

Recent Research on L2 Vocabulary Collocations Acquisition. What are the Implications for Language Teaching?

Wei Qin Wang

Department of English and American Literature, Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract: In recent years, the study of vocabulary collocations has provided a new perspective for second language acquisition, and has inspired English learning. Mastering collocations of different words has many good impacts on the use of the second language. The major theme of this paper is learning and teaching lexical collocations, which is helpful to second language acquisition. It includes various methods and activities aimed at raising students' and educators' awareness of their existence in different English environments, and at the same time intensifying the importance of grasping frequently used collocations of words. The purpose of this research is to specify the vocabulary collocations and their acquisition, to clarify the great effects of studying vocabulary collocations, to showcase specific teaching strategies of collocations that can be utilized in a variety of contexts, and to give implications for language teaching in English reading, listening, speaking and writing skills for young and adult learners when they study collocations in the English language classroom.

Keywords: English Learning; L2 acquisition; Teaching Strategies; Vocabulary Collocations.

1. Introduction

When it comes to second language acquisition, learning a lot of vocabulary is of great significance for students to improve and enhance their language proficiency. There are various kinds of vocabulary. According to the part of speech, they can be categorized as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions and quantifiers and so forth. Among these words, they do not occur singly, but often appear together to convey certain meaning in different circumstances. This set of vocabulary can be regarded as collocations. The first section of this paper will introduce the acquisition of vocabulary collocations, then followed by teaching useful collocations.

Loewen (2020) mentioned that English learners do not necessarily need to understand the grammatical rules when they produce groups of words like chunks or phrases in the appropriate context. In other words, lexical collocations are the usual phenomenon in daily English expressions that can be used implicitly without learners' awareness to improve their fluency. Nevertheless, collocations can also be explicit because they may be instructed directly in certain formulaic forms. Ma (2009) pointed out that formulaic sequences are two or more word collocations or complete utterances, expressing a single meaning or a specific function. For example, collocations like "how are you doing" used to greet someone might make interaction more successful. Common formulaic forms contain idioms, phrasal verbs, stable collocations and some other longer strings of words, such as "Achilles' heel", "come on", "here we are", "as far as I'm concerned", etc. From this point of view, collocations could be the definite and stored knowledge in the brain that would be supplied for speakers to use. This not only helps young learners but also older generations to save their efforts on psychological processing and produce the second language confidently. It will be discussed in more detail later that centers on practical strategies and instructional implications for different kinds of L2 learners.

2. Vocabulary Collocations

There are multiple types of collocations by virtue of combining different kinds of words. As Rao (2018) mentioned, lexical collocations mainly contain the combination of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs etc. The most commonly used vocabulary collocations include seven categories, namely, "adverb + adjective", "adjective + noun", "noun + noun", "noun + verb", "verb + noun", "verb + expression with preposition" and "verb + adverb". Take the type of adverb + adjective collocation as an example, English-speaking people often use "absolutely delighted", "bitterly disappointed", "reasonably happy", "really amazing", "terribly disappointing", "eternally grateful" and "desperately eager" to express their emotion and emphasize the degree of the adjective. In this sense, if non-native English speakers know these frequent collocations, they might be able to speak English more naturally, fluently as well as accurately.

3. Vocabulary Collocations Acquisition

In the wake of the viewpoints mentioned above, it goes without saying that learning vocabulary collocations serves as a great strategy to help English learners to acquire a second language. Through this process, learners can utilize formulaic chunks, often use collocations as well as frequency-based word lists to expand their vocabulary knowledge in specific domains. For example, more frequently used words "take" often occur with prepositions like "take up", "take on", "take down" and "take over". If learners study and produce these frequent words, it will help them to acquire a lot of words in the form of "take + preposition" in different contexts. Therefore, learning vocabulary collocations is an inseparable component of second vocabulary acquisition. Benefits are manifold when students study collocations, especially in the aspect of improving their language use. First of all, provided that learners grasp some special and fixed types of English collocations, they might be capable of communicating better

