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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Aims of Task

This paper examines the difficulties students have with **collocation** in English. Specifically, it aims to:

- 1) understand the *extent* to which collocation is a problem for students;
- 2) identify the particular kinds of problems which they encounter;
- 3) suggest ways of dealing with those problems.

This will involve identifying and analyzing the collocational difficulties experienced by Japanese high school students aged 16-17, before suggesting an approach and possible materials for dealing with those difficulties.

1.2 Exploring Collocation

The central concepts of research done by J. R. Firth (1951) were originally **colligation** and **collocation**. Unfortunately, colligation failed to take off and collocation was recognized and accepted only as an insight. Firth, who was considered by many to be the “Father of Collocation”, believed in the separation of Lexis and Semantics because he thought collocation was the central part of a word’s meaning. From his research, he was responsible for bringing the term collocation into prominence during the 60’s and the 70’s (Carter, R. & M. McCarthy 1988). By definition, “collocation is the likelihood of co-occurrence between words, or the way in which words associate with one another” (McCarthy 1990:158). For example, a word such as *blonde* collocates strongly with *hair*. The word *beige* collocates strongly with the word *car*. But they cannot be collocated inversely to become *beige hair* or *blonde car*. Collocates can also be separated by many relevant words, making their relationship very difficult for learners to identify. For this reason, Collocation presents many problems for learners. Some of these problems to be examined will include, measuring collocation restriction, paradigms vs. syntagms and lexical vs. grammatical relationships.

1.3 Collocation Restriction

Understanding collocation restriction can be difficult for EFL students. Carter (1998:70)

helps illustrate the complexity of these relationships by arguing the presence of a **cline**. For students to be able to determine how fixed lexical patterns are, they need to identify in which group the expression belongs. In (a) **Unrestricted collocation**: most core words fall into this category. An example would be *fat*, *bright*, and *head*. This may also include core verbs such as *take a look*, *rest*, or *holiday*. Other abstract entities in this category might include *run a business/shop/team*, etc. In (b) **Semi-restricted collocation**: patterns embrace a number of items, which can be substituted into more determined syntactic slots as in *harbor doubt*, *grudges* or *uncertainty*. Group (c) or **Familiar collocation**: contains combinations between words that keep regular company with each other. Examples from this group might include *innocent bystander* or *lukewarm reception*. Finally, in the partnerships of category (d) **Restricted Collocation**: words are generally more closed and fixed, as in *stark naked* or *pitch black*.

Carter believed the cline of collocational restriction runs less fixed to more fixed (a to c). The Syntactic Structure cline: includes (a) **Flexible** – *nice to see you*, (b) **Regular** – *to smell a rat* and (c) **Irregular** – *the more the merrier*, groups. The cline of Syntactic Opacity: also runs from less fixed to more fixed (a to d). These include: (a) **Transparent** – *long time, no see*, (b) **Semi-idioms/metaphores/idiomatic similes** – *a fat salary*, (c) **Semi-transparent** – *bumper to bumper traffic*, and finally (d) **Opaque/overt** (which are uninterpretable without contextual/cultural knowledge) as in *bottoms up*. He concludes that clear lines of “fixity” cannot be placed in the main categories. A focus between intelligibility and assessing the degrees of difficulty in learning and encoding fixed expressions can be linked. The (b-group) idiom *a piece of cake* will be used later in this report to identify a collocational problem for L2 students.

1.4 Problems and Solutions Introduced

As presented in the relevant literature, there are many problems that EFL students may encounter when trying to understand collocational relationships. I believe the most difficult problem for students is knowing **how to** collocate word relationships. Therefore, I predict the *extent* of collocational problems for *my* students, will specifically be in the areas of:

- a) **Recognizing** collocational relationships out of context.
- b) **Understanding** fixed expressions or idioms.
- c) **Frequency** in using expressions appropriately.

After these problems are explored, possible solutions for teachers to help learners solve these problems, will be examined through research-based methods including:

- a) The use of **dictionaries** as a practical classroom resource.
- b) The use of **grids** and **scales** to help illustrate word relationships.
- c) The utilization of **computers** as a potential resource.

