Exploring the Ways of Enhancing Conversational Skills in EFL Class with a Perspective of Collocational Usage

Dr.V.Sudhakar Rao

Associate Professor of English & Head, Dept. of Humanities & Sciences
Balaji Institute Of Technology & Science, Narsampet, Warangal, Telangana State, India

Abstract – **This paper focuses on the concept of adopting collocations in improving speaking skills of students particularly in academic environment. An understanding of collocation is vital for all learners in improving vocabulary and comprehending language at large. It is essential that they are not only conscious of the variety and mere density of this particular feature of the language but that they are able to use these collocations both within and outside the classrooms to become proficient in their regular interactions.**

Collocations arise spontaneously in text as an phenomenon of the meaningful use of language in Context. It is not enough for the students to possess the knowledge of vocabulary as individual words because a single word rarely stands alone. Therefore, language teachers need to make sure that their students know which word goes with which other word(s), and that necessitates teaching collocations. By imparting knowledge of collocations teachers can help learners acquire the language more quickly and efficiently.

The collocation ability of English decides whether learners could masterly use real English in effective communication. Many college students often ignore the learning and study collocations of the target language. This causes the students to commit many collocation mistakes in English writing, conversations and exams. Some implementable countermeasures of these mistakes are proposed for pedagogic and learning purpose as well. While mentioning the significance of collocations, this paper throws light on all relevant aspects of collocational learning and the activities to be conducted for the students to acquire knowledge of collocations. Through this collocational knowledge, students can enhance their conversational skills in EFL classrooms.

Key words: Collocations-Definition- concepts-learners of EFL- problems-solutions-activities-conversational skills.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the implications of improving interactive skills by using collocations in EFL classroom. The use of collocations is considered as a corroborative feature in enhancing conversational skills. Collocational richness in speaking indicates learner's grip in the language. Hence imparting the knowledge to learners in collocational domain acquires greater significance. At first language teachers need to have a comprehensive idea about collocational definition, types of collocations, and the range of collocational usage besides considering them like formula for making language a formulaic language to facilitate easy learning by learners. Further teachers need to work on the activities involving students to improve interactive skills using collocations. They have to explore as to what extent collocations are used by learners in the classroom. The frequency of using collocations determines level of learning English as a foreign language. It has also to be taken into account to what extent learners usually fail to retain the collocations to which they are exposed. Further it has to be examined whether the input provided regarding collocations is sufficient.

In order to inculcate the concepts of collocations in the minds of students, lists of collocations starting with two-word collocations should be provided to them with proper explanation. Suggestions should be made for ways in which they might go beyond two-word listings. In this context the concept of using formulaic language in learning language will come into picture and this should be injected in the minds of learners. Formulas are gaining an increasingly prominent position in present-day teaching and reference materials and entire teaching approaches have been based around the learning of formulaic language (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).Formulaic

language is the basis of acquisition of a language because it promotes natural language use and fluency. Hence language teachers and learners are to engage effectively with
formulaic language and need to have a pedagogical focus on collocation.

The last three decades have seen much interest within the second language teaching community in the phenomenon of formulaic language. Learning formulaic language has been viewed as an essential element in achieving native like production (Pawley & Syder, 1983) and as key to the general language acquisition process (Peters, 1983).

Collocation is one of the most intricate features in second language learning, but has been mostly ignored by the language teachers and researchers. The primary question concerns with teachers how collocations are best learnt by students. Listings of the individual words that second language learners are most likely to need have been used for many years (e.g., Thorndike & Lorge, 1944; West, 1953).collocations are in general much rarer, much more diverse, and much more strongly tied to specific areas of discourse than are individual words. Normally a collocation list is used in imparting as a language less number of times by teachers than they use the traditional word lists.

The fundamental question to be addressed is that of whether a useful learning inventory of
target collocations can be specified for a particular group of learners. Therefore it is to be found whether a pedagogically-useful listing of target collocations can be compiled for one particular area of English in which the word list approach has been particularly popular – that of English for academic purposes.

