

Teaching Noun Plus Verb Collocation in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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Introduction

When it comes to a noun, teachers are already quite familiar with teaching a definition, the plural, opposites and synonyms, collocating adjectives and prepositions, etc. They may be less familiar, though, with ways to present the verbs that may occur with a noun when the noun is used as a subject or object. In this paper, I'll show a way teachers can do this by focusing on the verbs for the noun "path" in the sense of "a strip of ground that people walk along" (Collins Cobuild New Student's Dictionary).

Communicate What You Want from Your Students

The teachers' first task must be to clearly communicate to their students what they want from them. Students are used to questions like, "What's this?" and "What's the opposite?" and yes / no and Wh-questions. However, there's a very good chance they may never have been asked the questions, "What are some verbs for the noun used as a subject?" and "What are some verbs for the noun used as an object?" These two questions must be taught.

The following is how I communicate what I want to beginning students who may or may not know what a subject or object are. To elicit the verbs for when the noun is used as an object, I'll ask silly questions like, "Can I eat a path?" or "Can I drink a path?" (No, but you can follow a path.) And to get at the verbs for a noun when it is the subject, I'll ask equally silly questions like "Can a path drink?" and "Does a path wake up at 6:00?" (No, but a path can go somewhere.)

Elicit a List of Verbs

When the students understand what you want, write a few verbs for the noun on the board to get things started. For example, you might write "a path can lead / go (somewhere)" on one side of the board, and "you can build / walk (along) a path" on the other side of the board, so as to graphically separate "path" used as a subject from "path" used as an object. This is your "starter list." Ask your students if they can think of any other verbs for path used as a subject or object, either by

- noticing them in the context supplied in the textbook,
- recycling verbs they've previously learned in the course, or
- that they know from their outside knowledge.

Include the verbs they come up with on your "starter list."

Finally, ask your students to look up path in a dictionary of collocations, and have them tell you which verbs are listed that you have not already written on the board. Add those to the list on the board.

At the end of this process, your students might have identified some of the following verbs. For "path" used as an object, they might have told you that you can be on a path, or you can bicycle on a path, or block a path, or design, build or construct a path, or look for and find a path, or follow a path, or get on or get off a path, or jog / leave / light / maintain / ride / run (along) / take / use / walk (along / up / down) a path., etc.

As for "path" used as a subject, you and your students might have come up with some of the following: A path can begin (at a place) / branch (off) / climb / continue (to a place) / cross (a road) / cut across (a field) / curve (left / right / north / south) / descend / disappear (around a bend) / emerge (from a forest) / end / enter (a forest) / follow (a river or lakeshore or disused railway bed or

country road) / fork / go (for miles, to a place, uphill or downhill, north, around a field, etc.) / head (inland, left, into the woods) / lead / loop (around or back) / meander / pass (some feature) / reach (a feature) / return (to a place or feature) / run (north, etc.) / skirt (a feature) / snake / start / stop / stretch / switchback / twist / turn / take you somewhere / take a turn / wind (its way through a forest, up a slope, down a hillside) / zigzag, etc.

There is no need to be comprehensive, and just mentioning four or five verbs for any one noun is probably enough. The point is to get students used to the idea that to know a noun is to also know a few of its collocating verbs, and to recycle previously learned verbs.

Ways to Focus on the List of Verbs

The following are some suggestions for things you can do with the list of verbs that you and your students have come up with.

Add to the List

It is often the case that verbs we see on the list will prompt us to think of still other verbs. The fact that a path can descend and leave should prompt you and your students to add ascend and enter to the list, and the fact that you can bicycle (along) a path might cause a student to mention skate.

Categorize the Verbs

Whenever you look at the verbs for a particular noun, you can generally find ways to categorize them. With this particular noun, you can focus on a path as a piece of infrastructure, like a road or a building. You can ask your students to identify those verbs that relate only to building and maintaining a path: build, construct, design, light, maintain, etc.

Or you can ask your students to identify those verbs that relate to manner of motion along a path, such as bicycle, jog, run, skate, walk, etc. You could even ask your students to think of similar verbs that wouldn't occur along a path: you wouldn't ordinarily crawl along a path, for example, unless something unfortunate had happened!