2.0 Understanding Collocation

2.1 The Collocational Spectrum

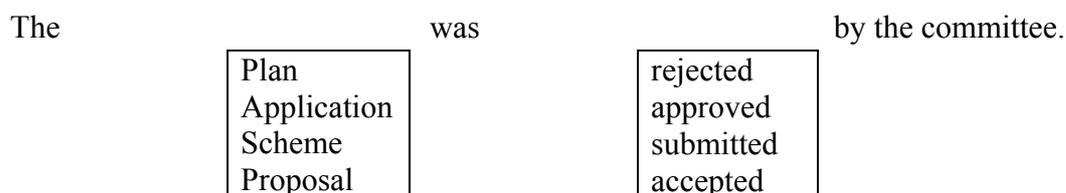
Because collocational links cover a very broad spectrum, they can pose great problems for L2 learners. Aitchison (1994:89) illustrates this range starting from (A) **Commonly Associated Words** such as *fresh-faced youths*, *rude adolescents* or *unruly hair*. The next group on the scale is (B) **Cliches or Habitual Connections** such as *astronomically expensive* or *agonizing decision*. Third on the scale are (C) **Freezes**. They include pairs of words that are fixed or frozen together such as *bread and butter* or *bride and groom*. Finally, these cliches and freezes overlap into the (D) **Idiom Group**. These phrases contain words that change meaning completely once they are combined and cannot be isolated word-by-word. Examples include *call it a day* or *fall into place*. This group will be exploited further for problem-identification of collocation.

Because this range spans so broadly, some idioms resist being changed. For example, Carter (1998:65) demonstrates, “*to have/get/give cold feet* (being hesitant) cannot be altered to *chilly feet* or *frozen feet* without changing the meaning.” Idioms pose a particular problem for learners because they are frozen syntactically. They also have very unique collocational patterns, such as *let the cat out of the bag* (to reveal a secret) cannot be decoded if the words are set in isolated form. Sinclair (1987:323) supports this by stating, “dependency of meaning correlates with the operation of the idiom principle to make fewer and larger choices.” I agree because students need sufficient context clues to understand word meaning, especially when learning fixed expressions. **Context** will be the target in identifying the *extent* of student-collocational problems.

2.2 Paradigms, Syntagms & Lexical Cohesion

Collocation can also be difficult for students to understand because it can occur on a

paradigmatic or **syntagmatic** scale. The paradigmatic scale is more vertical in nature and includes synonyms, antonyms and hyponyms. The syntagmatic scale, which is more left-to-right in dimension, has more grammatical dependencies. In this lexical structure, the patterns are more likely to occur due to their linguistic environment. McCarthy (1990:16) shows us an example of this pattern structure here in figure 2.2.1.



Other linguists involved in the study of lexical collocation have also contributed to the development and better understanding of lexis. This group includes Halliday, Sinclair and Hasan. They referred to lexis as a *delicate* grammar, and believed that it should be studied in similar reference to chain patterns on a syntagmatic axis. This approach leaves the paradigmatic axis as a choice. Halliday and Hasan (1976) used a “5-component” scale to acknowledge this **lexical cohesion** of linguistically connected text. Under the target sentence, *There`s a boy climbing that tree*, the reiteration category includes (a) **Same-word repetition:** The *boy* is going to fall. (b) **Synonym/near synonym:** The *lad* is going to fall. (c) **Superordinate:** The *child* is going to fall; and lastly, (d) **General word:** The *idiot* is going to fall.

The 5th component, which is collocation, is left undivided. Collocation is classified into all lexical relationships that do not depend on any reiteration or referential identity. This scheme makes a convenient analytic tool for written texts. These lexical ties must be recognized as *lexico-semantic* relationships. Finally, another problem for students may be in identifying these differences, primarily because the relationships tend to be *semantic-syntactic* and generally problematic in nature. The *extent* of the problem may depend on students` prior background and understanding of these word relationships.

