

PROBLEMS OF TEACHING COLLOCATION IN VOCABULARY LESSON TO 5TH GRADE LEARNERS

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Abstract

Collocation knowledge is an essential component of vocabulary competence and plays a crucial role in developing learners' fluency and natural language use. However, teaching collocations to young learners, particularly 5th grade students, presents several pedagogical challenges. This literature review examines the main difficulties in teaching collocations, including limited awareness of word combinations, interference from the first language, memorization problems, and low motivation. Furthermore, the study highlights effective strategies and classroom activities that can enhance collocation learning. The findings emphasize the importance of contextual, interactive, and communicative approaches in improving students' vocabulary development.

Key words: collocations, vocabulary teaching, young learners, EFL classroom, language acquisition, communicative approach

Introduction

Vocabulary learning is not limited to knowing individual words; it also involves understanding how words naturally combine with each other. These combinations, known as collocations, are essential for achieving fluency in a foreign language. According to David A. Wilkins vocabulary is the core of communication, and without it, meaning cannot be conveyed effectively. [4]

For 5th-grade learners, learning collocations is particularly important because they are at an early stage of language development. At this level, students begin to form simple sentences, and learning correct word combinations helps them sound more natural. However, teaching collocations is often challenging, as

young learners tend to translate directly from their native language or memorize words in isolation. [2]

Literature Review

Collocations have been widely studied in vocabulary acquisition. Paul Nation emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge includes not only word meaning but also how words are used in combination. He argues that repeated exposure and meaningful use are necessary for mastering collocations. [1]

Similarly, Norbert Schmitt states that vocabulary learning is a gradual process involving form, meaning, and use. He highlights that learners often struggle with collocations because they are not explicitly taught. [2]

Research by Scott Thornbury suggests that collocations should be taught as chunks rather than isolated words. This approach helps learners produce more natural and fluent speech. [3]

Additionally, studies such as Teaching Vocabulary Through Collocations show that teaching vocabulary through collocations improves retention and communicative competence. Learners who study collocations are more likely to use vocabulary accurately in real-life situations. [5], [6]

Major Problems in teaching Collocations

1. Lack of Awareness of Collocations

One of the most significant problems in teaching collocations to 5th grade learners is their lack of awareness that words naturally occur in fixed or semi-fixed combinations. At this stage, students usually focus on learning individual words rather than understanding how words function together. As a result, they often produce unnatural expressions such as “make homework” or “strong rain” instead of “do homework” and “heavy rain.”

This issue arises because traditional vocabulary teaching methods tend to present words in isolation, without highlighting their collocational patterns. Learners are rarely exposed to authentic input where such combinations occur

naturally. According to Scott Thornbury, teaching vocabulary without collocations limits learners' ability to produce fluent and natural language.

Furthermore, young learners may not yet have developed the cognitive ability to independently notice patterns in language. Without explicit instruction and guided practice, they fail to recognize that certain words "go together." Therefore, raising awareness through repeated exposure and focused activities is essential for helping learners internalize collocations.

2. First Language Interference

Another major challenge in teaching collocations is the strong influence of learners' first language (L1), particularly Uzbek or Russian. Students often rely on direct translation when trying to express themselves in English, which leads to incorrect collocations. For example, a learner might say "open the light" instead of "turn on the light," because the equivalent expression in their native language follows a different structure.

This interference occurs because collocations are language-specific and cannot always be translated word-for-word. As Paul Nation explains, knowing a word involves understanding its typical usage patterns, including its collocations. However, young learners tend to transfer their existing linguistic knowledge to the target language, especially when they lack sufficient exposure to correct English input. [2]

3. Memorization and Retention Difficulties

Collocations are more difficult to remember than individual words because they involve word combinations rather than single lexical items. Many 5th-grade learners can recall separate words but fail to use them correctly together, producing errors such as "do a decision" instead of "make a decision."

