

The Constitutive Role of Collocation in Communicative Competence: A Pedagogic Model for Integrating Collocation in the Curriculum

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Abstract

The pioneering explorations in computational lexicography and corpus linguistics have brought to centre stage the decisive role of collocational competence in enhancing the learners' language proficiency. Collocation or the conventional co-existence of words in a semantic context is a conspicuous feature of the English language and serious collocational deviations in the learners' utterances can impede communication. The inclusion of specifically designed language activities that place great emphasis on the functional aspects of language and the incorporation of authentic texts in the course content are a reflection of this recognition. These insights call for a new pedagogic model that situates language learning within a communicative framework. Key aspects of these curricular interventions will include extensive collocational exposure and illustrations in the course content as well as integrated multiple language-in-use activities. It will also entail the conception of new forms of integrated and graded dictionaries that serve semantic and collocational functions.

Keywords: Collocational Competence; Collocational Constraint; English Language Teaching; Integrated Dictionaries; Pedagogic Model.

Though current pedagogic theories and praxis have disentangled themselves from the deep-set tenets of the structural paradigms, achieved predominantly under the positive impact of functional approaches and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in particular, the constitutive role of collocation has not yet been adequately recognised in the curricular and transactional framework. When the focus was decidedly shifted from the formal properties of language and its general abstractions to the mechanics and subtleties of the processing of language for actual commu-

nication, a conformative reorientation was necessitated in both the curricular content and the methodological approach. This ushered in many pedagogic concepts carrying deep implications for the learning process such as learner autonomy, personalized learning, authentic language for instructional purposes, and communicative contexts. Evidently, all these schemes underscored the enhancement of the communicative competence of the learner, which, according to Finocchiaro and Brumfit, is attained through “interactive communicative use that encourages the negotiation of meaning” (91).

The need for collocational competence is situated within this context where the autonomous learner becomes “more responsible managers of their own learning” (Larsen-Freeman 131) which also compels attention to the fact that a learner’s genuine attempt at a meaningful communication is seriously impeded by intralingual interferences at the semantic level. Challenges confronted by learners from such interferences were explored by William E. Rutherford who located collocation as one of the four key problematic aspects of semantic formation, the other three being verb-argument relations, where a noun/phrase assumes different grammatical functions in relation to the main verb within the same semantic field; lexical properties, evident in synonym categories with contextually-defined semantic variations; and cohesion between lexical items functioning through devices such as hyponymy, anaphora etc. (84-93).

With the growing thrust on communicative competence and the functional aspects of language, the role accorded to the collocational feature of the English language within the ELT curriculum was subjected to a reassessment. That the practitioners of ELT had recognised the pivotal role of collocation in the acquisition of English is reflected in the scholarly works that address the issue. As Jimmie Hill avers, “. . . the current view is that language consists largely of pre-fabricated ‘chunks’ of lexis. The key feature to the formation of these chunks is collocation” (3). Hill further notes,

Any analysis of naturally-occurring text shows how densely collocations occur. While it can be difficult to define the boundaries of a collocation, every text I have analysed has seven out of ten words occurring in some kind of collocation; even a figure of 50% would have serious consequences for comprehension and choice of text. There are immediate classroom implications for how we deal with texts. (3)

Collocation, which is ubiquitously present in all English utterances, is gen-

erally understood as a 'co-location' or co-existence of words in a semantic context, evincing a high degree of predictability in the syntactic structure. Since the co-occurrence of words can be perceived across the whole gamut of expressions and is reinforced through conventional use, it comes to be regarded as an inherent quality of the language, with its natural corollary that serious and frequent deviations from the normative use, made by the learner, are adjudged as instances for inadequate proficiency. How does the collocational feature of English impede the learner's communicative competence? A search into the pedagogic implications of such deviations and the curricular interventions to be designed thereof demand an analysis of how the collocational feature articulates itself at different levels.

Building upon the foundational works of Firth and Halliday computational lexicography and analysis has given a new impetus to research in collocation from the 1980s. John Sinclair, who brought out his *Corpus Concord Collocation* in 1991—a pioneering study in corpus linguistics—envisaged that the rich results yielded by the computational analysis of linguistic components gathered from authentic contexts, would serve as “a database for teachers' reference, a repository of facts about English on which new syllabuses and materials can be based” (78).

