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Teaching word formation and word combination

In Chapter 1 we looked at some of the principles of word formation in English. We noted that words can be formed by the addition of prefixes and suffixes – a process called **affixation**. (The word *affixation* is itself an example of the result of adding affixes to the root *fix*.) We also saw how, by **compounding**, two or more words can join up to make one. Thus: *black + board = blackboard*. Or, new words can be created by a process called **conversion**, when a word that in one context is one part of speech (such as a noun), in another context can be enlisted to serve a different function (such as a verb). Hence, you may have heard the relatively recent term *to board* as in *The teacher boarded the new words and the students wrote them down.*

Then again words can cluster (but not join up) to form **multi-word units** – loosely called chunks – that behave as if they were single words. For example, alongside *black*, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* lists: *black and white, black and blue, black sheep, in the black* and *to black out.* (This last is an example of a phrasal verb.) Many chunks have an **idiomatic** meaning – that is to say the meaning of the chunk as a whole is not directly inferrable from the individual words: *He's the black sheep of the family; you've introduced a red herring*, etc.

The way bits of words combine, and the way words themselves can be combined, is a constant source of difficulty for learners. Errors of the following types are common:

- Affixation errors
  There are *uncountless* ways to bring happiness to my life thanks to the internet.
  After finishing the paragraph and reading it again, I felt *unsatisfy*.
  I think that my real and only *knowledgements* are in the vocabulary.

- Compounding errors
  In London I took a *two floor bus* and of course crossed the city in the highest floor.
  I saw my dog died in a *box's shoes*.

- Errors of multi-word units
  We have also a *buses network*.
  Sometimes dog isn't the *best man's friend*.

- Collocation errors
  I don't like when I *do mistakes*.
  Some teachers are strict they *put us a lot of homework* and exams.

- Phrasal verb errors
  She used to go to school with her maid, and a maid was *picking up* her from school.
  There are some days that the better it's stay in bed and don't *get up you*.

- Idiom errors
  I have no more money. So most of time I just *watch shops' window*.
  I don't like to *blow my own horn*, but my grammar knowledge and my vocabulary are quite good.

In responding to these kinds of problems, there are two possible approaches. You can either

- teach rules, or
- expose learners to lots of correct examples

A rule-based approach starts by isolating and highlighting any relevant patterns or regularities. Take word formation, for example. In a rule-based approach, words can be grouped and presented according to the manner of formation (affixation, compounding, conversion, etc). Within these categories finer distinctions can be made. So, of the words formed by affixation we can select those formed by the addition of prefixes, and this group can be narrowed down further to those that have a negative meaning. The way these words are formed can then be described in general terms in the form of a rule – or 'rule of thumb'. Here is an example of such an explicit rule statement (from Gude K and Duckworth M, *Proficiency Masterclass*, OUP):

B   Negative prefixes. The prefixes *mis-*, *dis-*, *ig-*, and *un-* can all be used to give a word a rather negative meaning. The prefix may help you to guess the meaning of the word.

mis- = 'wrongly, badly' or 'not done' (*mismanage*)
dis- = 'away from, the opposite of, lack of' (*distaste*)
ig- = 'not, lacking in' (*ignorant*)
un- = 'not, lack of, the opposite, reversal or removal of' (*undo*)

Here is some advice to help you choose the correct prefix.

- *dis-* can be used to form verbs, eg *dissatisfy*; adjectives, eg *dishonest*; and nouns, eg *disability*.
- The prefix *ig-* appears only before the letter *n*.

Here, on the other hand, is a table which suggests – but doesn't explicitly state – a rule about noun and verb endings:

1 *Now you can strengthen the thin green line.*

Strengthen is a verb which is formed from the adjective strong. Work in pairs and complete this table.

ADJECTIVE	NOUN	VERB
wide		
strong		
deep		
weak		
short		
high		

from Naunton J, *Think First Certificate*, Longman

A similar approach is used with word **collocations** (see page 7), wherever a general tendency can be identified. Here, for example, is a coursebook extract that focuses on the difference between *make* and *do* combinations:

VOCABULARY

Make or do?

1 Read the following sentences carefully.
Last night I tried to do my homework. However, I kept making mistakes because the man upstairs was doing his exercises and making a noise.

Make usually means to create, bring into existence, or produce a result.
Do usually means to perform an action. However, there are exceptions to this 'rule', as you will see in Exercise 3.

from Bell J and Gower R, *Intermediate Matters*, Longman

One problem with a rule-based approach is that the scope of the rule is not always clear. How many, and which, adjectives can be turned into verbs by the addition of *-en*, for example? *Sweet* and *fresh* – yes, but *wet* and *dry*? There is the added problem of the lack of one-to-one match between forms and categories. For example, *in-* and *un-* both express negation (*uncertain*, *inactive*), but *in-* can also be used with the meaning of *in*, or *within* (as in *inclusive*). And when do we use *in-*, as opposed to *un-* or *non-* or *dis-*, to convey negation? How, for example, does the learner know whether to use *unsatisfied*, *dissatisfied*, *insatisfied* or *nonsatisfied*?

One advantage of knowing the meanings of different affixes, however, is that they may help the learner unpack the meaning of unfamiliar words when reading and listening. So, a reader coming across *dissatisfied* for the first time should have no trouble understanding it if they know *satisfied* and

are familiar with different negative prefixes. However, even when applying the rules to reception there are problems. *Outline* does not mean *out of line*; *research* does not mean *search again*; nor does *inflammable* mean *non-flammable*. Some teachers therefore recommend using word formation as a guide to meaning only if all other means (such as using context clues) fail.

The alternative to a rule-based approach is an **item learning** one. In other words, the learning of complex words (like *indisposed* or *dissatisfied*) would simply involve the same processes as the learning of simple ones (like *sick* or *sad*). That is, it is basically a memory task, with each word learned as an individual item. And, as with any memory task, the quantity of encounters with the items is a critical factor. According to this view, learners need exposure, and plenty of it, rather than rules.

There are good grounds for favouring an item learning approach. For a start, this seems to be the way words are acquired naturally. They are first learned as items, and then gradually re-categorised according to rules. That is, once a critical mass of separate items (such as *widen, strengthen, deepen, weaken*, etc.) has been learned, the mind starts to sort them according to their shared regularities (adjective or noun + *-en* = verb). This seems to be the case not only for the learning of patterns of word formation but for the learning of grammar as well. Learners may have to learn a lot of separate instances of a structure (*I am going ... are you coming? ... he was saying ...*) before these items coalesce into a rule (subject + *to be* + *-ing*). In fact, item learning may be a prerequisite for rule learning generally. (This doesn't mean, of course, that the process always results in correct inferences. Learners can over-generalise from their own rules, so as to produce *He's a good cooker*, for example.)

