

## Teaching Collocation in Japanese Classrooms

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Best-selling vocabulary books for high school students

If Japanese high school students are asked what kind of English textbooks they have, they probably can name various kinds of books, and one of the most popular textbooks may be some kind of vocabulary book. In classrooms, on trains and buses to and from school, and at home they spend a great deal of time in struggling to memorize English words which are listed in the books.

These are books, especially made for university entrance examinations. They consist only of lists of verbs, adjectives and nouns, which have frequently appeared in the entrance examinations for Japanese universities. In the books the words are often accompanied by their meanings in Japanese and a short decontextualized sentence which includes the word, and sometimes synonyms and antonyms.

I myself studied with one of these books when I was a high school student. Teachers suggested to me that memorizing all the words in the books was helpful and even essential for passing examinations. Therefore, I memorized almost all the words one by one, and later found out that memorizing the words might have helped me obtain a few extra points in the tests, but had not helped me develop abilities to use English very much. What happened to me at that time was that I actually memorized the words, but I did not know when and how to use them appropriately. The same problem seems to still be happening to present university students (Sakai, 1996).

#### 1.2 The notion of collocation missing in English teaching in Japan

What are limitations of memorizing all the words in the vocabulary books? One may say the problem is that they are lists of words only for the entrance examinations, and they do not include words frequently used in the real world such as names of food, words describing feelings or needed in shopping, etc. Another may say the order of words is random, and there are no connections between the words, as “courtesy” is followed by “presence” and then “matter”. However, even if they include daily words and are arranged in a logical way, students may still not be able to use the words. Why is that? Because there is one important element missing in these kinds of books, which is the sense of collocation. In fact, languages are full of strong collocational pairs and, therefore, the study of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary. Collocation is “an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language” (McCarthy, 1990, p.12).

This notion of collocation is not only lacking in the vocabulary books, but also omitted in

English classrooms in Japan. Teachers have been demanding students to remember words listed in the textbooks and conduct several tests to check if their students have memorized the words. However, I have seldom seen teachers discussing how the students should learn words, or teaching collocation in classrooms.

### **1.3 The aim of this study**

This paper first looks at the theories concerning collocation, and clarifies the importance of teaching collocation in classrooms. It also considers the relationship between collocation and grammar. Then it reflects on the extent to which collocation is really problematic for Japanese students, and why Japanese classrooms are having these problems. Further, it discusses some ways teachers can help students in learning collocation, through showing examples of Japanese collocations, helping students' consciousness raising for collocation in authentic materials, teaching collocation along with grammar and recommending effective use of dictionaries.

## **2. Collocation in English teaching**

### **2.1 What is collocation?**

Collocation can be defined as the restrictions on how words can be used together, for example, which prepositions and verbs are used together, or which nouns appear with particular verbs (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992). As Sinclair (1991) points out, it is obvious that words do not appear at random in texts, and people could not produce natural sentences simply by operating on the principle of grammar. Rather, words seem to be selected in pairs or groups and language users are considered to have available to them "a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices" (Sinclair, 1991, p.110).

### **2.2 Importance of learning collocation**

Learning collocation can be considered an essential part of acquiring language, because the meaning of a word has a great deal to do with the words with which it usually associates. "Not only do these associations assist the learner in committing these words to memory, they also aid in defining the semantic area of a word", and also "permit people to know what kind of words they can expect to find together" (Nattinger, 1988, p.69-70). Aitchison (1994) notes that when we observe the human word-web, that is the way in which people connect words together in their mind, words appear to be organized in semantic fields, and there, collocational linking seems to be particularly strong.

Collocational knowledge is part of native speakers' competence, and can be problems for learners in cases where collocability is language-specific and is not solely determined by universal semantic restrictions (McCarthy, 1990). The argument that collocation is an important level of

language selection is persuasive when we observe foreign-learner texts containing deviant collocations. There is surely need for an understanding of and a concern with collocation by teachers and students (Carter and McCarthy, 1988).

