Making Your Classroom Approach More Lexical: Focusing on Collocation Rather than on Grammar

Matheus de Mello Cunha

Tutor: Profª. Ms. Márcia Helena Venâncio Faleiros

Introduction

According to Ur (2005), when students want to learn a language they want to communicate in that language. If they know only grammar rules, the communication will not be established. As a result, they need more than grammar, they need lexis to fill the slot that only grammar produces.

Therefore, this article aims to show the importance of the implementation of lexis in the English classes, in opposition to the study of grammar as the only way to learn and understand a language.

Firstly, we discuss some factors that contribute to make English the most important language of communication around the world. These factors also explain the reasons why people want to learn a foreign language, which will lead us to some characteristics of the foreign language teaching-learning process based on Harmer’s ideas.

In the second topic the focus is on the teaching of grammar. We start with comments about the importance of grammar in the language instruction in the past and then we reflect upon the negative connotation it has today. However, grammar has its importance, it should not be banned from the English classes, the approach is what has to be changed.

Topic three holds a discussion on the Lexical Approach based on Lewis (2001, 2002) reflections. Firstly, we talk about what the aim of this approach is, what differences it makes in the English classes, and its contributions to the teacher’s role in the classroom. Then, to make the approach more meaningful we explore the complex issue of idiomatic expressions and collocations. Together with these

---

1 Aluno regularmente no Programa de Pós-Graduação Strictu Sensu - Letras: Linguagem, Ensino e Pesquisa do Uni-FACEF – Centro Universitário de Franca, no ano de 2010.
2 Professora Mestre em Ciências e Práticas Educativas; atuante no corpo docente do departamento de Letras, de Turismo e Hotelaria e Sistema da Informação do Uni-FACEF – Centro Universitário de Franca.
phenomena the different kinds of collocation, and their use is approached. Last but not least there is a discussion on the word-for-word translation versus chunk translation.

Finally, we present an interesting analysis of a questionnaire, that check students’ knowledge of collocations. The questionnaire was answered by twelve students – four from of each semester – who do Languages at Uni-FACEF.

1. The foreign language teaching-learning process

1.1 Brief comments on the language

Nowadays, English seems to be the most popular language of communication around the world. This language is used by a lot of people, which include native speakers and non-native speakers. Therefore, there are some people that use English as L1, and as L2. Concerning language popularity, Harmer (2005) says that there is no doubt that English is and will remain a vital linguistic tool for many business people, academics, tourists and citizens of the world who wish to communicate easily across nationalities for many years to come. This is the reason why English has become a lingua franca that means, “a language widely adopted for communication between two speakers whose native languages are different from each other and where one or both speakers are using it as a ‘second language’” (HARMER, 2005, p. 01). Being a lingua franca involves many factors, such as historical, economic and cultural ones. Thus, the English power has been growing since the colonization, as Harmer emphasizes (2005, p. 02):

[... ] When the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the Massachusetts coast in 1620 after their eventful journey from Plymouth, England, they brought with them not just a set of religious belief, nor only a pioneering spirit and a desire for colonization, but also their language. Although many years later the Americans broke away from their colonial master, the language of English remained and it is still the predominant language of the world’s greatest economic and political power.

Another reason that contributes to the English language power is tourism, because in most places around the world English is usually the language used together with the local one.

---

3 In this research we will use L1 to refer to a person’s First Language or Mother Tongue
4 L2 refers to a person’s Second Language although it is known it also refers to foreign language. The distinction is not important in this paper.
Much travel and tourism is carried on, around the world, in English. It is a phenomenon of multilingualism of many tourism workers in different countries, but a visit to many airports on the globe will show sings not only in the language of the country, but also in English […] (HARMER, 2005, p.03).

Popular culture also helps to improve this fantastic phenomenon, as Harmer (2005, p. 12) explains, “Pop music that saturates the planets airwaves. Thus many people who are not English speakers can sing words from their favourite English medium songs.”

Regarding culture, although English is spoken all over the world it is worthy of note to keep in mind that a language can take many forms, depending on who speaks it, and where they do it, taking into consideration differences of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. For instance, there are differences between American and British English, such as, flat (American English) and apartment (British English.), and there are regional varieties as well. Harmer (2005, p. 07) comments and exemplifies the information above:

[…] in addition to geography, factors such as social class, ethnic grouping, and sex affect the language being used - and influence the way in which business judge speakers […] while a Londoner might get a take away meal to eat at home, a Scottish person will order a carry out.

Harmer (2005) also says that, there is a multiplicity of varieties, which makes it difficult to describe English as one thing.

These comments on the language, in a way, lead us to the reasons why people want to learn a foreign language, especially English. According to Harmer (1994), there are many factors that influence the learning process such as school curriculum, or advancement, because people “think it offers a chance to advance in their professional lives. They will get a better job with two languages than if they only know their mother tongue” (HARMER, 1994, p. 01).

Another reason is the target language community. If students want to go to an English-speaking country for professional or academic reasons, English will be the survival language in the community. Learning at least a bit of the language would make things less complicated. Culture is also a factor that helps, as students “want to know more about the people who speak it, the places where it is spoken and (in
some cases) the writings which it has produced” (HARMER, 1994, p. 02). Last but not least, we can say that there are miscellaneous reasons for learning a language according to Harmer (1994). Some people do it just because all their friends are learning the language. Others want to be a tourist in a country where that language is spoken, and there are the ones who do it just for fun.