The main disadvantage of an item learning approach is that it is very gradual and requires a great deal of exposure. But the good news is that the process can be speeded up by **consciousness-raising**. Consciousness-raising means drawing the learners' attention to the patterns and regularities of the language – helping them to **notice** these regularities. In this way, the teacher can facilitate the development of a *feel* (as opposed to a cast-iron rule) for what is the best interpretation of a word, or the most acceptable production of one. This does not necessarily mean teaching rules, but simply making patterns stand out. In a way, it is a compromise position between rule learning and item memorisation.

One writer, Anita Sökmen, provides a good example of how the teacher can guide learners to work out meaning, while at the same time integrating new knowledge with old:

A less-structured approach to word parts is to sporadically ask students to analyze words. For example, in one course I have taught for several years, the word *innate* routinely comes up and students rarely know the meaning of the word, or its root, '*nat*'. However, once we review what the prefix '*in*' means, and I elicit other words containing the root '*nat*' (*native, natural, nation, nationality, pre-natal*), someone in the class can infer the meaning, *birth*, from their understanding of the brainstormed words. In this way, word unit analysis asks learners to compare the new word with

known words in order to get to their core meaning. Because it demands a deeper level of processing and reactivation of old, known words with the new, it has the potential of enhancing long-term storage.

(from Schmitt N and McCarthy M (Eds.), *Vocabulary*, CUP)

Other pattern-highlighting techniques involve the use of texts and include the following:

- learners are given a text and asked to search for and underline all compound nouns, negative prefixes, multi-word units, etc.
- learners find words in a text that are derivations. For example, 'Find three words in the text that are derived from *sense* ...'
- learners classify these derivations according to which part of speech they are
- learners categorise underlined words in a text according to a common affix, or according to the word formation principle they exemplify (compounding, conversion, etc.)

The more of these kinds of operations the learner does the better, since (as we saw in the last chapter) the more decisions the learner makes about a word the greater the depth of processing.

A great advantage of working from texts is that the words that are to be focused on are already in context, hence their meanings may be clearer than if presented as isolated words in a list (see Chapter 4). Also, and perhaps more importantly, the shared context will bring words together that are commonly associated. In the following text, for example, there are a number of words associated with time, crime and the law:

TIME LIMITS

There are strict time limits on the detention of persons without charge. An arrested person may not be detained without charge for more than 24 hours, unless a serious arrestable offence has been committed. If a serious arrestable offence has been committed a superintendent can extend the period to 36 hours to secure or preserve evidence by continued questioning. Where a serious arrestable offence has been committed and the suspect needs to be held in custody beyond the 36 hour period, the police must bring the suspect before a magistrate to extend the time limit to a maximum of 60 hours.

(from McCarrick-Watson, *Essential English Legal System*, Cavendish)

As well as words associated with the legal process (*detention, arrested, charge, offence, commit, superintendent, questioning,* etc.) there are words of the same derivation (*detention, detained; arrested, arrestable; person, persons*). There are also a number of examples of collocation and chunking. Some relate to time: *time limits, extend the period, 36 hours, the 36 hour period;* and others to crime: *commit an offence; without charge; hold in custody.* These words and combinations are found not only in close association, but in their typical grammar contexts. For example, the crime language occurs in passive constructions: *to be detained without charge* and [an] *offence has been*

committed. This particular text has the added advantage that a number of key words and phrases are repeated (e.g. *a serious arrestable offence has been committed*) thereby increasing the likelihood of retention in memory.

An approach to focusing on these features might be:

- Ask students to read the text and to answer comprehension questions to gauge level of understanding. For example:

1   The maximum time you can be detained without charge is:
   a 24 hours   b 36 hours   c 60 hours

2   You can be detained for 36 hours only if:
   a a serious arrestable offence has been committed.
   b a magistrate gives permission.
   c further questioning is necessary.

- Ask learners (working together and using dictionaries) to underline all words relating to legal processes, and to categorise these according to a) people, b) processes.
- Ask them to use dictionaries to make verbs for these nouns: *limit, detention, charge, offence, questioning, suspect,* and to make nouns of these verbs: *arrest, detain, commit, extend, secure, preserve.* Which of the verb forms can take *-able* to form an adjective?
- Ask them to circle all time expressions with numbers and note the prepositions used in each case.
- Ask learners to identify the verbs that fill these slots: _____ *a person without charge;* _____ *an offence;* _____ *a suspect in custody;* _____ *a suspect before a magistrate;* ____ *a time limit.*
- Ask learners to rewrite the passage in 'plain English', e.g. as if they were explaining it to a friend. Alternatively, ask them to translate it into their own language.
- Learners then use the rewritten (or translated) passage as a basis for reconstructing the original text from memory. They then compare the reconstruction with the original.
- A follow-up activity might be to ask learners to research and summarise this aspect of the legal system in their own country (respecting, of course, their cultural sensitivities).

Note that this text, although short, is difficult and the tasks would be achievable only by quite advanced learners. Nevertheless, the same tasks could be adapted to much easier texts, and used at lower levels.

To summarise, then: the teaching of the grammar of word formation and word combination can be approached from two directions: early instruction in the rules, or the learning of a quantity of vocabulary items from which these rules are slowly distilled. We have looked at the case for a midway position that recognises the need for early exposure but at the same time accepts that consciousness-raising through focused attention can speed up the process of 'getting a feel for it'. Plentiful exposure plus consciousness-raising is a key principle underlying what has come to be known as a **lexical approach**.

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A lexical approach

A lexical approach to language teaching foregrounds vocabulary learning, both in the form of individual, high frequency words, and in the form of word combinations (or **chunks**). The impetus for a lexical approach to language teaching derives from the following principles:

- a syllabus should be organised around meanings
- the most frequent words encode the most frequent meanings and
- words typically co-occur with other words
- these co-occurrences (or chunks) are an aid to fluency

A syllabus organised around meanings rather than forms (such as grammar structures) is called a **semantic syllabus**. A number of theorists have suggested that a syllabus of meanings – especially those meanings that learners are likely to need to express – would be more useful than a syllabus of structures. For example, most learners will at some time need to express such categories of meaning (or **notions**) as *possession* or *frequency* or *regret* or *manner*. Simply teaching learners a variety of structures, such as the *present simple* or the *second conditional*, is no guarantee that their communicative needs will be met. The present simple, for example, supports a wide range of meanings (*present habit, future itinerary, past narrative*, etc), some of which may be less useful than others. Wouldn't it be better to start with the more useful meanings themselves, rather than the structure?

