Lexical Collocation Errors in Essay Writing: A Study into Vietnamese EFL Students and Their Perceptions

Do Ngoc Hoang My[1][ID], Le Quang Thao[1*]

[1] Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[*] Corresponding author's email: thao.lq@vlu.edu.vn
[*] [ID] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5083-5730
[doi] https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.23221

ABSTRACT

Keywords: lexical collocation errors, EFL learners' perceptions, essay writing, collocation perceptions	Writing requires practicing language by combining words, not using them separately. Accordingly, EFL learners commit errors in lexical usage or lexical collocations. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of collocations in writing and identifying lexical collocation errors, but few researchers have looked into this field in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, this paper investigates lexical collocation errors of Vietnamese EFL learners in their writing essays and their perceptions. 104 English majors at a private university in Vietnam participated in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected, and essays and semi-structured interviews were research tools. The results show that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most common lexical collocation errors, which are attributed to learners' lack of competence, negative transfer, synonym strategy, and approximation. The interview results suggest EFL learners do not understand collocations adequately, so there should be guidelines and instructions from teachers for better collocation practice.

Introduction

Vocabulary has been demonstrated to play an essential role in L2 language proficiency (Thach, 2022) and in good writing (Vo, 2022). As Smith (2000, as cited in Alqahtani, 2015) pointed out, lexical knowledge is pivotal in communicative competence and the acquisition of a second language. Likewise, Decarrico (2001, as cited in Susanto, 2017) emphasized the importance of vocabulary learning, stating it is fundamental to language acquisition, regardless of the language role, i.e., first, second, or foreign. Vocabulary knowledge is so indispensable that the meaning cannot be transmitted entirely without lexical knowledge (Wilkins, 1972, as cited in Barcroft, 2004). Therefore, the comprehensible input of vocabulary is essential in learning (Thach, 2022). Among many aspects of vocabulary learning, collocation is considered the most important. Hosseini (2007) suggested a strong correlation between learners' general proficiency and collocational competence. However, collocation is the most challenging barrier for EFL

learners, and their collocation knowledge is moderate (Angkana, 2008; Huang, 2001; H. Nguyen & Webb, 2017). Such problematic issues of collocation competency have negatively influenced EFL learners' writing skills. As stated by Kim and Bae (2012), whereas there is a nonsignificant correlation between students' reading skills and collocation knowledge, a significant relationship between writing quality and collocation usage is found. In particular, learners are inclined to make mistakes mostly in lexical collocation (Shamsudin, Sadoughvanini & Zaid, 2013; Ying, 2009, as cited in Sadeghi & Panahifar, 2013). Lexical collocation errors are concerning problems in writing since they strongly correlate with the writing quality. Hsu (2007) concluded that Taiwanese college EFL learners' frequency of lexical collocations and their online writing scores are positively correlated.

In the Vietnamese context, the notion of learning and teaching collocations receives insufficient attention from teachers and learners (Bui, 2021). The curriculum designed for EFL learners concentrates predominantly on grammar orientation. As a result, EFL learners' vocabulary competency in general, and collocations in specific, is limited (Dang, 2020; Tran, 2013; Vu & Nguyen, 2019, as cited in Vu & Peters, 2021). Several studies have been conducted on collocation learning and usage, but few studies have been conducted on collocation errors and learners' perceptions of the situation. This research is intended to contribute to such a research area, suggest some corresponding pedagogical implications, and raise students' awareness of the importance of learning and using collocations in their writing. In particular, the study aims to find typical types of lexical collocation errors in Vietnamese EFL learners' writings. Besides, the researchers desire to gain insights into the sources of those mistakes and how students view the collocation concepts.

Literature review

Definitions of collocations

Many scholars have defined the term "collocations" in different ways.

The definition is introduced by adopting the frequency-based approach. Firth (1957) was mentioned to be the first linguist to introduce "collocation," which is the co-occurrence of particular word combinations (as cited in Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Evert, 2008; Hong, Quyen, Nhu & Yen, 2022). Later, other scholars gave a similar sense of definition to Firth that emphasized the frequency of a group of words co-occurring (Carter, 1998, as cited in Bartan, 2019; Lewis, 1993, as cited in Trang, Anh & Khanh, 2021; Nation, 2001, as cited in Setiarini, 2018). In addition, the co-occurrence of word combinations is derived from the natural usage of native speakers (Celce-Murcia & Schmitt, 2010, as cited in Duong & T. Nguyen, 2021; O'Dell & McCarthy, 2017, as cited in Trang et al., 2021).

