



The Wind of Change!

Phraseology Perspective Gaining More Ground

Ali Şükrü Özbay¹

1. Introduction

*T*his study aims at highlighting the existence and the significance of an “unknown” or “only partially comprehended” feature of English language for the majority of the EFL learners in Turkey. This feature is named “the phraseological or collocational nature” of English language and it is an old consensus by now that EFL learners experience difficulties and huge challenges while exploiting the collocational patterns in their academic and expository texts as well as spoken ones (Lewis, 2000; Evans and Green, 2006). The contention is that writing in EFL setting requires a good level of language proficiency and failure to master a certain amount of lexical proficiency causes problems writing (Hinkel, 2004; Reynolds, 2005). In this paper, the several concepts related to the writing skill in terms of using appropriate words and lexical competency are briefly examined with a specific focus to their relevant features with the subject. At this initial stage, however, the researcher would like to make several reflections from his own teaching in EFL classrooms for more than 14 years as well as explain the reasons behind the interest towards the subject and the observations made towards the nature of English.

The researcher holds that humans live according to the some symbols in their lives which are meaningful to them and these symbols for most of the time and for many of them turn out to be the mere targets they desire to achieve in the rest of the never ending struggle! Similarly, the researcher`s long desire to be an English teacher resulted in no failure, though in the course of time the researcher started to question about its potential value as a profession to continue for the rest of a life time. This process of questioning soon gave way to other questions which helped the

¹ Ali Şükrü Özbay, Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey



researcher seize the opportunity of discovering more about the internal mechanism of English language.

While teaching, investigating and learning more about the internal mechanism of English language, the researcher observed one striking feature related to the phraseology of English which turned out to be strikingly important for EFL learners. In fact, this feature may be the product of personal experience and, therefore, will be investigated as the subject of this paper. The classroom observations and the professional experience of teaching EFL learners at various levels, for years and finally my corpus based Ph.D. study all helped understand some of the existing problems and their possible solutions related to the learning of English language among EFL learners.

One of the these crucial problems, based on the observations, is that EFL learners have problems making correct lexical decisions or producing words that are most suitable for the different contexts, academic or argumentation. It is also the case that the EFL learners misuse words and word groups and display almost a complete lack of awareness towards the phraseological nature of English. These problems are, to a great extent, confirmed by Hill (as cited in M. Lewis, 2000), who stated that “despite having a strong content for writing, EFL learners usually have low grades from the language part and the reason for this is their failure to use important lexical combinations and collocations of a key word (p. 50)”. Lewis (1997), on the other hand, argues that the learning of lexical combinations or collocations will help EFL learners produce better writing and this is also consistent with language acquisition theory which urges learners to analyze the language in terms of lexical combinations. McCarthy and O’Dell (2005) defined these multi word combinations as “the most natural way of saying something in English” (p. 6). The researcher contends that EFL learners need to know that each word has its collocational field and it may come in various combinations with other words and with a different meaning each time. Therefore, knowing that an individual word should be used and coupled with its true associations and context of words will definitely help learners increase their language awareness as well as level of language proficiency.



As a language teacher, the researcher also claims that a thorough analysis of the ways these collocational combinations function or behave in a text will help us appreciate the ideas of the British linguist John Firth, who claimed that “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957, p.11). The fact that the words possess their own typical phraseology and they are most likely to occur in predicted contexts indicates that there is an internal mechanism behind the words and word groups and this “lexical and phraseological co-occurrence” or mechanism needs to be investigated together with all other components. It is this lexical co-occurrence in the texts that both contributes to the meaning of the words and influences subsequent lexical choices to be made in any text (Hunston, 2002, p.138).