### **2.3 Collocation along with grammar**

Pedagogical treatments of collocations would be seriously lacking if grammatical patterning were not included alongside lexical patterning (Carter, 1987). We should view lexical and syntactic patterning as distinct but interrelated structures. The study of collocations, based on an effort to establish lexis as an self-sufficient and separate linguistic level, has inclined to concentrate on linear, syntagmatic co-occurrence of words. However, the study of collocations should include “the syntactic and semantic statements that are often essential in a treatment of collocations” (Carter, 1987, p. 55).

Greenbaum (1970) distinguishes between an “item-oriented” approach to collocation, which works independently of syntax and semantics, and an integrated approach. The item-oriented approach has serious limitations; simply to state that “like” and “much” collocate ignores the fact that “I don’t like him much” and “I like him very much” are acceptable, but “I like him much” is unacceptable. Greenbaum (1970) concludes that an integrated approach, which concentrates on the collocative behaviour of a clearly delimited syntactic configuration, seems to yield the best results.

Furthermore, lexical particularities seem to derive their formal meaning not only from contextual extension of lexis but also from grammatical generalizations within which they occur (Mitchell, 1971). Mitchell (1971) shows the different meanings of the same collocations such as those between “hard work” and “hard-working”, and “go on” and “goings-on”. He concludes that making grammatical generalizations, such as generalizations about typical inflexional or syntactic forms concerning collocations, is the most meaningful approach.

Section 4 of this paper discusses ways to learn collocation along with grammar. What is important to remember is that communicative competence is not a matter of knowing grammatical rules of composing sentences. It is much more a matter of possessing a stock of preconstructed units, formulative frameworks and a kit of rules and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are needed according to contextual requirements (Widdowson, 1989). As Widdowson states, “communicative competence is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative but regulative and subservient” (1989, p.135). Teachers need to remember that grammatical rules may be useless if students do not possess patterns of lexical co-occurrence for the rules to operate on effectively.

## **3. Collocational problems for English-learners in Japan**

### **3.1 Word choices by Japanese students**

To what extent is collocation a problem for Japanese students? This question will be answered by observing students' actual word choices. Appendix 1 shows the word choices of the high school students whom I have recently been teaching. These are extracted from the results of pre-second and second grades English tests, authorized by the Ministry of Education, conducted in June, 1998 (The Society for Testing English Proficiency, 1998). The 45 students who took the tests were 16 to 18 years old and had been studying English for at least four to five years at Japanese schools.

In this test the students are given sentences with blanks and asked to select one appropriate word to fill in the blank from among 4 choices. Appendix 1 displays the choices of words and the percentages for all of the students. This result shows that Japanese students have great problems in choosing proper collocations.

In sentences 1, 2 and 3, only 30 to 40% of the total students chose the proper collocations. Sentence 1 shows that the students are in great confusion in singling out the proper collocation of "earn money". Only 31% of the total students chose the right collocation, and 69% of the students chose either "gain money", "develop money" or "create money". Especially, 33% chose "gain money", which may be because students guessed from Japanese "shotoku (money) + wo (particle) + eru (gain)". Sentence 2 shows the same tendency more clearly. Only 32% students selected the right collocation of "defeat rivals", and 53% students chose "win rivals". In Japanese we would rather say "kyousou aite (rivals) + ni (particle) + katsu (win)" rather than "kyousou aite (rivals) + wo (particle) + yaburu (defeat)". In sentence 3, students who knew the right collocation of "see a dentist", could mark the right word partner, but 33% students chose "take a dentist", probably because of Japanese expression of "haisha (dentist) + ni (particle) + kakaru (take)".

In sentences 4 and 5, about half of the students could produce the proper collocations. Still the other half preferred inappropriate ones. In sentence 4, 63% students selected either "direct machinery", "conduct machinery" or "perform machinery". In sentences 5, 40% chose "put an eye on" and "hold an eye on". When they do not know the appropriate collocation of "keep an eye on", it is confusing to choose from "keep", "put" and "hold", which for Japanese students to be very similar.

Sentence 6 shows that 80% of the students chose the correct collocation of "a deep breath". It can be considered that this is because in Japanese we have the same collocation of "fukai (deep) + iki (breath)", and therefore it was easy for students to choose the correct word partners.

