

Chapter 4

Teaching Strategies and Techniques

Collocations and Multiword Units

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Introduction: Collocations Are Everywhere

In language teaching, grammar and vocabulary instruction are typically viewed as two rather separate domains of tools and skills, in addition to listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For learners, becoming fluent and proficient in using vocabulary and grammar takes a great deal of time and work simply because the English grammar system is complex, and the number of words to be learned, retained, and practiced is enormous. An excellent case in point is that English dictionaries intended specifically for language learners are large books, and some have upwards of a couple of hundred thousand words, combinations of words, and examples. It is also a fact that many words are combined in various patterns to create new meanings that cannot be predicted from the meaning of their component parts, e.g. *look after, look up to, look into, drop by, come by, come around, come into view, come to a stop, come to an agreement.*

In language analyses, combinations of words that frequently occur and re-occur together are called collocations and multiword units. These can be laborious to learn and use correctly because they consist of two or more component parts (Howarth, 1998; Hinkel, 2002, 2004; Nation, Shin, & Grant, 2016).

Although in English teaching, phrasal verbs, for example, such as those in the examples above, routinely receive a good deal of attention, other types of multiword constructions are often slighted and go unnoticed (this is a collocation), e.g.:

big deal/news/noise/excitement/improvement/disappointment/mistake/problem
large amount/number/population/scale/size
heavy rain/snow/fog/coat/traffic/load/meal/losses (plural)

However, due to the fact that many recurrent word combinations can have unpredictable meanings and grammatically irregular structures – these units of language cannot be derived and formed according to grammar rules – noticing their occurrences and components is very important if learners are to increase their linguistic repertoire, fluency, and proficiency. Most proficient first language and second language (L2) users attain their facility with collocations over time and through encountering them in all manner of interactions, reading, and writing (Cowie, 1992; Durant, 2014; Hinkel, 2015, 2016; Nation, 2011).

One of the key issues with collocations and multiword units is that they are extremely frequent. Some researchers have claimed that “up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression” (Hill, 2000, p. 53). Others have counted their occurrences in the hundreds of thousands, but the point is that these units of language are so numerous that their exact numbers are unknown (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Nation, 2011, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017). In language teaching and research, at present, a clear consensus has been achieved that understanding and producing language is in fact impossible without the use of collocations (see the Preamble earlier in this volume). Another and equally important finding is that, without explicit instruction, most language learners cannot always identify the occurrence or prevalence of multiword units in either spoken or written English, and in part for this reason have restricted opportunities of learning how and when to deploy them in language comprehension or production.

To add to the complexity, in English many words, particularly frequent ones, are polysemous, that is, they have multiple meanings, and the more meanings words have, the more frequently they occur, e.g. dozens of combinations with the verbs *make* and *take* can be encountered in speech and writing: *make an appointment, make time, make coffee, make a phone call, make a promise, make a mistake, take your time, take turns, take a break, take a bus/train, take a minute, take a picture, take a seat, take a walk, take care, take notes.*

Word combinations can have deducible meanings that can be transparent and thus figured out even if approximately, as in *take (have) a shower/taxi/test/class*, but then the meanings of other collocations are opaque, e.g. *find ~~ out/a way/success/value/interesting/hard/time/a minute/words/a solution.*

Although various definitions of collocations and multiword units have been investigated, examined, explored, proposed, debated, reviewed, refuted, deliberated, and discussed, what represents a collocation is likely to be immaterial in the classroom. On the other hand, for teaching and learning, a few pedagogical considerations are of crucial importance. Collocations and multiword units have a few specific attributes that make them difficult for learners to remember and use correctly. Two of their features that are directly relevant to teaching are noted here.

- (1) A key characteristic of collocations is that most (but certainly not all) have a rigid word order that cannot be altered or re-arranged, e.g.:
 - *one or the other*, but not **the other or one*
 - *here and there/up and down*, but not **there and here/*down and up*
 - *near and far*, but not **far and near*
 - *a verb/noun phrase*, but not **a phrase of verb/noun*
 - *a drop in the bucket*, but not **a bucket drop*
 - *birds of prey*, but not **prey birds*
 - *a couple of pencils*, but not **a pencil couple*
- (2) Another indelible attribute of collocations is that their lexical components cannot be replaced even when the meanings of phrases are transparent; “the problem is that native speakers do not say it in that way” (Shin & Nation, 2008, p. 340), e.g.:
 - **heavy wind*, instead of *strong wind*
 - **past night*, instead of *last night*

- **fall into parts*, instead of *fall apart*
- **take a looking/a talk/for walking*, instead of *take a look/walk, have a talk, or take [someone/something] for walk*
- **get loss/tire/hunger/a dress*, instead of *get lost/tired/hungry/dressed*

Because the structure of collocations does not follow grammar rules and because their meanings are unpredictable, multiword constructions cannot be assembled in the process of comprehension or communication. By and large, their forms, meanings, and functions have to be learned and memorized.