So as to provide more insight into the lexical and phraseological aspects of English language, there is a further need to define and integrate the several concepts in Applied linguistics. These features are relevant to the subject of this paper from the standpoint that they both justify the existence of lexical combinations and all refer to the collocational nature of English language as well as emphasizing the significance and power of words and word combinations in written texts. These being;

1. Sinclair`s “idiom principle” versus “open choice principle”
2. Semantic preference, Semantic Prosody and Prosodic Profiles
3. Hoey`s Lexical Priming theory
4. Phraseology and Lexicology in Applied Linguistics

2. Idiom Principle versus Open Choice Principle

Idiom principle and open-choice principle terms were proposed by Sinclair (1991), who claimed that to fully analyze any language text, there is a need for considering the two principles, these being the open-choice and the idiom principles, two principles that govern the choice of words by speakers and writers.

According to the open-choice principle, which is more general and includes a wide range of possible and acceptable words, language analysis is considered as a result of a number of complex choices and the open choice principle is based on the idea that language is made up of



many slots which need to be filled with correct and grammatical choices (Barnbrook, 2007). Although an important part of language analysis is done through open choice principle, many studies related to lexicology and phraseology have shown that words are not always in random order (Kilgarriff, 2005).

It is clear, however, that words do not occur randomly in a text, and that the open-choice principle does not provide substantial enough restraints on consecutive choices. For this reason we don't usually produce texts simply by operating the open-choice principle (Sinclair 1991, p.110). According to Sinclair (1991), open choice model is freely selected of words and cannot give the idiomatic meaning unless they are considered in segments.

Idiom principle, however, is composed of collocations, idioms and fixed phrases that tend to appear together, and generate a huge number of phraseological units adding new meanings to their combinations. Sinclair (1996) called this phraseological nature of language as "idiom principle". In his words, "the word is the unit that aligns grammar and vocabulary" (Sinclair, 1996, p. 24). According to this model, language is composed of a series of phrases and semi-fixed phrases that are expected to be encountered in specific registers, and should be studied as chunks.

Both principles should be considered part of a unified theory of language (Hunston& Francis, 2000). In Sinclair (1991) words, communication seems to start with the idiom principle. Language use, therefore, alternates between these pre-constructed word combinations (idiom) and word-by-word combinations (open-choice) (Erman& Warren, 2000). Identifying language use as clear realizations of either the open choice principle or the idiom principle is not an easy task, as they form a continuum, rather than a dichotomy (Hunstonand Francis, 2000; Sinclair, 1991).

Here, the contention is that a thorough knowledge of both principles may lead EFL learners to appreciate and pursue a meticulous word selection process. A related concept to these principles is the notion of "semantic prosody" and "semantic preference" and these notions need to be approached seriously by EFL learners in their attempts to make appropriate word selection while they are writing and speaking.



3. Semantic Prosody and Semantic Preference

Semantic prosody is an important notion in several fields of Applied Linguistics for several reasons. One definition says semantic prosody is a “consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” (Louw, 1993, p.8). According to Partington (1998), semantic prosody is the “the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries”(p.68). According to this definition semantic prosody is mostly related to connotation. Lauder (2009) describes semantic preference as “a kind of semantic patterning in which a number of a word’s collocates share some semantic properties” (p.9). According to Stubbs (2001), semantic preference is “the relation, not between individual words, but between a lemma or word-form and a set of semantically related words” (p.65). Finally, Sinclair (1999) defines semantic prosody as “When the usage of a word gives an impression of an attitudinal or pragmatic meaning, this is called a semantic prosody“ (p. 86). The last definition is from Hunston and Francis (2000), who said that “a word may be said to have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with other words that belong to a particular semantic set” (p.137).

All the definitions above point to one commonly shared feature that the semantic prosody is an inevitable component of language in ways not anticipated before. Three striking features of SP, according to Sinclair (1996), make it all the more interesting and special, these being its functionality, linguistic choice and communicative purpose. Functionality feature is necessary to make sensible and meaningful selection of sentences which perform the intended functions of the sentence at the functional level of SP (Sinclair, 1996, p.87). Linguistic choice feature makes it necessary to choose every single word carefully and in mutual relation to each other to ensure the meaning as well as selectional relation. Finally, the communicative purpose feature makes it necessary to choose right words together with SPs in order to express the intended communicative message clearly and pragmatically (Sinclair, 1996, p. 87).

