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Strategies for Teaching Lexical Collocations in Maritime English Classes

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Abstract. Maritime English mastery is key to the professional development of maritime students. However, an important part of maritime English vocabulary is represented by collocational structures, which may pose serious difficulties to the learner. It is an accepted fact that without a clear understanding of such structures, English proficiency cannot be acquired. With this in mind, the present paper seeks to address the issue of lexical collocations in maritime English, and outlines a series of explicit vocabulary-building activities that may lead to better specialized vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Introduction. The concept of *collocation*

In connection with defining what is conventionally called *syntagmatic units* (Henriksen 2013: 29), *recurrent combinations*, *fixed combinations*, or *collocations* (Benson et al. 1986: ix) consensus has yet to be reached. There is neither a common definition of the term *collocation* nor common criteria to be used when identifying collocations. However, one aspect linguists have agreed on is the pervasiveness of English collocations. (Tannen 1989, Nattinger 1980, Hill 2000, Lewis 2000, Nation 2001).

Another characteristic that is often brought to attention is the frequency with which collocational patterns occur. It was actually H.E. Palmer who first used the term *collocation* in 1933 to refer to “recurring groups of words”. (Palmer 1933, cited in Kennedy 2003). A considerable number of recent studies also apply the criterion of frequency of co-occurrence when identifying collocations. (Schmitt and Carter 2004, Borucinsky and Kegalj 2015) It seems that „*collocations become established as units of learning depending on the frequency with which they are experienced*” (Kennedy 2003), and that if a word pattern is frequent in a corpus, this might be an indicator that it is „conventionalised by the speech community”. (Schmitt and Carter 2004)

However, the attempts made in order to distinguish between collocations and other word patterns, such as free word combinations, compounds or idiomatic expressions do not always converge. Lewis & Hill (1998) believe the difference between a free combination of words and a collocation resides in the structure’s predictability. However, as observed collocations occur arbitrarily, and they „cannot be accounted for on semantic or syntactic grounds” (Wei 1999). Nevertheless, in the study undertaken by Michael Lewis (*The Lexis Approach* 1993), collocations are viewed as one giant umbrella covering various lexical groups. To Lewis, all collocations are idiomatic and all phrasal verbs and idioms are collocations or contain collocations.

To Benjamin Bruening (2019), the lexical elements of collocations merely co-occur with a high degree of frequency and are recognized as „conventionalized expressions by speakers of the language”. Speaking of the syntactic constraints of idioms and collocations, he also asserts that two types of structures should “be treated the same, as a broad class of conventionalized expressions”. The author illustrates this claim by classifying *come to grips with* as a collocation because the verb is used within its normal semantic range, while *grips* conveys the same meaning of “understanding” or “acceptance” in other situations, such as *to get a grip on* (e.g. a concept). On the other hand, he classifies *keep someone posted* as an idiom because *posted* does not convey the same meaning outside of this pattern. (Bruening 2019: 369) To Benson et al. (1986) collocations are also “fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions”. However, Larson (2017) claims that collocations are completely different from idioms as far as their syntactic structure is concerned. He goes on to say that collocations are combinations of words which do not have a special, non-literal meaning (e.g. *cost a fortune*), unlike idioms which are fixed expressions that have a non-literal interpretation (e.g. *kick the bucket* = ‘die’)

Other studies simply place collocations as an intermediary category between free word combinations and idioms. (Alverson 1994:45, Nattinger 1980), or speak of ‘transitional areas’ (Cruse, 1986:41), which makes it even more difficult to solve the problem of defining collocations.

