

# Metaphorical Collocations Through the Prism of Language Teaching: Why and How They Should Be Included in ESP Vocabulary Instruction?

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## *Abstract*

Figurative language is part of our everyday interactions to a much larger degree than we are probably aware. Metaphorical collocations (MCs) are a specific subset of figurative expressions and as such are currently deemed a necessary part of any language teaching curricula. In MCs, the base, which is usually a noun, retains its literal meaning whereas the collocator (e.g., an adjective or a verb) is used figuratively (Stojić & Košuta 2021). In this paper, the presence of English (L2) metaphorical collocations in a specific set of maritime newspaper articles is explored from the perspective of L2 corpus frequency and the existence of L1 equivalent expressions. Finally, teaching methods are proposed on how to include MCs in ESP vocabulary instruction in a learner-friendly manner that should yield better retention than the traditional approach to vocabulary instruction.

**Keywords:** metaphorical collocations, ESP, vocabulary instruction, corpus frequency.

## 1. Introduction

Figurative language (FL) in language instruction is no longer as neglected as it used to be in the past. Teaching material design has come a long way from including FL in “bonus” vocabulary exercises to dedicating entire teaching sections to FL vocabulary instruction. Collocations receive a special treatment in this regard due to its immense productivity which earns them the status of being “challenging” to teach and learn respectively. In Evert’s (2008: 1212) words, “the concept of collocations is certainly one of the most controversial notions in linguistics”, and, we might add, one of the most difficult categories to determine. Collocations are not exactly free combinations, but they are not as fixed as, for example, idiomatic expressions (see Moon, 1998). The Croatian Collocation Database (the Institute for the Croatian Language) defines collocations as word combinations with more restricted or specific meaning, as opposed to free combinations of words. Evert (2008) discusses collocations from the perspective of phraseological theory where collocations are viewed as a category on an imaginary continuum between completely opaque multiword expressions (MWEs) on the one end (e.g. idiom *gather rosebuds* ‘to act and enjoy oneself now, before one’s situation changes’) and semantically compositional, free word combinations on the other end (e.g. *gather pumpkins*, *gather everyone*, etc.). Macis and Schmitt (2016) mention the limited view of collocations from the perspective of teaching materials in which collocations are regarded as merely word partners that co-occur together. In this paper we adopt Mel’čuk et al.’s (1995) view of collocations that identifies them as word combinations in which one element, usually the base, retains its basic, i.e. literal, meaning, and the other element, usually the collocator, is used in its metaphorical sense. This definition goes in line with that of

Patekar (2022: 44) who identifies metaphorical collocations (MCs) as having only the collocator that is used metaphorically whereas collocations where the base is used in its metaphorical sense (e.g., *political suicide*) are referred to as simply “metaphorical expressions”. According to this view, instances of collocations where both the base and the collocator are used metaphorically are also classified as another type of metaphorical expressions, and not MCs (e.g., the adjective-noun collocation *green light* or the previously mentioned verb-noun idiom *gather rosebuds*). Grossmann and Tutin’s (2016) definitions of collocations seems to support this view; they identify them as “recurrent binary associations of meaningful words, which have a syntactic and a semantic relation” (p. 271). In these associations, the semantic meaning of the base can be interpreted outside its relation to the collocator and the semantic meaning of the collocator can only be constructed in cooccurrence with the base. In this way, collocations are basically expressions in which the meaning of one of the words has been modified to an extent. Evert (2008) labels them as “semi-compositional expressions”, i.e., word combinations that show a tendency to co-occur in natural language. Their meaning can be partially derived from the meanings of individual words (e.g., *heavy smoker*) unlike metaphorical expressions (e.g., *black sheep*) where the phrase meaning is far less transparent. Macis and Schmitt (2016) also draw attention to individual learner differences and not just the collocation’s semantic properties as playing a role in phrase comprehension. What Patekar (2022) refers to as “metaphorical expressions”, Macis and Schmitt (2016: 51) label “figurative expressions” whose meaning is non-compositional and cannot be deduced from the meanings of individual constituents (e.g., knowing that *black* stands for color and *sheep* for a domestic animal will not result in the meaning of the phrase *black sheep* “a member of a family or group who is regarded as a disgrace to it”). Macis and Schmitt (2016) also mention “duplex collocations” that have both literal and figurative interpretations (e.g., *green light* can literally refer to a traffic light or metaphorically to someone’s consent).

