Helping ESL Learners to Minimize Collocational Errors

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The importance of collocation in ESL language acquisition is the focus of this paper. It stresses the fact that the neglect of collocation in ESL classroom should be a concern for teachers. Learners' lack of knowledge of collocational patterns of lexical items makes them to be prone to all sorts of collocational errors, which can be more disruptive in communication than grammatical errors. This study therefore suggests some practical ways teachers can help learners to minimize collocational errors in ESL classrooms.

Introduction

A lot of efforts in applied language research are being concentrated on the grammatical, phonological and orthographical levels, while the lexical level does not arouse the same degree of interest. The effect of this is the dearth of knowledge on how teachers can handle EL2 lexical problems. Teachers, therefore concentrate on the other problems and make little efforts to help students in their lexical problems. Where the lexical aspect is taught at all, teachers concentrate more on the paradigmatic sense relations of lexical items (relations of set of lexical items that belong to the same class and can be substituted for one another in specific grammatical and lexical contexts). Very little attention is paid to the syntagmatic aspect of lexis (ability of items to co-occur, otherwise known as collocation.

This article sees lexical errors as equally significant as grammatical errors and in fact, more disruptive in communication. According to Sonaiya (1988), lexical errors are perceived by native speakers as more serious than all other types of errors because "it is in the choice of words that effective communication is hindered most"

Collocation and English Language Learning

Collocation is observed between lexical items, when arranged in texts. It is the meaning relation between individual lexical items and the ones that habitually co-occur with them in the language. For instance, we might expect *bank* (where money is kept) to have a high probability of co-occurrence with *cheque*, *cashier*, *account* , *transfer*, *ledger*, *etc* ., but a low probability of co-occurrence with *bed*, *saucepan apple*, *etc* . Lexical items involved in collocations are always, to some degree, mutually predictable (Crystal, 1995).

The relationship of collocation according to McCarthy (1995) is fundamental in the study of vocabulary. J. R. Firth is often quoted having said "you know a word by the company it keeps (Firth, 1957). Knowledge of appropriate collocations is part of the native speakers' competence. Collocation, therefore deserves to be a central part of vocabulary learning. Effective performance of ESL learners depend on their stock of conventional collocations, which are characterized by varying degrees of restrictedness. They range from free combinations such as:

- run a risk / business
- to fixed ones like
- take the bull by the horns

Below is a spectrum of collocations adapted from Howert (1996) and Carter, 1987).

Spectrum of Collocations

FREE COMBINATIONS :

run a risk / a business make an attempt / way

RESTRICTED COMBINATIONS :

(i) Adjective + noun hardened + criminal

-extenuating + circumstance

(ii) adverb + verb -readily + admit

-totally + unaware

(iii) verb + noun -renovate + house

-shrug + shoulder

(iv) noun + verb -brake + screech

-cloud + drift

MULTI-WORD EXPRESSIONS

(i) irreversible binominals--part and parcel, leaps and bounds

(ii) phrasal verb--pull out, give up

(iii) idioms--to take the bull by the horns, to set the ball rolling

It is clear from the spectrum of collocations presented above that lexical items in the language can be put into what J. R. Firth call "mutual expectancy". The words that are closely associated with others may depend in their association on the context of a particular situation. Context here refers to who is using them and where they are being used. For instance, power struggle, power boat, power house, power steering all collocate easily and will be used freely in English in different contexts.

In English, the unacceptability of some combinations is not necessarily based on compatibility in meanings of the individual items, but rather on convention. Butter is rancid and eggs are addled. Learners who are not aware of these conventions may produce unacceptably combinations.

Pupils who lack collocational competence sometimes make longer sentences because they do not know the collocations, which express precisely their thoughts. For instance, such expressions as listed below have been found in ESL pupils' compositions in Nigeria:

- they have sex the wrong way (sex abuse)
- people have the ability to say what they need (freedom of expression)
- the situation whereby people vote for their rulers to rule them (democratic rule)

ESL learners who are not properly taught the lexical resources of the language focus on the decontextualised lexical items as listed in the dictionaries thereby losing sight of word association. Such learners often belabour their speeches using one word at a time and simple vocabulary to express both simple and complicated ideas.

