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Contrastive Exercises for Teaching Collocations

Summary

It is generally accepted now that learners of a foreign language need to have command of different word combinations, particularly collocations. However, in spite of the fact that collocations have recently been discussed by many linguists, there is still a lack of understanding of how word combinations, and among them collocations, are learned. It is of great importance that collocations are taught intensively to students who have already acquired the basis of a foreign language they wish to master. Collocations are also of the utmost importance in the study of language for specific purposes. Teachers of a foreign language try to approach this issue in different manners. This paper addresses different ways of making students aware of word combinations and their importance. Moreover, teachers of a foreign language are provided with some ideas for teaching collocations and correcting collocational errors students of a foreign language make when they write or speak. Some mistakes made by Slovene speakers of English are listed. The paper also provides some examples of exercises that may be of help when correcting collocational errors made by Slovene speakers of English. Finally, there is some information about different types of dictionaries.

Key words: foreign language teaching, contrastive approach, collocations.

Vaje za poučevanje kolokacij

Povzetek

Danes se jezikoslovci na splošno strinjajo, da je pri učenju tujega jezika zelo pomembno, da obvladamo različne besedne zveze, posebej kolokacije. Čeprav so kolokacije v zadnjem času pogosto predmet obravnave v različnih člankih in raziskavah, pa še vedno ne vemo zagotovo, kako se jih v tujem jeziku naučimo. Kolokacije so posebej pomembne tudi pri učenju jezika stroke, saj predstavljajo velik del besedišča pri posameznih strokah. Poučevanja kolokacij se učitelji tujega jezika lotevamo na različne načine. V tem prispevku so opisani nekateri načini poučevanja kolokacij s posebnim poudarkom na odpravljanju napak, ki so tipične za slovenske govorce angleščine. Na koncu je tudi kratka informacija o slovarjih, ki so nam na razpolago.

Ključne besede: poučevanje tujega jezika, kontrastivni pristop, kolokacije.

Contrastive Exercises for Teaching Collocations

1. Introduction

I would like to start this article by pointing out that different word combinations pose different problems for non-native speakers. On the one hand, there are idioms, fixed word combinations, which might be difficult to decode, translate from a foreign language into the mother tongue since they are semantically opaque and the words they consist of usually do not retain their literal meanings. When we say *It's raining cats and dogs* we do not speak about cats and dogs but a heavy downpour. However, it must be added that idioms are not very often found in the language of native speakers. On the other hand, there are collocations, recurrent loosely fixed word combinations in which words more or less retain their literal meanings. The expression *a whirlwind tour* is not the only word combination in which the word *tour* occurs. On the contrary, there are numerous expressions in which we can find this word: we can say *a foreign/international/national/overseas/world/city tour* or simply *tour* and similarly the first word can be found in other word combinations or on its own. In the process of decoding, most collocations do not create serious problems for non-native speakers since we can to a certain extent rely on the meanings of individual words. Nevertheless, this cannot be said for the process of encoding, translating from our mother tongue into a foreign language. When non-native speakers do not know a particular collocation in a foreign language they are also ignorant as to whether this collocation consists of the predictable translational equivalents of the words in the collocation in their mother tongue. Let me illustrate this with the following examples. Slovene speakers of English sometimes speak about *sea water* and **sweet water*; the first collocation is correct, whereas the second one is wrong because of the simple fact that in English another collocation expresses the same meaning as the Slovene collocation *sladka voda*. If you look up the individual words in a Slovene-English dictionary, everything is clear, *sladka* is *sweet* and *voda* is *water*, so the translation you come up with should be correct. It would be, of course, if it were not a collocation that is different in English, where native speakers would never think of using it; they say *fresh water*. While students of tourism very often speak about *a freshwater lake in Fiesa (Slovenia)*, its water sometimes erroneously becomes *sweet*. More mistakes made by Slovene speakers of English stemming from the cross-linguistic influence are: **typical for (typical of)*, **to cook coffee (to make coffee)*, **to go on coffee (to have a cup of coffee)*, **interested for (interested in)*, **good in (good at)*, **allergic on (allergic to)*, **married with (married to)*, **depend of (depend on)*. Gabrošek (1998, 129) mentions some more interesting examples, such as **a clock shows time (a clock tells time)*, **a high age (an advanced age)*, **angel guardian (guardian angel)*.

In this article I am not going to focus on the reason why collocational mistakes are made by non-native speakers, but rather on some ways of making students of a foreign language aware of the fact that collocations can be different in different languages and that we simply have to learn them. I have chosen collocations for the simple reason that they are very common and difficult to learn.

2. Collocations

Firth (1957, 181) wrote that: “Collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word in collocational order but not in any other contextual order and emphatically not in any grammatical order. The collocation of a word or a ‘piece’ is not to be regarded as mere juxtaposition; it is an order of *mutual expectancy*. The words are mutually expectant and mutually prehended”. And since he said that “You shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth 1957, 179), many linguists have been sharing an interest in collocations.