According to Norbert Schmitt, vocabulary learning requires repeated exposure in different contexts. However, young learners often rely on simple memorization techniques, which are not effective for retaining collocations.

Without regular practice and meaningful use, collocations are quickly forgotten, which limits students' ability to use them in communication. [1]

4. Lack of Contextualized Teaching

Another key problem is teaching collocations without meaningful context. In many classrooms, vocabulary is presented as isolated words or translations, which does not help learners understand how words function together.

Collocations are best learned in context, such as in sentences, dialogues, or short texts, where learners can see their natural usage. Research, including *Teaching Vocabulary Through Collocations*, shows that contextual learning improves both understanding and retention. Without context, learners struggle to apply collocations correctly in real-life communication. [3]

5. Low Motivation and Engagement

Low motivation is another significant challenge in teaching collocations. Traditional methods such as memorizing word lists often fail to engage young learners, making the learning process boring and ineffective.

As a result, students may lose interest and become less willing to participate in classroom activities. This reduces their opportunities to practice collocations and affects their confidence in using English. According to Paul Nation, motivation and active use are essential for successful vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, engaging and interactive activities are necessary to maintain students' interest and improve learning outcomes. [5]

Effective Strategies for Teaching Collocations

Teaching collocations effectively requires the use of meaningful, student-centered approaches that help learners understand and apply natural word combinations. For 5th grade learners, strategies should be simple, engaging, and focused on real communication.

1. Teaching Collocations in Context

One of the most effective strategies is presenting collocations in meaningful contexts such as short texts, dialogues, or everyday situations. Context helps learners understand how words function together and improves retention.

According to Paul Nation [1], repeated exposure to vocabulary in different contexts is essential for long-term learning. When learners see collocations used naturally, they are more likely to remember and use them correctly.

2. Teaching Collocations as Chunks

Collocations should be taught as fixed expressions or “chunks” rather than separate words. This approach helps learners produce more natural and fluent language.

Scott Thornbury [3] states that learning vocabulary in chunks reduces learners’ cognitive load and supports fluency. For example, teaching “make a mistake” as one unit is more effective than teaching each word separately.

3. Providing Repetition and Active Use

Regular repetition and active use are essential for mastering collocations. Learners need multiple opportunities to practice collocations through speaking and writing activities.

According to Norbert Schmitt [2], vocabulary acquisition requires continuous exposure and use. Interactive tasks such as pair work, games, and short dialogues help reinforce collocations and improve retention.

Classroom Activities for Teaching Collocations

Activity 1. Matching Collocation Pairs

In this activity, students match words to form correct collocations such as make a decision and do homework. It helps learners recognize natural word combinations and develop awareness of lexical patterns. According to Scott Thornbury, such practice improves fluency by teaching vocabulary as chunks.

Activity 2. Fill-in-the-Gap Exercises

Students complete sentences using appropriate collocations, for example: “I always ___ my bed” (make). This activity strengthens contextual understanding and accurate usage.

Activity 3. Collocation Bingo

Students mark correct collocations on bingo cards while the teacher reads them aloud. This game increases motivation and reinforces vocabulary through fun and interaction.

Activity 4. Sentence Building Activity

Students create sentences using given collocations such as take a photo. This encourages active use and helps develop productive language skills. According to Norbert Schmitt active use is essential for vocabulary development.

Activity 5. Story Completion Task

Students complete a short text using appropriate collocations. This activity improves contextual understanding and encourages creative language use. Research like Teaching Vocabulary Through Collocations shows that contextual tasks enhance vocabulary retention.

Conclusion

Teaching collocations to 5th grade learners is challenging but essential for developing natural and fluent language use. Students often struggle due to lack of awareness, L1 interference, and limited practice. However, these challenges can be overcome through effective teaching strategies such as contextual learning, repetition, and interactive activities.

By incorporating games, communicative tasks, and meaningful practice, teachers can make collocation learning more engaging and effective. As a result, students will not only expand their vocabulary but also improve their ability to use English naturally in real-life communication.

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