Put the Verbs in a Sequence

And you can generally find a nice sequence or series in the verbs that occur with a particular noun that can be expressed in the form, "First / then / finally..." For path such a series could be, "First, you get on the path. Then you follow (take) the path. Finally, you get off (leave) the path." Sequences lend themselves to memorization, as they are logical. So, after going over the sequence, you can ask a student to look away from the board and repeat it.

For review, you can take the sentences, jumble them, and then have the students put them in the proper sequence.

Make Creative Comparisons

When we look at a set of verbs for a particular noun, we can often find verbs that relate to other objects in a way that allows us to make interesting and even original comparisons. When we do this with the verbs for "path," we come up with questions like, "How is a path like a snake? (It can wind / snake) or "How is a path like smoke in the wind?" (It can disappear) or "How is a path like a guide?" (It can lead you somewhere), etc. Such comparisons can affect how students think conceptually of objects.

A path is essentially a line, and so are letters, so you can ask questions like, "Which letter of the alphabet meanders like a path? ("S") or "Which letter of the alphabet zigzags like a path? ("Z") or "Which letter of the alphabet forks like a path? (Y). These questions are very nice, as the letters resemble what paths actually look like if you were to make a drawing of them.

Another idea is to draw a Capital M on the board, call a student up to the board, and ask that student to describe what the lines in that particular letter are doing. Using his/her finger to point, the student might say things like, "This line ascends (goes up), this line descends (goes down), this line runs parallel to this line, this line meets this line here," etc.

Give a Writing Exercise

As a writing exercise, you can ask your students to write a short paper entitled, "My Favorite Path/Trail," or "The Path I take from my House to the Well" or "The Path I Follow from My House to School Every Day" or "The Path to the Next Village," that incorporates at least ten of the verbs. Remind the students that a path does not have to be an established one, but can simply refer to the course a person takes from one point to another.

After students have finished their writing exercises, they can share their results with their classmates. Have a student read his/her result to the class using the "look down, look up" technique. In the "look down, look up" technique, the student looks down at the text, commits a phrase, clause, or short sentence to memory, and then looks up and delivers the phrase, clause or sentence while maintaining eye-contact with the members of his/her audience. Ask his/her classmates to quickly raise and lower their hands whenever they hear a verb used for path, or ask them to write down the verbs they hear for comparison with their classmates after the reader has finished.

Take Your Students Outside

If you are able, take your students outside, ask them to notice all the lines they see, either man-made, like telephone wires and roads and the lines of walls and roofs, or natural, like the lines of ridges and mountains, and then ask them what those lines are doing. This is an extremely difficult task, but can be very rewarding, and can literally affect how students visualize the world around them. There are a lot of things out in the world that can be thought of as lines, if we only stop to look and think.

The Value of Noun + Verb Collocations

The power of a noun combined with a verb is considerable, as a noun and a verb are enough to make a sentence. Verbs allow students to use nouns for self-expression, and the result is they are more communicative and their language has a better chance of developing naturally, through thought and use. This is different from simply learning a definition or memorizing a translation, and using vocabulary simply to fill in grammar patterns.

In addition, the verbs you and your students identify for "path" can be recycled in the company of a multitude of common words that can be thought of as lines like track, trail, sidewalk, road, street, highway, route, river, rope, fence, rail line, fence line, coastline, property line, ridgeline, etc.

Ideally, the context in your textbook will provide plenty of collocating verbs for a noun like path (or street, or coastline, or lamp) used as a subject and object, but this is rarely the case. All too often such words are introduced in the impersonal construction, "There is (a path in the valley)," oftentimes accompanied by a picture. Such context is useful for defining the word for comprehension, but notably unhelpful in providing collocating verbs that can be noticed by students and that will help them to use the word productively for self-expression. This situation will hopefully change as new texts are written with an eye towards collocation instead of simple definition.

Conclusion

The Collins Cobuild New Student's Dictionary lists three other senses for path, and each sense has its own important collocating verbs. For example, if you happen to be in the path of a hurricane, it would be a good idea for you to get out of its path! A person might block your path as you are trying to go through a door. As for the figurative use of path, we can "choose/adopt a path," and "put something or someone on the path to something," or "throw obstacles in somebody's path."

I hope the day will come when beginning students are as accustomed to the question "What's a verb for the noun when the noun is a subject/object?" as they now are to questions like, "What's this?" or "What's the opposite?" The questions we ask to a large extent determine what our students learn, which is why we want to ask the right ones.

References

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<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Stockdale-VerbsForNouns.html>