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Teaching Collocations

Activities for Vocabulary Building



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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

Contents

2	Introduction to Collocations
8	Activities
8	Collocations Scavenger Hunt
9	Creating Collocations with a Thesaurus
10	Verb + Noun Hunt
11	Collocate Search
11	My Favourite Collocations
12	Collocations on a Topic
14	Reconstructing a Text
14	Gapped Text
15	Finding Collocations in Dictionaries
16	Collocations on Walls
17	Easy as Possible
18	Missing Verbs
18	Listening for Collocations
19	Recommended Books

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Introduction to Collocations

Select collocations from list below (answers on page 19)

	Coll?	Strength	Type	Notes
1				
set yourself a realistic objective				
catch up with the news				
revised edition				
widely available				
2				
learn a foreign language				
live dangerously				
speak through an interpreter				
pocket calculator				
I told her off				
3				
turn in				
aware of				
fire escape				
on the other hand				
hook, line and sinker				
to put it another way				
examine thoroughly				
the fog closed in				
4				
go home				
happy marriage				
make dinner				
go crazy				
very good				
torrential downpour				
refute a hypothesis				
surf the web				
profoundly disturbing				

What is a Collocation?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a collocation is “the habitual juxtaposition of a particular word with another word or words with a frequency greater than chance.” However, there are different ideas on the number and types of words that constitute a collocation. By some definitions, collocations can consist of more than two main words and, while functional words like prepositions are not considered primary components of these collocations, there are some definitions that actually include them. Part of the reason for this difference of opinion is that the study of lexical constructions in the language is not that old and ideas, terminology and definitions are still in the process of being formed.

One of the main reasons that the study of collocations is not that old is that it was the development of corpora that prompted investigation into the relationship between words. A corpus (plural: corpora) is a computer database of language that can be analyzed with a computer program to provide statistics and other information about how words are actually used.

Though there are different opinions on the nature of collocations, one thing that everybody agrees on is that, unlike grammatical constructions, there are no rules for the formation of collocations. What determines what words go together is usage over time. We don't know why people have, hold and throw parties rather than make them but what we do know is that it is that way because that's what people say.

As for the type of words that make up a collocation, there are those in the field who consider phrasal verbs to be collocations (take up) as well as verb and preposition combinations (walk in). Some consider semi-fixed expressions to be collocations. These are lexical (not grammatical) structures which can be used repeatedly by changing one word/part. For example, “It's a _____ day today.” Fixed expressions, such as idioms, which allow little or no variation are also considered by some to be collocations. However, what technically is a collocation is perhaps irrelevant as what is most important in a teaching context is a definition that will make teaching and learning easier. For this reason, it is suggested that phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases, semi-fixed and fixed expressions remain separate categories and collocations be restricted to (primarily) two-word combinations made up of the main parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs).

Collocation Types

Taking for granted that we are going to consider collocations to be primarily two-word combinations made up of the main parts of speech, we can then classify them according to which parts of speech are in the collocation. Here are some common examples. Try categorizing group 4 on page 2.

Collocation	Type
sunny day	adjective + noun
learn a language	verb + noun
language school	noun + noun
a ship sinks	noun + verb
speak slowly	verb + adv.
quite common	adverb + adjective

Creating Collocations Using a Thesaurus

	<i>Speaking</i>		<i>Listening</i>		<i>Reading</i>		<i>Writing</i>
	<i>Vocabulary</i>		<i>Grammar</i>		<i>Pronunciation</i>		<i>Warmer/Icebreaker</i>

This activity is useful because it is an easily implemented productive activity and these type of activities are not that common for collocations. Most activities with collocations tend to be receptive, where students look at a text and find and categorize certain types of collocation. In this activity, students look at the nature of a collocation and try to guess which similar words could be substituted using a thesaurus, thus producing more collocations.

To begin the activity either supply the students with a list of collocations, or, better still, have them collect them from a text. Try to get them to focus on the collocations most likely to produce more variations. Students work in pairs or small groups with the list of collocations and they try to select one that would produce the most variations. Each pair/group should choose a different collocation. If you want, list them on the board and have each group cross off the one they have chosen. This activity works best if you have significantly more collocations than groups of students. When each group has chosen, give them a thesaurus. They look up synonyms of one (or both) of the two words and guess which words from the thesaurus could be used as an alternative. For example, if the students were working with “send a message”, the Thesaurus entry for “message” would produce memo, letter, note, etc., which could all be used instead of message. When each group has finished listing the alternatives, get some feedback to check their answers and award them a point for each correct one. Other groups can write them down as they are read out.

Main Entry: **message**
 Part of Speech: *noun*
 Definition: communication, often written
 Synonyms: bulletin, cannonball, communiqué, directive, dispatch, dope, earful, epistle, information, intelligence, intimation, letter, memo, memorandum, missive, news, note, notice, paper, report, tidings, wire, word

Entry for *message* from <http://thesaurus.com/>