

# **A Study on the Phenomenon of Collocations: Methodology of Teaching English and German Collocations to Russian Students**

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Relevance of the issue stated in the article is determined by the fact that there is a lack of research devoted to the methods of teaching English and German collocations. The aim of our work is to determine methods of teaching English and German collocations to Russian university students studying foreign languages through experimental testing. The result of our study is to create a classification of collocations teaching methods. In our study we follow the broadside approach in respect of the volume of collocations applying the terminology of foreign and Russian linguists. A model of effective methods of teaching collocations to junior language students has been introduced, by using the modelling method. Collocations with a complicated semantic structure cannot be understood without some special knowledge and require, as a result, special methods of teaching. The models of exercises suggested can be used effectively by first-year students at German and English classes.

**Keywords:** collocation, set phrase, word combination, phraseological unit, methods of teaching, exercise models

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The relevance of the study**

The issue of determining the volume of collocations is very important when choosing methods which would ensure successful acquisition of English and German collocations by Russian-speaking students. If we follow the broadside approach, the number of methods increases significantly, while the number of methods is reduced

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if only set phrases are included in the volume of collocations, avoiding free combinations of words.

The aim of our work is to determine the methods of teaching English and German collocations to university students through experimental testing. The result of our study is to create a classification of methods of teaching collocations. In our study we follow the broadside approach in respect of the volume of the units tested. The relevance of the work is in perceiving the differences within the semantic structure of collocations through the experimental testing provided, and through the methods of teaching collocations.

### **A collocation in Russian linguistics: Notion analysis**

Language units that are called *collocations* in foreign linguistics are the object of study of two linguistic disciplines in Russian linguistics: phraseology and corpus linguistics.

In phraseology, the notion of *a collocation* is usually considered synonymous to the notion of a *phraseological combination*. Hence, we understand *a collocation* as a unit with "a certain meaning associated with the phrase." "In such units the meaning of the lead component can only be derived from the combinations, in which this component is used" (Kunin, 1996; Canli & Canli, 2013; Kalayci, 2012). For instance, *to pay a call (a visit)*, *to pay attention*, *to bear smb a grudge / spite / an ill-feeling* (the principle of analogy is inconceivable in these units, while such formations as *to pay a date (a meeting)*, *to bear kindness, love, sympathy* are inadmissible).

Another approach treats *a collocation* as a traditional combination of words that is familiar to native speakers; moreover, the words "traditional", "typical" or "usual" convey a high probability of co-occurrence (McCarthy, 2005). This approach is characteristic of corpus linguistics, where it is necessary to establish their frequency. This treatment of the semantic value of *a collocation* is broader, since it also includes idiomatic combinations, phrasal verbs and idioms in the number of collocations.

Thus, *a collocation* is rendered in Russian in different ways depending on the field of research.

### **A collocation in foreign linguistics: The broadside approach**

In foreign linguistics the notion of a collocation may acquire a different semantic content and interpretation, as well as differences in classification, which depend, in most cases, on the point of view of the researcher and his/her treatment of the phenomenon.

In 1933, Harald Palmer offered one of the first interpretations of the concept of *a collocation*, defining it as "a sequence of two or more words that need to be studied as an indivisible whole, and not decomposed into components" (Palmer, 1933). In other words, it was first stated that the meaning of a combination of words can be equal to the meaning of one word.

John Rupert Firth also uses the concept of *a collocation* in his works, indicating that the meaning a combination of words reveals is not fully derivable from the meanings of its components (Firth, 1957).

John Sinclair explores collocations structure, dividing them into meaningful elements. He calls one of the items *the node*, and the second is *the collocates*, arguing that the degree of importance of both elements in the functioning of collocation is identical. Moreover, Sinclair examines the so-called *collocational span*, the minimum length of the text, in which there may be complicated relations between the semantic structures of words (Sinclair, 1987).

Morton Benson talks about *collocations volume*, adhering to a broadside approach in research in this area, by collocations he understands combinations of words that often appear together in a particular language and are semantically associated having varying degrees of cohesion (Benson, 1989).