2.3 Understanding Collocational Relationships

Understanding lexical and grammatical relationships poses an even bigger problem for students. McIntosh (1961) considered lexical and grammatical relationships to be of equal importance. He referred to these lexical patterns as **ranges**. From this, he believed that words only have compatibility to a certain tolerance. But for the L2 learner, knowing the range tolerance of a word can be quite difficult. A possible solution could

be, when students encounter new or unusual collocates, to categorize words into **range extensions**. This allows for the attraction of new partners to the initial list. An example might be in classifying a new word such as *software* into an extension of the range *computer hardware*. In his research, McIntosh points out how language learners process these collocations and many other multi-word units. However, both Halliday and Hasan (1966) believed that because these associations were so difficult to define or label, collocation should be left undivided. Halliday went one step further and decided to focus his research on how collocation is used in the generation of lexical **fields**.

These sets were established by formal statistics without reference to meaning or **semantic-field** notions. According to he and Sinclair (ibid.) this co-occurrence had two important features. Firstly, a gap between relevant words may be present. Secondly, collocation seems to be grammatically independent in type. They both agreed that these grammatical restrictions are important. But, it was Halliday who paralleled syntagmatic structure to paradigmatic systems, and separated them from collocation sets in lexis. These sets can be seen as homonyms. Sinclair agreed to an extent, but allowed for the occurrence of one **polysemous** item, if collocate sets overlapped into each other. Finally, sets of collocates can allow for the ability to distinguish the differences between genuine lexical sets i.e. *soccer field* and *baseball field*, and a lexical series such as *tabletop* and *desktop*. However, they both agreed that having to describe the language lexicon, is indeed a difficult task. Based on this research, it can be seen that collocation has many difficult elements to consider. These elements can cause many problems for EFL students trying to successfully understand and learn collocational relationships.

3.0 Problems of Collocation for Learners

3.1 General Problems Identified

Because collocation can be defined broadly or narrowly, it makes it difficult to classify categorically. However, the extent of this problem may be in coherency and global organization. This refers to common knowledge of collocational appropriacy as part of native-speaking competence. In the case of L2 learners, where collocation is language specific, this appropriacy may not be primarily determined by universal constraints. Another factor to be considered is age. Aitchison (1987) found that children around age 7 were able to fit associations together. At first, children cope with their newly acquired lexis by classifying things from larger to smaller scales. Even though these findings are

disputed, **collocational links** appear to be stronger than those between **co-ordinates**. In word-association research and experiments, children were found more likely to associate words *paradigmatically* when they were young, and *syntagmatically* when they got older. Another significant finding may be the acquisition of efficient retrieval skills. However, the argument still remains in *how* children develop the need to process and retrieve words as their vocabulary sets become larger. In his research, Alexander (1984) also found these problems in teaching collocation to L2 learners.

- 1) **Necessary context/information** related to the frequency and currency of particular word patterns.
- 2) **Greatly variable style levels**, particularly in the area of conventionalized language.
- 3) **Recognizing points on a cline**, where patterns are neither fixed or clearly fixed, are difficult to establish for students.
- 4) **Groups of idiom-prone items** such as *go, give, break, hit, take,* and *read* have extensive, but not completely open, collocations.

He believed that words concerning complex-collocability relations (#3) are the most difficult for students. I have also recognized this to be a problem in my own students as well. For example, Japanese students will often mistakenly refer to a younger sibling as a *small* brother or sister instead of the proper synonym *little* brother or sister. Ruhl (1979) argues that problem #4 (idiom-proneness) has to be resolved by lexicographers. He believed that idiom-proneness and polysemy are attributing factors and the main point conveyed in items remaining the same. An example might be *cut away, cut some corners* or *cut to the chase*. All of which contain the word *cut*, but vary greatly in meaning and context. To a native speaker, they are ordinary idiomatic expressions. But for an EFL student, they can very easily produce a multitude of literal confusion.