Regarding the phraseology approach, collocation is identified by analyzing its syntax and semantics characteristics (Granger, 2005, as cited in Chang, 2018). In particular, the criterion for identifying collocation is the arbitrary constraint on substitution (Nesselhauf, 2003). For example, in the phrase "reach a decision," the noun "decision" can be substituted by other words that represent a similar meaning of "a particular aim," such as "conclusion," "verdict", or "compromise", but not the word "aim"; this kind of restriction results from the unsystematic

convention, rather than semantic properties (ibid). Therefore, this study adopts the definition of "collocation" as the combination of the two approaches. Collocation is the co-occurrence of word combinations having a restricted selection of its constituted elements that native speakers use frequently and naturally.

Collocations and other word combinations

Previous researchers have raised the concern of distinguishing collocations and other types of word combinations since there exists a misunderstanding about those kinds of word combinations. Even teachers inaccurately understand the term "collocations," which is an unchangeable or even closed group of words (Le Linh, 2017). Therefore, it is important to highlight the differences between them.

Table 1. Collocations and other word combinations

Word combination categorization	Explanation	Example
Free word combinations	The literal meaning of separate parts is used to understand a free combination's meanings. (Howarth, 1993, as cited in Farrokh, 2012). Of all combinations, free combinations are the least cohesive. Their constituents have the most leeway in terms of combining with other lexical entities (Benson et al., 1986, as cited in Farrokh, 2012).	In the case of "put", the semantic constraint on the object is relatively open-ended, and thus the range of words that can occur is relatively unrestricted (McKeown & Radev, 2000). Some combinations from "put" are: *"put" these flowers on the table, "put" it over there, ...* Other examples are *"to take" the bus, "to take" the tour, etc.; "to buy" some food, "to buy" a car, etc.*
Restricted collocations	This category is more restricted in the choice of compositional components and generally has one element used in a specific context (Howarth, 1993, as cited in Farrokh, 2012).	"Explode a myth" is a true collocation, "explode" illustrates a much more restricted collocational range such as belief, idea, and theory (ibid)
Idioms	Idioms refer to word groups in an unchanged order with the meaning impossible to guess by only knowing the meaning of every single word (O'Dell, 2008, as cited in Bui, 2021)	In the English language, for example, the expression "kick the bucket" is an idiom. A listener who knows only the meaning of "kick" and "bucket" would be unable to deduce the actual meaning of the expression (Bateni, 2010, p. 594-595)

Collocation categorization

There have been various ways of categorizing collocations based on the restriction level of the elements. In other words, the classifications depend on how wide the node goes with its collocates. Several types of collocations adopt this kind of approach. The first type is **strong collocation.** Those phrases that combine rigidly with each other, "auburn hair" and "deliriously happy", for example, and one part of it hardly collocates with other words (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 1997, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008, 2017, as cited in Hong et al., 2022). This kind of

classification is related to the "restricted collocation" of Sughair (2007, as cited in Petkoska & Neshkovska, 2019) which the node (the headword) only goes together with particular words, and users cannot easily predict the accurate "node" upon the meaning of the collocates. The other one is **weak collocation.** There will be a higher capability of one part of the collocation to collocate with other words, and users can make a precise prediction easier compared to strong collocation (e.g., good boy, white shirt, white wine) (Sughair, 2007, as cited in Petkoska & Neshkovska, 2019). Similarly, "open collocation" from the perspective of Sughair (ibid) and Mahmoud (2005) has the same characteristic, which is that the number of words to collocate with the other is significant (e.g., a good book, a good chance, a good idea, …)

Besides, Sinclair (1991, as cited in Hong et al., 2022) proposed another classification of collocations that are upward and downward collocations. As mentioned above, a collocation consists of a node and its collocates. Accordingly, **upward collocations mean that** it is the node that collocates more often with other words than the node itself (e.g., "back" collocates with "at", "down", "from", "into", "on", all of which are more frequent words than "back"), whereas **downward collocations are defined that** the frequency of a word that combines with its collocates is less than the word itself (e.g., "arrive", "bring" are less frequent occurring collocates of "back")

Although scholars have classified collocations into various types, the categorization of grammatical and lexical collocations from the perspective of Lewis (2000, as cited in Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022) and Benson et al. (1986, as cited in Kuo, 2009) remains the most comprehensible. More specifically, **grammatical collocations** consist of content words (noun, verb, adverb, etc.) and functional words (prepositions) or other structures that served grammatical functions (an infinitive or clause), while **lexical collocations** only include content words with different word classes (noun, verb, adverb, etc.) and can be subdivided into several types which are going to be described.

