

Raising Awareness of Collocation in the EFL Classroom

Jamie Szuba

1. Introduction

This paper examines the constraints on word-combinations in English, and how they can be demonstrated in the classroom. It begins by outlining the competing theories of language underpinning the teaching of lexis. After defining the terms surrounding collocation, it discusses its relevance for learners and presents ideas from the literature as to which combinations should be prioritised. The second half of this paper uses these ideas to select lexical items from a newspaper article, and shows how classroom resources can be used to increase learner awareness of word-combination constraints. The aim is to create more autonomous and skillful language learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differing theories of language

2.1.1 The open-choice model

Noam Chomsky (1966) uprooted behaviourist theories of learning with his theory of transformational grammar (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 66) which posits that language, rather than being acquired through imitation and repetition, involves complex mental processes. For Chomsky, language learning is a creative process enabled by the language user's innate grammatical knowledge. Meaningful text is generated through the selection and placement of lexis into grammatical 'slots' within the sentence. Each 'slot' constitutes a single choice, constrained only by syntactic rules. As such, this open-choice model views language as a structural phenomenon which allows the language user to make complex choices and create text.

2.1.2 The idiom principle

Pawley and Syder (1983, cited in Ellis, 1997: 127) challenge Chomsky's model; the open-choice model would facilitate a massive range of language choices and novel text, but this is simply not evident in native speaker output. Corpus linguistics has shown that output is far less random than this, demonstrating the frequency and predictability with which many expressions and word-combinations occur. Native speakers reject a whole range of unique, grammatically correct expressions in favour of commonly used and understood expressions, which suggests that a different model is being employed.

John Sinclair (1991) asserts the *non*-random nature of language and users' choices, for which the open-choice model alone inadequately accounts as it 'does not provide for substantial enough restraints on consecutive choices' (1991:110). Sinclair's idiom principle (1991) provides an alternative interpretation, suggesting that most text consists of memorised 'semi-preconstructed phrases' (or 'chunks') retrieved from the user's mental lexicon, each lexical unit (or 'phrase') constituting a single choice (110). The idiom principle is important for this paper because it is characterised by three phenomena which account for the

We can identify *commit murder* as a collocation according to definitions in the literature. These features will provide a working definition which this paper will employ:

- The words co-occur in a statistically significant way (Lewis, 2000: 132)
- Therefore, the combination is considered predictable and habitual (Hill, 2000: 50)
- Its constituent parts cannot be freely substituted, i.e. it is constrained (Benson et al)
- Yet, as a lexical unit it 'springs readily to mind' and is 'psychologically salient', unlike a free combination (Bahns, 1993: 57).

2.2.3 Collocation classification

Benson, Benson and Ilson (1986b: ix) classify collocations into two categories, lexical collocation and grammatical collocation (or *colligation*). Lexical collocation includes six combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. Grammatical collocation involves eight major combinations of nouns, adjectives and verbs with prepositions and infinitive clauses, and 'is the way one word regularly co-occurs with a particular (grammar) pattern' (Lewis, 2000: 137). These classifications are useful for labelling the most appropriate collocations to teach and learn (discussed in 1.4).

2.2.4 Points of disagreement

The concept of collocational arbitrariness is a contested area among commentators. At the macro level there is general agreement that the lexicon is not arbitrary, that 'to an important extent vocabulary choice is predictable' (Hill, 2000: 53). However, at the micro level the extent to which we can explain why words collocate is disputed. This is important because there are implications for how collocations are taught and learned.

Sinclair (1991), Lewis (2000), and Hill (2000) suggest that collocations are arbitrary in that meaning stems from convention and can only be understood in context. They cannot (and should not) be broken down and analysed. For example, we cannot explain why 'make a mistake' is preferred to 'do a mistake' (Woolard, 2000: 30). Most collocations are not fully predictable from their component parts (Lewis, 2000: 135). It follows that the study of collocations should focus on the noticing, recording and memorisation of 'chunks' in text (Lewis, 2005: 10), and teachers should resist breaking language down in the search for an explanation.