These reasons take us forward to the teaching-learning process, which will be better discussed on the next topic.

1.2 Comments on some characteristics of the foreign language teaching-learning process

The teaching-learning process involves a lot of factors. They may vary from the method to rapport.

Before getting into more details about it, it is worth making the distinction between acquisition and learning\(^5\). Acquisition is the ability of the speakers to use the language unconsciously, it is when learners are forced to learn the language in some real situations of communication, “it happens as a result of the input they receive and the experiences which accompany the input” (HARMER, 1994, p. 33). On the other hand, learning is the process that students go through in Brazil when they want to speak English. They attend regular classes by understanding the language process as it is a formal teaching situation.

Krashen, for example, suggests that comprehensible input means that language is acquired and is therefore available for use (in other words the student can produce the language spontaneously) whereas consciously studied language is only learnt (and is therefore much more difficult to produce spontaneously). Acquired language is somehow ‘better’ than learnt language because you would have to concentrate to produce the latter, thus interrupting the flow of language production (HARMER, 1994, p. 37).

As learning is what happens in Brazil concerning the English teaching-learning process, it is important, at least, to mention the methods and approaches that still influence this process. According to Harmer (2004), they are: The Grammar Translation Method, Audiolingualism, PPP, Task-based learning and Communicative Language Teaching. As it is not the aim of this paper, we will not explain them in

\(^5\) The distinction between these words was made by Stephen Krashen, who also helped to elaborate the Natural Approach.
details and we also assume that teachers have some knowledge of them. It is worth mentioning that there is not a best method, they all have characteristics that benefit different learning situations.

Independently of the method, what teachers have to do is to bring acquisition as close as possible to learning. To accomplish this goal and also suggest ways of doing it, Harmer (2004, p. 25) says:

Like language learners outside schools, they will need to be motivated, be exposed to language, and given chances to use it. We can therefore say what elements need to be present in a language classroom to help students learn effectively. We will call these elements ‘ESA’, three elements which will be present in all - or almost all - classes.

The ESA (Engage – Study – Activate) elements guide students to a more interesting and motivating process.

Engage is the part of the lesson in which the teacher tries to make students get more interested in what comes next, so, it works with students’ feelings and emotions. Some kinds of activities that help students to get engaged are “games (depending on age and type); music, discussions (when handled challengingly) simulation pictures, dramatic stories, amusing anecdotes, etc […]” (HARMER, 2004, p. 25). According to Harmer (2004), this element is important because when students are engaged, they learn better than when they are not.

Study is related to activities through which students focus on the language and its construction. Some examples of Study activities, mentioned by Harmer (2004, p.25 ) are:

- The study and practice of the vowel sound in ‘ship’ and ‘sheep’;
- The study and practice of the third person singular of the present simple, like ‘He sleeps’;
- The study and practice of the way we use pronouns in written discourse, for example, ‘A man entered a house in Brixton. He was with an unusual hat. It was multicolored’.

Activate, to Harmer (2004), describes activities that allow learners to use language as free as possible according to given topics, functions, etc. Some activities that involve the Activate element are: “[…] role plays, […] advertisement design
(where students write and then record a radio, commercial); debates and discussions, [...]" (HARMER, 2004, p. 26). **Activate** helps students to retrieve language they have already studied.

Harmer (2004) states that these elements should be present in the teaching sequences no matter what the main focus is.

At the same time, it is important to know that:

To say that the three elements need to be present does not mean they always have to take place in the same order. The last thing we want to do is bore our students by constantly offering them the same predictable learning patterns [...] It is, instead, our responsibility to vary the sequences and content of our lessons [...] (HARMER, 2004, p. 27).

What Harmer is trying to say is that the ESA does not have to fit the lesson in this order - **Engage**, **Study** and **Activate**. It may very or repeat an element according to the aim or purpose of the activity.

These elements also give teachers the chance to use **authentic** material in the classroom and not only **non-authentic** ones. **Authentic** materials are the ones that “are designed for native speakers: they are ‘real’ texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question” (HARMER, 1994, p. 185). Some examples of this kind of material are songs, radio commercial, and newspapers (written in English), and others. On the other hand, **non-authentic** or **restricted** material “is one that has been written especially for language students” (HARMER, 1994, p. 185). The course book activities in general are examples of this kind of material.

Introducing students to **authentic** material is a way of engaging them into the language and also a way of making students fell more motivated. Although a balance between **authentic** and **non-authentic** material would lead to a more complete learning.

As we have already mentioned, the elements and the kind of material make students more motivated. According to Harmer (1994, p. 03), motivation is:
... some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action. If we perceive a goal (that is, something we wish to achieve) and if that goal is sufficiently attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal.

There are two kinds of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. The first one is “concerned with what takes place inside the classroom” (HARMER, 1994, p. 03). Harmer (1994) exemplifies it talking about physical conditions (teachers have to try to make their classrooms more attractive); the method (if the method is not appropriate, students will be de-motivated) and the teacher (the teachers’ approach while dealing with the method).

Extrinsic motivation is “concerned with factors outside the classroom” (HARMER, 1994, p. 03). Harmer (2005) mentions that it can be aroused by the students’ interest in the culture of English-speaking countries or the fact that it will help them get a better job.