3.2 Collocation problems for my students

Collocation, especially fixed expressions and idioms, can be very difficult for students to learn or understand. To support this theory, a lesson on such expressions was presented to 200 Japanese high school students (aged 16-17) over a three-week period. The idiom, *a piece of cake*, which means “something very easy to do” (Collins COBUILD 1988: 103: 3.2), was chosen as a follow-up survey sample. To find the *extent* of collocational problems, I argue that meaningful context is necessary for

understanding. To support this argument, 100 students from Group A were given the expression in isolated form. In addition, no context clues, elaborate explanation or resources were provided. As one might expect, the comprehension level was quite low. 18% translated it into its literal definition, *keki o hito kire* (a piece of cake). 82% stated they did not know the meaning. To demonstrate that meaningful context is necessary to help students better understand collocational relationships, the idiom was placed into the following dialogue. **Steve:** Can you do this? **Sharon:** Sure! *It's a piece of cake!*

Question: What do you think the underlined expression means?

Group B : answers

44% = I don't know

33% = It's easy

16% = It's delicious

7% = No special meaning

Why did these two groups score so differently? Here are the possible reasons to consider. Firstly, even though group B had no resources to refer to also, I attribute the higher scores to having some meaningful context on which to make an appropriate guess. This data directly correlates with Alexander's (ibid.) findings mentioned earlier. Without this context, the collocation of a word or expression proved itself quite difficult or even impossible for these students to recognize and understand. Secondly, cultural elements may have been a factor. The Japanese idiom-equivalent of *it's a piece of cake* is *asa meishi mae* (before breakfast). This meaning originated from doing one's easiest tasks before breakfast because, "it was considered a busy time of the day" (Ogami, 1992:19). In using these idioms, one might need to fully understand the context, function and possibly the origin in order to use them appropriately. For these reasons, the extent of collocational problems may go beyond simple translations. Thirdly, even though 33% of Group B chose the correct meaning of the contextualized idiom, these were the follow-up results of *how often* and *why* the students actually utilized it in their L1:

Group B: Answers

Survey question: How often do you use idioms in Japanese?

* I _____ idioms because they are _____.

always use = 4%

easy = 6%

sometimes use = 55%

usual = 19%

never use = 41%

difficult = 75%

From these results, it is difficult to measure the accuracy of students' answers because

of an unexpected variable or “*x-factor*”. The *x-factor* variable of surveys must be incorporated into these results because students may answer differently from the way they actually behave. However, I believe this problem may stem from a lower understanding of idioms in the L1. Students lacking the ability or confidence to use a fixed or idiomatic expression in their L1, *may* lack incentive to use an idiom in their L2.

Finally, another problem found from this lesson/survey, was the issue of **frequency**. I believe the extent of this problem, in part, to English being studied as a *foreign* language (EFL) in Japan, and not as a *second* language (ESL). This may give students even less opportunity to **use** these learned expressions and idioms. Students require high frequency to exercise L2 skills in order to keep them from becoming lost or fossilized. Evidence of this problem can be seen in the survey given one week later on the same idiom. The question presented was: What does *asa meishi mae* mean in English?

Group A: answers

I`m a piece of cake = 5%

It`s a piece of cake = 48%

It`s before breakfast = 23%

Couldn`t remember = 24%

From these results it can be seen that even though 48% of the students remembered the actual meaning, 52% of the students in this group still displayed a lack of complete understanding of this fixed expression. But, a possible solution to this problem might be to provide more opportunities for EFL students to use learned expressions. Without written or spoken practice, these expressions may become lost or remain misunderstood.

3.3 Utilizing the Dictionary as an Effective Resource

To help students better understand idioms and provide meaningful context, finding an effective solution was necessary. However, due to the large number of students involved, choosing a practical method was a fairly difficult task. So, the PROCEED dictionary was chosen because it was the most readily available resource to all students. The final follow-up activity to this research came when group **A** was given the same idiom *asa meishi mae*. This time, the idiom was presented in a contextual dialogue with access to information from the PROCEED *Japanese/English dictionary*. These were the results:

Question: Using the J/E dictionary, what does the **idiom** *asa meishi mae* mean?