Challenging this view, Bahns and Eldaw (1993), Walker (2008), and Liu (2010) claim that many collocations can be analysed using corpora to uncover their underlying motivations. For example, Liu (2010: 21) suggests that we say 'make a mistake' because corpora show 'make' is most often used when we are producing something, whereas 'do' signifies the performing of an action. This is an example of how collocations can be broken down during the learning process rather than accepted as merely one lexical item resistant to analysis; they 'reflect the meanings of their constituent parts' (Bahns, 1993: 57).

This paper takes the view that both positions offer useful teaching strategies for demonstrating

constraints on word combinations. These strategies are discussed further in section 2.4.

2.3 Fixed expressions

Moon (1997: 43) defines fixed expressions (or ‘multi-word items’) as ‘extreme collocations’, a sequence of two or more words formed by forces other than grammatical rules (for example, fossilisation). They can be identified according to three criteria (44):

- institutionalisation (the extent to which the item is understood by language users to be a unit and is regularly used as such)
- fixedness (the extent to which the item is frozen and can be inflected or altered syntactically)
- non-compositionality (the extent to which the item’s meaning can only be understood as a unit rather than on a ‘word-by-word basis’).

When a sequence of words displays a high degree of fixedness, is resistant to alteration and analysis and is embedded in the consciousness of the language community, it can be considered ‘extreme’ and a fixed expression/multi-word item. On the cline provided by Benson, Benson and Ilson (Fig. 1), we can categorise ‘idioms’ as a type of fixed expression. However, Moon identifies four other types of multi word items, which this paper will adopt: compounds, phrasal verbs, prefabs and fixed phrases (or ‘items which fall outside the previous categories’) (46).

2.4 Which collocations and fixed expressions should we teach?

It has been claimed that up to 80% of normal language is made up of pre-fabricated lexical items (Altenberg, 1998), many thousands of which are ‘stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use’ by the native speaker (Wray, 2000: 465). However, research repeatedly demonstrates poor collocational knowledge among even advanced students (Bahns and Eldaw, 1993: 101), which can be attributed to teaching methods aligned with the open-choice principle (Farghal and Obiedat, 1995). This lack of collocational competence manifests itself in longer utterances and grammatical mistakes as the language user struggles to paraphrase that which a native speaker would express more precisely (Hill, 2000: 49). However, research also shows that instructional intervention can improve collocational competence (Myers and Chang, 2009).

Given the daunting size of the task for the language learner, many researchers promote modest first steps; the training of learners to notice collocations (Lewis, 2000: 23) and record those which are most useful (Woolard, 2000: 33). This sensitising to collocation necessitates an understanding of constraints on word combinations; that, for example, we say ‘strong tea’ but not ‘powerful tea’. To demonstrate this in the classroom, researchers have attempted to prioritise which items to teach and learn. Table 1 shows a selected range of views in the literature:

	Collocations	Fixed expressions
Gairns and Redman (1986)		Teach useful expressions that 'can be incorporated...without seeming incongruous' (36, cited in Moon, 1997: 60).
Bahns (1993)	Collocations which have no equivalent in the student's L1.	
Bahns and Eldaw (1993)	Collocations which are difficult to paraphrase.	
Farghal and Obiedat (1995)	Test students first, then focus on collocations which are misused or avoided.	
Moon (1997)		Teach the most frequent items (according to corpora) (62).
Sokmen (1997)		'Choose phrases which have a large number of slots, e.g. a ____ ago, one of the most common ____ '(254).
Hill (2000)	Focus on de-lexicalised verbs and 'medium strength' collocations (62).	
Lewis (2000:116)		
Liu (2010: 12)		
	Focus on verb+noun,	
	verb+adjective+noun collocations.	
Lewis (2000)	Focus on words students 'half know'	Focus on adverbials.
Woolard (2000)	Focus on 'those co-occurrences of words which I think my students will not expect to find together' (29)	
LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations (2002)	Focus on those that the learner is uncertain of or which are needed to use English carefully and precisely (8).	

Table 1: Selected views re: which collocations/fixed expressions to teach

A short, written text which could be used to raise learner awareness of collocation will now be introduced, justifying the choice of collocations and fixed phrases based on the ideas presented in Table 3. Using selected items from the text, some teaching ideas which could be used to demonstrate the constraints of lexical and grammatical collocations, and fixed expressions, will be proposed.