Stubbs` (1996) categorization of SP into three groups, namely negative prosody, positive prosody and neutral prosody make the study of SP all the more interesting and challenging. The fact that some words have predominantly negative prosodies, others having positive prosodies,

and yet the others having neutral prosodies may constitute a challenge for EFL learners. When the collocation of a word carries strong negative semantic characteristics, the word gains a negative prosodic meaning. But, when the collocation of a word carries positive words, then, it is possible to say that the word gains a positive prosodic meaning. Neutral prosody takes place when the main word has both positive and negative collocates in the same context. According to Sinclair (1996), the node “set in” has a negative prosody, because its main collocates are “rot”, “decay”. On the contrary, the node “career” mostly collocates with positive prosodic words such as “satisfying”, “successful” and “good”.

Table 1: Samples for Semantic Prosody (Zhang, 2010, p.194)

Authors	NegativeProsody	PositiveProsody
Sinclair (1991)	<u>Set in</u> Happen <u>Breakout</u> Leadto	
Louw (2000)	Bent on Buildup of Endupdoingsmth.	Buildup
Stubbs (1996)	Cause Accost Signs of	Provide Career
Partington (2004)	Commit Peddle	impressive

Table 1 above summarizes some of research findings related to the prosodic profiles of some words and words combinations. Two words with the same meaning may have opposite semantic environments in which they are used by native speakers. However, EFL learners need to be aware of the prosodic profiles of the words they use in their writing. Failure to do so may bring about misuse of the lexical items. In a study conducted by Özbay (2015), it was reported that EFL learners experienced problems in the use of collocations in their argumentative essays. The investigation was based on a learner corpus (KTUCALE), which contained slightly over 500.000 words that were analyzed. A close investigation of the KTUCALE learner corpus revealed that EFL learners ignore idiomatic principles of the English language and their collocational competency turned out to be very low. Table 2 below displays some of the research findings.



Table 2: The Problematic Wrong Verb Combinations of EFL learners

Misuse	have	make	give	do-take
Wrong verb	Have a profit	Make a crime	Give harm	Do joke
	Have an attempt	Make exercise	Give tendency	Do knowledge
	Have a comfort	Make an experiment	Give hazard	Do comment
	Have a fingerprint	Make a test	Give pain	Take reaction
	Have a resemblance		Give punishment	Take consideration

The analysis of the EFL learners` use of collocations revealed deviations in the use of verb complements. Wrong verb-noun combinations (SVC) such as “have a profit”, “make a crime”, and “do joke” and “take consideration” were selected for analysis. These findings are similar to the Lombard`s (1997) findings. What Lombard did in his research was to search the non-native collocations in a corpus of 78,000 words produced by 8 students and found that the major type of mistake was the use of near-synonyms such as “make and do”. The use of “make” and “have” as head verbs with wrong complements such as “make profit” or “have crime” provide evidence for the existence of possible L1 interference and blending. Blending can simply be defined as a process of lexical selection in which the speakers or the writers use their semantic knowledge while choosing words (Nesselhauf, 2004).

Semantic preference is very similar to semantic prosody in that when a word co occurs with some words which have the same class, a word is an example for semantic preference (Stubs, 2001). According to Oster (2010) semantic preference “refers to the semantic subsets a word`s collocates predominantly belong to” (p.732). Sinclair (2004) concludes that “semantic preference is the restriction of regular co-occurrence to items which share a semantic feature, for example that they are all about say, sport and suffering”(p.142). Garretson (2010) states that “given such a lexical network, semantic preference is defined here as the tendency of a node to occur with the exponents of particular concepts and semantic field in the lexical network (p. 234).

The knowledge and the awareness towards the prosodic nature of words and word groups as well as semantic preference will foster EFL learners` language development and lexical development as well as enabling them to use the language as efficiently as possible. However, the contention is that EFL learners lack adequate skills to efficiently employ the notions of semantic



prosody and preference. Part of this problem may arise from the fact that their awareness level towards the collocational nature of English is limited.

