An Inside-out Review of Lexical Collocations: Considerations for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in EFL Contexts

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Assuming the importance of lexical competence as a crucial variable in learning English as a Foreign Language, this paper attempts to discuss lexical collocations including the phrasal verbs from theoretical and pedagogical point of view. More specifically, the paper focuses on how collocations and phrasal verbs are composed in terms of their lexico-grammar and semanticity. The study also reveals learners' problems with the form, meaning, use and phonology of collocations and phrasal verbs. The paper concludes with the mention of some practical teaching measures based on awareness-raising and practical tasks as a solution to these issues. It is anticipated that these will provide EFL teachers an insight into the concept and use of collocations and phrasal verbs to make their teaching practice more effective.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the acknowledgement that collocations significantly facilitate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in developing near-native proficiency in the target language, there is a lack of due focus on collocations in EFL pedagogy, second language (L2) learning, and linguistic enquiry (Abduldafi & Abdalla, 2019). Premised on the notion that "acquisition of vocabulary is crucial to successful language learning" (McCarten, 2007 p. 26), this paper presents an inside-out review of some of the theoretical and pedagogical perspectives on lexical collocations with phrasal verbs as a distinct entry, especially in regard to their form, meaning, use and phonology. The choice of the topic was motivated by two factors: First, lexical collocations including the phrasal verbs provide learners with a range of lexis that can be used for diverse communicative purposes (Hyland, 2008) and secondly, they help learners acquire native-like clarity and naturalness in speech and writing (McCarthy & O'dell, 2007; Nation, 2001). Following Halliday and Hasan (1976) cited in Ahmad (2019), collocations as a class of reiteration are instrumental in establishing co-referential ties within and beyond the clause structure to give the text its cohesive property which results in the creation of texture - the essential qualification for a text to be defined as such.

However, research on collocations has revealed that most L2 learners including the advanced level face difficulties in using collocations appropriately (Nesselhauf, 2005; Revier & Henriksen, 2006). Phrasal verbs - a sub-category of lexical collocation - also offer a formidable challenge to both the teacher and the learner of English as a foreign/second language. The diversity of meaning (verb/particle collocation) embedded in the phrasal verbs is often confusing as is the form which involves a complete understanding of the verb-particle behaviour. EFL learners' problems with collocations motivated the initiation of this article which is expected to provide useful insights to the EFL practitioners as far as the understanding and teaching of lexical collocations and phrasal verbs are concerned with specific attention to the concept, issues, awareness-raising, and practical tasks.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term collocation was coined by Firth who propounded that "meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words" (Firth, 1957 in Cheng, 2019 p.108). This entails that the meaning is not derived from the individual words but from the collocational

relationship that is established between the words which frequently co-occur. Collocations can, therefore, be understood as a class of formulaic language or idiomatic expressions which are arbitrary both in their lexico-grammatical composition and semanticity. Zaabalawi and Gould (2017 p.21) argue that "collocations are not necessarily grammatical and/or cannot be generated through knowledge of rules or formulae". This speaks for the relative difficulty which EFL students face when dealing with collocations.

Collocations are thus combinations of words with "habitual co-occurrence" (Crystal, 2008 p.86-87) such as *make dinner, have a shower* etc. Cruse (2006 p.27) is of the opinion that we can understand collocations from two different perspectives: First is the any grammatically well-formed combination, such as an *excellent performance*. The second is the compositional co-occurrence which has a semantic unity and is sometimes referred to as the 'encoding idiom' (ibid). For example, in the *high seas, high wind, high office, have a high opinion of,* the word *high* has a special meaning in every use which is different from its default meaning as, for instance, in *high wall*.

Combinations of words which are fixed are called "strong collocations" (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2006 p.6). For example, in *take a photo* the verb *take* cannot be replaced by any other word. Collocations which allow for different words to give the same meaning are "weak collocations" (ibid) such as *fast bowler, fast car, fast food* etc. However, a strong collocation may be infrequent in its use, for example, *bite the dust*, and a weak collocation like *have lunch, have a nice day* etc can be more frequent. Idioms are also a type of collocations which have a fixed meaning that cannot be guessed through the meaning of the discrete words.

A phrasal verb, on the other hand, is formed when a particle (an adverb or a preposition or both) is added to a verb (Thornbury: 2006 p. 164). Phrasal verbs are also sometimes called multi-word verbs or two-part verbs (Attenburg & Vago, 2010 p. 38-39). Some writers consider phrasal verbs (verb + adverb particle), prepositional verbs (verb + preposition particle), and phrasal-prepositional verbs (verb + adverb + preposition) distinct from each other due to the grammatical patterns in which they occur. But, nowadays, the term phrasal verb is often used to include all the three types mentioned above (Platt & Richards, 1992 p. 275-276).