Coping with the activities and the factors mentioned before, we realize that the lexicon is a key point in the teaching-learning process. If the aim of English classes today is to bring acquisition as close as possible to learning, the more students are familiar with the lexis of a language the better. Students will feel more motivated and more prepared to deal with authentic material. Besides it, through collocations students will be engaged into the learning process as they make it more meaningful. Learners will have the chance to study collocation when, for instance, they understand that we say do homework and do someone a favor, but make a journey. Even though in Portuguese do and make mean “fazer”, in English they are not interchangeable.

As for the activate element, students can use all the language studied in debates or discussions in the classroom.

As we can see, all the aspects that characterize the teaching-leaning process are well contemplated by the use of collocation.

If we teachers work only with grammar, emphasizing its structure, we will prevent student from gaining essential knowledge of the language. However, this topic will be better discussed in the next chapter.
2. Grammar teaching in the English classes

The importance of studying English nowadays has been growing quickly. As we have already mentioned, people want to learn this language because of many factors such as: the school curriculum, the target language community, culture, etc. However, the focus of the English teaching-learning process has changed throughout the years. In the past, for many years, learning a language involved learning its grammar, as Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 145) point out:

In the early parts of the twentieth century, grammar teaching formed an essential part of language instruction, so much so that other aspects of language learning were either ignored or downplayed. The argument was that if you knew the grammatical rules of the language, you would be able to use it for communication.

Scrivener (2005, p. 253) corroborates this idea when he says:

For many years, ‘learning the grammar’ has assumed a central role in students’ expectations about what learning a language involves. Nowadays, however there are many different views about what learners need to learn and how best to go about teaching it.

Following Scrivener’s ideas, it is clear that when teachers are teaching a foreign language they should not get stuck to the idea that grammar rules and their explanations are the only way to teach the language. Actually, according to Harmer (2004), it is necessary that students are exposed to the language, understand its meaning and its form (how it is constructed) and practice it.

We teachers should not “assume, as many do, that ‘grammar’ equals only ‘tenses’ or verb forms (e.g. present perfect, past continuous/ progressive). Grammar is language and how we use it; tenses are just a fraction of our language” (RIDELL, 2001, p. 27).

More details about the teaching-learning grammar process will be give on the next topic.

2.1 The recent teaching of grammar
When people hear that they are going to learn grammar, most of them usually think that “grammar teaching means teaching a grammar syllabus and explicitly presenting the rules of grammar, using grammar terminology” (HARMER, 1999, p.23).

This negative connotation is also expressed by Riddell (2001, p. 07):

[...] The very word ‘grammar’ has negative connotations for most people, and can be a real turn-off in the classroom, much as the word ‘homework’ can. But it is a word with an undeserved reputation! Ask most people what they understand by ‘grammar’ and they will usually come up with “rules”, “exercises”, “copying from board”, “boring”, “not usefull” etc [...].

However, grammar has its importance in the teaching-learning process as stated by Richards & Renandya (2002, p. 151):

Knowing how to build and use certain structures makes it possible to communicate common types of meaning successfully. Without these structures, it is difficult to make comprehensible sentence. We must, therefore, try to identify these structures and teach them well [...].

Therefore, they conclude that:

In some contexts, serious deviance from native-speaker norms can hinder integration and excite prejudice – a person who speaks ‘badly’ may not be taken seriously, or may be considered uneducated or stupid. Students may therefore want or need a higher level of grammatical correctness that is required for mere comprehensibility (RICHARDS & RENANDYA, 2002, p. 152).

However, teachers should bear in mind the place of grammar teaching.

The place of grammar in the teaching of foreign languages is controversial. Most people agree that the knowledge of a language means, among other things, knowing its grammar, but this knowledge may be intuitive (as it is in our native language), and it is not necessarily true that grammatical structures need to be thought as such, or that formal rules need to be learned (UR, 2005, p. 76).

As we can see, grammar is only one aspect of language. According to Riddell (2001, p. 28) it “involves meaning, pronunciation, form and practice”. This
aspect cannot be taught in isolation as language is a series of related items. When teachers are aware of this fact, they may help students understand the language, its constructions and meanings better.

The problem teachers have been facing nowadays is that the theory does not always match the practice. We still have teachers who teach ‘grammar’ through isolated sentences, which are not part of a contextualized situation.

Stranks (2008) mentions that we sometimes serve up grammar for our learners in a way that bears little relation to actual language use – that we give learners grammar practice that isn’t necessarily language practice. In addition, Lewis (2001, p. 47) says:

 [...] We are at present in one of those awkward stages in the development of ELT methodology when teachers are still putting into practice ideas which most theoreticians have long abandoned. All manner of ideas are still associated with the obsession with grammar: standards, traditional ways of doing things, how textbooks are written, how texts are constructed, and most inhibitingly of all, perhaps the expectations both teachers and students bring to textbooks and courses.

We cannot forget that grammar practice should be called ‘language practice’, as suggested by Stranks (2008, p. 06):

A large number of very different things are used lumped together under the heading of ‘grammar’. There are areas which rarely involve semantic meaning but are simply a matter of conformity (for example, the position of adverbs in English sentences, or noun gender in languages like French or Portuguese); there are areas where meaning is central (for example, the choice of verb tenses in English), and there are areas where the choice to use a particular structure affects the pragmatics of conversation [...].

