally....*)

In the Lexical Approach collocations have a special role. Lewis points out:

> Instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways. (1997:204)

Lewis defines collocation as "the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency" (ibid., 8). It is important to emphasise that the relationship between words is not determined by logic; it is arbitrary, decided by linguistic convention. Hill offers the following taxonomy of collocations (2000:63–64)

- **unique** collocations (*to foot the bill*, *to shrug your shoulders)*: the verb is not used with any other nouns
- **strong** collocations (*rancid butter*): *rancid* is most commonly used with butter
- **weak** collocations (*long hair*): these combinations are completely free and predictable to students
- **medium-strength** collocations (*to make a mistake, to hold a meeting*). These are neither free nor completely fixed.

Pragmatic knowledge is also important in deciding which collocation to use, as some collocations are not appropriate for certain contexts.

Hill argues that students should acquire more medium-strength collocations if they want to leave behind the intermediate level.

According to Hill we can further categorize collocations based on the elements they contain (2000:51):

- adjective + noun (*a huge profit)*
- noun + noun (a *pocket calculator*)
- verb + adjective + noun (*learn a foreign language*)
- verb + adverb (*live dangerously*)
- adverb + adverb (*half understand*)
- adverb + adjective (*completely soaked*)
- verb + preposition + noun (*speak through an interpreter*)

The Importance of Teaching Collocations

Rote learning, which means that students have to memorise endless lists of single words in isolation, is still common practice in many Hungarian schools leading to superficial, surface-level knowledge and impeding meaningful vocabulary learning, which is the key to progress. As a result of rote learning, learners may transfer incorrect forms from their native language (negative transfer). Hill maintains that teachers should raise their students' awareness of collocations and encourage learner autonomy because acquiring competence in collocations is a long process. Learners should be sensitive to noticing collocations in language. Noticing is a key term in the lexical approach as it plays the role of transforming input into intake, which according to Michael Lewis is "perhaps the most important of all methodological questions" (2000:159). He insists that "exercises and activities which help the learner observe or notice L2 more accurately ensure quicker and more carefully-formulated hypothesis about L2, and so aid acquisition, which is based on a constantly repeated Observe-Hypothesise–Experiment cycle" (Lewis 1997:52). It is worth mentioning that all four skills can be practiced in this way: reading and listening help learners notice collocations while writing and speaking activities provide opportunity to practice. Hill maintains that language learners should be presented with authentic texts. One of the best examples is a newspaper article, which is extremely rich in collocations. Seeing how language is really used is a great motivating factor for learners (2000:58). The way students record collocations is also important. Collocations should be recorded in an organised way. As Lewis says: "If you want to forget something, put it in a list" (1993:118). He suggests that the best organising principle is using topics and semantic fields. Later these collocation journals will be much more useful for learners than textbooks.

Classroom Activities Focusing on Collocations

Jimmie Hill, Michael Lewis and Morgan Lewis present general and specific classroom activities, which centre on collocation (2000:98–106). These could easily be incorporated into lessons to raise students' awareness of English word combinations, provide practice and encourage learner autonomy.

- Students read or listen to a text, and they have to find some collocations which centre on a topic.
- Students are given a list of words and they have to find what collocates with them in the text.
- Students have to do a gap-filling collocation exercise based on the text.
- Students have to do a matching exercise based on the collocations which occurred in the text.
- Students have to find the odd one out in a list of words, which can be combined with another word.
- Students are given a word, and they have to brainstorm as many collocates as they can.
- Students get a list of words which collocate with one word; they have to guess the headword.
- Students read a text and then they have to summarise it orally using collocations.
- Students have to translate sentences / short texts containing collocations.
- Students have to spot the errors in a text.

Reference Sources for Classroom Use

There are excellent dictionaries which can develop students' collocational sensitivity:

1. *The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* informs the users on the collocational behaviour of words:

   > Example: Words frequently used with **meaning:**
   > adjectives: *actual, deep, hidden, intended, literal, real, symbolic, true*
   > verbs: *catch, decipher, determine, discover, get, grasp, understand*

2. *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations* is an excellent guide to help students master English collocations:

> Example: **reputation**
>
> 1. to acquire, earn, establish, gain, get a ~ 2. to enjoy, have a ~ (he had the ~ of being a heavy drinker) 3. to guard, protect one's ~ 4. to compromise, blacken, blemish, damage, destroy, ruin, smear, tarnish smb.'s ~ 5. an enviable, excellent, fine, good, impeccable, spotless, unblemished, unsullied, untainted, untarnished ~ 6. a tainted, tarnished, unenviable ~ 7. an international, worldwide; local; national ~ 8. a ~ suffers 9. a ~ as, for (that judge has a ~ for being fair) 10. by ~ (to know smb. by ~) 11. (misc.) to live up to one's ~; to stake one's ~ on smt.

