

Encouraging Collocational and Colligational Fluency: Pedagogical Chunking, Word and Verb Mapping, Pause Reading and Other Strategies

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide an exploratory overview of second-language classroom activities that can be used in order to stimulate students' collocational and colligational fluency. For at least two decades, it has been acknowledged in second language vocabulary acquisition research that lexical proficiency extends beyond knowledge of single words, and thus, learners should be given exposure to longer stretches of language, i.e., what is sometimes referred to as "chunks". After briefly discussing the motivation behind this theoretical stance, this paper will present and discuss a range of strategies that learners can successfully employ to notice, store and actively produce the many multi-word expressions that make up the bulk of language in use. The relevance of the current study lies primarily in its pedagogical implications. The selection of strategies has been based on a review of the current literature into the teaching of phraseology as well as the author's own reflective practice. One of the main findings to emerge from this paper is that though many strategies have been suggested, only a small minority has been subjected to empirical or experimental verification, and that practitioners like curriculum developers, materials writers and teachers should be advised to judge the available array of activities critically.

Key words: second-language vocabulary learning, collocations, colligations, learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

This article sets out to explore the wide range of vocabulary teaching strategies that can be successfully deployed when trying to improve second-language (L2) learners' collocational and colligational fluency. The term "collocation" refers to one of the features of "vocabulary depth", i.e., the quality—rather than the mere quantity—of a person's lexical knowledge (Daller *et al.*, 2007). It is generally defined as "the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur" (Halliday & Hassan 1976, p. 284). Examples include adjectives and nouns (e.g. *scenic drive*), nouns and nouns (e.g. *test drive*), verbs

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plus nouns (e.g. *take a drive*), nouns plus verbs (e.g. *the drive lasted two hours*) and all sorts of more or less fixed templates or phrases (e.g. *within an hour's drive, be a short drive away*). As such, collocations refer to items that are syntactically related rather than just loose co-occurrences (Evert, 2004). Note that collocations are also known as “word partnerships”: lexical items partnered with other lexical items. For a recent discussion of the terminological issues in collocation research, see Antle (2012).

By “colligations” we mean recurrent combinations of lexis and grammar (Sinclair, 1987; Hoey, 1999, 2000, 2005). For example, it is far less likely to find a declarative utterance like *the drive would have been being gone for* (future progressive perfect in the past, passive voice) than the more functional *let's go for a drive* (*let's* imperative). The combination of *go for a drive* (lexis) and the exhortative imperative (*let's*) then counts as a colligation.

Language production (Skehan, 1998) can be described and evaluated in terms of three dimensions: accuracy, complexity and fluency. Depth and breadth of vocabulary are, needless to say, important measures of that overall productiveness. It makes sense to devote our pedagogical efforts to expanding students' productive vocabulary, not just by adding more and more words but also by deepening their store of words in terms of collocational and colligational potential. To quote Dellar and Hocking (2000, p. 32),

English has thousands of words—vocabulary, collocations, idioms, and expressions. We express what we mean mostly by our choice of vocabulary. If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!

The paper is structured as follows. After a brief section on the theoretical background and methodology, an overview will be given of classroom activities and strategies aimed at enhancing learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge through collocations and colligations. In the *Discussion* section, a first attempt will be made to critically evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. It should be borne in mind, however, that much of the research reported here is exploratory.

RELEVANT THEORY AND REVIEW

Over the years, there has been a growing realisation that the key to efficient and effective L2 learning may well lie in shifting our focus from single words to phrases and formulaic multi-word expressions. Though interest in these lexical phrases, idioms and the more formulaic aspects of language use go back at least 40 years (Bolinger, 1976), it is thanks to both the corpus linguistic revolution of the early nineties and the cognitive turn that was taking place at the same time that the lexicon and aspects of L2 vocabulary acquisition got into their own.

