Incorporating Collocation Teaching in a Reading-Writing Program

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Abstract
This paper discusses vocabulary teaching in tertiary institutions in China and points out the importance of learning collocation in an English as a foreign language context. The authors propose that the teaching of collocation should be incorporated into any standard reading-writing program by addressing three important aspects in the process, namely: use of resources, training of students’ note-taking strategies and incorporation of classroom tasks that require noticing, recording and using collocations. This is further elaborated through an example of how a reading text can be exploited to promote students’ awareness and use of collocation, and their learning of collocation in and outside the classroom.

Introduction
In the last two decades, there has been considerable discussion among ELT (English language teaching) researchers on the importance of lexical collocations for second/foreign language learning (Bahns, 1993; Hill, 1999; Lewis, 1998; Lewis, 2000; Lewis, 2001). Collocation, or in other words, the combination of words that have a tendency to come together, is thought to be an important part of language learning “because the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to all language use” (Hill, 2000, p. 53). There is a need, therefore, to develop a student’s ‘collocational’ competence - the possession of “a sufficiently large and sufficient phrasal mental lexicon” that enables the student to produce language that is “fluent, accurate and stylistically appropriate” (Lewis, 2000, p. 177). Collocational competence is one of the hallmarks of an advanced language user.

Despite the clear need for EFL students to develop their collocational competence, however, collocation does not appear to be a priority in ELT practices in China. EFL students in China
generally possess limited collocational competence, which has led to several problems in their language production such as overusing general words and using ‘Chinglish’. It is therefore necessary to help Chinese EFL students develop collocational competence.

This paper proposes teaching strategies and tasks that help incorporate collocation learning into the current widely adopted reading-writing program in tertiary classrooms in China. The paper starts with a discussion of the importance of collocation in learning English as a foreign language, followed by a description of some of the problems that Chinese tertiary students face due to their lack of collocational competence. It is proposed that a collocation teaching approach should involve three important areas: (i) the use of collocation learning resources, (ii) the training of students’ note-taking strategies and (iii) the incorporation of classroom tasks that require noticing, recording and using collocations. We will illustrate this approach with the example of a trial reading-writing program that incorporates collocation teaching and by showing how a text can be exploited to facilitate the learning of collocation in and outside the classroom. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges we encountered in integrating the teaching of collocation in the program, and looks into the possibilities of follow-up classroom research with regard to the teaching of collocation in the Chinese tertiary EFL classroom.

**Collocation and its role in second/foreign language learning**

This section explains what collocation is and explores the role of collocation in language learning from theoretical and practical perspectives with special reference to EFL in the Chinese tertiary context.

**Defining collocation**

Firth refers to collocation as “words and their companions”, emphasizing words and their relations with other words (quoted in Palmer, 1976, p. 94). *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English: A Guide to Word Combinations* identifies two kinds of collocation, grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. “A grammatical collocation is a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun, adjective or verb) and a preposition or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause” (Benson, Benson & Ilson, 1986, p. ix). The word *afraid*, for example, possesses collocations like *afraid of*, *afraid to* and *afraid that* which are called grammatical collocations. On the other hand, lexical collocations “normally do not contain prepositions,
infinitives, or clauses” and typically “consist of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs” (Benson et al., 1986, p. ix). Examples of lexical collocation include intense training (adj + N), withdraw an application (V + N) and the dough rises (N + V). This paper focusses on lexical collocation.

Lexical collocation can be explored by examining its internal combinatory strength. Some applied linguists (Bahns, 1993; Benson et al., 1986, p. 252-253) categorize lexical collocations into free combinations, collocations and idioms while others place them on a weak-strong continuum (Conzett, 2000) in terms of their degree of fixedness or idiomaticity. At the weaker end of the continuum are the free combinations. The word fast, for example, can be used relatively freely in weak combinations such as fast runner, fast train and fast student, within more stable collocations such as fast colour, fast friendship, and fast hold (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995), and in a strong combination such as the idiomatic expression play fast and loose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fast runner</th>
<th>fast colour</th>
<th>play fast and loose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>train</td>
<td>friendship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td>hold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weak (free combinations) Mid strength (stable collocations) Strong (idioms)

Figure 1: Weak-strong continuum for degree of fixedness

This paper focuses on combinations that are weak (free combinations) and of mid strength (stable collocations), not strong collocations.