Grammatical and lexical collocations

Collocations are frequently divided into two major groups: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations (Benson et al. 1986, Gyllstad, 2007, Henriksen 2013, Borucinsky, Kegalj 2015, Jens Bahns. Grammatical collocations consist of a „dominant word” (noun, adjective, past participle, verb) and a preposition, or take the form of a grammatical structure such as an infinitive/gerund or clause. Lexical collocations do not have a dominant word, and follow patterns such as: verb + noun (inflict a wound, withdraw an offer); adjective + noun (a crushing defeat); noun + verb (blizzards rage); noun1 + noun2 (a pride of lions), adverb + adjective (deeply absorbed), verb + adverb (appreciate sincerely). (Benson et al. 1986, p.ix)

Teaching collocations

Collocations are an important but rather „underevaluated” feature of productive English vocabulary. More and more researchers regard collocational competence as essential in second language acquisition. (Kennedy 2003, Rahimi and Momeni 2012, Basal 2019, etc.) Nowadays, the lexical approach to language teaching places more emphasis on presenting the words in language chunks rather than in isolation (Lewis 1997, Willis & Willis 2006). Chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and they have a “crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency” (Lewis, 1997).

Analysing the effect of teaching collocations on students’ English proficiency, Rahimi and Momeni (2012) reach the conclusion that teaching words in chunks highly improves students’ language proficiency. Given the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of collocations, students should be guided and encouraged throughout the learning process. The ways in which terms associate need to be highlighted by the teacher to ensure better language production on the part of the student. In order to activate collocation vocabulary, and to shift from receptive to productive vocabulary, students need to be familiarized with such phrases and the ways in which words collocate with each other. For instance without stressing the differences between the mother tongue and English, students would not be aware of structures such as *to do one’s homework* (Rom. „a-și face temele”) or *to make the bed* (Rom. „a face patul”).

Teaching collocations in Maritime English

In the following, we shall focus on lexical collocations In Maritime English, as an important aspect of conveying information on board ships. The need to increase students’ awareness to lexical collocations also applies to this field, where limited collocational competence leads to limited specialized language fluency. Therefore, increased emphasis should be put on teaching maritime collocations as part of Maritime English instruction. The importance of collocational competence for students of maritime English has also been stressed by Vișan & Georgescu (2011) and Borucinsky, Kegalj 2015, Cole et al. (2007).¹ It is indeed vital to teach collocations in maritime universities in order to comply with the basic requirements of the International Maritime Organization’s International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW95) – for increasing on board safety and productivity.

Identifying collocations in this article

As Borucinsky, Kegalj 2015 and Pritchard 2015 observe, when dealing with Maritime English vocabulary, the real problem is distinguishing between collocations and other lexical structures,

¹ According to Cole et al. (2007) collocations (especially those of the verb+object noun type) are one of the most productive ways of enriching vocabulary and terminology in modern Maritime English.

mainly compound terms. To differentiate between the two, a compound is the combination of two or more nouns put together to create a new noun, whereas a collocation is a set phrase created by the association of two or more words. This association relies on repeated context-dependent use. For the purpose of this article, we have used the criterion of the frequency of co-occurrence to distinguish between collocations and other lexical units. We also place collocations as an intermediary class between free word combinations and idioms.

How best to teach maritime collocations?

What are the most effective ways to acquire collocational knowledge in Maritime English? The challenges that maritime collocations pose require a different approach to teaching. However, there are few studies addressing the issue. (Vişan, Georgescu 2011, Borucinsky, Kegalj 2015) In the context of teaching maritime collocations, we can distinguish two categories of exercises: those that focus on the reception of vocabulary and those that focus on the production of vocabulary. In fact, every learner has a double lexical knowledge, one in reception (recognition of lexical units) and the other in production (use of lexical units in utterances). In many cases, the same unit can be recognized, but not produced. This usually happens because the passive skill is stronger than the active one.

In addition, the exercises which focus on the receptive or productive vocabulary, must privilege the presentation of the collocation in its context. We would like to stress the importance of the context, which allows for collocations to be better integrated into their semantic field and thus better assimilated. In other words, collocations are acquired more easily. Authentic materials offer students the possibility of understanding terms in relation to the context in which they usually occur. Clearly, there are also exercises that position the collocation outside such context. The limits of such an approach are obvious, that is why would use these exercises only for review or assessment purposes, and not for introducing new collocations.