## **3.2 Why is this happening?**

### **3.2.1 Lack of awareness of differences between Japanese and English collocations**

As we have seen above, when students do not know the appropriate English collocation, they tend to guess word partners by directly translating from Japanese collocates. However, collocational restrictions are different from language to language (Redman, 1997). Collocations are dissimilar

even between European languages, such as English and French. For example, the English word “heavy” takes a variety of different forms in French (Mitchell, 1975). Japanese collocational restrictions are different from those of English, and the difference may be larger than those among European languages.

Appendix 2 shows collocational problems that Japanese students are likely to have because of the differences in collocational restrictions. The left column displays appropriate English collocations, and the middle shows equivalent Japanese collocations and the right indicates what happens when Japanese students try to guess English word partners by using their knowledge of Japanese collocational restrictions. For example, when students want to express that their friend is having “a serious illness”, they may say “a heavy illness”, because in Japanese when illness is serious people say “*omoi* (heavy) + *byouki* (illness)”. Similarly, Japanese students may say “hot (spicy) wine” instead of “dry wine”, “dark tea” instead of “strong tea” and “big voice” for “loud voice”.

### **3.2.2 Present collocation teaching in Japanese classrooms**

Underlying Japanese students’ difficulties in choosing proper collocations, there seems to be another factor. This is the fact that Japanese teachers have not paid much attention to how to build vocabulary and have not taught the notion of collocation. Teachers usually demand that students memorize as many words as possible, but unfortunately they do not help them develop ways to learn words effectively.

This fact will be clear when we examine vocabulary books aimed at university entrance examinations and teaching plans written by English teachers in Japan. As mentioned earlier, the vocabulary books simply list words one by one, and there is little collocational information in the books. For example, in one of the books, Eitango Target 1900 (Miyagawa, 1996), a noun “experience” is listed as one of the important words to remember. However, they give only two usages, “by experience” and “an unpleasant experience”.

In addition, Japanese teachers have not taken into account collocational restrictions. For example, Mochizuki and Yamada (1996) edit a textbook for English teachers in Japan, in which 24 high school teachers’ recent teaching plans are displayed. However, only one of them, Ikeno (1996) suggests the use of an English-English dictionary and that is the single example which comments on the way to teach lexis. There is no plan mentioning collocation in the textbook.

It can be said that this situation was partly brought about by the Japanese Ministry of Education’s guidelines (1989), in which there is little concern for vocabulary, and no concern for collocation. Naturally, as a result, there is little consideration for collocation in the government-authorized high school textbooks, which most teachers use in classrooms. For example, in Polestar (Ishiguro, 1997), one of the most popular high school textbooks, the word “experience”

appears merely once in the sentence “read the experience of three students”. We can easily imagine that Japanese students who study government-authorized textbooks at school, with teachers who have little concern about collocation, and struggle with vocabulary books at home, have great difficulties in learning collocation.

#### **4. In what ways can teachers help Japanese students learn collocation?**

In these circumstances where Japanese students have problems in learning collocation, how teachers can help them? There may be several ways. Teachers can show students examples of Japanese collocations and help them realize the importance of collocation in languages. Then, teachers can help students find English collocation, possibly through the use of authentic materials. While teaching collocation, teachers need to remember to introduce it along with grammar. It may also be valuable to encourage students to use good dictionaries rich in collocational examples.

##### **4.1 Show students collocations in Japanese**

As seen in section 3, Japanese students tend to guess English word partners from Japanese collocational restrictions. This can be considered a reasonable strategy for language learners (Deignan, Knowles, Sinclair and Willis, 1998), but they need to be careful in guessing. Therefore, teachers should lead the students to recognize differences in collocations between English and Japanese, and the importance of learning collocations. One way to realize this objective is to show students Japanese collocations, which they always use unconsciously, but foreign Japanese-learners may have difficulties using naturally and need to pay special attention to.