To have a clearer understanding of the individual types of collocations, I quote Benson, who writes in the introduction to *Dictionary of English Word Combinations* (Benson et al. 1997, xv): “In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called *recurrent combinations*, *fixed combinations*, or *collocations*. Collocations fall into two major groups: *grammatical collocations* and *lexical collocations*.”

Grammatical collocations are combinations of a dominant word and a preposition or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause, for example *account for*, *accuse (somebody) of*, *adapt to*, *agonize over*, *aim at*; and further, the words cannot be replaced by other words, for example **account over* or **accuse somebody on*.

Benson et al. (ibid, xvi) list eight types of grammatical collocations:

- noun + preposition, for example *apathy towards*,
- noun + to infinitive, for example *an attempt to do something*,
- noun + that clause, for example *an agreement that he should*,
- preposition + noun, for example *by accident*,
- adjective + preposition, for example *fond of*,
- predicate adjective + to infinitive, for example *necessary to work*,
- adjective + that clause, for example *afraid that*,
- verb patterns, for example *send something to somebody*,

and seven types of lexical collocations:

- verb + noun/pronoun, for example *make an impression*,
- verb meaning essentially eradication or nullification + noun,
for example *reject an appeal*,
- adjective + noun, for example *strong/weak tea*,
- noun + verb, for example *alarms go off/ring/sound*,
- noun indicating a unit + noun, for example *a pride of lions*,
- adverb + adjective, for example *strictly accurate* and
- verb + adverb, for example *amuse thoroughly*.

This is just one possible classification of collocations; many authors have come up with different types. In the introduction to the recently published *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2002) we find the following types: adjective + noun (*bright light*), qualifier + noun (*a beam of light*), verb + noun (*shed light*), noun + verb (*light gleams*), noun + noun (*a light source*), preposition + noun (*by the light of the moon*), noun + preposition (*the light from the window*), adverb + verb (*choose carefully*), verb + verb (*be free to choose*), verb + preposition (*choose between two things*), verb + adjective (*declare something safe*), adverb + adjective (*environmentally safe*), adjective + preposition (*safe from attack*), short phrases including the headword (*the speed of light, safe and sound*).

Though I do not find such classifications of paramount importance, it is useful to read them to get an impression of what type of word combinations are commonly considered to be collocations.

3. Teaching collocations

Why teach collocations to students of a foreign language at all? After all, many linguists agree that using wrong collocations does not cause a communicational breakdown. It might occasionally sound funny, but speakers still make themselves understood. Nevertheless, knowing and using right collocations brings non-native speakers closer to native speakers of the language and enables them to say precisely what they mean, not to mention the fact that language for specific purposes consists of numerous collocations typical of that particular field. Consider the following collocations: *a(n) direct/easy/free/wheelchair access, a human-made/major/natural/tourist attraction, a confirmed/provisional booking, a sightseeing/courtesy bus, airport/dining/eating/hotel/room facilities, a tourist/tour guide, off-peak/shoulder months, a honey-pot site, acquired taste, the high/low season, dry/wet lease, a chartered/scheduled/domestic flight, a bucket-and-spade/package holiday, to audit/close/open/settle an account, to satisfy/whet somebody's appetite, to cater for customers/tourists, to protect/clean up/preserve/pollute the environment, to allocate a room/seat, to fill/ have a vacancy, to check/claim one's luggage, to notify the next of kin, a pre-arranged/tentative itinerary, out of/(with)in sight, typical of, on offer, recommend highly/strongly, to travel widely/light, fully/highly qualified, a leg/stretch of a journey, in the lap of luxury, next of kin*. There are just some of the examples of collocations typical of the language of tourism (Čeh 2001, 91–112). Furthermore, language for specific purposes is a very important knowledge area students need and expect to acquire at tertiary institutions that they are attending (Jurković 2002, 113).

Generally speaking, teaching collocations means also (Lewis 2000, 13) furthering the understanding of what words mean and how they are used, recycling half-known words, accelerating learning and bringing useful collocations to students' attention.

For students of tourism this means knowing the language of tourism.

To begin with, collocations are everywhere: in the videos we watch, the course books we use, the texts we read and listen to. We just have to pay attention and maybe change the

way we approach the text. Instead of asking students whether there are any words they do not understand, we should call their attention to word combinations, to words they already know, but do not know how to combine with other words. Collocations also prove to be very useful when we try to explain the differences between words. Instead of explaining different meanings, we can come up with different collocations of individual words. The difference between two words does not always lie in dictionary definitions but in collocational fields (Lewis 2000, 13). For example, *wound* and *injury*.

Bahns (1993, 109) says that collocations should be taught and that a learner's knowledge of collocations does not develop parallel to their knowledge of vocabulary. Howarth (1998, 35) investigated the use of collocations by native speakers in comparison to non-native speakers and came to the conclusion that native speaker collocational density was 38%, whereas the percentage with non-native speakers was 25%, ranging from as little as 13% up to 33%. Howarth writes that there is no clear evidence of a direct correlation between overall language proficiency and accurate use of collocations; proficient learners might make even more errors, blending parts of different collocations.