The role of collocation in language learning

Knowing a word involves knowing its collocations

Mastering the use of a certain word involves more than knowing its definitional meaning. Definitional meanings are all too often overgeneralizations that do not cover all lexical properties. Some lexical properties can only be conveyed through their combinations with other words. For example, the words journey and trip have similar dictionary definitions, but while business trip is acceptable, business journey is not. An attempt to use definitional explanations alone to differentiate between these two words may be of limited help. An important difference between the two words lies in their collocations. In summary, knowing the definitional meaning
of a word does not necessarily help a student ‘use’ the word. It does little to help students build their active lexicon – the words they can use in their production of the target language.

**Collocational restrictions**

Another important reason for teaching collocation is that “the way words combine in collocations is fundamental to all language use” (Hill, 2000). We do not speak or write as if language is “one huge substitution table with vocabulary items merely filling slots in grammatical structures” (Hill, 2000, p. 48). Knowing which words collocate and which do not is an important part of language competence. The following examples may serve to illustrate this point.

(1) Be careful. That snake is poisonous.

(2) *Be careful. That snake is toxic. (Conzett, 2000, p. 73)

The two sentences share the same grammatical structure. Conzett (2000) commented that the student who came up with sentence (2) obviously understands the meaning of the word *toxic*, but he makes a collocational mistake. The word *toxic* is not used to describe snakes like the word *poisonous* can be. This example shows that words combine in restricted ways. In English, some collocational relationships are strong, and therefore highly predictable, such as those found in *shrug one’s shoulders, foot the bill* and *dead battery*. Some are common collocations – verbs such as *do, have* and *get* are often used in common collocations – but there are also restrictions. For example, we can say *do one’s hair, do one’s best and do somebody a favour* but not *do a mistake*. Morgan Lewis (2001) refers to this collocational characteristic of words as *word grammar*.

**Fluency**

Theories in cognitive psychology support the positive role of learning collocation in improving language fluency. Wickens’ (1989) attention resource allocation theory uses the metaphor of a limited capacity channel to illustrate the point that the human brain, when engaged in a difficult task, may be required to tap on different resources simultaneously. When some of these resources are automatized, i.e. ready to be used without much processing, more attention can be focused on the more difficult components of the task. In the case of performing language production tasks, Raupach (1984) and Pawley and Syder (1983) pointed out that collocations
or ‘language chunks’ serve as automatized resources that allow for fluency in production and faster processing. With a good storage of ‘chunks’ and the released attentional mechanisms in processing these chunks, a complex language task may be easier to complete. In other words, language fluency is more likely to be the outcome. Native speakers can express their thoughts rapidly and fluently because they have a huge stock of ready-made chunks available for use. It is thus believed that mastering collocation or word chunks plays a positive role in improving language fluency.

**Intermediate or advanced: collocational competence**

We assume that language students aim to become advanced speakers of the target language. The advanced students of a language normally have “a sufficiently large and significant phrasal mental lexicon” (Lewis, 2000, p. 177) readily available to them when they use the language. Possessing and having access to an immense pool of collocations constitutes their collocational competence that enables them to express themselves effectively. Without this collocational competence, students may “create longer utterances because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say” (Hill, 2000, p. 49). A comparison of the following two pairs of sentences helps illustrate the point.

(3a) That was a turning point in his life.
(3b) That was a very important moment in his life and everything changed afterwards.

(4a) One of the main ingredients of successful learning is setting yourself realistic objectives.
(4b) If you want to succeed in learning, you must set objectives which you can reach, because they are not too difficult or too easy for you. (Morgan Lewis, 2001)

(3b) and (4b) are grammatically correct and comprehensible but are clearly not as concise and effective as (3a) and (4a). Morgan Lewis refers to (3b) and (4b) as “intermediate” sentences. This is not because the grammatical structures in (3a) and (4a) are more complicated, or that these sentences make use of complicated words that are not in the intermediate students’ repertoire. *Turning point, ingredients, successful,* and *realistic objectives* are all words familiar to the intermediate students. The problem, according to Morgan Lewis, is that students have never noticed and learned the collocations associated with these items of vocabulary (i.e. a
turning point, ingredients of successful learning and set realistic objectives) so they rely on individual words and over-grammaticalized structures, which results in expressions that are “intermediate”. Students should not be satisfied with this level of accuracy if their target is to become more advanced speakers of English.