The next topic will expand more on what happens when teachers work only with grammar.

2.2 Disadvantages of working with ‘grammar’
According to Lewis (2001, p. 15) “grammar enables us to construct language when we are all unable to find what we want ready made in our mental lexicons”.

Teaching grammar emphasizing the accuracy of form will focus only on the structure. This may be the reason why students frequently use L1 in their English classes. “Many students believe, when they first start out to learn the language, that virtually every expression or vocabulary word in Portuguese (be it colloquial or not) can be converted literally into English in the blink of an eye (IGREJA, 2005, p. 13).

Another problem students may encounter is mentioned by Richards & Renandya (2002, p. 151):

[…] They know the main rules, can pass tests, and may have the illusion that they know the language well. However, when it comes to using the language in practice, they discover that they lack vital elements, typically vocabulary and fluency […].

This approach, also according to Richards & Renandya (2002, p. 151), can be counterproductive, as “it tends to make students nervous of making mistakes, undermining their confidence and destroying their motivation”.

The effective and constant grammar teaching can demotivate learners, and at the same time it does not help them to understand the language.

The Present Perfect tense is a grammar aspect that exemplifies the above statement clearly. Due to the fact that students cannot resort to L1, as we do not have the same verb tense in Portuguese, it is even more difficult to understand the rules which are complex.

Podemos, então, até dizer que as unidades didáticas não fazem sentido do ponto do objetivo gramatical, uma vez que vão suscitar nos sujeitos-alunos os sentidos e as significações da L1. Isto porque este tempo não existe no português e a tradução do paradigma verbal leva a um outro tempo com significação, o sujeito-aluno não encontra o objeto do discurso [...] (FONSECA, 2005, p. 111). ⁶

⁶ In this paper, we will keep the quotation in their target language.
According to Murphy (2004), this verb tense is used when we talk about a period of time that continues from the past until now. Besides it, we can also give students the following list of the use of the verb tense:

- To talk about an action which began in the past and still continues;
- To talk about someone’s experience;
- To talk about a past action with present result;
- To talk about an action that happened at an indefinite time in the past;
- To talk about an action that happened more than once in the past.

Even after this explanation and also sentences to exemplify each of them, students may not understand it and the reason is clearly stated by Fonseca (2005, p. 112) when she says that:

 [...] o tempo verbal deve ser ensinado discursivamente porque ele tem valores que se perdem quando uma sentença é despregada de seu discurso, porque é somente dentro do discurso que ele pode ser examinado, dentro de um todo maior.

Lewis (2001) corroborates this statement saying that learners do not really understand the present perfect until they understand the simple present and the past simple too, and the relationships that the meanings of all these different verb forms have with each other.

When we prioritize the grammar teaching, we not only demotivate students but also an effective learning is not conveyed.

[...] Traditional grammar teaching, emphasized repeated practice as a way of fixing patterns; a lexical approach suggests that it is repeated meetings with an item, noticing it in context, which covert that item into intake” (LEWIS, 2001, p. 171).

The grammatical versus lexical structures will be better discussed on the next topic.
2.3 Grammar and lexicon structures

Nowadays, there have been strong debates on what is more relevant in the teaching-learning process: grammar or lexicon?

Firstly, we have to say that the role of grammar has changed throughout the years. As we have already said, grammar is not only verb tenses, now teachers are aware of the fact that the verb tense is only one aspect of grammar.

Looked at as an actual utterance rather than a sentence, it is difficult to make grammatical generalizations from I'll see you tomorrow – variations such as You/He'll see me/you/him tomorrow, although ‘correct’ are not entirely convincing as what people do, rather than what they might, say. This is true of many utterances beginning I'll, where the equivalent with you seems likely only if tagged: I'll bring it on Monday. You will bring it on Monday, won't you? (LEWIS, 2001, p. 149)

Languages consist of much more than grammar. According to Lewis (2001), language is meaning and meaning is represented by lexis, which consists of collocations, words, expressions, etc. An important statement given by Lewis (2001, p.147) is that “[...] grammar although important, plays a subordinate role.”

Ur (2005, p.78) emphasizes with him when she mentions:

[...] Teaching learners how to construct grammatical sentences does not enable them to produce real-life discourse. The implication is that the learners need to learn how to make meanings within real contexts, and how to create longer units of language than single sentences.

As we can see, language involves much more than grammar and also much more than rigid generalizing rules.

[...] this view denies that when learners produce correct sentences these are based on abstract ‘rules’ the learner has been taught; the rules are neither more nor less than various provisional and partial generalizations, based on understanding and breaking down in different ways and to different degrees, input which is essentially lexical (LEWIS, 2001 p.148).
When we state this, we are not saying that grammar explanation should be banned from the teaching-learning process. Based on the theory presented so far, we are trying to expose that the grammar approach is what has to be changed.

According to Sinclair apud Lewis (2001, p. 147), “we have sufficient corpus-based evidence we may see that our earlier understanding of the role of grammar may have to be revised”.

Although there is considerable disagreement about what categories are most appropriate for different purposes, the consensus of opinion among applied linguists is that the separation of grammar and vocabulary as distinct categories is simply wrong […] (LEWIS, 2001, p. 147).

