

Lexicographic Vocabulary Learning

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How can Japanese learners of English be helped to become productively accurate with English collocations? Based on the results of a small-scale classroom research project, I first look at how familiar or unfamiliar first-year students are with basic English collocations. Problems of collocational knowledge and use are identified in terms of direct translations and L1 lexical transfer. To overcome these problems, monolingual dictionary use is explored for both bottom-up and top-down processing. Possible classroom solutions are then presented to help students raise their awareness and use collocations in English appropriately.

‘CHUNKS’ AS A BASIC ORGANISING CONCEPT

The central argument in this paper is founded on the assumption that the following two elements are necessary for successful language learning: (i) background knowledge or frame of reference, and (ii) linguistic knowledge in terms of chunks. *Background knowledge* or *frame of reference* means extralinguistic knowledge about the world. Even if learners are versed in linguistic knowledge, they may well experience difficulty in both decoding and encoding without sufficient background knowledge. *Linguistic knowledge*, on the other hand, can be viewed as knowledge about how to put lexical items in meaningful order in order to convey messages. Since lexical items are not arranged at random, linguistic units or *chunks* play a crucial role here.

I would like to define chunks as an umbrella term for grammatical collocations, lexical collocations, phrasal verbs and idioms. To begin with, *grammatical collocations* are syntactic combinations, usually, with a syntactically dominant word such as a verb, noun, or adjective followed by a functional or syntactic structure, such as a prepositional phrase, *to*-infinitive, or clause. This means that such structures as verb patterns, noun patterns, adjective patterns, etc. are all examples of grammatical collocations. Take the verb *arrange*, for example. Its typical grammatical collocations are as follows:

arrange + N:	ex. arrange a party
arrange + to-inf:	ex. arrange to meet him
arrange for + N:	ex. arrange for an appointment
arrange for + N + to-inf:	ex. arrange for a taxi to pick you up

Second, we can contrast *grammatical collocations* with *lexical collocations*. Lexical collocations are habitual combinations of words which are semantically related. Typical lexical collocations involve such combinations as follows.

V + N:	ex. make an excuse
Adj + N:	ex. critical importance
V + Adv:	ex. damage severely

(See Benson, Benson & Ilson, 1986; Firth, 1951, 1956, 1957 for more discussion of the distinction between these two basic types of collocations.)

The third type of chunk is *idioms*. These are different from the above, because idioms are ‘opaque’ in the sense that the meaning of each lexical item does not add up to the whole meaning of the chunk. For example, the meaning of *hit the sack* (= go to bed) cannot be reached by adding the meaning of each word, *hit*, *the* and *sack*. The fourth kind consists of *phrasal verbs*, or verb phrases in which a verb is followed by one particle (adverb/preposition) or possibly more. So *stand up* and *put up with* are phrasal verbs. Their meanings may be opaque or transparent. For example, *stand up* is transparent, while *watch out* is opaque because ‘watch’ and ‘out’ do not add up to the meaning ‘be careful.’ These four types of chunk are summarised in the following table.

Table 1
Types of chunking

	structure	semantic transparency	examples
Grammatical collocations	verb patterns, noun patterns, adjective patterns, etc.	transparent	arrange for N to be done, familiar with N
Lexical collocations	V+N, Adj+N, V+Adv, etc.	transparent	make an excuse, drive a car
Idioms	verb phrases, prepositional phrase, sentences, etc.	opaque	hit the sack, in a jam
Phrasal verbs	V + Adv/Prep	transparent / opaque	stand up, watch out

Given such a distinction between chunks, we may now question what it means to ‘know’ a particular word again. Once students start learning English, almost all Japanese learners of English quickly learn such words as *umbrella*, *library*, *salt*, etc. What is meant by *learn* here is that they come to know how to spell such words and identify their equivalents in Japanese. However, such knowledge alone cannot be adequate as communicative knowledge, because learners may not be able to put these words in context properly. If they cannot, for example, use appropriate verbs to go with individual words, such as *put salt on (food)*, *open an umbrella*, etc., their knowledge is quite

to diabetes research. You could help us by sending a donation, joining the BDA or by remembering us in your (7). Please do, because this mother and many others are depending on us to (8) a cure. (*Newspaper advertisement by the British Diabetic Association*)

Answers: 1. with 2. depend 3. on 4. alive 5. face 6. suffer 7. will 8. Find

The above exercise is directing learners' attention on the following collocations.

(someone) with diabetes
depend on (someone/something)
be dependent on (something)
stay alive
face a task
suffer from diabetes
remember (someone) in one's will
find a cure

After learners have become comfortable with the content, such exercises can be easily done.

