

English Collocations, a Way to Hone Business Vocabulary Skills

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Abstract

The present article addresses the usefulness of business English collocations, thought of as one of the pillars of English lexis, to students' vocabulary development. We take the view that learning to identify such examples and altogether delineate them from a mere word amalgamation, refining their dictionary skills, drawing up entire lists of collocations as well as adding them to an active business English vocabulary are equally instrumental to economics students' linguistic background. Furthermore, as far as collocations are concerned, it's also imperative to emphasize that 'rote learning' represents an integral part of the process of language acquisition. In short, given that collocations amount to guidelines on which words work together to sound more natural, in a native-speaker fashion, economics students as English learners should take great interest in studying this vocabulary chapter.

Keywords: business English collocations; dictionary use literacy; language acquisition; native-speaker fashion; collocating patterns.

Rezumat

Prezentul articol abordează utilitatea colocațiilor din limba engleză de afaceri pentru dezvoltarea vocabularului studenților, colocațiile reprezentând, de altfel, unul dintre pilonii lexicului englez. Avem convingerea că însușirea cunoștințelor necesare identificării și delimitării acestor colocații de o simplă amalgamare a cuvintelor, îmbunătățirea competențelor de folosire a dicționarelor, întocmirea frecventă a unor liste de colocații precum și integrarea lor într-un vocabular activ al limbii engleze pentru afaceri contribuie, în egală măsură, la pregătirea lingvistică a studenților de la Facultatea de Economie și Administrarea Afacerilor. Mai mult, în ceea ce privește colocațiile, este absolut necesar să se accentueze faptul că memorarea reprezintă o componentă a procesului de învățare a unei limbi străine. Pentru a conchide, dat fiind faptul că sunt colocațiile cele care jalonează combinațiile lexicale specifice limbii engleze, studiul lor ar trebui să le trezească interesul studenților care învață limba engleză.

Cuvinte cheie: colocații din limba engleză pentru afaceri; ABC-ul utilizării dicționarului; însușirea unei limbi străine; în maniera vorbitorului nativ; modele de combinații lexicale.

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1. Premises

No doubt that, if economics students as business English learners widen their collocation horizons, they are bound for greater success. Described as one of the essential pillars of English lexis, collocations map out a safer path for students to follow in pursuit of business English proficiency.

In the same fashion, if equipped with solid knowledge of how collocations work, economics students can sail through different business English exams, and also easily avoid falling into the trap of merely amalgamating words.

Advanced students need to be aware of the importance of collocations. Just as significant, it takes consistency in students' study of business English collocations in order for them to manage to untangle collocations' rather complex uses.

2. Fleshing Out Collocations

First and foremost, for students to grasp the use of collocations, it's only natural to provide them with a set of definitions. To this purpose, we have chosen three frames of reference, namely *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*, *English Collocations in Use. Advanced*¹, and also *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*². Students therefore learn from *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* that collocation 'is the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing' and also that '[...] it takes a greater degree of competence with the language to combine' words 'correctly in productive use.'³

¹ Felicity O'Dell and Michael McCarthy. *English Collocations in Use. Advanced*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2017, p. 6: "What Are Collocations? A collocation is a combination of two or more words which frequently occur together. If someone says, 'She's got yellow hair', they would probably be understood, but it is not what would ordinarily be said in English. We'd say, 'She's got blond hair'. [...] Collocations are not just a matter of how adjectives combine with nouns. They can refer to any kind of typical word combination, for example verb+ noun (e.g. arouse someone's interest, lead a seminar), adverb + adjective (e.g. fundamentally different), adverb +verb (e.g. flatly contradict), noun + noun (e.g. a lick of paint, a team of experts, words of wisdom). [...] It can be difficult for learners of English to know which words collocates, as natural collocations are not always logical or guessable."

² ****Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Della Summers (director) et al. (eds.) Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 1150: "What is collocation? In English, you can talk about 'heavy rain', 'light rain', and, in British English, 'pouring rain'. You do not talk about *strong rain or *mild rain. 'Light' goes well with 'rain', while 'mild' does not. This sort of language behaviour is called 'collocation'. There are lots of cases in English when it is difficult to know which words will go well with the word you want to use, because there are no clear rules. Some words sound right together, while others do not."

