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TEACHING ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS AS MARKS OF LINGUSITIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Starting from the general view that collocations represent one of the most important tools that speakers can use in communication in order to manifest their linguistic and cultural identity, the present paper aims at demonstrating that teaching collocations should not be limited to highlighting their linguistic specificity, but should also take into consideration pointing out their cultural markedness. Moreover, since collocations are agreed to be restricted according to the context in which they are used, teachers should consider gradually moving from practicing collocations in general contexts to practicing collocations in specific contexts meant to raise the learners' awareness of the various identities they may acquire when using such fixed lexical patterns. If emphasis is laid on both the linguistic and cultural specificity of collocations and on the possibility of using them according to a certain identity which is envisaged, learners may become more aware of how important the correct and appropriate use of collocations is in both their native language and in any foreign language they might learn. As a result, learners are likely to pay more attention to collocations, to use them more correctly, thus developing their native and foreign language - collocational competence.

Keywords: collocational competence; communicative competence; cultural identity; linguistic identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is the result of over a decade of constant research on various types of fixed lexical patterns in English, Romanian and Italian, in general, and on collocations, in particular. Irrespective of the approach envisaged (from the perspectives of lexicology, phraseology, semantics, stylistics, psycho-linguistics, methodology or translation studies), special attention has been devoted to the linguistic and cultural specificity traceable in this type of fixed lexical patterns. In addition, distinction has been made, in a significant number of research articles and papers, between collocations used in general and in domain-specific contexts with a view to prove that membership to a given professional community facilitates the understanding and the appropriate use of collocations specific to the domain envisaged, as well as their transfer from one language culture into another.

As far as the teaching of collocations is concerned, relevant lexical and grammatical collocations have been explained, practiced and tested in a series of practical and optional courses of English language over the years, giving me the opportunity to constantly adapt my teaching methods and strategies to my students' needs and interests.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

People communicate their thoughts, feelings and attitudes by language, and words are agreed to be the main tool used by speakers in the process of communication. Whether used in isolation, or combined in various more or less fixed lexical patterns and grammatical structures, words often make reference to facts, ideas or events which are shared by different people. In such cases, communication across languages and cultures is easier to achieve, and meaning is more accessible to both the sender and the receiver of the message, irrespective of their mother tongue and of the language code they use in communication. Communication across languages is also facilitated when speakers use words which are neutral in their denotations and connotations, which are not stylistically marked and which have similar or identical representations in different language cultures.

On the contrary, when the words or lexical patterns used in communication convey culturally-marked, symbolic meanings or refer to cultural values, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs which are not shared by the people involved in the process of communication, it may be difficult or even impossible to gain insights into the worldview or system of cultural values referred to. In such cases, the interlocutors should ascertain the cultural symbols embedded in words and should try to decode the semantic content of such cultural words by making assumptions about each other's intentions, desires, or goals. Since appropriate topics are determined by culture, interpreting the speakers' intentions of communication is mainly conditioned by cultural norms. Under the circumstances, culture may be considered to liberate individuals from anonymity, and to constrain them by imposing a structure and a series of principles of selection on them. This point of view is made explicit by Kramsch (1998) who states that "the members of a community do not only express experience", they also create experience through language. Through verbal and non-verbal aspects, language embodies cultural reality. Language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through language and they view their language as a symbol of their identity" (Kramsch 1998: 3). Since language and culture are symbols of an individual's identity, it is logical that people might be distinguished in terms of their linguistic and cultural identity.

Intercultural communication traditionally means communication between people originating in different cultures, having different nationalities and speaking different languages, thus between people with different national, cultural and linguistic identities. Nevertheless, intercultural communication is considered to apply to individual cultures, as well, because "communication across different groups with different knowledge and values may be conceived as being intercultural, even within the same linguistic and cultural community"(Dumitraşcu 2009: 463). Consequently, the conclusion may be drawn that one and the same individual as a representative of a specific nation, culture and language may be attributed various identities at different times (e.g. national, cultural, linguistic, social, professional, political, sexual, etc.) depending on the approach and circumstances envisaged.

Since each of these identities is visible in communication, special attention should be devoted to raising the learners' awareness with respect to the various identities they may acquire when communicating, in both their native language and in a given foreign language they might choose to learn.

Starting from the general view that words are the basic unit used in communication, many teachers consider that 'incorporating lexical insights' in their language classes strictly means teaching new isolated words. The situation is quite different and recent studies in language teaching have demonstrated that, irrespective of the language envisaged, it is more useful for learners to store larger lexical units in their mental lexicon from the very beginning. This is because most words have a clear meaning only when used in specific lexical combinations, or, to put it differently, the lexical patterns in which words occur are essential to the meaning of those words and cannot be separated from them. In addition, learners who store strings of words, rather than individual words may "compose lengthy

utterances with the minimum effort" (Hunston and Francis 2000: 271) and are likely to remember those lexical patterns for a longer period of time. To be more explicit, since most languages are made up of prefabricated strings, storing fixed lexical patterns is likely to have a long-term result for learners, ensuring their fluency and accuracy in the foreign language studied.