II. THE DEFINITION OF COLLOCATION

A collocation is made up of two or more words that are commonly used together in English. It is a familiar combination of words, in particular words that regularly appear together and thereby express meaning by association. Learners need to think of collocations as words that usually go together. Collocations are used as combination of words that are remembered as wholes and often used together with greater than usual frequency . They are very common in business settings when certain nouns are normally combined with certain verbs or adjectives for example draw up a deal.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLOCATION

Many students take the amount of English words as the main standard to measure the ability of learning English as a foreign language, and it appears that by memorizing many words one could freely use this language, but in fact, one should understand that it is more vital to know the bonds among words, proper combination of words, phrases and lexical chunks.

College students would often use the lexical collocation which only deals with the former language situation and they would often extend and use some lexical collocation rules without taking into account the exception and limitation of the special language situation. The collocation rules are decided by the present language situation. Students often would not know how to properly use the word to express right meaning in formal or informal occasions, for example, "return" is more formal than "bring back or take back", and "tough" is more general and relaxed than "strict or harsh."

Learners should be aware of concept that collocation can be used not only to help understand and handle lexis but also to communicate thoughts more effectively.

IV. CONCEPTS RELEVANT TO LEARNING OF COLLOCATIONS

A. Predictability of Collocations-

Among collocations, some are much more predictable than others. 'Blond' collocates strongly with 'hair', 'flock' with 'sheep'. Some collocations are totally predictable, such as 'spick' with 'span'. "Collocations should not be

confused with 'association of ideas.' The way lexemes work together may have nothing to do with 'ideas.' We say in English *green with jealousy* (not *blue* or *red*), though there is nothing literally 'green' about 'jealousy.'" (David Crystal, 2005)

B. Collocational Range-

Collocational range refers to the set of items that typically go along with a word. The amount of a collocational range is to some extent determined by a word's level of specificity and number of meanings. The first is its level of specificity: the more common a word is, the broader its collocational range; the more specific it is, the more limited its collocational range. "The second factor which determines the collocational range of an item is the number of senses it has. Most words have several senses and they tend to attract a different set of collocates for each sense." (MonaBaker,1992)

C. Collocations of Strength (Strong & Weak) and Frequency (Frequent & Infrequent)

There is also a difference between strong/weak and frequent/infrequent collocations. A collocation that is frequent for example 'a warm day' need not be a strong collocation, as either word in the company suggests a number of other collocations such as 'Warm sweater', 'Warm smile'. In the same way, a particularly strong collocation may be used very infrequently (e.g. bat your eyelashes). The most handy combination in pedagogic view, then, seems to be a combination of strong and frequent collocation. A strong/infrequent collocation may be significant to draw the learners' attention to its existence. However some class time would need to be spent on collocations at the weak/infrequent ones also. This helps the students use collocations of all types to make their interactions in the class hurdle free.

D. Verb Collocations

Some of the most common verb + noun collocations used in everyday situations help the students in enhancing their speaking skills. Here are some examples of the types of verb: to come prepared, to find a replacement etc

E .Noun collocations

Nouns are also important as part of collocations because they are usually the words that carry the most meaning within a sentence. Since the majority of general nouns usually require further qualification, many collocations are formed with a noun as a primary word: make a mistake, do your homework ,well-paid job, boring job etc.

F. Business Collocations

Some collocations are used in specifically in business and Professional areas. To form such collocations, different forms including adjectives, nouns and other verbs are combined with key words used in such situations. Here are some of the business collocation examples: to deposit a check, hard-earned money.

G. Ardent Expressions - Strong Collocations

Adverb intensifiers can be used to emphasize verbs. Such emphatic expressions are used in formal English in written documents and when speaking at formal occasions such as business meetings, negotiations and giving presentations

to foster interactive proficiency in academics. Intensifiers: deeply - strongly, with much feeling; enthusiastically - with great joy .These intensifier + verb combinations are strong collocations.

deeply regret - I am strongly sorry for my actions.
enthusiastically endorse - I happily, and with my whole heart believe in something.

V. PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

A .Quantity &Arbitrariness

A major stumbling block to most learners is the fact that there are so many possible collocations and that the choice of which word to collocate with, say, a noun is completely arbitrary. Such problems arise partly because of the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of collocations. If students are encouraged to record collocations as they appear, they will have proper notes of possible combinations of words forming into collocations. Learners should revise and practice the collocations they have learnt or to add new ones.