Due to the fact that the number of collocations is very large, in L2 teaching and learning, there is not a moment to lose. When it comes to collocations and multiword units by any other name the teacher's job is essential:

- To bring learners' attention to word combinations as they occur in context.
- To focus on more valuable, frequent, and useful collocations and to avoid spending time on those that are low frequency.
- To provide learning strategies and techniques to help learners remember and practice collocations.

This chapter presents several teaching strategies, techniques, and activities that can be implemented at any level of learners' proficiencies from beginning to advanced. Instruction in collocations can take place in the teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and their uses can be highlighted in practically any context, as the sample teaching activities demonstrate. As has been mentioned, collocations, recurrent phrases, and multiword units are so frequent and ubiquitous that they can be found anywhere. A few teaching activities and ideas exemplified here can be further modified and adapted in any language classroom and beyond it. Because practically all collocations and phrases are idiomatic and highly conventionalized, their instructional applications can contribute to learners' strategic language development in learners' receptive and productive skills in various instructional settings.

Noticing Collocations and Raising Learners' Awareness

The first order of priority is to select multiword units that are frequent and recurrent. Beginning and intermediate learners can be asked to notice

words that tend to co-occur in short and simple texts (Arnon & Snider, 2010; Shin & Nation, 2008). Many samples can be easily found in student textbooks and materials, and even on textbook covers. A few common and transparent word combinations found on student textbooks covers are provided in Example 1.

Example 1

- ⇒ *Learn the words you need to improve your English*
- ⇒ *Learn conversational expressions by looking at the pictures*
- ⇒ *Improve your vocabulary and learn new grammar structures*
- ⇒ *Look at the examples and learn useful words and phrases*
- ⇒ *Improve your speaking skills in five minutes a day*

In such short and clear examples, collocations are easy to identify, notice, and highlight: *learn* + noun, *improve* + noun, and *need to* + verb. Additional opportunities for noticing multiword units can also arise if the teacher chooses to focus learners' attention on, say, *look at* and *in five/ten* [number] *minutes/one hour/two hours* [*in* + time], or *a day/a week/a month* [per day/week/month].

Example 2

For high-intermediate and advanced learners who are required to take tests and exams, a similar noticing practice can take place in the course of L2 learning and preparation. In most cases of students who are working toward formal assessments and exams, a great deal of attention, time, and effort is devoted to teaching and learning academic vocabulary and grammar. However, as Lewis (2000) comments astutely, one of the reasons that learners do not notice or learn collocations is that teachers do not point them out in the text. That is, the vocabulary that students encounter may not be new, but word combinations in which it occurs are likely to be, e.g. *you know/see, the fact is, or in this/that way.*

In most texts where collocations can be found and identified, some are more frequent and valuable to learn, but others might be less so. Example 2 includes two sets: those that are common with transparent meanings and that are suitable for learners at any level, and those that are less frequent.

Sea eagles are the one of the largest birds of prey in the world. You might think that life is good at the top of the food chain, and that all the smaller, less powerful

birds would stay away from these predators. Not so. Crows, for example, often harass eagles in flight, and you can frequently see a group of three or four crows circling and driving off an eagle. Crows usually noisily follow an eagle to add insult to injury. Once in a while, a crow who's not on the ball will feel the larger bird's talons, but mostly the crows get the better of the eagles in these battles in the air. Eagles are big and powerful, but crows are able to maneuver quickly. Crows are also more intelligent and able to work together in social groups.

The teacher's job is to identify and highlight multiword units, focus learners' attention on their form, structure, and meaning, point out lexical and grammatical patterns, and explain their uses in context. Pointing out, identifying, and discussing collocations in context is an essential step in teaching multiword units: these word combinations are difficult and work-consuming to learn, and noticing them in text can ease the task.

As is the case with most vocabulary learning, collocations can be frequent and valuable for teaching and learning, or less frequent and productive. The teacher's guidance is almost always required to identify high frequency multiword units, as well as those that might be already partly familiar, and separating valuable word combinations from those that are not. The two sets of collocations presented here provide an example of those found in the text on sea eagles.

Frequent and transparent: *one of the* [+ noun], *in the world, at the top, stay away (from), not so, for example, a group of* [+ noun], *drive off/away, once in a while, in the air, are [be] able to* [+ verb], *in social* [adjective or noun, e.g. *big, large, small, study, family, reading*] *groups*

Infrequent and opaque: *the food chain, in flight, to add insult to injury, on the ball, to get the better of* [+ noun]

In addition to helping students notice co-occurring word combinations, it is relatively easy to design exercises and practice activities with frequent and essential multiword units that can be employed productively in the long run (a few exemplars are discussed later in this chapter). Since most L2 teaching takes place with the aid of spoken or written texts, noticing and collecting frequent or less prevalent word combinations lends itself to instruction when working in any language skill. For instance, when collocations are encountered in textbooks on listening and speaking, a supplemental writing practice can further promote remembering and retention, or those that

are found in reading texts excerpts can come in handy in practicing L2 listening and speaking (Hinkel, 2015, 2016, 2018).