A semantic syllabus – i.e. one based around meanings – is likely to have a strong lexical focus. The following sentences, for example, all involve the present simple, but they express different notions. These notional meanings are signalled by certain key words (underlined):

Does this towel <u>belong</u> to you? (possession)
How <u>often</u> do you go to London? (frequency)
I <u>wish</u> I'd done French. (regret)
Exercise is the best <u>way</u> of losing weight. (manner)

Words like *belong, often, wish* and *way* carry the lion's share of the meaning in these sentences: the grammar is largely padding. A lexical approach argues that meaning is encoded primarily in words. This view motivated two coursebook writers, Dave and Jane Willis, to propose that a **lexical syllabus** might be the best way of organising a course. The Willises believed that a syllabus based around the most frequent words in the language would cover the most frequent meanings in the language. Accordingly, they based their beginners' course around the 700 most frequent words in English. They used **corpus** data (i.e. computer banks of naturally occurring text – see page 68) to find out how these words 'behaved' – that is, the kinds of words and structures that were associated with these high frequency words.

For example, an extremely common word in English is *way*. According to COBUILD corpus data, it is in fact the third most common noun in English (after *time* and *people*). An analysis of corpus data shows that *way* is used to express a variety of meanings:

1 method or means	It's a useful way of raising revenue.
	The cheapest way is to hire a van.
2 manner, style, behaviour	He smiles in a superior way.
	Play soccer Jack Charlton's way.
3 what happens, what is the case	That's the way it goes.
	We were so pleased with the way things were going.
4 degree, extent, respect	She's very kind and sweet in lots of ways.
	In no way am I a politically effective person.
5 location, movement, direction, space	A man asked me the way to St Paul's.
	Get out of the way.

(after Willis D, *The Lexical Syllabus*, Collins)

Using corpus data, they then studied what kinds of grammatical structures *way* was typically found with – i.e. its **syntactic environment**. For example, the first use of *way* in the table above (meaning 'method or means') is commonly found in association with this pattern:

way + of + -ing   a useful way of raising revenue
                   the different ways of cooking fish

The next step was to devise teaching materials that illustrated these meanings and patterns, bearing in mind that the starting point was not the pattern itself, but the meaning (*method, means*), and its frequency, as evidenced in the high frequency of the word *way*.

Here, for example, is how Willis and Willis summarise this use of *way* in *The Collins COBUILD English Course 2*.

Similar treatment is given to other high frequency words in the language, such as *thing, so, do, place, get, like, look*, and *would*. Note that some of these words – like *do* and *would* – are traditionally associated with specific grammatical structures, such as the present simple or the second conditional. However, in a lexically organised course, they are dealt with in much the same way as words like *way* and *like*. That is, first their principle meanings, and then their typical syntactic

> way
>
> *There are different ways of writing 'colour' – the American way (color) or the English way (colour).*
> *How many ways are there of saying this number?*
> *Practise these ways of agreeing and disagreeing.*
> *I like the way he sings.*
> *Do it this way. Look.*

environments, are identified. Interestingly, when the syntactic environment of *would* (to talk about hypothetical situations) was examined, it was found that the combination of *would* and *if*, as in the 'second conditional' (*I'd do an MA if I had the money*) occurred relatively infrequently. Much more common was *would* on its own, as in

It would be nice to keep bees.
Opening the beaches would not be a solution.
'Would she make a deal like that?' she wondered.

The Willises argued that *would* should be dealt with as just another word, rather than as part of a syntactic structure. A lexical view of language, then, starts to dissolve the distinction between function words and lexical words. In so doing, it starts to dissolve the distinction between grammar and vocabulary.

The second major development underlying a lexical approach was the recognition of the important role played by multi-word units, or **chunks** (see page 6). A number of researchers have noticed that a lot of early language learning takes the form of chunks (such as *this-is-mine*, *give-me*, and *leave-me-alone*). These are acquired as single, unanalysed units. The capacity to use these chunks in conversational exchanges seems to be an important factor in developing fluency. Using 'pre-fabricated' language, rather than using grammar rules to fabricate language from scratch, saves valuable processing time. These chunks are then stored away and only at a later stage of development are they analysed into their component parts. So, *this-is-mine* is eventually broken down into:

determiner (*this/that*, etc.) + *to be* + possessive pronoun (*mine, yours*, etc.)

This analysis allows the production of other combinations using the same pattern, such as *That is yours* or *Those are hers*.

This 'chunking' process serves two purposes in early language production: it enables the child to have chunks of language available for immediate use, while at the same time it provides the child with language patterns to hold in reserve for later analysis. Not only that, some of the new creations (e.g. *that is yours, those are hers*) can in turn be 're-chunked' – i.e. memorised as wholes, and stored for later retrieval. The researchers Pawley and Syder proposed that adult language users have at their command a repertoire of literally hundreds of thousands of these memorised chunks. For example:

How are you?
Long time no see.
So anyway ...
Don't mention it.
There you are, you see.
Speak of the devil.
It's got nothing to do with me.
Hang on a minute.
If you ask me ...

It seems that the mental lexicon is not so much a dictionary as a phrase book.

It is this 'phrase book' view of language that prompted Michael Lewis to propose his version of a lexical approach (called *the* Lexical Approach). Lewis argues that 'language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar'. In other words, he challenges the traditional view that language competence consists of having a foundation of grammatical structures into which we slot individual words. Instead, we store a huge assortment of memorised words, phrases and collocations, along with their associated 'grammar'. In order to maintain conversational fluency, we select from this

vast phrase book the chunks we need, and then fine-tune for grammar. Thus, to make a request, we might select the chunk *D'you think you could …* and tack on to it another chunk – *turn the volume down?* – while at the same time making any appropriate grammatical adjustments to ensure the two chunks stick together neatly. (Compare that with: *Would you mind + turnING the volume down?*) According to a lexical approach, language learning is essentially a process of item learning, as opposed to rule learning. In fact, Lewis is very sceptical about the value of studying traditional grammar rules at all.