When we deal with grammar together with vocabulary we, according to Lewis (2001), avoid problems we would face when we deal with them separately as every word has its own grammar. “Teaching collocation means giving attention to a much wider range of patterns which surround individual words; this means many more patterns than those of any traditional structural syllabus” (LEWIS, 2001 p.150).

3. The lexical approach

According to the Lexical Approach “language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks […]” (LEWIS, 2002, p. 03). Lewis (2002) also says that it does not involve a big change in the teacher’s understanding of language, but only small, consistent changes in the classroom.

Most of the time, people think that language is divided into grammar and vocabulary, as they know that language consists of grammar (structure) and vocabulary (words). On the other hand, the Lexical Approach “[…] argues that language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text […]” (LEWIS, 2002, p. 07).

The Lexical Approach can be divided in four basic types of chunks: words, multi-word items (collocation, fixed-expressions, semi-fixed expressions).
Words are single items. It’s the largest category, and the most familiar one. They consist of polywords and de-lexicalised words and verbs. Polywords, are “indivisible word-like units. They are ‘words-with-space-in-them’ [...] They are nearly always very short 2-or-3-word phrases which are obvious units” (LEWIS, 1997, p. 22). Such as: *by the way, up to now*, etc.

Lewis (2002) defines de-lexicalised words as the ones that carry little meaning in themselves or that have many ‘friends’. They may have more than one use, such as *point, thing* and *way*. De-lexicalised verbs are defined by the same author as the ones that do not often have much meaning in themselves, such as *get, make, do, have and take*.

Multi-word items, which is one of the four types of chunks, consist of collocation, fixed and semi-fixed expressions as we have already mentioned.

Lewis (2002, p. 08) describes collocation as:

[...] the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency [...]. Collocations range on a spectrum from fully fixed (a broken home, to catch a cold), through relatively fixed, to totally novel [...].

*Fixed expression* according to Lewis (1997, p. 216), is “a phrase or sentence which has an idiomatic pragmatic meaning”. Some examples of Fixed Expressions are: *Good morning; Happy New Year; I’ll have to be going; I’d like a twin room for … nights, please.*

The last category is the *Semi-fixed Expression* that is “an item with one or more variable slots which must be filled by an item chosen from a relatively small group of items which share particular language characteristics” (LEWIS, 1997, p. 219).

[...] The *Semi-fixed Expression* category contains items which are hardly covered by the informal use of the word ‘expression’. This is a large and important category which contains a spectrum, from very short to very long and from almost fixed to very free [...] (LEWIS, 2002, p. 11).
As we can see, according to the Lexical Approach, words have to be analyzed together. Its purpose is to memorize the chunks of a language as we memorize more than individual words.

The next topic brings a discussion about idiomatic expressions that also represents the importance of understanding chunks and not isolated words and sentences.

3.1 Idiomatic expressions

Firstly, it’s important to mention that, when we are talking about idioms, we immediately have to think about fixed expressions. An example of typical idioms is: to fall under weather, which means to fall unwell.

Everyday expressions also help to understand better the idiomatic expressions. According to McCarthy & O’Dell (2004), they are the everyday spoken language that could be full of fixed expressions, that are not necessarily difficult to understand but which have a fixed form that does not change.

These kinds of expressions are used in the daily routine of a person’s spoken language, they are not good expressions to be used when we are writing. Their translation may be difficult for teachers and students, because in some situations, there are not specific words to construct the meaning of the expressions. It shows that each language has its own characteristics and it may not correspond to students’ L1 characteristics. According to Igreja (2005):

> When dealing with languages one should bear in mind that sometimes a certain word or expressions may be unique in a language and there may not be a good counterpart for it in another language. Take the Portuguese word “saudade” for example! […] (IGREJA, 2005, p.12).

Idiomatic expressions also represent a kind of collocation, to understand it better, the next topic is about collocation and its importance to the English classes.
3.2 Collocation

Collocation plays a central part to the understanding of the Lexical Approach as we have already mentioned. There are lots of definitions of collocation, we shall start with this one given by Lewis (2001, p. 132):

[...][3.2 Collocation]

Collocations are not words which we, in some sense, ‘put together’, they co-occur naturally, and the first task of the language teacher is to ensure that they are not unnecessarily taken apart in the classroom. If words occur together, learners need to notice that co-occurrence and, if they are to be recorded in a vocabulary book, the words should be recorded together, a point already made by several contributors.

Collocation is an outstanding contribution to the student’s knowledge of a language in the teaching-learning process. Most of the times students learn individual words which make it much more difficult to the understanding of chunks/collocations. Lewis (2001, p. 53) states this difficulty when he says:

If you learn two words separately, you must also learn a third item, the correct collocation. Separating collocations into their component words is easy; it is considerable more difficult to put words together to form natural collocations [...].

Knowing what collocation is, is only one aspect of the teaching-learning process that teachers should consider. The other one is raising students awareness of it.

We, teachers, should not only draw student’s attention to more familiar ones such as green eyes but also, and specially, the less frequent ones as heavy seas/smoker, as Woolard (2001, p. 28) mentions.