Group A answers:

It's easy to do = 94%
I don't know = 4%
Before breakfast = 2%

Group **B** was then given the same survey. But, access to information from their PROCEED *English/Japanese dictionary* was provided instead of their Japanese/English dictionary. (Dialogue) **Steve**: Can you do this? **Sharon**: Sure! *It's a piece of cake!*

Question: Using the E/J dictionary, what does the idiom *it's a piece of cake* mean?

Group B answers:

It's easy to do = 67%
I don't know = 28%
No special meaning = 5%

Even though idioms are only one part of collocation, I argue the *extent* to collocational problems for my students is context-based. From these results it can be seen by utilizing a dictionary as a resource, is it possible to improve students' understanding of fixed expressions or idioms. Again, in reference to Alexander's (ibid.) research, students can locate the meaning of an idiomatic expression easier by using necessary background or context clues. This may eventually help EFL learners to better understand difficult collocational relationships.

4.0 Additional Solutions for Collocation Learners

4.1 Alternative Dictionaries Examined

There are many ways in which teachers can help students better understand collocation. One solution in helping students understand word relationships, as demonstrated in the earlier lesson, is utilizing an appropriate dictionary. One such dictionary is the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (1975/1983). The primary aim of the *ODCIE* in the teaching of collocation is to help the learner understand usage and put that understanding into productive use. The main strategy behind the *ODCIE* is in presenting information that has been selected to be representative of collocation which is

unrestricted. Without such restrictions, a wider range of choices is made available. The *ODCIE* has been developed specifically for the treatment of fixed expressions and boasts its strength in presentation of idiomatic expressions. This dictionary makes the understanding of collocation easier by presenting idioms and non-idioms on a scale of degrees, rather than treating them as separate properties. Another dictionary is the *BBJ Combinatory Dictionary of English* (Benson, Benson and Ilson 1986). This dictionary was written with the explicit purpose of providing headwords with their most common collocations. Word definitions are kept at an absolute minimum and all entries concentrate on the presentation of collocates. The authors of this dictionary have claimed exceptional success in raising test scores and enabling students to encode new collocations appropriately.

However, using a dictionary has several drawbacks. Firstly, a learner may have to know a large amount of background vocabulary in order to find the desired field or idiom. This is not always easy because many words are specialized or uncommon. Secondly, using such a dictionary may sacrifice a great deal of accuracy for the sake of achieving simplicity. Thirdly, Bejoint (1981, 1994) and others found that L2 learners usually utilize dictionaries as a reference, rather than for collocational information. So, a problem lies in the learner requiring appropriate citation to understand that words usually exist in variable contexts, and not isolation. Even though using dictionaries for the understanding of collocation may be difficult for L2 learners, I believe them to be an effective resource to be utilized. As demonstrated in the study using the *PROCEED* dictionary, the 200 Japanese students were able to find the meaning of *a piece of cake* easier, because they each had a copy. Finally, dictionaries can be a good resource for EFL students because many are quite portable and reasonably inexpensive to purchase.

4.2 Grids and Scales

Another possible solution for teachers to help learners better understand collocation is the use of grids and scales. Channell (1981) confronted this problem of teaching paradigmatic aspects of Lexis. After learners have mastered basic vocabulary, he suggested the incorporation of semantic insights from a combination of **componential analysis** and **field theory**. These fields and components can then be adapted into scales and grids. This helps the instructor to better illustrate a word's semantic feature as well as its collocability. The objective in using grids and scales is to get the learner to know how words relate to each other and what other words they can be combined with. These

relationships correspond to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes where lexicological investigation can then proceed. I would use this technique to demonstrate the phonological and semantic relationships of words between languages. This could easier be taught because lexical items would be presented together in groups, and not as isolated vocabulary. In figure 7.3c, an abridged sample from Rudska *et al.*, (1982) semantic grid of typical collocational patterns of words meaning *attractive*, can be seen.

