



## **In Response to Reynolds' (2019), 'Against Teaching Collocations'**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the Comment feature of the *ELT Journal* (Volume 73, Issue 2, 2019), Brett Reynolds raises the issue of 'against teaching collocations' drawing on two claims made in the literature on English language teaching (ELT). The first claim Reynolds draws upon was made by Yorio (1980, p. 440) about the notion of idiomaticity that "most of the idioms we ask our students to use are not, in fact, really necessary". The second claim comes from the notion of intelligibility in pronunciation teaching put forward by Abercrombie (1949, p. 120) that "[most] language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation (and by 'comfortably' intelligible, I mean a pronunciation that can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener", and also by Levis and LeVelle (2011, p. 1) that "a generally accepted goal of pronunciation pedagogy is to help learners achieve a comfortably intelligible pronunciation rather than a native-like one". Reynolds (2019, p. 224) extends these arguments to 'collocation' teaching suggesting that teachers should aim at "comfortably intelligible collocations rather than native-like ones, and we should be working to reduce prejudice against those who use 'the wrong collocations'". Reynolds (*ibid.*) further makes a reservation that "[t]his is not to say that idiomaticity should- or even could- be dispensed with altogether. But I am explicitly arguing against pushing for finer and finer levels."

### **SOME ARGUMENTS AGAINST REYNOLDS' CLAIM**

There is obviously some truth in Reynolds' statement regarding the intricate, 'finer and finer' levels of collocations in some cases but not necessarily in others. This might be the case especially in teaching EFL where exposure to language is quintessentially confined to the classroom with its limited time allocation and where it has always been impossible to expose learners to more than a small fraction of the language, including collocations, they might be felt to need. However, in response to Reynolds' claim, we take the position that at least the following four points could be considered against overlooking collocation teaching in language learning classes or programmes.

First, extending the argument of teaching (or not teaching) idioms to collocations is debatable as collocations could be used and function differently from idioms (Renouf & Sinclair, 1991). While Michael Lewis (2000, p. 131) refers to collocations as "a part of the overall spectrum

of idiomaticity”, more recent studies (see Hyland, 2012, for a review) in corpus linguistics and discourse analysis have viewed collocations as multi-word expressions or lexical bundles that are more transparent than idioms syntactically and semantically exploited routinely to foster fluency and coherence in language use. Effective knowledge of collocations would also aid learners in making better sense of texts and talks while reading or listening, just the way we do not teach pronunciation only to help learners be understood but to also help them figure out connected speech and other prosodic features of language. Further, achieving the native-like competency in using English collocations is crucial for a large number of language learners, due most probably to its sociolinguistic and sociopolitical implications as well as its recognition in a wide range of language learning and teaching training courses and programmes worldwide. Even Reynolds himself relied on a native-speaker corpus to justify which collocations are important to teach and which ones are trivial.

Second, the concept of ‘intelligibility’ of collocations is rather hazy in Reynolds’ comment. In the literature, ‘intelligibility’ has been referred to as a clarion call mainly to ‘pronunciation’ teaching (e.g., Goodwin, 2014; Harmer, 2015; Kenworthy, 1987; Munro & Derwing, 2015) and not to collocation teaching (and learning). Assuming intelligibility as the goal suggests that some pronunciation features are prioritised over others in maintaining intelligibility in some contexts, and there are in fact some scholars (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010) who have proposed a move towards teaching a ‘lingua franca core’. As such, the very idea of ‘intelligible collocations’ in various contexts of English usage and the criteria (e.g., perceptual salience, frequency criteria, or other) to identify which collocations are intelligible and which are not and which are ‘important’ or ‘trivial’ have remained unanswered.

Third, the notion of L1-L2 incongruity or the idea that some collocations cannot be literally translated from the source language to the target language in multifarious English teaching and learning contexts seems to have been overlooked by Reynolds. For example, learners whose L1 is Persian will encounter difficulty in producing the verb-noun collocation *run a risk/ run the risk of doing sth* or *take a risk/ take the risk of doing sth* even after they are being taught, although they may understand it easily when encountered in the input (i.e. recognition). Therefore, one cannot rule out the possibility that a so-called intelligible collocation to an Iranian EFL learner may render its intelligibility difficult or even impossible to a Chinese learner, for instance, “bearing in mind that the structure of the expression may be very different in one language from the equivalent expression in the other” (Morgan Lewis, 2000, p. 16).

Fourth, Reynolds (ibid., pp. 223-224), reporting from Lorenz (1999), considers ‘purported native-speaker collocations such as *heavily loaded*, *deeply rooted*, or *highly estimated*’ as ‘trivial items’ which “teachers should not be wasting students’ time trying to teach them” because of their low frequency in COCA. However, while this might hold true in some respects, especially in terms of teaching and learning the most frequent or useful collocations first and in view of time constraints, we should not assume that ‘one size fits all’, given the diversity of individual learners’ language learning needs and goals. Some learners see language as an identity marker and language learning as a means to professional success, academic achievements, or personal development and aspirations. For example, if a Turkish student wishes to pursue a degree in biology at Harvard University with the dream of finding or developing a vaccine for Covid-19, the subtle nuances of collocations then may not be among his or her first priorities. But, if the same student wishes to get his or her paper on Covid-19 published in *The Lancet* for attracting international readership, then he or she might find that intelligibility in using collocations does not obviate the need for learning accurate, precise, native-like ones.

## CONCLUSION

In closing, we believe that Reynolds raises an ethical concern in arguing that we should tolerate learners' use of 'wrong collocations'. However, we also believe that learners should not be given the greenlight to use collocations the way they wish. It would be equally ethical for teachers to intervene in order to scaffold learners' appropriate and effective use of collocations as a rich source of language input that could build their confidence in speaking, writing and other areas of language learning. This is further compatible with the demands of the competitive international job market, the expectations of high stakes, gate-keeping international proficiency exams, and the requirements of academic programs offered in English where the use of natural, native-like language would certainly contribute to learners' personal, professional and academic success.

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