Effectiveness of Teaching Collocations to Primary School Students (Grade 6)

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to study the effectiveness of teaching collocations towards the increase of vocabulary knowledge of Grade 6 students from Koksumu School in Narathiwat, to study the effectiveness of teaching collocations towards the vocabulary retention rate and to compare the effectiveness of teaching collocation towards the increase of each type of collocations. The instruments used in this study were 12 lesson plans and a collocation test consisting of 32 items. The experiment and data collection lasted 30 hours. Means, standard deviations and t-test were computed.

The results showed that students scored an average of 11.47 points on the pretest and an average of 16.17 points on the posttest, with a statistical significance of 0.01. Additionally, the vocabulary retention rate was 15.44 points and the t-test result showed statistical significance of -0.01. Verb+Noun collocations were scored the highest (73%) and Noun+Preposition ones were the lowest (33.25%).

Keywords: Collocations, teaching vocabulary through collocations, vocabulary retention
Background

Nowadays teaching English plays a significant role in the everyday life of the world population. In Thailand English is an important tool for communication in various daily situations. It is also a communication tool that is used in creating understanding of cultural diversity in the society leading to friendship and cooperation in various areas, including education, economics, sciences, and technology. It is, thus, essential that people become ready and increase the ability in various aspects necessary for their lives.

English language ability is one of the necessary skills people have to have in order to be well prepared for better opportunities as workers enter the competitive international workforce within the ASEAN community. This is important as Section 34 of the ASEAN charter specifies “The working language of ASEAN shall be English.” (The Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, the National Legislative Assembly, 2007).

Akbary (2008) maintained that learners will not be able to communicate with each other if they lack vocabulary. Moras (2001) stated that the main purpose of teaching a language is to enable the learners to use the language in communication. And vocabulary is an important factor that helps the learners communicate effectively. Therefore, it is essential that learners improve their vocabulary knowledge because vocabulary plays a significant role in developing language skills.

In teaching English as a foreign language in Thailand nowadays, significance has been placed on vocabulary teaching from the elementary level onward. Studies on different techniques in teaching vocabulary to help learners remember vocabulary efficiently have been conducted. One of the techniques is teaching vocabulary by emphasizing lexical collocations. To learn and memorize a large amount of vocabulary is vital to all language learners. However, if the learners are not able to use the lexicon knowledge they have learned through rote memory to compose grammatically correct sentences and up to native speakers’ norms or standards, the learners will not be able to communicate accurately and successfully. In addition, in teaching English, especially in the elementary level, the emphasis is on rote memory, not comprehension. This has caused problems and failure in communication through the English language.

Nantana Kampapan (1997) and Preema Maligamart (2003) pointed out that teachers tended to teach vocabulary separately from grammar. Teachers usually emphasized word meanings in teaching vocabulary and rules when teaching grammar. These practices fail to reflect the important nature of language that consists of several complete phrases (groups of words having definite features). When learners do not see the language features beyond the
word level and the close relationship of the words co-existing in the phrases, they fail to properly use the phrases in natural ways was as native speakers do.

The reasons elaborated above show that word collocations may play a significant role in language learning and teaching. Hence, in teaching a foreign language teachers should have the learners remember words in the whole phrase, or word collocations rather than having them rote memorize each word separately.

Regarding the importance of vocabulary as reviewed above scholars interested in vocabulary development have conducted studies and proposed guidelines and teaching techniques that focus on vocabulary development. One approved technique is to teach words with allocations, which are also important in teaching and learning speaking and writing skills. Lexical collocations help language learners to communicate by combining words, or using each word with its collocations without any or with fewer problems (Firth, 1957; Lewis, 2000; Sinclair, 1991), cited in Martynska (2004).

Teaching collocations is essential for teachers who teach English as a foreign language in Thailand. The technique helps learners develop lexical learning and understand passages. Moreover, learners are able to compose sentences to be used for communication the way native speakers do. Shin and Nation (2008) argued that teachers and learners should pay attention to lexical collocations because knowing word collocation helps improve learners’ language proficiency and this may lead to an increase in confidence in selecting the correct words as native speakers do.

In a study by Ozgul and Abdulkadir (2012), a comparison was made between teaching vocabulary by emphasizing lexical collocations and traditional teaching techniques—such as synonyms, antonyms, word meaning, and translation the new words into the learners’ mother tongue. Results showed that the learners who learned word collocations achieved better scores than learners who were taught with more traditional teaching techniques. Teaching vocabulary by emphasizing lexical collocations enhances the retention of new vocabulary. This teaching technique is an effective teaching strategy to help learners remember new words more easily and use the newly learned words.

The researcher, therefore, was interested in trying out the teaching technique with grade 6 Thai learners the results of which are expected to be guidelines for the development of teaching and learning English at the elementary level.

**Objectives/Research Questions**
1. To study the effect of teaching vocabulary through collocations on Grade 6 learners’ vocabulary improvement.