4. Hoey`s Lexical Priming Theory

The fact that words of a language rarely occur in isolation and that they are continuously subject to the many potential influences of the lexical items preceding them makes understanding of lexical priming crucially important for language teachers as well as learners in their attempts to recognize the words. Lexical priming is important especially for EFL learners since this will foster their ability to understand a spoken or written discourse relatively faster. When the EFL learners know that words are primed to occur one another, they may also understand a discourse more accurately and easily.

In priming, the node word may receive a faster response within a related and familiar context. For instance, after the related prime word “cat”, the target word “mouse” tends to receive faster and more accurate responses (Jones and Estes, 2012). According to Hoey (2005), “priming can provide for sets of words that can be used when a person hear the word bread, he will identify the words such as knife, baker, butter quite easily rather than doctor, radiator, and mortar” (p.151).

5. Phraseology and Lexicology in Applied Linguistics

The study of lexicology and phraseology is gaining more ground in the Linguistics research in recent years and according to Nation (2001) this tendency will continue in the future since the role of collocations, word groups and combinations are attached greater interest and importance in the field of Applied Linguistics. The belief that the words and words groups are “building blocks of language, communication and teaching rather than grammar” reflect the philosophy of Lexical Approach (Richards and Rogers, 2001, p. 132). This shows again that the lexical approach present us the belief of the centrality of the lexicon to language structure, language learning and language use (Lewis, 1993). Phraseology, on the other hand, is the study of set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs and other types of multi-word lexical units,

in which the component parts of the expression take on a meaning more specific than or otherwise not predictable from the sum of their meanings when used independently.

The awareness, as an EFL language teacher, related to the phraseological nature of English language made me realize that grammar teaching alone does not account for the students' success every time. The fact that the EFL learners make mistakes in their writing is not necessarily something related to their lack of their grammatical competence. Part of the problem may be due to the lack of awareness and knowledge about the lexical and phraseological structures. So, teaching phraseological aspects of English is an important part of language teaching and Lewis (2000) supported using a lexical approach while teaching collocational aspects of the language. Considering the fact that EFL students have problems with combining words together, It is hoped that teaching multi word combinations (phrases, idioms, lexical combinations...etc) will raise students' proficiency in language learning.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the understanding and comprehension of the above considerations are of crucial importance for the EFL teachers as well as learners. Failure to do so may bring about some continuous misunderstandings related to the nature of English language. In a recent research carried out by Özbay (2014), it was concluded that EFL learners lack lexical competence in terms of using the multi word combinations or collocations in their argumentative essays. The failure and inefficiency of the EFL learners in terms of using the collocational nature of English language may not be a recent phenomenon, but it is certain that it requires immediate pedagogical focus and attention.

It appears that knowledge of multi word combinations or collocational competence will foster the development of EFL learners' lexical competence as well as giving them a sense power and freedom of expression in their writing essays. This is called "idiomatic principle" and The researcher's contention is that EFL learners need to be informed about the concept of "idiom



principle” for achieving more appropriate use of the language as well as to better understand and appreciate how English words function and behave with certain patterns in other contexts. Unless Turkish EFL learners are fully equipped with the knowledge of this combinative nature of English language they may always experience difficulties in depth and width in their written productions. Another difficulty may arise in the way they form grammatical sentences. This may happen when a learner can't find the proper words or word combination and instead constructs strange lexical properties in the form of sentences and odd clauses in writing or translation. The reason behind this type of inefficient use of language may be the lack of lexical competence rather than structural or grammatical one.

Another deeper mechanism underlying lexical performance is the notion of “semantic prosody” and “semantic preference”. Having an awareness towards the positive and negative semantic prosodies of the words in English will provide an EFL learner with a rich and appropriate use of language. It is also the case that the knowledge of semantic preference will help language learners select the right kind of words for the right meaning. Having an ability to select the words and their collocations within the scope of a semantically correct framework is more likely to increase the quality, precision and the accuracy of the language use for an EFL learner.

With regards to the Hoey` “Lexical Priming Theory” it is possible to conclude that the theory provides the learners with the contextual information in which the learners can predict the probable content of any speech or writing. The fact that words rarely occur in isolation is the fundamental aspects of the theory and EFL learners need to make predictions based on the related words and word groups about the meaning. This ability to recognize words before they appear in speech or writing will foster the understanding and language proficiency of EFL learners.

