# Collocation and lexical development for language learners

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## Abstract

English language teaching, which has given so much attention to syllabus design and methodology, remains naive about learning vocabulary. All except the most advanced textbooks severely limit vocabulary, while simplified readers also do that *and* excise idioms, set phrases and non-literal use of language. The profession seems to avoid the question of how learners can progress from controlled classroom discourse and conventional materials to authentic text, at least for its lexical content. There are probably no ready solutions, but this paper suggests that *collocation* has some potential, and that the word, as well as the practice, should be standard in the ELT classroom. Thereafter the teacher exploits lexis as it is met in context.

Carter (1987), in his book <u>Vocabulary</u> says:

*For many years vocabulary has been the poor relation of language teaching. Its neglect is in part due to a specialization in linguistic research on syntax and phonology which may have fostered a climate in which vocabulary was felt to be a less important element in learning a second language.*

The following statement by Gleason (1961), while strangely appearing to suggest that vocabulary does not have "content" or "expression", typifies attitudes held in the 1960's:

*In learning a second language, you will find that vocabulary is comparatively easy, in spite of the fact that it is vocabulary that students fear most. The hard part is in mastering new structures in both content and expression.*

Communicative language learning has perhaps "de-emphasised" this obsession with structure, but it has done little to solve the problem of vocabulary. The problem of vocabulary refers here to the fact that students in Thailand at B.A. or B.Ed. levels, do not have enough words to perform proficiently in any skill area; secondly that Gleason was right to suggest that it is vocabulary that students fear most, but wrong to suggest that vocabulary is comparatively easy. Put bluntly, there is no hope that our students would pick up a novel and read it, something light and racy from the airport bookstall, and the main reason for this is that they do not have enough vocabulary for even moderate reading. This explains the circularity:language learners develop vocabulary by *extensive* reading; but our students do not read extensively because of an impoverished vocabulary.

While academic literature has since recognised both the importance and the difficulty of vocabulary teaching, methodology, and by implication current orthodoxy in language teaching, seems still to be unwilling to tackle the problem. Harmer (1983:85) in his widely recognised book <u>The Practice of English Language Teaching</u> allows just a little over one page of the 250 or so in the book to the subject "Presenting Vocabulary". This is prefaced as follows:

*Frequently the teacher will find it necessary to explain the meaning of a word or short phrase. (There can be no quarrel with that proposition). The teacher's aim here will be to explain the new word as quickly and as efficiently as possible.*

He does not explain why it must be quickly. It might be more profitable occasionally to exploit words, and their multiple meanings and occurrences, than some of the trivial exercises which are for the present thought to be "good" language teaching. It is interesting to consider Hamer's paragraph length proposals for "presenting" vocabulary. There include a) realia b) pictures c) mime action and gesture d) contrast (bit vs.small, empty vs.full) e) enumeration ("vegetable" as a superordinate, followed by cabbage, carrot etc.) f) explanation and g) translation, which he concludes with the comment:

*Translation, then, seems a useful measure if used sparingly, but it should be used with caution (Harmer, 1983:86).*

Now there is nothing wrong with any of these ways of dealing with vocabulary. It is just a matter of how the learner gets enough of them. Some 90 pages further on in the book, under the heading "identifying functional organisation" the following text occurs:

*Most species of gulls signal appeasement in fighting by turning their head sharply away from their opponent. This clearly identifiable display is called headflagging. Young gulls do not signal in this way; if they are threatened, they run to cover. One gull species, however, has proved to be an exception to the rule. Chicks of the ledge-nesting kittiwake species do employ the headflagging display when they are frightened. Their anomalous behaviour is the result of the interplay between innate behaviour patterns and environmental forces (Harmer, 1983, 171).*

The text is then analysed in terms of generalisation, definition, exception, reason and inference. In fact there is nothing conceptually difficult about that text, *except* vocabulary, which is exactly of the type one would find in hundreds of pages of encyclopaedia and/or information-based text. The problems might be even more serious in literary text, not because of a greater incidence of low-frequency words, but because a number of words are used figuratively and therefore occur in unusual association. It would be easy from this point to proceed to some very dangerous and damaging conclusions, such as that our learners will, in most cases, never be able to read authentic text, whether informational or literary; while deducing from Harmer that "presenting vocabulary" is something which belongs to the elementary stages of language teaching; and that thereafter learners just acquire vocabulary. In most cases-they do not. In the case of the above text it would make sense to consider its general organisation, which is a "study skill" required by students who need to retrieve information from L2 texts, through the medium of Thai, and to exploit the text for its vocabulary, which could be classified as "formal" "abstract", and, additionally, "difficult for most Thai learners of English".

