

# CAPÍTULO 11

## ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### 1. RESUMEN

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En este artículo defendemos la importancia del aprendizaje de un tipo de unidad lingüística conocida como *colocación* en la adquisición de inglés como segunda lengua, ya que la enseñanza de este tipo de unidad ha sido relegado a un segundo plano a favor de la enseñanza de unidades fraseológicas con mayor grado de idiomatismo, como los verbos frasales y las expresiones idiomáticas. Sin embargo, su dominio es fundamental para hablar inglés con propiedad. Aunque deben ser aprendidas en todos los niveles de adquisición, cobran especial importancia en los niveles avanzados de aprendizaje o cuando el aprendiz usa esta lengua franca para la comunicación intercultural, como por ejemplo, en el uso del inglés para el terreno profesional. Como contribución práctica, presentamos una herramienta multimedia para el aprendizaje de las colocaciones diseñada para aprendices de nivel avanzado de inglés como segunda lengua.

PALABRAS CLAVE: colocación, aprendiz de segundas lenguas, herramienta multimedia de autoaprendizaje.

#### ABSTRACT

In this paper we emphasize the importance of learning a lexico-grammatical type of unit known as *collocation* when learning English as a second language, as the teaching of these units has been traditionally neglected in favour of more idiomatic units such as phrasal verbs and idioms. However, their mastery proves essential for natural sounding English. Although they should be learned at every language level of the learner they gain additional importance when the learner has advanced level of English or uses this lingua franca for intercultural communication, e.g. English for specific purposes. We present a multimedia self learning tool tailored to the needs of the advanced learner of English as a second language.

KEY WORDS: collocation, second language learner, multimedia self-learning tool

## 2. INTRODUCTION

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This paper deals with the importance of acquiring collocations when learning English as a foreign language. Collocations are defined as word-combinations which display a lesser degree of idiomaticity (e.g., *vast majority*) than other phraseological units such as idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*) or phrasal verbs (e.g., *pass away*). For this reason, their treatment in English teaching methods and materials has been rather peripheral in favour of the later. However, their mastery proves essential for natural sounding English. Furthermore, research has shown that even in cases of congruence between the collocation in the learner's first language and the foreign one, collocations do pose a serious difficulty for the language learner. Raising the learners' collocational awareness would be the first step towards the solution of this issue, which should subsequently be implemented by requiring learners to identify these linguistic units whenever they are exposed to English both in natural settings, e.g. listening to native speakers talk, reading the press, watching a movie, or in their learning practice when dealing with tasks such as vocabulary learning exercises or extensive reading activities. As teachers of English as a second language we have designed a multimedia learning resource in order to implement the learning of these multiword units. This resource will be presented in the final section of the paper.

This paper also highlights the importance of having a good command of English for intercultural communication, especially in fields which require its use for

specific purposes, e.g. business, academia, science, and so on. We argue that the mastery of collocations is especially significant in these fields as collocations pervade every communicative exchange. The next section will be devoted to introducing English as the lingua franca for specific purposes and showing its pivotal role for intercultural communication and professional success.

### 3. ENGLISH FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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The term “English as a lingua franca” (ELF) has recently emerged to refer to communication in English between speakers with different first languages. Seidlhofer (2005) points out that EFL was gradually established as the main term to refer to what used to be referred as “English as an international language”, “English as a global language”, or “English as a world language”. ELF interactions may include “interactions between members of two or more different linguacultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue” (House 1999: 74, cited by Seidlhofer 2004: 211), or as Ur (2010) propounds, interactions between native speakers of one of the varieties of English and speakers of other languages. Although there are various definitions for this term, Smit (2005: 67) claims that the vast majority of researchers agree on the basic understanding that it “(...) refer[s] to the use of English amongst multilingual interlocutors whose common language is English and who [usually] communicate in a country or area in which English is not used in daily life”.

