Patterns after verbs

Aims

- To learn about the range of possible grammatical patterns after verbs.
- To develop awareness of the arbitrary nature of language, and the problems this can cause for learners.
- To become familiar with dictionaries as a source of information about word grammar.
- To consider ways of helping learners to learn about grammar more independently/outside the classroom.

Materials required

- An up-to-date learner dictionary, ideally at advanced level (see Further reading).

Appropriate for

- New teachers/More experienced teachers.

Look at these sentences. In each case, what's the mistake? How would you correct it?

1. *'Do you want go to the cinema tonight?'

2. *'I don't really enjoy to cook very much.'

3. *'If you have time, I recommend you to visit the art museum.'

4. *'The general ordered to begin the attack.'

5. *'Should we invite them on the party?'

In 1, the question should be 'Do you want to go …?' This is because the verb *want* must be followed by an infinitive with *to* (rather than a bare infinitive).

In 2, the sentence should be 'I don't really enjoy cooking …' because we use the *–ing* form (rather than an infinitive) after *enjoy*.

In 3, we could say 'I recommend visiting …' (an *–ing* form) or 'I recommend that you visit …' (a *that* clause).

In 4, the use of the infinitive *to begin* after *order* is correct – but *order* also needs an object: 'The general ordered them/the soldiers/the army to begin …'

Finally, in 5, the preposition is wrong: we *invite* people *to events* rather than *on* them.

In all these examples, we can see that verbs like *want*, *enjoy*, *recommend*, *order*, *invite* can only be followed by specific structures or **patterns**. Here are some common verb patterns:

These verbs …	… go with these patterns	Example sentences
can, must	bare infinitive	'You can go now.'
make, let	object + bare infinitive	'Let me go!'
hope, manage	infinitive with *to*	'I hope to see you again soon.'
remind, teach	object + infinitive with *to*	'Did you remind him to buy some milk?'
avoid, finish	*–ing* form	'We should avoid driving through London.'
imagine, stop	object + *–ing* form	'I can't imagine him being a doctor.'
say, think	*that* clause	'They said (that) they'd be here at six.'
persuade, tell	object + *that* clause	'They told us (that) they'd be here at six.'
learn, predict	*wh–* clause	'Nobody can predict what will happen.'
ask, show	object + *wh–* clause	'Can you show me how to do it?'
agree, decide	preposition	'We've already agreed on a plan.' 'Have you decided about this evening?'
challenge, congratulate	object + preposition	'He challenged me to a game of chess.' 'She congratulated us on our success.'

Three points about verb patterns:

- They are important! If learners are to use a verb correctly in their speaking or writing, it's not enough for them to know the meaning of the verb. They also need to know which patterns can (and can't) follow it.
- Many verbs have a number of different possible patterns. For example, we can *agree on* something, *about* something, *with* someone, *to* something, *to do* something. On the other hand, there will always be some patterns which are not correct. For example, we can't *agree *at* something, **doing* something, **someone *to do* something.
- Verb patterns are **arbitrary**. In other words, there are no reliable rules which say which patterns go with which verbs. Instead, learners simply have to learn by heart which patterns are (and are not) possible with any particular verb. For example, there seems no logical reason why we can say *I advise you to go* but not **I recommend you to go*.

Task 1

Which patterns are possible with these verbs? Make a list for each verb. To help you, think of example sentences and use the table of verb patterns above as a checklist.

1. love
2. stop
3. regret
4. complain

When you've finished, look up the verbs in a learner dictionary. A good learner dictionary will include detailed information about possible verb patterns, with example sentences. Some advanced dictionaries are listed in the Further reading section below. Check and add to your notes.

Task 2

What can we do in the classroom to help learners to notice, learn and use verbs with the correct patterns? Think of two or three ideas, then compare your ideas with the suggested answers.

Suggested answers to task 2

- Give learners practice in noticing patterns after verbs. For example, after reading a text, ask learners to find particular verbs in the text and underline the patterns which come after them. If you do this regularly, it should help learners to notice and remember verb patterns independently in the English they hear and read both inside the classroom and beyond.
- When learners record a new verb in their notebooks, encourage them to write down not just the verb itself but also one or two example sentences which illustrate the patterns which go with the verb.
- Give learners practice in using learner dictionaries to find out about verb patterns – for example, when noting down new verbs, when checking their work for mistakes, when doing some writing at work or at home.
- When you're teaching learners a new verb which you think they should be able to use in speaking or writing, make sure that the verb is presented in a clear context. Provide example sentences and highlight useful patterns. Avoid presenting verbs in isolation.
- Look out for mistakes with verb patterns when listening to your learners or reading their work. Put their mistakes on the board, then work with the learners to correct the mistakes. Highlight other possible patterns with the verb.
- When looking at a verb and its patterns with your learners, ask them to translate the sentences into their own first language. Find out if the patterns in the learners' first language and English are the same or different (there will often be some differences).

Further reading

Learner dictionaries:

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (2006) 5th ed. England: Collins.

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2007) 2nd ed. England: Macmillan.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) 8th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.