In classroom instruction and with the teacher's guidance, many L2 learners can become experienced and proficient in noticing word co-occurrences and phrase patterns, and this is considered to be one of the foundational language learning skills (Foster, 2001; Yorio, 1989).

- In language teaching, it is important to note collocations and bring learners' attention to their uses, forms, and functions: essential multiword units can be productively added to learning grammar and vocabulary in context.
- The teacher's guidance and contextualized discussion is paramount to determine which co-occurrences are common and thus should be learned, or those that are rare and that may not be worth the time and work that learning them requires.

Carefully selecting collocations for learning can become an ongoing task for both teachers and learners, and a few criteria for deciding what collocations to choose are discussed in the next section.

Research has demonstrated that flash cards or electronic applications and tools (e.g. mini self-quizzes, review lists, or phrase collections) represent the single most efficient way of learning and practicing vocabulary and collocations for retention (Hinkel, 2004, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017). Numerous electronic applications send automatic and timed review notifications and reminders – a great convenience for teachers and learners. When it comes to learning vocabulary of any type, be it single words or multiword units, students should be asked to make lists of valuable, frequent, and productive collocations and put them on flash cards. Examples with these words, phrases, and synonyms can be added to the lists and flash cards of any variety. Vocabulary and multiword unit notebooks are also a very useful, efficient, and practical learning aid because reviewing the items that have been covered and learned previously can be made easier when they are collected in one place.

Highly Frequent and Absolutely Essential Multiword Units

Typically, collocations consist of two elements: a pivot word and accompanying word(s) (one or more). A pivot word is the main/focal word in the

collocation, and its meanings are crucial to the meaning of the entire collocation. Accompanying word(s) can come before or after the pivot word. For example, *reach* is the pivot word in the following multiword units:

reach for/over/out, beyond/within [someone's] reach, long reach, reach the point, reach the end/limit, reach a goal/an aim, reach your [one's] destination, reach a conclusion, reach [someone] on the phone, reach [place/location/height], reach an agreement

According to a large corpus study by Shin & Nation (2008), the number of collocations of the most frequent 100 pivot words accounts for 53 percent of collocations in spoken English, and the top 200 most frequent pivots for approximately 70 percent. Shin and Nation explain that the shorter collocations are, the more frequent they are, and 77 percent of all spoken collocations consist of two words. In fact, most common collocations are encountered so frequently that they do not need to be specially taught or learned, e.g.:

you know, I think, a bit, as well, a lot of, thank you, very much, talk about, at the moment, a little bit, this morning, come on, come in, come back, have a look, last year, this year, last night, go back, very good, that way, at the end, for example, all the time, too much, over there, make sure, very well, in the morning

One of thorniest problems with L2 uses of multiword units, however, is that they can be difficult and laborious to learn, and many are error-prone. An immediately obvious consideration in learning them is that they contain more (and more complex) component parts than single-word vocabulary. Many L2 students know from experience that learning collocations is tedious and work-consuming. Their L2 uses often lead to a high rate of errors because of the irregularity of their grammatical and lexical forms, mis-applications of translated L1 collocations with similar meanings, or simple old-fashioned confusion of which collocational component goes with which (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Boers, 2000). However, most frequent collocations are so ubiquitous that they are encountered in any context, and without these no L2 learner can survive.

As mentioned earlier, short collocations are encountered highly frequently, and most have transparent meanings and functions. For this reason, they can be a suitable starting point for teaching beginners or learners at

any proficiency level. However, many short collocations have complex structures and can be challenging for L2 learners to use correctly (Hinkel, 2002, 2004, 2013; Nation, 2011, 2013).

Two samples of complex multiword units with prepositions are presented in Examples 3 and 4, and these require a great deal of attention and practice. English prepositions are famously (notoriously, extremely, incredibly, tremendously) difficult to teach, learn, and use correctly. Even for highly advanced and proficient L2 English users prepositions represent an ongoing problem. There are many reasons that make prepositions onerous to use correctly, but at least a couple may be worth mentioning:

- (1) Prepositions can have different functions in different contexts, and for instance, *in the house, in June, in class, in time, in the book, in the evening, in the picture*.
- (2) Almost all uses of prepositions are idiomatic and lexicalized, and they do not follow grammar or vocabulary rules.
- (3) Many (most?) uses and functions of prepositions are un-derivable, illogical, and opaque, that is, their meanings cannot be guessed from context.

The uses, functions, and meanings of most prepositions and prepositional phrases are collocational (and idiomatic), and they cannot be assembled in the process of speaking or writing.

