

Natural language learning



Julie Moore considers how learner's dictionaries can help students develop a more natural command of English.

What is implied by the term 'a natural command of English'? I recently heard a Swiss student being interviewed on a BBC news programme about the expansion of the EU. He referred to '*this time when the European Union is getting into shape*'. I smiled as an image popped into my mind of Europe sweating it out in the gym, trying to lose a few pounds! I then immediately felt guilty for making fun of someone whose command of English was really very good and who was brave enough to be interviewed in a foreign language.

So where exactly did this student fall down and what effect did it have on his listener? Perhaps he had confused two idiomatic expressions, *get into shape* and *take shape*, or perhaps he was just struggling to find an appropriate verb to describe something becoming a new shape. Alternatively, he may have intended to use *getting into shape*, albeit somewhat atypically, to mean 'preparing and getting organised for an event'. Such mismatches and near misses do not always matter if the general meaning is clear, but they can lead to a speaker putting across the wrong impression or even being completely misunderstood. A natural command of English implies not only a good grasp of grammar and an adequate vocabulary, but also an understanding of how to put the language together in a way that will sound typical and familiar to the listener.

The cline of idiomaticity

As a lexicographer, I'm sometimes asked to settle a dispute about whether a particular combination of words is in fact a phrase or an idiom, a collocation or a colloquial expression. My usual response is to shrug and say it doesn't really matter. It is perhaps more useful to think of word combinations as a cline from the totally free – *see a man/car/book* – to the totally fixed or idiomatic – *not see the wood for the trees*. The second phrase here is not only fixed in form, but also has nothing whatever to do with woods or trees. In between these two extremes, we find a whole range of expressions which are neither totally predictable nor totally opaque as to meaning.

1 **Weak collocations:** words which are often used together in a seemingly free way and are only significant when viewed alongside apparently similar combinations which don't fit together quite so naturally. You could describe a person as *big, large, small, tall, short, fat* or *thin*, but not normally as *little* (except for a child), *wide, narrow, high* or *low*.

2 **Strong collocations:** words which are used together so frequently in a particular context that they have become fixed and other alternatives seem unlikely: *cross the road, heavy rain, blissfully unaware*

3 **Set structures and formulae:**
The more ... the more/less ...
(*The more I tried to help him, the more stubborn he became.*)

4 **Fixed phrases:** *by the way, in the end, for all I know*

5 **Variable idiomatic expressions:**
cost/spend/be worth a (small) fortune, with (all due/the greatest) respect

6 **Metaphorical expressions:**
feel out of your depth, (argue/talk) until you're blue in the face

7 **Opaque idioms:** *kick the bucket, paint the town red*

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▶▶▶ Many learners enjoy learning about idioms, but are hesitant about using them for fear of getting them wrong or of sounding funny. This fear is not totally unfounded, as Stuart Redman and Ruth Gairns point out; some of the more opaque, highly idiomatic phrases, such as *at the end of my tether* or *get your knickers in a twist* are very difficult to integrate into learner interlanguage and just end up sounding particularly unnatural. Such opaque idioms and expressions are, however, actually quite infrequent in the language of the average native speaker. We sometimes perceive them as being more common because when they *are* used, they stand out and are noticed. Research has shown that even the scriptwriters of popular soap operas fall into the trap of including far more idioms in their dialogue than is typical of normal conversation because they feel that it gives their characters a more authentic appeal to the audience.

In general, highly idiomatic expressions are often very culture-bound and are used largely, especially by professional writers, such as journalists, comedians and novelists, as a way of establishing a relationship with their audience based on a shared background and culture. This is frequently a national, or even regional culture: TV shows do not always cross the Atlantic Ocean without getting at least partly lost in translation.

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A natural model

It follows that extreme idiomatic language is not a useful model for learners to copy. What learners need is a form of English that is like native English, but without the cultural baggage. It is the language at the less fixed, more predictable end of the cline on page 29 which forms the basis of much of the language used by the average native speaker. This huge range of transparent collocations, fixed and semi-fixed phrases which are more neutral in style, will fit quite easily alongside the learner's current language. A command of this range of linguistic devices will allow the exam candidate, for example, to develop a natural, interesting style, which will impress the examiner, or enable the learner studying in an English-speaking country to make a good impression with their English-speaking friends. Even between non-native speakers, appropriate choices in terms of collocations can be vital in providing a common framework within which both speaker and listener will know what to expect. The Greek learner, for example, who asks someone to *'open the light'* (a direct translation from the Greek) may be understood by his classmates, but might receive puzzled looks from speakers of other L1s.

By upper-intermediate level, learners will already recognise and understand many of these phrases. Combinations such as *take shape* or *cost a fortune* will cause few problems in terms of comprehension, especially when encountered in context. The challenge for many learners, as we will see below, is to move these useful lexical chunks from their passive to their active vocabulary. In their research into the language that learners actually use, Redman and Gairns noted that *'many upper-intermediate learners tended to "play safe" with language and relied on fairly simple structures and lexis, which prevented them from expressing more complex ideas and using greater subtlety'*.

