

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR ACTIVATING BISHKEK HUMANITIES UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COLLOCATIONS

Abstract: The article investigates the role of collocations in the English classroom and five creative activities that foster learners' production of collocations.

Key words: collocations, noticing, notebooks, revision, original thoughts, pictures, a social networking website, translation.

Аннотациясы: Макала катышуучуларды сөз айкаштарды колдонууга шыктандырган беш көнүгүү жана англис тили сабагында сөз айкаштардын ролун изилдейт.

Түйүндүү сөздөр: сөз айкалыштар, байкоолор, дептерлер, кайталоолор, оригиналдуу ойлор, сүрөттөр, социалдык тармак, котормо.

Аннотация: Статья исследует роль словосочетаний на уроках английского языка и пять креативных упражнений, которые стимулируют учащихся использовать словосочетания.

Ключевые слова: словосочетания, наблюдение, тетради, повторение, оригинальные мысли, картины, социальная сеть, перевод.

Abstract

The implementation of collocations into the English classroom appears to be a feasible way to encourage learners to produce original thoughts in a natural way. The article explores five creative activities that stimulate learners' production and facilitate their understanding of collocations in different contexts. Additionally, the article discusses strategies that encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning and it promotes learners' active engagement during classroom activities.

Introduction

Collocations play a central role in a language acquisition. One way to integrate them into English classes is to create a dynamic atmosphere that encourages learners to practice them on a continuous basis. To achieve this goal, it is imperative to address the research question: What activities can help Bishkek Humanities University to produce collocations?

Literature review

Raising learners' awareness of collocations is a significant element of vocabulary learning. Read (2000) draws our attention to the definition of collocations: "Words commonly come together in combinations, or collocations, of two, three, four or more that seem to form relatively fixed expressions" (p.21).

Noticing collocations in a text is of primary importance; therefore, it is imperative to provide learners with helpful guidance on finding collocations in different contexts. Some learners might not be capable of recognizing words that go before or after nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs. This might account for the fact that they were trained to pay attention to individual lexical items. A successful acquisition of collocations suggests noticing not only separate lexical items, but also other words that surround them. Lewis (2008) maintains that "Accurate noticing means teachers need a set of organizing principles so that they can encourage learners to record selected

language in carefully designed lexical Notebooks..." (p.85). With regard to the notebooks, they appear to be a significant component of English classes. A key aspect of keeping them is that learners record collocations in a way that allows them to find necessary lexical items easily for a particular task or activity.

It is essential to emphasize that rote memorization of long lists of collocations does not take place during English classes. Learners consult their notebooks every time they perform a task and select only those collocations that are relevant to the activity; therefore, learning happens in a natural way. Additionally, when learners listen to their peers' oral presentations or writing tasks, they automatically acquire collocations and remember them faster. Ur (2000) suggests that "The most effective review takes place when students still remember the item but need a slight effort to recall it" (p. 69). Learners' exposure to collocations occurs every lesson, since students have their own favourite collocations that they are comfortable with. The exchange of collocational experience allows learners to repeat new and previously learnt collocations on a regular basis. Harmer (2001) points out that "When students write or speak in lessons, they have a chance to rehearse language production in safety, experimenting with language in different genres that they will use on some future occasions away from the classroom" (p.249).

English collocations have specific patterns that empower learners to create different meaningful collocations based on existing chunks. For instance, students encounter a collocation: a healthy exercise. Their background vocabulary knowledge allows them to substitute the adjective healthy with the following words: light, mental or morning. This way learners develop an ability to combine different words into new and creative expressions. Stern (1983) draws our attention to the role of creativity in a language learning "... competence is active and dynamic, not mechanical or static. As users

we do not merely possess a set of repertoire of phrases and sentences” (p. 344). Therefore, it is imperative that learners familiarize themselves with key collocational patterns so that they could create their own original expressions.

With regard to writing, students can produce insightful paragraphs even when they have only several collocations in front of them. Each collocation can evoke specific memories or students’ personal experience related to it. These images or schemata serve as a source of knowledge that can be manipulated in a wide variety of ways. McCarter and Jakes (2009) state that even individual lexical items outside context can lead students to diverse images (p. 132). This way students start a thinking process from the moment they encounter the word. Additionally, these activated images involve different experiences that can result in insightful stories and situations. Nutall (2005) acknowledges that “The kinds of assumption we make about the world depend on what we have experienced and how our minds have organized the knowledge we have got from our experiences” (p.7). In line with this, it is important to point out that learners relate collocations to their unique areas of knowledge and they are capable of producing original thoughts independently. Therefore, activities on activating learners’ schemata should be weaved through the academic term to help learners to shape their own ideas retrieved from their memories.

Methodology

The participants of the action research were fifteen pre-service teachers of Bishkek Humanities University, who at the beginning of the study were freshmen. Students, whose level of English was intermediate, had one class everyday from Monday to Friday. It was a two-year study conducted between autumn 2014 and summer 2016. This research incorporates qualitative and quantitative data, namely an interview with three professional foreign teacher trainers, an interview with six first-year students, a survey with thirty one first year students, a written feedback on five activities of fifteen students.