However, the perception of English as a common language is far from new. Fifteen years ago, Firth already referred to English in the following terms: “a *contact language* between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” (1996: 240). Similarly, its importance as a widely spoken language around the world has long been acknowledged. In 1997, Crystal argued that there were 400 million native speakers and 1.4 billion speakers who used it as a second or third language, which made it the leading international or “global” language. He later claimed (Crystal, 2003:13) that the adoption of English as a lingua franca arose from “the need for a global language.”, and that in fact, this use was far more frequent than its use amongst English native speakers. This claim has been fully endorsed by other authors such as Seidlhofer (2005) and Graddol (2006).

As for the causes for the need of a global language or lingua franca, Ruiz-Garido et al. (2010) note the following: the spread of science and technology all over the world, the globalization of the economy, and the fact that the academic world is becoming more international. Due to the development of science and technology

in the United States, English has become a middleground language for intercultural exchanges, both in formal and informal contexts, e.g., travelling and tourism, business, employment, academic purposes, politics. However, as Bredella (2003: 39) argues, using a common language for communicative exchanges in these contexts requires the interlocutors to be able and willing to “reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others’ perspective and see things through their eyes” as well as to distance themselves from their own system of values and perception of the world. Only then, their ability to negotiate meaning both in terms of self expression and understanding their interlocutors shall be successful. In the following paragraphs, we shall highlight the importance of ELF in the aforementioned communicative contexts.

International communication is key for those involved in the business sector. In business, visiting other countries to meet existing or potential partners and customers is crucial, especially now that we are part of a global economy and big companies have significantly increased their international trade. For this reason, being able to communicate with people from other cultures is essential in order to go beyond the national market and entering a new niche markets. The need for a common language is obvious as the mastery of several languages is both hard to achieve and expensive. It is hard if one takes into account the 6.900 languages spoken around the world, according to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*<sup>40</sup>, and expensive if one thinks of hiring a native speaker or training one’s staff to be able to communicate in several languages other than their own. This way, budget reasons has severely limited the range of languages spoken by people working in this field, and the use of English which has no geographical boundaries, unlike other languages spoken by more than a billion people such as Chinese, becomes a business choice. In fact, English has been worldwide used as a lingua franca for more than three decades to build relationships, negotiate, and complete deals.

In addition to this, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world’s major companies discovered that production costs could be significantly cut by sending their jobs overseas. This is known as outsourcing (or offshoring). Alternatively, they could cut costs by bringing immigrants into the country on work visas. This way, the foreign employees would work for the company for a given period of time, and once their visa expired they would return home. While many people in English speaking countries complained about the impact of outsourcing, the lucrative opportunities it presented both for the immigrant-workers and for the companies made it an unavoidable issue. For this reason, in the less developed countries of Asia, Africa, and South America, the ability to communicate in English may determine who can raise their living standard. In this sense, English it not only a lingua franca but a language of hope.

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40 <http://www.ethnologue.com>

Furthermore, in countries where English is not the native language, people who master the language will be presented with a number of career opportunities which they would not have access to if they did not. Also, the Internet, a powerful communication tool which bears a strong responsibility in the spread of English throughout the world, allows many institutions and companies to advertise their vacancies online, opening up new career opportunities for people competent in this lingua franca, e.g., they can move to a foreign country for a job that fits them better, or they can work as freelance for a foreign company without leaving the comfort of their desk. As Kankaanranta (2008) argues, the reasons for the increasing use of ELF in the business context are connected with globalization of both business operations and information technologies.

The relevance of English in academic settings began in the 1960s and it has not decreased ever since. According to Ypsilandis and Kantaridou (2007: 69), English for Academic Purposes (henceforth EAP) refers mainly “to the academic needs of students and of future professionals who would seek a career in the academic environment”, and covers many types of communicative practices in different levels of the academy ranging from material design and elaborating classroom tasks to participating in classroom interactions, e.g., teacher-student communicative interchanges, tutorials, and seminar discussions (Hyland 2006). It also plays a key role as it guarantees uniformity of language to connect individual scholars to international large-scale activities (Pérez-Llantada, 2010: 25). That is, it gives students and lecturers the opportunity to (i) participate in international programmes, e.g., Erasmus, Leonardo Da Vinci, Fulbright; (ii) engage in international projects, e.g., language courses abroad and summer camps, meetings and conferences, and (iii) introduce their work to foreign media since the vast majority of academic activity is done through English (Crystal, 2003). In this sense, Swales (1990: 99) claims: “(...) there is no doubt that English has become the world’s predominant language of (...) scholarship.”