Moreover, the selection of suitable collocations should follow the pre-established curriculum, and favour the programming of contents and the progressive learning of the concepts, while supervising the cognitive evolution of the learners. Also, the exercises dealing with the reception and production of collocations should be both oral and written.

A classification of the learning-teaching activities concerning collocations should comprise, alongside the indirect learning activities (i.e. oral and written reception and production of texts), direct learning activities that imply the use of exercises to commit the lexical information in the students' minds. Such activities may be receptive (semasiological) - with collocations presented in or out of context, productive (onomasiological) - with collocations being used in context, or semi-productive - with collocations being used in both receptive and productive exercises. The next section of this paper presents some types of exercises that the teacher can use in the context of teaching collocations in Maritime English. The following classroom activities have been organized to cover both receptive and productive vocabulary, with more focus being placed on encouraging learners to use receptive maritime collocations productively.

1. Collocation detector.

This type of receptive activity may be used in order to improve student retention of maritime collocations. To solve the exercise, students need to identify collocations in a given text, as follows:

At an appropriate distance from the berth the engine is stopped and the ship's headway is used to bring her alongside the wharf. This headway should be just enough to keep the ship moving ahead without losing steerage way. If a ship has too much headway, it should be stopped by backing the ship with the engine or by letting the anchor go. As a matter of fact, only the off-shore anchor is dropped and then a heaving line is passed ashore. A head rope, a bow spring and two breast lines are run out from the ship and secured to bollards ashore. Working on these lines, as well as on the stern rope and stern spring which are also run out in due time, the ship is hove into her berth and made fast.

Following this activity, a number of maritime collocations should have been identified. *appropriate distance, due time, to lose steerage way, to bring a ship alongside, to back a ship, to hove a ship into her berth, to let an anchor go, to drop anchor, to run lines out, to secure lines, to work on the lines.* They may also be organized according to a key term, such as *ship, anchor, lines, etc.*

2. Collocation checklists.

The information gathered in exercises such as the one above may be used to create collocation checklists. In this case, the translation of the collocation could be used for students to create a collaborative dictionary.

3. Matching exercises

Matching exercises are semi-productive activities that may take different shapes, asking students to find the definitions of maritime collocations, their synonyms, antonyms or translations. Some examples are given below:

3.1. Definition search

1. to moor a ship	a. goods that you have to pay tax on when they are brought into a country
2. dutiable goods	b. to tie a boat so that it stays in the same place
3. customs clearance	c. the speed at which any vessel is manoeuvrable in any particular circumstance
4. steerage way	d. all of the formalities and procedures required for goods entering and leaving a specific national territory

(Answer key: 1b, 2a, 3d, 4c)

3.2. Synonym search

1. tie up a ship	a. slacken
2. let an anchor go	b. pass (ashore)
3. run a line out	c. drop
4. reduce speed	d. moor

(Answer key: 1d, 2c, 3b, 4a)

3.3. Antonym search

1. shallow	a. bring up	water
2. load	b. deep	a ship
3. pay out	c. clear	anchor chain
4. enter	d. discharge	a port

(Answer key: 1b, 2d, 3a, 4c)

3.4. Translation match-up

1. to bring a ship to anchor	a. a lua relevmente
2. to give a ship the sternway	b. a vira, a ridica ancora
3. to weigh anchor	c. a deplasa nava înapoi

4. to take bearings	d. a aduce nava la ancoraj
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(Answer key: 1d, 2c, 3b, 4a)