Second, efforts must be made to directly associate concepts with collocations in the target language. Let us remember that even if collocations themselves are easy, like *open an umbrella*, Japanese learners cannot use them freely, simply due to L1 interference. That is, knowledge of Japanese collocations sometimes put a brake on producing appropriate collocations in English. Indeed, Bahns (1993) maintains that teachers should focus on the collocations where lexical transfer is not easy, but he fails to give instances of specific exercises. We will take exercises with monolingual dictionaries to overcome this barrier and to enable learners to associate concepts directly with English collocations, without recourse to Japanese collocations.

EFL DICTIONARIES VS. OTHER DICTIONARIES

In order to improve the above situation, the teaching tool to be used here is monolingual dictionaries—in particular, EFL monolingual dictionaries rather than those for native speakers of the language. To see why this is important for Japanese learners, let us compare the definitions of *dog*.

a. _____ Dictionary for general native speakers

dog: a domesticated carnivorous mammal, *Canis familiaris*, usu. having a long snout and non-retractile claws (...) (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*)

b. School dictionary for native speaker learners

dog: a four-legged animal that barks and is closely related to the wolf. There are many separate breeds of dogs that differ from each other in size and appearance. (*The Lincoln Writing Dictionary*)

c. EFL dictionary for non-native speaker learners

dog: a very common animal with four legs that is often kept as a pet or used for guarding buildings (*Longman Dictionary of American English*)

What can be observed in the dictionary for general native speaker use is that words such as *domesticated*, *carnivorous*, *mammal*, *Canis familiaris*, *snout*, *non-retractile*, and *claws* are very difficult for non-native speaker learners and cannot be properly handled. As for the school dictionary for native speakers, the wording is much easier, with a few difficult words such as *bark*, *breeds*, *appearance*, etc. In the EFL dictionary for non-native speaker learners, however, the wording is simple and quite illustrative. In other words, the wording in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structure is considerably easier in EFL dictionaries.

Top-down vs. bottom up approach to monolingual dictionaries

Another point to be made on monolingual dictionaries here is that a top-down approach should be taken rather than a bottom-up approach. The difference between the two approaches can be explained in the following way. *Bottom-up* use of monolingual dictionaries is where users try to understand the meaning of a particular word, by looking at the definition of that word. For example, suppose learners are not familiar with the word *double-dealer* and wish to know its meaning by consulting a monolingual dictionary. They will refer to its definition, which might be as follows.

double-dealer: someone who deceives other people (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd ed.)

It should be noted above that it is crucial for EFL learners to know the meaning of *deceive*, in order to understand this definition or to come up with Japanese equivalents. Otherwise, they must look up the verb in the dictionary and come back to the target noun phrase again. *Top-down* use of monolingual dictionaries, on the other hand, follows a reverse procedure, in that learners refer to definitions of already familiar word, using their background knowledge of that concept to help them process information given there. Look at the above definition of *double-dealer* again. When learners take a top-down approach, they already know the meaning of *double-dealer*, possibly through their bilingual dictionary. They then find the above definition. This dramatically changes the situation;

even if they do not have previous knowledge of the verb *deceive*, they can predict for sure that this means ‘make someone believe something that is not true’, because they know what double-dealers do to people now. Thus, a bottom-up processing of monolingual definitions requires lexical and syntactic analysis to understand what concepts the definitions refer to. On the other hand, with a top-down approach, learners already know what a particular word ‘means’, and then they can look at monolingual definitions of that word.

Figure 1.
Bottom-up versus top-down dictionary processing

Bottom-up processing

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- process smallest units to the whole
- analytical
- grammatical & lexical

Top-down processing

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- process with the whole to the smallest
- holistic
- use the background knowledge

How, though, can this be practised in the classroom? We turn our attention to this in the next section.

Definition search with a top-down processing: classroom method

Following the comparison between EFL dictionaries and those for native speakers, and also between top-down and bottom-up use, three classroom activities that can be used with monolingual dictionaries will be presented.

The first is definition search. This is an activity in which learners try to find equivalents of Japanese collocations in monolingual definitions. There are three main stages for this method:

- 1st stage: Have learners guess what headword contains the target collocations or other expressions.
- 2nd stage: Have them refer to the definition of that headword to see if the target expression may be found; if not, have them try a different headword or different dictionary.
- 3rd stage: If found, elicit the collocation, usually in an active, infinitive form.

Based on this, let us look at some examples. Suppose the target collocations are *cohi o dasu* (serve coffee) and *hi o kesu* (extinguish). First, the learners can be asked to imagine what kind of headword might include these expressions. This can be done effectively by having them think of lexemes that they can in part associate with a definition frame such as ‘somebody who does X [target collocation]’ or ‘something that does X.’ As for ‘serve coffee’, learners can easily tell that such words as *coffee cup*, *coffee shop*, etc. are relevant. This can be verified by looking at various dictionary entries.