**Collocation: A missing link in Chinese tertiary EFL**

Regrettably, there is little awareness of collocation in vocabulary teaching and learning in the Chinese tertiary classroom. The most common approach to vocabulary learning at the moment focuses on memorizing individual words and studying their definitional meanings. Teachers explain and analyse the meanings of words in class. Tests on vocabulary use multiple choice options, in which students are asked to identify the word from a given set that is closest in meaning to the word tested. Some students memorize lists of words from dictionaries, or memorize words listed together with Chinese glosses. Some resort to the use of ‘Fast Translation Devices’ to input an unknown English word to retrieve its Chinese counterpart. Generally, there is a strong tendency for both teachers and students to neglect common words that they know the meaning of and their combinations. For example, if the word information appears in a reading text, intermediate students will usually not pay attention to this word because they think they already know its meaning. Teachers also do not usually introduce things like:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{furnish} & \quad \text{collect / gather} \\
\text{give} & \quad \text{find} \\
\text{offer} & \quad \text{information} \\
\text{provide} & \quad \text{seek} \\
\text{impair} & \quad \text{extract} \\
\text{information} & \quad \text{receive}
\end{align*}
\]

This exemplifies the kind of neglect in vocabulary teaching currently in China. For Chinese students of English, this neglect may affect their ability in language production and may lead to the following problems:

1. Students do not know how to use certain words in context and rely on basic grammatical structures to produce “intermediate” sentences.
2. They tend to use simple and general expressions, such as *good* to describe all positive things, and overuse common verbs such as *do*, *have* and *get*, regardless of the context, resulting in an unsophisticated style of writing.

3. They use Chinese counterparts when they do not know a word’s appropriate collocations in English, and as a result Chinglish expressions abound. For example:
   a. *It can be divided into two cases.*
   b. *To reach our desire,* we must stop wasting fresh water.
   c. *You must do a lot of problems* of this kind to *add your practice.*

Strictly speaking, all three sentences are grammatical. However, while the underlined collocations are allowed in Chinese, they sound odd in English. Such sentences may not be intelligible to a native speaker of English.

**A trial: integrating the teaching of collocation into the existing reading-writing program**

We therefore see the need for more collocational awareness in the Chinese tertiary EFL context and the importance of incorporating the teaching of collocation into existing reading-writing programs. Usually, a standard reading-writing program commonly implemented in universities in China comprises a few courses. One of these courses aims for the development of students’ extensive reading skills and their essay writing skills. This course is mandatory for all second year students majoring in English language.

A theme-based textbook that is widely used in the course mentioned is *Reading to Develop Your Ideas* (Jiang & Yang, 2001), with three to four selected articles on each of ten topics, such as ‘The Internet and Our Life’, ‘Family and Marriage’ and ‘Men and Environment’. The teaching of the course basically adopts a process-oriented approach: Teaching starts from pre-reading questions to trigger students’ prior knowledge related to the issues under discussion, followed by a careful study of the reading texts for comprehension and language learning. Post-reading activities are conducted through student discussion on both comprehension-based questions and questions that draw on their own experiences and own opinions. Students look for more online articles on the same topics, and finally a group debate is organised for students to express their views. Students are also asked to write a summary or an argumentative essay.
We started a trial program in the South China University of Technology to incorporate the teaching of collocation in the standard reading-writing program and introduced three important components into the course: (i) the introduction and use of collocation resources, (ii) the training of students’ proper note-taking of collocations and (iii) and incorporation of classroom tasks that promote students’ awareness and use of collocations.

**The introduction and use of collocation resources**

**The textbook**

The ‘input-rich’ theme-based textbook features articles mostly taken from magazines and newspapers published in native English speaking countries. The theme-based topics provided students with a core set of words sharing common semantic fields. This core facilitated our selection of which collocations to teach; we focused on theme-related keywords that were also specified in the word list of the National University Curriculum in order to set a clear experimental boundary. This boundary prevented students from being overwhelmed by an inordinate number of collocations.

**Online resources**

**The collocation dictionary**

Most of the Chinese students have an English-Chinese/Chinese-English dictionary, but very few of them possess a collocational dictionary. To prepare them for the present course, we introduced to them an online collocation dictionary accessible at http://www.ozdic.com/ which focuses on lexical collocations, suitable for students who have basic grammatical knowledge but need to expand their active lexicon.

**Just the word**

This resource (http://www.just-the-word.com/) provides more detailed lists of collocations from the British National Corpus, an authentic language database. Figure 1 gives an example of one of these lists for the word analysis. The length of the horizontal (green) bar to the right of each collocation indicates its frequency of use.
Clicking on the word set on the left leads to the corpus from which the collocations are retrieved, as can be seen below when the collocation set complete analysis is clicked on:

![Clicking on the word set on the left leads to the corpus from which the collocations are retrieved, as can be seen below when the collocation set complete analysis is clicked on.](image)

**Figure 2:** ‘Just the word’ collocation list for analysis

**Figure 3:** Corpus data for complete analysis
Once students were aware of the online collocation resources, they were keen to make use of these useful reference tools to find possible combinations they could then use in their own language production.