Example 3

Frequent Multiword Units That Need to Be Taught and Practiced (and Practiced)	
Quantity Collocations	Time Collocations
<i>a couple of</i> [+ noun plural], e.g. <i>a couple of apples/hours</i> ~ <i>a couple of times</i>	<i>in</i> + month/year, e.g. <i>in June, in 2000</i> <i>in the</i> + season, e.g. <i>in the fall/winter</i>
<i>a few</i> [+ noun plural] (vs. <i>few</i>), e.g. <i>books, pens, people</i>	<i>on</i> + day of the week/date, e.g. <i>on Monday, on June 1</i>
<i>a little</i> [+ noncount noun, e.g. <i>milk, water, information, attention, work</i>]	<i>at</i> + hour, e.g. <i>at 12 o'clock, at noon, at 1:30</i>

Frequent Multiword Units That Need to Be Taught and Practiced (and Practiced)	
<i>a great deal of</i> [+ noncount noun]	<i>at night/midnight</i> ~ <i>late at night</i>
<i>a number of</i> [+ noun plural] ~ <i>lots of</i>	<i>in the afternoon/evening</i>
<i>a great/large/high number of</i> [+ noun plural]	∅ <i>next time/week/month</i> (e.g. <i>June</i>)/ <i>year</i>
<i>much</i> [+ noncount noun] vs. <i>many</i> [+ noun plural]	∅ <i>last time/week/month</i> (e.g. <i>May</i>)/ <i>year</i> ~ <i>last night</i>
<i>plenty of</i> [+ noun plural or noncount]	<i>in</i> + amount of time, e.g. <i>in a minute/hour/day/week</i> <i>in a couple of days/weeks/months</i>
<i>each/every</i> [+ noun singular], e.g. <i>each person/every student</i>	<i>on/for the weekend</i>
<i>one/two of the</i> [+ noun plural] <i>some of the</i> [+ noncount noun]	<i>once a day/week/month/year</i> <i>once in a while</i> <i>twice a day/week/month/year</i>

In addition to the frequent expressions of quantity and time, two- and three-word collocations with transparent meanings are also appropriate for beginners, as in Example 4. These can be productive in teaching with follow-up review activities to facilitate their retention (see Suggested Teaching Activities below).

Example 4

Two- and Three-word Multiword Units with Transparent Meanings		
<i>in and out</i>	<i>this and that</i>	<i>far away/nearby/close to</i>
<i>up and down</i>	(<i>thank you</i>) <i>very much</i> ~ OR <i>thanks a lot</i> [<u>but not</u> * <i>thank you a lot</i>]	<i>peace and quiet</i>
<i>come and go</i>	<i>off and on</i>	<i>here and there</i>
<i>more or less</i> [<u>but not</u> * <i>more and less</i>]	<i>a/the difference between</i> [noun and noun]	<i>back and forth</i>
<i>true or false</i>	<i>in a distance/at the distance of</i> [+ noun/number & noun], e.g. <i>a mile, five kilometers</i>	<i>day and night/all day/all night/all morning</i>
<i>once or twice</i>	<i>one way or another</i>	<i>sooner or later</i>

In much L2 vocabulary and grammar teaching, phrasal verbs, e.g. *take on, take out, take along, come by, come out, look forward to, look for, look in*, typically occupy a prominent place. In addition to these and multiword units of quantity and time, large collocational patterns with unpredictable and un-derivable meanings can also be found in the following contexts, with, for example:

- Prepositions of location (e.g. *in/on the corner, on xxx street, on the left/right, in/from [city], across, on the wall/desk, at the terminal/station/airport/stop/ Sony building*)
- Prepositions of movement and direction (e.g. *walk for [distance]/toward/along, through, out/out of, to, into, up, down, around, on/off, away/away from, back/back to*)
- Prepositions of instruments and transportation (e.g. *with (a spoon/knife), by bus/car/taxi, vs. on the bus/in a car, by email/phone/text*) ~
BUT ~ *a novel/poem by John Smith* ~ *xxx invented by Thomas Edison*

Checking the Frequency (and Accuracy) of Collocations

A very useful and practical technique for checking the accuracy and frequency of collocations, multiword units, and expressions of any kind is to perform an online search (illustrative examples are provided in the Appendix to this chapter). Some popular search engines permit searches for a specific phrase exactly in the form that it takes when the search term is surrounded by quotation marks.

For instance, it is easy to check which form of an expression is more frequent, e.g. “each and every” or “each or every.” The number of search hits serves as a good guide to demonstrate whether the first or the second string is prevalent. For instance, “each and every” gets 117 million hits, but “each or every” – only around 56 thousand. So, clearly, “each and every” is the more frequent (and probably more linguistically accurate) form of this expression. It is not a pristine corpus query, of course, but it is indicative, cheap, and easy.

This search technique takes only a couple of seconds, and the results are instant and usually pretty clear-cut. It can be useful for both teachers and learners for any type of an expression and in any context (see the Appendix).