2. To study the effect of teaching vocabulary through collocations on the vocabulary retention of grade 6 learners.

3. To compare the effects of teaching vocabulary through collocations on the increase of different types of word collocations.

Research Methodology

Participants were 36 grade 6 learners at Baan Koke Sumu, Mueang District, Narathiwat Province. They were taking a mandatory fundamental English course in the first semester of 2014 academic year. The English course was prescribed as the Core Curriculum by the Ministry of Education. The participants were purposively selected (without sampling) based on the rationale stated above; the previous performance in the English course showed that the learners had problems in learning English vocabulary. The problems included learners’ inability to use the lexicon they had learned to compose grammatically correct sentences, inappropriate diction, and incorrect word order. Direct translation from the mother tongue was another problem which resulted in the learners’ producing sentences deviating from the English language sentence structures. The problems have led to an awkward use of English, the L2. Another reason for selecting the participant group was the fact that they have been learning English since grades 4 and 5. It is, thus, appropriate to expose the group to an experimental teaching technique—teaching vocabulary through collocation.

Research instrument consisted of 12 reading passages from which word collocations were sorted out and grouped based on the collocation types proposed by Benson et al. (1986) consisting of 4 types of lexical collocations (verb + noun, adjective + noun, verb + adverb, and noun + of + noun2) and 4 types of grammatical collocation (verb + preposition, adjective + preposition, noun + preposition, and preposition + noun). A version of New Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English was employed to check the accuracy. A native speaker of English was also asked to double check all the collocation words in the present study.

Twelve lessons were designed that emphasized word collocations. Each lesson consisted of the contents for two 60-minute teaching sessions. Each session consisted of 3 steps: presentation, practice and application. Hill’s idea of how to teach collocations was also integrated in teaching collocations.
Another type of instrument used in the present study was a test to measure the learners’ word collocations. It consisted of 32 test items: 8 4-multiple choice items, 8 sentence gap-filling items, a cloze test consisting of 8 gaps, and 8 comprehension test questions from reading 2 passages. All the 32 test items were employed to test the participants’ knowledge about word collocations occurring in the contexts different from those in the lesson plans.

**Findings**

The following are the results of teaching vocabulary through collocations:

1. The vocabulary test score in the pre-test was 11.47; whereas the score of the post-test was 16.17. The difference between the score in the pre-test and the post test was 4.69. That is to say, the learners scored significantly higher after receiving the vocabulary teaching by emphasizing word collocations, at 0.01. ($t = 9.12$, $p \leq .01$)

**Table 1:** Scores on vocabulary tests before and after receiving vocabulary teaching by emphasizing word collocations of Grade 3 learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{X}$</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-treatment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11.47</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>9.12**</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-treatment</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16.17</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Grades 6 learners’ vocabulary retention after receiving vocabulary teaching by emphasizing word collocations

2. The teaching collocations posttest scored an average of 11.47 and the vocabulary retention was 15.44, the $t$-test result showed statistical significance of -0.01 ($t = -3.99$, $p \leq .01$) (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Grades 6 learners’ vocabulary retention after receiving vocabulary teaching by emphasizing word collocations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{X}$</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the 8 collocation types, the learners’ ability to use Verb + Noun Type collocations was found the highest—73 per cent; while the ability to use the Noun + Preposition type was found the lowest—33.25 per cent (Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of teaching collocation types’ posttest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collocation Type</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Verb + Noun</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>73.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adjective + Noun</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>59.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Verb + Adverb</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Noun1 + of + Noun2</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>46.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Verb + Preposition</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>52.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adjective + Preposition</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>40.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Noun + Preposition</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>33.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Preposition + Noun</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>49.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When consider the progress of learning word collocations, it was found that the learners had the most improvement in the Preposition + Noun type; the score on the pre-test was 1.03 while that on the post-test was 1.97—the difference of which was 0.94. In contrast, they had the least improvement in the Verb + Noun type (a type of lexical collocations); the score on the pre-test was 2.86 and that on the post-test was 2.92, -- the difference of which was 0.06 (Table 4).

Table 4: Comparison of pretest and posttest of teaching collocation types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Samples Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Mean Differences</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

** significance level 0.01
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Collocation</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>t Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>[p]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb + Noun</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.65**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective + Noun</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.09**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb + Adverb</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.39**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun1 + of + Noun2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.70**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb + Preposition</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.39**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective + Preposition</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.74**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun + Preposition</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5.20**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition + Noun</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.41**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussions**

The study was carried out to identify the effects of teaching vocabulary through collocations, vocabulary retention, and the learners’ ability in using each type of word collocations after being taught using the teaching technique. It was found that the learners scored better after
receiving the treatment compared to the scores they made in the pre-test, which can be explained as follows:

1. The teachers raised the learners’ awareness of the word collocations in the reading passages. The learners were asked to locate all the word collocations in each passage, so that they could notice the use of each word collocations. Nithida Adinpataranan (1997) stated that teaching language by emphasizing vocabulary collocations was the technique aimed at teaching word meanings, phrases and the grammar of each word that occurs in different context. The teaching technique also provided the learners with opportunities to learn various meanings of each word, thus helping enable the learners to make connections between words and to use each word correctly. Likewise, Brown (1980), cited in Worachart Pootong (1994), argued that teaching vocabulary through word collocations raises the learners’ awareness of how each word can be used and how the meaning changes.