Moving one step forward, teaching collocations in context may prove even more useful. In doing this, teachers should guide their learners to notice and appropriately analyse the "relations between lexical items above the sentence level, across conversational turn boundaries and within the broad framework of discourse organization" (McCarthy 1984a: 14-15, in Carter 1998: 220-221). Such a teaching approach would help learners understand the complexity and multifaceted nature of collocations, as well as their role in achieving cohesion and coherence in communication.

Regarding the cultural and domain-specificity of collocations, teachers should bear in mind the fact that unaware non-native speakers of English are always "caught" with collocations. That is why teaching English collocations is a difficult task which is greatly conditioned both by the teacher's lexical knowledge and by his/her ability to make lexical information accessible and interesting to learners. In approaching collocations, I consider that teachers should constantly integrate these fixed lexical patterns in their English language classes moving gradually from simple to complex and from general to domain-specific contexts.

Among the teaching strategies suggested by specialists in the field, mention should be made of Morgan Lewis' view (2000: 19) who suggests that collocations may be more easily remembered and more safely translated if teachers guide their learners to preserve something of the context and to keep recorded lexical chunks that are as large as possible. Moreover, the fact is pointed out that mistakes related to words collocability should not be merely corrected by teachers. Giving further examples of collocations could be a much more useful tool for both correcting the mistakes and improving the learners' collocational competence. In other words, teachers should not correct, but collect collocations. For example, the wrong association between the verb 'to give' and the noun 'an exam' in the collocation *to give an exam (as a linguistic calques, due to its interference with Romanian) should not be merely corrected by providing the lexical pattern to take an exam, but it should be immediately effaced by further examples such as: to re-take an exam, to pass an exam, to fail an exam, to go in for an exam, to scrape through an exam. Moreover, integrating some of the problematic collocations in accessible contexts (e.g. I took the English exam yesterday, but I didn't pass it. I failed it.) may become very useful for developing learners' collocational competence and for raising their awareness with respect to the obvious linguistic and cultural differences existing between the two languages in contact.

Another useful strategy which could be used in teaching collocations would be that of replacing longer explanatory structures by semantically equivalent collocations with a view to help learners understand that using such fixed lexical patterns in communication helps them be more precise. Thus, collocationally unaware learners who tend to use longer explanatory structures such as: good possibilities for improving one's job might be guided to appropriately replace such structures by a collocation with the same semantic content: i.e. excellent promotion prospects. By constantly integrating this type of synonymy practice in the English language class, teachers will guide learners to understand that they may communicate more efficiently when using collocations.

However, synonymy is not very helpful in the case of those words which have little meaning unless used in collocations, e.g. to make vs. to do or wound vs. injury. In such cases teachers should avoid explaining the difference between the two synonymous words and should provide contextualized examples for each of them to clarify their semantic content and collocational restrictions. Contextualization is also useful in the case of words which have unclear meaning unless used in collocations: e.g. I can't see the point in buying this car; The point is that she is divorced; This is definitely a very good point to make; He always makes a point of forgiving the others. The teaching strategy suggested in such cases makes it clear that learners should be guided to avoid explaining isolated polysemantic words, and to explore their meanings by contextualizing them, instead.

Woolard (2000) does not agree with this view. He considers that teachers should avoid explaining the meaning of a word by providing synonyms, by paraphrasing or by contextualizing it. Instead, he suggests that teachers should highlight the chunk of language, i.e. the collocational pattern, in

which the respective word occurs and activate the respective chunk by further practice. For example, instead of trying to explain the meaning of the noun 'view' by providing a synonym, i.e. 'opinion', by paraphrasing it with 'what somebody thinks of something' or by contextualizing it e.g. What is his view regarding environment protection? (Woolard 2000: 31), teachers should highlight the collocational patterns in which the respective word occurs, e.g. to have/ hold/ take/ express/ put forward a view, a(n) conflicting/ idealized/ conventional/ radical/ moderate view, etc.

Choosing relevant and accessible key words in teaching collocations is also a very important strategy. Teachers should select vocabulary items bearing in mind the fact that "words have different degrees of lexicalization, and that different types of vocabulary may need different co-textual reference, thus different teaching techniques" (id.: 33). For instance, a highly lexicalized and domain - specific word such as 'penicillin' will occur in few collocations, whereas less lexicalized words such as 'drug' or 'medicine' will have a better collocational representation.

Specialists such as Woolard (2000) and Hill (2000) believe that teachers may raise the learners' awareness with respect to collocations if they intentionally use mis-collocations. Such an approach may help learners understand that "learning vocabulary is not just learning new words; it is often learning familiar words in new combinations" (id.: 30). Moreover, students may become more aware of collocations if they are guided to notice them, on the one hand, and to find further examples of similar collocational patterns, on the other.