The two related and equally important concepts “Phraseology” and “Lexicology” are important for several reasons for the EFL learners. Considering the idea that words or lexis are the building blocks of language, communication, teaching and grammar, it can be concluded that lexical development lies in the center of language learning. Phraseological development, on the other hand, is an equally important phenomenon. When EFL learners learn how to use fixed-



expressions, idioms and phrasal verbs and other multi-word lexical units in their writing and speaking this will definitely foster their abilities to use the English language efficiently and appropriately in different contexts.

References

Barnbrook, G. (2007). Sinclair on collocation. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 12(2), 183-199

Erman, B., and Warren, B. (2000). The idiom principle and the open choice principle. *Text, an interdisciplinary journal for the study of discourse*, 20(1), 29–62

Firth, J. (1957). A synopsis of linguistic theory 1930-55. *Studies in Linguistic Analysis* (Special Vol.), Philological Society. Reprinted in F. Palmer (Ed.), (1968). *Selected papers of J. R. Firth 1952-59* (pp. 168-206). Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press.

Garretson, G. (2010). *Corpus-Derived Profiles: A framework for studying word meaning in text*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

Jones, L.L. & Estes, Z. (2012). Lexical priming: Associative, semantic, and thematic influences on word recognition. In J.S. Adelman (Ed.), *Visual Word Recognition*, Vol. 2.

Kilgarriff, A. (2005). Language is never, ever, ever random. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistics Theory*, 1(2), 263-275.

Lauder, A. (2009). Collocation, Semantic Preference and Translation – Semantic Preference as a Reference Source for Translation. Universitas Indonesia. Kézirat. Elérhető <http://english.um.edu.my/anuvaada/PAPERS/LAUDER.pdf>

Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications.



Lewis, M. (Ed.). (2000). *Teaching collocation: Further development in the lexical approach*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications

Lewis, M. (1997). *Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications.

Louw, Bill.(1993) Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer?The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosodies. In Baker, M., Francis, G. &Tognini-Bonelli, E. (eds) "*Text and Technology*". Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

McCarthy, M.andO'Dell, F. (2005).*English Collocations in Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Nesselhauf, N. (2004), *Collocations in a Learner Corpus*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Partington, A. (1998). *Patterns and Meanings – Using Corpora for English Language Research and Teaching*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Oster, U. (2010). Using corpus methodology for semantic and pragmatic analyzes: What can corpora tell us about the linguistic expression of emotions? *Cognitive Linguistics*, 21, 727-

Hinkel, Eli (2004), *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Hoey, Michael. 2005. *Lexical Priming. A new theory of words and language*. London: Routledge.



Hunston, S., & Francis, G. (2000). *Pattern Grammar. A corpus-driven approach to the lexical grammar of English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

Hunston, S. (2002). Pattern grammar, language teaching, and linguistic variation. In R. Reppen, S. Fitzmaurice & D. Biber (Eds.), *Using corpora to explore linguistic variation* (pp. 167-86). Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Reynolds, Dudley W. (2005), "Linguistic correlates of second language literacy development: evidence from middle-grade learner essays", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14, (19-45).

Richards, J. C. & Rogers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, J. (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Sinclair, J. McH (2004) *Trust the Text: Language Corpus and Discourse*. London: Routledge

Sinclair, J. (1996). The search for units of meaning. *Textus*, 9, 75-106.

Sinclair, J. (1999). A Way with Common Words. In S. Oksefjell, & H. Hasselgård, *Out of Corpora: Studies in honour of Stig Johansson* (pp. 119—141). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Stubbs, M. (2001). *Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*. Oxford, UK and Malden, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishers.

Stubbs, M. (1996). *Text and Corpus Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Özbay, A.Ş. (2014), *Corpus analysis of the support verb construction development and use by EFL learners*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon



n a l a n s
ISSN: 2148-4066

Narrative and Language Studies
A Biannual Journal