3. The text

The written text (Fig. 2) is an extract from a newspaper article taken from The Japan Times (August 15, 2014 edition, page 16). Headlined 'Pixies to bring 'Cindy' to Summer Sonic' it features an interview by journalist Shaun Curran with the American rock music group Pixies prior to their performance at

Japan's Summer Sonic festival. Newspaper texts satisfy many of the requirements identified by McGrath (2002: 106) to be a useful authentic text teaching material. They are easy to access, culturally appropriate, introduce familiar matters/concepts, and articles can be chosen to match the learner's interests. Linguistically, this article is appropriate for intermediate to advanced level students.

Addressing the Pixies is a **daunting enough prospect** as it is. This is, after all, a band whose initial six years in existence were among the most influential in rock music history. The five albums released after their 1986 formation in Boston, full of groundbreaking, unhinged songs containing incest, mutilation and religious violence, **set the standard** against which alternative rock is now judged. Kurt Cobain certainly thought so, telling Rolling Stone in 1994 that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was Nirvana's **attempt to "rip off** the Pixies".

By then, the Pixies had split, **tensions between** Francis and Deal - him the intense frontman yin, her the iconic, **too-cool-for-school** yang - **grinding the band to a halt**. Such was the hostility, Francis told Deal the band was finished via fax.

Their reformation after an 11-year hiatus - during which Francis recorded as Frank Black and Deal enjoyed crossover success with The Breeders as the Pixies' **influence grew** exponentially - was therefore unexpected, and greeted with levels of anticipation that **far outstripped** their original **modest success**.

That fervour remains. Later tonight, the Pixies will play a brilliant, ferocious show at Summer in the City to a **rapt crowd**. Hours earlier when I meet Francis, he looks far removed from any notion of a rock star: Painting on a makeshift canvas **in the sunshine** when I'm introduced, he **sits through** our interview wearing a T-shirt and shorts covered in paint.

Figure 2: Extract from *The Japan Times* article 'Pixies to bring 'Cindy' to Summer Sonic'

3.1 Collocation and fixed expression selections

Twelve collocations, including some fixed expressions, were chosen using the classifications of Benson et al (1986b). For the purposes of a classroom task, one free combination (*rapt crowd*) was also selected. The Bank of English (BoE) corpus was used to confirm that the word combinations are statistically significant, with a t-score of $t=2.0$ or above signifying that the collocate combining with the node is not simply down to chance (Walker, 2008: 293). Selections were justified based on findings in the literature (Tables 2, 3, 4).

3.1.1 Selected lexical collocations

Collocation (node underlined)	Classification	BoE t-score	Listed in LTP Dictionary?	Reason for selection
<u>daunting</u> prospect	adjective + noun	12.07	Yes	Medium strength; potentially difficult to paraphrase

set the standard	verb + noun	15.32	Yes	Frequent and strong; <i>set</i> is a de-lexicalised verb.
enjoyed success	verb + noun	9.41	Yes	L1 interference; Japanese speakers commonly say <i>seikou shimashita</i> (<i>lit: did success</i>)
influence grew	noun + verb	3.31	No	Medium strength collocation
modest success	adjective + noun	8.36	Yes	Medium strength collocation
far outstripped	adverb + verb	5.73	N/A	Medium strength collocation
rapt crowd	adjective + noun	1.72	No	Free combination chosen for task
far removed	adverb + verb	32.00	N/A	strong collocation

Table 2: Selected lexical collocations

3.1.2 Selected grammatical collocations

Collocation (node underlined)	Classification	BoE t-score	Reason for selection
<u>tensions</u> between	noun + preposition	29.47	Strong collocation
in the <u>sunshine</u>	preposition + noun	25.97	Strong collocation

Table 3: Selected grammatical collocations

3.1.3 Selected fixed expressions

Fixed expression (node underlined)	Classification	BoE t-score	Reason for selection
<u>rip</u> off	phrasal verb	18.04	Can be used without sounding incongruous
grinding to <u>a</u> halt	idiom	9.05	Can be used without sounding incongruous
<u>sits</u> through	phrasal verb	25.41	Can be used without sounding incongruous; frequent expression

Table 4: Selected fixed expressions

4. Demonstrating word-combination constraints: lexical collocation

Sinclair states ‘many uses of words and phrases attract other words in strong collocation’ (1991: 112). We can demonstrate this by exploring words which do not attract others. Conzett (2000) suggests that teachers can use near synonyms to show ‘that words with similar meanings are frequently not collocationally ‘interchangeable’’ (78). The following section shows how learners can use their most practical resource - dictionaries - to explore word-combination constraints, taking the collocation *enjoyed success* as an example.

