A FOCUS ON COLLOCATIONS

1. From *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*

What is collocation?

Collocation is the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. For example, in English you say *strong wind* but *heavy rain*. It would not be normal to say **heavy wind* or **strong rain*. And whilst all four of these words would be recognized by a learner at pre-intermediate or even elementary level, it takes a greater degree of competence with the language to combine them correctly in productive use. To a native-speaker these combinations are highly predictable; to a learner they are anything but.

Combinations of words in a language can be ranged on a cline from the totally free – *see a man/car/book* – to the totally fixed and idiomatic – *not see the wood for the trees*. This idiom is not only fixed in form, it also has nothing whatever to do with wood or trees. Between these two extremes, there is a whole range of nouns that take the verb *see* in a way that is neither totally predictable nor totally opaque as to meaning. These run from the fairly 'weak' collocation *see a film* (which elementary students learn as a 'chunk' without pausing to reflect that this is not quite the literal meaning of *see*) through the 'medium strength' *see a doctor* to the 'stronger' collocations of *see danger/reason/the point*. All these combinations, apart from those at the very extremes of the cline, can be called collocation. And it is combinations such as these – particularly in the 'medium-strength' area – that are vital to communicative competence in English.

2. From *English Vocabulary in Use*

What is collocation?

If you want to use a word naturally, you need to learn the other words that often go with it (word partners). These can be very different from language to language. For example, in English we say:

I missed the bus (= I didn't catch the bus) [NOT ~~I lost the bus~~]
She made a mistake [NOT ~~she did a mistake~~]
A heavy smoker (= someone who smokes a lot) [NOT ~~a strong smoker~~ *or* ~~a big smoker~~]
It was a serious illness [NOT ~~a big illness~~ *or* ~~a strong illness~~]

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3. From *English Collocations in Use*

A collocation is a pair or group of words that are often used together. These combinations sound natural to native speakers, but students of English have to make a special effort to learn them because they are often difficult to guess. Some combinations just sound 'wrong' to native speakers of English. For example, the adjective *fast* collocates with *cars*, but not with *a glance*.

We say …	*We don't say …*
fast cars **fast food**	~~quick~~ cars ~~quick~~ food
a quick glance **a quick meal**	a ~~fast~~ glance a ~~fast~~ meal

Learning collocations is an important part of learning the vocabulary of a language. Some collocations are fixed, or very strong, for example **take a photo**, where no word other than *take* collocates with *photo* to give the same meaning. Some collocations are more open, where several different words may be used to give a similar meaning, for example **keep to / stick to the rules**. Here are some more examples of collocations.

You must **make an effort** and study for your exams (NOT ~~do~~ an effort)
Did you **watch TV** last night? (NOT ~~look at~~ TV)
This car has a very **powerful engine**. It can do 200 km an hour. (NOT ~~strong~~ engine)
There are some **ancient monuments** nearby. (NOT ~~antique~~ monuments)

Sometimes, a pair of words may not be absolutely wrong, and people will understand what is meant, but it may not be the natural, normal collocation. If someone says *I did a few mistakes* they will be understood, but a fluent speaker of English would probably say **I made a few mistakes**.

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