It should be clear that the lexical syllabus of Dave and Jane Willis and Michael Lewis's Lexical Approach share a number of features. Both acknowledge the important meaning-making function of vocabulary, and both question the traditional distinction between vocabulary and grammar. In their view, words are really 'small grammar' and grammar is 'big words'. Where these writers differ is in their classroom approach, the Willises favouring a **task-based approach** to learning the semantic syllabus, while Lewis argues for a more analytic, text-based approach, in which texts are examined for the kinds of chunks embedded in them.

Teaching lexical chunks

So far we have been talking about lexical chunks as if they were a single undifferentiated category. But, as we saw in Chapter 1 (page 6), there are different types of chunks and different degrees of 'chunkiness'. Of the different types, the following are the most important for teaching purposes:

- collocations – such as *widely travelled; rich and famous; make do with; set the table*
- phrasal verbs – such as *get up; log on; run out of; go on about*
- idioms, catchphrases and sayings – such as *hell for leather; get cold feet; as old as the hills; mind your own business; takes one to know one*
- sentence frames – such as *would you mind if …?; the thing is …; I'd … if I were you; what really gets me is …*
- social formulae – such as *see you later; have a nice day; yours sincerely*
- discourse markers – such as *frankly speaking; on the other hand; I take your point; once upon a time; to cut a long story short …*

Within these categories further distinctions can be made in terms of **fixedness** and **idiomaticity**. Fixed chunks are those that don't allow any variation: you can say *over the moon* (to mean *ecstatic*) but not *under the moon* (to mean *not ecstatic*). Nor *over the full moon, over the sun*, etc. Many chunks are semi-fixed, in that they allow some degree of variation. *Nice to see you* is semi-fixed in that it allows *lovely, good, wonderful*, etc. in the *nice* slot, and *meet, talk to, hear from*, etc. in the *see* slot.

Some chunks are transparent in that the meaning of the whole is clear from their parts, as in the case of *as old as the hills* and *to knock down*. Others are much more idiomatic: *to spill the beans* and *to knock off* (meaning *to steal*). Neither fixedness nor idiomaticity are absolute values, however. Rather there is a cline from very fixed to very free, and from very idiomatic to very transparent. Phrasal verbs are a case in point. Some phrasal verbs are

syntactically flexible: *I'll bring up the paper* or *I'll bring the paper up*. Others are not: *I can't tell the twins apart* but not *I can't tell apart the twins*. Moreover, the combination *bring up* has a range of meanings, some literal (*I'll bring up the paper*), some semi-idiomatic (*Don't bring that subject up again*) and some very idiomatic (*They brought their children up to speak Italian*).

The ability to deploy a wide range of lexical chunks both accurately and appropriately is probably what most distinguishes advanced learners from intermediate ones. How is this capacity developed? Probably not by learning rules – as we saw with word formation, the rules (if there are any) are difficult to learn and apply. A lexical approach is based on the belief that lexical competence comes simply from:

- frequent exposure, and
- consciousness-raising

To which we could perhaps add a third factor:

- memorising

Classroom language provides plentiful opportunities for exposure to lexical chunks. Many learners are familiar with expressions like *I don't understand* and *I don't know* long before they have been presented with the 'rules' of present simple negation. By increasing the stock of classroom phrases, teachers can exploit the capacity of chunks to provide the raw material for the later acquisition of grammar. Many teachers cover their classroom walls with useful phrases and insist on their use whenever an appropriate opportunity arises. A sampling of phrases I have noticed on classroom walls includes:

What does X mean?
How do you say X?
What's the (past/plural/opposite, etc.) of X?
Can you say that again?
Can you write it up?
How do you spell it?
I'm not sure.
I've forgotten.
I left it at home.
I haven't finished yet.
It's (your/my/his) turn.
You go first.
Here you are.
Pass me the ...
Let's have a break.
etc.

The repetitive nature of classroom activity ensures plentiful exposure to these chunks. This is vital, because occasional and random exposure is insufficient. Many learners simply aren't aware if a combination is one that occurs frequently (and is therefore a chunk) or if it is a 'one-off'. Nevertheless, there is more chance of encountering instances of chunking in authentic text than in text that has been 'doctored' for teaching purposes.

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This is yet another argument for using authentic texts in the classroom, despite the difficulties often associated with them.

Here, for example, is an extract from a fairly well-known authentic text:

Yo, I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,
So tell me what you want what you really really want
I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,
So tell me what you want what you really really want
I wanna I wanna I wanna I wanna I wanna really really really wanna
zigazig ha
If you want my future, forget my past,
If you wanna get with me, better make it fast
Now don't go wasting my precious time
Get your act together we could be just fine ...

If you wannabe my lover, you gotta get with my friends
Make it last forever, Friendship never ends
If you wannabe my lover, you have got to give,
Taking is too easy but that's the way it is.
What d'ya think about that? Now you know how I feel.
Say you can handle my love, are you for real?
I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try
If you really bug me then I'll say goodbye

(from *Wannabe* by the Spice Girls)

Like many pop songs, the lyrics of this song are rich in lexical chunks, including sentence frames (*I'll tell you what I ...; what I really [really] want [is ...]; If you wanna ... better ...; If you really, then I'll ...*), collocations (*wasting my precious time; last forever; taking it ... easy; give you a try*), and catchphrases (*better make it fast; get your act together; that's the way it is; are you for real?*).

How could you use the above song text? Essentially, the approach need not be very different from the approach to the legal English text on page 110. That is:

- check understanding of text (for example, by eliciting a paraphrase or translation of the text)
- using transcript, set tasks focusing on features of words in combination

Examples of such tasks might be:

- Underline all contractions. Decontract them (i.e. *wanna* = *want to*)
- Find examples of these sentence patterns in the song:
  ... tell ... what ...
  If you ... imperative ...
  If you ... you have got to ...
  If you ... then I'll ...
- Write some more examples, using these patterns, that would fit the theme of the song.
- Use examples from the song to show the difference between *tell* and *say*.