- Metaphorical collocations (MCs) are a specific subset of figurative expressions that are a necessary part of any language teaching curricula.
- Verb-noun collocation types are frequently included in common ELT exercise formats such as matching sets of verbs and nouns.
- Teaching material design is still lagging behind the current theoretical findings on figurative language, specifically collocations.
- L1 transfer should be utilized in vocabulary instruction of MCs whose identical expressions can be found in L1.
- If L1 equivalent expressions do not exist, conceptual metaphors should be used instead of L1 transfer to facilitate the teaching of MCs.

In this paper, we use the term *metaphorical collocation* to refer to those word associations where at least one constituent is used metaphorically. We further expand on the definitions proposed in literature and include collocations where both the base and the collocator are used metaphorically.

### 1.1 On teaching collocations

As with all other aspects of FL, collocations do not occupy a predefined space in vocabulary lessons. This is to say, they are normally introduced as “vocabulary boost” exercises and usually at a more advanced level of language learning (Doiz & Elizari, 2013; Forsberg, 2010). Figurative speech in L2 has long been deemed as a native or a near native-level skill (Charteris-Black, 2002). However, recent decades have seen a rise of interest in FL inclusion in language instruction even at lower levels of proficiency. Collocations are now an integral part of many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks with verb-noun collocation types frequently included

in common exercise formats such as matching sets of verbs and nouns (Boers et al., 2014). Recent awareness of the role of FL in everyday communication has incited a shift in focus that has almost exclusively resided on the literal use of L2. This came as a direct result of studies into the nature of FL instruction that revealed the use of figurative language helps overcome some of the difficulties an advanced language learner experiences (e.g. insufficiently motivating materials, reaching a vocabulary acquisition plateau, etc.) by expanding the learners' vocabulary (Danesi, 2008). The positive effect of FL instruction has also been discussed in relation to how learners "organize, learn and recall vocabulary, and have greater success in their on-line comprehension of previously unseen expressions" (Phillip, 2005:16). However, even if one is to acknowledge the beneficial effect of incorporating FL into vocabulary learning, we are faced with practical issues such as FL categorization, representation and teaching material design. This problem becomes even more evident in the field of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) where terminology bears much significance in vocabulary instruction. Kövecses (2012) discusses ways how idioms can be organized in a dictionary, that, we believe, can be applied to how collocations might be systematized in ESP teaching materials. In the case of FL in general, cognitive linguists suggest organizing vocabulary units in a way that reflects the presumed conceptual structuring in our minds should represent the most effective way of presenting FL to language learners. Kövecses (2012) examines three dominant ways FL is represented in dictionaries, namely idioms. As opposed to the traditional alphabetical order of entries, the key word-based arrangement, and the thesaurus-like arrangement, the author suggests a metaphor-based arrangement is the most effective method of organizing FL units. However, if "the number of metaphorical idioms produced by conceptual metaphors is quite large" (Kövecses, 2012: 93), imagine how great that number would be if we were to look at metaphorical collocations whose syntactic structure is far less salient than that of idiomatic expressions.