Natural combinations

A key problem for many learners is that they don't recognise the lower and mid ranges of fixed and semi-fixed collocations and expressions as 'new vocabulary' at all, because they are often made up of 'easy' words which they already 'know'. They might read through a text containing such

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combinations as *make an effort to do something* and *pose a problem* without batting an eyelid, but would not think to use them in their own speech or writing.

Raising awareness

Many coursebooks and vocabulary practice books contain notes, study sections and practice exercises focused specifically on highlighting collocations and everyday phrases. Such activities can be key in raising awareness of natural English and in introducing concepts such as collocation. They are, however, rather restricted in terms of the range of language they can exemplify. To really expand their active knowledge of collocations and useful phrases, the learner next needs to develop the skills to access reference resources such as learner's dictionaries, which contain a wealth of information, enabling them to explore language for themselves and to become more 'language rich'.

Dictionaries for learners

There persists an idea that dictionaries are simply there to give the meanings of unknown words. What learners often miss out on when they opt for the quick, easy translation offered by a bilingual dictionary, though, is all the additional information about a word which is there to be exploited in a good monolingual learner's dictionary. In addition to information about meaning, spelling, pronunciation, grammar and usage, monolingual learner's dictionaries also present a range of phrases and examples which show the most common collocations, phrases and patterns which a word is used in.

A learner searching for an appropriate way, for example, to describe a lot of rain, could make a 'safe' guess and choose a common adjective – **bigstrong rain* –

both of which would sound awkward and unnatural. Opting for a slightly more colourful translation from their mother tongue might also lead to somewhat odd results: a French learner, for example, might come up with **beating/diluvian rain* or **to rain in big drops/in waves/in torrents*. A quick look in any of the major learner's dictionaries, though, shows *heavy/pouring/torrential rain* and *rain hard/heavily*, either as bolded collocations or in examples. Looking in a more specialised collocations dictionary (here the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*), we could further add *driving rain*, *pour with rain*, *rain beats/lashes/pelts/pours down* and *rain incessantly/non-stop/solidly*.

Many learner's dictionaries also now include special boxes at the entries for common words showing a range of collocations. And learners searching for more than simple collocations could also try more specialised dictionaries, such as the *Longman Language Activator*, which gives a range of vocabulary, including collocations, phrases and idioms, associated with a particular concept, or the SMART thesaurus facility on the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's CD-ROM Dictionary* which suggests a range of words and phrases related in meaning to a search word (*rain* throws up such phrases as *a downpour* and *be tipping it down*).

Overcoming reluctance

Learners, especially at lower levels, are often reluctant to use monolingual dictionaries because they think they will be difficult to understand. Classroom activities can help them become more comfortable with using dictionaries on their own.

- Introduce lower-level learners to intermediate, or even elementary, level dictionaries first so that they do not feel overloaded by too much information.
- Point out that the definitions are written in a very simple style (using a restricted range of vocabulary) which is really very easy to understand.
- Compare the treatment of particular words in a bilingual and monolingual dictionary to show learners the different types of information available in each.

Referencing skills

Learners won't make full use of their dictionaries, however, unless they know how to use them and are motivated to do so. Referencing skills are a vital part of

learner training and teaching dictionary skills should not be a one-off lesson or activity, but an ongoing process of working together with students as and when vocabulary issues crop up.

- Use dictionaries together with students in class, guiding them through the format and the different types of information available.
- Send students to their dictionaries to solve vocabulary queries (rather than providing quick easy fixes yourself) to encourage learner independence.

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- Introduce new dictionaries – advanced level, collocations dictionaries, etc – gradually, focusing on their special features. Make use of introductory pages and study sections to help students find out what's available.
- Divide a class into groups and get each group to investigate a different dictionary, reporting back to the rest of the class with a review, either orally or in writing.

Dictionaries for production

It is also important that learners don't see dictionaries only in terms of decoding language, but as useful for production as well. As we have seen, many upper-intermediate learners will understand many common phrases and collocations, so they won't bother to look them up; yet they don't actually 'know' them well enough to use them actively.

- Challenge learners' beliefs about what they know by getting them to write their own dictionary entries for relatively common words and then compare them with the information included in an actual dictionary.
- Extend familiar brainstorming activities to include dictionaries. Get

learners to look up key words in a given topic area and list possible useful phrases and collocations in preparation for a piece of written work.

- Get learners into the habit of including a box of some of these key collocations and phrases at the start of each piece of written work, to refer back to while they write and for future reference.
- Make sure you give positive feedback to learners who then use the combinations they have found correctly.



By making learners more aware of the way in which the words of the language are put together and the effect that these combinations have on communication, and by further teaching them the reference skills they need to explore the words and expressions they might want to use for themselves, we can hope to encourage them to move away from their safe, but rather awkward learner language. We can equip them with the skills to search for appropriate collocations and phrases which will best express what they want to say, in a style which is interesting and conveys a sense of their own personality and feelings, but is, at the same time, natural, typical and clearly comprehensible to native speakers and other non-native speakers alike. **ETP**

Redman, S and Gairns, R *Natural English Upper-intermediate Teacher's Book* OUP 2003

Learner's Dictionaries:

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
Macmillan English Dictionary
COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary

Specialised resources:

Oxford Collocations Dictionary
Longman Language Activator



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