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• Find the verbs that fill these slots: ____ *it fast;* ____ *my precious time;* ____ *your act together;* ____ *forever;* ____ *it easy;* ____ *goodbye.*

Their repetitiveness, combined with their tendency to incorporate a lot of spoken chunk-type language, make pop songs a useful resource for vocabulary work. And not only do they recycle many current idioms and catchphrases, they are often responsible for introducing new ones into the language, such as *What I really really want* ... Advertising has a similar effect: think of *finger-licking good, it's the real thing* and *it reaches parts that other [...]s don't reach.*

But it is not just informal language that is rich in lexical chunks. As we saw earlier, legalistic language is richly patterned in this way. And so is the language of business. In fact, increasingly the teaching of business English recognises the importance of raising awareness about collocation.

Here, for example, is an exercise on collocations related to the word *sales:*

The word in the centre of the diagram is the **keyword**. There are different kinds of words in the **background** words. Use different coloured pens to underline the background words so that you divide them into groups. Find some two-word and three-word partnerships. Look for some partnerships which include **the keyword** and a verb from the background words. Write four sentences about your own situation. Use coloured pens or highlight the word partnerships so you can check them easily later.
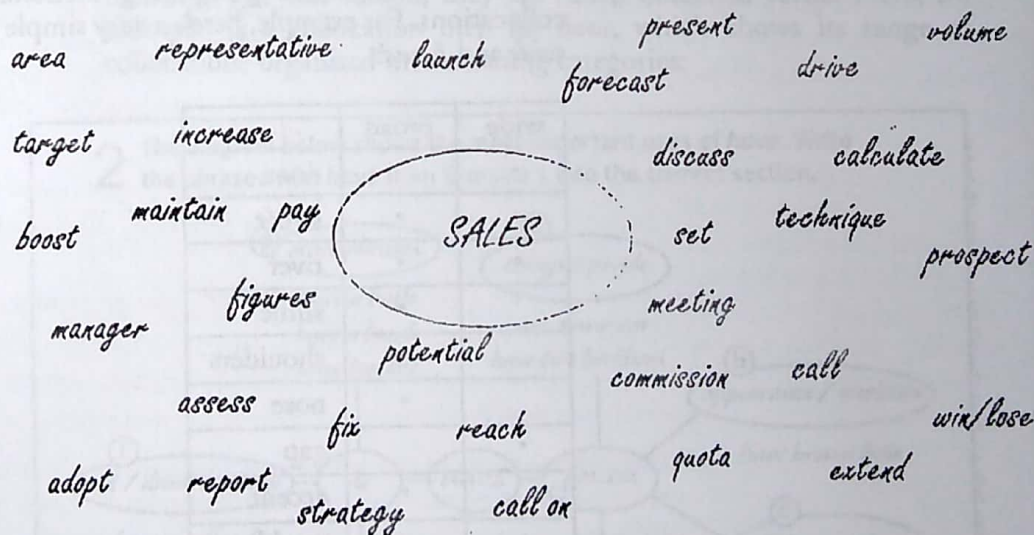
from Wilberg P and Lewis M,
*Business English: An Individual
Learning Programme,* LTP

Notice that the focus is not just on noun + noun collocations (*sales volume*) but on verb + noun + noun combinations (e.g. *boost our sales volume*). Chunks of this size require the addition of only a little real grammar to provide much of the substance of typical business text: *We need to boost our sales volume.*

Here are some more ideas for teaching **collocation**:

- Learners sort words on cards into their collocational pairs (e.g. *warm + welcome, slim + chance, golden + opportunity, lucky + break, mixed + reception*, etc). Use the same cards to play pelmanism (see page 97). Or they sort them into **binomial pairs** (pairs of words that follow a fixed sequence and often have idiomatic meaning such as *hot and cold, to and fro, out and about, sick and tired*). Or into groups, according to whether they collocate with particular 'headwords': e.g. *trip (business, day, round, return, boat)*, *holiday (summer, family, public, one month, working)* and *weekend (long, every, last, next, holiday)*. Follow up by asking learners to write sentences using these combinations.

- Read out a list of words: learners in groups think of as many collocations or related expressions as they can. Set a time limit – the group with the most collocations wins a point. Good words for this include parts of the body (*face, head, back, foot, hand*), colours (*red, green, blue, black*, etc.) and opposites, such as *weak/strong, narrow/wide, safe/dangerous, old/young*, etc.

- Fill in a collocational grid, using dictionaries, to show common collocations. For example, here's a very simple (and completed) one for *wide* and *broad*:

wide	broad	
•		door
•	•	street
•	•	river
	•	smile
	•	shoulders
	•	nose
•		gap
	•	accent
•		world
•	•	range
		variety
•		apart
•		awake

In preparation for writing or speaking activities, learners can spend some time searching databases for useful collocations. Ask them first to brainstorm any nouns and verbs they are likely to need, and then to check for common collocates, using a concordance program (see Chapter 5) such as the COBUILD corpus on the Internet or a collocation dictionary (such as the *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations*), or simply a good learners' dictionary. Here, for example, are collocates and compound words for keywords selected in preparation for a composition on the subject of *flying*. They were all found using entries in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*:
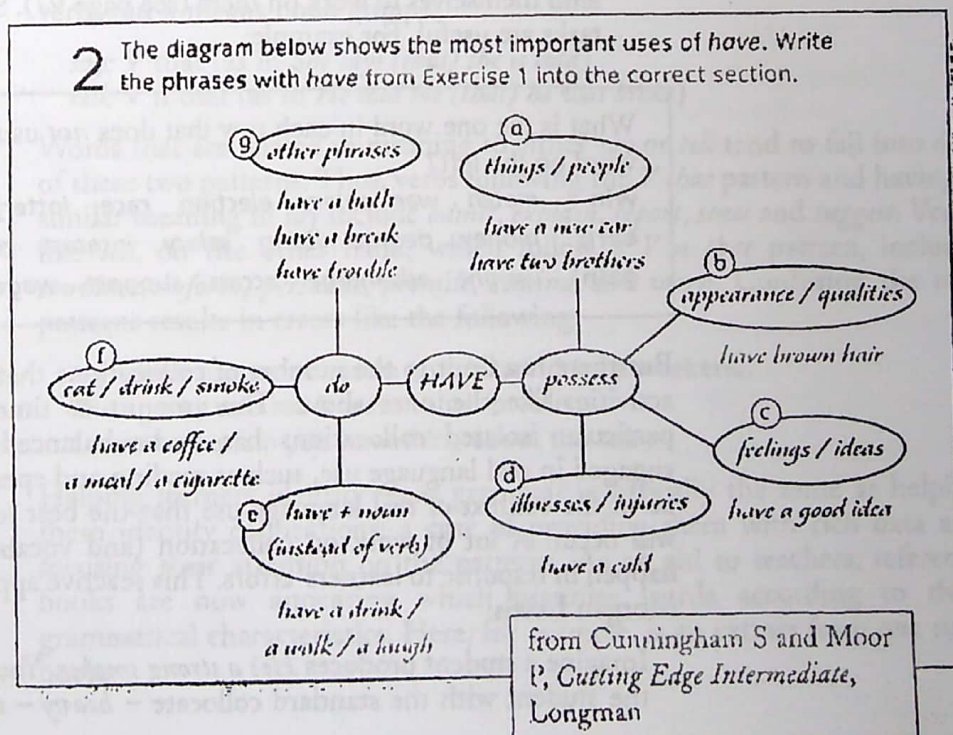
fly: fly direct, fly on to, fly economy class, fear of flying
flight: an hour's flight, my flight's been called, charter flight, flight attendant, flight path, flight recorder
air: by air, airborne, airbus, aircraft, aircrew, airfare, air hostess, airline, airplane, airport, airsick, air traffic controller
travel: travel by train, car etc, travel widely, travel around, travel light, travel the world; well-travelled, widely travelled

