

Lesson Plan: Collocations & fixed expressions to sound more natural

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Lexical Focus: Collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions

Skills: Vocabulary accuracy, speaking, editing, noticing patterns

Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define collocations and fixed expressions.
2. Distinguish between **free combinations**, **collocations**, and **fixed expressions**.
3. Recognize why some word combinations sound “wrong” despite being grammatically correct.
4. Produce natural-sounding English using appropriate collocations for different registers.

Materials

- Board / slides
- Handout with examples
- Short authentic text (news article, opinion piece, academic excerpt)
- Optional: collocation dictionaries or corpus screenshots

1. Warm-Up (10 minutes): What Sounds Wrong?

Write on the board:

- A) **Make** a decision
- B) **Do** a decision

- A) **Strong** coffee
- B) **Powerful** coffee

Ask students:

- Which sound natural?
- Why can't we explain it with grammar rules?

Students discuss in pairs, then share.

Teacher note:

Elicit the idea that English prefers **habitual word partnerships**, not logical ones.

2. Clarifying the concepts (10 minutes)

Introduce the **collocation spectrum**:

1. Free combinations

Meaning is literal; many options possible.

buy a book / buy a car / buy time

2. Collocations

Words that commonly appear together.

make a mistake
heavy rain
deeply concerned

3. Fixed / Semi-fixed expressions

Little or no variation allowed.

by and large
at the end of the day
the sooner, the better

Highlight:

- Fixed expressions behave like **single lexical units**.
- Changing one word often breaks naturalness.

3. Core focus: Types of collocations (20 minutes)

A. Verb–noun collocations

make progress
reach a conclusion
pose a threat

Contrast with incorrect or awkward versions.

B. Adjective–noun collocations

strong argument
heated debate
growing concern

Explain how meaning shifts subtly:

- *strong rain* ❌
- *heavy rain* ✅

C. Adverb–adjective collocations (advanced)

highly unlikely
deeply offensive
painfully obvious

Point out that *very* is often replaced in advanced English.

D. Fixed & semi-fixed expressions

Examples:

- **Fixed:** *by and large, once and for all*

- **Semi-fixed:** *It's not so much X as Y*

Discuss:

- Which words can change and which cannot?

4. Controlled practice (15 minutes)

Task 1: Choose the natural option

1. commit / do / make a crime
2. absolutely / very / strongly exhausted
3. serious / heavy / big mistake
4. raise / increase / grow awareness

Students justify their choices.

Task 2: Error correction

Correct the collocation errors:

The company did a serious effort to solve the problem.

(Expected: *made a serious effort*)

5. Advanced practice: meaning & register (15 minutes)

Give pairs two options:

- A) a **big** problem
- B) a **major** problem

Students discuss:

- Which is more formal?
- Which would you use in:
 - An academic essay?
 - A conversation?

- A news report?

Repeat with:

- *totally wrong* vs. *fundamentally flawed*
- *very important* vs. *of vital importance*

6. Production task (15 minutes)

Option A: Collocation upgrade

Give students a basic paragraph and ask them to improve it.

Original:

The situation is very bad and makes many problems.

Improved:

The situation is **extremely serious** and **poses numerous challenges**.

Option B: Speaking

Students describe:

- A current issue
- A past experience
- A debate topic

Rule:

- Use at least **5 strong collocations or fixed expressions**

Peers listen and note good usage.

7. Wrap-Up & Reflection (5 minutes)

Discuss:

- Why native-like English relies more on vocabulary partnerships than grammar

- Why collocation errors are more noticeable than tense errors at advanced levels

Key takeaway for students:

Fluency is not about knowing more words — it's about knowing which words belong together.

Optional homework

- Keep a **collocation notebook** organized by key words.
- Extract collocations from a news article and classify them.
- Rewrite an old essay focusing only on collocation improvement.