Michael Lewis builds his classification on the basis of the number of words, which the lexical unit enters into combination with (Lewis, 2000). According to this principle he distinguishes:

1) *strong collocations*, for example, the word *auspicious* is combined with only a very limited number of words, such as, for example, in collocations: *auspicious occasion, auspicious moment, auspicious event*;

2) *weak collocations* are combinations of words that can be used in an unlimited number of phrases, such as: *a tall woman, a red shirt, an expensive car, a loud noise*;

3) *medium-strength collocations*, i.e. those collocations in which the words are used together with a greater frequency than with other words (for example, the collocation *to hold a meeting*).

Anthony Cowie repeatedly notes in his writings that the definition of a *collocation* is quite difficult to give: there is no generally accepted single definition of collocations, as well as some single system organisation in dictionaries. As a way out of this situation, the researcher proposes to define *set phrases*, which include collocations, subsequently excluding collocations from set phrases. Cowie says that the choice of the two elements in a set phrase is not free in a set phrase. The choice of the second element is dependent on the choice of the first according to the tradition of a language, and the choice is not always motivated semantically, the loss of the etymological roots of the utterance is also possible (Cowie, 1998).

By focusing his research on the semantic structure of a collocation, Cowie suggests the classification: 1) pure idioms; 2) figurative idioms; 3) restricted collocations; 4) open collocations. Consequently, the collocation *a broken window* is called open because of the fact that the meaning of the phrase is composed of two separate meanings. By contrast, restricted collocations differ, because one of the words is not used in its usual meaning (as, for example, in the phrase *to jog one's memory*).

Thus, the cornerstone of foreign linguistics is the semantic volume of collocations. The broadside approach to the scope of collocations includes not only phraseological combinations in their structure, but also idioms and phrasal verbs, as well as free combinations of words, while the restricted approach significantly reduces the number of units belonging to the so-called *collocation*.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Methods of study

The material was collected by the following research methods: analysis, comparison, testing, questionnaires, including observation, the modelling method, experimental work. The use of the modelling method has enabled us to introduce a model of effective methods of teaching collocations to first-year students studying foreign languages.

### The experimental base of the study

The experiment was conducted with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year university studying foreign languages. These are beginners studying English or German as a second foreign language. The level of students' knowledge was fairly low and was, according to the tests, at elementary level. Testing was conducted in two groups consisting of 10-15 students. For the material of our study we chose 10 English collocations and

10 collocations from the German language. All the units were given to the students in context.

### Experimental stage (1)

The English collocations were the following:

- 1) *to make a killing* (Sony has made a killing on its popular Play Station line);
- 2) *to be in the red* (Our company is in the red again this month);
- 3) *to be in red* (Mrs Smith was in red as usual);
- 4) *to lay off* (Martin was laid off from his job six months ago, and he still hasn't found a new position);
- 5) *a real dog* (In 1985, the Coca-Cola Company released New Coke. It was a real dog and was in stores for only a few months);
- 6) *a funny article* (I read a funny article in this newspaper last week);
- 7) *to pay attention* (We have long ago decided not to pay attention to his strange habits);
- 8) *to have a good nose* (He had a good nose for a sale);
- 9) *a cup of tea* (I've been teaching for 20 years, it's obviously my cup of tea);
- 10) *out of the blue* (He called me up out of the blue).

The students were given the task to translate these expressions consulting the context. Before the experiment, the students were given a list of all the words that the sentences contain. After having read them, the students announced that they knew the meaning of each word.