in English. For example, idiomatic expressions tend to depend on specific collocations, so comprehending these definable collocations will help second language learners grasp and use these expressions naturally. Additionally, if students use English collocations, such as adverbial adjective collocations, their ideas will be expressed with greater force. Because large amounts of adverbs are used as modification of adjectives and are typically seen as intensifiers to emphasize the degree of the strength of adjectives in various meanings (Morzycki, 2008). Specifically, English adverbs have the stance-marking function when they collocate with different adjectives. Plenty of adverbs in common use, such as “absolutely, actually, extremely, totally, really, awfully, so, very, most, quite etc.,” (Rhee, 2016, p.396) share the function of marking the speaker’s stance of emphasis. For instance, the sentence “I’m absolutely angry, it’s such a senseless thing.” The adverb “absolutely” collocates with the adjective “angry” to denote the highly subjective meaning of the mad emotion. Moreover, the acquisition of collocations underpins vocabulary retention in the long run. Learning vocabulary as an aspect of collocational unit produces stronger mental associations, making it easier to remember and retrieve these words when needed (Rao, 2018). For instance, “thoroughly enjoyable” is likely to be more memorable and easier to recall than the words “thoroughly” and “enjoyable” occurring separately. This collocation learning also promotes faster language acquisition, as more than one word can be identified and grasped. Specifically, learners not simply acquire the adverb, but the adjective and the like at the same time.

Furthermore, apart from the oral part, taking advantage of vocabulary collocations would also be helpful to improve learners’ writing sophistication. Hasselgård (2022) showed that studying the frequency of adverb-adjective combinations, the evidence of the greater variation in the collocations can be discovered in the writers’ compositions. It means that knowing a variety of vocabulary collocations can add beauty and elegance to the writing ability, rather than boring repetition of words. Hence, the acquisition of lexical collocations is of significance to the development of second language learners’ proficiency in both their speaking and writing proficiency.

The effects of vocabulary learning draw upon the connection between collocation and meaning (Webb & Kagimoto, 2009). Acquiring vocabulary collocations is an approach to form-meaning mapping. That is to say, learners should associate particular semantic concepts with definite forms, which can be some specific types of collocations. This form-meaning mapping is indispensable since it allows second language learners to understand and use language more efficiently. Take the Chinese English teaching as an example. Students sometimes use the word part of their knowledge to figure out the meaning. The collocation serves as one category of the word information. For instance, when it comes to the collocation “shine brightly”, shine indicates emitting light or being bright, while brightly is derived from the adjective “bright”. From one component of the collocation, students will probably be able to deduce that such a collocation means emitting light with high brightness or intensity. It is noticeable that the significant information about brand-new vocabulary for the learners is the form, and matching it with the word meaning. Therefore, for vocabulary acquisition, what is crucial for learners is the form-meaning mapping, namely, matching the form and meaning. Form refers to the special phonological or orthographic form, like

pronunciation or spelling, while meaning relates to comprehension of the word. Accordingly, collocations act as the form usually convey certain meanings with nuanced and contextually appropriate expressions. In the second language acquisition context, it might be enough to make students aware of the importance of learning collocations, and to instruct them to notice words that regularly appear together in context. This method might, in turn, lead to incidental gains. However, mere awareness of collocations is only one step in vocabulary acquisition. Teachers are supposed to use effective methods to guide learners to learn the second language smoothly.

4. Collocations Teaching Strategies

The following section will discuss the strategies for teaching vocabulary collocations. There are several kinds of teaching approaches, while choosing appropriate ways to help learners truly grasp vocabulary collocation requires careful consideration and efficient practice. From this point of view, teaching collocations needs targeted strategies instead of just one-way instruction. Normally, a great deal of exposure to vocabulary is a method to learn collocations. In this sense, educators should call on students to carry out extensive reading that might enable them to accept relevant knowledge of collocations like structure and meaning. As Laufer & Hulstijn (2001) mentioned, careful attention to vocabulary’s formal and semantic characteristics is a contributory factor to its retention. For young students, teachers can utilize picture books that contain various collocations. Such students will notice words that go together when they read and understand the vocabulary via vivid images. For instance, looking at the picture of people with their eyes closed in bed, the collocation “fall asleep” could be grasped easily by such young learners. While for adults, educators should select passages that include lots of collocations in accordance with different themes, such as sport, weather, study, travel, shopping, etc., and then encourage learners to read and understand these words in a specific context.