- a. A **coffee cup** is a cup in which *coffee is served*. (*Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*)
- b. **coffeepot** a container in which *coffee is made or served* (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*)
- c. **coffee shop** (*esp.* US) small restaurant, *esp* in a hotel or shop, serving coffee as well as other drinks and simple meals (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*)

From this information, the learners can draw out the collocation *serve coffee*. Some other useful candidates would be *coffee break*, *coffee table*, etc. As for ‘extinguish fires’, again it is not difficult for learners to associate such words as *firefighter* and *fire engine* with this collocation.

- a. **Firefighters** are people whose job is to *put out fires* (*Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*)
- b. A **fire engine** is a large vehicle that carries firemen and equipment for *putting out fires*. (op. cit.)
- c. **fire fighter**: someone who *stops fires burning*, either as their job or as a special helper during forest fires or wars (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*)

Here again, the collocation *put out/stop fires* can be found.

Some other suggested target collocations and possible lexemes that may contain them are as follows.

sting eyes (tear gas)
 control traffic (traffic lights)
 police (obey the law)
 store/retrieve information (computer, floppy disk, hard disk)
 tidy one’s hair (comb)
 add flavor (sauce)

With this definition search method, users can rely on top-down processing in order to identify easily relevant collocates from definitions. Again, this is because they will be looking into definitions whose content will be more or less already familiar to them.

Defining things

After learners have become more comfortable with monolingual dictionaries with the above activity, they can try defining things themselves. This can be achieved in the following manner. First, learners can define something they choose with one of the following defining types. (X: target word, LC: lexical collocation)

- a. X is/means Y to [for, when, etc.] LC.
- b. You LC₁(X) to [for, when, etc.] LC₂.
- c. You LC with [by, etc.] X.
- d. X LC.

Second, they can refer to a monolingual dictionary for the definition of the target word, and elicit useful information from there. And thirdly, they can revise their definition, using the expression found in the dictionary. Let us look at an example. First, a learner chooses the word *umbrella* and defines it as follows.

This is a thing. You use an umbrella for *not getting wet*.

Then they can look at the monolingual definition.

- a. **umbrella:** an arrangement of cloth over a folding frame with a handle, used for *keeping rain off the head* (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*)
- b. **umbrella:** an object that you *carry* to *keep you dry* when it is raining. (*Oxford Wordpower Dictionary*)

What can be observed is that although the learner uses the negative and the adjective *wet*, neither of them is found in the monolingual definition. Instead, such collocations as *keep rain off the head* or *keep (someone) dry* are used. Thus, they may borrow such expressions to revise their first definition as follows:

- a. An umbrella is a thing for keeping rain off the head.
- b. You carry/open an umbrella to keep rain off the head.
- c. You keep yourself dry with an umbrella.
- d. An umbrella keeps you dry.

This activity can enhance learners' ability to explain something with the help of monolingual dictionaries.

Guessing activities

Together with the definition activity, this one can be done in a game-like environment. This is a group activity in which a member of the group picks out one word from a monolingual dictionary and reads the definition aloud to the rest, without revealing the word itself. Once someone in the group guesses the word correctly, the next member takes the dictionary and chooses another definition to read out. For example, the first person may read out the following:

A **** is a long curved fruit with a yellow skin and pale pinkish-yellow flesh, that grows in bunches. (*Longman Dictionary of American English*)

The speaker repeats the definition or adds extra information until other members guess the word *banana*. This activity prepares the listeners for the bottom-up use of monolingual dictionaries. What is more important, though, is that both the speaker and the listeners can share the structure of definitions and get themselves more used to explaining things. It is not difficult, for example, to apply the structure of the above definition to other fruits, say, *apple* or *orange*. This is because as long as they observe the frame 'a *** fruit with a *** skin and *** flesh', they can explain any fruit. It should be noted as well that there is minimum Japanese involved in this activity, because low-level learners can just read the definition, and more advanced learners can modify the definition or add information in their own way.

CONCLUSION

This paper started by showing that Japanese learners of English lack sufficient knowledge of collocations even for basic words. In order to improve on this situation, three activities were introduced. First, definition search is a method in which learners elicit target collocations from monolingual definitions of particular lexemes whose definitions are expected to include these collocations. Since this method uses definitions of headwords whose content is already familiar to learners, it can avoid the difficulty that arises with bottom-up processing of monolingual definitions. The second activity was a definition exercise. In this activity, learners not only explain things in their own way, but also get feedback from definitions in monolingual dictionaries. Again, this is a top-down approach, because the learners try explaining a target word first; they then look at its monolingual definition, and focus on useful expressions that may be found there. The third was a guessing activity. This is a group activity in which each member chooses a target word of their own

and reads its definition from a monolingual dictionary until the other group members correctly guess the headword. Both speakers and listeners benefit by accustoming themselves more to how things are explained in English. Through these activities, learners can become more aware of collocations, overcome L1 interference, and enhance their productive abilities.

References and recommended reading

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