For instance, teachers can show students collocations of the Japanese verb “nomu” that is used partly similarly to “drink” in English (see Appendix 3). Like “drink”, “nomu” associates together with several kinds of liquids, such as tea, coffee, juice and alcohol. Unlike “drink”, “nomu” can collocate with liquid food such as vegetable soup as well as Japanese traditional soybean soup. Also, “nomu” collocates with some solid materials, such as medicine and any food, if people can take them into their mouth and swallow them. People can “nomu” a cigarette, too. Further, you can use “nomu” metaphorically. For example, if “nomu” is used with “namida (tears)”, it means “tolerate something regrettable”, and when “nomu” collocates with “teki (enemy)”, it means “overpower the enemy”. Teachers can explain that in English “drink” is usually used only with liquid objects, and expressions such as “drink a cigarette” or “drink tears” are not acceptable in English.

##### **4.2 Show students examples of English collocations**

The next stages may be to show examples of English collocations to students. Rudzka et al. (1981) advocate a grid method to present collocations. They, for example, show collocates of the three adjectives “plain”, “simple” and “homely”, and expect students to answer which adjectives are

appropriate for several nouns such as “water”, “language”, “facts”, “cooking”, “explanation” and “calculation”. Teachers can adopt this exercise to their own situations and make their own drills. For example, a grid can be constructed for delexical verbs, such as “get”, “make”, “have” and “take”.

Carter (1987) states that instead of words being presented singly or in paired associates, the enlargement takes place by means of grids in which words from the same semantic group are subjected to a modified componential analysis and/or to an analysis which reveals the common collocates of the target items. Teachers sensitive to teaching words in contexts will not introduce the grids as inflexible, but rather as hypotheses which learners can test against further data. Furthermore, it is likely that “the associations generated by and across words in this kind of semantic network aid both the retention and recall of word by learners” (Carter, 1987, p.173).

#### **4.3 Help students find collocation in authentic texts**

It is important to teach collocation with natural materials because if students would like to obtain abilities to use English, they need to know actual word associates which are used in the real world. The following is a way of teaching collocation with natural material (see Appendix 4). The authentic text used here is an extract from a travel information pamphlet issued by London Transport in 1998, which informs passengers of advice to stay safe while travelling in the London area.

Teachers can help students learn collocation using this material in various ways. First, before showing the text, teachers can ask students to find suitable verbs to complete sentences, such as “take” in “( ) note of all safety notions” and “( ) care with children” and also “get” in “( ) on and off trains”. After this activity, students can read the text and check the answers. Then teachers can combine this task with the grid exercise mentioned above, and help students to look further into the verb “take”, and introduce other collocates of “take”, including “an exam”, “a photo”, “a shower” and “a bus/train/plane/taxi”. In addition, teachers can encourage students to keep a record of common collocations by using “spidergrams” in their own vocabulary notebooks, which I recommend students to make.

It is not possible for teachers to present every example of collocations in English. However, teachers can raise students’ consciousness of collocation. One good way to realize this may be through data-driven learning proposed by Johns (1991). In classes teachers can utilize concordance printouts, which consist of authentic examples of the most frequent patterns. Teachers can have students explore corpora and look for collocations for themselves. In the DDL approach teachers abandon the role of expert and take on that of research organizer, and through the use of concordance data, students may “develop inductive strategies that will help them to become better language learners outside the classroom” (Johns, 1991, p.31).

#### **4.4 Show collocation along with grammar**

As discussed earlier, collocation can be learned sufficiently along with grammar. Teachers probably need to take more account of grammatical classes (Willis, 1993). Teachers can group words according to their behavior, and in classifying words teachers may make useful statements about the ways in which words collocate with other words.

For example, teachers can present the class of delexical verbs, which are used in expressions where they do not have distinct meanings, that is where most of the meanings are carried by the nouns which follow them. Teachers can identify the verbs and organize them semantically. For instance, one of the verbs, “have”, collocates with nouns which indicate several common activities, such as meals: “breakfast”, “dinner” and “tea”; or talking: “a chat”, “an argument” and “a conversation”; or relaxation: “a break”, “a holiday” and “a day off” (Willis and Wright, 1995). This semantic categorization provides learners with a productive rule which allows them to incorporate words like “a snack”, “a discussion” and “a rest”.