Sinclair (1991) distinguished the *open-choice principle* behind language and the *idiom one*, and where Chomskyan linguistics emphasised the former, the increasingly sophisticated analysis of ever larger corpora of authentic language data pointed up the extent to which language use is idiomatic, in the sense of pre-fabricated or ready-made. Language production is not only a matter of making but also of taking, i.e., of creating new strings of lexical items (in particular syntagmatic patterns) and of simply helping oneself to pre-existing utterances and phrases. The revolutionary insight was that these pre-existing utterances and phrases are not just proverbs (e.g. *a friend in need is a friend indeed*) and genuine idioms (e.g. *between a rock and a hard place*) but that they pervade language (as in the examples given in the *Introduction* section).

More recently, phraseology has become a major concern and research interest in Cognitive Linguistics (CL), witness volumes like Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) or De Knop *et al.* (2010). The basic assumptions of CL tie in well with conceptualisations of language as being more than just lexis plus grammar, and in fact, support views that the lexis-versus-grammar divide is a fallacy. The reality of language as a cognitive and interactional achievement is that lexis and grammar form a continuum along which different form-meaning pairings can be arrayed, including structures and words. Structures are as meaningful as words and vice versa. Words have their own grammar, for example, a point made in Systematic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985). Both collocations and colligations are instances of how words and structures meet halfway to form meaningful units of language usage. Parallel to this development in linguistic theory is a remarkable increase in L2 collocation research over the past five years, with Barfield and Gyllstad (2009) as a case in point. This edited volume is entirely devoted to collocational knowledge and development among non-native speakers and learners, and offers ideas as well as research findings on how to present, for example, collocations/colligations in dictionaries.

Milton (2009) offers a concise overview of what it means to know a word. It involves:

1. Understanding its meaning(s) in context, whether written or spoken.
2. Recalling it when you need it.
3. Using it with the correct meaning (e.g. beware of false friends!).
4. Using it in the appropriate context (e.g. level of formality, connotations).
5. Using it with its maximally useful partners (i.e. the right collocations).
6. Using it in a grammatically correct way.
7. Knowing its derivations (i.e., word grammar possibilities).
8. Spelling it correctly.
9. Pronouncing it correctly (word stress!).

It is well known that learners do not acquire this depth of vocabulary knowledge through grammar instruction and explicit vocabulary teaching alone, but that considerable progress can be made in a short period through memorisation of the recurrent patterns

(see item no. 5). The following steps are generally agreed to be important (Hatch & Brown, 1995):

1. Encountering new words.
2. Getting the word form—in both speech and writing.
3. Getting the word meaning.
4. Consolidating word form and meaning in memory.
5. Using the word.

This sequence has sometimes been simplified into:

1. Noticing.
2. Retrieving or recalling.
3. Creating (e.g. using the word in the proper context).

One of the best known pedagogical approaches to follow this through while underscoring the significance of prioritising lexis over syntax is the so-called *Lexical Approach* to teaching developed as of the 1990s mainly by Michael Lewis (1993, 1997, 1999, 2000). Firstly, students need to develop awareness of the language to which they are exposed and gradually develop ways, not of assembling parts into wholes, but of identifying constituent bits within the whole. Many of these are lexical items and form the most important single key to the Lexical Approach. For the theoretical point of view, reference can also be made to Wray's (2002) work on formulaic language and the lexicon. The pedagogical implications of this theoretical stance have led to a range of strategies and activities meant to complement the L2 instructor's available toolkit.

The purpose of this paper is to share some of the phrase-learning activities that have emerged in the literature as well as in classroom practice. In order to “teach” lexical phrases, students should be made to notice them first (e.g. by hearing them). Good noticing activities potentially require a lot of (mental) processing. The more processing that takes place, the better as more processing will arguably enhance retention and recall (future use or recognition). This refers to the level-of-processing (LOP) theory (Cermak & Graik, 1979). The more complex the cognitive processes involved in engaging with new lexical items, the deeper the overall processing and the more likely that these new items will enter the learner's long-term semantic memory.