Out of the fifteen English language learners:

- 1) the expression *to make a killing* was translated by no one (the variants of the translation were the following: *kill, close, transform*, etc.);
- 2) the expression *to be in the red* was not translated correctly (the translation variants: *to be on the wave of success, to make a profit, be in favour*, and the like);
- 3) the phrase *to be in red* was translated correctly by all students without an exception;
- 4) the phrasal verb *to lay off* was translated correctly by 10 out of 15 students;
- 5) the expression *a real dog* was understood only by one student, others translated this expression as *a great success, luck, commercial discovery*, etc.;
- 6) the phrase *a funny article* was transferred correctly by all the students;
- 7) the collocation *to pay attention* was understood by all the students;
- 8) the expression *to have a good nose* did not cause any problems, the same as the previous two;
- 9) the expression *my cup of tea* was perceived correctly by two people, the rest of the students translated this expression literally;
- 10) the expression *out of the blue* was not understood by a single student.

The experimental results showed that the free word combinations (3,6), the expression where one component has an associated meaning (7), as well as the phraseological unit with the equivalent in the Russian language (8) were translated by the students without mistakes. Unmotivated combinations of words with a complicated semantic structure (1,2,5,9,10) were understood by virtually none of the English language learners with a low level of language proficiency. Phrasal verbs (4) are comprehensible for the students more often than expressions with a complicated semantic structure, but much less frequently than free word combinations.

### Experimental stage (2)

The German language learners were offered the following collocations:

1) *etwas auf der Zunge haben* (Ich hatte schon eine böse Antwort auf der Zunge. Aber dann habe ich lieber doch nichts gesagt);

2) *ein hohes Tier sein* (Wegen des Kredits für dein Haus kann ich mal meinen Onkel fragen, der ist ein hohes Tier bei der Bank. Vielleicht kann der dir helfen);

3) *eine bittere Pille schlucken* (Seit 15 Jahren habe ich für meine Firma gearbeitet und jetzt haben sie mir gekündigt! Aber was bleibt mir übrig? Ich glaube, ich werde diese bittere Pille einfach schlucken müssen);

4) *jemanden zur Rede stellen* (Meine Tochter hat Lügen erzählt. Ich werde sie zur Rede stellen, warum sie das gemacht hat);

5) *aus allen Wolken fallen* (Hast du dein Auto schon aus der Werkstatt geholt?" – „Ja. Als ich die Rechnung gesehen habe, bin ich aus allen Wolken gefallen);

6) *in seinem Element sein* (Ist Ihre Frau heute wieder im Sportstudio, Herr Peters?" – „Ja. Sie wissen doch, wenn sie Sport macht, ist sie in ihrem Element);

7) *Kalter Kaffee sein* (Wer glaubt schon an die grosse Liebe bis zum Tod – das ist doch kalter Kaffee);

8) *Platz nehmen* (Die Zuschauer mussten auf Bänken ohne Rücklehne statt auf Einzel-Sitzen Platz nehmen.);

9) *zum Ausdruck bringen* (Er muss klar zum Ausdruck bringen, ob er als Rechtsanwalt oder Notar tätig wird);

10) *Bahnhof verstehen* (In Sprachwissenschaft versteht er nur Bahnhof).

Since the purpose of the experiment is to determine the inner form of these combinations of words, the students were also presented with a list of translated words before the experiment.

Out of the 15 students of the German language:

1) the expression *etwas auf der Zunge haben* ("be prepared to say smth in the language") was translated correctly by all the students, as this expression does not have any other but direct meanings of words; variants in translation were marked by some differences in shifts of meaning;

2) the expression *ein hohes Tier sein* ("feel extremely important and prominent") was translated by 7 of the students (because the expression has an equivalent in their native language), only with some deviations from the exact translation. Among the options the students gave the following variants of translation: "to be a major, stand at the helm";

3) the verb+noun combination *eine bittere Pille schlucken* ("swallow the bitter pill") was translated correctly by all the students. In this example, there is an exact equivalent that does not depend on the context;

4) the expression *jemanden zur Rede stellen* ("request an answer, demand an explanation") was translated by the students as "to let someone speak", "to give the floor to someone (for making a speech)"; only 5 students translated the expression correctly;

5) the expression *aus allen Wolken fallen* was translated correctly by all of them;