In my own, not so distant past, any dealing with an authentic text in the classroom was followed by my question whether there were any words students did not understand. Recently I have been asking if students have noticed any useful phrases. After listening or reading we collect useful chunks of language, not only collocations but all ready-made pieces they can retrieve later on when they speak or write. After watching a video about national parks we were able to collect the following extremely useful chunks of language: *two main purposes of national parks, conservation of the landscape, promotion of the area for public enjoyment, the national park was designated in 1929, there are several honey-pot sites, prevent erosion, reinforce the river banks, the clash between local population and visitors, traffic congestion, build footpaths, prevent pollution*, etc.

In the course book (Čeh 2003, 10) each listening or reading activity is followed by a list of prefabricated chunks of language from the authentic texts and students are encouraged to add as many as they can remember. There are also numerous exercises with collocations, such as matching, filling in the blanks, and grouping. Also the words that are listed in exercises are later on used in collocations and larger chunks of language.

4. Contrastive approach

However, such collocational exercises were just the beginning. Subsequently I realised that as a teacher of the foreign language I was supposed to deal with the mistakes that students repeatedly made in their writing or speaking. I started collecting them and including them in new exercises. Over time it became obvious that it would be irrational to limit the choice to collocations only and I included other types of word combinations as well. I wanted to put word combinations in context and since I hated separate sentences I asked my friend who is a native speaker of English to help me produce short passages of text, the mistakes in which the

students are expected to correct. This is usually done in groups and students are encouraged to come to grips with the text by means of collocational dictionary or any other dictionary that might be helpful.

A typical example of such exercises would be the following two texts that are given to students for correction.

This is the paper I give to my students:

Is there a better way of saying it?

Cruising was before thought of as a holiday you take just one time in your life.

It now competes with holidays that include more components and when you buy it you really get what you paid for.

You must not forget that it is a holiday that includes all meals.

Cruise companies give passengers food of good quality and you can usually get it at any time.

Another reason for the fact that cruising is becoming more popular is that you can choose between different offers.

There are cruises to each country of the world offering what different age groups want to buy.

More and more tourists want to buy cruises which offer something to people with a particular interest.

They organize lectures on a ship and they include different topics.

You do not have to pay extra to attend lectures.

It is now possible to choose between so many different topics that it is important to choose carefully.

Luxurious boats will take you to many different places tourists go to.

All cabins have their own bathroom and air-condition.

Cruise ships usually offer outside swimming-pools and also some other equipment.

The picture most people have of cruising has changed very much.

And this is an example of how my students should correct the text:

Cruising was formerly thought of as a once-in-a-lifetime holiday.

It now competes with package holidays for value for money.

You have to bear in mind that it is a full board holiday.

Cruise companies provide quality food usually available round the clock.

Another reason for the growing popularity of cruising is the choice on offer.

There are cruises all over the world catering for all age groups.

There is a growing demand for special interest cruises.

They organize lectures on board which cover a wide range of topics.

Lectures are free of charge.

The choice is now so wide that it is important to select carefully.

Luxurious boats will take you to numerous holiday resorts.

All cabins have en-suite facilities and air conditioning.

Cruise ships usually offer outdoor swimming-pools as well as some other facilities.

The cruising picture has changed dramatically.

And another example of a different exercise:

Fill in the blanks.

I'd like to introduce you to my friend who studies with me because she is interested _____ catering. She is good _____ combining recipes which are typical _____ the different regions in our country. She is also aware _____ the different needs of our potential customers who might be allergic _____ a variety of ingredients. She considers herself fortunate because she is married _____ a chef who works the same unsociable hours as she does. How they spend their free time depends _____ the season. They are both keen _____ outdoor activities, in the winter they go cross-country skiing and in the summer diving.

A thorough analysis of the mistakes students make might show that most of them are made because of the collocations in the Slovene language and this is why I call this approach contrastive. As I have mentioned earlier, I do not aim to analyse the reasons for mistakes, but rather to help students correct them.

In order to be able to use different types of dictionaries students need to be given some basic information about them. Bilingual dictionaries often do not prove to be very helpful when looking up word combinations (we are looking forward to the publication of the new Slovene-English dictionary as it is expected that many more collocations will be included in it). Since unfortunately there is no bilingual collocational dictionary available for Slovene speakers of English, we use English dictionaries of collocations. The problem with monolingual collocational dictionaries is that they were written for "everybody" and not for any particular group of speakers of the language. Slovene speakers of English are often unable to find in the English collocational dictionary the collocations that are difficult for them. The problem is further compounded when the user starts looking up word combinations typical of the language for specific purposes. Logically many of them are not included since the dictionary is not meant to cover that particular field completely.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that collocations are a very important feature in languages. In order to be able to express ourselves accurately and precisely, we have to learn, apart from the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language, word combinations, particularly collocations. Unlike some other word combinations such as idioms, collocations are used all the time by native speakers. They are very difficult for a non-native speaker to learn, since in some of them words may be replaced and in others not. One of the tasks of a foreign language teacher is to make students aware of the importance of collocations, encourage them to study collocations and help them find appropriate and efficient ways of doing so.

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