In short not enough is done about the teaching of vocabulary. It is not the only problem of language learning, but it is the most neglected. The problem is carefully evaded by the constant use of simplified texts, carefully edited learner materials, and word lists which include all items which, following Harmer's basal methodology, are demonstrable, pictorial, and as a last resort, explicable or translatable. In this respect it is interesting to consider, from the above text, "appeasement" and "anomalous"

It is well-known that native speakers acquire vocabulary over many years. It seems that after beginner levels many foreign learners are left to do likewise, but of course, unless they have massive exposure to both spoken and written target language, they have very little opportunity to acquire more than a fraction of the words which are neces-

sary to function in a language, in the lexical meaning of "function", and without reference to its specialised meaning in ELT. It follows from this that learners need help. More time, and thought, should also be given to the teaching of vocabulary, but we must be systematic about it. It is doubtful if a random list of words (which might include both "appeasement" and "anomalous") would serve much purpose, even if presented in conjunction with a text. The obvious problem is that vocabulary seems to be less amenable to systematic grouping than either phonology, with its neat categories and subcategories of vowels and consonants, or syntax, which forms and transforms, but it is not impossible. Words form groups or sets; words can be defined in relation to each other; and words collocate. All this can be exploited, from an early stage, in the language teaching classroom. The feature proposed here is quite distinct from Harmer's methodology, because it deliberately does not note the separateness of words (whether for drawing, explanation etc.) but the associational quality of words--words with other words. It is contended that if presented with care and a little imagination, words, and even set phrases and idioms, can be every bit as interesting to the language learner as any other topic which is exploited for language learning purposes.

To say that words collocate means nothing more than that certain words repeatedly and predictably occur alongside other words. In other words, any pair or group of words occurring or fitting together in this predictable way is a collocation. Collocate and collocation can be extremely useful words in the classroom, if taught, with the warning that they are *classroom* words, and have no validity outside the classroom.

To exemplify with a short sample of classroom discourse: the teacher says "I always wear these thin shirts in a hot .........", leaving the sentence incomplete and inviting learners to provide the missing word "climate". "Hot climate" is then a collocation. Of course "hot weather" is equally a collocation, but does not fit the example grammatically, after the article "a". The teacher may follow this up with a question related to the

real world, of the type. "What sort of clothes would you wear in a cold...?" A limited range of examples of this kind would be sufficient to illustrate that "hot" and "cold" collocate with "climate". The teacher may then invite other words with which "hot" and "cold" equally occur, and it should not be difficult to elicit "food", "water", "air" etc. He may then ask, without providing a context, if it is possible to speak of "hot music", possibly miming or gesturing it, to make use of Harmer's limited methodology. He may then ask if it is possible to speak of "cold music" (leaving aside the different, but related, matter of "cool music", which is a further collocation). With one or two further examples, possibly including "hot money", the idea of collocation should be already established.

At this point collocation crosses certain boundaries--from the literal into the figurative--possibly into the area of idiom, where knowing the words which comprise the idiom does not ensure that the hearer/reader can decode the new formation. Thus a learner may know the core items "smell" and "rat", but fail to understand, when a person says "I smell a rat", that that person is suspicious. Thus, "hot", in the phrases "hot music" and "hot money" does not mean quite the same thing as "hot" in other collocations, but it is still not seriously opaque; that is, the hearer/reader could readily guess its meaning, with or without a context. Drawing attention to collocation in the classroom has important methodological implications. For example, a teacher might say something like the following about the phrase "in a hot climate".

*"a hot climate"; you will know what a hot climate is; Thailand has a hot climate for most of the year. But "hot" also collocates--do you remember the word it simply means "fits together with "--"hot" collocates with "music". (Manit) what sort of music is "hot music"? (pause) Where would you expect to hear such music? .........I can also say "hot money". What sort of person would have "hot money" .........
.........................*

In such a sequence, which sounds acceptable as classroom discourse, the teacher is changing the focus, or at least the topic, of the lesson; to use an idiom, he is jumping about. This is perhaps permissible in the language teaching classroom; even desirable. The text or topic of the lesson is probably of very limited interest, as in a lesson in which third year students are required to spend the whole hour practising a trivial dialogue about asking for the bill in a hotel. It is the contention here that learners are not interested in asking for the bill in a hotel for more than a few minutes. After that time they can no longer role-play with conviction; they begin to disbelieve but the same students are interested in words, in phrases, and in acquisition in a general way. Such activity does not fit neatly into lesson planning; it may lead to learners acquiring some seemingly low-frequency vocabulary. This can be exemplified with the following text:

> *Majestic temples and magnificent elephants, glittering roofs and garlands of orchids, shining seas and shimmering silks, fascinating markets and fabulous silver, enchanting people and exotic cuisine .......one could write a long book about the land they call Thailand (and many seasoned travellers have).*

This extract is clearly from a promotional type text, and may be used for various reasons, either for integrated skills teaching, language appropriacy, or as a prelude to a parallel writing exercise. The point is that in the noun phrases which form the greater part of this text, the nouns are known to even the weakest learners at tertiary level: temples, elephants, seas, markets etc. but the adjectives are probably not known. The unrestricted collocational property of *some* of these adjectives could be explored thus:

> *Now "magnificent" means "very, very good; something you really like or admire" and it is not a word I usually put with "elephant". I might say"*
>
> *.....................*

*has some magnificent scenery". What other words does "magnificent" collocate with? "Magnificent book"--yes-- "magnificent painting"--OK. Where would you expect to see a really magnificent painting? "Magnificent car"-- no, I don't think I would usually say that. "Magnificent win "/" magnificent victory"--very good. Where would you find those two phrases? A history book. Well maybe, but much more commonly..........that's right in the sports page of a newspaper, talking about Khaosai Galaxy.*

"Fascinating" also has the property or characteristic of collocating with a large number of words: fascinating book, movie, person, job; though it is at this point that the teacher can be discriminating, and increase sensitivity to words by *not* accepting the less likely collocations of fascinating food*, fascinating weather*, or fascinating road*. From the example quoted in the original text this raises the question of why the market is fascinating. It should be noted that there is no intention of exploiting all the adjectives in this text; though if "magnificent" and "fascinating" have not been too time consuming, one might proceed with "enchanting", in spite of its being a low-frequency word, and 'exotic' illustrating that an overworked collocation like 'exotic cuisine' is in fact a cliche, and a cliche, generally, is to be avoided.

Collocation, so far, seems to be adjective plus noun. Variations of this is contained in Stevie Smith's poem "Tenuous and Precarious" (see over), where a group of latinate sounding adjectives ending in the letters/-us/ are used as the names of her family -- and all have negative connotations, the most negative being her husband, Perfidious. This is a poem which lends itself perfectly to "collocational response" from learners, who are invited to put nouns with the names/ adjectives which constitute the proposition of the poem. As a point of technique rather than method, it is probably not wise to try and make collocations

of all the names in one lesson, but exploit it slowly, for short periods, so that the poem stays in the mind of the learners and becomes part of a total acquired language programme (TALP).

### Tenuous and Precarious

*by Stevie Smith*

Tenuous and Precarious
Were my guardians,
Precarious and Tenuous,
Two Romans.

My father was Hazardous,
Hazardous,
Dear old man,
Three Romans.

There was my brother Spurious,
Spurious Posthumous,
Spurious was Spurious,
Was four Romans.

My husband was Perfidious,
He was Perfidious,
Five Romans.

Surreptitious, our son,
Was Surreptitious,
He was six Romans.

Our cat Tedious
Still lives,
Count not Tedious
Yet.

My name is Finis,
Finis, Finis,
I am Finis,
Six, five, four, three, two,
One Roman,
Finis.

However, collocation then is not necessarily adjective plus noun, nor indeed any other fixed combination, though some collocations, for example "the more the ......................." are syntactically invariable; that is, "the more is merrier" cannot be said. Here, the method used is to leave out the final element of a well-known collocation and invite the class as a whole to complete it. This is particularly valuable where the collocation has been met previously, either in a text or in speech, though the latter is likely to have been "lost" unless the teacher drew attention to it at the time. This of course applies most to those collocations where the first word almost rigidly determines what follows, as, quoting again from Carter,

| | |
|---|---|
| unrequited | (love) |
| unmitigated | (disaster) |

and, in non-adjectival combinations,

| | |
|---|---|
| readily | (admit) |
| ups and | (downs) |
| hit and | (miss) |

Collocation almost certainly plays a part in vocabulary acquisition by native speakers, as many such speakers who would not be able to "explain" (cf.Harmer) "unmitigated" would have no trouble at all with the collocation "unmitigated disaster". From this it is hypothesised that collocation is a way of building vocabulary and avoiding the false economy of constantly limiting vocabulary.

It is the more restricted collocations that should be used as to when teaching. There is no need to worry if these overlap with, or are elsewhere classified differently as "fixed expressions". Thus with "She's a pain in the ................" treat the word "neck" there as part of a collocational grouping. However, one should avoid a core word like "take", which equally collocates with "a holiday/ a rest/a walk/a look", partly because each of these phrases is transparent, and partly because drawing attention to it as a collocation does not seem to help in remembering it. In other words the whole process is at least partially concerned with "familiarising the less familiar". If language does work like this, then it seems well to teach it like this. Any authentic text will provide the necessary examples.

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## Note :

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## The Author

Mike Long worked in the supervisory unit of the Teacher Education Department of Thailand from 1972 to 1991, during which time he was involved in various aspects of pre-service and in-service teachers training. His extensive experience in the Teacher Education Department enabled him to observe the problems of teacher at various levels, and he organised a very large number of courses and training programmes in an attempt to find solutions to these problems. In addition to teacher training he is interested in the teaching of literature to nonnative speakers. He also writes short stories, several of which have been published, and now works in the University of East Asia, in Macau.

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