Form and Meaning

Collocations may be grammatical as well as lexical. Grammatical collocations have a content word, i.e. an adjective, a noun or a verb, and a preposition or a grammatical construction such as a clause or an infinitive. For example, *(to be) attracted to, (it is) delightful + to + infinitive, (to have) an interest in (something), (it is) a myth that +clause* and *to vote against (someone/something)* (Maurer-Stroh, 2004 p. 1). Lexical collocations, on the other hand, consist of two content words and typically reveal the following structures (Maurer-Stroh, 2004; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005):

i. Adjective + noun (e.g. unemployment is a *major problem* for the government at present).

ii. Nouns + verb (e.g. John *proposed a solution* to the board of governors).

iii. Noun + noun

Nouns often require further qualification and are usually the words that carry the most meaning within a sentence. The pattern *a .... of ....* is quite frequent in English (e.g. After the traffic warden left the place, I felt *a sigh of relief*).

iv. Verbs and expressions with prepositions (e.g. The mother *burst into tears* when she heard the news of her only son's accident).

v. Verbs and adverbs (e.g. She *sang beautifully* at the concert last night).

vi. Adverbs and adjectives (e.g. The mobile phone battery was*fully charged* when I gave it to you).

vii. De-lexicalized verbs

De-lexicalized verbs like *get, have, make, do, put, take* have a basic meaning (make = create/manufacture, have = own/possess), they mostly collocate nouns or other words as chunks of meaning (e.g. Get an instruction; Have a nice weekend)

viii. Fixed expressions with adjective / verb + dependant preposition (e.g. depend upon; good at)

ix. Idioms/fixed collocations where substituting any of the words is impossible: (e.g. to get out of bed on the wrong side; to shrug your shoulders).

Diversity in the Meaning and Use of Lexical Collocations

Collocations make the language sound and read natural. This naturalness of the language is achieved with the use of register and quite often, it is the

collocation that suggests a particular register (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2006). Different combinations are used for different contexts and purposes and have formal and informal connotations. EFL learners are exposed to a variety of genres (a particular class of speech event or text type) during the course of their learning English, and hence the possibility of diverse use of collocations. For instance, the use of collocations in conversational English is less formal and is different from that of writing (e.g. The students were all *bored stiff* by the lecture). Business English has its own specific register, and thereby its exclusive collocations (e.g. South Korea's Samsung Electronics *launched a new version* of its Galaxy Tab in order to *compete aggressively* with Apple's iPad). Collocations which are used in an academic or official context are more formal than the collocations of the conversational English. These are often found in instructions, acknowledgements, and legal notices.

e.g. "I would like to express my *sincere thanks* and appreciation to all those colleagues and friends whose *helpful comments*, support, and encouragement were invaluable to me in the preparation of this book". (Omaggio, 1986 p. xv)

Similarly, newspaper English is often sensational and frequently makes use of word combinations that create an emotive and dramatic effect. Newspaper collocations do not appear in everyday usage.

e.g. US Republican *hit aid* to Pakistan: Representative Howard Berman, *the top Democrat* on the committee and a main author of the 2009 bill, said he agreed on the need to "*get tough with Pakistan*" but disagreed on restrictions over civilian aid.

Diversity in the Meaning and Use of Phrasal Verbs

Redman (1997 p. 36) suggests that "sometimes the meaning of the phrasal verb is very similar to the base verb, and the adverb just emphasizes on the meaning of the base verb". For example, *stand* in *stand up* suggests an upward movement and the particle *up* does not add or change the meaning; it only gives an extra stress on the meaning. Thornbury (2006 p.165) argues that the meaning of the phrasal verbs "is not simply a combination of the meaning of their component parts". He refers to the abstract and idiomatic meaning that most of the phrasal verbs carry (e.g. It took her a long time to *get over* her illness). However, sometimes the concrete meaning of a phrasal verb can help in understanding the abstract meaning; for example, you can *look back* to say goodbye to someone as you leave in a car (concrete meaning – look behind you), or you can *look back* on your past life (abstract meaning – remember or recall) (McCarthy & O'Dell: 2004 p. 14). Many phrasal verbs have more than one meaning

(Redman: 1997 p. 36), but there is no direct connection between the multiple meanings of a single phrasal verb as is illustrated in the examples below:

    a. It was hot so I decided to *take off* (remove) my jacket.

    b. I am always very nervous when the plane *takes off* (leaves the ground).