Ask learners to prepare 'collocation maps' of high frequency words and their collocates. Words like *have, take, give, make* and *get* lend themselves to this kind of treatment. They are often used in combination with nouns to form an expression which has a meaning of its own, as in *have a look, take a break, give advice, make an appointment*, so that the verb itself has little or no independent meaning. For this reason, they are called **delexical verbs**. Here, for example, is a collocation map for *have*, which shows its range of collocations organised into meaning categories:

> **2** The diagram below shows the most important uses of *have*. Write the phrases with *have* from Exercise 1 into the correct section.
>
> ⑨ *other phrases*
> have a bath
> have a break
> have trouble
>
> ⓐ *things / people*
> have a new car
> have two brothers
>
> ⓑ *appearance / qualities*
> have brown hair
>
> ① *eat / drink / smoke* — *do* — HAVE — *possess*
>
> ⓒ *feelings / ideas*
> have a good idea
>
> have a coffee /
> a meal / a cigarette
>
> ⓔ *have + noun*
> *(instead of verb)*
>
> ⓓ *illnesses / injuries*
> have a cold
>
> have a drink /
> a walk / a laugh
>
> from Cunningham S and Moor P, *Cutting Edge Intermediate*, Longman

Learners can either create their own maps using dictionaries (or concordance programs – see page 70), or add to an existing map, as this task (also from *Cutting Edge Intermediate*) suggests:

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3 **a)** Add the phrases below to the correct section of the diagram.

have a broken leg	have a party	have fun	have a lot of energy
have a holiday	have a meeting	have a strange feeling	have a wash

b) With which uses can you also use *have got*? What do you notice?

Teachers can exploit the fact that many film and book titles and names of pop groups are common collocations. Think of *Fatal Attraction, Desperate Measures, Deep Impact, The Usual Suspects* (all films) or *Dire Straits, Take That, Primal Scream* and *Public Enemy* (all names of groups). A search of the Internet quickly revealed that all the following collocations of *last* are names of bands: *Last Call, The Last Dance, Last Free Exit, Last in Line, Last Laugh, The Last Resort, Last Supper* and *Last Tuesday.* Learners can do the same – search for band names and check, using a dictionary, if they are common collocations or not. Alternatively, they could consult a dictionary, or a dictionary of collocations, in order to invent band names or film titles of their own.

Because of the two-part nature of collocations, any matching activities lend themselves to work on them (see page 97). Similarly, odd one out tasks are useful. For example:

What is the one word in each row that does *not* usually go with the word on the left?

win	match	war	salary	election	race	lottery
earn	money	degree	living	salary	interest	place
gain	weight	advantage	access	support	wages	experience

But there is a limit to the number of collocations that can be dealt with in activities like the ones above. The amount of time spent on targeting particular isolated collocations has to be balanced against time spent engaged in real language use, such as reading and speaking. It may, in fact, be in the context of real language use that the best learning opportunities will occur. A lot of work on collocation (and vocabulary generally) may happen in response to learners' errors. This reactive approach is described by Morgan Lewis:

Imagine a student produces *He's a strong smoker.* You could simply supply the student with the standard collocate – *heavy* – and move on. But an

ideal opportunity to activate language on the edge of the student's lexicon has been missed. It requires very little extra time or explaining to add: *occasional*, *chain* and *non* as more collocates of *smoker*.
(from Morgan Lewis in *Teaching Collocation*, LTP)

Finally, as a general approach to the teaching of lexical phrases and collocation, the following advice is sound:

- Become more aware of phrases and collocations yourself.
- Make your students aware of phrases and collocations.
- Keep an eye on usefulness and be aware of overloading students.
- Feed in phrases on a 'little but often' basis.
- Introduce phrases in context, but drill them as short chunks.
- Point out patterns in phrases.
- Be ready to answer students' questions briefly.
- Keep written records of phrases as phrases.
- Reinforce and recycle the phrases as much as you can.

(from *Cutting Edge Intermediate Teachers' Book*, Longman)

Teaching word grammar

It may seem out of place to be talking about grammar in a book on vocabulary. However, there is only a thin line – if indeed there is a line at all – between these two areas of language. As we saw in Chapter 2, knowing a word means knowing its associated grammar. What exactly is the associated grammar of a word? It is those patterns of words that typically co-occur with it. For example, a word like *say* has a different grammar from a word like *tell*. You can *tell someone something* but you can't *say someone something*. The grammar of *say* and *tell* can be represented like this (where *V* means verb, and *n* means noun group):

say: V that (as in *She says (that) she is cold*)
tell: V n that (as in *He told me (that) he was broke*)

Words that are related in meaning to either *say* or *tell* tend to fall into one of these two patterns. Thus, verbs following the *V that* pattern and having a similar meaning to *say* include *admit*, *explain*, *report*, *state* and *suggest*. Verbs like *tell*, on the other hand, which follow a *V n that* pattern, include: *convince*, *inform*, *persuade*, *promise*, *remind* and *warn*. Confusing the two patterns results in errors like the following:

My friend suggested me to go to Madrid for a weekend.
The agency said me it wasn't their problem.
I want to explain you something about the tour.