In order to avoid possible confusion and even antagonism, I prefer to adopt a definition of collocation that does not overlap or clash with any of these established categories. For me collocation does not re-define or re-order what I teach, it simply extends and enriches it. Therefore, for teaching purposes, I feel we need a definition that confines itself to a level of patterning that has previously received no explicit focus in our classrooms. A number of overlapping definitions of collocation exist, many of which have at their core some sense of the ‘co-occurrence’ of words. A typical definition
is ‘words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggests’ [...].

Grabbing students’ attention to noticing combinations that teachers think students may not find together is also part of the definition that Woolard (2001, p. 29) gives of it:

The definition of collocation I have adopted is essentially a pedagogic definition. It took me a while before I felt I could see useful collocations in text with ease, which suggests that teachers and students need to invest time in both absorbing the concept, and practice in noticing useful collocations in text. Before I became focused on collocation, I would look at a text, and typical of the ELT profession, isolate the major grammar patterns and any items of useful vocabulary almost automatically. Now I find that it is collocations that are first to spring out the texts I read. It is very much a case of seeing more than you used to in a text.

Words that co-occur together are a really broad definition and it leads us to the various groups that can form this co-occurrence. This is the topic of the next item.

3.2.1 Kinds of Collocation

When we say do the dishes or hazel eyes we are dealing with two different kinds of collocation. The former is a verb + noun collocation, and the latter is an adjective + noun collocation. As we can see, there are different kinds of collocations. According to Lewis (2001, p. 133), they could be:

1. a difficult decision (adjective + noun);
2. submit a report (verb + noun);
3. radio station (noun + noun);
4. examine thoroughly (verb + adjective);
5. extremely inconvenient (adverb + adjective);
6. revise the original plan (verb + adjective + noun);
7. the fog closed in (noun + verb);
8. To put it another way (discourse marker);
9. a few years ago (multi-word prepositional phrase);
10. turn in (phrasal verb);
11. aware of (adjective + preposition);
12. fire escape (compound noun);
13. backwards and forwards (binomials);
14. hook, line and sinker (trinomial);
15. On the other hand (fixed phrase);
16. A sort of…(incomplete fixed phrase);
17. Not half! (fixed expressions);
18. See you later/ tomorrow/ on Monday (semi-fixed expressions);
19. Too many cooks … (part of a proverb);
20. To be or not to be … (part of a quotation).

Lewis (2001) also says that there are some writers who make the distinction between *lexical collocations* as in *suggest an alternative* and *grammatical collocations* such as *aware of* or *climb into*. The suggestion put forward by Lewis is to work with both – *lexical* and *grammatical words* – “such as in *put the meeting off until* …, so they include both *lexical words* and *grammatical words* which are often used together” (LEWIS, 2001, p. 134).

An important element to mention concerning collocations is their categories: *unique, strong, week and medium-strength collocations*.

*Unique collocations* are the combinations that usually occur with only one noun concerning the whole area of that noun. An example would be *shrug our shoulder* as we will not use *shrug* with another part of anatomy, as Lewis (2001) mentions.

*Strong collocations* are considered the co-occurrences in which the knowledge of one part is incomplete without the other part as in *rancid butter*.

This idea is better expressed by Lewis (2001, p. 63):

A large number of collocations, although not unique, are strong or very strong. Predictably, we may talk of *trenchant criticism* or *rancid butter*, although this does not mean that other things cannot be *trenchant* or *rancid*. We often have *ulterior motives* or *harbour grudges* while being *reduced* or *even moved to tears* […]

*Weak collocations* are related to the words that have many uses. A lot of nouns can collocate with the adjective *red*. Lewis (2001, p. 63) says that “many things can be *long* or *short, cheap* or *expensive, good* or *bad*. Students can make combinations such as *blue shirt, red car*, etc, they can apply the colours in English in a similar way to their own language”.
Medium-strength collocations are the ones that are not strong or weak. However, it helps students expand their mental lexicon. According to Lewis (2001, p. 64):

[…] Most intermediate students will know the words hold and conversation, but may not know that you can hold a conversation. They know the words make and mistake, but have not stored make a mistake in their mental lexicon as a single item [...].

As we can see, there are different kinds of collocations and different uses for it. This use will be explored below.

3.2.2 The use of Collocation

Collocation can be used at different moments of the English class. Teachers should help students develop strategies to deal with them independently of the skill. “[…] Raising learner’s awareness of collocation may be one very efficient way of increasing their communicative power – that is, the ability to say more of what they want to say with the limited language resources at their disposal" (LEWIS, 2002, p. 33).

Students can notice and learn collocations while they are reading a text, listening to a passage, listening to the teacher or while working with functions and even grammar.

Many of the exercises in TEFL coursebooks involve the production of sentences, the content of which is ‘bare fact’. In natural discourse speakers often signal or focus what they are going to say with an introductory chunk. These have often been considered structurally complex, and so they are omitted from many coursebooks. If, however, they pose little difficult, even for learners at lower levels (WOOLARD apud LEWIS, 2002, p. 40).

To exemplify the above quotation, Lewis (2002, p. 40) mentions the sentence: “That must have been terrifying.”