4.1 Using dictionaries and collocation grids

The Oxford Dictionaries online thesaurus gives two synonyms for the mass noun *success* as *victory* and *triumph*. However, learners are given no indication of how collocationally interchangeable these words are; can they, for example, say *enjoyed victory*, or *enjoyed triumph*? For the learner, an exploration of these words, and their collocates, can demonstrate appropriate usage. A collocation dictionary is an invaluable resource for noticing how near synonyms collocate in different ways. Bringing this research together in a collocation grid (Fig. 3) helps visualise word-combination restraints (Channell, 1981: 120) while providing a written record for practice and review (Conzett, 2000: 78). Below are verb collocates for the nouns *success*, *triumph* and *victory*, taken from the LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations (2002). A blank version of this grid could be given to learners to research and complete, using a collocation dictionary.

	success	triumph	victory
achieve	○	X	X
end in	○	○	○
enjoy	○	○	○
gain	X	X	○
lead to	○	X	○
snatch	X	X	○
taste	○	X	X
wrest	X	X	○

Figure 3: A collocation grid

The aim of this task is to sensitise learners to the idea of word-combination restraints; showing that *taste(d) success* is a commonly used and understood collocation but *taste(d) triumph/ victory* is probably not. It encourages learner autonomy, trains students to think about word combinations they use, and gives them a means of checking if they are unsure. This activity, like all subsequent ones in this paper, encourages teachers and students to explore language rather than giving students an explanation. This is in the belief that it leads to a fuller understanding of collocation through greater exposure (Lewis, M., 2000: 22).

However, this exercise is not without limitations. Firstly, both collocational grids and dictionaries are

concerned with form rather than context, making it difficult for the learner to grasp the meaning and nuances of collocations they are meeting for the first time. Secondly, the self-imposed limitations of collocation dictionaries can be problematic. The LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations has been compiled very much at the authors' discretion, meaning it is by no means comprehensive. Using the above collocation grid activity, a learner might surmise that native speakers don't say *taste victory*, when in fact a BoE inquiry suggests we do (with *victory* as the node, it has a t-score of $t=5.47$). So, while useful for raising awareness of collocation and constraints generally, a more nuanced research tool is necessary. With this in mind, the following sections turn to the raw data provided by corpora and concordances.

4.2 Using corpora and concordances

I have chosen to begin with the word combination *rapt crowd*. As will become clear (Table 5), this pairing can be considered a free combination, not a collocation. However, it provides a useful starting point for a pedagogical task; I aim to increase learner awareness of collocation by contrasting predictable and habitual combinations with co-occurrences which are not. This opens up an array of learning opportunities and allows students to engage with the text in a more critical way. (We may conclude by asking whether the author's choice of words is the most appropriate).

4.3 Using corpora frequency lists

Many students will be encountering the adjective *rapt* for the first time. By looking at the most frequent node+1 noun collocates of the node *rapt* (Table 5) students can try to work out the meaning. This task can be followed by a dictionary search to check their guesses. Importantly, learners should notice that *rapt crowd* is relatively infrequent in this corpus, but its near synonym *audience* frequently co-occurs with *rapt*. By introducing the idea of word combination frequency, learners are sensitised to collocation as a habitual phenomenon. Unlike collocation grids, corpora frequency lists demonstrate that it is unhelpful to talk in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' collocations, and much better to think in terms of 'probable' collocations (Woolard, 2000: 40). After all, the BoE corpus gives us three occurrences of *rapt crowd*. We may conclude that convention has dictated we say *rapt audience* as opposed to *rapt crowd*. By considering each pairing as a chunk, we could surmise that one is a predictable and habitual pairing, while the other is probably not. On this basis, we might say that *rapt audience* would be a more appropriate choice of words than the author's actual choice *rapt crowd*.