2. After each lesson the learners practiced using the word collocations in different types of exercises. This allowed them to review what they studied and to enhance their comprehension. Completing the exercises also helped the learners summarize the language they studied thereby increasing their awareness of the recently studied lexicon. Boonyasanguan (2006) argued that having learners do different types of exercises help them learn the coexistence of each word. Similarly, Lewis (2001) maintained that the variety of exercises and activities enhanced L2 learners’ ability to notice the occurrence of words leading to their ability to use vocabulary accurately and appropriately.

3. After the learners were given the English lessons through the teaching vocabulary through collocations, they were assigned to write each word collocation in their vocabulary notebook (designed by the teacher). When doing so they were expected to learn the word collocations systematically. This was supported by Hill (2000) who stated that a notebook for systematic word recording is essential for every learner. Writing down each word, arranging words in a notebook, and adding word collocations to previously recorded words could provide additional exposure to the language being learned, and that is part of the language learning process.

Teaching vocabulary through collocations significantly increased lexical collocation retention—(p = 0.1). The learners scored better on the word collocation test immediately after the teaching treatment compared to the scores they made 2 weeks after the treatment. This indicates that teaching vocabulary by emphasizing
word collocations enhances vocabulary learning only to a certain degree. The test which was taken 2 weeks after the teaching using the technique showed lower achievement. (See Table 2)

Teaching vocabulary through collocations led to an increase in knowledge about different types of word collocations as classified by Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986). It was found from the test results (32 test items) that after the treatment the learners’ ability in using lexical collocations was significantly higher than their ability in using grammatical collocations, at 0.01. The mean scores on lexical collocations after the treatment were higher than those before the treatment. As for the scores on grammatical collocations, it was found that after the treatment the learners scored significantly higher at 0.01. Among the 8 types of word collocations, after the treatment scores on seven types were found to be significantly higher. An insignificant difference was found in the score on one type-- the verb + noun type (See Table 3).

It can be summarized from the data analysis that teaching vocabulary through collocations is an effective teaching technique. The learners who received the teaching treatment had a higher ability in using word collocations. It is, thus, undeniable that the ability in using word collocations can help improve the learners’ general language ability. Taylor (1997) argued that word collocations played a significant role in the learners’ language achievement. She further stated that the learners’ knowledge about other languages beyond English was derived from the learning of word collocations in each language, which can directly lead to overall language proficiency.

Although the present study showed that learners achieved higher scores on word collocations after receiving the teaching treatment, it was found that the learners had various problems in learning the English language: their background vocabulary repertoire was different; they did not understand the English speakers’ culture; they were familiar with direct translation from the mother tongue; they had negative attitudes towards English language learning; and they lacked opportunities for real life use of the English language. In addition, the experience of learning vocabulary through the traditional approaches (as stated earlier) may have been hindered by the learners’ comprehension of the meanings of each word. This may have lead to confusion in using each word and learners’ ineffective use of previously learned words.
Recommendations

1. Based on the results, it is recommended that teaching vocabulary by emphasizing word collocations should be implemented at every level of elementary education so as to increase grade 1 to grade 6 learners’ knowledge about word collocations and to increase vocabulary retention.

2. Learning materials, such as dictionaries with word collocation, should be adequately provided.

3. The cooperation among teachers should be promoted in order to provide practices to the learners to enhance teaching effectiveness. At the time of the present study, the number of teachers implementing the teaching approach was limited; disproportionate with the number of learners. Those implementing the approach were unable to cater to all the learners leading to learners’ lack of opportunities to better learn vocabulary.

4. Vocabulary lessons incorporating word collocations should be designed to suit learners’ ability levels—ranging from learning activities to different exercises. In addition, teachers should emphasize pronunciation, spelling, meaning and use of words so that the learners are able to make the correct choice of vocabulary and word collocations when producing sentences for different situations.

5. English learning materials should be congruent with learning vocabulary through word collocations. Different kinds of learning materials for learning word collocations should be encouraged, such as E-books, and E-learning, which are considered appropriate for autonomous learning in the present digital era.

Recommendations for further study

1. Future studies should be conducted on sample groups of different levels in order to attain the most suitable standard of teaching vocabulary through emphasizing word collocations.

2. Comparisons should be made between teaching vocabulary through emphasizing word collocations and teaching vocabulary using traditional approaches.

3. The duration for data collection, following up the results of the treatment should be longer for more accurate results.
4. Teaching vocabulary through emphasizing word collocations should be tried out in teaching to enhance learners’ other skills such as writing and reading.

References