Some phrasal verbs can be formal or informal depending upon the mode of use i.e. spoken or written. Spoken language allows for a frequent use of the informal phrasal verbs (e.g. They have *put off* the match until next week). However, when it comes to formal use as, for example, in writing, there is a one-word verb with the same meaning as the phrasal verb (Eastwood: 1994 p. 306). The above mentioned phrasal verb *put off* can be substituted by a single word *postponed*. But sometimes this substitution is not possible and a phrasal verb is needed for formal expressions (e.g. The Saudi Airlines flight SV 702 for Asmara will *take off* at 7: 00 a.m.).

The particle carries a clear basic meaning in some of the phrasal verbs as in the following sentences:

    c. Jack *invited* me ***out.*** (let's go out together)

    d. Rosie *invited* me ***in***. (Please come in!)

According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2004 p. 10), most particles have multiple shades of meaning. For example, *over* can be used to express "changing positions" as in *fall over* or can be used to give an idea of "thoroughness" such as *talk over*. The use of phrasal verbs varies in different cultures, especially in the English speaking countries (ibid p. 14). For example, the Australian *belt into* versus the British *throw yourself into* or the American *wash up* versus the British *freshen up*.

Phonology of Lexical Collocations and Phrasal Verbs

The phonology for collocations involves proper ordering of chunks (which are believed to be equivalent of an intonation unit), linking in connected speech, stress placement, and weak forms. For instance, the chunk *white and black* will sound unnatural. Similarly, the stress in compounds generally falls on the first syllable as in *high' rise*. Pauses normally come at the end of a chunk, while content words are stressed. The phonology of phrasal verbs, on the other hand, involves stress on the verb or the particle for achieving different communicative functions like giving instructions, orders, showing directions etc, for example, in *pick* ***up*** the particle

down emphasizes the meaning of the lexical verb and will be stressed. Phrasal verbs also involve linkingwhen spoken as a chunk, for example /pɪ ˈkʌp/ instead of /pɪk/ /ʌp/.

3. LEARNER PROBLEMS WITH COLLOCATIONS AND PHRASAL VERBS

The sub-sections below present learners' problems in regard to collocations and phrasal verbs.

Quantity and Arbitrariness

One of the basic problems learners have is the huge body of collocations itself. The Cambridge International Corpus of written and spoken English, the CANCODE corpus of spoken English, and the Cambridge Learner Corpus mention several thousands of collocations in English (McCarten, 2007; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2006). The fact that there are so many possible collocations and that the choice of which word to collocate with, for instance, a noun is completely arbitrary. This leads to the question: "Well, why is it have a coffee not drink a coffee?" and the inevitable reply (hated by teachers and students alike): "It just is." (Hunt, 2006). Similarly, the grammar of phrasal verbs is certainly complex as it involves not only transitive and intransitive verbs but also the behaviour of these verbs with different particles which can either be a preposition or an adverb or both. The positioning of the particle before or after the object is often confusing for the learners and, we can come across such utterances as "I can no longer *putup youwith*". Similarly, not all verbs followed by a preposition are phrasal verbs as in, for example, I *looked*at the painting. Phrasal verbs carry multiple meanings. It is really hard for the students to distinguish the idiomatic meaning from the concrete. Since phrasal verbs allow different particles to convey different meanings, the learners find it difficult to retain the variety of meanings that occur in one set of phrasal verbs. According to Thornbury (2006 p.166), many phrasal verbs "are restricted in terms of style, tending to be informal or even slang such as *nod off, chill out*.

Tendency for Learning Individual Words

Wray (2002) argues that the learners mostly focus on individual words rather than on chunks of language. One reason for this is the traditional approach to language teaching where the primary focus is on achieving accuracy through teaching form, and the teaching of vocabulary is given a secondary importance. Learners who learn individual words take a longer time in processing and retrieving the target item and sound less natural than those learners who learn language in chunks and achieve a better fluency (Thornbury, 2006, p. 85). Similarly, Vilkatie &

Schmitt (2019 p.329) refer to several studies which show that "collocations are processed faster than matched control phrases, both in L1 and in L2". Hence, a frequent exposure to collocations not only facilitates reading ability but also comprehension.