To work with functions, Lewis (2002, p. 40) suggests that:
In place of the traditional functional exponents for given advice, learners can be given the sentence head *The best thing to do is* … and encouraged to use: *The best thing to do is make an appointment to see the doctor. The best thing to do is to go bed.*

Another example pointed out by the same author to work with reactions is given in the box below, which presents a lexical organization and not a structural one (LEWIS, 2002, p. 39):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>That’s</th>
<th>great.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That sounds</td>
<td>dreadful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That must be</td>
<td>exciting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That must have been</td>
<td>terrifying.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[…] we may say that grammar helps us to use novel language – (relatively) new combinations of lexical items – to talk about (relatively) unusual situations, while lexis helps us handle highly probable events fluently and effortlessly by providing us with prefabricated ways of dealing with them […]) (LEWIS, 2002, p. 41).

3.3 Word-for-word translation x chunk translation

In the teaching-learning process, teachers should make students aware of what lexis involves. According to Lewis (2002, p. 07), it “consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text”.

Students have a tendency to use L1 in the English classes, which can cause some problems, especially when they do a word-for-word translation. An
example which makes clear is the sentence *The man who had cancer kicked the bucket*, whose equivalent in Portuguese is “O homem que tinha cancer morreu” wouldn’t be reached with a word-for-word translation.

Every teacher knows that learners have a tendency to translate word-for-word and, as we saw […], we want to encourage identification of chunks, and a recognition that word-for-word equivalence is often impossible (LEWIS, 2002, p. 60).

The quotation above shows that word-for-word translation is most of the times unsatisfactory especially if we are dealing with the following aspects mentioned by Lewis (2002, p. 63):

- Idioms, both traditional and the Fixed Expressions of the normal spoken language;
- Collocations and Expressions using de-lexicalised verbs or other common words which individually carry little meaning, but which are often elements in multi-word lexical items.

To do a chunk-for-chunk translation successfully, students have to identify the chunks. Helping students identify the chunks is part of the teachers’ job as we already mentioned.

To overcome these difficulties students have to understand that each language has its own expressions, they have to open their minds to L2.

Although the knowledge of equivalents is something students should have in mind since the very beginning of the teaching-learning process, it is not what really happens. Another important aspect is that the longer students are exposed to English the more familiar the expressions seem to be for them.

In the next chapter we are going to analyze a questionnaire, in which the knowledge of collocations and translation is checked.
4. Analyzing and checking

As we have already said, we designed a questionnaire (see Appendix A) to check students’ awareness of collocations and expressions.

The reply to the questionnaire was given by twelve students – four from each semester – who do languages at Uni-FACEF and who also had already studied English for at least two years.

While analyzing the students’ answers to the question “What is collocation?” (see Appendix B), we realized that most of them are not aware of the definition. Two of them said they did not know what collocation was. Three students tried to give a definition but unfortunately it was not correct. Two students defined it as the co-occurrence of verb + preposition which is mentioned by Lewis (2001, p. 133) as one kind of collocation- phrasal verb. Lewis (2001) says that there are some writers who make the distinction between lexical collocations as in suggest an alternative and grammatical collocations such as aware of or climb into. As we can see, students most of the time remember a kind of grammatical collocation, maybe it happens because the focus in the English classes are most of the times on grammar. On the other hand, according to Lewis (2001), we have to work with both – lexical and grammatical words – “such as in put the meeting off until …, so they include both lexical words and grammatical words which are often used together” (LEWIS, 2001, p. 134). However, this is not enough to describe collocations as it consists of various other kinds of combinations. Five of them described it accurately as “words that we put together”; “words that can be used only with a group of words”; “words that can go with some words” and words that can not go with some other words”.

The definitions given above by the five students match Lewis (2002, p. 08) statement “[…] the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency […]”.

The second question required knowledge of kinds of collocation and/or examples of them. Half of the students could exemplify, to a certain extent, kinds of collocations. The two learners who defined collocation on grammatical bases also exemplified it in the same way. One student gave as an example a fixed expressions “Let’s call it a day”, which is a kind of collocation mentioned by Lewis (2001). Three
students showed their awareness of the verb + noun combination by writing “do homework, make dinner, have breakfast”.

The other half does not know any of them. One student gave an example of a fixed expression. However, it was an expression from the other exercise whose instruction made it clear they were all collocations.

The third and last part of the questionnaire consists of two exercises (see Appendix A). The first one is made up of six fixed collocation in which learners should spot the exact word that does not belong to the expression and also give the correct equivalent in Portuguese.

The first sentence was corrected precisely by seven students - *It’s up to you* – and the correct equivalent in Portuguese was also given: “Você escolhe”, “Fica a seu critério”, “A decisão é sua”, “É com você”, “Você que sabe/depende de você”. Three other students could identify the exact words of the fixed expression, however, the equivalent was not appropriate. On the other hand, one student gave the correct equivalent but could not correct the expression. Another student was not able to correct the expression nor to give the equivalent.

The wrong word in expression number two was spotted by ten students – *Look at it from my point of view* – and nine learners could give the correct equivalent in Portuguese: “Ollhe isto do/ através/ sob o meu ponto de vista, etc”.

Only one student could handle well with sentence number three – *It never crossed my mind* - , whose correct sentence in Portuguese is “(Isso) nunca passou pela minha cabeça”. Four other students wrote the correct equivalent in Portuguese. Among these four learners, two identified the wrong word – *touched*. However, they were not able to correct it. The other two ones could not deal with the wrong word at all.

