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TEACHING COLLOCATIONS: A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

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Abstract

The focus of the present article is to investigate the role of teaching collocations in raising foreign language proficiency. Students of English as a Foreign Language are facing a variety of problems (overuse of general, delexicalized words; misuse of collocations by neglecting word combinability; tendency of using fancy and complicated words not frequently used by native speakers) that make their speech non-nativelike. One major problem is the lack of appropriate vocabulary which could be related to the ignorance of a subset of formulaic sequences – topical collocations which is one of key aspects enabling native speakers to be fluent. Thus, pedagogical principles have been outlined aimed at raising awareness about collocations and helping students to internalize the acquired units, language learners' attitudes towards the phenomenon of collocation in the process of foreign language learning have been obtained.

Keywords: collocation, noticing, collocation awareness, collocational competence, authenticity, learner-centered approach.

КОЛЛОКАЦИЯЛЫҚ ОҚЫТУ: ОҚУШЫҒА БАҒДАРЛАНДЫРЫЛҒАН ӘДІС

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Аңдатпа

Мақаланың мақсаты – шет тілін меңгеру деңгейін арттырудағы коллокацияларды оқытудың рөлін зерттеу. Ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде оқытын студенттердің сөйлеу тілі ана тіліне ұқсамайтын әртүрлі мәселелерге тап болады. Негізгі мәселелердің бірі – формулярлық тізбектердің ішкі жиынын білмеумен байланысты болуы мүмкін тиісті сөздіктің болмауы – бұл ана тілінде сөйлейтіндерге еркін сөйлеуге мүмкіндік беретін негізгі аспектілердің бірі. Осылайша, эксперименталды зерттеу барысында оқушылардың тіркестерді білу деңгейін арттыруға болатын педагогикалық принциптер тұжырымдалған, бұл өз кезегінде бұл бірліктерді меңгеруге көмектеседі. Студенттердің шет тілін меңгеру үдерісіндегі «коллокация» тілдік құбылысы туралы рефлексиясы ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: сөз тіркестері, тану, коллокацияны білу, коллокация құзыреттілігі, түпнұсқалық, тұлғаға бағытталған тәсіл.

ОБУЧЕНИЕ СЛОВСОЧЕТАНИЯМ: ЛИЧНОСТНО-ОРИЕНТИРОВАННЫЙ ПОДХОД

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Аннотация

В центре внимания настоящей статьи находится исследование роли обучения словосочетаниям в повышении уровня владения иностранным языком. Изучающие английский язык как иностранный

сталкиваются с множеством проблем, которые делают их речь менее аутентичной, то есть не подобной речи носителей языка. Одной из основных проблем является отсутствие соответствующего словарного запаса, что может быть связано с незнанием словосочетаний, которые являются одними из ключевых элементов, позволяющих носителям языка свободно говорить. Таким образом, в ходе экспериментального исследования были сформулированы педагогические принципы, которые могут быть использованы для повышения осведомленности учащихся о словосочетаниях, что в свою очередь поможет им при усвоении данных единиц. Предлагается рефлексия учащихся относительно языкового явления «коллокация» в процессе изучения иностранного языка.

Ключевые слова: словосочетания, узнавание, коллокационная осведомленность, коллокационная компетенция, аутентичность, личностно-ориентированный подход.

Introduction

The starting point for this investigation was classroom observations which showed that language learners often have particular problems with word combinations, even at a relatively advanced level. The study conducted by D. Brown investigated nine General English textbooks with regard to the aspects of vocabulary knowledge they give attention to. It was found that the textbooks give most attention to form and meaning, then grammatical functions, then spoken form, while such aspect as collocations receive not much of attention [1, p.94].

Collocation is a crucial aspect of language learning as it helps learners understand how words go together to convey meaning. M. Lewis stressed its importance by stating that both native speakers and advanced learners of a foreign language have a significant phrasal mental lexicon, or “collocational competence”, which allows them to use language fluently and appropriately [2, p.177]. Therefore, this type of language competence provides cognitive processing advantages when producing utterance and is essential for using language fluently to achieve nativelike mastery. Thus, according to N.C. Ellis, language learners need to know formulaic language, in particular collocations [3]. Moreover, use of effective formulaic language helps to achieve communicative purpose – communicate a message. Therefore, nativelike selection of expressions including collocations or under- or mis-use of these word combinations can reveal how proficient a user of English is.