node+1 noun	Frequency	T-score
attention	74	8.59
audience	11	3.31
silence	10	3.15
concentration	8	2.82
gaze	5	2.23
wonder	5	2.22
fascination	4	1.99
expression	4	1.99
face	4	1.99

contemplation	3	1.73
admiration	3	1.73
crowd	3	1.72

Table 5: Selected noun collocates of the node *rapt* (taken from BoE)

This conclusion assumes that collocations are arbitrary and can only be understood as one lexical item. However, we could choose to break down the pairings into their constituent parts. The question then becomes; why does *rapt* collocate with *audience* more strongly than with *crowd*? Is this due to some nuance in their individual meanings? Concordances allow learners to explore individual word meanings and word combinations in context, helping them to notice how context acts as a constraining force on the language users' choice.

4.4 Using concordances

Selected concordances (figs. 4 and 5) were taken from the BoE using the pattern noun+node+past tense verb (where the node is *crowd* and *audience* respectively). Here, the noun is acting as an adjective, belonging to the adjective+noun collocation classified by Benson et al (1986). In effect, we are asking 'What kind of *crowd/audience* did *what*?'

the press club a record crowd gathered to hear Peter Arnett's
in the country are constant. A Hindu crowd destroyed a mosque in the city of
Yeltsin government, and the entire crowd stood up. <p> Yeltsin promptly
baseball. In Baltimore, a sellout crowd cheered as a 46-year-old left
him enough." The bumper 6,000 holiday crowd showed their appreciation for
tannoy, an entire section of the home crowd stood up and waved red cards.
points in front of a 14,000 capacity crowd earned the Scarlets a home draw
was nothing deliberate, but the Ponty crowd went berserk. They reckoned Mr
supporters in the 14,190 capacity crowd streamed silently out of the
never played in a game where the home crowd wanted a visiting player on the
experience as the Roland Garros crowd inspired him to victory at the
graze the woodwork. <p> The loud home crowd turned on Mark Delaney in the
<p> Even the intimidating Anfield crowd failed to knock Leeds out of their
the good, old days with a full-house crowd sardined into an old-fashioned
Sir Paul, who will play to a huge NY crowd, poured his heart out to The Sun
loose ball and fired home. The home crowd erupted, then ordered their heroes
the start of the race the Albert Park crowd thought they were in for another
blasted his own fans. The Gothenburg crowd jeered Gary Sundgren's every touch
end of the Garvaghy Road, a loyalist crowd started chanting at Catholic
Cork's fans in the 45,800 Thurles crowd went home singing the praises of
the matches left the Centre Court crowd bored, restless and distinctly
and, amazingly, most of the American crowd seemed to be rooting for Garcia!
down the fairway as the Chicago crowd roared. He went on to finish

Figure 4: Random concordance lines for noun+crowd+past tense verb (from BoE)

ideas to hold his radio audience led him to turn against the
a national television audience, described what had happened
because the Broadway audience tended to be a little older
then a Christmas night audience watched the defending champion
when the studio audience began asking the questions.
when a national TV audience saw Stu Miller blown off
Republicans in the studio audience moved closer to a decision.
and a Cuban-American audience gave the president a rousing
member of the studio audience said: `We were left speechless
a 42 break, the Crucible audience went wild. Hendry, 15-8
" But the British audience sniggered for several minutes.
was led away the studio audience sang: `He's going home,
Scotland." As the Aberdeen audience booed, she said: `I want to go
Fulham fans in the TV audience criticised him for walking
with a deranged studio audience, laughed hysterically at
break. If the Countdown audience did that they'd never get
had waned. The Promenade audience sang for an England they
really what an American audience wanted to hear, this third novel
perish" and the entire audience applauded. Monday, 14
largest-ever recorded rock audience-turned up at an air base
Asian community. To a white pop audience, Arranged Marriage" was probably
near a theatre. The Winnipeg audience obliged, even the mainly
young people in the cinema audience believed that getting