As the other seven students did not give the correct answers concerning the wrong word, although four of them identified the wrong word – touched, or the equivalent, we realized that most of the students “may have the illusion that they know the language well. However, when it comes to using the language practice, they discover that they lack vital elements, typically vocabulary and fluency […[ as Richards & Renandya (2002, p. 151) says.
The fourth sentence was corrected properly by five students who could spot the wrong preposition *in* and substitute it for *on* – *Could you hold on a moment please*. The sentences in Portuguese given by these students were: “Você pode/poderia esperar um momento por favor”; Poderia esperar um pouco por favor, etc”.

Three students gave the correct equivalent in Portuguese. However, the wrong word was not noticed by them. Three other students did not accomplish it.

As interesting point to be made is that one student translated it as “Você poderia me abraçar por um momento, por favor”. The learner ignored the preposition *in* but he showed the awareness of the definition of the verb to hold, which in this case is *to have something in your arms*. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is clear his lack of knowledge of the collocation *hold on* which consists of a phrasal verb. As Lewis (2002) says, it is the co-occurrence of words in texts that produces continuous coherent meaning.

Expression five – *Take your time – there is no hurry* – was corrected precisely by four students who also gave the correct equivalent in Portuguese: “Você tem tempo, não temos pressa”; “Relaxa, não há pressa”; “Planeje seu tempo, não há pressa”, etc.

Seven students were not able to give correct answers. Among these seven learners, one tried to translate it and another one only spotted the mistake *Have*, however, there was no attempt to write it in Portuguese. Another student corrected the wrong word but the sentence in Portuguese was not adequate.

Most of the students could not correct expression six - *Sorry, I didn’t catch that. Could you repeat it, please?*. Only five students spot the wrong word correctly, however, they gave synonyms for the word *catch* in the expression, which were *understand, get and hear*. The use of *get* by a student, in this sentence reinforces the statement given by Lewis (2002) that as this is a de-lexicalised verb it is a possible element in multi-word lexical items. On the other hand, the equivalent in Portuguese was given by eight students.
Although it is not the aim of this analysis, we also noticed the importance of local culture while learning a language as Harmer (2005) mentions. Three students did not translate the word please while writing their sentences in Portuguese. The reason might be the fact that, we, Brazilians do not use it as often as Americans or English people do.

The second part of question three deals with verb + noun collocations based on the verbs take, make, do and have, and the nouns trip, break, date, dishes, walk and lunch. Students were supposed to tick possible combinations.

The verb take collocates with trip, break (a short rest), a walk and lunch (formal). Make goes with trip, break (change/ interruption), a date and lunch.

The verb do is a possible combination with the nouns a walk and the dishes. Have collocates with a trip, a break, a date, a walk and lunch.

Having in mind the fact that the noun is a good starting point when we want to learn possible collocations, we can say that based on them all the students identified at least one suitable combination. However, none of the students could identify all the possible collocations concerning the nouns trip, date, walk, and lunch.

There were some inadequacies such as take/make the dishes, do lunch and make a walk. The reason why they considered make the dishes and do lunch a correct combination may be due to their unfamiliarity with lexis as stated in chapter one. Even though in Portuguese do and make mean “fazer”, in English they are not interchangeable.

As we have already said, working with collocation is a way to deal with grammar and vocabulary together, which, according to Lewis (2001), avoid problems we would face when we deal with them separately as every word has its own grammar.
Conclusion

The purpose of this paper, considering the importance of English world-wide and that students who are learning a language want to communicate in that language, is to show the importance of lexis in the English classes in opposition to focusing only on grammar. To reach this aim, first, we talked about some factors that helped English to become the most important language of communication around the world, such as tourism, popular culture, and also historical ones. These factors helped us to understand the reasons why people want to learn a foreign language and we also mentioned some aspects that should be considered while dealing with the teaching-learning process.

Then, we held a discussion on the fact that the role of grammar has changed throughout the years, talking about the advantages and disadvantages of focusing lessons on grammar. The discussion ended with the idea that the grammar focus is what has to be changed during language instruction.

After that, we showed the contributions of the Lexical Approach to the teaching-learning process as Lewis (2002) states language consists not only of grammar and vocabulary but also of multi-word prefabricated chunks.

The analysis of the questionnaire showed that most of the learners are not aware of the definition of collocation. However, some of them could exemplify it to a certain extent, especially on grammatical bases.

Concerning the fixed and semi-fixed expression, we can conclude that dealing with authentic language is still not as easy as it should be to students. They dealt will only two of the expressions concerning the correct sentence and the correct equivalent. If learners were talking to a native speaker, they would have problems while communicating; it either be while saying the accurate sentence would not be given or listening (the correct chunk not be understood) to the expression. Accuracy matters here, as Lewis (2002) mentions because a
minor mistake can make the expression meaningless, and break the flow of communication.

As we have already mentioned, lexis is a key point in the teaching-learning process especially if the aim of English classes is to bring acquisition close to learning.

Dealing with collocations, students will handle events fluently and effortlessly according to Lewis (2002) and it will avoid predictable learning patterns and also boredom, as Harmer (2004) states.

We tried with the research to show the importance of the lexical approach in the English classrooms and we hope it encourages teacher’s reflection upon the teaching-learning process. Other studies may be conducted from the one.

Bibliography


