

Definition Plus Collocation in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Definition and collocation are both important in vocabulary learning and teaching. Definition is concerned with establishing a single word's meaning, whereas collocation takes definition for granted and is concerned with the words that typically appear with any particular word: the verbs that might occur with a noun, for example. Such collocational information often enables a word to be used.

In this paper, I examine definition and collocation as they relate to our presentations and dictionaries. It is my hope that, after reading this paper, teachers will be better able to assess the relative weight they pay to definition and collocation in their vocabulary presentations and explanations, and adjust their teaching accordingly, if necessary.

Presentations

When our focus is on definition, we might explain a verb like *dream* as follows:

"A dream is like a film in your head that you sometimes have when you are asleep."

When learners hear a presentation based on definition, their main purpose is to decode the stream of words with the goal of matching an L1 translation equivalent to the new word in their minds. They are less likely to notice and retain a collocating verb, and afterwards they are unlikely to come up with collocating adjectives like *bad* or *scary* on their own, much less an expression like, "Sweet dreams!"

When our focus is on collocation, we might say something like the following:

"An important verb for dream is have. Two frequently appearing modifiers for dream are bad and recurrent, and two prepositions that often occur with dream are about.. and 'In my dream, I was ..' In addition, dream can be used as a modifier in words like dream catcher and dream diary. When we put a child to bed at night, we often say, 'Sweet dreams!'"

Both definition and collocation have their limitations. A presentation based only on collocation might enable a student to say, "I had a bad dream," but not know what they are saying. And a presentation based solely on definition would allow a student to match an L1 translation to *dream*, but perhaps not be able to use it. Definition plus collocation, on the other hand, makes for a complete presentation that allows for meaning and use.

Dictionaries

To find a word's definition, teachers and students can look in any number of definition-based dictionaries. In addition, there are bilingual dictionaries that provide translations, and picture dictionaries that supply pictures. Bilingual electronic dictionaries exist that will not only provide a translation, but pronounce the word and save it for download to a computer later. Using such resources, students can look a word up and find a definition, translation, or picture, and even hear the word pronounced.

To find a word's collocates, teachers can look in dictionaries of collocations such as the LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations (Hill and Lewis), or the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2002). And this is a very good thing, because we are simply not very good at coming up with a word's collocates off the top of our heads (Fox).

Explaining Words

When our focus is on definition of single words, we commonly do things like provide a picture of a word, or bring realia to class to show students the object itself, or mention a synonym, opposite, superordinate (Gairns and Redman). Or we might explain by saying, "Best is the superlative of good." We might ask students to learn "word families" like *grow*, *growth*, *grower* in the hope that this will spur rapid acquisition. (DeCarrico).

When emphasis is on collocation, we immediately encounter some problems with the above practices.

(1) Opposites. A word might have two opposites: the opposite of *short* might be *long* or *tall*, depending on if we are referring to a person's hair or a person's height. The opposite of a *bad* case of poison ivy is not a *good* one, but a *mild* one, and the opposite of *rock-hard* would not be *rock-soft*, but might be expressed as *baby-soft*.

Also, it is hard to say what an opposite is. Is *enemy* the opposite of *friend*? *Friend* might be contrasted with *enemy* in a proverb like, "A thousand friends are not enough, one enemy is too many." But in naturally occurring language *friend* is more often connected with words like the following: "family, friends and acquaintances," "friends, neighbors, co-workers," "friends and acquaintances," etc. Hopefully, the new dictionary of collocations will contain series like these.

(2) Synonyms. In certain contexts *earth* and *world* might be roughly synonymous, but when we use those words for expression we say, "the largest airport *in* the world," or "the largest airport *on* earth," not "the largest airport *on* world," or "the largest airport *in* the earth." Gairns and Redman (1986) point out that while *break out* may have the meaning of *start* in a sentence like, "A fire broke out," it would be quite wrong to say, "Class breaks out at 7:30 every morning," even if it seems like it.

(3) Superordinates. Boxing is often categorized as a sport, but it is a particular kind of sport, and might just as well be categorized as entertainment, business, a skill, art or a science.

Providing examples of words as they naturally occur in the frame, "X, Y and other / similar / related Zs" is a better way to provide hyponyms and superordinates for words. If we type "waterfalls and other" in a computer browser, we find things like, "beaches, lava flows, waterfalls, and other scenic attractions (Hawaii)" or "canyons, mountain ranges, waterfalls and other natural features," and "waterfalls and other obstacles (salmon)." Naturally occurring usages like these remind us that a waterfall can be many things, including a scenic attraction, a natural feature and an obstacle to fish. Hopefully, the dictionaries of collocations produced in the future will include examples of words being used in these frames.

(4) Word families. A word like *grower* is regularly derived from the verb, but is almost always premodified, and students need examples like "peach growers" and "sugar growers," and "chicken growers," if they are to actually use the word. The idea that you can "grow" chickens might surprise many students!