Searching into the reasons for the frequent association of words in an individual's use of language, Robert Bley-Vroman cites an interesting and extremely strong instance of collocation from Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Of the total two hundred thousand words of Darwin's book, “. . . over half of the uses of the word *profound* (or *profoundly*) are together with the word *ignorance* (or *ignorant*). Almost all the others refer to the depths of the sea” (209-10). Bley-Vroman explores two possible approaches for the co-occurrence of words as in the case of *profound* and *ignorance* in the text—the first, based on frequency and the second, on meaning. While acknowledging the role of human cognition and the favoured phrases for expressing the communicative intent, he concludes his enquiry by foregrounding the positive correlation between the frequency of occurrence and the intake: “the more often something occurs in the input, the more opportunities there will be for it to be noticed” (213).

What this perception underscores is the fact that the learners' positive exposure through designed opportunities in the curriculum and their active interface with the relevant contexts for optimal 'intake' of useful and frequently employed collocations are highly significant in developing their communicative competence. *The Oxford Collocations Dictionary* elucidates the various advantages of using appropriate collocations in communica-

tion, the most notable merit being their ability to lend precision, force, and vividness to expressions. Individual words, as the *Dictionary* points out, “embrace a whole range of meanings, some quite distinct, and some that shade into each other by degrees. The precise meaning in any context is determined by that context: by the words that surround and combine with the core word—by collocation” (vii).

The implication is that the most appropriate collocation affords maximum clarity and precision. That the collocational competence enhances one’s proficiency and fluency has been established by several studies. Michael McCarthy, for instances, states that “. . . research has shown that knowledge of collocations is a good indication of general ESL proficiency. . . . acquiring collocations is an integral part of acquiring proficiency in the target language.” McCarthy further explains:

Another important point is that, if we had to create every word, one single word after another, every time we speak or write, we could never achieve fluency. Fluency depends on being able to produce combinations of words automatically. Collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms and everyday chunks such as bitterly cold, set off, get rid of and at the moment, are used as ready-made pieces of language. They are not assembled every time we use them; they have ‘addresses’ in our minds that we can access quickly when we need them.

While significantly augmenting the communicative potential of a word, the collocates of the core word can also impose severe constraints in two specific ways in a beginner’s use of English. The first is intrinsic—English offers a narrow range of collocates for many common words due to its highly idiomatic feature. The second issue emerges from the persistent curricular predominance on individual lexis, disregarding its collocational constitution, which leads to the learner’s inadequate repertoire for the communicative purpose. This can be illustrated with any number of examples. Within its collocational field, the noun *promise* can naturally collocate with such verbs as *give*, *make*, *keep*, *fulfill*, and *honour* in an affirmative sense while for a negative denotation, the only verb available in normal use is *break* besides the phrasal verb *go back on*. A more restrictive instance can be found in the noun *fee* for which the user can employ the only verb *pay*, or *remit* which carries the distinct sense of ‘sending money’ or ‘paying a fine’. In other words, the communicative attempt of the learner is hampered by his/her being unacquainted with the collocating verb. What these examples highlight is the fact that unless the learners have noticed

and taken in *pay fee* as a chunk or linguistic unit rather than the words in isolation, their communicative competence and fluency will be seriously hindered. It is this constraint that is at the core of Richards and Schmidt's definition of collocation as referring to "the *restrictions* on how words can be used together, for example which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together" (95).

There are such innumerable words in English where only a single verb or a very limited set of hardly two or three verbs are available for a noun to collocate with. Unless the learning context is conducive to 'noticing' and 'intake' of the collocates of a linguistic unit or the prefabricated chunk, the speaker is most likely to choose a verb that would sound incongruous with the nouns 'fee' and 'promise'. One strategy that learners successfully adopt is to construct a negative sentence with the verb being used in the affirmative sense: *He did not fulfill/keep/honour his promise*. However, this is possible only when an affirmative verb is at hand to express a negative meaning; it cannot work without having the verb 'pay' for 'fee.'

