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Still Against Teaching Collocations

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I'd like to thank Askari & Naghdipour (2021; hereafter A & N) for engaging with my arguments against teaching collocations (Reynolds, 2019) and for giving me this opportunity to address this important topic again. A & N begin with a fair and accurate summary of my position and then set out four criticisms. First, they claim that my extension of Yorio's (1980) arguments against teaching idioms does not apply because "collocations could be used and function differently from idioms" (Askari & Naghdipour, 2021, p. 170). They speculate that "effective knowledge of collocations would also aid learners in making better sense of texts" (p. 171), They suggest that my idea of intelligibility isn't clear. And they claim that "achieving the native-like competency in using English collocations is crucial for a large number of language learners" (p. 171).

As A & N point out, while there is some overlap between idioms and collocations, they are not exactly the same. A & N don't explain why this should matter, so I'd like to try to explore the idea. To be clear, I am also against teaching idioms, for reasons that will become apparent.

Sinclair (1991) proposed the "idiom principle" in contradistinction to the "open-choice principle".

> The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments. (1991, p. 110)

This is based on a longstanding meaning of *idiom*, and in this sense, idioms are collocations and collocations are idioms. But there is a newer meaning of the word explained by Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor (1988).

> A large construction may specify a semantics (and/or pragmatics) that is distinct from what might be calculated from the associated semantics of the set of smaller constructions that could be used to build the same morphosyntactic object. (p. 501)

In other words, the meaning of the whole may not be easily understood from the meaning of the parts. In this sense, then, we could say that idioms are collocations, but collocations may not be idioms. For example, *have at it* is an idiomatic collocation in this sense, while *cook dinner* is a collocation that is not. Presumably, it is this newer, narrower sense that A & N are thinking of when they draw attention to differences between collocations and idioms. And the distinction that A & N draw is one that Yorio (1980) makes as well.

Yorio's point, though – that many things we teach our students aren't really necessary – is a general one. Yorio specifically mentions idioms, but there is no reason to limit the consideration of how necessary an item is to cases where there is a mismatch between the form of the utterance and its meaning. In fact, when Yorio lists his criteria for the selection of specific forms – "need, usefulness, productivity, currency and frequency, as criteria" (p. 438) – he does not limit these to idioms. So, while A & N are clearly correct in observing a distinction, the point isn't really pertinent. Yorio's criteria apply to whatever we choose to teach, including individual words, grammar points, pronunciations, or idioms, whether construed narrowly or broadly.

Yorio's criteria, specifically the criterion of usefulness, relate to A & N's claim that knowledge of collocations could be useful for comprehension. If so, that would be an argument for teaching them. But, on its surface, this seems unlikely. Nesselhauf's (2003) example of *make a decision* provides us with a useful case to consider because, although *take a decision* is unidiomatic for many English speakers, it is common in British English. As a Canadian, I remember being somewhat surprised when I first encountered it, but its meaning was perfectly obvious. And I would expect, similarly, that any language learner who had only the *make* or *take* version should similarly have no trouble understanding the alternative. But rather than relying on intuition, I would like to consider the evidence.

Unfortunately, none of A & N's citations claim that knowledge of collocations facilitates comprehension, and the same is true of the publications that I cite in my original paper. In fact, I have been unable to find any direct evidence for this idea at all.

In terms of indirect evidence, there have been some studies of processing speed of collocations, and processing speed could be seen as having an effect on overall comprehension, so this might be worth considering. For example, Siyanova and Schmitt (2008) find that "native speakers" process more frequent collocations faster than less frequent ones, and that learners do too, but it seems that learners "gain a processing advantage only when the differences in frequency are relatively extreme" (p. 452). Processing here refers to the speed of judgements about whether something is a collocation, though, not to comprehension.

In a later study, Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin, and Schmitt (2011) study learners' ability to process idioms as measured by the number and length of eye fixations. Notice here that the focus has shifted from collocations generally to idioms more narrowly, but as I've said, idioms are a special case of collocations. Moreover, the study compares figurative idioms (e.g., *at the end of the day* meaning "eventually") with their literal counterparts (*at the end of the day* meaning "in the evening"), which are collocations in the broad sense. And what they find is no significant difference between processing of idioms and frequency-matched novel phrases, whether the idioms have figurative or literal meanings. It is, of course, a general finding that readers process familiar language faster than unfamiliar language, and so to the extent that being taught collocations would make them more familiar, it would help learners in "making better sense of texts" (A & N, p. 171). That, however, would apply equally in individual words and would require – following Yorio's criteria of need, usefulness, and frequency – that teachers teach the items that learners are most likely to meet.