³ ****Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. Colin McIntosh et al. (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. V



Coupled with the definition, students are also provided with a range of reasons why the use of collocations is highly beneficial, reasons among which a much more natural spoken and written English as well as precision: 'Collocation runs through the whole of the English language. No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocation. For the student, choosing the right collocation will make his or her speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like, even when basic intelligibility does not seem to be at issue. [...] Poor collocation in exams is also likely to lead to lower marks. But, perhaps even more importantly than this, language that is collocationally rich is also more precise. [...] The precise meaning in any context is determined by that context: by the words that surround and combine with the core word - by collocation. A student who chooses the best collocation will express himself or herself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something more precise.'⁴

Equally important, students should bear in mind that there are different types of combination covered by collocations as follows: '1) noun - a) adjective + noun - bright/harsh/intense/ strong *light*; b) quantifier + noun (...of) - a beam/ray of *light*; c) verb + noun - cast/emit/give/provide / shed *light*; d) noun + verb - *light* gleams/ glows/ shines; e) noun+ noun - a *light* source; f) preposition + noun - by the *light* of the moon; g) noun+ preposition - the *light* from the window. 2) Verb: a) adverb + verb - *choose* carefully; b) verb + verb - be free to *choose*; c) verb + preposition - *choose* between two things. 3) Adjective: a) verb + adjective - make/keep/ declare sth *safe*; b) adverb + adjective - perfectly/ not entirely/ environmentally *safe*; c) adjective + preposition - *safe* from attack.'⁵

Similarly, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* lists the following three collocating patterns: 'a) *verbs that collocate with nouns*.'⁶ For example at *management*, it is useful to know that the following verbs collocate with it: 'a) *need* - *The project needs stronger management*. b) *perform, provide*; c) *handle* - *Day -to- day management is handled by his sons*. d) *be responsible for, oversee* - *She is responsible for the day-to-day management of the company*. e) *enhance, improve*; f) *facilitate*; g) *simplify*; h) *streamline*; i) *outsource*.'⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Id.*, pp. VI-VII

⁶ ****Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Della Summers (director) et al. (eds.) Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 1150

⁷ ****Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. Colin McIntosh et al. (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 501



b) *Adverbs that collocate with adjectives*. There are a number of intensifying adverbs that can be used instead of 'very' or 'extremely' with adjectives, for example *highly controversial* (= very controversial), *deeply offended* (= very offended), and *bitterly disappointed* (=very disappointed). Often it is difficult to predict which adverb will be used with a particular adjective; some adverbs occur surprisingly often before some adjectives, for example *perfectly normal* (= very normal) and *grossly misleading* (=very misleading).⁸

Looking up the adjective *educated* in a collocations dictionary, we are provided with the following adverbs: 'a) *highly, very, well*; b) *poorly*; c) *reasonably* (esp. BrE); d) *properly*; e) *fully*; f) *broadly*; g) *classically, formally*; h) *liberally*; i) *expensively* (esp. BrE), *privately*.'⁹

c) *Adjectives that collocate with nouns*. When students want to describe a noun, there is often a range of different adjectives which they can use. For example when talking about *economy*, the adjective series includes: 'a) *booming, buoyant* (esp. BrE), *dynamic, healthy, prosperous, robust, sound, stable, strong, thriving, vibrant*; b) *expanding, growing*; c) *improving, recovering, strengthening*; d) *ailing, bad* (esp. AmE), *declining, depressed, failing, faltering, flagging, sagging* (esp. AmE), *slowing, sluggish, slumping* (esp. AmE), *sputtering* (esp. AmE), *stagnant, struggling, troubled, weakening*; e) *fragile, vulnerable, weak*; f) *overheated*; g) *bubble*; h) *competitive*; i) *sustainable*; j) *advanced, developed, modern*; k) *developing, emerging, new, third-world*; l) *agrarian, agricultural, capitalist, free-market, industrial, industrialized, knowledge - based, liberal, market, mixed, monetary, planned, political, rural, socialist*; m) *domestic, global, globalized, internal, international, local, national, world*; n) *black, illicit* (esp. AmE), *informal, underground*.'¹⁰



3. Dictionary Literacy

We take the view that exercises like *filling in the gaps with the appropriate words that collocate with a particular business English term* are aimed at sharpening economics students' linguistic skills, as learning how to look words up in either collocations dictionaries, or general English dictionaries is integral to the entire process of language

⁸ ***Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Della Summers (director) et al. (eds.) Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 1150