If figurative language is generally underrepresented in ELT materials, metaphorical collocations are even more seldomly included in the materials. Macis and Schmitt (2016) analyzed a set of collocations for their meanings with the end goal of providing directions for language instructors. In their study they tried to determine whether a pattern of co-occurrence or a pattern of meaning played a more significant role in language instruction. In their choice of collocations, they limited themselves to more frequently appearing collocations (since high frequency words are usually acquired faster than lower frequency words) and they only looked at three most common verb + noun collocations and the three most common adjective + noun collocations. Their study corroborated the existence of metaphorical collocations and accentuated the need for teachers to become familiar with the different types of collocations (Macis & Schmitt, 2016). Led by the assumption that L2 learners are prone to making errors in collocation use under the influence of their L1, Peters (2016) investigated the effects of L1 (the existence of literal translation equivalent in L1) and word class (adjective-noun, verb-noun, phrasal verb-noun collocations) on learners' learning collocations. She concluded the difficulty learners encounter with L2 collocations arises from the fact that they fail to notice formal differences between L1 and L2 collocations when the meaning is transparent.

Whatever the case, metaphorical collocations seem to elude not only categorization, but also any attempt at proposing effective methodology that would offer a helping hand to learners mastering their large number (Cheng, 2019). The effectiveness of any such methodology will be based on available databases and inventories of collocations, therefore, developing collocation resources is a necessary first step in MC research (Stojić & Košuta, 2022). In our study we will attempt to propose different approaches to MC instruction in the ESP context drawing on existing resources on collocations in English and Croatian.

## 2. Method

Authentic maritime text was scanned for collocations using the *Feedspot.com* platform. The platform features various written forms such as news articles and maritime blogs to

deliver the latest news to its readers. The top 10 maritime blogs are ranked on *Feedspot.com*<sup>1</sup> by relevancy, authority, social media followers and freshness. *The Maritime Executive* website was chosen since it also features recordings of its articles, which enables multiple ways of presenting authentic content to learners. The article authored by Euan Graham and titled *UK-Mauritius Chagos Deal Removes Risk for Diego Garcia Naval Base* (1,383 words in length) was chosen for its inclusion of different collocations that are the focus of this study.<sup>2</sup> Once the authentic text was selected, it was scanned for different types of verb-noun collocations. In the next step, the metaphoricality of selected MCs was established as well as the existence of L1 translational equivalents. Finally, a teaching method for each type of MC was selected based on their specific properties that are listed below:

- 1) *Strength of co-occurrence* (the collocational strength of verb and noun collocates expressed in relative corpus frequency);
- 2) *Degree of metaphoricality* (the degree of phrase meaning transparency, establishing the metaphorical use of the collocator and the base);
- 3) *L1 congruency* (existence of L1 equivalent expression).

*Strength of co-occurrence* was established using the Word Sketch query available through the *SketchEngine* (SkE) platform. The L2 corpus used was the *enTenTen21* corpus of English comprising 61,585,997,113 tokens (52,268,286,493 words) and covering the largest variety of text types and web sources. Every noun collocate from the selected text was run through SkE to see which verbs are the most frequent collocates in the *Verbs with “noun” as object* column. All the verb collocates were then filtered to see if there are any instances of the verb-noun combination from the selected text appearing in the corpus. If yes, relative frequency (RF) was registered for that specific verb-noun combination.

The second step entailed establishing whether the verb-noun collocation was metaphorical (MC) or non-metaphorical (nonMC) in nature. Following the methodology for identifying MCs established in previous studies (Macis & Schmitt, 2016; Cheng, 2019), the verb collocator in each collocation was manually evaluated for degree of semantic transparency, i.e., whether the collocator was used in its non-literal sense therefore rendering the meaning of the entire collocation non-compositional (or at least semi-transparent in meaning).

The third step included the assessment of the collocation's *L1 congruency* following Peters' (2016) methodology. Each collocation that was tagged as (partially) metaphorical in Step 2 was further analyzed for L1 equivalent expressions. Equivalent collocations were searched using the Croatian Collocation Database (CCD). When the search would yield no matches, the L1 corpus (*hrWaC* in SkE) was consulted. The corpus search was a necessary step because, even though the CCD is sourced from Croatian newspapers, contemporary lexicographic manuals, scientific journals from the linguistics field, and Croatian corpora (*HrWaC* and the Croatian National Corpus (HNK)), it only included the most represented word combinations in Croatian. That is why corpus search was done to provide a wider collocational sketch for each noun base included in this study.