*Suggested Teaching Activities for Highly Frequent Collocations***An Important Note on Learning and Retention of Vocabulary, Collocations, and Grammar**

Spaced repetition is the single most important factor in all remembering/vocabulary retention. Review, review, review the collocations and words learned. For example, effective vocabulary reviews can take place at regular intervals, such as one, two, three, and seven days apart. Vocabulary practice and review is the essential foundation of vocabulary learning and remembering.

Providing opportunities for regular spaced repetition is the single most important technique in all vocabulary teaching and learning.

The need for spaced repetition for language learning and retention has been widely recognized by the vast expanse of the language learning enterprise. Dozens of online and offline applications are available for vocabulary and collocation reviews, and many are free to use while others require a nominal charge. As always, however, old-fashioned flash cards may be convenient in the settings where electronic tools are not immediately accessible or available.

- (1) Ask students to write a letter to someone to describe what they did the previous day or week (past tense practice), what they usually do every day or week (present tense practice), or what they do during their class/ at school.

An alternative: Students can provide a detailed explanation of the school activities that take place during a day/week in order to clarify the schedule for a new student who is not familiar with the structure of the school day.

- (2) To make a careful shopping (or grocery) list for someone else who can do their shopping, students receive a list of items where they need to supply the quantity of what the helpful shopper is requested to buy. Ask students specifically to use quantity collocations in Example 3. For instance:

_____ tomatoes	_____ orange juice
_____ cucumbers	_____ snacks
_____ blue pens	_____ pencils
_____ bottles of water/milk/soft drinks	
_____ notebooks	_____ sandwiches

- (3) For speaking and dictation practice, working in pairs or small groups, students can dictate their schedules or shopping lists to someone on an imaginary phone. While one or two students are dictating, their partners can write down the schedules or the lists.
- (4) With and-or expressions (Example 4), students receive a list with one half of the pair, with the conjunction for beginners, but without it for intermediate learners (Ur, 2012). Then students are asked to complete the collocations, e.g.

in (and) _____ *once (or)* _____ *here* _____

An alternative: Students receive a list with ten (and not more than this) collocations of quantity and/or time. In pairs or small groups, they are asked to write out food preparation instructions that include timing and recipes, make weekend or vacation plans, or create timetables for buses, trains, guided tours of interesting or well-known locations, or exercise routines.

- (5) The number of highly frequent quantity and time collocations that students need to learn is actually pretty small, that is, around 12–15 of each type. A mini-quiz for six to ten minutes during each class can become an excellent opportunity for Spaced Repetition.
- (6) Students can make up questions with each collocation (interrogative/question construction practice) and take turns asking one another in pairs, e.g. *What do you usually have for breakfast/lunch/dinner? What time does your favorite TV show start? When do leave your house in the morning? How often do you go out with your friends?* (Collocations are underlined.)

Collocations with a Purpose, Part I: Speaking and Conversations

A large body of research has demonstrated that conversational exchanges and routines are highly pre-patterned, structured, and stereotyped (Coulmas, 1981; Hinkel, 2013, 2014). Analyses of conversational discourse and their findings are almost universally reflected in student textbooks for teaching L2 listening and speaking. In everyday spoken interactions, pre-patterned exchanges can be readily identified in casual conversations, small talk, meetings, discussions, or service encounters, and most include highly frequent collocations. These can be deployed with a practically unlimited range of functions, such as greetings, openings, introductions, answering the phone, requesting information, pre-closings, closings, asking for directions or clarifications, or making requests.

Recurrent word combinations can be utilized to develop learners' strategic language skills, spoken fluency, and easily accessible collocation substitutions, e.g. *We had a great/wonderful/fantastic time.*

In L2 speaking skills, fluency refers to the amount of attention and effort required to produce stretches of speech without communicative breakdowns and important misunderstandings.

The uses of pre-patterned expressions clearly provide a great resource when L2 speaking takes place in real time and under pressure (Hinkel, 2014; Nation & Webb, 2011). Collocational expressions typically mark discourse and conversation organizational structure. In this example of a conversation starter, a few multiword substitutions can be available in context:

- *Hi/Hello! How are you?/How is everything? How is your morning/day/week/class going?*
- *Hi! Good/great/excellent/fantastic. Can't complain/Doing well/Everything is going well. How about you?/What's going on with you?/How's everything with you?*
- *Doing (very) well/Great so far/My morning/day/class is pretty good.*

Collocations play a prominent role in short two-turn exchanges (also called adjacency pairs in spoken discourse analysis), and these are almost always pre-patterned and routinized.

Collocational two- (or three-) turn conversations can be found in a great range of conversations, and they are typically constructed with multiword units to structure discourse:

greeting – greeting, compliments – thanks, requests – grant/apologize and deny, information question – response, apologize – accept

For example:

- (1) *Good morning! How's everything going?*
 - *Great, can't complain. How's everything with you?*
- (2) *Thank you.*
 - *You are welcome.*
- (3) *Sorry, wrong number. /Sorry, I am late. /Sorry, I am lost. /Sorry, I missed my bus.*
 - *No problem.*

To help learners develop conversational fluency, multiword units are also highly frequent in nominating, maintaining, and expanding conversational topics.