METHODOLOGY

Given the largely descriptive and exploratory aim of this study, activities and strategies were gleaned from the existing literature (Lewis, 1997, 2000; Lewis & Hill, 1992; Lindstromberg, 2005; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Jiang, 2009; Antle, 2012). However, this paper will also share some of the activities that the author has been piloting himself over the past ten years. No attempt is made at this stage in the research to offer an exhaustive list. Gairns and Redman (1986) were one of the first to try and map out the many alternatives that were available. Nation (2001) alone, for example, described

well over 30 different vocabulary teaching activities looking at form, meaning and use. Interestingly, only two of these, however, were collocational—matching and finding collocations. It is this imbalance that the following findings are meant to redress.

FINDINGS

According to Lewis (1993), the basic exercise types include (pedagogical) chunking, matching, completing, categorising, sequencing and deleting. The two most central strategies, however, are chunking and categorising. It is these two that will be discussed first. Note that tasks like categorising or matching and their corresponding teaching/learning strategies can be classified in many different ways. One classification that has been suggested recently is to use a system of *families* of task types based on the type of learning input involved, materials that are actually being used: (written) texts, lists, spreads and student-collected chunks (Lindstromberg, 2005). This approach makes it easier to plan one's lessons, as much of the success in lexical phrase learning depends on how carefully the input materials have been selected. In this paper, the latter classification will be used when presenting pause reading and other strategies.

Pedagogical Chunking

Without noticing skills, students will be unlikely to expand their collocational and colligational fluency. The term and technique originate from Lewis (1993). Setting out from an existing text, teachers will guide students towards “chunking” the text in terms of high frequency and maximally useful combinations of lexis and combinations of lexis and grammar. Developing a sixth sense for combinations that are central to the language (e.g. *to lock the front door*) and those that are not (e.g. *to paint the front door green*) is critical in deepening one's knowledge of the word “door”.

Word and Verb Mapping

This refers to the maps in Appendices A and B. Students can collect “chunks”—whether guided or not—but the question that remains is where to store the new vocabulary and how. Vocabulary notebooks have long been recognised as a valuable resource (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) ever since the corpus-based language-learning revolution of the mid-eighties. Yet, there is surprisingly little research into what formats work and how to motivate learners. This observation does not only hold true for single-item learning but also for collocations and colligations.

One way of remedying this situation is through single/loose-sheet word maps and verb maps—two worksheets that the author has piloted in his own teaching practice, and which, pending empirical verification, have helped students become more aware of the phraseological nature of language, on the one hand, and organise and revise lexical phrases more successfully, on the other. In both maps, the central item (the “node”) goes into the circle in the middle, with collocates (or “partners”) arranged around it in terms of position only. Though the maps use the proper syntactic terminology (e.g. adjective

or direct object), in essence, what a learner needs to know is where the words are put vis-à-vis each other. The maps thus offer a convenient but powerful aid to enhance students' visual pattern recognition of salient word partnerships, be they noun-based or verb-based, with the emphasis firmly on directional relationships rather than syntagmata. To illustrate, the *business* word map would thus contain collocations and colligations like *to set up a business*, *retail business*, *business conference*, *the business is growing*, and fixed expressions like *mind your own business*. The verb map for *drive*, on the other hand, would have to include high-frequency combinations like those illustrated in the introductory section of this paper.

Pause Reading

This strategy sets out from a text with the targeted collocations and colligations, which the teacher or language trainer will read out to the class. Collocations or colligations that have been selected for learning will be broken up, i.e., the teacher will insert a pause during which the entire class can fill in the missing next word(s). This technique works well for word partnerships that are relatively strong such as *to go out of + business*. The topic of the text as well as the local meanings instantiated through the utterances will guide students and limit the range of options. As Lewis (1997) pointed out, not all two words can be separated by a pause—the teacher has to select only those phraseological units that demonstrate strong internal consistency.

Note that Lindstromberg (2005) refers to this technique by the phrase “What comes next?”. Teachers can do all the reading and pausing themselves but the exercise can also be profitably done in pairs or in fours. In that case, students will take turns reading and completing. It may help to have two or three different texts ready for the different groups. According to Lindstromberg (2005), the sequence of the technique can be as follows:

1. One student on the team receives a text that contains a number of double slashes (//).
2. He/She reads out the text slowly and dramatically until he/she reaches //. The other students in the group are then invited to fill in the missing word (a more or less predictable part of a collocation, part of an expression, etc.).
3. Halfway through the article (or when using a two-page article, when reaching the next page), the roles can be switched.
4. In the following stage, students can be asked to put in the slashes themselves. However, they have to make it as easy as possible for their partner by only choosing collocations they would certainly know.