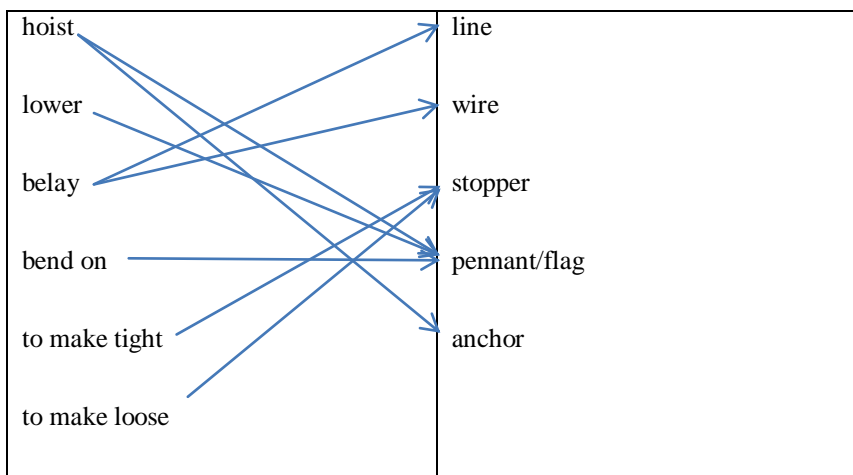
4. The odd one out

Collocation lists with intruders can prove to be a very efficient way of distinguishing between real collocations and false friends. Students are given a set of collocations where there is an intruder (“a pseudo-collocation”).

bend on attach hoist secure	a flag a pennant
belay let go secure fasten	lines wires
make fast back hove let go	a ship

5. Collocation formation.

In this type of vocabulary activity, the collocation bases are given in one list and the collocatives in the other.



After doing the exercise, students should have discovered the following collocations: *hoist a flag*, *hoist an anchor*, *hoist a pennant/flag*, *lower a pennant/flag*, *belay a line/wire*, *bend on pennant/flag*, *to make a stopper tight/loose*.

6. Multiple choice exercises

Multiple choice exercises are semi-productive activities in which the learners need to choose the correct answer and ignore the distractors. The starting point could be either a sentence which needs to be filled in with a suitable phrase, or a definition and four possible answers as illustrated below:

Polypropylene has the lowest _____ point.

- melting**
- welding
- moulding
- heating

A tax paid on goods that are imported is:

- a. **customs duty**
- b. customs fee
- c. customs charge
- d. customs tax

7. Fill-in exercises

Fill-in exercises are also commonly used in teaching collocations. They may take numerous forms from the standard in which students are asked to fill the missing words by choosing from a list. Usually, the bases are given, and students need to find their collocatives. For instance, in the sentence below, the missing collocatives are 1) *upright* and 2) *correct*:

In order to 1) _____ the ship you have to transfer fuel, ballast water, fresh water or oil from one tank to another to 2) _____ the list.

8. Open cloze exercises

Open cloze exercises would be a good follow-up activity for matching and multiple choice exercises as they encourage the production of vocabulary, and ensure the memorization of the targeted collocations.

E.g. An anchor is _____ and lowered by a windlass. (Answer: *hoisted*)
The cargo must be properly _____ so that it doesn't shift. (Answer: *lashed*)

9. Error correction

Error correction exercises ask students to identify misused terms in a particular context; the learner must find the right collocation or the correct use of the collocation in question. This type of activity appeals to productive vocabulary since students assume the responsibility of reinforcing the collocations they have learnt.

E.g. In order to 2. raise the ship you have to transfer fuel, ballast water, fresh water or oil from one tank to another to rectify the list. (Answer key: 1. upright 2. correct)

Conclusions

Collocation mastery holds a special place in teaching and learning Maritime English. Since most of the linguistic competence of a seafarer is based on the acquisition of standard marine communication phrases, it goes without saying that a good command of maritime collocations will lead to the learners' professional development. Explicit vocabulary-building activities such as the ones mentioned above highlight learner-centered techniques and strategies for the efficient teaching and learning of Maritime English. The reiteration of maritime collocations through varied exercises brings about the memorization of the lexical structures. It is essential that each exercise be guided by a specific goal and follow a specific topic, while giving particular attention to false friends which pose most problems to students. In addition, the selection of collocations should be made mainly in relation to the pre-established curriculum, promoting the progressive learning of concepts, while respecting the cognitive evolution of learners and managing the memorization of all the concepts to be acquired. With this in mind, the benefits of focusing on teaching maritime collocations are obvious: they increase student awareness and retention of such structures and they ultimately lead to better specialized vocabulary.

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