For example (collocations with topic nominations are underlined):

- *Nice day/weather today .../Looks like more rain today ...*
- *I've been watching/following the soccer/football game/TV show*
- *I am taking a cooking/French class*
- *Have you seen the xxx movie/read the xxx book/noticed the xxx announcement?*
- *Do you live close to xxx?//Where do you live?*
- *The bus/train is late again/is on time today*

In general terms, routines and collocations are employed in most conversational or speaking contexts, and these multiword units have an enormous array of interactional and social purposes and functions (Ur, 2014). In spoken contexts, routinized expressions have transparent meanings, and for this reason, they readily lend themselves to teaching and learning. However, an important consideration in instruction is that interaction participants have to be able to understand their linguistic forms and highly predictable social functions.

Communicative breakdowns can occur if and when the interactional purpose of a collocational exchange is misinterpreted or misunderstood (Cowie, 1992; Fernando, 1996). For example, the expressions, such as *Okay, I'll see you there* or *Sorry, I have a bus to catch*, are not in fact announcements of plans or schedules, but they have the function of pre-closing a conversation, and these expressions are usually followed by good-byes.

A further benefit of noticing and learning collocations applies directly to the improved grasp of their interactional functions. As has been mentioned, a critical characteristic of collocations is that they do not follow grammar and lexical rules, and their communicative goals, as well as routinized responses, also require explicit teaching and learning (Hinkel, 2014). Conversational and spoken fluency can be addressed, for example, in a variety of in-class and out-of-class activities:

- Analyzing collocations in textbook dialogs, test preparation materials, and authentic interactions
- Identifying pre-patterned expressions and adding substitutions
- Re-working or re-stating frequent collocations in teaching materials, role plays, paired practice, and rehearsing

In more formal presentations and lectures, multiword expressions are also very common, and their typical functions are to highlight discourse organization or transitions from one section to the next. Among the most frequent are such collocations as *on the one hand, on the other hand, in the case of, as a result of, it is important to, take a look at, going to talk, at the same time, for this reason, a little bit, in the end, the best way, or the role of the* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Since these collocations are longer and more complex than conversational expressions, typically, learning their forms and discourse features is more laborious and challenging. Although many of these multiword units are suitable for high intermediate and advanced learners, a few highly frequent expressions can be useful even to beginning learners, nonetheless.

Specifically, the ubiquitous collocations that are worth the work and effort include just a handful, but for learners, these are very useful simply because they are very frequent and relatively inflexible in their forms. Examples of high frequency multiword units include the following.

on the one hand/on the other hand

the most important thing

my point is that ...

for example/for instance

I think (that)//I don't think so

I would like to//would you like to?

my first point/second point/final point the next/second point

another thing//the other thing

Suggested Teaching Activities for Collocations in Speaking and Conversations

(1) Matching conversational collocations and possible responses. For example:

Hi! How's everything going?

Thank you! I study very hard.

I missed class yesterday. Could I borrow your class notes?

I think, but I am not sure, that it's on zzz (day) at xxx (time). (Note: The preposition on is used with days and dates, and at with time points.)

When is the xxx? (day and time)?

Sure! I am afraid, though, that they are a little bit messy.

Where is the yyy?/How far is xxx? (location)

I am sorry, but I don't know. Maybe, yyy could tell you?

Your English/Spanish/French is great! Great/good/fine. How about you?

(2) Short talks/presentations, between one and four minutes. Students can be divided into pairs or small groups when they prepare short and timed presentations. The teacher prepares in advance a list of ten (and no more than ten) collocations that learners are required to use in each talk. When their preparations are completed, students make presentations to one another in groups of three to five while the listeners make notes of effective or less effective talk elements.

It is paramount to vary topics, rotate groups, and provide partially overlapping collocation lists. Initially, such presentations can be scheduled for one or two minutes a piece. Then the time limit can be gradually extended to four or five minutes each and practiced on several occasions. After several presentations, each student can have opportunities to learn and practice around 40 or more frequent spoken collocations.

Experience has shown that with regular rotations of student groups and different presentation topics, students usually enjoy these short talks and can become quite skilled at giving mini-talks.

Planned and prepared short talks are excellent activities for reviewing high-frequency collocations and vocabulary, as well as developing spoken fluency.

- (3) Dictogloss is a language teaching activity when the teacher reads a short text, usually more than once, while learners are required to reconstruct it after listening. The first step is for students to listen and write down key words, expressions, or grammar constructions. Then these noted language components are used as a base for reconstructing as much of the text as possible.