B. First Language Transfer

First Language Transfer is another ESL problem with collocation—students transfer the appropriate collocation from their first language. Many learners expect that because they collocate something a particular way in L1, it will translate directly (and correctly) into English. For instance: do your homework; Write your homework

Collocation grids can be useful in helping learners to understand which words are possible collocates and which aren't, by finding the correct combination. The grids can be formed from the students' own material of written or spoken form as a correction exercise as well as more general ones in textbooks: Rob/ steal - money/car/shop/wallet

C. Method of Perceiving the Meaning

Especially when dealing with text, many learners are inclined to concentrate on the words that they have not come across so far or difficult words, rather than on the combinations of words or collocation. This is because of the method adopted by the learners normally in finding a new word and recording its meaning without considering it as a part of collocation. Even more advanced learners who know that word move on without checking for any collocates in the text. Students have relatively good command of lexical items in isolation. Although they seem to know the meanings of *big*, *heavy,* and *smoker*, they happen to produce strings like *big smoker* instead of *heavy smoker*. These problems occur due to from poor learner-training. In view of this learners need to have an idea of noticing collocations for themselves and their meaning as well

In any EFL class room, learners should be provided with different material such as articles from daily Newspapers and journals, selected paragraphs from story books and videos of TV soap operas and recorded commentaries on different sports. Students should be trained to collect such material for this kind of noticing activity. In this way students will be benefitted from such authentic material and learn – the language and especially collocations in a natural way.

D. Segmenting and Linking in Phonology

A direct result of this inability to recognize collocation is that many learners sound very stilted when speaking. The reasons for this are:

1. They pronounce every word with equal stress

2. They fail to notice how the sentence could be cut up in to segments.

3. They don't link such chunks together. Without knowledge of collocation, learners are unable to divide, link and stress longer sentences correctly making them sound unnatural. By providing choral drilling and some extra time students can comprehend the aspect of collocation. As an additional effort, teacher can go for a demonstration on the board to show the students where the linking and stress occurs. This can be particularly for those students who learn more visually.

E. Influences of Native Language

Most lexical collocation mistakes are related with the native language. Foreign language learners would deliberately or sometimes unintentionally correlate or compare the aspects of foreign language with their native language, which would lead to irregular associations or collocation mistakes because of the thinking mode of native language. For example, students would often replace "take medicine" by "eat medicine". 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"

F. Lack of Cultural Competency

Lack of cultural competence could also be a strong reason for learners' failure to do well on culturally- denoted collocations. Certainly, knowledge of cultural is a factor that has a clear impact on collocation knowledge. Teliya and Bragina (1998) argue that the use of some lexical collocations is restricted by certain cultural stereotypes (p. 170). For instance, they stress that metaphorical collocates serve as clues to the cultural data associated with the meaning of restricted collocations. Thus cultural knowledge of a learner has its own role in improving the knowledge of culture based collocations which can be used in interactions where culture is involved.

G. Lack of Awareness

Students need to have a word relevant problem brought to their notice before they even understand that it is a problem. They may not be fully aware of the fact that some words go together better than others. Hence such awareness about word combinations becomes an essential feature and it should be a part in language instruction.

The importance of collocations for successful language learning was recognized over seventy years ago (Palmer, 1933). Hornby (1974) contend that oral listening comprehension and reading speed can both be improved by increasing collocational knowledge. Marton (1977) showed that collocation errors constitute a high percentage of errors committed by L2 learners. Very little attention is paid to the syntagmatic aspect of lexis (ability of items to co-occur, otherwise known as collocation.

Negligence of collocation in EFL classroom by the students should be an alarming aspect for teachers. Carelessness by students leads to all sorts of collocational errors, which can be more troublesome in general communication in classrooms than grammatical errors. Hence it is the need of hour to disseminate some practical ways through which teachers can help learners to minimize collocational errors in classrooms. Concentration can be shown more on the ways used to improve interactive sessions where collocations can be part of students' oral discourse.

VI. ACTIVITIES TO HELP STUDENTS WITH COLLOCATION

When students come to comprehend that collocation will play an important role in their communication in English, various activities to improve their collocational knowledge can be mentioned which intern enhances their fluency in language.

*Recycling activities***:** Students may be suggested to revise collocations from a previous lesson.