Familiarity with typical collocations in English will make learners to appreciate the humorous or aesthetic power of unlikely collocation, such as:

- *I will now abolish my speech* .
- *The bus cross the road and fell down.*
- *They suppose to press the gear.*

Learning collocations is learning typical expressions in a language. Proper acquisition of collocations makes learners competent

socially at the level of personal and technical communications. Below are some of the ways teachers can make learners conscious of this fact.

How Teachers Can Help Pupils Minimize Collocational Errors

1. Teaching and learning of English lexis should not be restricted to course books. A course book can only serve as a guide to learning. It cannot possibly handle the complex nature of lexical collocations acquisition. Teachers should encourage learners' creativity through the use of some aids to vocabulary learning such as, lexical matching and networks. Such aids to learning should not be presented as immutable, but rather as hypothesis which learners can test against further data; the technique can thus be seen to further creative and dynamic ends (see Meara, 1997; Carter, 1987). There is also the likelihood that the associations generated by and across items in these kinds of exercisesaid both retention and recall of items by learners.

2. Teachers should encourage pupils to be involved in extensive reading of a lot of literature written in English. This will not only expose them to a massive amount of vocabulary, but will also help them to discover and acquire new collocations. According to Taiwo (2001: 323), chances that ESL learners cannot combine words correctly without having previously read them are very high.

3. ESL learners should also be encouraged to make effective use of English dictionaries, especially the ones written with learners in focus. The dictionary is a trusted and respected repository of facts about the lexicon of a language. Dictionaries such as, the Collins COBUILD English Dictionary (CCED), BBC English Dictionary (BBCED), and Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (OALD), which were based on extensive naturally occurring data are particularly good for the acquisition of the collocational properties of English lexical items.

4. Adequate attention should be drawn to collocations in the teaching of register. There is a tendency for ESL learners to see two items that belong to the same register as collocates. This is evident in some of the errors of such learners, *eg* :

- *Government should allow the farmers to <u>borrow</u> <u>loans</u>.*
- *I learnt from the head girl in the school how to <u>type</u> the <u>keyboard</u>.*
- *If possible <u>post</u> me a <u>mail</u>.*

Pupils should be made to know that the mere fact that two lexical items belong to the same register does not mean that they can collocate. Moreover, the same item may have different collocational properties in different registers.

5. It is also important that English language teachers focus attention on some common collocations, which will help learners to be precise in their language use, *eg* :

- (a) sounds animals make, eg: mouse-squeak, monkey-chatter
- (b) sounds objects make, eg: trumpet-blare, brakes-screech
- (c) motions animals make, eg: butterfly-flutter, horses-gallop
- (d) motions objects make, eg: car-swerve, cloud-drift

There is tendency for learners to resort to the most general items when they are not familiar with the specific collocates.

6. Lastly, teachers should emphasize areas of differences in the collocational patterns of the mother tongue (MT) and the target language (TL). Studies of collocatioanl errors reveal that collocations in the MT are often translated directly into English. For instance, Yoruba learners of English produced such expressions as:

- *house money* for *rent*
- *the rich man collected his wife* for *the rich man seduced his wife*
- *their eyes were black then* for *they were not civilized then*
- *the girl took pregnancy in SS 1* for *the girl got pregnant in SS 1*

The major thrust of these suggestions is to make the teachers create the consciousness of collocations in learners. According to Schmidt (1990), what language learners become conscious of ...what they pay attention to, what they notice...influences and in some ways determine the outcome of their learning".

Conclusion

In the paper, we stressed that the lexical component of language is as important as the grammatical aspect and we also emphasized the significance of collocations in language learning. We traced collocation errors to the neglect of conscious teaching of collocations in L2 classrooms and suggested some ways teachers of ESL can help pupils to minimize collocational errors.

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