Also, teachers can group adjectives followed by to-infinitives and summarize them semantically. There are adjectives which show degree of difficulty like “difficult”, “easy” and “possible”, or those showing rarity like “unusual”, “likely”, “sure” and “common”, or those indicating good/bad like “nice”, “better” and “helpful” (Willis, Shortall and Johns, 1997). After learning these grammatical and semantic classes, students should be able to look for other items which fit the classes. For instance, when they sing the phrase “Is it wrong to believe when the feeling is so strong?” in a Marry Black’s song “Fat Valley of pain”, they can easily categorize “wrong to” into the “adjective + to-infinitive” group which shows good/bad. Thus, the grammatical and semantic categorization can aid students’ learning collocations.

#### **4.5 Encourage students to use dictionaries**

As seen earlier, collocational examples are limited in popular vocabulary books or authorized high school textbooks in Japan. One way to improve this situation may be to use appropriate dictionaries, where students can find plenty of collocations. However, teachers need to be careful in choosing which dictionary to use. Appendix 5 examines collocations of a frequently used noun “experience” in three Japanese-English dictionaries Genius (Konishi, 1994), New Century (Kihara, 1996) and Lighthouse (Takebayashi, Kojima and Higashi, 1996) and one English-English dictionary, COBUILD (Sinclair, 1995).

Here COBUILD’s sentences can be considered examples of typical usage in natural contexts since the sentences are selected to indicate the patterns that are frequently found alongside a word or phrase (Sinclair, 1995). By comparing with COBUILD’s examples, Japanese dictionaries’ usefulness in the area of collocation may be clarified. According to this examination, New Century introduces some useful collocations, such as “learn from experience”, “speaking from experience”, “have experience” and “experience of”, which are also found in COBUILD. However, Genius shows



only two examples presented on COBUILD, such as “have experience” and “learn from experience”, and Lighthouse displays merely one collocate shown on COBUILD, which is “learn from experience”. Teachers can encourage students to use good Japanese-English dictionaries which show abundant collocations. At the same time, it is significant to lead students to utilize English-English dictionaries, such as COBUILD, which present collocations in use in natural English.

## **5. Conclusion**

Learning collocation is considered to be an important part of acquiring English. However, teachers and students have not paid much attention to the notion of English collocation in Japanese classrooms, and when Japanese students try to use English, collocation becomes a great problem.

There are several ways teachers may help students in this area. First, teachers can show the importance of collocation, by presenting examples of Japanese collocations which Japanese students usually use unconsciously. Then, teachers can introduce examples of English collocations, such as delexicalized verbs. In this stage grammatical and semantical categorization of the words can aid students' learning collocations.

When conducting these activities, teachers can introduce authentic texts and help students find collocations in the materials. The activities may help students become more conscious of looking at English in order to find collocational restrictions, especially as done by the DDL approach. In addition, teachers can encourage students to use dictionaries full of collocational examples. Some Japanese-English dictionaries include information on collocation, which teachers can recommend students to use. Furthermore, teachers can lead students to utilize English-English dictionaries, such as COBUILD, which have plenty of collocational information.

What seems important is the fact it is impossible for teachers to show every collocation which is used in the English speaking world. However, teachers can raise students' consciousness on the importance of the notion of collocation, which will help students to build abilities to use English naturally in the future.

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**Appendix 1    Examples of word choices of Japanese students (percentages of 45 students who took the test)**

Sentences with blanks	Proper word	Other word choices		
		Word 1	Word 2	Word3
1. Jim needs to (     ) some money in order to be able to go on a trip to Australia.	earn 31%	gain 33%	develop 20%	create 16 %
2. Our soccer team (     ) our biggest rivals in the finals of the tournament.	defeated 32%	won 53%	broke 16%	ruled 0%
3. You had better (     ) a dentist as soon as possible.	see 40%	take 33%	look 22%	watch 4%
4. All new employees receive training on how to (     ) the machinery safely.	operate 47%	direct 21%	conduct 21%	perform 11%
5. Can you (     ) an eye on the baby while I go shopping?	keep 58%	put 22%	hold 18%	give 2%
6. When I feel tired, I always take a (     ) breath to relax.	deep 80%	thick 9%	wide 7%	heavy 4%

Data are taken from the students' responses of a public high school in Japan on the English tests conducted by the Society for Testing English Proficiency in June, 1998.

