

Teaching Collocation to Children: Raising Young Learners' Language Awareness

by Mari Nakamura

In Japanese EFL classrooms, the explicit instruction of word partnership seldom takes a center stage. When teachers teach common phrases such as “watch TV”, “wash your face”, or “go to bed”, students are rarely encouraged to pay attention to how the words are put together to make the phrases. One of the reasons for this is that we believe that the usage of grammatical terms is best avoided when teaching children, and that we cannot teach word order without using meta-language. Another reason is that children are capable of absorbing chunks of language without analyzing how they are constructed. Yet another reason would be that EFL teachers in Japan are always working under time restraint—“We only have 40 hours’ instruction time a year. Why do we need to spend an entire hour teaching collocation!?”

However, there is considerable pedagogical value in raising young EFL learners’ awareness of collocations and word order:

(1) Learners develop the habit of paying attention to chunks, rather than just individual words, when listening and reading;

(2) If they recognize combinatory possibilities, and are able to make informed guesses about what word comes next, they become more fluent listeners and readers. This leads to better comprehension;

(3) Without conscious study of the language system, students seldom reach intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency in an EFL environment, which provides them with very limited language acquisition opportunities outside the classroom; and

(4) Through being instructed in collocation, students acquire vocabulary building skills such as the ability to list and categorize words.

All of these benefits help improve learners’ English proficiency, and encourage them to become autonomous learners. Why not spend more time teaching something that will help young ones become life-long learners?

I would like to introduce you to a lesson plan which helps elementary school students to review useful phrases and learn how the words in them are put together, in a relaxed atmosphere.

Now, let the lesson begin!

Aim

- To review common verb phrases
- To raise awareness of common word partnerships

Level and age group

Intermediate and advanced level elementary school students (from G4 through G6)

Time

60 minutes (including the warm-up and one of the suggested follow-up activities)

Preparation

(This game requires some preparation but you can reuse the items)

1. Photocopy a Snakes and Ladders board for each group, and color the squares of the game board as follows:

1, 4, 11, 19, 21, 29, 33 – Blue

3, 6, 9, 15, 18, 23, 31 – Red

2. Choose 12 verb phrases that the students have learned, and make two sets of flashcards using construction paper.

12 Blue Cards with verbs such as, “do”, “go”, and “watch”.

12 Red Cards with the associated phrases such as, “my homework”, “to bed”, and “TV”

This could be done by the students with the aim of minimizing the teacher’s preparation time, and of promoting the students’ listening, reading, and spelling skills.

SUGGESTED VOCABULARY for intermediate level elementary school students

Blue Cards	Red Cards	Blue Cards	Red Cards
do	my homework	play	tennis
go to	a restaurant	read	comics
go to	bed	take	a bath
go to	school	take	a nap
listen to	music	watch	videos
play	computer games	watch	TV

Getting your students ready!

Warm-up activity

Mix all the cards, and stick them face-up and in random order on the whiteboard with magnets so that all the students can see them (You could use a large table with a small class). Without saying a word, look puzzled. Wait for a moment until your students voluntarily start to comment on the cards. Let a few of the students come to the board, and give them time to experiment with the cards freely. The students will probably start matching some verb cards with the associated phrase cards. When they finish matching all the cards, praise them, and ask several personalized questions relating to the phrases that they have completed. You could ask, “What time do you go to bed, Hiroshi?”, “Yoko, do you like to listen to music? What kind of music do you like?”

The purpose of this warm-up activity is to help your students “tune in” to the topic. The following four points should be kept in mind:

(1) Do not over-teach. Let your students take the initiative and explore by themselves. This is the crucial first step to raising students’ autonomy.

(2) When holding brief dialogues with your students

using the phrases on the cards, do not expect them to use full sentences and do not correct minor errors. It is important to reduce the inhibitions of shy or less competent students during this activity.

(3) This is a great chance for less capable students to show their comprehension to the teacher and the rest of the class by just arranging the cards without having to speak much English, except for a few simple answers to the teacher's questions. Encourage "weak" students to help you. If they want to try it out with a friend, allow them to work in pairs. Give them a lot of praise for getting up the courage to come forward.

(4) Use personalization from the outset. In many lessons, students are offered the chance to express themselves at the end of a lesson— "Now that you've memorized all the phrases, let's make a poster about your daily schedule". In actuality, using a personalized activity at the beginning of a lesson makes pedagogical sense: Personalized activities attract the students' attention, and show them that English and their lessons are relevant to their lives. They have great motivational value.

Snakes and Ladders Game

This activity is an adaptation of a game in *Building Blocks for English* (Philpot, 2000)

1. Students work in teams of two or three members. Two teams use one game board and compete against each other.

2. Place a Snakes and Ladders game board in the center of a desk. Put the verb cards face down on one side of the board, and the phrase cards face up on the other side.

3. The students roll a die and take turns to move their counters around the board.

4. If they land on the bottom of a ladder, they go up to the top of the ladder. If they land on a snake's head, they go down to the end of the tail.

5. If they land on a blue square, they pick up one blue card. If they land on a red square, they pick up one red card.

6. Every time a team collects a card, the students read the card aloud.

7. They get one point for each card, and an extra three points when they are able to make a complete phrase. For example, if a team gets both "do" and "my homework", the team gets five points in total.

8. The team that reaches the finish first gets five bonus points.

9. The team with the higher score at the end of the game wins.

A few pointers

- When introducing this game for the first time, do not spend too much time explaining how to play it. After a brief explanation, demonstrate the game with a few students. The explanation above may look complicated, but you will be surprised how simple it actually is when you play it.