Lexical collocation classification

According to Benson et al. (1986, as cited in Bahns, 1993), lexical collocations are subdivided into six types, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Lexical collocation subtypes

(Benson et al., 1986, as cited in Bahns, 1993, p. 57)

No.	Type	Example
1	Verb + Noun	Withdraw an offer
2	Adjective + Noun	A crushing defeat
3	Noun + Verb	Blizzards rage…
4	Noun + Noun	A pride of lions
5	Adverb + Adjective	Deeply adsorbed
6	Verb + Adverb	Appreciate sincerely

Lexical collocation errors in writing

EFL learners still perform poorly in writing skills and commit many types of errors. Refraining from denying the significance of other errors, the study only focuses on the collocation errors since lexical errors comprise a high proportion. As Llach (2011) highlighted that lexical

mistakes have been proven to be the most prevalent in several research investigations and identified as the most serious type of error. Nevertheless, committing errors is inevitable. By finding the errors and correcting them, learners can develop their writing further in any language learning path. Therefore, helping learners realize their shortcomings through error analysis effectively improves their language proficiency. Studies on collocation errors have been numerous in the international context.

In a study by Boonraksa and Naisena (2022) about collocation errors of Thai EFL learners, they employed a collocation test to collect the data. The findings indicated that students commit a high level of collocation errors both in grammatical and lexical collocations. The most popular lexical collocation error is Adverb + Adjective lexical collocation. This finding is interesting since it is inconsistent with results from other studies. For example, Harta, Bay, & Ali (2021) investigated lexical collocation errors of Indonesian students by collecting data from writing samples. The results found that students have problems mostly in Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun combinations. Bartan (2019) conducted a study on lexical collocation errors in the translation of L2 learners of English. The study's findings agree with Harta et al. (2021) that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun take up the largest percentage of lexical collocation errors. Similarly, Shitu (2015) suggested that Verb + Noun collocation error occurs most frequently in students' essay writing. In the Chinese context, Quping and Pramoolsook (2014) studied collocational errors of non-English major students obtaining the same results that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most frequent lexical collocation errors in students' writing samples.

Causes of lexical collocation errors

Interlingual errors

Many studies attribute the sources of lexical collocation errors to interlingual interference and synonym misuse. Boonraksa and Naisena (2022) pointed out that the cause of lexical collocation errors is that Thai verbs are literally translated into English. Besides, Thai EFL learners also commit errors by using English words and phrases that have similar equivalents in Thai or adopting the synonym strategy. Likewise, results from other researchers also indicated the same reasons for lexical collocation errors (Bartan, 2019; Gitsaki, 1997, as cited in Setiarini, 2018; Harta, 2021; Huang, 2001; Mahmoud, 2005; Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011; Shitu, 2015; Trng & Thao, 2021).

Interlingual interference also refers to other interchangeable terms such as "native language interference", "language transfer", etc. According to Brown (1994, as cited in Erkaya, 2012), learners' first acquisition of language is their native language; such exposure exerts a significant influence on later language learning or the L2 acquisition process because native language plays a role as the primary reference for learners. Within lexical collocation errors, the majority of them are caused by L1 interference that writers make literal translations from their mother tongue to the target language.

Intralingual errors

Apart from interlingual errors, other categorizations of errors resulting from the limited knowledge of learners in the L2 language are classified as intralingual errors. Concerning the use of wrong synonyms as another main cause of lexical collocation errors, it was explained that learners are able to use the right synonyms but fail to use the correct collocability of the word, for example, instead of using "accept with opinions" and "broaden with vision", they wrote "receiving other people's opinions" and "broaden your eyesight" (Kuo, 2009, p. 149).