In general, the ways we mention opposites, synonyms, superordinates and word families are useful for grouping words, or establishing sense relations, but like all definition-based strategies don't really teach words for use. When our emphasis is on collocation, we might start out our explanation of *better* by saying, "Well, *better* is the comparative of *good*," or "*Better* is the opposite of *worse*," but we would go on to mention such exemplifications as "a better world / future / job" or expressions with verbs like "feel better" and "look better" and "get better" and "make something better," or modification with adverbs like, "a little / somewhat / quite / much / significantly better," etc.

Definition Versus Exemplification

When our focus is on definition, we commonly define a word by using it in the subject position (An X is...), often supply a superordinate, and supply a picture if possible. The following definition of *donkey* from the Collins Cobuild New Student's Dictionary contains all these features:

"A donkey is an animal like a small horse with long ears => see picture on page 815."

When we focus on collocation, we are more interested in exemplifications, both for analysis and production, as illustrated by the following sentence:

"My donkey helps me carry water four times a day."

Definitions are rather formal affairs. An exemplification, on the other hand, is an example of the word in use, may embody almost any thought, is conversational, and more revealing in terms of a word's collocates.

In the exemplification for *donkey*, the possessive adjective + noun collocation ("My donkey...") reminds us that someone usually owns a donkey, and the collocating verb ("My donkey helps me...") reminds us of the important role that donkeys play in many societies.

Exemplifications like these can be thought provoking (Fox), and affect the way we think about things. In many societies, for example, a woman without a donkey must be a donkey herself. Definition cannot provide such an insight, but exemplification can.

Comprehension Questions

When our focus is on identification or definition of single words, our comprehension questions mirror our focus. And so, after presenting a word like *friend*, we test comprehension with questions like, "What's a friend?" or "What's the opposite of *friend*?" or "What's *friend* in your language?"

When our focus is on collocation, our comprehension questions also mirror our focus, but we ask different kinds of questions. We might ask things like, "What are some verbs used with *friend* used as an object?" or "What kinds of friends are there?" or "What would I call I friend whom I met in the army or college?" or "Give me some modifiers for *friend* that relate to nationality," or "Give me some modifiers for friend that relate to the length of the relationship," or "what words often occur with *friend* in a series?" or "I'm a friend of Ali's ... now spell 'Ali's.'"

Notes

In classrooms and courses that emphasize vocabulary as the definition of single words, students typically annotate the alphabetized list of new vocabulary that begin each unit with L1 translations, and do the same for the word in context. Students will often write down a long list of unrelated words with their L1 translation on a piece of paper, and study it before a test.

In classrooms and courses that emphasize collocation, students are far more likely to highlight a collocating verb, or circle a collocating preposition. And their notes will look quite different. They might write down a noun along with five or six verbs. Or an adjective and five or six things it can modify. Or a verb, followed by five or six collocating adverbs. Such notes generally include few or no L1 translations.

Recycling

In a curriculum that emphasizes collocation, no opportunity is missed to recycle a vocabulary item from the start of the course to the end. This level of recycling is quite different to what most of us are used to. For example, *heed* and *ignore* would not simply be mentioned in the context of *advice*, but recycled when we introduce *warning*, *order*, *recommendation*, *suggestion*, etc. Constant recycling is a hallmark of collocation, and an important reason why students end up using and learning words.

Teachers who teach the same curriculum over and over again, and stick to it, are most at risk for forgetting to recycle words, and I offer myself as an example. For years I taught "limb" in one unit, and "artificial" in another, without ever thinking to put them together to create *artificial limb*. And that is in spite of the fact that I am an amputee, and wear one!

Conclusion

When we focus solely on definition, our students are less likely to be able to use vocabulary for expression, and they miss countless opportunities to recycle words they know. If we focus only on collocation, students may be able to use words but not know what they are saying. The solution to either approach's flaws is obvious. A teacher need only add definition to collocation, or collocation to definition, to to compliment each other. To give definition its due, it must come first.

Collocation is of much higher importance, however, in terms of use, acquisition and ultimate success in language learning. In a vocabulary presentation, one-tenth of our time should be spent on establishing a definition, and the rest of the time should be spent on collocation and use.

Future dictionaries of collocations would be improved by inclusion of words in series connected by *and*, *or* and *versus*, and words as they appear in the frame "X, Y and other / similar / related Zs." They will also hopefully include possessive noun + noun collocations (city's neighborhoods / ins and outs / attractions, etc.) and collocations in the frame "X and it's / their Y" (data and their interpretation / storage / analysis / interpretation, etc.) as a way of further associating vocabulary.

Teachers are more accustomed to providing definition than collocation in their presentations. This will change, however, as dictionaries of collocations catch on and new and better dictionaries of collocations appear on the market. With a dictionary of collocations, a teacher can simply look up a word, view a word's collocates, and incorporate the information and examples in a presentation. In time, teachers will be as quick to think of a word's collocates as they are now to think of a definition.

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