Like many strategies, there is room for enhancing the pause reading activity by introducing choral work, individual turns, and by increasing the number of missing words to be filled in.

Text-Based Strategies

Using Existing Texts

Well-known activities include the chanting of rhymes and the singing of songs. Songs are probably the best way to become more lexically proficient—at least if the songs contain enough collocations of interest, which they rarely do. Memorisation of texts (e.g. dialogues) is very useful too, and is related to the audio-lingual method of language learning prevalent in the sixties. However, aural processing may benefit certain learners and thus has to be included in the range of classroom activities. The same holds for dictation (including student-to-student dictation).

Less well-known activities are, for example, “What did I say instead of ...?” The five-step procedure can be described as follows:

1. Students receive a short or longish text that has been centred on the page. They are asked to fold the sides so that there are no margins at either left, right, top or bottom.
2. The teacher reads the text out loud fairly quickly and replaces certain words (these can also be collocates or collocations). This time students can mark these changes (e.g. by underlining or highlighting them) while the teacher reads the text. If they are really fast, they can even write down the new words, or they can write them down afterwards or just write down the first letter of the change.
3. Then they check with a partner to see whether they have the same results.
4. The teacher goes over the text line by line and every time asks whether something was changed (“Were there any changes?”, “What did I say instead of ...?”) and if so, into what. Write these changes on the blackboard, if you like.
5. Finally, the students are asked to turn their papers over and to retell the story, news item, etc.

News articles, especially longer ones (like one A4 column), are a rich source of collocations and colligations. This activity focuses students’ attention on both. The following illustrates the changes that can be made:

- Latinate words replaced by Germanic ones or vice versa (e.g. *permission* → *green light*, *phone* → *call*, *wake* → *arouse*).
- A synonym (*home* = *house*, *sound* = *go off* <about a smoke alarm>, *provide* = *furnish*) as well as polywords (*on the grounds that* = *for the reason that*).
- Nouns and verbs (*to be no longer under any obligation* = *to be no longer obliged*).
- Adding an adjective (*waste of time* → *a royal waste of time*).

Additions allow us to work with a basic version of a text (for example, stripped of its adjectives), which students are then invited to elaborate on.

A similarly underused exercise type is *Dictogloss*. Every student takes a blank sheet of paper (an A4 and they should hold it “portrait”-wise). They are told that they are going

to listen to a story (not too long, about 10 lines or so, e.g. a short newspaper article that might interest the class). Consider, by way of example, the following snippet:

Top Skater in a Coma

In-line skating champion, Richard Taylor, 23, was in a coma in hospital after breaking both legs and fracturing his skull when he ran into a lamp post while skating near his home in Cardiff.

Note that selecting the right text (with the right collocations) is always the first step: *top skater*, *to be in a coma*, *to break a leg*, *to run into something*, etc. The actual activity can be broken down into the following five steps:

1. Read the story once. Students should listen carefully but are not allowed to write anything down unless told otherwise (so “pens down”). Once the teacher has finished reading the story for the first time, students have to write down as many words as they can remember from the text, making a vertical list in the centre of the page (also taking into account the chronological order in which the words occurred). They can “cheat” by looking left and right, thus, adding more words (or phrases). This is what it may look like in the case of the text given above:

skater
champion
coma
lamp post
broke both legs
Cardiff

2. The text is then read out loud for the second time. Again, the students can only start writing afterwards to complete their list of words. This can be done by adding other words next to the ones they already have (thus, creating collocations, e.g. *in-line + skating + champion*).
3. The teacher reads out the text for a third time very slowly and the students are allowed to write (so that it becomes a kind of dictation).
4. The students are then divided into pairs. One person of each pair is chosen to be the secretary. The students put their results together and try to come up with an exact reproduction of the text, which is then written down by the secretary.
5. Some of the “secretaries” are then asked to read their final copy out loud. If the final copy can still be improved, other teams may provide corrections (e.g. a team may have got the syntax wrong like *broke* instead of *breaking* or missed a piece of information).