Nevertheless, reading is not the only way for students to learn vocabulary. Many researchers lay stress on reading, while the other three skills, namely, listening, speaking and writing are also significant in the course of vocabulary instruction and acquisition (Schmitt, 2020). Hence, teachers need to take a variety of strategies according to these skills so as to cater to the learning needs of students at different stages. When it comes to listening, it refers to input and receptive vocabulary knowledge, like reading, which can be seen as explicit information. In other words, the more one is exposed to collocations, the more likely it is that one will master that knowledge. From the perspective of children, taking advantage of rhymes, songs and stories that include several collocations serves as a relaxing way for students to acquire lexical collocations. Thanks to the advancement of technology, people are free to access listening materials, so educators should utilize such resources wisely to help young students gain L2 input through enjoying the elegant poems, beautiful musics as well as interesting stories. For example, a story relates to adventure that stresses “take a risk” and “take chances”, so young students might acquire such collocations in a fascinating atmosphere. From the point of view of adult learners, audio materials and podcasts could be used to instruct them to learn collocations. Teachers are supposed to choose authentic and native English listening resources to let students find the collocations they heard. Wei

(1999) described that one of the most helpful methods of teaching collocations is posing challenges to students. Adults have more mature minds and higher proficiency in learning, so they need to take notes during listening and do exercises, such as gap-filling activities (completing blanks with the right collocations) after listening. These tasks could stimulate their consciousness to identify collocations and grasp their usages.

Admittedly, incidental exposure and receptive vocabulary knowledge might be relatively advantageous for learners to comprehend collocations. However, productive knowledge and output tend to motivate more active memorization and effective learning. In this sense, speaking and writing need to be taken into consideration because they are related to approaches to production and output. During such processes, students possess more opportunities to engage and practice. In terms of speaking skills, some different strategies should be taken towards young learners and adults. From the perspective of young students, it is easier for them start with the simple action. At the beginning of the classes, the teacher speaks out collocations and then asks students to repeat the pronunciation of such collocations at least two times. Via this way, new collocations could be stored in young students' brain. After acquiring these collocations, students should practice speaking and using the vocabulary learned previously by themselves. One of the useful activities for reviewing collocations taught before is to ask learners to participate in the role-play task with learned collocations as much as possible (Antle, 2013). At this time, the leader needs to describe certain background where young students might be able to use special collocations in their dialogue. For example, in a rainy day, they might talk "close the windows", "take an umbrella", and "wet ground". While for higher level learners, independent study is of importance for them explore the mystery of new contents. When adults contact the sentence with emerging collocations, the teacher should encourage them to read aloud and clearly at the first time. Through this process, they could notice collocations, pronounce and guess new vocabularies tentatively. Moreover, communication activity is a great way to practice collocation because students could engage in the learning process more actively and form their own knowledge reserve (ELLIOTT, 2020). In this sense, the educator could give learners a relevant topic to discuss or debate with the use of collocations to express their own ideas. For instance, in the topic of whether unmanned vehicle is feasible or not, students might speak collocations like "take into account" and "make a difference". During the discussion, collocations could be practiced intentionally and presented in the certain context not simply the vocabulary itself.

In addition to reading, listening and speaking, second language learners ought to develop their writing skills during the step of acquiring and learning vocabulary collocations. It goes without saying that games are suitable for children, particularly when they learn something new. Hence, before the writing process, "Mix and Match" game could be used to activate young learners' interest in exploring and uncovering the hidden collocations. In this game, the teacher will prepare word cards, with one half including the first part of the collocation and the other half with the second part. Students will find the pairs that should occur together and gain vocabulary collocations naturally. For example, "blue" collocates with "sky" and "go" collocates with "shopping". After the game, students should use the targeted collocations to create sentences and write the story. Through this, young

learners might be capable of using collocations in specific circumstances. From the perspective of adult learners, the teacher could utilize the collocation dictionary to help students choose useful word combinations. Then students need to write the composition with regard to a certain topic, like overseas travel. After learners finish the writing, the teacher asks them to exchange their work and pay attention to collocations. As Wei (1999) mentioned, peer correction serves as a student-centered process that provides feedback immediately and will reinforce the knowledge and usage that students have learned. Because they could suggest improvements and notice collocations that their partners used. Although there are lots of strategies for second language vocabulary learning and teaching, educators not only use more strategies, but also help learners use them more consistently to a large extent (Folse, 2004).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, vocabulary collocations play an important role in second language learning and teaching, which have numerous benefits for students to acquire collocations. Teachers are supposed to take targeted strategies in accordance with young and adult learners' reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. Hence, learners might master collocations explicitly and implicitly in various contexts.

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