## Appendix 2 Predictable collocational problems for Japanese students

Proper collocations in English	Proper collocations in Japanese	Direct translations from Japanese to English
a serious illness	omoi (heavy) + byouki (illness)	a heavy illness
dry wine	karakuchino (hot, spicy) + wain (wine)	hot (spicy) wine
strong tea	koi (dark, thick) + ocha (tea)	dark (thick) tea
loud voice	oukina (big) + koe (voice)	big voice

### Appendix 3 Collocations in the Japanese verb “nomu”

Noun + wo + nomu	Meaning in English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ocha (tea) + wo + nomu</li><li>• kusuri (medicine) + wo + nomu</li><li>• shiru (soup) + wo + nomu</li><li>• tabako (cigarette) + wo + nomu</li><li>• namida (tears) + wo + nomu</li><li>• koe (voice) + wo + nomu</li><li>• teki (enemy) + wo + nomu</li><li>• youkyuu (the terms) + wo + nomu</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• drink tea</li><li>• take medicine</li><li>• eat soup</li><li>• smoke a cigarette</li><li>• tolerate something regrettable</li><li>• keep silent because of shock</li><li>• overpower the enemy</li><li>• accept the terms</li></ul>

Note: “Wo” is a Japanese propositional particle which indicates objects. This table is made by the writer based on Iwanami’s Japanese Dictionary (1994).

## **Appendix 4 Travelling in London: staying safe (London Transport, 1998)**

### **General advise**

Smoking is not permitted on the Underground or on buses. Please keep personal belongings with you at all times to avoid delays caused by security alerts. (Abandoned luggage may be destroyed.) Be aware that pickpockets operate in busy areas. Please take note of all safety notices and in the unlikely event of an emergency follow the instructions of our trained staff. Travelling is easier and more comfortable outside of the busy “rush hour”: 0800-0930 and 1700-1800 Mondays to Fridays.

### **Lifts and escalators**

Keep loose clothing and luggage clear of lift doors. On escalators take extra care with children. Pushchairs and buggies should be folded. Be careful when stepping on or off an escalator, especially when carrying luggage.

### **Platforms**

Do not stand near the edge. NEVER try to pick up any belongings that have fallen onto the track, as it is electrified. Staff will assist you.

### **Trains and buses**

NEVER obstruct doors or try to get on or off as the doors are closing. Mind the gap between the train and platform edge when entering or leaving a train. Only get on or off when it is stationary at a bus stop.

**Appendix 5 Collocations shown in three Japanese-English dictionaries and  
one English-English dictionary COBUILD**

<b>Japanese-English dictionaries</b>		<b>COBUILD</b>
<b>Genius</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gain experience by practice</li> <li>• require experience</li> <li>• one's life experience</li> <li>• learn by (from, through, with) experience</li> <li>• have long experience as a teacher</li> <li>• more experience on the job</li> <li>• unusual experiences</li> <li>• get a wonderful eating experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have managerial experience on every level</li> <li>• plenty of experience with the twins</li> <li>• experience taught me caution</li> <li>• learn from experience</li> <li>• a common experience for me</li> <li>• his only experience of gardening proved satisfying</li> <li>• speaking from experience</li> <li>• because of a bad experience in the past</li> </ul>
<b>New Century</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learn by (from) experience</li> <li>• speaking from experience</li> <li>• a man of practical experience in teaching</li> <li>• a lot of (little) experience in this kind of work</li> <li>• bitter (direct, long, wide) experience</li> <li>• get experience</li> <li>• lack experience</li> <li>• have a personal experience of fire</li> <li>• related her experiences in the United States</li> </ul>	
<b>Light-house</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• considerable experience</li> <li>• learn by (from, through) experience</li> <li>• thirty years' experience</li> <li>• according to my experience</li> <li>• a shocking experience</li> <li>• forget the experience I had during my stay in America</li> </ul>	