Besides, lexical collocation errors can be traced back from other causes such as lack of collocation knowledge, overgeneralization of rules, approximation (Harta et al., 2021; Shitu, 2015), false concepts hypothesized, and ignorance of rule restrictions (Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011). False concepts hypothesized are due to the misunderstanding about the differences among words in the target language; for example, learners often use "make" and "do" interchangeably (ibid). In terms of an overgeneralization, Richard (1974, as cited in Sari, 2016) defined it as the way learners use incorrect structures of the target language based on their previous experience; for example, learners might add "s" to irregular plurals. In addition, an approximation is described as the use of incorrect structures or vocabularies; for example, the misuse of the word forms that take a noun to act as a verb, e.g., "success in our education" instead of "succeed in our education" (Dravishi et al., 2011, as cited in Harta et al., 2021, p. 24). In addition, the ignorance of rule restrictions refers to the inability of learners to observe and obey the restrictions of structure in the target language (Richard, ibid). Overall, the causes of lexical collocation errors can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Causes of lexical collocation errors

No.	Error Causes	Subtypes
1	Interlingual error	A literal translation from L1
2	Intralingual error	False concepts hypothesized Wrong synonym usage Overgeneralization Approximation

Students' Perceptions about collocations

Although most EFL learners acknowledge that collocations are challenging to learn, they claim the importance of mastering collocations, especially in writing. D. Dang and D. Nguyen (2022) reported that more than 60% of students admitted the necessity of learning collocations that helps decrease colorlessness in writing, enhance vocabulary, and gain an understanding of the cultural features of native speakers. At the same time, more than half of the students confirmed the extreme difficulty of the learning process that they found it hard to recognize collocations and understand how words go together. Likewise, P. Nguyen (2021) suggested that 96% of students consider collocations difficult but essential. In the study by Duong and T. Nguyen (2021), EFL learners pointed out the two significant benefits of collocations in academic writing, which are collocations for obtaining better grades and collocations for the development of lexical resources. Turkish EFL learners also recognize several advantages of learning collocations, such as fluency in speaking English, collocation pattern awareness, quicker

vocabulary acquisition and simpler language learning (Yuvayapan & Yükselir, 2021).

EFL learners confess their limited knowledge of collocation concepts. For example, 90% of EFL learners who participated in the study by Chan and Liou (2005) are reported to not know about the concept of collocation. Ying and O'neill (2009) researched the effectiveness of learning collocations adopting the "AWARE" learning approach. Participants confessed that they did not pay attention to "collocations" before joining the study because studying words in a single form has long been a habit of learning new vocabulary. The researchers emphasized that unless learners are told to be aware of the importance of collocations, they can hardly recognize this aspect of learning a language.

Regarding learners' opinions on collocation errors, only a few studies describe how students think about their collocation errors. While collocation errors are demonstrated mainly from the negative transfer of the mother tongue, Duong and T. Nguyen (2021) showed an interesting result in their study that students do not perceive the negative influence of their mother tongue as one of their problems (only 36.2%). In other words, students may not know the cause of collocation errors from L1 interference. In contrast, Yuvayapan and Yükselir (2021) indicated learners' awareness of the negative influence of L1 interference on collocation errors or interlingual transfer from Turkish.

EFL learners also give comments on several collocations' learning strategies. Some learners choose a way of learning collocations without the interference of a dictionary. Duong and T. Nguyen (2021) mentioned that students learn collocations by retaining those phrases in their memory without using tools. Similarly, C. Dang, Thai, Ngo and Tran (2022) described that learners do not rely on any tools to search for collocations. Instead, they imitate the expressions of other people on the Internet. However, the majority of EFL learners utilize online dictionaries as a useful tool anytime they write an essay of academic writing (Cao, 2023). They feel more confident using dictionaries for searching collocations since they believe in the native-like of these expressions. Other learning strategies include learning through visual channels (watching English movies), noting down collocations in reading, and using computer programs to test those collocations (Ying & O'Neill, 2009).

Overall, even though EFL students may have limited awareness of collocations in general and lexical collocations in particular because they are difficult to master, they still admit their crucial role in writing, and have turned to different ways of dealing with their own situation.

Research Questions

To satisfy the purposes of the study, our research is going to answer the following questions:

Question 1: What is the distribution of each type of lexical collocation errors found in Vietnamese EFL learners' essay writing?

Question 2: What are the causes of lexical collocation errors made by Vietnamese EFL learners?

Question 3: What are the Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of lexical collocation errors and collocation learning?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study took place at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The authors employed a convenience sampling method, in which 104 participants volunteering to get involved in the study were English major students at a Foreign Languages Faculty. These students have completed and passed five writing courses which cover instructions of paragraph writing and essay writing. Overall, they have been taught and expected to acquire the following key skills:

Course 1 and 2: Students can write different kinds of sentences (basic, compound, complex, compound-complex sentences) effectively and can write a complete passage well.

Course 3 and 4: Students can write different types of essays (comparison, causes and effects, argumentative) on a variety of topics well and know how to deliver coherence and cohesion as well as identify grammatical and lexical errors.