In recent decades, researches conducted in the field of vocabulary learning have shown that knowledge of collocations by second language learners (L2 learners) is lower than that of native speakers, with L2 learners often misusing these combinations and making many mistakes [4]. For instance, some typical errors include saying “hard wind” instead of “harsh or strong wind”; “make homework” instead of “do homework”; “cook a cake” instead of “make a cake”. Most intermediate-level English language learners lack collocational competence, this, in turn, may result in three general problems in their language production. To begin with, learners may have difficulty producing longer phrases and utterances due to a lack of necessary collocations to express their thoughts in target language accurately and to the point. Furthermore, their “English” may sound strange or not authentic since learners use the word combinations which are the same as their mother tongue’s translation equivalent. Finally, learners may overuse general words, leading to an oversimplified language, for example “deal with problems” instead of “face / tackle / address problems” or, for example, overuse the delexical verbs such as “get” instead of using strong collocations like “obtain information / consent / permission” [5, p. 51]. Linguists such as A. Adel and B. Erman, B. Laufer and T. Waldman believe that, in general, language learners do not know collocations because they were not made aware of them, so they have to make use of strategies, such as the use of synonyms, paraphrasing or avoidance [6, 7]. However, just asking learners to pay attention to collocations does not seem to be that effective and enough for them to utilize them in their speaking and writing.

Another quite common way for acquiring collocations seems to be extensive exposure. Even though exposure is important, but the kind of high-quality engagement with language is that what makes difference while learning and acquiring collocations. To ensure this engagement, teachers should create a conducive environment, where learners notice and are able to implement collocations in their speech in target language for meaningful and pleasurable communication.

Pedagogical principles in collocation learning

To address the problem stated in the introduction, pedagogical principles have been formulated to assist a group of EFL learners with their collocation learning.

Pedagogical principles include:

1. Raising learners' awareness of important language features, particularly collocations, by encouraging them to notice topical collocations in weekly theme-based readings or other input sources. At this point the role of a teachers is to help learners understand the reasons for and meaning of learning collocations. This, in turn, activates learners' noticing – a starting level of awareness of specific features in the target language input [8].

2. Making learners acquire noticed collocations using a variety of strategies tailored to their individual learning styles to promote effective learning. At this point in the learning process, learners have the opportunity to cultivate a more profound level of cognitive awareness by utilizing different strategies to thoroughly process the language features they have noticed in the input, thus having a greater chance of internalizing target collocations.

3. Having learners reflect on their learning experience and content and make necessary adjustments to improve their learning. Metacognitive awareness of their learning process enables language learners to become more autonomous in their learning in the long run.

4. Demonstrating what has been learned by using as many topical collocations as possible that learners have noticed and internalized. Of course topical collocations are not bound to a particular topic but can be used in discussing different spheres of life.

The principles discussed above are learner-centered, that is language learners should not only grasp the purpose of what they are learning (learning content – collocations) but also actively engage themselves in the learning process (learner's role) by choosing strategies that work best for them.

Research methods

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of learners' perceptions and utilization of the principles described above in collocation learning. The study involved 16 young adult English learners who participated in four-week experimental study. These learners had reached an intermediate proficiency level, so they were capable of producing generally grammatically correct sentences but with a vocabulary lacking nativelike word combinations.

A qualitative methodology was employed to explore selected cases of learners' perspectives on collocation learning and their actual practices during the learning process. The students were interviewed at the beginning and end of the language program.

The study is focused on two main research questions:

1. How do participants respond to implementation of the pedagogical principles and perceive collocation learning process?

2. What difficulties or problems do they face during the process, and why do they find them challenging?

Results of research

The findings will be presented regarding students' thoughts on their collocation learning process based on the described principles. Additionally, the study will report and discuss the difficulties and problems students encountered during the learning process.

Learners admitted that they were vaguely aware of collocations in their previous learning experience, as they expanded their vocabulary mainly by learning new separate words.

Even when some of the students felt that they learned something similar to what was called collocation, such as phrasal verbs, they generally memorized them by following a word/phrasal list offered by the teachers and they were tested on these items. Most of them reported that they had not been guided to notice and pay attention to collocations to enhance their awareness of them in language input. Some students also pointed out that common word combinations were easily comprehensible, and therefore they did not pay attention to these combinations but focused more on those things that they did not know: they felt that they were learning new things by paying attention to the unknown words.

Student 4, for example, said that *‘before the course I have never heard of a collocation’*.

Student 11 also pointed out that *‘It was not until I attended this course that I got to know about collocation learning.’*

Student 2 said that *‘I did not know the importance of collocation learning, so I did not pay attention to it.’*

Student 8 said that she did not know the word collocation before. She learned similar things such as phrases, but basically by remembering the phrases *‘teacher gave us’*.