⁹ Id., p. 261

¹⁰ Id., p. 260



acquisition. Additionally, given the fact that dictionaries are customarily seen as the backbone of vocabulary development, we also highlight their primary role in devising students' speech structure and helping them navigate a maze of rules, words and phrases:

'In pursuit of English proficiency, the lexical fabric has to be woven in all manner of ways. By the same token, [...] toiling on *the wordland* enables learners to come to grips with the wealth of subtle nuances of meaning, which lie at the heart of English vocabulary.' (Iliescu, 2021: 78)

Equally important, we maintain that *dictionary literacy* is likely to pave economics students' way for a better command of business English. Also, we do believe that by helping students to develop their *dictionary skills*, we may succeed in raising their awareness of how instrumental business English collocations are to the overall vocabulary competence. Furthermore, the most compelling evidence of dictionary usefulness resides in students' ability to acknowledge a hotchpotch of ideas as opposed to meaningful sentences.

By way of illustration, we have included a set of exercises designed by Alexander Hollinger to bolster students' confidence in terms of business English collocations. The prevailing pattern is that of a short text peppered with incomplete collocations for economics students to consider and decide which words work together, and also sound more natural.

a) "Fill in the gaps with the right words from the series, words that collocate with 'price': *unit; wholesale; retail; total*."

We believe that, after an in-depth analysis, economics students will determine which words work together, as follows: 'When you go to the grocer's you pay (1) *retail* prices. When a trader buys in large amounts for resale he is quoted a (2) *wholesale* price. Invoices must show the (3) *unit*, that is the price for a single item, and then point out the (4) *total* price, that is the price due for the entire delivery.'

b) "Fill in the blanks with words that collocate with 'debt': *bad; get out of; incur; outstanding; pay off; run up; settle; write off*."

To our mind, it won't take long for students to puzzle out the right match in every single case as long as they keep consulting their collocations dictionary: 'If you borrow money for food supplies you'll (1) *run up/incur* debts. Then you'll have to save a lot to be able to pay and (2) *get out of* debt. Their debt has been (3) *outstanding* for some time, and there is no signal that they are going to (4) *settle/pay* it *off* soon. If it turns into a *bad* (5) debt the bank might have to (6) *write it off*.'

¹¹ Alexander Hollinger. *Test Your Business English Vocabulary*, București: Teora, 2002, p.30

¹² *Id.*: p. 34



c) "Supply, in each blank, the suitable word that collocates with 'invoice': *amount; clerk; commercial; consular; customs; duplicate; make out; original; pro forma.*"

We have every confidence that, after careful consideration, economics students will succeed in identifying the right collocates of 'invoice': 'The invoice (1) *clerk* is an employee in the bookkeeping office of a company who (2) *makes out* invoices. The most common form of invoice is the (3) *commercial* invoice. A seller sometimes sends a (4) *pro forma* invoice that shows prices and other charges that would be payable if the transaction actually took place. The buyer receives the (5) *original* invoice, the seller keeps the (6) *duplicate* invoice. We allow 10% off the invoice (7) *amount* for orders of more than \$ 1,000. For export transactions special types of invoice may be required such as (8) *customs* or (9) *consular* invoices.'¹³

Now we're in business...

4. 'Now We're in Business' Collocations¹⁴

In our opinion, the collocations list below will enable students to accurately describe business dynamics: a) collocations list related to *starting out a business* may include: 1) *start up* - an agency/ a branch/a business/ a company/ a firm/ in business (*esp. Br E*)/ a network/ an office/ an organization/ a project/ a scheme (*BrE*) /a venture/ a website; 2) *launch* - an advertising campaign/ a career/ an initiative/ an operation/ a product/ a programme (program)/ a project/a scheme (*BrE*)/ a takeover bid/ a website.

b) Collocations list related to *being in business* may include: 1) *operate* - an airline/ a facility (*esp. AmE*)/ a fleet (*of trucks, etc.*)/ a flight/ a scheme (*BrE*)/ a service/ a store/ at full capacity/ at a loss; 2) *run* - an airline/ a bar/ a business/ a campaign/ a company/ the economy/ a factory/ a restaurant.

c) Collocations list related to *doing well in business* may include: 1) *boost* - circulation/ demand/ the economy/ production/ profits/ spending/ takings/ tourism/ trade/ turnover; 2) *generate* - business/capital/ cash/ employment/ income/ profit/ publicity/ revenue.