Course 5: Students can paraphrase, summarize, and cite properly in their academic essay.

30 males and 74 females participated in the study, and they were nearly the same ages ranging from 20 to 21 years old. The participants' English proficiency level is intermediate (higher B1 to B2 level approximately). They are all expected to obtain a bachelor's degree in the English language after 4 years of studying.

Design of the Study

This paper used both qualitative and quantitative data to fulfill the research questions. Written essays and a semi-structured interview are instruments employed in the study.

Students were asked to write an opinion essay of at least 250 words in 40 minutes. The essay proposition is "Nowadays many people choose to be self-employed, rather than to work for a company or organization. Why might this be the case? What could be the disadvantages of being self-employed?" (Cambridge IELTS 14, 2019, p. 95). A teacher observed the writing session to make sure that references were not allowed to minimize cheating. All writing compositions were recorded in an E-learning system to store and analyze efficiently.

In the interview session, participants were asked about their opinions on collocation concepts, errors, and learning. Interview questions were framed upon the literature review for relevancy and reviewed by two other colleagues to ensure disambiguation and comprehensibility.

Data collection & analysis

Students' essay data

The researcher collected students' essays and stored documents online on the E-learning system and Google Docs. The data preparation and analysis followed the following process:

Table 4. Data collection and analysis process

Steps	Descriptions
1	Extracting lexical combinations adopting Benson et al. (1986) classification (as cited in Bahns, 1993)
2	Storing lexical combinations in Excel file
3	Checking MI score using British National Corpus (BNC)
4	Filtering out free word combinations
5	Checking collocations' accurateness using Online Oxford Collocation Dictionary & BNC
6	Calculating the distribution of errors in each subtype
7	Explaining sources of errors, and suggesting appropriate collocations

As mentioned above, the study does not involve analyzing free word combinations. This next step intends to exclude free word combinations from the data. To do so, the researcher had to set criteria to distinguish collocations from free word combinations. The study takes the MI (Mutual Information) score, which indicates the semantic bonding in words. "Pairs with scores above 3.0 can probably be considered collocations and below that, free combinations" (Patrick, 1990, as cited in Quping & Pramoolsook, 2012, p. 4). In this step, the researchers did not calculate the MI scores themselves but looked them up on BNC (British National Corpus). Any word combinations with an MI score below 3.0 were filtered out from the data.

After the classification process between free word combinations and collocations, the remaining collocations were checked for correctness using the Online Oxford Collocation Dictionary to extract lexical collocation errors. The errors then continued to be calculated and explained according to types suggested by Benson et al. (1986, as cited in Bahns, 1993)

Interview data

The researcher continued with collecting the semi-structured interview later. 104 students were invited to participate in the interview for in-depth investigations about their perceptions of collocations, but only eight students agreed to join in. In this article, the authors are going to use S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7 and S8 to refer to each of the participants. The interview session took place on MS Teams (approximately 20 minutes per interview) on a one-on-one basis and all questions were asked properly. The authors asked for permission to record the interview for research purposes from the interviewees. After the interviews, the interview data were transcribed, coded and stored in an Excel file for the content analysis.

Results/Findings

Question 1: What is the distribution of each type of lexical collocation errors found in Vietnamese EFL learners' essay writing?

After collecting and analyzing 104 essays (31596 words in total), the researchers gathered 2331 word combinations. The correct lexical collocations took up the most significant proportion with 1033 (44.4%); lexical collocation errors were 560 (24%); unidentified word combinations were 545 (23.3%); and finally, free combinations were 193 (8.3%). Correct collocations, free combinations (MI score < 3), and 545 word combinations that the researcher had insufficient evidence to conclude, were excluded from the study. Regarding 560 lexical collocation errors,

they were categorized into six subtypes adopting the classification of Benson et al. (1986, as cited in Bahns, 1993). Details can be found in Table 5.

Table 5. Lexical collocation errors subtypes distribution

No.	Types	Number of errors	Percent (%)
1	Verb + Noun	245	44
2	Adjective + Noun	202	36
3	Noun + Verb	8	1
4	Noun + Noun	53	9
5	Adverb + Adjective	14	3
6	Verb + Adverb	38	7

From the above table, it was found that students made errors mostly in Verb - Noun lexical collocations (44%), followed by Adjective - Noun (36%). The other types took up a small percentage, including Noun - Noun (9%), Verb - Adverb (7%), Adverb - Adjective (3%), and Noun - Verb (1%).

