

Collocation: From the Corpus to the Classroom

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Abstract

A number of authors (Lewis 1993, 1997, 2000, Woolard 2001, Thornbury 2002) writing for English language teachers have argued that collocations are arbitrary and therefore there is no point in attempting to explain them to foreign language learners in the classroom. It is my impression that these writers have been very influential with the result that this view of collocation is firmly entrenched in both classroom methodology and material. Learners are being encouraged to read more and to keep lists of the collocations they encounter. It would seem that they have no alternative but to rote learn these lists of 'arbitrary collocations'.

In this paper I will present findings from my corpus-based research which challenge this view of collocation. Data obtained from both the Bank of English and the British National Corpus clearly show how many collocations are not arbitrary and can be explained when one considers the linguistic phenomena which would seem to underlie the collocational process. It is often the case, for example, that the most frequent collocates of a particular word reflect its different senses (e.g. *contentious issue*, *share issue*, *September issue*) or the way the word can be used both literally (e.g. *bombing target*) and metaphorically (e.g. *sales target*).

I will show how it is possible to design teaching material which presents and practises collocations in a meaningful way. By designing collocational exercises which focus on one particular phenomenon at a time, it is possible for the learners to work out for themselves why, for example, you can *run a department* but not *a committee*. The collocations are presented in such a way they can be explained, and therefore the whole process of learning collocations becomes more meaningful and, it is argued, more memorable.

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