Helping learners identify word grammar is basically the same as helping them identify collocations: a case of providing them with rich data and focusing their attention on the patterns. As an aid to teachers, reference books are now appearing which organise words according to their grammatical characteristics. Here, for example, is an extract from one such book:

2 Some verbs are followed by a noun group and a that-clause. For example, in *I told her that there had been an accident*, the verb *tell* is followed by the noun group *her* and the that-clause *that there had been an accident*. This pattern is **V n that.**

After most of these verbs, the word *that* is often left out, especially in speech.

Active pattern

	Verb group	noun group	that-clause
He	told	me	he loved me.
They	had warned	me	that it would hurt.

Passive pattern

	Verb group	that-clause
He	was informed	that he had been disqualified.
He	was told	that it could never happen.

Verbs with this pattern are concerned with causing someone to know or think something.

assure	guarantee	promise	satisfy	tell
bet	inform	reassure	show	warn
convince	persuade	remind	teach	

*We are pleased to **inform** you that we have been able to accept your application.*

*I **reminded** her that on several occasions she had remarked on the boy's improvement.*

from *Verbs: Patterns and Practice, Classroom Edition,* Collins COBUILD

Teaching phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are another instance of the fuzziness at the boundary between words and grammar. They are particularly problematic for learners both because of their lexical meanings (which are often idiomatic) and their grammatical form. Here is how phrasal verbs are often grouped, according to their grammar:

2 There are four types of phrasal verb.

Type 1: intransitive e.g. *come to* (recover consciousness)
These don't take an object.

Type 2: transitive inseparable e.g. *look into* (investigate)
These must take an object which always comes after the verb.

Type 3: transitive separable e.g. *put off* (postpone)
The object can either come between the verb and the particle or after the verb. If we use a pronoun then it must go between.

Type 4: three-part, e.g. *put up with* (endure)
These are always transitive inseparable.

from Naunton J, *Think Ahead to First Certificate,* Longman

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Traditional approaches to the teaching of phrasal verbs have tended to focus on these rules. Hence, when phrasal verbs are presented they are categorised according to whether they are Type 1, Type 2, etc. They are also often grouped according to their lexical verb (that is, the word that carries the major share of the meaning): *get up, get back, get off, get over*, etc, and exercises are designed to test the learner's knowledge of the difference. For example:

Use phrasal verbs with *get* to complete these sentences:
1 I can't _____ how much Julia has changed: it's amazing!
2 Excuse me, I want to _____ at the next stop.
3 The concert was cancelled so I'm going to see if I can _____ my money _____.

Typical exercise types used in the teaching of phrasal verbs include:

* sentence gap-fills (as the example above)
* re-phrasing: e.g. changing the verb in the sentence (e.g. *depart*) to a phrasal verb that has a similar meaning (e.g. *set off*)
* matching: e.g. matching the phrasal verb with its synonym

More recently, exercise types have focused on the meanings of the **particles** – a particle being the adverb or preposition component of the phrasal verb (*in, back, off, around*, etc). A focus on particles aims to sensitise learners to the shared meanings of a group such as *carry on, drive on, hang on, go on* and *come on*. Here, for example, is an exercise sequence that deals with the particle *down*:

Phrasal verb study

Down

Down is an adverb and a preposition. The basic meaning of down is to do with movement from a higher position or level to a lower one. In the text on page 36 of the Students' Book you read:

In 1948 Tennessee Williams and I *drove down* in his jeep from Rome to Naples ...

1 a Match these descriptions of *down* phrasal verbs with the sentences below.

1 Movement and position
2 Decreasing, lowering and reducing
3 Fastening and fixing
4 Collapsing and attacking
5 Completeness, ending and change
6 Eating and drinking
7 Writing and recording

I drank down my double Scotch eagerly. _____

The lid of the box was nailed down. _____

The water floods their homes or breaks down the walls. _____

Go and lie down on your bed. _____

If the firms failed to make enough money, they would close down. _____

They ask me the date and flight number: I always write it down so I'll remember. _____

It's a bit hot in here – turn it down. _____

b Here are five more *down* phrasal verbs. Check their meaning in your dictionary and write a sentence for each one.

drive down –
cool down –
stick down –
kick down –
note down

from Radley P and Millerchip C,
Workout Upper Intermediate,
Longman

The systematic approach to the teaching of phrasal verbs reflects the rule-driven approach to the teaching of word formation. But there is no reason to believe that a rule-driven approach is any more effective with phrasal verbs than it is with composite words. Often the rules are so daunting that learners tend to avoid using phrasal verbs for fear of making mistakes – not a good basis for mastering an important area of language. It may be the case that phrasal verbs are best learned on an item-by-item basis, and preferably in short contexts that demonstrate their syntactic behaviour. The following passage, which comes from a guide to the Cambridge First Certificate in English examination, offers some good advice to students:

1 Whenever you read a book, newspaper or text in English, get into the habit of *identifying* and underlining phrasal verbs ...
2 Write down in a special notebook the sentences in which they appear.
3 Use your English–English dictionary to look up the meaning, and write this after your sentence.
4 Try to write your own sentence using the same phrasal verb in a different context.
5 Get an English teacher or friend to check that your sentences are correct.
6 Limit the number of new phrasal verbs you collect to, say, two or three each day; if you do five or ten minutes' good work with each, you will quickly build up a useful stock of words which you have actually seen used in the English you have read.

(from Naylor H and Hagger S, *First Certificate Handbook*, Hulton Educational)

This approach is self-directed and text-based, and, admittedly, assumes a high degree of motivation on the part of the learner. Nevertheless, the approach can be adapted to the classroom. For a start, the teacher can increase the probability of learners coming across phrasal verbs by providing texts that are likely to have a high frequency of phrasal verbs in them. Because phrasal verbs are often idiomatic they tend, like other idioms, to cluster together – where you find one, you are likely to find others. Here, for example, is a short text from a magazine with the phrasal verbs underlined:

Next time you go <u>rushing off</u> to <u>sign up for</u> an exercise class, consider first what you want to <u>get out of</u> it. [...] If you really want to de-stress, <u>set</u> an hour or so <u>aside</u> afterwards to go home, listen to music and have a leisurely shower or bath. <u>Working out</u>, having a shower and then <u>dashing back</u> to work or <u>rushing on</u> to meet friends just doesn't allow you enough time to benefit fully from the relaxing after-effects of exercise.