Figure 5: Random concordance lines for noun+audience+past tense verb (from BoE)

Having students underline and record any nouns or verbs they know (on either side of the node) helps them think about the context in which the node is used. The results could look something like this (Fig. 6):

home sellout record Chicago Centre Court	crowd	destroyed erupted roared gathered went berserk
television studio Broadway radio rock	audience	watched began asking laughed applauded sniggered

Figure 6: Example word grouping boxes

Grouping recognisable vocabulary in this way allows the learner to think about how a word's meaning relates to its context. From these concordance lines, *crowd* suggests a large group (*sellout crowd, record crowd*), perhaps unruly in behaviour (*crowd went berserk, crowd destroyed*) and probably watching a sporting performance (*Roland Garros crowd, Anfield crowd, Centre Court crowd*).

Audience implies a smaller, more controlled group (*audience sniggered, audience criticised*), watching and listening to a performance related to arts or media (*studio audience, cinema audience*). It can also suggest a larger, geographically diverse group interacting with a media form (*television audience, radio audience*).

We can compare these findings to the most frequent noun collocates of *rapt* (in the node+1 position) (table 5). We may conclude that *rapt* is associated with peaceful, cerebral human states (*rapt attention, rapt concentration, rapt silence*). The above concordances show us that *crowd* is commonly associated with volatile and noisy situations, in which case *rapt crowd* sits uncomfortably as a combination (advanced learners might speculate that this was the author's intention; to communicate the idea of an unruly mass silenced by the performance they are witnessing).

Regardless of our opinions on the author's word choice, these corpus and concordance tasks have demonstrated to learners that certain words occur together repeatedly, and their degree of fixedness could be related to the context in which they are used. These tasks could be extended to the other lexical collocations selected from the text. For example, learners could investigate which kind of verbs are modified by the adverb *far*, using dictionaries and grids. Concordance lines and frequency lists may reveal the collocational restraints on the nouns *influence* and its near synonym *effect*, or *standard* and *level*. In what contexts do we most commonly use the delexicalised verb set?

5. Demonstrating word-combination constraints: grammatical collocation

5.1 Using concordances

Sinclair states that 'many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to co-occur with certain grammatical choices' (1991: 112). Concordances are an effective method of demonstrating these constraints when a grammatical collocation such as *tensions between* is used. Concordance lines such as those in Figure 7 can be used for learners to seek out common patterns.

this act will raise tensions between the white and black if there were not. But the trade tensions between the US and China are had fallen foul of heightened trade tensions between the US and Europe complicated by Israel's timeless tensions between Muslims, Christians and 1957), which again dealt with tensions between indigenous Britons and and is the focus of growing tensions between the Government and those course. <p> There are, too, growing tensions between some midwives and family ideological schisms, spiced with tensions between party grandees and senior teachers and even local officials. Tensions between the public and the party has hardened in recent weeks as tensions between the regime and the out the violence. <p> Such are the tensions between the US and Europe that at over the changes follows reports of tensions between Mr Nasser and Billy Ford, has significantly increased the tensions between the Vatican and the Wessex intend to confront him." <p> Tensions between the `modernisers" and the reveals the town's racial tensions between black, white and a and Central London properties. Tensions between Mr Davidson and the rest these difficulties and the latest tensions between security forces and the for the media. The row will deepen tensions between the Earl and the Prince see precisely eye-to-eye, and tensions between `the frocks and brass that of head of the judiciary. <p> Tensions between political pressures and was regarded as a means to reduce tensions between the north and south. The but also broader economic and trade tensions between the US and Europe. The Office in Kew. They reveal the tensions between Buckingham Palace and 10

Figure 7: Random concordance lines for *tensions between* (from BoE)

Through this task learners can notice and build up generalised patterns, such as:

	<i>tensions</i>	
	<i>tensions between</i>	
	<i>tensions between</i>	proper noun and proper noun
'(de)escalating' verb/adj	<i>tensions between</i>	proper noun and proper noun
e.g.	<i>heighten/heightened</i>	<i>tensions between the US and China</i>

By building up sentences in this way, learners become aware of how choices at a paradigmatic (vertical) level influence and constrain choices at a syntagmatic (horizontal) level. Here, the word *tensions* anticipates its collocate *between* (BoE t-score t=29.47), which in turn anticipates the use of a [noun *and* noun] chunk.

