

# An Alternative Approach in Teaching Collocations for Construction Industry

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## Abstract:

*The present paper aims to introduce an alternative approach in teaching collocations used in construction industry. It is specifically designed for students who are studying for a job in construction field. As you know construction industry covers different areas of engineering, including the design and construction of large structure, such as commercial buildings (schools, hospitals) and residential buildings (houses, apartments). It also includes the industrial sector (factories and power plants) and the infrastructure sector (roads, bridges, tunnels, etc.). We propose a theme-based approach in which the students would engage in speaking tasks around a specific topic or situation.*

**Keywords:** *alternative approach, specific topic, targeted vocabulary, theme-based, approach*

## 1. The notion of „collocations”

Collocation represents a combination of words in a language to express natural sounding - speech and writing. They are necessary to be acquired for developing competent communication in English.

Sinclair defines collocations as „the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text” (Sinclair, 1991:170). He distinguishes two types of collocations, namely „significant” and „casual” collocations, and sometimes reserves the term „collocation” to the former type. (Sinclair, 1991:115). A.P. Cowie is one of the most important representatives of the phraseological approach. Cowie divides word combinations into two main types, „composites” and „formulae”. Formulae are combinations with a primarily pragmatic function such as *How are you?* or *Good morning!* (Cowie, 1994:3169) Collocations belong to the group of „composites”, which are described as having a primarily syntactic function.

The *restricted collocations* can be divided into three types. The first type is based on the syntactic features of the collocation, the second one

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on its *semantic* characteristics and the third one on the *commutability* of its elements. In terms of syntactic features, for example, Hausmann (1989:1010) divides collocations into six types:

- adjective + noun (*heavy smoker*)
- (subject) noun + verb (*storm - rage*)
- noun + noun (*piece of advice*)
- adverb + adjective (*deeply disappointed*)
- adverb + verb (*severely criticize*)
- verb + (object) noun (*stand a chance*)

In terms of semantic characteristics, there are two classifications. One is limited to verb-noun collocations and it is based on the nature of the meaning of the verb. Cowie distinguishes between verbs with „figurative”, a „delexical” and a „technical” meaning.

The third classification for *restricted collocations* depends on the commutability of the elements of a collocation. The most comprehensive classification on the basis of commutability has been made by Howarth; it is, however, restricted to verb-noun collocations. A student who chooses the best collocation will express himself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something quite precise.

## **2. The role of collocations in language teaching**

Teachers should take into account four important aspects before teaching collocations: the first aim is to identify the typical difficulties in the production of collocations. The second one is to identify the factors that contribute to the difficulty of collocations. The third aspect is to find out what strategies students use to create collocations. In the end the fourth important aspect is to formulate suggestions for language teaching based on these results. More precisely, these aspects are interconnected.

The acquisition of collocations represents a major aim in teaching English to civil engineering students. Our students have low-proficiency in producing real English language. They confirm the lack of productive ability in the target vocabulary, therefore we need a new approach that would improve the student's spoken fluency. An alternative is a theme-based approach in which the students would engage in speaking tasks designed around a specific topic or situation. Prior to the speaking tasks, the students will study a collection of individual words useful when discussing the given theme. For example we'll give a word list consisting of words such as „fees”, „utility”, and „construction” for a theme about estimating process in the construction industry. However, targeting collocations have two advantages. First, a collocation represents a larger portion of an utterance than an individual word. Second, we fill that if we compile word lists around the particular theme, we would choose the best



option for improving the student's spoken abilities with targeted vocabulary.

Knowing collocations requires an understanding of how individual words function together. Wolter uses the term „collocational productivity” to describe how easily a word can have relationships with other words. High productivity words can have relationships with a wide variety of other words, whereas low productivity words can have relationships with a limited number of words.

Furthermore, collocation study allows students to use what they already know. Woolard emphasize that „learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations” (Wollard, 2000:31)

### **3. Incorporating 5 themes in teaching collocations to students in Construction Industry**

Collocations are useful for foreign language learners if they want to use the language efficiently and more natural. Hill (2000) suggests that classroom procedures involve a) teaching individual collocations, b) making students aware of collocation, c) extending what students already know by adding knowledge of collocation restrictions to known vocabulary, and d) storing collocations though encouraging students to keep a lexical notebook. Collocations encourage students to focus on meaning and context.

Our paper deals with a modern approach in teaching collocations. A theme-based approach to English Construction Industry introduces a selection of major texts adapted to construction students for teaching collocations.

#### **a. Collocations relating to estimating process such as:**

*preliminary specifications (adjective + noun); other collocations: complete / detailed / full / clear + specifications; design / technical / job / product + specifications; (verb + specification): draft / draw up / write / meet + specifications; preposition + specifications: according to the + specifications.*

e.g. Each dam can be built according to the technical specifications.