Fig. 7.3c

<i>Attractive</i>	Woman	Man	Dog	Weather
Handsome	No	Yes	No	No
Pretty	Yes	No	Yes	No
Charming	Yes	Maybe	No	No
Lovely	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

However, there are many drawbacks to using grids. Porter and Williams (1983) found the grid approach can be made to suggest static models of word meanings for learners and thus assume a degree of *prescriptiveness*. Another problem they found was in the *psycholinguist validity* and *naturalness* of word set analysis. Definitions can be more complex semantically than the actual word being defined. For these reasons, I chose not to utilize grids for this particular research. Finally, it is the responsibility of the instructor to be sensitive when using grids to present vocabulary in or out of context.

4.3 Computer Assistance

Another possible solution for teachers to help students better understand collocation is by utilizing a computer. Computer-assisted word-searches are more efficient and inevitably faster than hand-collected data. Computers can also help provide data on identifying the syntactic and collocational properties of words. Halliday (1966) approached this problem when the University of Birmingham's COBUILD project was launched. He believed a corpus of 20 million words, equivalent to 2,000 hours of conversation, was the amount of lexis necessary as a minimum for getting sufficient results. By utilizing a computer to do so, he and others accomplished what might have taken decades to achieve. Computer counts have greatly facilitated the measurement of collocational partnerships, making understanding of such difficult relationships more

accessible for L2 learners. The final products of this technology and research are the first COBUILD dictionary (CCELD 1987) and the latest edition CCED 1995. I believe these dictionaries are essential for all ESL/EFL teachers to utilize for the understanding of collocation because they can provide excellent, illustrated meaning by way of actual, natural-occurring usage. I also recommend the use of the COBUILD Corpus available on CD-ROM. It is an efficient way for students and teachers with access to a computer, to quickly cross-reference difficult vocabulary. Unfortunately, the main drawback in using computers is economic. Computers and software are expensive to purchase, operate and update. Therefore, I argue, while computers are a very good method for helping L2 learners better understand collocation, they may not be the most practical for teachers and/or students to utilize on an everyday or classroom basis.

5.0 Conclusion

While collocation may be a difficult aspect of Lexis for teachers to teach and learners to learn, it is quite possible to achieve successful results. In this report, ways in which teachers can help students better understand the complexities of collocation were suggested. However, there are many other ways to do so including tree-diagrams, classified lists or even maps. But, I believe the primary element in helping EFL learners understand collocation, is for language teachers to always be open to alternative modes of presentation. Because students vary in learning styles, teachers need to be aware of which technique is most suitable for each learner and be ready to evaluate the results of each strategy. By doing this, the teacher can better able themselves to understand the needs of the student and focus change where necessary.

Even though I believe understanding collocation out of context to be the *extent* of problems for *my* students, these results represented just a small area of problems for students. For example, the survey techniques I used for these particular test groups may not have completely identified the source of other collocational problems on a more global scale. Also, the results and data collected from my research revealed many flaws. These flaws included possible (1) teacher-subjectivity (2) application-style surveys and (3) the use of only one sample idiom. For these reasons, I would have to argue, while these results were interesting and beneficial for me as a teacher, the methodology of these findings must be taken into account and considered by other researchers in this area.

However, in this research to find to what *extent* collocation was a problem for my students, I was able to find other “semi-related” problems in the process. These problems included (a) a better understanding of students’ possible misconceptions of collocation (b) apparent lack of understanding with idioms in the L1 and (c) the *x-factor* variable. To a degree, the *x-factor* was probably the biggest variable in doing research of this nature, because it was not anticipated when this research began. This includes the group of students who either choose answers untrue to their real behavior, or even guessed to avoid appearing unknowledgeable or potential embarrassment. By itself, this percentage of students can make results inaccurate or even misleading for researchers.

In regards to ways in which teachers can help students better understand collocation, teachers must find the best method to modify instruction to each student’s age, level and ability. Because learner styles vary so greatly, one *coverall* method of instruction is **not** suitable for all students. It is therefore the responsibility of each instructor, to identify the extent of each problem and determine the best route for the L2 learner to travel.

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