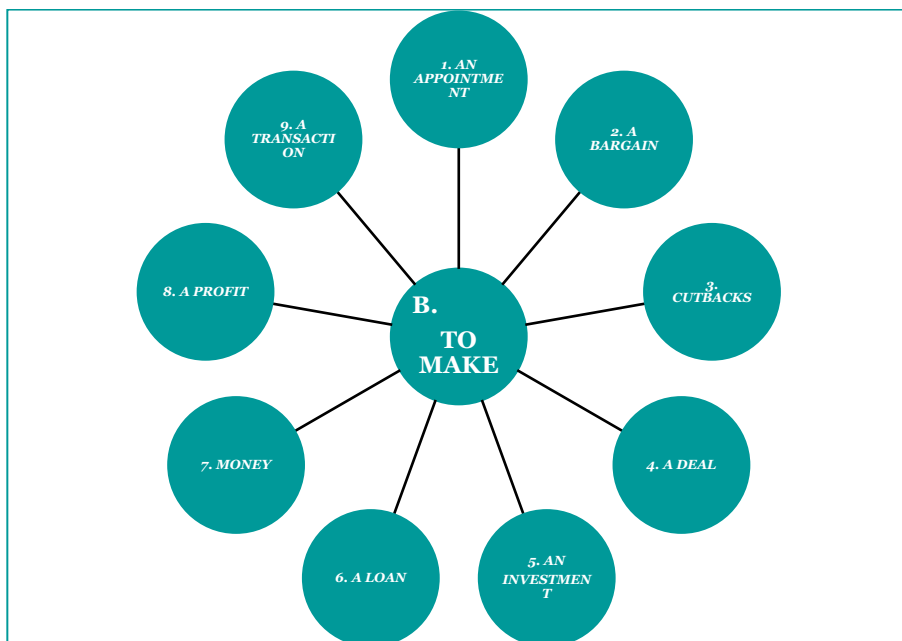
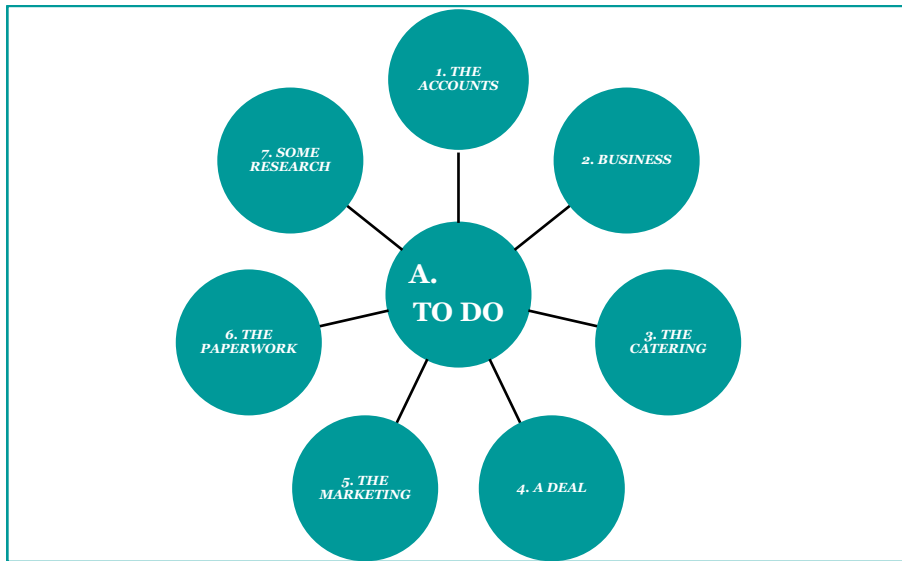
¹³ *Id.*: pp. 87-8