Without the emphasis on raising learners’ awareness of collocations in the learning process, they would not have realized on their own the need to pay attention to this aspect of language. However, during the experimental study, where collocations were taught and emphasized, all students were able to develop a heightened awareness of collocations. Some students noted that after a while, they couldn’t help but notice these multiword combinations outside the classroom while reading, listening to podcasts or songs, and watching films or TV series. It can be stated that the awareness of collocations was successfully enhanced in all students participating in the program through noticing strategies. Some of the strategies the students were being equipped with are mentioned hereinafter. Language learners usually know separate words but could not figure out the meaning of the word combinations they are being part of, for example, *in the long run, no big deal* etc. Therefore, students should be prompted to have a closer look at this type of collocations.

Noticing unexpected collocations is a useful strategy because producing such unexpected collocations may lead to interference error, though learners might not be aware of any potential problems in transferring an L1 collocation to L2, for example, *heavy rain, strong chance, immediate future, remote possibility*. “I wouldn’t say so” is another quite effective strategy, it helps language learners to add to their repertoire some natural, nativelike collocations. For example, learners are unlikely to produce in speech something like: “As a side effect he developed a rash”; instead they will probably say: “As a side effect he got a rash”. Indeed, both expressions are correct but being able to show a great range of vocabulary and not just relying on using delexical verbs such as “get” or “have” is a quality of a literate and well-rounded person. B. Laufer found that, independently from their proficiency level, learners produced non-conventionalized, idiosyncratic collocations when compared to natives [4]. Of course, there are some other strategies that learners have been acquainted with; however, ways to recognize collocations in texts (here we imply any text, typed or audio) should not overwhelm students and equipping them with the strategies should be reasonably implemented in a learning process.

Discussion

Most of the interviewed foreign language learners while reflecting have come to realize that knowledge of collocations can greatly benefit them in their attempts to achieve high proficiency in L2. They found really helpful the tips how to make record of the collocations

they encountered while doing reading or listening activities. How to make notes of the words that commonly go together depends on the lesson aim. For instance, the topic of one of the lessons being taught was “Milestones”, so students had to think of some major decisions people make in their lives. Here students were asked to come up with connected vocabulary. The point of that activity was to elicit some collocations they already might know. By common effort the following was generated: *major decisions: move house, change a career, start a family, give up smoking*. Next learners were asked to study the collocates of the word “decision” itself.

During whole class feedback students gave such collocations as *make/ arrive at a decision; regret my decision; a major/life-changing/difficult decision*. There was also the text about a young man sharing his process of making serious decisions in his life. Students were asked to read it and complete the diagram “Decision making process”. This was a great opportunity for them to notice some useful collocations on the given topic. The outcome of the task were stages of decision making: *“Making decisions” – analyze the situation->look at the options->make a list of pros and cons->weigh up the pros and cons->ask for advice->consider the consequences->make up my mind->change my mind*. This post-reading task aimed at noticing some great vocabulary – versatile collocations yet connected to the topic above – is aligned with outlined principles. Not only did the task help students to notice target collocations and put in order the stages of making decisions but it further encouraged them to speak at length about their own decisions as the diagram and written collocations were a starting point of their personal answers. Even in one lesson several ways of writing down collocations were provided: make a list of connected vocabulary (also collocations), write typical collocates of the word (like with word “decision”), and write the stages of the process. There are also other ways how to organize notes on collocations (topic collocations, visuals, word webs, in line).

Indeed, any exposure and engagement with collocations is vitally important and language learners after becoming aware of what is a collocation and how to approach them – notice them, decide which to choose, write them out, group them or organize them in word webs or other possible forms should further make collocations as a part of their mental lexicon by learning them through spaced repetition. Of course it is a teacher’s job to help students learn and acquire collocations but without self-study language learning including work on collocations would not be sufficient.

Conclusion

From the interview data we learned that learners’ collocation awareness could be successfully enhanced through pedagogical intervention. Adopted pedagogical principles have proved to be viable. Under proper guidance provided and practice opportunities given throughout the experimental study, the majority of students were able to manage their collocation learning independently; they actively employed strategies that suited themselves and made adjustments to their learning based on what they thought worked well or what did not. The students also expressed satisfaction with their improved understanding of the relationship between words and their usage in a broader context. In conclusion, the study suggests that learner-centered pedagogical principles are useful and effective for teaching collocations. In addition, teachers need to be mindful of individual learner needs and consider modifying the outlined principles according to learners’ needs and abilities.

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