Also, Mendis (2010) claims that competitiveness among the most prestigious research universities imply their recruiting teaching and research staff with diverse critical thinking who are not necessarily from contexts where English is used as a first or dominant language. In this sense, Swales and Feak (2004: introduction) argue as follows: “the traditional distinction between native and non-native speakers of English is becoming less and less clear-cut. In the research world, in particular, there are today increasing numbers of ‘expert users’ of English who are not traditional native speakers of that language.

English has for decades been the dominant language of science (Ammon, 2001), and science has in fact been one of the main fields contributing to the spread of English as a global language (Ruiz-Garrido et al., 2010). This view is supported by the many prestigious international scientific publications that exist, and the fact that over 80% of scientific publication is done through English. Even those international publications published in another language still include English

language abstracts or publish content pages in English. There are many arguments that support the importance of publishing the results of academic research in English. Firstly, because it would reach an international audience preventing authors from remaining anonymous and achieving recognition of their work at an international level. Secondly, because it would provide the whole scientific community with fresh information as research results would be available faster than if they were reproduced in the author's native language, and then translated into other researchers' native languages. Last but not least, because it would allow a faster application of new discoveries in a worldwide scale, benefitting not only the research's country of origin but humanity as a whole. In this respect, ELF fulfils a crucial role in the context of scientific communication.

In addition to the previous communicative contexts, there are other contexts in which ELF plays a relevant role. Globalization, mobility and information technologies are bringing the world's countries closer together so the world of international relations, politics, communication media would highly benefit if the interlocutors were able to communicate in this language without the need for an interpreter. English is also the official language of many of the world's most important organisations, such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Commonwealth of Nations, and NATO.

For the aforementioned reasons, the mastery of English language is not only an advantage but a prerequisite in the current world. However, mastering a language does not only involve speaking it fluently, but also being able to produce written documents and texts, as English is used for all sorts of external communications such as memos, letters, written telephone messages, faxes, emails, reports. Also, in each of the aforementioned fields there are other types of documents which require a proficient command of this language. For example, in the business world, the production of orders, requisitions, quotations, invoices is a daily routine; also, academic writing, e.g. writing journal articles, conference papers, essays, is one of the most important types of tasks carried out by the university community to spread their research findings. Students are themselves involved in formal writing tasks such as grant proposals, essays, examination answers, dissertations and PhD theses.

Having said all this, the obvious question would be: what is the role of "collocations" in international communication? This is a question that we shall address in the following section.

#### **4. THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS**

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Even though the mainstream tendency nowadays is to regard a language as a vehicle for communication, linguistic correctness becomes a must in the aforementioned

intercultural communication contexts. Especially, when this communication is carried out through formal written documents since, as Hyland (2000) propounds, all these written documents and texts are subject to the closest scrutiny and evaluation because they have more permanency than their spoken counterparts. In fact, Kjellmer (1987: 140) claims as follows: “In all kinds of texts collocations are essential, indispensable elements (...) with which our utterances are very largely made”. Although we pointed out the importance of the mastery of English in these fields as its use has repercussions either in terms of economic growth, international recognition and academic excellence, several authors<sup>41</sup> have made their claims with regards to general advantages of the mastery of collocations in foreign language use. We present a brief summary below:

- Collocation knowledge is the essence of language knowledge since the latter can be explained in terms of the “chunks” of language stored in long-term memory.
- Collocations are key for accurate language production as the correct use of word sequences makes second language learners sound like native speakers.
- Collocations are the key to fluent, elegant English; learning words on their own may enable learners to communicate, but unless they learn the words that go with them in a natural, typical way, their English will always be clumsy.
- As many words are recurrently used in a limited set of collocations, learning these “chunks” of language involves learning the words that constitute them.
- The use of these word combinations supports comprehension, hence reducing processing effort.
- An increase of the students’ knowledge of collocations will result in an improvement of their oral and listening comprehension and their reading speed.
- Their mastery may also compensate other language issues, such as incorrect pronunciation, grammatical or spelling mistakes or communicative noise. For example, when using collocations the addressee of the message may understand the meaning of a text without the need to hear every word. For instance, if she misses the collocate (e.g., *make*) but hears the base (e.g., *claim*) in context (e.g., *If you make a claim, you need to give evidence*) she will be able to retrieve the collocate (e.g., *make*).
- Learning collocations also helps L2L to increase their vocabulary range and use words with a more precise meaning that fit the context better. The use of collocations gives them alternative ways of saying the same thing, so L2L have innovative and different ways of expressing themselves in English. For instance, instead of saying “*It was very cold and very dark,*” it would sound more native-like to say “*It was bitterly cold and pitch dark.*”

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41 (Palmer, 1933; Brown, 1974; Fillmore, 1979; Aitchison, 1987; Partington, 1996; Pawley and Syder, 1983; Ellis, 2001; Nation, 2001; McCarthy & O’Dell, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2005; Walter and Woodford, 2010).

- They contribute to avoiding simple, flat style of writing (e.g., overuse of general words, so that they can say *put forward a theory or propose a theory* instead of *\*give a theory*) which is necessary when doing academic writing.

Despite these obvious advantages and the generalized acknowledgment of their importance, the mastery of these linguistic units is far from reality. McCarthy (1990) pointed out that this occurs independently of the level of proficiency of the language learner as the following quote shows: “Even very advanced learners often make inappropriate or unacceptable collocations.” (*Ibid.*: 13). Other authors such as Nesselhauf (2005) and Blanco-Carrión (2010) found that there is a tendency for learners to not use the correct word combination even when there is congruence between the native language and English. As Blanco-Carrión (2010) argued, this is not surprising as these types of combinations have been in the blind spot for students of second languages for the following reasons:

Firstly, because the learning of the lexicon has been in the background for decades while grammar enjoyed a privileged position. Secondly, because the approach to vocabulary teaching consisted in learning words in isolation. Although in the 1980s linguists realized that vocabulary skills involved more than the ability to define a word, and a shift of interest towards the learning of the lexicon over syntax occurred, as shown by Widdowson’s words (1978: 115): “*Lexis is where we need to start from, the syntax needs to be put at the service of words and not the other way round*”, the new perspective regarding language as grammaticalised lexis and placing the way words combine at the centre of its theoretical perspective does not significantly change the practice of the vast majority of teachers’ of English as a second language in Spain. However, the lexical approach endured the test of time, as can be observed in Lewis’s (1993:38) claim: “*words carry more meaning than grammar, so words determine grammar.*”

Thirdly, as just mentioned, and as McCarthy (1984), Carter (1987) and Sinclair (1991) argue, because teachers (and researchers) paid scant attention to collocations. Both our personal experience as non-native learners of English and the surveys’ results done by several generations of 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students of English Language and Literature at University of Córdoba show that collocations (e.g., *vast majority*) have not been properly dealt with in the teaching methodology used in the classes of English as a second language, i.e. their learning has been peripheral in favour of other multiword units whose meaning is not easily decomposable or graspable from the meaning of their parts such as phrasal verbs (e.g., *pass away*) and idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*). This has been the case even though from the 90s several authors and teaching resources have focused on the importance of acquiring collocations in the learning of second languages (e.g., Kjellmer, 1994; *Collins Cobuild English Collocations*, 1995; Hill and Lewis, 1997; Benson et al., 1999).