The text can be a story or an excerpt as short as one paragraph and as long as several depending on students' proficiency levels. Students are asked to write down all the collocations that they can identify. A good practice can take two to four repeated readings. Then, based on their collocation notes, in pairs or small groups, students can be asked to re-tell or reconstruct the story to the best of their ability. When they have finished, the entire story or the list of collocations is handed to students for checking.

A classroom dictogloss can be take as little as five to ten minutes, and it can be used as often as necessary during a school term. An excerpted example is presented below (collocations are underlined).

My brother called last night, but I was too busy to answer the phone. So, he left a message. He said that he was nearby and on his way to my house. He showed up a little while later together with his five friends. They decided to visit me because they were looking for something to eat. But all I had in my refrigerator was a couple of cucumbers, a little orange juice, and a bottle of soda. Needless to say, my brother and his friends were very disappointed. I hope that they learned their lesson about coming by uninvited.

Collocations with a Purpose, Part II: Academic Writing

At present, a great deal is known about frequent collocations and multiword units typically required L2 academic writing, such as common phrases (e.g. *in general...*, *on the whole ...*, *for this reason ...*), non-referential *it*-constructions (e.g. *it is interesting/clear/has been established*), or complex inflexible prepositions (e.g. *except for*, *in spite of/despite*, *by means of*, *in regard to*, *on top of*, *together with*, *prior to*, *such as*).

The teaching of academic writing – other than to absolute beginners – may be difficult to carry out without teaching recurrent academic collocations and multiword units, as well as longer stretches of text, such as *for a long time xxx*, *it has been the case that*, or *recent evidence/findings suggest(s) that ...*. In most

(if not all) student academic writing, such multiword expressions and their variations can be simply unavoidable (Hinkel, 2015, 2016, 2018).

As with conversational routines, in formal academic prose, what is appropriate and inappropriate in written discourse is also highly conventionalized (Swales, 1990). To a great extent, academic writing is also highly patterned, stereotyped, and rigidly structured, and particularly so in the case of student essays and written assignments (Hinkel, 2015; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). The stereotypical structure of most academic writing usually begins with an opening or an introductory statement, followed by the topic nomination, then moving on to the main points, and some sort of closing statement at the end. Generally speaking, the progression of writing from one rhetorical section to the next is clearly identified by means of flexible collocations, such as *To begin/start with/First, The main idea/point/question, and To conclude/sum up, In sum/conclusion, Finally.*

In academic writing, many conventional and highly predictable phrases that mark discourse junctures are called “institutionalized” because they occur more frequently in certain types of texts than in others (Howarth, 1996, 1998; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Swales, 1990). In writing instruction, learning frequent multiword units can take place in the context of L2 writing, say, when constructing predictable essay openings with variants and substitutions, e.g. *Many authors/books/articles state/say/that . . .*

For example, the number of reporting verbs that can be employed to mark paraphrases is around a dozen, and they can be learned with relative ease while working on a writing assignment, e.g.

*the author says/states/indicates/comments/notes/observes/believes/points out/
emphasizes/advocates/reports/concludes/underscores/mentions/finds*

Additionally, frequent academic collocations with similar meanings and textual functions can also be learned and practiced:

*according to the author/article/book, as the author states/indicates, in the
author’s view/opinion/understanding, as noted/stated/mentioned (in the book/
article), based on the article/author’s opinion*

A large number of academic collocations can have transparent meanings, and these can be useful for learners at any proficiency level. Although some are longer than two or three words, typically, such multiword units consist of only

one or two content words accompanied by function words, such as articles (*a, an, the*) and highly recurrent prepositions (e.g. *of, in, to, for, with, on, at, from*).

Highly Frequent Academic Multiword Units with Transparent Meanings		
<i>the end of the</i> ~ <i>at the end of</i> ~ <i>at the end of the</i>	<i>the beginning of the</i> ~ <i>at the beginning of</i> ~ <i>at the beginning of the</i>	<i>a number of the</i> ~ <i>a large/small number of the</i> ~ <i>in a number of</i> (<i>in</i>) <i>a total number (of)</i>
<i>one of the</i> ~ <i>one of the most</i> <i>most of the</i> <i>some of the</i> (<i>a</i>) <i>part of the</i>	<i>at the same time</i> <i>for the first time</i> <i>at this/that time</i> <i>at the time of</i>	<i>the size of the</i> <i>the amount of the</i> <i>the type of the</i> <i>the rate/frequency of the</i> <i>the value of the</i> <i>the form of the</i>
(<i>is/are</i>) <i>the same as</i> <i>the same way (as)</i>	<i>is similar to</i>	<i>as well (as)</i> <i>as well as the</i>
<i>a wide range of</i>	<i>based on (the)</i> ~ <i>is/are based on the</i> <i>on the basis of the</i>	<i>in addition</i> ~ <i>in addition to the</i> ~ <i>in addition to this/that</i>
<i>as a result (of)</i>	<i>for this reason</i>	<i>because of (the)~ due to (the)</i>

(Adapted from Biber, et al. (1999) and Simpson-Vlach & Ellis (2010))

Essential and frequent collocations can become an efficient means of expanding L2 learners' language range, particularly when they are also taught how to substitute their elements appropriately and in practical ways.