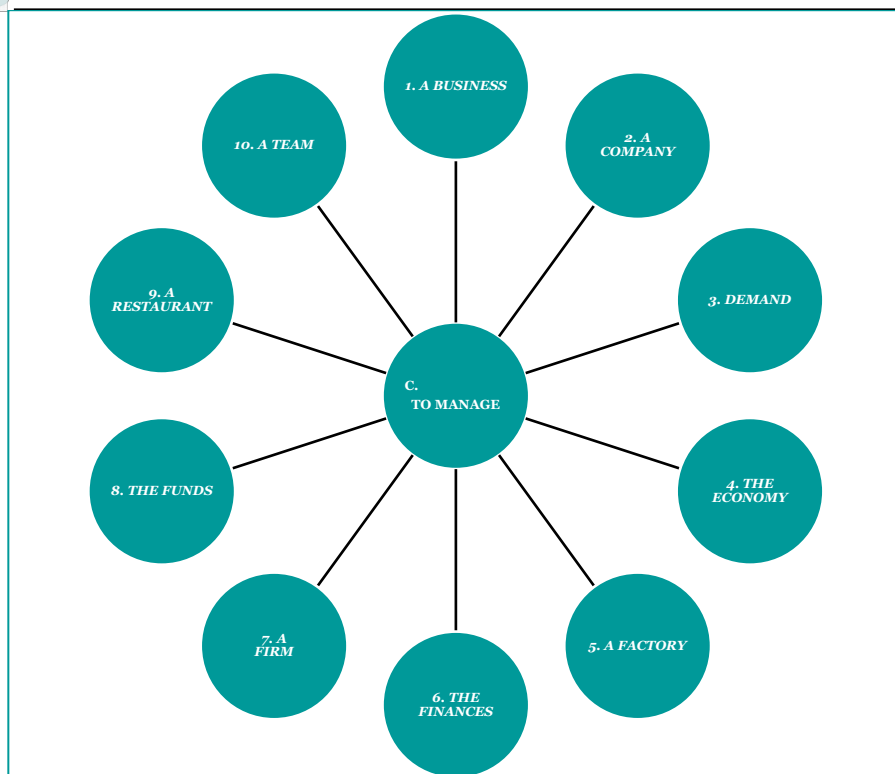
¹⁴ ****Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. Colin McIntosh et al. (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 93



d) Collocations list related to *not doing so well in business* may include: 1) *a company* goes bankrupt/ goes under; 2) *a deal* falls apart/ falls through; 3) *the euro* falls to a new low; 4) *growth* slows; 5) *negotiations* break down; 6) *profits* plummet/ plunge; 7) *recession* looms; 8) *sales* are down; 9) *shares* plummet/ plunge (*esp. BrE*); 10) *stocks* plummet/ plunge (*esp. AmE*).

5. 'To Do, To Make, To Manage' Business Collocations





****Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*. Colin McIntosh et al. (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 93

**Collocations
for Meetings**

6. Collocations for Meetings¹⁵

Similarly, meetings are portrayed as a milestone in business. Therefore, to enumerate collocations relative to meetings, we have included this list: a) *before the meeting* collocations - 1) *call/ convene* the meeting, or *invite* people to *attend* the meeting; 2) *draw up* and *circulate* an *agenda*; 3) if some people are unable to attend, you may need to *postpone* or *call off/cancel* the meeting. b) *At the meeting* collocations: 1) you usually appoint somebody to *chair* the *meeting*, or *keep/ take minutes*. 2) After the chair has *opened* the meeting, the first *points/ items* on the *agenda* are often to *approve* the *minutes* of the previous meeting and to *agree on* the *agenda* for the current meeting. 3) It may be

¹⁵ *Id.*, p. 515



necessary to *add* an *item* to the *agenda*, or *remove* sth *from*/*take* sth *off* the *agenda*. b.1) *In a meeting* you can: 1) *consider/discuss/ examine* an issue/ a matter *in depth/ detail*; 2) *debate/discuss* an issue *at length*; 3) *address/identify/tackle* a *problem*; 4) *have* an *in-depth discussion* about/ on the issue; 5) *have/ take* an *in-depth look* at the issue. b.2) As well as making decisions at meetings, you can also: 1) *make* a proposal/ recommendation/ a suggestion; 2) *raise* an issue/ an objection/ a point; 3) *give/ state* your opinion/ your view; 4) *agree on* a compromise/ further action; 5) *reach* (an) agreement/ a compromise/ a conclusion/ a consensus/ a decision; 6) *take* a decision/ a vote; 7) *adopt* a resolution. c) *Ending the meeting* collocations: 1) *adjourn* the *meeting* until a later date; 2) *close* the *meeting*; 3) *bring* the *meeting* to a *close* - e.g. 'The chairman brought the meeting to a close by thanking all those who had attended.' d) *After the meeting*, it is usual to *write up* the *minutes* and *circulate* the *minutes*.