Then there is the learners’ lack of collocational awareness. Every native speaker of a language has the ability to use words in a natural and accurate way. However,



a vast amount of the language we produce as native speakers occurs in a more automatic and unconscious way than one may initially think. Contrary to the lay view of language as a repository of words, every language should be understood as a repository of chunks (of language) used to convey meaning. Learning chunks of language is actually a more realistic option than learning words in isolation, as Ellis (2001) points out that both language knowledge and language use are based on associations of words stored in our brains (chunks). In this sense, Pawley et al. (1983) propound that second language learners, apart from knowing the rules of a language, should store thousands of preconstructed clauses as chunks in the memory and draw on them in their language use. It is important to point out the following difference between first and second language acquisition. Native speakers of a language produce these chunks in a natural way, i.e. without the need of previous instruction, however unless instructed in the nature of these units they remain unaware of their existence. In other words, awareness of the existence of collocations is not essential for their correct use in one's mother tongue. For example, a native speaker of Spanish understands and produces the collocation *la inmensa mayoría*, and acknowledges without effort that *la gorda mayoría* is incorrect— even though he has never been taught this collocation explicitly. Learning chunks of language in one's mother tongue takes place unconsciously thanks to the frequency of exposure of the speaker to the co-occurring components of the chunk. This apparently natural issue is far from natural in the case of foreign languages, as the learner hardly ever has the possibility of being exposed to the second language as he is exposed to his mother tongue, and there is a different process involved, e.g., conscious learning. In a nutshell, native speakers of a language are not generally aware of the tendency of certain words to co-occur because (i) the components of collocations are not thought of as members of a construction, or word combination, but as individual words, and (ii) their combination is (unconsciously) learned, and hence appropriately used, due to their frequency of use. This lack of collocational awareness, which is not an obstacle when speaking one's native language, becomes a major difficulty for second language learners, who unless explicitly made aware of the tendency of certain words to co-occur would have serious difficulties to identify them.

Collocations are also rather slippery units for the second language learner as their combinatory nature vanishes as soon as the meaning conveyed by each of its components is understood. This is due to the fact that the learner has been previously exposed to its components in isolation and perceives them not only as word-forms but as meaningful lexical items. It is widely known that conveying meaning comes first than using language in the communication process, and because of this need to communicate the speaker may use any type of communicative behaviour, e.g., body language, linguistic signs. Thus, the fact that the collocate (e.g., *vast*) for a given base (e.g., *majority*) may have several synonyms (e.g., *huge*, *enormous*, *astronomical*, *grand*, *colossal*) makes it difficult for the learner to choose the correct

one in a given context. In other words, the lower degree of meaning opacity that the components of the collocations possess in comparison to more idiomatic units represents an obstacle for their perception as a linguistic unit, making their learning almost impossible. With regards to how these linguistic units are to be acquired when learning English as a second/foreign language, there are some general learning tips that could be followed. For instance, Lewis (2001) argues that vocabulary should be acquired by learning new lexical items with their frequent collocate/s. For example, if the learner has to learn the noun *research*, instead of learning it in isolation, she should learn the collocation *conduct research* to prevent her from storing only the base word of the collocation in her long term memory, and avoiding the subsequent problem of having to find a collocate for it in her linguistic production, which in the vast majority of cases is a process that suffers interferences with the learner's mother tongue. In this sense, Palmer (1933:4) argues as follows: "Each [collocation] (...) must or should be learnt, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts."

Several authors argue that raising the learners' collocational awareness (Hill 2000, Ying 2004, Károly 2005), i.e. making the learner aware of the existence of these linguistic units, is crucial so that she can subsequently detect them in her exposure to English language. However, other researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2005; Blanco-Carrión, 2010) found that students who have collocational awareness still make mistakes when producing these lexical units. In our opinion, this may be due to the fact that second language learners are not frequently exposed to significant contexts where this type of structure might be learned, i.e. being exposed to contexts meaningful for the learner, e.g., using the second language for academic or professional purposes, and as natural as possible, e.g. using realia such as movies, videoconferences, newspapers, novels, any kind of real material not designed for learners. On the other hand, one of the best ways to record a collocation is in a phrase or a sentence, that is, in its context of use. This proves crucial for the learner to unveil the meaning of a collocation. Authors such as Firth (1957), Halliday (1961), Howarth (1996) suggest that words must be learned in context as speakers attribute them a certain sense depending on the context where they are used. That is, a word's context of use is required in order to get the sense of that word activated in that context. This is utterly important both to understand the meaning of and learn the correct collocation as in order to discriminate among the various collocates that a base may have, the context is the clue for both meaning and deciding which collocate occurs with a given base.