6) the expression *in seinem Element sein* ("to feel in the right place; to feel confident in some sphere") was rendered exactly almost by all the students, as there is a partial equivalent in their native language;

7) the phrase *Kalter Kaffee sein* ("to become obsolete") was translated correctly thanks to the transparent inner form of the phrase;

8) the expression *Platz nehmen* ("take the place of") was understood and translated by all the students correctly because the meaning of this combination is disclosed in the context very well;

9) the expression *zum Ausdruck bringen* ("to express") was translated correctly by all of the students;

10) the phrase *Bahnhof verstehen* ("understand nothing") was understood by no one, as this unit has neither equivalents nor analogues in their native language; thus

it is untranslatable using the direct meanings of the words either; it can be explained only by regional geographic features.

## RESULTS

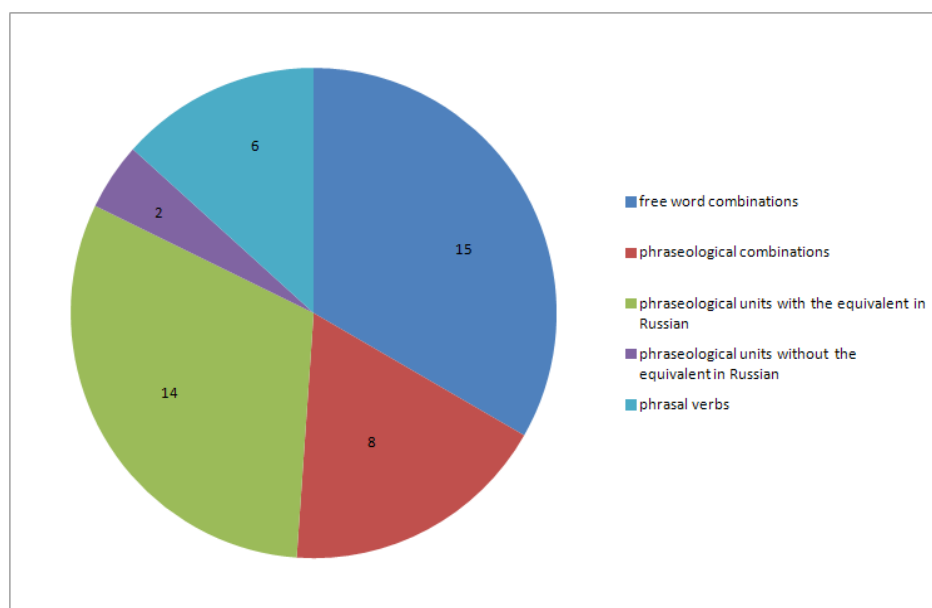
Thus, we can conclude that in the process of translation of different types of collocations into English and German by the students, such a method of translation as a search for a similar unit in their native language was more frequent than others and proved to be the best in most cases, because with minimal losses it allowed to convey the meaning of the phraseological units to the reader.

Some students used literal translation. It is not exactly a good way of translating phraseological units, it does not convey their meaning, and the phraseological units remain incomprehensible. However, there is a certain group of phraseological units, for which literal translation is an acceptable and correct method of translation.