Scholars who have explored the constitutive role of collocational competence in language learning have reiterated the need to lay greater emphasis on this lexical aspect in the ELT curriculum. Zahra Sadeghi, for instance, underscores the significance of teaching collocations in her paper, "Importance of Collocation in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning:" in the following words:

Teachers have therefore made little efforts to help students in their lexical problems. Where the lexical aspect is taught at all, teachers concentrate more on the paradigmatic relations of lexical items (relations of sets of lexical items that belong to the same class and can be substituted for one another in specific grammatical and lexical contexts). Very little attention is paid to the syntagmatic aspect of lexis (ability of items to co-occur, otherwise known as collocation). (1)

However, the traditional assumption that formal grammar should be an exclusive terrain and a major component of the undergraduate curriculum has not been completely dismantled. This is evident in both the list of prescribed books and the content and pattern of the question paper at the tertiary education. These books are most often comprised predominantly of elucidation of grammatical definitions and rules with a meagre attention paid to the actual practice of the language items introduced. Consequently, the need for creating contexts for the development of nec-

essary vocabulary with thrust on its communicative functions is hardly addressed. Hence the possibility of formulating an alternate model that allows for mastering both the functional aspects of grammar and the collocative features of lexis has to be explored. However, this model involves the challenge of creating a confluence of two apparently incongruent components—grammar distinguished by a set of descriptive rules and collocation that is characterised by its arbitrariness. In other words, what is grammatical need not be collocationally or idiomatically acceptable as pointed out in *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*.

Foregrounding the collocational elements within the learning content, devising well-defined pedagogic strategies, integrating collocations-based language activities and practices, and finally, incorporating specially-designed collocations dictionaries into the learning material are proposed as effective methods for enhancing the collocational competence of the learners. Several studies have brought to centre stage the need for raising awareness among the learners about the significant role of collocational competence. For instance, Zaabalawi and Gould argue that “exposure to collocations does lead to a natural inclination to use them appropriately in subsequent novel settings” (22). Their studies posit that “reading texts should be viewed by EFL teachers/practitioners as a source of collocational content” (26). Similarly, Peters and Pauwels have explored the effect of explicit, vocabulary-focused instruction on EFL students’ recognition, output, and spontaneous use of academic formulaic sequences (FS). Their studies have established that instructions and specific types of classroom activity in academic formulaic sequences lead to significant learning gains and promote spontaneous use of FS (28-39).

Redesigning the dictionary as an essential learning material can serve as effective means for achieving the end. Researches in corpus linguistics and lexicography have ushered in many innovative and learner-friendly features in dictionaries in the past decades, the most remarkable one being an elaboration of the illustrative sentences for usage, highlighting collocations, under a prioritized and numbered listing of meanings in each entry. Many dictionaries such as OED also provide exclusive pages or tables for charting the collocates of selected words. However, the conventional dictionaries and the collocations dictionaries still remain almost mutually exclusive categories. In other words, learners have to take recourse to two dictionaries simultaneously—one for gathering the meaning and the other, for locating suitable collocations. What is direly needed is a new kind of dictionary that combines the virtues of both. Integrated and graded dictionaries, catering to these specific requirements of the ESL learners are yet

to be designed and made part of the curriculum. They can significantly enhance the learning experience by providing essential information on each word, including cautionary notes through cross-referencing to other entries to foreground error-prone domains and contrast collocations that are unsuited to a semantic context. The curricular framework must therefore, include such need-specific dictionaries for transactional purpose.

The most significant factor in dealing with collocations is to sensitize students to the need for learning it. Many effective instructional strategies have been suggested for foregrounding the collocational elements. Language activities such as making a regular record of the newly acquired collocations, topic-wise enlisting of useful and frequent collocations, dictionary-based practice sessions, filling-in activities, identifying/chunking together collocating words in a passage, editing for collocational errors, transcreating equivalent collocations in the first language, writing descriptive/narrative passages or dialogues with focus on specific sets of collocations etc can serve to enhance the competence. Highly useful resources are available today that cater to the specific requirements for administering each of the activities cited above. Comprehensive lists of topic-wise or domain-wise collocations are provided by many websites such as the EAP Foundation that offers an Academic Collocation List (ACL) of the most frequently used collocations under specific headwords, developed by [Kirsten Ackermann and Yu-Hua Chen](#) using the Pearson International Corpus of Academic English (Smith).

Recognising the key role of collocational competence in enhancing language proficiency, a new pedagogic model that integrates collocational aspects of the language into the curriculum has to be evolved. It must simultaneously seek to provide exposure to the learners through ample collocational illustrations situated in appropriate contexts and promote multiple language-in-use activities that enable them to navigate confidently through the constraints and possibilities afforded by the collocational feature of the language.

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