Note that it is possible to mix this classroom activity with the “What did I say instead ...?” exercise described above.

Making New Texts

“Left-right dialogues” is one of the more effective collocational/colligational learning activities based on the free production of texts but, judging from the literature, not widely known. The following steps describe this activity:

1. Provide students with a list of idiomatic expressions that people might use to sum up a certain situation, e.g. “Well, what goes around comes around”.
2. Students work on these expressions for approximately 10 minutes, after which they put the sheet away.
3. Then they take a blank A4, turn it on its side (landscape), fold it exactly in the middle and open it out again, and finally, write a big A in the top left corner and B in the top right corner.
4. On the left hand side (the A side), they write down one of the expressions they have been working with. They then hand their paper to the person on their right who reacts to the expression on the B side. The paper is then returned to its original owner who continues the conversation. The students can shift the paper back and forth five times or so.
5. Both students then read out their dialogue.

List-Based Strategies

Lists provide valuable learning opportunities:

- Make lists of word partners (including expressions) with their translation equivalent (e.g. *roundabout* | “bulatan” or *toolbox* | “kotak peralatan”).
- Make lists of word partners (including expressions) with their translation equivalent plus a hint in English (....) (*toolbox* | “kotak peralatan” + *tool*).
- Make lists of word partners (including expressions) with one half in English and the other half in translation (e.g. *finishing* | “garisan”).
- Make lists of word partners (including expressions) with initials in different places (e.g. “menubuhkan s.” | “m. syarikat”).
- Make lists of word partners (including expressions) with a hint (e.g. *raw materials* | *oil*).

Make a numbered list of word partners (including expressions) on a strip of brown cardboard and their translation on the other side. Students can hang this anywhere and use it to review collocations by going through the list and flipping the cardboard around to check answers.

A similar set of strategies involves partly ordered lists, spreads, split boards and split handouts. Any activity based on an existing text (e.g. “What did I say instead of ...?”) can be used as a preamble to split boards or split handouts. The reading passage will probably contain some phrases or expressions that students need to remember better. Collocations, colligations, phrases, etc. are often easy enough to understand but this does not mean

they are part of a learner's productive vocabulary. To push these phrases from reception into production, (i.e., to convert input into intake), more hearing, deeper processing, and more repeated encounters may be required. One relatively straightforward technique is as follows:

1. Split up the lexical or lexico-grammatical phrases into two parts and put them up on the whiteboard randomly but on two sides, left and right.
2. Students are asked to establish the link between the first part of a particular target phrase (e.g. *I feel ...*) and the second part (... *the same way*).
3. The teacher can give students a little hint or mime something to get them to recreate the whole target phrase (e.g. *I feel the same way*).

Alternatively, teachers can provide students with an A4 with all the phrases, ask them to fold the A4 in the middle and open it out. The students are asked to go through the same steps as listed earlier. This time, they can draw a line between the two parts. By folding the A4 sheet, the students get a neat little completion exercise (starting from either the first or second parts of the target phrases).

Card-Based Strategies

Finally, sets of shuffled cards can also motivate the more kinetic learners to focus on collocational and colligational expressions. On the basis of the lists with target phrases, one can make two-sided word cards: on one side of the card partnership words are written, while on the other side, the main partners are added. File these cards thematically, alphabetically or by some other principle (from long to short, from very frequent to less frequent, from "difficult" to "easy", from unfamiliar to well-known) or even randomly (just put them into a shoebox or plastic bag).