Question 2: What are the causes of lexical collocation errors made by Vietnamese EFL learners?

Sources of lexical collocation errors have been withdrawn, based on the lexical collocation errors learners made in their essays. Negative transfer, lack of competence, misuse of synonyms, and approximation are the main reasons for lexical collocation errors.

Lack of competence

There are several reasons for students' lack of collocation competence. Likely, they do not have significant exposure to collocations, resulting in a limited understanding of this type of word combination. This limited knowledge of collocations is derived from students' insufficient amount of collocation learning. Moreover, collocations are underestimated in curriculum design, and few English Language departments incorporate collocations in their teaching and learning materials. It largely depends on the teachers to actively guide and encourage their learners to pay close attention to collocation learning since it is hard for low-level students to recognize and acquire that knowledge in the language learning process. Errors stemming from lacking collocation competence are presented in the following table.

Table 6. Extracted lexical collocation errors due to lack of competence

No.	Lexical Collocation Error	Suggested Collocation
1	Start shop	Open a shop
2	Boring task	Tedious/mundane task
3	Newly graduated	New/recent graduate
4	Work individual	Work alone
5	Working trend	Employment trend

Negative transfer from L1

As mentioned above, L1 exerts a profound influence on students' language learning since the mother tongue plays a role as the primary reference. Students commit this kind of error due to the literal translation from the L1 language. In the table of extracted collocation errors, "follow passion" is comparable with "theo đuổi đam mê" in Vietnamese (*"…There are several reasons why people might choose to be self-employed: flexibility, increased earning potential, following a passion" …*). Apparently, the student adopted literal translation from their mother tongue, resulting in lexical collocation errors. Some examples can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Extracted lexical collocation errors due to negative transfer

No.	Lexical Collocation Errors	Suggested Collocations	Comparable phrases in Vietnamese
1	Follow passion	Indulge passion	Theo đuổi đam mê
3	Strong development	Rapid development	Sự phát triển mạnh mẽ
3	Constantly adapt	Quickly/readily adapt	Liên tục thích nghi
4	Work individual	Work alone	Làm việc cá nhân
5	Working trend	Employment trend	Xu hướng làm việc

Using synonym strategy

A small proportion of lexical collocation errors in the study are due to the adoption of synonym strategy. This traces back to the intention of learners to diversify their vocabulary usage in writing to avoid repeated phrases or replace basic vocabularies with academic ones. Synonym strategy can be an effective way to reduce colorlessness in writing. However, writers may have failed due to using the incorrect collocability among words since not all words can be replaced perfectly by their synonyms. Several noticeable errors can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8. Extracted lexical collocation errors due to synonym strategy

No.	Lexical Collocation Error	Suggested Collocation
1	Allocate work	Allocate task
2	Self-employed individual	Self-employed person
3	Financial issue	Financial problem
4	Steady wage	Steady salary
5	Appealing option	Attractive/good option

Approximation

Apart from the above causes, approximation is also one of the reasons for lexical collocation errors. Those errors were made by students because they used the wrong structure of the target language. In particular, they used false functions of word classes. For instance, an adjective is used as a noun in "*have passionate*", a noun acts as an adverb in "*work efficiency*", etc. More examples are in the following table.

Table 9. Extracted lexical collocation errors due to approximation

No.	Lexical Collocation Error	Suggested Collocation
1	Have passionate	Have passion
2	Work efficiency	Work efficiently/effectively
3	Technology advances	Technological advance
4	Developed technology	Advanced technology
5	Independent work	Work independently

Question 3: What are the Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of lexical collocation errors and collocation learning?

Students' understanding of collocations

In the first part, participants were asked three questions about how they defined collocations and whether they perceive collocations to be the same as idioms, phrasal verbs, and compound nouns.

Regarding students' perceptions of collocation's definitions, their first assumption toward collocations was:

> S1: I think collocations are the order of words, right? […]
>
> S2: I have heard about collocations before, but I cannot explain it […]
>
> S3: Sorry, but I cannot define it […]
>
> S4: Collocations are phrases used frequently by native speakers […]
>
> S5: I don't really know about it […]
>
> S6: It is phrases frequently used by native speakers? […]
>
> S7: I think collocations are word combinations […]
>
> S8: Collocations are phrases that look fancy helping you to get a higher score. They are often used by native speakers […]

As can be seen, their understanding of collocations is still limited and somehow reflects some misunderstanding. Some even have no idea of what collocations are.