Different teaching approaches are then analyzed and specific vocabulary teaching strategies are put forth depending on the nature of collocations included in vocabulary instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [https://blog.feedspot.com/maritime\\_blogs/](https://blog.feedspot.com/maritime_blogs/). Accessed Sept 10, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> MaritimeExecutive.com. Available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/uk-mauritius-chagos-deal-removes-risk-for-diego-garcia-naval-base>. Accessed Sept 15, 2024.

### 3. Results

In total, the scanning of text yielded 46 verb-noun combinations. The total figure does not include phrasal verb collocators (e.g., *give up territory*) or verb-noun collocations with adjectival collocates (e.g., *send mixed signals*). However, instances in which the verb-noun collocation also appeared without the adjectival collocate (e.g., *receive (keen) focus*) were not omitted from further analysis. All 46 examples were run through SkE in order to obtain data on their relative frequency of appearance in the L2 corpus (see Table 1).

Table 1. Verb + noun expressions (N = 46) and their relative frequencies (RF, number of hits per million tokens) from SkE

V+N	RF	V+N	RF
make way	17,830	obtain an opinion	0,150
take a role	4,880	receive (keen) focus	0,140
reach an agreement	3,710	undertake repairs	0,100
make a (financial) commitment	3,470	end uncertainty	0,090
release a statement	2,890	deepen partnership(s)	0,070
break (international) law	2,790	constitute a benefit	0,050
sign the deal	2,770	hamper operations	0,050
provide security	2,480	ratify the deal	0,050
maintain balance	1,300	preserve base	0,041
continue operation(s)	1,290	criticize a deal	0,040
strike a deal	1,030	endorse the deal	0,040
receive income	0,860	chart a pathway	0,020
announce a deal	0,820	preserve status quo	0,020
seek access	0,700	jeopardize access	0,020
give blessing	0,580	fan anxieties	0,010
prompt a question	0,440	govern a base	0,010
delay decision	0,410	vacate the base	0,010
gather momentum	0,290	gauge the deal	0,010
maintain agreement	0,240	administer island	0,002
cause uncertainty	0,220	kick-start negotiations	<0,01
disrupt operations	0,210	get sovereignty	0,000
end dispute	0,180	relinquish sovereignty	0,000
open negotiations	0,150		

The expressions (N = 26) that appeared in the corpus with a relative frequency equal or larger than 0.1 per million tokens were included in further analysis. Each verb-noun expression was manually evaluated for potential metaphorical use of either the verb collocator (Mv+NMn), or both the collocator and the noun base (Mv+Mn). No instances were recorded where the noun base was used metaphorically and the verb collocator literally. Of the total number of expressions included in the analysis of metaphoricity, seven were judged as non-metaphorical, i.e. neither the

verb nor the noun collocator were used in their metaphorical sense (NMv+NMn). These expressions were excluded from subsequent analysis (Table 2).

Table 2. Classification of verb+noun expressions according to the metaphorical status of verb and noun collocates

<b>metaphorical verb + metaphorical noun (Mv+Mn)</b>	
make way	give blessing
make a (financial) commitment	gather momentum
maintain balance	take a role
<b>metaphorical verb + non-metaphorical noun (Mv+NMn)</b>	
reach an agreement	maintain agreement
release a statement	open negotiations
provide security	obtain an opinion
strike a deal	receive (keen) focus
seek access	undertake repairs
prompt a question	break (international) law
delay decision	
<b>non-metaphorical verb + non-metaphorical noun (NMv+NMn)</b>	
sign the deal	cause uncertainty
continue operation(s)	disrupt operations
receive income	end dispute
announce a deal	

The expressions that were found to be metaphorical in nature (N = 19) were cross-compared to collocation sources for L1 (Croatian) - the Croatian Collocation Database (CCD) and hrWaC (Croatian web corpus). Table 3 shows L1 equivalent expressions for every L2 metaphorical collocation with respective sources named in parentheses.