Matching activities in which the collocations are divided and written on separate cards. Students need to use collocation dictionaries to find better ways of expressing ideas, including replacing words with similar meaning words to create typical collocations, or finding the 'odd verb out'. Students should work to match up split collocations.

Board races where the teacher calls out one half of the collocation and the students work in teams to write the other half on the board.

Communicative activities: With collocations organized by topic, learners can conduct a survey among their classmates and follow it up with a written or oral report. "The ability to deploy a wide range of lexical chunks both accurately and appropriately is probably what most distinguishes advanced learners from intermediate ones." (Thornbury 2002:116)

Textual analysis activities Students should practice to analyze texts to heighten their awareness of collocations and to find further possible collocations with certain items in the text using a collocation dictionary. Gap-filling based activity on authentic texts; prediction exercises are the activities in which teacher has to reveal a text gradually and get the students to predict the next word or phrase. Asking the students to reconstruct the content of a text from a few words only serves to highlight the central importance of collocations as against individual words.

*Preparation activities***:** Students should brainstorm nouns on a particular subject. Then they should get verbs and adjectives that collocate with such nouns, then adverbs that collocate with the verbs, thus building up a number of lexically intense collocational segments. Teacher should advise the students to write collocations in a variety of ways - in boxes, grids, and scales . Learners can affix fresh words in the appropriate parts as they come across them in texts and lessons etc.

Speaking activities Students may be asked to do creative drills. For example, they should practice on 'Find somebody who...' activity using collocations. For instance, Find someone 'who has been on a strict diet'.

A short talk or telling a story, perhaps three of four times would be very useful. This activity using collocations improves the fluency of the students. Language teacher may provide recorded radio news items, or TV advertising to give examples of typical collocations. This would also help students in learning language with proper intonation and pronunciation.

First, learners should realize the importance of collocation, and teachers should also give due regard to it while the teaching outline of English. some practical collocation exercises should be the part of the selected teaching materials in colleges.

VII. CONCLUSION

Collocation, or how words occur together in speech, is an important part of speaking fluently. To be able to produce native-like speech, students need to know which words work together well. Of course, it is not an easy task in making sure that the words we put together in English feel 'comfortable' in each others' association. Here lies the crux of learning collocations. Learning collocations is learning typical expressions in a language. Methodical understanding of collocations makes learners competent socially at the level of personal and technical communications. It is only by doing this through increased exposure that they can be fluent in speaking English language.

Collocation is a major issue in current linguistic thinking and its applications to language learning and speaking, in particular. This is partly because a sound knowledge of collocations brings language production closer to native speaker norms. Students should always understand that they can learn a word easily by the company it keeps. By increasing their knowledge of collocations they can improve their interactive skills either in classroom situation or in outside formal teaching environment.

REFERENCES

[1]   David Crystal, *How Language Works*. Overlook Press, 2005
[2]   Hornby, A.S. (1974). *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[3]   Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*. London: Thomson Heinle
[4]   Marton, W. (1977). "Foreign vocabulary learning as problem no. 1 of language teaching at the advanced level." *Interlanguage Studies Bulletin*, 2(1), 33-57.

[5]   Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Course book on Translation*. Routledge,
[6]   Nattinger, J. R., & DeCarrico, J. S. (1992). *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[7]   Palmer H.E. (1933). *Second interim report in English Collocations*. Tokyo: Kaitakusha.
[8]   Pawley, A., & Syder, F. H. (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and native like fluency. In J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 191-226). New York: Longman.
[9]   Peters, A. M. (1983). *The units of language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[10]   Sonaiya, C. O. (1988) *The Lexicon in Second Language Acquisition: A Lexical Approach to Error Analysis*. A Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornel University.
[11]   Teliya, V. & Bragina, N. (1998). Phraseology as a language of culture: Its role in the representation of a collective mentality. In A. P. Cowie (Ed.), Phraseology, *theory, analysis and applications* (pp. 161-186). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
[12]   Thornbury, Scott *How to Teach Vocabulary* (Longman 2002)
[13]   Thorndike, E. L., & Lorge, I. (1944). *The teacher's word book of 30,000 words*. New York: Teacher's college, Columbia University.West, M. (1953). *A general service list of English words*. London: Longman.