An aspect not to be ignored in teaching collocations is that teachers should make the most of what their learners know. To be more precise, instead of focussing on the brand new words, teachers should make the relatively new words accessible or lay stress on the practice of common and familiar words. The words which learners are familiar with are called 'available words' by Richards (1974: 76-77, in Carter, 1998: 235) and they "are considered to be known in the sense that they come to mind rapidly when the situation calls for them". Familiarity with a word is "a factor of the frequency of experiencing words, their meaningfulness and their concreteness" (ibid.). By working with familiar words, teachers may improve their learners' collocational competence, thus making them more communicatively competent in the foreign language they study.

3. DISCUSSION

Having made an inventory of the most common strategies used in teaching collocations, the fact should be pointed out that different age groups and different levels of linguistic competence require different approaches and different teaching strategies. Nevertheless, creative teachers may adapt most of the teaching strategies mentioned above to their learners' age and linguistic competence, and by doing this they start working on the learners' collocational and communicative competences from early stages.

If we consider elementary learners of English, the strategies used in teaching collocations should envisage working with familiar words, practicing synonymy and antonymy between words used in different collocations and integrating as many collocations as possible in relevant sentences. Teachers may choose to practice collocations in texts, as well, but the selected texts should be short, accessible and relevant for the general use of collocations in familiar situations.

With intermediate learners of English, teachers may gradually move from simple to more complex exercises such as: practicing synonymy and antonymy between collocations, integrating acquired collocations in short texts, identifying and distinguishing between collocations used in general and in special contexts (biology, geography, history, etc.). Even though rather difficult, teachers may choose to guide intermediate learners towards a careful exploration of the words' co-text and of their relations with other words. Such an approach will help learners notice and record similar co-texts and relations between words (e.g. to receive criticism for/over + v- ing) and will help teachers emphasize the fact that lexical and grammatical collocations should not be considered in isolation, as they often combine in more complex collocational structures.

Intermediate learners may be gradually trained "to observe and note collocations in reading and writing" (Conzett 2000: 79-80). The collocations identified in reading might be easily integrated by

teachers in writing short texts as a means of practicing and storing the fixed lexical patterns envisaged. Of course, the written tasks should be appropriate to the learners' age and linguistic competence.

Regarding advanced learners, they should also be encouraged to work with collocations while reading and /or/writing, but both the reading and the writing should include more complex examples of collocations. Such learners may be initially asked to identify and collect key words and collocations related to a given topic in a text and then to integrate them in a well-structured and coherent written essay. By combining identification of key words and collocations in a text with their further integration in a written text, teachers facilitate the learners' writing task and are likely to improve the correct use of collocations in specific contexts. For example, the task of writing an essay on education may be greatly facilitated if learners are initially challenged to find words closely related to the topic (e.g.: school, education, qualification, teacher, courses lectures, etc.) and then to write down the collocations corresponding to each of the words envisaged. The writing assignment will only be a matter of integrating the selected collocations in a structured and coherent text. When working with texts, the teacher's selection of appropriate examples from various domains is very important because it helps learners become aware of the frequent use of collocations in various fields of activity.

Last, but not least, since collocations are linguistically and culturally marked, teachers should help learners of all ages and levels of linguistic competence remember collocations by constantly 'recycling' them in various types of exercises. Specially designed grids and vocabulary exercises, as well as building up illustrative sentences, and creating collocation games designed for each group of selected collocations are just some of the tools that teachers have at their disposal to help learners develop their collocational competence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Linguistic and cultural identity may be expressed in different ways and achieved at different levels in communication. Sometimes the cultural specificity of language is traceable at the levels of morphology and syntax, whereas in other cases grammatical specificity is doubled by the use of culture-specific lexical items denoting realities which lack an equivalent in other language cultures. Given the obvious limitations imposed by such grammatically- and culturally-marked words, specialists agree that their appropriate use is an essential criterion in ascribing speakers membership to a certain linguistic and cultural community, or, on the contrary, in excluding them from that community. Out of the numerous linguistic instances bearing an obvious cultural imprint, collocations represent a valuable resource in identifying and differentiating among various linguistic and cultural identities.

Given the linguistic and cultural specificity of collocations and their high frequency, teachers should constantly adapt the strategies used in teaching them. With elementary learners the teachers' main objective should be to gradually increase the number of individual words and of simple lexical patterns introduced and practiced, at the intermediate level learners should be introduced to a larger number of new words and to more complex collocations, whereas in the case of advanced learners teachers should envisage adding both to the semantic content of individual words and to the collocations specific to each and every meaning of the polysemantic words introduced and practiced. To put it differently, *"the more advanced the learner becomes and the more emphasis is placed on production, the more teaching of words in a network of semantic associations should be activated"* (Carter 1998: 240).

Although some might think that the appropriate use of English collocations is merely a matter of learning lexical chunks, specialists in the field have proved that things are not as easy as they might seem. Non-native speakers of English may become collocationally competent if vocabulary teaching is constantly combined with independent vocabulary learning and with a lot of practice.

Teaching English collocations is extremely important because it facilitates the learners' access to more routinized aspects of language production and to the essential skills of maintaining discoursal relations through language use. Moreover, teaching such word combinations in discourse may prove incredibly useful because it "encourages appreciation of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions of lexical items at all levels" (id. ibid.).

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