With regards to what collocations should be learned first, or how to proceed in the acquisition of collocations, the proposals made by different researchers consider three main parameters: frequency of use, previously known language and usefulness of the language learned. These three parameters are inextricably interrelated although authors may have favoured one or another. For example, in 1933 the

*Second Interim Report on English Collocations* was published and contained a list with the most frequently used collocations in English to be taken into account from a learning perspective. This list contained several thousands collocations as subjectively identified by Palmer. This parameter is still emphasized at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by researchers such as Nation and Nesselhauf. Nation (2001:336) claims that very frequent or immediately useful collocations can simply be memorized and used, and later be analysed when learners' level of proficiency is more advanced. In the same sense, Nesselhauf (2005:259) suggests that teachers should focus on common collocations rather than unusual or advanced collocations, although the latter may seemed more attractive at first sight. The second parameter has been highlighted by researchers such as Lewis and Hill. Lewis (2000:24) argues as follows: "Time spent on half-known language is more likely to encourage input to become intake than time spent on completely new input". Hill (2000:67) argues that the bulk of vocabulary practice should aim at increasing the learners' collocational competence with words they already know. Nesselhauf (*ibid.*) adds that teachers should concentrate on expanding knowledge of what is half-known by teaching students collocates of a known word.

We support Nation (*ibid.*) in her defense of the usefulness parameter. We believe the learning of collocations should be as meaningful for the learner as possible. For instance, the teacher may select conversational contexts which the learners has to face for her personal, academic or professional purposes and prepare material to learn the collocations frequently occurring in these contexts. With regards the professional fields dealt with in the previous section we may mention the existence of two main types of collocational units: those belonging to the special languages: e.g. business: clinch a deal, benchmarking exercise; science: conduct an experiment, emphasize hard data; or general vocabulary collocations which frequently appear in these specific communicative contexts: e.g. business: reach an agreement; science: significant difference<sup>42</sup>.

Making collocation learning relevant to the learners' commonest communicative situations contributes to the second factor to their retaining in long-term memory, their regular use. If the learner was not regularly exposed to the specific communicative context, the teacher could design materials for the learner to support the learning of the collocations introduced. These materials may include a variety of activities ranging from guided-exercises such as the wellknown "multiple choice" to more autonomous types of tasks, such as written and/ or oral production activities in which the learners is aware that her use of collocations is going to be assessed and graded so that she makes a conscious effort to use as many as possible. With this aim in mind, we have designed an online tool to support the autonomous learning of collocations by advanced language learners, which will be presented in the next section.

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42 Jiménez-Navarro (2011).

## 5. ON-LINE TOOL.

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This tool, available at <http://www.uco.es/~ff1blcao> has been designed for advanced learners of English. Its design was possible thanks to the collaboration of third year students of English Language and Literature at the University of Córdoba during the academic year 2010-11, and the participants in the teaching innovation project led by Blanco-Carrión<sup>43</sup>. Its main aim is to help advanced learners of English learn (and/or revise) collocations on their own in a free and easy way. It consists of a series of multiple choice tests. This type of activity is a fast and convenient way for learners of English to both learn collocations and check their collocational competence. Each test includes a series of prompt sentences with a gap to be filled by the learner by choosing the best collocate for a given base provided within the prompt sentence. Four possible collocates are provided.