L1 Transfer

Many learners over-generalize the collocation forms of their first language (L1) for L2 use and as a result, sound unnatural. One reason is the untranslatability of many L1 words and phrases into the target language. They take it for granted that because they collocate something a particular way in L1, it will translate directly and accurately into English. Many EFL students, for example, use incorrect *verb + noun* and *adjective + verb* collocations such as *open the fast* instead of *break the fast* and *beautiful food* instead of *tasty food*. They also over-generalize the meaning of phrasal verbs and try to find their equivalents in their L1. This may work for the literal meaning but when it comes to idiomatic meaning the learners falter. The particle is the most confusing element in this. For example, the students are likely to use the phrasal verbs *bring out* incorrectly as *to take something out* instead of *to publish something*.

Spoken Form

Since learners are in the habit of learning and noticing individual words, they often have problems speaking larger chunks in a natural manner. There are three main reasons for this: They give equal stress on every word that they speak or read, or stress the second syllable unnecessarily to make the word sound ambiguous. For instance, many Urdu and Arabic learners have this tendency of unduly stressing the second syllable, and we have confusions with words like *learn'ed* to understand whether it is an adjective or a verb.They may fail to notice how the sentence could be chunked. For example, *I have a mobile phone + like that.*The students may also find it challenging to link the chunks together. For example, *When I left university + I made a decision + to take up a profession + in which + I could be creative.* (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2004).Phrasal verbs are not too problematic for learners in terms of pronunciation, though misplaced word stress is a common error (Steele: 2005). Students are frequently reluctant to give stress to particles. They may pronounce *check in* as /ˈtʃekɪn/. Similarly, they fail to notice how the phrasal verb with an object between the verb and the particle could be chunked. On hearing a native speaker saying *pick them up* (ˈpɪk ðəˈmʌp), a novice EFL learner may wonder what **mup** is.

Written Form

Written form is affected by compounds (units of meaning formed with two or more words). Since there are no definitive rules but only guidelines about the formation of compounds, the learners are often confused if compounds are a single word or all *noun + noun* combinations are hyphenated. For example, the collocation *singer-songwriter* can be challenging for the elementary level learners to understand (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005 p.7).

Thornbury (2006 p.166) observes that the traditional approach to teaching vocabulary focuses more on the syntactic structure of phrasal verbs (2.1) than on meaning. This focus includes issues of transitivity and intransitivity and whether phrasal verbs are separable or inseparable. In addition, phrasal verbs are taught according to their lexical group of the verb which has the main meaning like, for example, *get up, get back, get off* etc. This approach, although systematic, may confuse the learners as the verbs are so similar in form.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

This section attempts to address the learners' problems through awareness raising and production tasks.

Awareness Raising

Research (e.g. Wood, 2010) suggests that raising awareness about the form, meaning, use, and phonology of collocational structures to EFL contexts may yield better results in terms of developing the discourse competence of the learners. Collocations are important for understanding new lexical chunks as well as for successful communication. The first step in developing learners' vocabulary is through awareness-raising which aims at developing the learners' notions of collocations, their significance in language learning, and readiness for new lexical items. One very effective method of awareness-raising is the activation of learners' schemata through elicitation and prediction techniques. Prompts such as pictures, realia, and cues with the help of the white board or digital paraphernalia can be exploited both for schemata and context development. Thornbury (1997) suggests that acquisition of vocabulary cannot be realized without noticing. Reading activities can also be used for awareness-raising. After answering comprehension questions, learners can be asked to put the original text away, and are given a new version with some of the key collocations blanked out. Working in pairs, they have to reconstruct the collocations, before checking with the original. An alternative could be to give a text to the learners, they read the text, and notice and underline the collocations.

McCarthy and O'Dell (2004 p. 6) suggest the learners to understand the meaning of a phrasal verb as one unit. This requires frequent noticing of phrasal verbs in context. Teachers should select those texts which have high frequency of phrasal verbs in them. Students can be asked to identify and underline phrasal verbs used in the text. To help EFL learners understand phrasal verbs as one unit, a set of theme-related phrasal verbs such as dealing with sports, travel, etc. can be useful. Learners can be engaged in a spoken interview where they use these phrasal verbs, for instance, to conduct a survey on a topic or ask each other questions and answers about a personal experience that is related to a certain theme. To further raise their awareness of phrasal verbs, students can also be asked to match the particle with the lexical verb or match phrasal verbs with their definitions or prompts.

As Thornbury (2002 p. 122) opines that "knowing a word means knowing its associated grammar", it is important to contextualize phrasal verbs in such a way as to help students understand their grammatical form. Teachers should select material from authentic texts and point to patterns in phrasal verbs. Students can also substitute the phrasal verb with a synonym or classify the verb according to the four types mentioned by Thornbury (2006 p. 166). Phrasal verbs can also be included in the classroom language. High frequency phrasal verbs can be used in varying classroom contexts to address problems of form, meaning, and phonology. Some of the common phrasal verbs for this use are *sit down, put your hand up, turn your papers over, write this down, look it up, hurry up*.