After being provided with three definitions of collocations, four students (50%) perceived collocations as "two or more word combinations that cannot replace any of their constituents with other words". Three students (approximately 38%) thought collocations are "two or more word combinations that go together with a high frequency" which is the correct definition. Only one student chose the definition "Collocations are two or more word combinations that go together sometimes".

Concerning participants' perceptions of the similarity or difference between collocations and other types of word combinations (idioms, phrasal verbs, and compound nouns), six students (75%) assumed that collocations are the same as idioms, phrasal verbs, and compound nouns. However, S3 assumed that short idioms are the same as collocations but not long ones. Only two students expressed that they did not see collocations as the same as idioms, phrasal verbs, and compound nouns.

Students' perspectives of the lexical collocation use in their writing

More than half of the participants claimed that they use a lot of lexical collocations in their writing, while others said that the frequency is just medium. When asked to pick up the two most common types of lexical collocations, the students chose Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun as the two most frequent ones.

> S1: I usually combine Adjective + Noun because they are easy to use and quite popular […]
>
> S2: I use the Verb + Noun combination most frequently since this is the most basic and simple […]
>
> S3: I use Verb + Noun because this is the easiest one to remember […]
>
> S4: I use Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun because they are fundamental, easier than other types […]

Participants in the study were not allowed to use any references during the writing session. However, in this part of the interview, they were asked whether they use any tools (collocation dictionary, website, etc.) to support their learning of collocation or not. The results show that only one student was aware of the online collocation dictionary, and the others suggested that they did not know about those tools.

> S1: No, I don't know any sources […]
>
> S2: I use the dictionary called "Glosbe" which helps me to find the phrases in English by typing the phrases in Vietnamese […]
>
> S3: No, I just use collocations in my memory […]
>
> S4: No, I just consult general dictionaries, not the specific one for collocation […]
>
> S5: No, I don't have a specific collocation dictionary to refer to […]
>
> S6: Yes, I use Online Oxford Collocations Dictionary […]
>
> S7: No, I often use Grammarly and alter the collocation use by adopting the ones being suggested in the app […]
>
> S8: I just use Google […]

Students' perceptions of lexical collocation errors

Participants attributed lexical collocation errors to the misunderstanding of vocabulary usage. In other words, they assumed that students have limited knowledge of collocation use and do not know precisely how words combine. Most of the students did not recognize the negative influence of the mother tongue until the researcher asked whether they agreed about the students' habit of literal translation from L1. They all confirmed the negative effect of the mother tongue on the use of collocations in writing.

> S5: I think Vietnamese has affected me in the use of collocations. I often translate directly from Vietnamese […]

Regarding their evaluation of the significance of lexical collocation errors, three students did

not consider these errors as serious. The rest agreed on the significant impact of lexical collocation errors but shared that it also depends on the examiners. Half of the participants did not think that collocation errors reflect the language proficiency of the writers, and the others admitted that learners' language competency is reflected through these errors.

> S1: I would not say getting much knowledge of collocations means you are an excellent language learner […]
>
> S6: I think mastering collocations shows that you are advanced learners […]

Students' perceptions of lexical collocation learning

Being asked how to improve collocation knowledge, the participants shared various ways such as doing more reading, watching movies and adopting selective collocations, watching YouTube, practicing English with friends, native speakers, or advanced-level learners, and studying with the application. S1 especially puts an emphasis on the support of online platforms and applications.

> S1: I think it would be best to make use of online resources available, including tools and apps on the Internet or mobile devices […]

They also indicated several challenging problems in learning collocations. Some of them are the difficulty in memorizing without practicing, in understanding their meanings, and in acquiring a large amount of knowledge for writing. Indeed, S7 says that these problems are obvious in any EFL learners.

> S7: It is undeniable that English learners find it hard to memorize all of this stuff, comprehend its meanings, and also, we cannot get much of it […]

Discussion

Common subtypes of lexical collocation error

The findings suggest that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the most problematic subtypes of lexical collocations. The result is consistent with the study of Harta et al. (2021, p. 18) that "students largely deal with Verb + Noun/pronoun (prepositional phrase) combination problems". Likewise, Bartan (2019) found that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most serious errors. Shitu (2015) also concluded Verb + Noun is the most frequent error pattern. Similarly, Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most common errors (Quping & Pramoolsook, 2014). Other studies presenting the same findings include Ridha & Al-Riyahi (2011) and Hong et al. (2022). This result strongly emphasizes that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most common and problematic lexical collocation errors among Vietnamese EFL learners.