For the design of each test, collocations frequently appearing in the course material for this advanced level were selected by students and project collaborators under the supervision of professor Blanco-Carrión. The tests were carefully designed so that their doing is easy and intuitive. Collocations were selected in terms of their frequency of use, and then inserted in a sentence extracted either from the course material itself, dictionaries, real material or the British National Corpus. The prompt sentences were carefully selected so that the context could be used as cue, e.g. it should help the learner easily unveil the meaning of the collocation and facilitate the choice among the four possible collocates. In this case, the learners have been introduced the collocation before in the classroom. A prompt sentence extracted from one of the tests is: "He lifted the receiver two-handed, leaned his ear to make sure he had a ..... tone, laid it down, dialled 01 for London (...). The four options provided are: dial, ringing, telephone, engaged. As observed all the options provided pertain to the semantic frame "making a phone call" although only one of the items fits the collocate gap for the base "tone". This is by no means a coincidence as we decided to offer the best possible distractors so that the learner's answer would be a faithful proof of her collocational competence.

The tool contents were subsequently refined the following academic year. We carried out a reorganization of the prompt sentences in the different tests according to the mistakes made by the next generation of students at the beginning of the academic year. This way, the sentences which presented a higher percentage of students' errors were included in level 4, the following ones in terms of difficulty in level 3, those with few errors in level 2 and those with almost no errors in level 1. That is, the tests were organized in four levels according to their (tested) difficulty. In addition to this, research conducted by Jiménez-Navarro, made it possible to

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43 This project was selected and provided some financial support by the Vicerrectorado de Innovación y Calidad of the University of Córdoba (Spain) during the academic year 2010-11.

add an additional test containing the most frequently occurring collocations found in research articles. The aim of the tool is now twofold: help advanced learners of English learn/revise collocations and help postgraduate university students and researchers acquire the general vocabulary collocations most frequently occurring in research articles so that they can actively use them when writing this type of academic document. Therefore, the tool have been designed taking into account the learner's level of proficiency in English, the frequency parameter among those mentioned in the previous section and the usefulness in the case of the specific collocations which can be used when reporting the research done in an academic setting. Also the "known language" parameter is at play as the collocations have been extracted from the course material by the students under the supervision of the project coordinator and it also permeates the organization of the sentences into the four levels of difficulty.

To conclude we believe that the fact that collocations are linguistic units pervasive in every linguistic performace is a more than reasonable argument to deal with them properly in language learning and for the design of course material adapted to the learner needs. The existence of collocations which are more specific of a given professional field further illustrates their pervasiveness not only in general day to day conversation but in special languages as well. We support the view that their knowledge contributes to natural sounding English and a high degree of professionalism as one needs to master the vocabulary of her professional field, understanding vocabulary not as single words but chunks of language (e.g. issue a statement, clinch a deal, customer care).

## 6. CONCLUSION

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Moreno (2009:252) pointed out that there is not much research on how to teach collocations in a systematic, rigorous and efficient way, which makes many second language learners wonder why they should learn collocations. We hope to have shed some light on the reasons to do so. We have also tried to show how and what kind of collocations should be acquired when learning English as a second language. We highlighted the importance of the context in two main senses. First, understanding context as the context of use, which should be as meaningful as possible to the learner, so that she comes across the collocations that are more useful to her in the context which she will face for academic or professional purposes. Second, learning collocations in contextualized sentences/utterances as this is essential for adscribing the right collocate to a certain base given the meaning conveyed in the specific context. We understand this as a pre-requisite for learning collocations and we have put it into practice in the design of our tool. Although the tool presented here is tailored to the needs of advanced learners of English, we believe collocations ought

to be learned at every level of proficiency in the second language, always taking into account the frequency and usefulness of specific collocations for each level.

Last but not least, frequency of exposure and use are believed to be pivotal factors for a successful learning of collocations in a foreign language, therefore teachign/learning material should be organized/ranked according to its collocational density and appropriately exploited in language practice. Guided types of activities such as the multiple choice presented in our self learning tool should be complemented by requiring the learner to use collocations in freer types of activities such as oral and written production tasks in order to be able to assess and grade the learners' collocational competence. The more practice the learners have on this rather slippery type of unit the better their performance will be.

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