*utility requirements (adjective + noun); other collocations: essential / detailed / further / specific / environmental / safety + requirements; (verb + requirements): comply with / meet / satisfy / set down + requirements; (prepositions + requirements): for your... / to your.... ; phrases: subject to the requirements / surplus to the requirements:*

e.g. 100 workers at the site have been told they are surplus to the requirements.



*relevant information,*  
*various documents,*  
*initial estimate; (adverb + estimate): currently / reliably / officially;*  
*(verb + estimate): be hard to / be impossible to / be used to + estimate*  
e.g. The building construction is officially estimated to have cost \$80 million.

*specific details,*  
*get accurate,*  
*costs of labour,*  
*subcontractor quotes (adjective + quote): written / free quote; (verb + quote): get / obtain / accept; (adverb + quote): accurately / directly / previously + quote*

*legal fees (adjective + fee) / high / huge / large / low / nominal / fixed / full / standard / additional / annual / professional / cancellation / licence / registration / student / tuition + fee; (verb + fee): charge / pay / refund / increase / reduce / agree / cover / afford / negotiate + fee; (fee + verb): be payable / cover sth / include sth; (fee + noun): income / structure*

e.g. They need money to cover fees and expenses.

*building permits,*

*bid price*

These collocations could be easily learned by the students in speaking / listening or reading / writing activities.

**b.** We propose another important aspect for construction industry which implies explaining how an organisation works, with a help of a chart. Here students should learn to use **collocations with prepositions** to talk about roles and responsibilities of the heads of different departments using an organisation chart. This theme deals with the following collocations:

*make sure, liaise with, work with, work for, work out, look for, look after, responsible for, deal with, go through, and so on.*

- e.g. My role is *to make sure* that all the project managers have the support they need for materials and equipment. We have a fleet of vehicles which the project managers and site managers use, and I also *liaise with* many different suppliers.

- e.g. There are only five people in my department, two lawyers and three assistants. We handle all the contracts and claims.

- e.g. My department *works with* all the other departments. The project managers *work for* me, but the people in the project teams *come from* the other departments. These teams change as the project *goes through* different phases.



- e.g. Our main role is to *work with* the clients and our management to plan the projects and *work out* costs. We also help to *look for* new clients.
- e.g. Our main task is to *look after* all the income and outgoings in the company. So we *send out* the bills to our clients and pay the suppliers.
- e.g. We are the technical department. We do the maths and *make sure* that things work the way they should. We *work* a lot *with* Operations and also Business Development.
- e.g. We help to recruit new staff and *deal with* training and development. We are also *responsible for* paying expenses and paying wages and salaries.

**c.** A very important thing in teaching English collocations for the construction industry comprises discussing types of a contract. We introduce for this theme the following **collocations relating to contracts**:

*submit a bid*

e.g. Most companies *submitted bids* which were far too high for the hospital's budget.

*award a contract,*

*take over responsibility,*

*provide contracting services,*

*take on a project*

e.g. Most companies in the area were not big enough to *take on such a large project*.

*carry out a study*

e.g. The city is looking for bidders to *carry out a study* which will *examine the feasibility* of widening the ring road between Junctions 45 and 49.

*find a solution*

e.g. The mayor is keen to *find a solution* which will avoid cost overruns.

*analyse a tender,*

*examine the feasibility*

**d.** Giving specific information about documents is a vital theme in construction domain. For this reason, students work with **collocations relating to documents** as follows:

*handwritten agreement,*

e.g. Don't worry, all the details are in the *handwritten agreement*.

*submission date,*

*serial number,*

*site plan,*

*minor changes,*

*change order, etc.*



e. In the end, we propose a theme named communicating Health & Safety guidelines where **collocations relating to advice** are used:

*follow the instructions,  
take precautions,  
keep your eyes open,  
watch out,  
follow the recommendations*

For this type of collocations we use texts for reporting instructions and advice:

„Don't *give hand signals* unless you're trained. *Make sure* the driver can see you. Don't *stand behind* the vehicle. *Keep away from* cables and moving parts. Don't touch any controls or switches.”

Language acquisition involves the storage of collocations in the mental lexicon, and producing fluent speech requires the quick retrieval of collocations from the mental lexicon.

#### 4. Conclusions

A lack of collocational knowledge may result in poor fluency „language students produce grammatical sentences that sound unnatural” (Eyckmans, 2009). Learner need should also be considered. Wood (2010) mentions that different collocations should be targeted for different syllabi. Fan (2009) ranks learner need as being the most important criteria to consider by saying: „While it is important to teach, for example, collocations which are *more restricted* or which occur *more frequently*, teachers should have confidence in focusing on collocational use they see as relevant to the making of meaning in a particular context, taking into account the language needs of their students irrespective of whether such use concerns only lexical words or both lexical and grammatical words. Nobody understands the needs of L2 learners better than their teachers. (Fan, 2009:121)

To summarize, teachers should choose collocations that are frequent, non-transparent, and authentic. Also, teachers can further reduce the number of collocations to be targeted by considering learner needs.

Our paper reveals five theme-based approach which can be easily incorporate into English classes targeted to Construction Industry.



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