Findings

To facilitate learners to produce their own thoughts with collocations, it is vital to create an environment, where they can communicate their own ideas. Students’ interview reveals that all six respondents consider pair and group work effective to produce collocations. Respondent E asserts: “I do not only use them [collocations], I can hear how other people use them and how they understand them. (Personal Communication, March 7, 2015).

91 percent of survey respondents acknowledge that translation of unfamiliar collocations is crucial to create meaningful statements. The following example illustrates the necessity of translation at English classes: one of the students translated the collocation “a dependable service” into Russian as *зависимый сервис* instead of *надежный сервис*. This misinterpretation was caused by a confusion of words *dependable* and *dependent*.

Students’ survey demonstrates that 100 percent of respondents did not focus their attention on collocations at school. Teacher trainers’ interview shows that neither of the trainers incorporate sessions on collocations into their programmes; however, all of them acknowledge the importance of raising teachers’ awareness of collocations. If teacher trainers and school teachers do not concentrate their attention on collocations; consequently, students will be unaware of collocations. Therefore, students need to receive experience in locating collocations in texts. It should be emphasized that not only are students unaware

of the ways to identify collocations, but even some native speakers might not notice them. One of the teacher trainers points out: “I am using collocations, because it is so natural to me that I do not recognize them by myself.” (Personal Communication, March 26, 2015).

Discussion

A Big Day that is held once a week is considered to be a special class that aims at increasing students’ motivation to produce collocations in a cooperative environment. Five meaningful activities create a dynamic atmosphere that empowers learners to manipulate collocations. Formative assessment is introduced to measure learners’ success and progress in collocations. A regular part of this day is learners’ reflection on producing collocations in speaking and writing activities. It is crucial to recognize the fact that reflection improves learners’ awareness of collocations and builds their confidence. Sharing and discussing strategies of manipulating collocations in a supportive environment allows learners to contribute to their peers’ future development. Another important factor to mention is that it was the students’ initiative to create designations for all of the activities.

The first activity is titled as “Stand Up.” One student delivers a one-minute speech on a free topic that contains five collocations. Afterwards, the students’ groupmates during two minutes should create some questions based on the presentation. It is vital that the questions contain collocations. Next, there is a question and answer section that might take from five to ten minutes. This type of interaction on diverse topics ties into learners’ personal interests and promotes a spontaneous application of old and recently learnt collocations. At the beginning, some learners might feel insecure to lead a discussion in front of a whole class; however, the more they practice collocations, the easier it becomes for them to express their original viewpoints.

The next activity is “Freewriting.” Students should use five different collocations, presented by a teacher, in a writing task on a free topic. It is essential that students create logically connected sentences with collocations for only ten minutes. After that, one or two students should share their short passages with the whole class. This will give every student an opportunity to compare the way their peers used the same collocations, but in different contexts. Additionally, students should not feel discouraged if they are unable to use all five collocations at once. Providing they create a couple of meaningful sentences with some collocations, this should be considered as a significant accomplishment. It is imperative that students are recognized for even a minor achievement. This way they are sure to feel more confident and secure about the way they produce collocations.

The results of the study demonstrate that students created short stories, gave useful advice to their friends and relatives, shared their real and imaginary life experiences. Classroom observations suggest that a teacher should nominate students to read their short paragraphs only when they finish writing.

“12 S” is the third activity that stands for twelve sentences. Every week a student makes a short presentation about one artist and his or her paintings. Students express their feelings and viewpoints with regard to one of the presented paintings only in twelve coherent sentences. It is crucial that every sentence contains at least one collocation. Students should hand in their notebooks to a teacher, who reads their thoughts and leaves a short comment.

“Two realities” is the fourth activity of the Big Day. Students’ task is to join one of their real photographs with any other image they prefer. This might be a scene from their favourite movie, a picturesque location or something else that they find appealing. A creative combination of real and unreal images into one photograph serves to be an engaging way to enhance learners’ thinking and speaking skills. Once a week every student has to make a two-minute speech about their image using around seven different collocations.

A social networking website Facebook was integrated into the English class. The fundamental purpose of blending Facebook into the academic programme is to practice collocations outside the class. In this connection, a Facebook closed group is the fifth classroom activity. Students send one link of their favourite posts to their teacher, who is the administrator of the group entitled “Silent THOUGHTS”. Members of this group should leave two comments on a post: the first comment should include their viewpoint to the post and the second comment should be the answer to one of the group members’ comments. It is important to emphasize that each comment should contain collocations and it should be no longer than two sentences. Some students do not have the Internet access; therefore, the administrator usually posts a new photograph on Sunday and students have a whole week to leave comments. Limitations of the study might lie in the fact that the primary goal of the research was fluency and not accuracy. Students made some grammatical mistakes with collocations;

however, those errors usually did not impede listeners to understand the message. Another limitation suggests that some learners overused the same collocations in their production and this might lead to further investigation on the ways to encourage learners to vary their collocations and to develop both fluency and accuracy.

Conclusion

Research data suggest that it is imperative to provide learners with useful tools for the production of collocations. A combination of five creative activities serves as a solid foundation for their learning. Collocations are viewed as channels through which learners can develop their language skills, gain confidence and take responsibility for their development.

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