**The training of students’ proper note-taking of collocations**

Learning new vocabulary is important, but we also pointed out to our students another dimension of vocabulary learning: words that they may know the definitional meanings of (and are therefore not considered new), but whose collocations may be unfamiliar to them. Students were required to keep a collocation notebook for the course and to note down useful collocations.

We asked students to “leave as much language as possible in the form in which we find it”, as recommended by Morgan Lewis (2000, p. 19). As an example, we could consider a sentence from the text ‘Surfing the Web’: The measures taken only provided a short-term fix for the problem. Some students wrote in their notebook:

- provide a fix
- a short-term fix

Teachers suggested that students keep as much context as possible when they noted down collocations and avoid breaking it up, since “attempting to generalise may result in your losing, not adding, relevant information about how the language is actually used” (M. Lewis, 2000, p. 19). Here are some examples of what teachers might suggest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ notes</th>
<th>Teachers’ suggested notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>add comments</td>
<td>The net users can add their comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present and read information</td>
<td>The software allows us to present and read information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>throughout the Internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specific alternatives</td>
<td>specific alternatives to using…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factual information</td>
<td>read factual information from an authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a high-tech image</td>
<td>present a high-tech image for your company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a dark side</td>
<td>It has a dark side.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exciting possibilities emerge      More exciting possibilities will emerge.

The suggestions include more context and are therefore more “situationally evocative” (Lewis, 2000, p. 19). They are more likely to be remembered by students for use in future.

**Incorporation of collocation-related classroom activities**

A number of activities were used in the classroom to promote students’ awareness and use of collocations. Below we introduce three different types of tasks used in the trial program, namely the ‘digging deep’ task, preparation tasks, and student-generated tasks.

**‘Digging deep into a word’**

This was a task designed to enhance students’ awareness of word collocations. The task makes use of the aforementioned ‘weak-strong’ continuum to encourage students to ‘dig deep’ into a word. Students were given some core words from the reading text and asked to check online resources to find their collocations and arrange what they found on a scale. For example, with the given word *resources* from our text, students found the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaker (free combinations)</th>
<th>Mid Strength (stable collocation)</th>
<th>Stronger (idiomatic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water/land/timber resources</td>
<td>inner resources</td>
<td>leave sb. to his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic/natural/untapped resources</td>
<td>own resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop/exploit/tap resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Weak-strong continuum for resources*

Through the checking-noticing-recording stages, students gained an in-depth knowledge of the word *resources* by getting to know the collocations associated with it. Students also paid more attention to the fixedness of mid-strength and stronger collocations and tried to learn them as one fixed unit rather than as separate single words.

**Preparation tasks**

Within the current reading course, there are five main types of post-reading tasks at the end of each theme. Three are normally completed in class: Group discussions on some given
questions, collaborative tasks that require students to list and summarize the essential points presented in the articles, and a debate. The other two, library or online research and summary or essay writing, are completed outside class. We incorporated the collocation learning element into the preparation stage of some of the post-reading tasks. During the group discussion of questions, for example, students were discouraged from giving impromptu answers to the questions. We deliberately slowed the students down by breaking them into groups and assigned each group two to three questions, asking them to think of relevant words they might use and to check out the common collocations of these words before they answered the questions. Then, based on what they found, they could make a selective use of the collocations they had collected and work on the discussion questions. Here is an example of one student talking about his experience looking for information on the internet:

Once, I tried to log on to the internet to dig up some information about online resources for learning writing. First, it took me a long time to establish a connection. When I finally accessed the net, I was glad to find a lot of detailed information on the topic, I carefully retrieved some of it and decided to share the resources with my classmates…

Students may fall back on the invariable use of find with information rather than using dig up, retrieve or they may use connect rather than establish a connection. In this task, the students’ attention was drawn to the means through which their ideas were expressed, and they did not make use of the readily available simple expressions in their current repertoire. This process of searching and using word collocations improved their collocational competence.