Table 3. A list of metaphorical collocations (N = 19) with equivalent expressions in L1 and their sources

<b>L2 collocation</b>	<b>L1 equivalent (source)</b>
make way	<i>krčiti /komu/ put</i> (CCD)
make a (financial) commitment	<i>dati /komu/ obećanje</i> (CCD) <i>vezati se obećanjem</i> (CCD)
give blessing	<i>dati svoj blagoslov</i> (CCD)
gather momentum	<i>dobivati snagu</i> (CCD) <i>prikupiti snagu</i> (CCD)
take a role	<i>preuzeti ulogu</i> (hrWaC)
maintain balance	<i>održavati ravnotežu</i> (CCD)
reach an agreement	<i>postići dogovor</i> (CCD) <i>doseći dogovor</i> (hrWaC)
maintain agreement	<i>držati se dogovora</i> (CCD) <i>poštivati dogovor</i> (hrWaC)
open negotiations	<i>započeti pregovore</i> (CCD) <i>pristupiti pregovorima</i> (CCD) <i>otvoriti pregovore</i> (hrWaC)
obtain an opinion	<i>zatražiti mišljenje</i> (hrWaC) <i>pribaviti mišljenje</i> (hrWaC)
receive (keen) focus	<i>pokloniti /komu/ pažnju</i> (CCD) <i>posvetiti /komu/ pažnju</i> (CCD)
undertake repairs	<i>obavljati/ izvoditi/izvesti popravke</i> (hrWaC)
release a statement	<i>dati izjavu</i> (CCD) <i>objaviti/ predati izjavu</i> (hrWaC)
provide security	<i>osigurati sigurnost</i> (CCD) <i>pružati sigurnost</i> (hrWaC)
strike a deal	<i>postići dogovor</i> (CCD)
seek access	<i>tražiti pristup</i> (hrWaC)
prompt a question	<i>nametati pitanje</i> (hrWaC)
delay decision	<i>promišljati prije odluke</i> (CCD) <i>preispitati/ odgađati odluku</i> (hrWaC)
break (international) law	<i>kršiti zakon</i> (CCD)

L1 equivalent expressions were identified for all 19 L2 collocations, with structurally identical expressions recorded in 11 cases (give blessing - *dati blagoslov*, gather momentum - *prikupiti snagu*, take a role - *preuzeti ulogu*, maintain balance - *održavati ravnotežu*, reach an agreement - *doseći dogovor*, open negotiations - *otvoriti pregovore*, obtain an opinion - *pribaviti mišljenje*, provide security - *pružati sigurnost*, seek access - *tražiti pristup*, delay decision - *odgađati odluku*, break the law - *kršiti zakon*).

#### 4. Discussion

Several factors should influence how metaphorical collocations are incorporated into vocabulary lessons. These, among others, include the collocation's degree of metaphoricity, its L1 congruency and, of course, collocation frequency. In ESP, learners are burdened with a lot of terminology that is essential to their passing the course, so additional vocabulary exercises should be carefully structured and aimed only at collocations they are more likely to encounter in everyday communication. That is why *break (international) law* (RF = 2,790) and *give blessing* (RF = 0,580) were chosen for inclusion whereas collocations such as *gauge the deal* (RF = 0,010) and *fan anxieties* (RF = 0,010) were not. In addition, the advantage of authentic texts lies in the fact that learners generally harbor positive attitudes to authentic teaching materials and are better motivated to learn from them (Elkasović & Jelčić Čolakovac, 2023). Apart from making sure our materials are relevant and up to date, L2 vocabulary should always be instructed bearing in mind the potential influence of L1. Following Irujo's (1986) conclusions, similar L1-L2 collocations are expected to be understood almost as well as MCs identical in structure, however, the similarities need to be accentuated in the instruction since L1 interference is usually prevalent in the production tests (Cooper, 1999). Furthermore, Irujo (1986) found that the easiest FL instances to remember were those whose literal meanings were closely related to their figurative meanings. This is why, in our study, special focus was given to the type of metaphorical collocation appearing in the text. Example (1) includes three instances of Mv + Mn collocations appearing in authentic context:

##### Example (1)

Mv + Mn

*India, Mauritius's de facto security guarantor, **has given** its tacit **blessing** to the sovereignty swap, which from its perspective is an optimal outcome.*

*Not everyone has been convinced of the validity of the Mauritian claim, despite its **gathering momentum** through international courts and the United Nations.*

*A carve-out for Diego Garcia that will preserve the administrative status quo for the base's operations on the island, with Britain effectively **taking a** caretaker **role** ...*

All three MCs (*give blessing*, *gather momentum*, *take a role*) have equivalent L1 expressions (*dati svoj blagoslov*, *prikupiti snagu*, and *preuzeti ulogu* respectively). As such, we argue that Mv + Mn collocations are included in vocabulary instruction along with their translational equivalents so as to allow for L1 transfer to be used as a learning strategy (see Koda, 1993; Cooper, 1999). One way of implementing this in a classroom is to present the collocations context-free and alongside L1 translational equivalents in order for the learners to focus solely on the comparable lexical structures of the collocations.

In Example (2) three Mv + NMn collocations are listed as they appear in the authentic text:

### Example (2)

Mv + NMn

*Britain was in a losing legal position and that an 'inevitable' binding judgment would force it either to abandon the base or **break** international **law**.*

*A joint **statement released** on 3 October 2024 left basic questions about the deal unanswered.*

*The government apparently believed it had to **strike a deal** on the best possible terms as soon as possible.*

In Example (2), the verb collocators in all three MCs are used metaphorically while the noun base retained its basic, literal meaning. *Break (international) law* is the only collocation to have an L1 equivalent expression (*kršiti zakon*). In the case of L2 MCs *release a statement* and *strike a deal* the verbs 'release' (lit. 'to give freedom or free movement to someone or something') and 'strike' (lit. 'to deal a blow or stroke to (a person or thing)') are used with their metaphorical senses. In Croatian collocations these verbs are replaced by *dati* ('give') and *postići* ('succeed'). Following Kövecses' (2012) rationale, underlying conceptual metaphors could be employed in the instruction of such L2 MCs where L1 equivalents cannot facilitate vocabulary learning.

### 5. Conclusion

The role of figurative language in everyday communication has been recognized and its effect on overall linguistic competence of an L2 learner has been the subject of various studies in the field of both vocabulary instruction and acquisition. However, teaching material design is still lagging behind the current theoretical findings on FL, specifically collocations. Metaphorical collocations as a specific subset of collocations are particularly difficult to categorize and ultimately include in a language instruction lesson. In the field such as ESP where terminology takes precedence, collocational fluency has particularly been neglected. Therefore it was the aim of this study to offer ESP practitioners guidance on how to incorporate authentic texts and FL instruction into their vocabulary lessons. For this purpose, a pre-selected maritime text was scanned for all verb-noun occurrences regardless of their collocational status. The expressions were then run through the corpus and relative frequencies were obtained for each occurrence. Only the expressions that appeared in the corpus with a relative frequency equal or larger than 0.1 per million tokens were further analyzed for metaphoricality. The metaphorical uses of verb collocators and noun bases were manually determined in relation to sentential context. The occurrences in which both the base and the collocator were found to be used in their literal sense were omitted from further analysis. The final list of L2 metaphorical collocations was tested against L1 corpus and L1 equivalent expressions were found for all the MCs on our list. We propose that L1 transfer is utilized in vocabulary instruction of MCs whose identical expressions can be found in L1; on the other hand, if such expressions do not exist, conceptual metaphors should be used instead of L1 transfer to facilitate the teaching of MCs.

### Acknowledgements

This paper was funded under the project line ZIP UNIRI of the University of Rijeka, for the project UNIRI-ZIP-2103-18-22.

The author declares no competing interests.

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