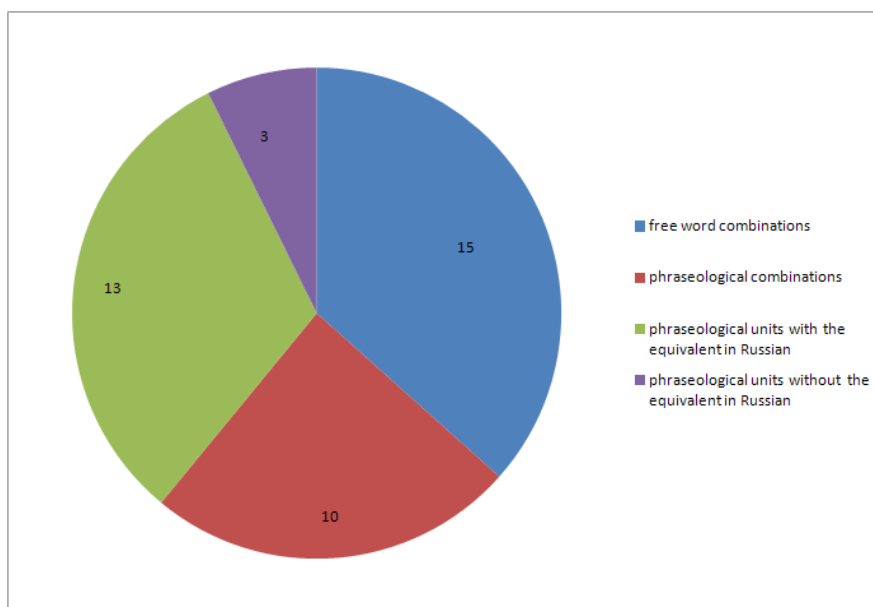
A dual or parallel way of translation of so-called collocations is also fairly good, if there is no direct correspondence in the target language: to lay off, *in seinem Element sein*.

The students translated free combinations of words correctly; the same refers to phraseological units with equivalents in the Russian language and the type of collocations which is called phraseological combinations in Russian linguistics. It means that their understanding is possible with little knowledge of the foreign language vocabulary, or just by consulting a simple dictionary without using a special dictionary of collocations.

Collocations with a complicated semantic structure cannot be understood without some special knowledge and require, as a result, special methods of teaching.



**Figure 1.** Results of testing in the English language (the figures indicate the number of students able to translate a certain unit)



**Figure 2.** Results of testing in the German language (the figures indicate the number of students able to translate a certain unit)

## DISCUSSION

Teaching collocations remains one of the less researched issues in the methodology of teaching English at universities. This issue is investigated in a number of studies (Kostyashkina, 1955; Ostapenko, 1961; Cosman, 1965; Slinkina, 1971; Limova, 2000; Ozolinja, 2002; Ivanova, 2002). They seek to identify the principles of selection of phraseological units, create sets of exercises and phraseological minimums for specific periods of training at the university, and for the entire stretch of five years of studying English. However, there are still questions that call for further research with regard to the organisation of studies: in what subjects, to what extent and with what frequency specific aspects of the teaching of a foreign language should be administered.

## CONCLUSION

The results of testing have clearly shown that it is necessary to do a lot of practical exercises to learn and use modern vocabulary of a foreign language. It requires a lot of work in the classroom and skill on the part of the teacher. We try to work with phraseological units in a playful way.

Of great interest is the explanation of the etymology of collocations. Thus, for instance, the expression *a game plan* means “the project implementation plan, a plan of action”. This collocation comes from the sports world. In American football *a game plan* means “a strategy for victory”. The expression *to drop the ball* has come from the sports lexicon: when a football player misses the ball, he loses the opportunity to change the score as the ball goes to the opposing team. The phrase *to pull out all the stops* (in reality “try to push all the buttons”) has come from the world of music. One of the «stop» meanings is an organ register. With the help of the register organ players achieve completeness of organ sound. The expression *to bite the bullet* has come from the military lexicon. It means “to decide on a difficult step”. During the American Civil War doctors often used whiskey for anesthesia during a surgery. If whiskey ended, the wounded soldier put a bullet in his mouth, and he literally “bit the bullet with his teeth”. It acted as a counter-attraction helping to dull the pain and thus released physical suffering. The expression *in the red* has come

from accounting practice to underline debits with red pencil, while credits – with black. The expression *in the black* means “to make a profit”.

The following exercises are extremely useful in the process of learning foreign phraseology for first-year foreign language students:

1. Find the best replacement of the highlighted words:

*Sony **has made a killing** on its popular Play Station line.*

- a. lost money on;
- b. made a lot of money on;
- c. decided to stop producing.

Answer: b. To make a killing - to earn a lot of money.