The same was done with essay preparation. The use of collocational dictionaries and online concordances can help Chinese tertiary students write better essays. With our reading course, at the end of the theme ‘Internet and Our Life’, students were told to write an argumentative essay on ‘The Pros and Cons of the Internet’. Instead of only giving them a set of individual words, we encouraged the students to think of ideas and keywords that they can use in the essay with their group members. The students then searched the collocation resources to find collocations of these keywords. For the above topic, students came up with key words like information, internet, service, advantage, disadvantage, network, issue, position, communication, and argument. They then searched and found the following collocations: access the internet, a decided advantage/disadvantage, to offset/overweigh a disadvantage, a
clear/obvious advantage, information service, communications network, a key/main/critical/complex/fundamental/particular issue, to raise/settle/deal with/address the issue, clarify one’s position, an appalling position, an argument erupted over, and advance/support/resolve an argument. The search process itself was helpful, as new ideas were generated through reading sentences and longer chunks in the online resources. It was a more useful way of essay preparation than giving them individual words alone or letting them go to a Chinese-English dictionary to search for individual words that were not in their repertoire. This way of preparing for essay writing helped the students to choose precise combinations of words for their language production, and the resulting essays contained more informational content than if they had only resorted to the grammatical structures and vocabulary in their current repertoire.

**Student-generated tasks: Substitution tasks**

All students’ essays were reviewed by their peers before finally being submitted to the teacher. One type of activity used in the reading course was to have students work on their problems with collocations. Students used time after class to read their peers’ essays and pick out sentences from the essays that

1. contained collocational errors, such as *do these problems*
2. used very general collocations such as using *good* invariably on anything positive
3. were long and ineffective

Below is a sample of problematic sentences students found in their peers’ writing:

(5) I went into google, searched and found a lot of *good* information on learning to write.
(6) What we should do is to work hard to *make success*.
(7) *There are much more advantages than disadvantages in using the internet.*

Students made use of these sentences to create substitution exercises on their own. This means that they worked collaboratively, using collocation dictionaries and online searching to find ways to replace the original word combinations or find a more effective expression. Such tasks proved to be quite helpful as the students generated tasks that better motivated them to be
responsible for their own improvement. They were also more likely to remember and avoid the problems since collaborative search, peer discussion and feedback provided opportunities for more in-depth learning.

**Student generated tasks: Translating your way to collocation awareness**

As mentioned, students often translate word for word from the mother tongue into the target language, ignoring collocational differences between the two languages. To address this problem, we encouraged our students to create mini-translation tasks for their peers. When the students read texts under a certain theme, they were told to select some sentences with collocations new to them, particularly those that did not fit in a word-to-word pattern with a Chinese expression, discuss with their group members to translate the sentences into Chinese. Two groups exchanged their Chinese translations and let the other group translate them into English. They then compared the translations with the original to “find the gap/differences” between the original and what they had translated. Students’ awareness of collocational possibilities and restrictions in the target language was greatly enhanced through this type of contrastive activity when they saw the possible discrepancies between their translated versions, which often contained ‘Chinglish’ combinations, and the original Standard English text.

**Solution to problems and future research**

This paper discusses the important role of developing collocational competence in English language learning and introduces resources and activities to teach collocations in foreign language classrooms. To teach collocations, teachers can introduce students to collocation resources, train them to record collocations and organize classroom activities to help students learn collocations.

In the course of our attempts to incorporate the teaching of collocations into the reading course, we encountered some difficulties and challenges caused by the scope of the task, which are illustrated below.

Due to the pervasive nature of collocations in the language input we encounter every day, it is obviously impossible to learn everything within the limited class time. It is essential that students do not stop learning outside class. However, exactly how to encourage students to continue learning outside class remains a challenge.
Another challenge is the process of selecting what to record and to learn. Our tentative solution is to base the selection on the principles of immediacy, relevance and frequency. By the principle of immediacy, we mean that we give priority to words that are in the wordlist of the national syllabus (to suit the immediate needs for students to cope with the College English Test Band 4, a degree requirement test). By relevance, we mean that we select collocations with keywords generally relevant to the ten themes under discussion and to the content area covered in a specific learning task. By the principle of frequency, we ignore rare collocations and pay attention to words that are more often used. Here, both the statistic frequency provided by the Just the Word and students or teachers’ instincts regarding which collocations are more frequently used play an important part in the choice we make. These principles help make the teaching and learning of collocations more manageable.

The purpose of incorporating collocation teaching into the reading course is to raise students’ awareness of words and their collocations, and to improve their production in the target language. So far, we have made positive and encouraging observations in our classrooms in terms of students’ active participation and enthusiasm for collocation learning. The current work, however, needs to be supported by future research into the effectiveness of each type of collocation task on learning outcome. A survey of students’ evaluations of the changes brought about through this course and a longitudinal study to understand the effect of teaching collocation on the development of students’ overall language proficiency might help.

References


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