When working with frequent academic collocations, it is important to bring learners' attention to fundamental distinctions between conversational and informal language units that are distinct from those found in formal writing.

Although both conversational and academic collocations are usually encountered in instruction, pointing out the differences in these two types of multiword units is of the essence: without explicit teaching, learners may simply miss conversational vs. academic language components.

Suggested Teaching Activities for Collocations in Academic Writing

- (1) Present students with a short set of numerical or survey data of, say, a population description, languages/dialects spoken, educational backgrounds,

or shopping preferences in a city, region, or country. Provide the list of academic collocations that are required in a written description of the data. Students can work individually or in pairs.

- (2) Give the students a list of necessary collocations before they begin working. Assign students to measure (however approximately) the size of the classroom, the school (or public) library, cafeteria, study area, their houses, rooms, or hallways; or count books in a bookcase, or attendees in a lecture hall or a large classroom, or types of drinks, vegetables, or snacks in a grocery store, various kinds of souvenirs sold to tourists, vehicles in a parking lot, or shoes sold in a shoe store. That is, the students' task is to come up with a set of numerical data that can be described and written up in a short survey report.

As a starting point, students can begin by answering specific questions to guide their data collecting: who/what? for what purpose? where? at what time/when? Some suitable versions of these questions are usually sufficient for students to begin working as a data or writing prompt.

- (3) Have students read a short editorial or an opinion on a popular topic. The task is to present the writer's views, e.g.

the author states that ~~~ the author also says that

the writer explains that ~~~ in addition, the writer reports that

the article shows that ~~~ at the beginning, the data demonstrates that

An alternative: The teacher reads aloud a short text slowly, sentence by sentence. The students write down each sentence with their own restatements/versions of the text (see Dictogloss earlier in this chapter). This activity can be very productive because it addresses a number of language skills at one time, e.g. spelling, collocations, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence constructions.

A Final Comment

As with all language learning, repeated exposures and practice lead to long-term memory retention and subsequent production in speaking and writing. Many L2 learners have great difficulty using collocations and becoming fluent simply because most collocations and multiword units cannot be pieced together in the process of communication, and due to their length, they are laborious to remember and use correctly. It is also well-known that collocations require instruction accompanied by contextualized uses, practice, and more practice.

Although most collocations do not have immediately comprehensible and transparent meanings and grammar structure, a good number that are

very common can be deducible and appropriate for learners at any level. When it comes to multiword units, a reliable rule of thumb is that the shorter the phrase is, the more likely it is to have a transparent meaning and grammatical structure (Nation, 2013; Nation, Shin, & Grant, 2016).

- Two- or three-word collocations and multiword units are the easiest to understand and learn
- This principle applies to collocations of practically any kind, including those that consist of a function word and a content word or two content words
- For teaching and learning, the short collocations and multiword units are encountered far more frequently than longer ones, and thus, can be easier to learn and practice

Examples of frequent collocations and multiword units are easy to locate – they are everywhere:

in fact, you know, I suppose, at the moment, work on, no way, used to, about right, on sale, feel free, save/spend/waste time, (have) no time, just now, right now, fast food, good start, for sure, any more, over there, I see/bet, it seems, and so on, let me see, (not) really, would like to

Because two-word collocations are highly common and can be found in both speech and writing, they are also relatively straightforward to come up with online, in dictionaries, and various teaching materials, such as picture books, textbooks, and electronic texts (Hinkel, 2014, 2015, 2018). On the whole, teaching and learning short collocations and multiword units is not a very demanding task due to their frequency: for example, they are almost always included in student textbooks on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For beginners, for example, a small number of fixed (e.g. *hold on, call me*) or minimally variable (e.g. *See you later/tomorrow/next week*) expressions could be a good place to start. For more advanced learners, the collocational expressions that mark conversational sequences or written discourse structure are essential to learn.

In general terms, ubiquitous multiword units can be well-suited for practice in conversations or formal academic writing when they are added, omitted, and modified to match different types of contexts, formality levels, teaching and learning goals, and learners' proficiencies, from beginning to advanced. All in all, a great range of concepts, ideas, and functions are

expressed by means of collocations and multiword units, and language usage is impossible without them.

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Appendix

By ~ ~ Large

"by and large"

About 43,300,000 results (0.46 seconds)

"by or large"

About 3 results (0.34 seconds)

Thank you

"thank you very much"

About 83,300,000 results (0.31 seconds)

"thank you a lot"

About 3,710,000 results (0.40 seconds)

More ~ ~ Less

"more or less"

About 128,000,000 results (0.56 seconds)

"more and less"

About 35,800,000 results (0.44 seconds)