The Importance of Teaching Phrasal Vocabulary to Second Language Learners

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Vocabulary is not only comprised by individual words. Much of it involves ‘prefabricated’ sequences of words, which function as single units:

formulaic expressions or formulaic sequences
Formulaic language

Formulaic expressions constitute formulaic language (phrasal vocabulary)

*Get on the bus; Keep a straight face; Kick the bucket...*
Definition of Formulaic Expression

“A sequence, continuous or discontinuous [slots to be filled...], of words or other elements [punctuation marks...], which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar”.

(Wray, 2002, p.9)
Formulaic expressions are essential in language

- Everywhere in language use.
- Variety of communicative functions.
- Improve fluency.
- Improve the general impression of L2 speakers’ speech production.
Formulaic language is everywhere

- 30% spoken discourse and 21% of academic prose (Biber et al. (1999)).

- 58.6% spoken discourse and 52.3% of written discourse (Erman & Warren, 2000).

- Up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write (Jimmie Hill, 2000).
Functions and meanings of formulaic language

- Functional use
  I’m sorry to hear about...; I’d be happy to...

- Social interaction
  Nice weather today; Oh, I see; I’ve got it; Did you really?

- Discourse organisation
  In other words...; On the other hand...

- Precise information in technical fields
  Taxi into position and hold.

Formulaic Language improves fluency

Formulaic expressions are stored in the mind as individual wholes and are processed as such.

Formulaic expressions are ‘ready to go’ lexical phrases. They give speakers more fluency and also assist the listener by reducing the processing effort.
Formulaic Language improves the general impression of L2 speakers’ speech production.

Non-native speakers that use formulaic language are judged as more proficient in both spoken and written discourse.

(Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Ohlrogge, 2009).
Phrasal vocabulary is not restricted to English, but it spreads through every other language.

The importance of teaching phrasal vocabulary to second language learners applies to every language.
Changes in the language teaching approach

From the traditional view where grammar was thought as “the bones of the language and vocabulary as the flesh to be added” (Hill, 2000), phrasal vocabulary acquisition has been moved to the forefront of language teaching by many language teachers.
Phrasal vocabulary in the language syllabus

• Idioms
  *Put the cat among the chickens*

• Phrasal verbs
  *Make up a story; Put the light out*

• Collocations
  *Get lost; Make up for lost time; Speak your mind.*
Collocations

• “Words that are placed or found together in a predictable pattern”. (Graney, 2000)

• “Words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggests”. (Woolard, 2000, p. 29)
## Types of collocations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Collocation</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb + noun</td>
<td>dispute findings; accept the outcome; predict the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb + adjective + noun</td>
<td>learn a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb + adverb</td>
<td>live dangerously; struggle unceasingly against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjective + noun</td>
<td>huge profit; unaccompanied minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb + adjective + noun</td>
<td>highly irregular situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb + adjective</td>
<td>completely soaked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb + verb</td>
<td>half understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb + preposition</td>
<td>engage in; hear about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb + preposition + noun</td>
<td>speak through an interpreter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What phrasal vocabulary should I teach?

The primary responsibility for identifying the most useful phrasal vocabulary to teach corresponds to the teacher.

Identifying useful collocations

Jane Conzett (2000, p. 74)
Discerning useful collocations

Collocate

- Strong tea/coffee
- Tall tree
- Heavy rain
- Rich taste
- Big mistake
- Great fun
- Sweet dreams

Don't Collocate

- Powerful tea/coffee
- High tree
- Weighty rain
- Deep taste
- Large mistake
- Big fun
- Nice dreams
Noticing

Teachers need to encourage learners to develop an appreciation for the different collocations they come across during their language training, and to expand this knowledge to subsequent collocations they meet.
Classroom activities

On the simplest level, teachers could encourage students to think bigger than the word – always look for the two or three-word expression. Ask students to underline all verb + noun collocations in a text:

- accept the outcome
- predict the future
- give (special) attention
Recording collocations

Organized lexical notebooks.

• Avoid breaking it up.
• Avoid grammatical analysis.
• Do not translate word-for-word, but whole phrase to whole phrase.
Encourage students to record new nouns in boxes like these and look for collocates in their collocation dictionaries. Leave some spaces to add other words later.

apply for a
be out of a
find a
hunt for a
resign from a

job

a one-man
a historical
a touring
a retrospective
a contemporary

exhibition

(p. 99)
Brainstorming exercises

Do collocations’ brainstorming exercises regularly in class.

Ask “or” questions to the students: 
*Do you always come by bus or do you sometimes come by car?/ Do you sometimes break promises or do you always keep them?* (Lewis, 2000)
Collocation games

**Domino-type games**
Match the cards end to end by matching the collocations.

**Find your partner**
Two-word collocations are split between members of the class who then have to find their partner.

**Memory game**
With cards placed face down on the table and, in groups, students take turns to turn over two cards at a time hoping to find the collocations.

(Hill, Lewis & Lewis, 2000)
Incorporate collocation teaching in your practice!
If we do not teach collocations...

we are ignoring a large set of items which express often complex ideas very simply and yet precisely.

Set yourself a realistic objective.

vs.

You must know what you want to do but it must not be too much for it to be possible for you to do.
Conclusions 1

• The centrality of vocabulary means that the traditional teaching of grammar structures should play a less important role than in the past. Less grammar, more vocabulary.

• Language consists largely of formulaic sequences, that is, prefabricated chunks of lexis. Teaching phrasal vocabulary should then be a top priority in every language course.
Conclusions 2

- Language teachers and students must be aware of collocation as a key element to language learning.

- Although students may be successful on communicating the intended meaning by manipulating single words with grammar, having an extended phrasal vocabulary increases the accuracy and fluency of their language production. “Formulaic language is intrinsically connected with functional, fluent, and communicative language use” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 16).


References 2