Having noticed the generalised pattern [verb/adjective + tensions between + proper noun + and + proper noun], further classroom practice (drills, substitution exercises, writing practice) can consolidate the

pattern as a single lexical item rather than six independent word choices. For the language user, formulaic sequences such as these save effort in processing and can improve fluency in learners (Wray, 2000: 473).

6. Demonstrating word-combination constraints: Fixed expressions

6.1 Semantic prosody and concordances

Sinclair states that 'many words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment' (1991: 112). For example, the word *happen* is habitually associated with undesirable events (*accidents happen*). Loew (1993) later coined the term *semantic prosody* to describe this idea, whereby a lexical item is given an 'aura of meaning' by its collocates (157). There is debate as to whether this meaning is binary positive/negative, or more gradable (Hunston, 2007: 250).

Sensitising learners to semantic prosody is an effective way of demonstrating word-combination constraints. If we take the phrasal verb *sits through* (*our interview wearing...*) from the Japan Times text, we may ask why the author chose this lexical item rather than, for example, *sits for*, *sits during*, *sits in* or *sits throughout*. Once again, concordance lines can be used to investigate contexts in which this fixed expression is used, asking learners to notice the object of the phrasal verb (Figure 8).

the fans from the torture of having to sit through extra time. <p> Ross
Of The Opera," and they'd have to sit through **two hours** of my self-
the 11-year-old hero will be unable to sit through what would be one of the
insider said: 'No kid is going to sit through a **four-hour** movie- however
would be cruel enough to make us sit through that again? Dark Blue World
t be really honest, and I couldn't sit through all the **really bad** ones."
It was stomach-churning having to sit through her **offensive statements**.
a one-off. <p> The Dane made them sit through a **video nasty** re-run of the
now discovering, Old Firm fans won't sit through **pedestrian games** like this
for mccall. He not only had to sit through **90 minutes of torture**, the
much longer. I'm not prepared to sit through **middle-of-the-table**
CLITONVILLE boss Marty Quinn had to sit through the **longest 58 minutes** of
manager revealed: 'I'm not prepared to sit through the middle-of-the-table
likes chick flicks, I don't. I can't sit through **two hours** of lovey goody
stuff. Much in the same way she can't sit through shootie gunnie war moves.
such occasions. But instead we had to sit through almost ten minutes of pop
were difficult times. Often we would sit through meals in complete silence.
of his top stars today by making them sit through a **video nasty** of Tuesday's
<subh> Disgusting </subh> He can sit through up to **EIGHT HOURS of vile**
see them shooting anymore. I couldn't sit through that anymore, especially
was that I couldn't even stand or sit through a whole football game on
Safety </subh> She added: 'If they can sit through a **long committee meeting**

Figure 8: Random concordance lines for *sit through* (from BoE)

We can see that the items that follow *sit through* are largely negative (*video nasty*, *long meeting*) and the

frequency of time expressions (*90 minutes, eight hours*) suggest endurance of these undesirable situations. These bad associations spread to the item itself. An activity such as this gives learners a more nuanced understanding of the item with which to return to the original text. In the text, the interview itself is repeatedly referred to in negative ways (*a daunting prospect*) and in this semantic environment the items *sit through* and *interview* attract one another. Similar investigations into the semantic prosody of the semantically opaque *rip off* and *grind to a halt* could also demonstrate the constraints they are subject to.

7. Conclusion

Authentic written texts are a useful resource for raising awareness of collocation and fixed expressions. Selecting appropriate items based on use-value, L1 interference or knowledge gaps, we can demonstrate to learners how word-combinations are subject to constraining forces. Dictionary work, collocation grids and corpora frequency lists sensitise learners to collocations as habitual, predictable single items. Formulaic sequences such as these save effort in processing and can improve fluency (Wray, 2000: 473). Analytical approaches using concordance lines and pattern build-up demonstrate the constraining influence of grammatical patterns and context on language user choice. These noticing tasks could be a first step towards more accurate and efficient language learner output.

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