2. Select the most appropriate response to the phrase:

*Our company is in the red again this quarter.*

- a. Congratulations! When's the celebration party?
- b. In the red again? I hope you don't go out of business!
- c. In the red? That's okay. It's better than being in the black.

The answer is b. Expression *in the red* means “to suffer losses”, expression *in the black* – “to make a profit”.

3. Insert the missing words:

*Martin was laid off from his job six months ago, and he still hasn't found a new position. He's ... jobs.*

- 1. among;
- 2. between;
- 3. out of.

The answer is b. *Between jobs* means “temporarily be out of work, not to be engaged”.

4. The Group is divided into two teams. The sentence is written on the board:

*In 1985, the Coca-Cola Company released New Coke. It was a real dog and was in stores for only a few months.*

What is *a real dog*?

- 1. A commercial success.
- 2. A commercial failure.
- 3. A bargain.

The content of the proposal suggests that this phrase means b – “a commercial failure”. The team which translates the phrase correctly scores a point.

5. This exercise is designed to memorise phraseological units, already well known to students.

A student stands with his/her back to the board. The teacher writes some units on the board, and the students try to explain the meaning of each unit in the English language. The student at the board should guess the meaning of the expression according to the description of his/her groupmates. For example, it is written *to break the news* on the board. The groupmates explain this expression as follows: to make something known, to tell someone some important news. The student standing at the board guesses: to break the news → a news report.

6. The student selects a card with a phraseological unit at random and gives its description without preparation. The other students try to guess the idiom according to the description. Whoever guesses it first, scores a point.

7. The Group is divided into two teams. The teacher writes on the board from 5 to 6 units proposed by students on the board, and then invites to come up with a story and draw it on the board. For example: *It's a deal!*; *to have in mind*; *to move on*; *market share*; *to cost an arm and a leg*; *to play one's card right*, and so on. The preparation is supposed to take approximately from 10 to 15 minutes. Then the students from each team depict the situation on the board and describe in English what they have drawn. The team that has best coped with the task, wins.

All of these exercises promote the memorisation of different types of set phrases, the development of spoken language and creative thinking.

Very useful is the exercise in which it is necessary to choose the meaning of the unit with a complicated semantic structure. Some of these units are presented in the story and students may not know their meaning, however, the context determines which meaning corresponds to the expressions presented in the left column. For example:

The target expressions in the context:

1. Tom **was on the ball**.
2. He had a good **track record**.
3. He **had a good nose** for a sale.
4. He usually **played his cards** right.
5. But success **went to his head**.

6. He began **to lose his touch**.

7. In the end he **was fired**.

(Key: 1-e, 2-b, 3-c, 4-d, 5-f, 6-g, 7-a)

The variants of meaning:

- a. He lost his job.
- b. His job experience was good.
- c. He was a natural salesman.
- d. He made the right decision.
- e. He was a clever employee; he knew what was going on.
- f. He began to have too important an opinion of himself.
- g. He started to make mistakes.

And here is the translation of the idioms: *on the ball* - quick, nimble; *a track record* - the list of all the job positions the person has ever had; *a good nose for smth* - to feel confident in a certain sphere; *to play one's cards right* - the most profitable use of the situation; to go to one's head - to make someone fall in love with you; *to lose touch* - to lose contact, communication; *to be fired* - to be dismissed.

It is known that the emotional factor plays an important role in the teaching of a foreign language. Emotional perception of educational material increases the effectiveness of training. To make the learning process more interesting, we try to find humour in the English collocations. Many of them look ridiculous for a foreigner or create a comic effect, reveal the unexpected. The teacher draws attention to the importance of this kind of phraseological units, which contributes to a more rapid absorption. For example: *to hit the ceiling* - to get angry or excited; *to shake a leg* - to hurry; *a white elephant* - something useless; *to pull the wool over one's eyes* - to deceive, to dupe; *a face so ugly it can stop a clock* - an ugly, repulsive face; *as merry as a cricket* - cheerful; *to talk through one's hat* - to lie; *as complacent as a cat* - smug.

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