Practical Tasks for Teaching Lexical Collocations and Phrasal Verbs

The following production tasks can be designed to help learners learn, practice, reinforce, and recycle the target collocations and phrasal verbs, and thereby overcome the problems they can have with the new lexical chunks:

Topic-based Approach

Keeping in mind the huge corpus of the collocations and the level of the learners, it is pertinent to adopt a topicbased approach to teaching collocations. This will give a better focus on the lexical items and it will be easy for the learners to understand them. For example, the elementary learners can be taught collocations from topics like *money, travel, towns* and *cities, sports* etc. To help students learn vocabulary in chunks and reinforce new lexis or personalize learning experience, contextualized set of sentences or a passage, for example, a gap-fill can be designed where students fill in the missing chunk using correct phrasal verb. They can also be given practice in dealing with particles to raise their awareness of their meanings, for example, by matching definitions of phrasal verbs, for

instance, with the particle *down* with sentences and then noticing the common meaning of the particle.

L1 Transfer

As mentioned above, the learners are influenced by L1 while using collocations because of the non-availability of the appropriate equivalent. Use of collocation pelmanism such as vocabulary grids (Morley, 2006) is a good idea to help the learners practice and create the word combinations that are possible in the target language. This can also be done by asking learners to first translate the collocations into L1 and then, retranslate them into the target language. These grids can be very useful for teaching weak forms where learners can notice one word going with several. To help students overcome L1 influence while dealing with phrasal verbs, activities which require matching phrasal verb with its synonym can be useful for elementary learners. Higher level learners can do rephrasing i.e. they can be given a text with lexical verbs in bold and then asked to substitute the verb by phrasal verb with same meaning as, for example, *depart* can be replaced with *set off*.

Spoken Form

To help learners figure out problems of the spoken form, choral drilling can be very effective for the learners to understand and use the correct model of pronunciation. The white board can be used to mark the stress, intonation, and linking. Oral surveys to personalize the newly learned phrasal verbs provide valuable repetition to consolidate pronunciation, meaning, and form.

Written Form

As already stated that there are no definitive rules as to the formation of compounds, the learners can be asked to notice and record the written form of the collocations. Recycling of the target collocations in the lesson is particularly important to tackle the issue of compounds and hyphenation. Similarly, surveys, reports, and stories can also be used to resolve the problems of the written form. In addition, matching activities such as matching the collocation with the correct definition as well as a cloze test to fill in the gaps can be very helpful.

To familiarize the learners with the four distinct grammatical patterns of phrasal verbs, learners can be asked to notice and record the patterns of target lexis. Elementary learners will benefit from a more gradual approach where they start underlining the form of phrasal verbs. Intermediate level learners can label phrasal verbs in a text as verb, particle, object etc. They can also categorize the verbs as transitive and intransitive. At intermediate and advanced levels,

learners can be asked to do gap-fill activities where they fill in the missing verb or particle or object. To do a comprehension check or gauge learning outcomes, students can also be set to do error correction on an activity which has phrasal verbs in an incorrect form. This activity cannot only be used to practice the form but also used for achieving accuracy of meaning.

Recycling Collocations and Phrasal Verbs

The learners have the tendency to forget chunks if they are not recycled in the subsequent lessons. Following Morley (2006), learners can be engaged in discussion that can either be on a topic or a personalized one such as narrating a travel experience or a broken relationship. In addition, pelmanism, i.e. the memory game where learners have to find matching halves of collocations from cards placed face-down on the table can be created by the teachers. The learners turn over two cards, and keep them if they go together. Using grids where students create a new collocation with any of the content words is also useful. The learners can be asked to write all the collocations they have done in the class. The teacher can provide a list of definitions and ask the learners to match the collocations with their definitions. This can also be done in the beginning of the lesson to develop a link with the previous lesson.

5. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that L1 interference and the tendency of the learners to learn individual words impede the learning process and the result is inaccurate and unnatural language production both in speech and writing. It has been observed that learners achieve a better level of accuracy and fluency if they learn chunks of language. One way of learning the language through chunks is through lexical collocations and phrasal verbs provided issues of course design, teaching methodology, instructional materials, and learner autonomy are adequately dealt with. Phrasal verbs are an excellent source of developing lexical range of students so that they could achieve native-like fluency. But they are daunting for students and therefore, for teachers. However, anticipation of students' problems and preparedness for awareness raising and production can figure out the complexity that surrounds the teaching and learning of collocations and phrasal verbs.

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