What, then, is the chance that we teach students just the right collocations? Any collocation will necessarily be less frequent than the individual frequency of any of the words involved, so we

can begin by considering the question of how many words to teach. Nation (2001, Chapter 1) explicitly sets out goals for vocabulary teaching from the considerations of practicality and utility, concluding that the target for most language courses should be to teach the 2,000 high-frequency word families that appear in a broad range of texts, while Schmitt & Schmitt (2012) argue that this number should be closer to 3,000 word families. This base will allow students to take a leading role in developing their own vocabulary, mainly through reading and listening. Selection of words to teach should rely largely on frequency, but it should also consider other criteria such as range, learner need, and difficulty (Shin & Nation, 2008, p. 346).

To put collocations on the same yardstick as this 2,000-word goal, it's useful to look at how frequent the 2,000th word family is. Leech, Rayson, & Wilson (Leech et al., 2001) developed a list of the top 2,000 word-types in spoken English, based on the British National corpus, which, according to Shin and Nation (2008, p. 345), all occurred at least 32 times per million words (PMW) in the spoken subcorpus. This is similar to the lower limit set by Coxhead in establishing the Academic Word List (AWL). Her cut point was 100 occurrences in the 3.5 million word corpus or 28.6 occurrences PMW (2000, p. 217). While Coxhead describes this limit as arbitrary (p. 217), the AWL has been widely embraced by English for academic purposes teachers, and the general consensus is that these are "advanced" words. In most cases, then, the threshold for entry for collocations should be around 30 times per million words.

We can now ask how many collocations occur at least that frequently. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999), includes some categorized lists of collocations. For example, they list all common collocations containing an adverb (p. 546). There are 13 in American English conversation that occur more than 20 times PMW. Verb + particle collocations (the so-called "phrasal verbs") are often claimed to be particularly common, but only 17 occur more than 40 times PMW (p. 1030; e.g., *come back, go down, live in, return to*). These are all collocations that are typically familiar to learners beyond the basic level and so need no special extra teaching attention. But the vast majority of collocations that most researchers and language teaching pundits from Lewis (1993) forward have focused on are simply not frequent enough to teach. And so, even if teachers dedicated a great deal of attention to teaching collocations, the payback in improved comprehension would be trivial at best.

Having addressed A & N's concern about comprehension, I return to issues of learner production. A & N suggest that researchers have not clarified the conditions under which "learner collocations"[1] should be considered intelligible. This seems true in some regards. If what A & N are looking for is a list of possible expressions that would be comprehensible, then certainly no such list exists, and it seems unlikely that one could be created. There are so many possible intelligible expressions that, even when we limit ourselves to binary collocations, this would be an impracticable undertaking. But this is not a problem for an argument like mine against teaching collocations. An experienced English teacher or adjudicator can readily judge the intelligibility of any particular expression, whether uttered by a learner or a proficient English speaker. In fact, we do this all the time. And if some expression causes intelligibility problems, we can address it as needed.

[1] Here I mean expressions produced by language learners that correspond to but do not match more established collocations.

This brings me to A & N's final argument: that some learners really do need to learn "accurate, precise, native-like" collocations (p. 171). I will make two responses to this claim, the first practical and the second ethical.

First, in making it, A & N don't consider the trade-offs that such teaching entails. Classroom time is limited, and each educational choice that we make requires us to forego other options. A teacher who teaches many collocations has decided not to use that time to work on other things. In almost every single instance, though, learning the basic meaning of a new high-frequency vocabulary item will both improve the learners' English competence and move them closer to some imagined "native speaker" ideal than teaching any number of collocations, to say nothing about the possibilities of building fluency, prosody, grammar, and other aspects of English.

Second, I agree with A & N: some learners will be discriminated against because of the way they speak or write. In fact, many so-called "native" English speakers will also face such discrimination if their variety of English isn't the "right" variety. And many who don't look or eat or dress or worship in a certain way or present as the expected gender or who are unable to see or hear or think or move like the majority will also be disadvantaged by bigotry, snobbery, and other forms of prejudice. Our goal as educators is not to teach these folks to conform to such narrow views; it is liberation (Freire, 2005), and "education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). This cannot be a field in which learners labour for their teachers and "native speakers". It must be fully theirs, theirs to cultivate, to harvest, to wander through, or to collocate in as they see fit.

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