DISCUSSION

Though obviously full of potential, a collocational and colligational approach to teaching vocabulary has its limitations. The main reason is that, as in the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993), the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected in favour of a paradigm based on the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle (Harmer, 2001). Observing (as in noticing during intensive reading or listening) and subsequently forming one's own hypotheses about the meaning of words and which words tend to collocate or colligate arguably take up more time than just being presented with the facts. As a result, nearly all of the activities are time-consuming; the main reason being that they are aimed at turning *input* into *intake* during class. Given the competing demands on the second-language teachers' allocation of time (widening vocabulary, explaining basic grammar, providing incentives for extensive reading, practising essay writing, using linking words, enhancing listening comprehension, etc.), most teachers are restricted to giving input and practising the new input rather than real consolidation during classes. Much of the actual learning has to take place elsewhere—in the student's own time.

Secondly, there is also a serious practical issue with teaching phrases, namely: the large number of phrases that can be formed from, say, the first 3,000 most common words in English is overwhelming (10 collocations per word). As Cobb (2003) observes, “[g]iven that not all learners manage to learn 3000 basic words qua words, the idea of building a second phrasicon through deliberate instruction seems problematic”. A quick glance through the available collocational dictionaries like *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations* (Benson, Benson & Ilson, 1997), *Dictionary of Selected Collocations* (Hill & Lewis, 1997) or *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (2002) is sufficient to reveal that the simplest of words especially (e.g. *book*) come with numerous collocations and not just compounds but also adjectives and verbs. There are so many collocations in common usage that teachers cannot begin to teach them all in class. Time has to be set aside, therefore, for helping students develop autonomous (i.e., out-of-class) learning methods, which will help them deepen their receptive and productive vocabulary.

A third limitation is that not all of these may work well at the higher education level. It takes courage to try and teach undergraduate students to sing a song! Additionally, although mostly fun to do, some of the strategies discussed earlier may suffer from the “new toy” syndrome. Teachers can carry them out once or twice but not much more than that. The results of Rahimin and Momeni’s report (2011) are only confined to the secondary school level. Antle (2012), however, found that students’ perceptions of collocational activities in the classroom are positive, though not overwhelmingly so. Additionally, his study found that the number of targeted collocations has to be carefully chosen so as not to inundate learners.

As a final note, one should also take great care to select the right input materials (texts, collocations, expressions, etc.). After all, the purpose of these activities is to actually learn new vocabulary in class, and there is no time to “waste” on lexical items that are not maximally useful. As Boers *et al.*, (2010) pointed out, maximal usefulness alone may be insufficient as a criterion for selecting the right input materials and much will depend on both the raw frequency of occurrence and psychological aspects such as cognitive salience and learnability. Though the later issues can be addressed through semantic and structural elaboration (Barcroft, 2002), it remains a fact that classrooms are heterogeneous and learners with different multiple intelligences will benefit differently from the strategies implemented.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study brought together a relatively wide range of activities that can be used in the second-language classroom. A common feature of the activities and strategies is that they foreground collocational and colligational fluency rather than single lexical items. However, from a lexical selection point of view, collocations act like “semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices for the speaker” (Sinclair, 1987, p. 320). This explains why they have to be noticed, stored, learnt and used as unanalysable wholes. As

was observed earlier, vocabulary is learnt in stages, which take the learner from noticing to storing to activating the new vocabulary in social contexts. Current insights consider how lexis and grammar interface have extended this approach to include recurrent lexis-and-grammar patterns, i.e., the so-called colligations. Despite the theoretical rationale for a phraseological approach and the many useful pedagogical interventions based on it, many questions remain unanswered and many hypotheses untested. Boers *et al.* (2010) found that it is only recently that teaching/learning strategies are being examined by means of correlational or experimental research designs. Initial findings show that claims made in the early days can indeed be made robust through corpus analysis, empirical research and pre-post experiments. There will be fewer claims in future but they will be more substantiated. Pedagogical effectiveness should not be based on the current fad or trend but instead grounded in solid research. De Knop *et al.* (2010), for example, highlighted a number of focussed studies in which collocational teaching was shown to yield results superior to other methods. At the same time, Rasekh and Ranjbari (2003) and other scholars have shown that much can be expected from lexis-specific “learning to learn” strategies rather than trying to address vocabulary knowledge issues directly.