The interview results also showed that students chose Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun as the most frequent types adopted in their writing. However, Boonraksa and Naisena (2022) produced a different outcome suggesting the most frequent lexical collocation error is Adverb + Adjective. Although Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the most popular errors, it cannot be concluded that Adverb + Adjective is easy for Vietnamese EFL students since they rarely use this kind of combination in their writing.

Causes for lexical collocation errors

Lexical collocation errors are discovered to derive from students' lack of collocation knowledge, the negative influence of L1, the use of synonyms, and approximation. The result corroborates previous studies (Bartan, 2019; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Harta et al., 2021; Huang, 2001; Mahmoud, 2005; Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011; Shitu, 2015). However, the finding is inconsistent with Kuo's (2009) conclusion that students make the lowest rate of errors in L1 interference, indicating learners' great awareness of the differences between L1 and L2.

Learners' perceptions about collocations

The interview results suggest that there is still a limited understanding of students about collocations. Not many students choose the proper definition and are confused about the differences between collocations and other word combinations. In addition, Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most common types of lexical collocations that students choose to incorporate in their writing.

The findings also show that the participants are unfamiliar with collocation searching tools. This study aligns with Duong and T. Nguyen (2021) that participants tend to use collocations in their memory rather than using any tools. C. Dang et al. (2022) also reported that students do not use collocation support tools, although they do assignments at home. Instead, they adopt collocations being used on the Internet.

The Vietnamese learners assumed that lexical collocation errors are due to the limited knowledge of writers and partly from L1 literal translation. Moreover, their attitude towards lexical collocation errors is relatively positive since not many take them seriously.

Several methods to improve collocation knowledge proposed by the students include doing more reading, watching movies and adopting selective collocations, watching videos on YouTube, practicing English with friends, native speakers, or advanced-level learners, and studying with applications. These practicing ways are similar to the "Acquiring Strategies" of the participants in the study of Ying and O'Neill (2009), in which they adopt methods of watching movies, learning with friends, etc. In this study, none of these ways are related to learning in corpus-based or dictionary. This result reaffirms that students do not utilize the above approaches to enhance their collocation knowledge.

Conclusion

This study looks into lexical collocation errors in writing essays of intermediate English-majored students at a Vietnamese private university. Findings indicate that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most frequent lexical collocation errors. Moreover, the causes of these errors are attributed to students' lack of collocation competence, negative transfer from their mother tongue, synonym strategy, and approximation. In addition, students' understandings of collocations are still moderate regarding their comprehension of collocation concepts, and the ability to differentiate between collocations and other word combinations. At the same time, students do not express a serious attitude towards lexical collocation errors. They also suggest several strategies to gain collocation knowledge.

This study proposes several pedagogical implications with the hope of making valuable

contributions. Firstly, teachers should become mentors to guide their learners in recognizing and acquiring collocations. This process can be done by listing vocabulary in the form of collocations in their lesson plans, giving collocation homework for students to get extra points, incorporating collocations in the test, and giving comments on collocation errors in students' writing works to make them pay more attention. Furthermore, teachers should emphasize the importance and benefits of gaining collocation knowledge so learners are more motivated to acquire it. Additionally, they should suggest appropriate learning strategies to students, especially encouraging them to utilize collocation dictionaries (Online Oxford Collocation Dictionary) and corpus-based websites (British National Corpus). However, learners should be more self-directed and must actively improve their collocation knowledge.

This study has some limitations related to research participants and the scope of the study. Due to the limited subjects in the curriculum, the study's findings may not represent all Vietnamese EFL learners. Moreover, the study solely covers lexical collocation errors and excludes grammatical ones. Thus, the data may not be sufficient to assess students' collocation competence in general. Future studies can expand the scope of the study, continuing researching lexical collocation errors in speaking, reading, or listening skills among different levels of students. These findings are necessary for the research field to compare results in writing skills and student types. Furthermore, studies may be carried out focusing on both grammatical and lexical collocation errors for better evaluation of students' awareness of collocations overall.

Acknowledgments

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Biodata

Le Quang Thao is currently a full-time lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He has been teaching English to students at the university for over ten years. His research interests include but are not limited to linguistics and English teaching and learning.

Do Ngoc Hoang My is an undergraduate student majoring in Translation-Interpretation at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. One of her fields of interest is conducting studies related to EFL learners' problems in learning English.