- Students can attempt to block their opponents by observing what cards the opposing team has. For example, if a team has the verb card, "do", then the opponent may want to block them by taking the phrase card, "my home-



"Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?" version for Young Children

work". If a team always tries to block their opponents, however, they may fail to collect complete phrases themselves.

- A team that tries to collect phrases associated with common verbs such as "go" and "play" has a better chance of obtaining more matching cards, resulting in a higher score.

- The teacher should encourage the students to use proper intonation when reading phrases aloud. Be aware that Japanese students tend to pronounce each word with the same strength and length (Japanese is a syllable-timed language while English is stress-timed). This tendency may become particularly pronounced when students read.

Suggested variations

For younger (G1 to G3) and lower level students, use *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, 1992) as the theme. Once the students are familiar with the story, play a similar game using a set of Color Cards and Animal Outline Cards. The aim of the game is for students to try to match Color Cards with the corresponding Animal Outline Cards. Place all the Color Cards face-down, and the Animal Outline Cards face-up. Follow the procedure above.

To make the game a little easier, you can use a simplified game board. You may also want to place all the cards face-up depending on the students' level of cognitive development.

Follow-up activities

Language awareness activities:

1. Match up all the cards used in the Snakes and Ladders game, and ask the students if they see any pattern in them. Elicit ideas from the students. Help them notice that all the phrases consist of two parts: the blue part that has an action word (verb) and the red part with the associated phrases. If you can, use the students' L1 to draw their attention to the fact that in English there are many common "set phrases".

2. Ask the students to categorize the phrases. If necessary, direct their attention to the verbs and encourage them to sort the expressions by verb so that all the phrases with "go" are grouped together and so on. If appropriate, elicit more phrases that include the same verbs, and add these to

the list. The list could then look something like this:

- go to a restaurant
- go to bed
- go to school
- go home (added phrase)

Communication activity:

Students work in pairs. They interview each other using structures that they have already learned and phrases from the cards. They make a note of their partner's answers. If time allows, they give a presentation about their partner.

Some recommended Q&A patterns are:

- How often do you...?* *Always/Often/ Sometimes/ Never.*
- Do you like to...?* *Yes, I do/No, I don't.*
- Did you ... yesterday?* *Yes, I did/No, I didn't.*

Pedagogical rationale: What's in this lesson plan for learners and teachers?

1. The Snakes and Ladders game uses color codes instead of grammatical terms to teach collocation, making it easier for young students to learn word partnerships. This is an activity in which students can learn about the systems of the language without the help of meta-language. This type of activity is especially helpful for those students whose analytical ability has not reached its full maturity yet. Also, the use of color codes is particularly effective for visual learners.

2. The small group setting of the game lowers learners' affective filter, thus enhancing learning. The risk-free environment is especially encouraging for less competent or self-conscious students, who tend to be afraid of public failure.

3. The students are involved in learning mentally, emotionally, and physically. They make various attempts to create meaningful phrases in their minds (or at times verbally), become excited during the game, and move their body to roll the die, arrange the cards, and communicate with teammates. This whole-person approach ensures success for all.

4. The game requires students to mobilize various non-linguistic skills along with linguistic ones: understanding probabilities, predicting, decision making and strategic thinking. The students rarely exhibit problem behavior during this activity because it occupies their minds throughout the process, and keeps them busy thinking.

5. The follow-up activities give young learners a chance to pay close attention to the language system, and teach them a way to organize learned phrases and expand their vocabulary. Next they use the phrases in meaningful exchange with peers by immediately connecting the language study to verbal communication.

6. The game played in small groups allows the teacher to monitor individual students. During the game, the teacher plays three major roles:

First, the teacher gives the students individual attention, and offers help if necessary (To promote student autonomy, it is important for the teacher not to be intrusive).

Second, the teacher monitors individual students' abilities through informal observation. This will help inform the

teacher of each student's level of communicative proficiency, which is generally difficult to evaluate through "one-off" performance on a test.

Lastly, careful observation will also give the teacher invaluable clues as to the areas in which students need further study or practice: Do they need teacher-led practice in blending sounds together? Are they ready for less-controlled pair practice? Will they benefit from explicit instruction on vocabulary building?

Conclusion

Having taught young students for more than 10 years, I have learned a lot about children through day-to-day classroom instruction. They are resilient, optimistic, and have great senses of humor. The most striking fact that I've learned, however, is that they love to learn as much as they love to have fun. They are intellectually curious, and as long as I provide them with well-focused activities that occupy their minds, they show great interest in the lesson and do not exhibit behavior problems. Furthermore, they often invent even more exciting and challenging activities!

On the other hand, since I started to train EFL teachers and observe EFL classes in Japan, I have realized that many lessons under-utilize children's intelligence and curiosity. There can be considerable benefits to TPR, activities like Fruit Basket, and teacher-centered song activities that are regularly used in Japanese EFL classrooms, especially for children in lower grades (G1 to G3), who have fun engaging in such activities and absorb English words and phrases through them. However, behavioral problems can start to emerge when older students are expected to learn English through similar activities. These older students want to know how English works, why they are doing an activity, and how much they have improved in what they have been working on. In other words, they are more aware of their own learning, and they are ready to take more active roles in the English learning process than many English teachers imagine.

I hope that some of the ideas presented in this article may help to spark your students' curiosity and increase their desire to learn English.

References

Martin, B. (1992) *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* New York: Henry Holt
 Philpot, Sarah (2000) *Building Blocks for English*. DELTA Publishing

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