3. The *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* contains over 150,000 collocations helping students speak and write natural-sounding English:

> Example: **education**

ADJ.: decent, excellent, first-class, good | poor | compulsory | formal *Although he had had little formal education, he could read and write well.* | adult, further, higher, pre-school, primary, secondary *a college of further education* | university | professional, vocational | all-round | health, religious, sex | full-time, part-time | public, state | private *parents who choose private education for their children*

> VERB + EDUCATION: have, receive *He was at a disadvantage because of the poor education he had received.* | give sb, provide (sb with) *The school provides an excellent all-round education.*| enter *students entering higher education* | continue, extend *She went on to college to continue her education.* | leave *young people who are just leaving full-time education* | complete, finish *He went to America to complete his education.*
>
> EDUCATION + NOUN: authority, committee, department, ministry, sector, service, system *funds provided by the local education authority* | minister, officer, official | policy | reform | campaign, initiative, programme, project, scheme *The council has launched a new health education*

campaign. | facilities, materials, resources | class, course *adult education courses* | centre, college, establishment, institution

PREP: in ~ *students in full-time education* | through ~ *We acquire much of our world knowledge through education* | ~ about *education about danger on the roads*

4. *The Longman Language Activator* is a revolutionary dictionary, which leads students from a general key word to the exact word or phrase they need. Each entry is followed by usage examples and appropriate collocations:

Example: **mistake**

1. something that is wrong or incorrect, which you do by accident

   mistake, error, slip, mix-up, slip-up, oversight, aberration

2. a mistake in writing or speaking

   mistake, misprint, spelling mistake, slip of the tongue, error

3. an action or plan that is based on very bad judgement, often leading to serious problems

   mistake, miscalculation, misjudgement, error of judgement, be a bad move, blunder, bad tactics

4. to make a mistake

   make a mistake, go wrong, get sth wrong, blunder, goof/goof up, slip up, misjudge

5. a stupid mistake that causes social embarrassment

   put your foot in it, faux pas, gaffe, boob/booboo, indiscretion

6. to deceive someone so that they make a mistake and say something they did not intend to say

   trip sb up, catch sb out

5. Two books entitled *The Words You Need* and *More Words You Need* aim at activating learners' collocational sense by presenting semantic matrices of words:

	weapon	drug	dose of a poison	wounds	danger	combat	enemies	blow	disease	poison	injuries	accident	mistake	step
fatal			+	+							+	+	+	+
deadly								+	+	+				
mortal				+	+	+	+	+	+		+			
lethal	+	+	+											

6. *English Collocations in Use* presents and practices collocations in typical contexts. Each unit focuses on a topic and provides not only the contexts but also several exercises to practice collocations.

Example: **Talking about types of food**

Tom: Kids eat far too much **junk food**.
      Nelly: Yeah, but it's hard to get them to eat **nourishing meals**[1].
They think they're boring.
[1]meals which make you healthy and strong
Fran: Have you tried the new supermarket yet?
      Jim: Yes. The **fresh produce**[2] is excellent, and they have a big **organic food** section.
      Fran: Mm, yes. I actually think their **ready meals**[3] are good too.
      [2]foods produced from farming, e.g. dairy produce, agricultural
       produce
      [3]meals already prepared or which just need to be heated quickly
       before eating
      Liam: I can't believe **food additives**[4] are good for our long-term health.
      Todd: No, and I think **processed foods**[5] in general are probably bad for us, not to mention **GM foods**[6]!
      [4] substances added to food to improve its taste or appearance or to
       preserve it
      [5] foods which are changed or treated as part of an industrial operation
      [6] genetically modified foods
      Gail: The restaurant was leaving **perishable food**[7] lying round outside the fridge, and some people got **food poisoning** so the authorities closed it down.
Terry: Oh dear.
      [7] food which goes bad quickly, e.g. cheese, fish

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