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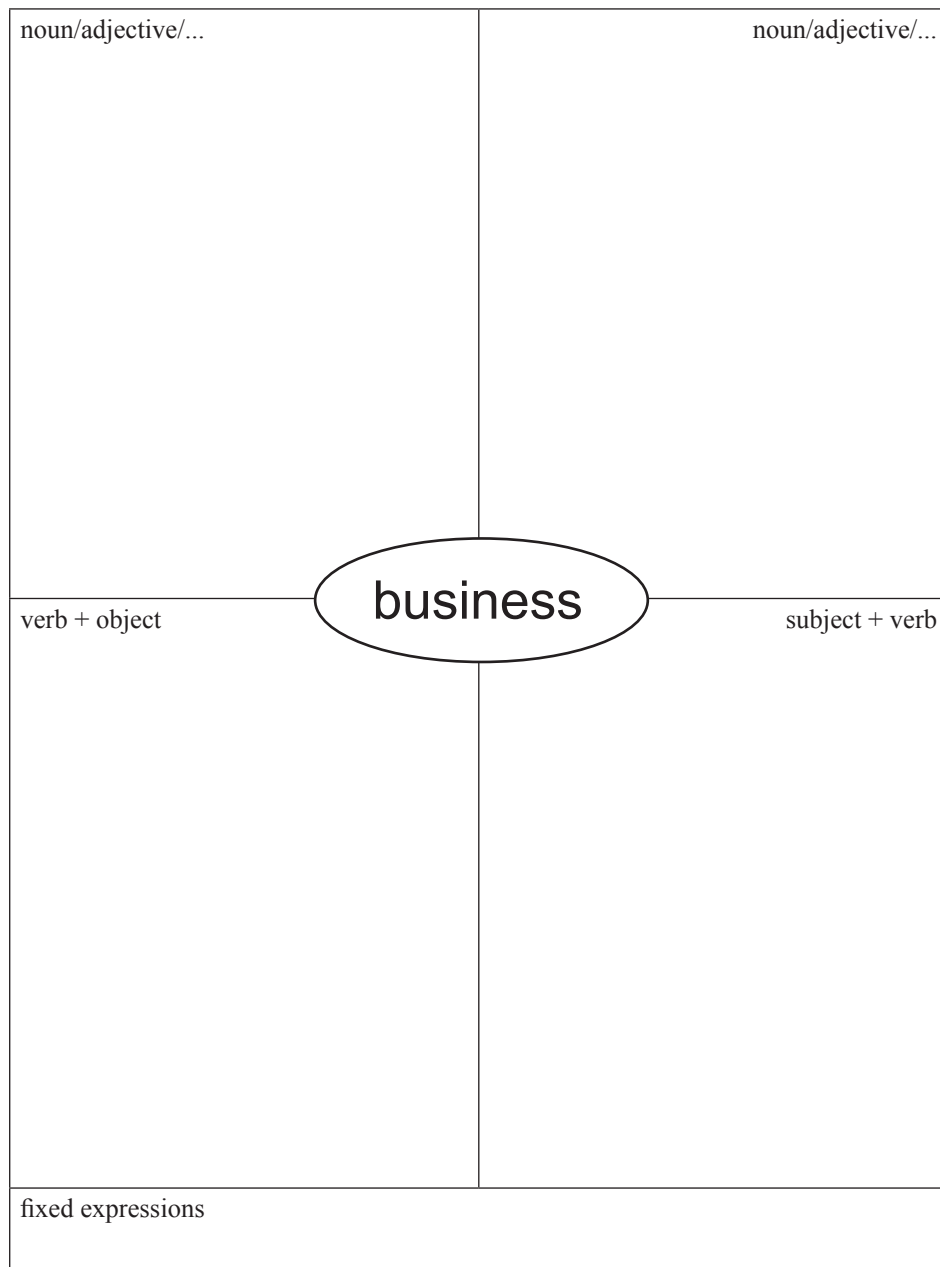
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Appendix A: Word Map



Appendix B: Verb Map