7. Contextualizing Collocations

Working Life

After graduating in economics, I did the usual thing of *putting together* my CV¹ and applying for jobs. I got a very *tempting offer* from an investment bank and accepted it. It was a high pressure environment but I felt motivated and I did very well. I was put on a *fast-track scheme*² and was *moving up the ladder*³ fast. However, one day I *had a change of heart*⁴. I realised I'd stopped enjoying the excitement. I felt I needed to *get my priorities right*.⁵ I decided that other aspects of my life should *take priority over*⁶ my work. I *handed in* my *resignation* and moved to the country.

¹CV= *curriculum vitae*, a written description of one's education, qualifications, skills and career;

² system for rapid training and promotion of talented staff;

³ being promoted;

⁴ my attitude or mood changed;

⁵ give importance to the right aspects of life;

⁶ be more important to me than;

(Felicity O'Dell and Michael McCarthy. *English Collocations in Use. Advanced*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2017, p. 28)

Our firm conviction is that economics students may cover an entire range of exercises to refine their business English collocations skills: a)



matching the beginning of each sentence with its ending to form a collocation; b) completing a text using collocations they have already studied; c) rewriting sentences using the corresponding words in brackets to illustrate different collocations as well as d) correcting a given number of collocation errors in a particular text.

Likewise, these exercises are primarily aimed at helping economics students exploit an increasing number of business English collocations in order to gradually become more confident English speakers: 'To successful international businesses, cultural sensitivity goes beyond a fashionable phrase, denoting instead the determination and efforts channelled into disputing, if not avoiding altogether the stereotypes.' (Iliescu, 2024: 22)

It's also worth underlining that drawing up collocations lists and constantly looking up further explanations in either a collocations dictionary, or a general English dictionary will enable students to broaden their perspective on the use of business English collocations.

7.1. 'Discussing Job Applicants'

Economics students are likely to advance their business collocations knowledge and polish up their linguistic skills by cultivating a sense of cognitive curiosity, which also translates into reading extensively and making notes of any relevant collocations that they come across.

Additionally, we believe that it's important to realize how helpful the texts abounding in collocations are to the overall process of collocation acquisition. Certainly, this lexical approach provides students with more insights into how business English collocations truly work when contextualized, hence its more engaging nature.

*Guy*¹⁶: So which of these applicants do you think we should interview? They all seem to *fit the job description* quite well to me. It's quite a *daunting task* to *narrow the list down* to just one person.

Julia: I agree. So, let's start by *taking up references* for these ten people.

Guy: OK. So why did you pick these ten out of the fifty who applied?

Julia: Well, these ten all seem to be people who realise the importance of *working as a team*. They've all shown that they are capable of *mastering new skills*. And they're all clearly comfortable with *taking on responsibility*.

¹⁶ Felicity O'Dell and Michael McCarthy. *English Collocations in Use. Advanced*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2017, p. 30



Guy: Did you automatically eliminate the two who'd previously *taken industrial action*¹?

Julia: One of them - I'd also heard rumours about his involvement in a *professional misconduct* case. He was certainly *relieved of his duties*² at ARG under mysterious circumstances. But the other was standing up for a woman who'd been *wrongfully dismissed*³, even though he knew he might lose his own job. So he sounded good to me.

Guy: Fair enough. He must have strength of character to risk *losing his own livelihood*.

Julia: That's right. So could we *pencil in a meeting* for considering the references? And then I'd better leave you and go and *clear my desk*⁴ before I go home.

¹ gone on strike;

² (formal) dismissed;

³ (formal, legal) unfairly dismissed;

⁴ deal with all the papers on one's desk (also used when someone is clearing their desk because they are leaving their job).

8. Why Is It Important to Learn Collocations?

According to Felicity O'Dell and Michael McCarthy (2017:6), 'an appreciation of collocation will help' students 'to use the words' they 'know more accurately', that is, they 'will *make* (NOT *do*) fewer *mistakes*' and 'sound more natural when' they 'speak and write - by saying, for example, *of great importance*, rather than *of big* or *high importance*', students 'won't just be understood', they 'will - quite rightly - sound like a fluent user of English.'¹⁷

9. Conclusion

For the sake of coherence and well suited examples, economics students as business English learners are reminded of how beneficial collocations are and, at the same time, how much clarity they add to their writing and speaking skills.

We also maintain that checking collocations dictionaries as often as they can to try and integrate new examples into their active business English lexis amounts to very good practice for students' vocabulary development.

In a nutshell, it's the use of collocations that may shape students' business English perspective, lending it a *native-speaker-like* touch.

¹⁷ *Id.*, p. 6



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