

# English Collocations in use

MICHAEL MCCARTHY & FELICITY O'DELL

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REVIEWED BY BRYAN COLEBORNE

Collocations are words that occur in patterns, such as *go shopping* or *to apply for a job*. Acquired naturally by native speakers, they present difficulties for foreign users of a language, who may make mistakes such as *\*go to shopping* or *\*to apply after a job*. They are different from idioms, which are really distinctive and more complex types of collocations that use words whose meanings cannot be inferred from what is known of the words themselves, such as *raining cats and dogs* or *to kick the bucket*. Collocations should be learnt, as Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell note, mainly because their correct use assists a learner to achieve the accuracy of form that occurs in natural speech and writing. They also help to develop a learner's vocabulary and style.

There are thousands of collocations in the language. McCarthy and O'Dell have worked from the massive resources of Cambridge University Press in order to develop the content of this guide for classroom use and self-study at intermediate level. They have chosen examples that are particularly suited to the needs of learners in spoken and written English, concentrating on the immediately useful, such as *to have a quick snack* and avoiding examples that are easily understood, such as *to eat an apple*. They have put aside forms such as *rancid butter*, on the grounds that their acceptance has become restricted. It would be worth stressing that the use of a formal register is likely to create difficulties in the colloquial circumstances of contemporary usage, where it is even regarded as dated.

The book contains 60 units, each of two pages, with examples and exercises neatly and effectively presented facing each other. A section of units at the beginning directs attention to the nature of collocations, the dictionary, register, and aspects of grammar and usage. The unit on metaphor is a particularly concise introduction to a difficult subject, which would be useful in a creative writing class. The remaining units are grouped in themes such as travel and the environment, people and relationships, and basic concepts (time, sound, distance and size, and so on) that are particularly appropriate for students who are coming to terms with the subtleties of usage. The result is a text that is most suitable for directed or personal study.

There are two problems with this kind of book. First, while a good deal of constructive thought has gone into its production, I would welcome some changes to its format in order to reduce the emphasis on the mechanics of language. The list of units in the contents contains sub-headings for different groups, dividing them into two kinds, those to do with understanding the linguistic aspects of collocations and those to do with themes. In the body of the book, however, the units are run on, one after the other. There should be an introduction to each group of themes, such as leisure and lifestyle, work and study, and society and institutions that makes the rationale for their choice clear and brings their human dimension alive. Second, *English Collocations in Use* belongs to an industry in which publishers compete with each other and recommend only their own products. In this case, users of the book are directed to the authors' *English Idioms in Use* and other Cambridge books, such as dictionaries. A suite of Cambridge publications is displayed on the back cover. While books of this kind support the work of teachers and students they also challenge them to transcend their limitations, lest those in the classroom and elsewhere become captives of market forces in a publishing culture that is doing very nicely.

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