(from *New Woman* magazine)

Some books on phrasal verbs present theme-related sets of verbs in specially written texts. Thus, a text about relationships may include such phrasal verbs as *go out with, get on with, fall out, split up, make up, get back together*, etc. As with lexical sets (see page 37), however, there is a danger that words of too similar a meaning will interfere with each other – especially if they

have a similar form (e.g. *go out with, get on with*). A looser and more natural relationship may be more effective, such as the way words occur in a text, as in this example:

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1 In the listening exercise on page 31 you will hear six new phrasal verbs. They are in bold type in this paragraph. From their context, work out which ones mean:

to leave   to recover consciousness   to finish
to arrive   to begin suddenly   to escape

War had **broken out** in the desert kingdom and we realized that we had to **get away**. Amanda **turned up** at my apartment three hours late, so we immediately got the car and **set off** across the desert. Soon, our petrol supply **ran out**, but we managed to beg some from a passing lorry. We were within sight of the border, when there was a sudden, loud bang and everything went black. When I **came round**, night had fallen and Amanda was watching over me with a worried expression. It was then that I realized we had driven over a landmine.

2 Complete these sentences by using each phrasal verb once.

1 He is still unconscious; I'll call you when he ....
2 She was so unhappy at home that she just had to ....
3 If you .... late, you won't be allowed into the concert.
4 We'll have to .... really early to catch the ferry.
5 Just use a cheque if your cash ....
6 A flu epidemic has .... at work; I hope I don't catch it.

from Naunton J, *Think Ahead to First Certificate*, Longman

Note that the occurrence of phrasal verbs in the text is fairly natural and that they are highlighted in order to promote noticing. Moreover, the tasks in this sequence move from recognition to production and the exercise is not encumbered with complex explanation or categorisation. All of these ingredients are conducive to successful vocabulary learning.

Finally, teachers should also try and include phrasal verbs in their classroom language as much as possible – and draw attention to these from time to time. Common classroom expressions incorporating phrasal verbs are *sit down, put your hand up, turn your papers over, write this down, cover the page up, look it up, hurry up* and *calm down!* By this means, exposure to a rich diet of phrasal verbs can begin on Day 1 of the course.

Teaching idioms

We've seen that many phrasal verbs are idiomatic – in that their meanings are not easily unpacked from their component parts. Knowing the meaning of *put* and *up* allows us to interpret the sentence *I put up a shelf in the kitchen*. But this knowledge is not much help in unpacking either *I put Luke up for the weekend* or *I put up with Luke for the weekend*. Both these last examples are idiomatic. Idiomaticity exists at both the single word and multi-word level. Individual words can be used figuratively, as in *This plan doesn't grab me*; *The kitchen is a pigsty*; *I can't unpack the meaning of this idiom*. More typically, idioms are formed from collocations, and vary from being both very fixed and very idiomatic (*smell a rat; the coast is clear*) to being both less fixed and less idiomatic (*explode a myth/theory, etc; run a business/theatre, etc*).

Idioms present problems in both understanding and in production. They are difficult to understand because they are not easily unpacked, and they are difficult to produce because they often allow no variation. Few errors sound more comical than an even slightly muddled idiom (e.g. *I don't want to blow my own horn*, instead of *I don't want to blow my own trumpet*). Moreover, many idioms have a very narrow register range, being used only in certain contexts and for certain effects. They therefore need to be approached with a great deal of caution, and most teaching guides recommend teaching them for recognition only.

Traditional teaching approaches tend to group idioms together according to some category, and present them in sets. But, as with phrasal verbs, teaching a set of idioms that are notionally related – such as idioms associated with parts of the body (*down at heel, put your feet up, foot the bill, toe the line*, etc.) – would seem to be a sure recipe for confusion. It's not difficult to imagine what could go wrong: *put your heels up, toe the bill*, etc. More typically, idioms are grouped by theme. For example, the expressions *under the weather, off colour, run down* and *out of sorts* are all synonymous with *ill*. But again, if these are being taught for production, the potential for confusion is high.

As with phrasal verbs, a more effective and less perilous approach might be simply to teach them as they arise, and in their contexts of use. That is, to treat them as individual lexical items in their own right, without making a *song and dance* about them. Since idioms tend to cluster together, certain text types are often very rich in them. In this extract (from *Sugar*) idioms (including idiomatic phrasal verbs) are underlined.

Eastenders

Martin gets a big wake-up call this month when Mark is taken seriously ill. How will he cope knowing his big bro's <u>days could be numbered</u> and will Nicky <u>stick by him</u> <u>through thick and thin</u>?

Home and Away
Tom offers to pay for Justine's courses in the city with the money he earned from acting in the commercial. What a sweetie, eh? However, Justine isn't that impressed, and feels that Tom's <u>cramping her style</u>. How can she <u>let him down</u> gently?

Coronation Street
The Mike, Mark and Linda triangle's still <u>going strong</u>, and <u>sparks are beginning to fly</u> between Linda and Mark's new girlie, Claire. Eeek! Things aren't too good over at the Platt's either.

Emmerdale
Mark is annoyed when neither of his parents <u>make it</u> to the parent's evening ... how embarrassing! Richie lends Sarah <u>a shoulder to cry on</u> after yet another bust-up with Jack. Will those two ever <u>get on</u>?

To use a text like this in class, learners could be set the task of working out the underlined idioms from either their form or their context. For example, *going strong* is easily unpacked from its components. *Sparks are beginning to fly* is less obvious, but its negative connotation can be deduced from what follows (*Eeek! Things aren't too good ...*). Showing learners how to work out idiomatic meaning from these kinds of clues can not only contribute to passive vocabulary knowledge but can improve reading skills as well.

Conclusions

There is more to words than simply 'words'. In this chapter we have seen:
- how parts of words combine in systematic ways to form whole words
- how whole words combine in systematic ways to form chunks

But, the fact that these combinations are systematic does not mean that the teaching of word formation or of word combination should necessarily be rule-based. The systems may be too complicated or too irregular to be of much use to learners, either for receptive or productive purposes.

Instead, an approach that combines frequent and contextualised exposure with consciousness-raising may work best. This is recommended for the teaching of:
- composite words
- collocations
- phrasal verbs
- idioms

Looking ahead

So far we have been concerned with teaching and learning. But, for various reasons and at various stages in the process, the learning of vocabulary needs to be measured. In the next chapter we look at ways of testing vocabulary knowledge – both before, during and at the end of instruction.