



**DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING
COLLOCATIONS IN WRITING OF ENGLISH-MAJORED JUNIORS
AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM**

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Abstract:

It goes without saying that writing is one of the central pillars of language learning that helps learners show their viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings to readers. If writing is considered an effective means of communication, collocations are the colour of language expressions. There is no doubt that collocations are interesting to learn and use. Obviously, they make our written English become more flexible, colourful, attractive, and easy to understand. However, students also face some difficulties in understanding and applying collocations. Therefore, the research “Difficulties in understanding and applying collocations in writing of English majored juniors at a University in the Mekong Delta” was conducted to find out some difficulties in learning collocations. Juniors of Bachelor of English 13 classes at Tay Do University were chosen as the participants. A questionnaire and interview were the instruments of the study. The findings of the survey would point out the learners’ difficulties consisting in vocabulary, recognizing collocation in the specific contexts, guessing meaning, and putting collocations in the appropriate situations. Based on the results, some solutions and tips would be suggested to help students be able to master collocations and use them accurately.

Keywords: collocations, understanding, applying, writing

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

There is no doubt that language plays a significant role in human life. People try to acquire, learn and use language as a means of communication. It is undeniable that English is considered an international language which is used in many nations not only as a foreign language but also as a second language. Particularly, in modern life, the need of using English as an effective tool in order to communicate effectively in the process of integration. It can be seen that English is absolutely an ideal window to open a good future. In recent years, Vietnamese have recognized the importance of learning English. Furthermore, *“as a developing country, Viet Nam currently has an urgent need for English to attract foreign investment as well as promote the economy. English, previously included in the curriculum from the first year of middle school, is now officially taught to children from kindergarten. Foreign language centers are dramatically increasing in numbers and English is the most popular foreign language offered for learners”* (Nguyen, 2007:2).

Besides, it is clear that learning English is a difficult process for many students. To study English effectively, learners have to learn many skills such as listening, speaking, writing and reading. These four skills have a mutual relation. If writing and speaking are said to be the language output, listening and reading are the language input. Among them, writing plays a vital role to facilitate other skills. It goes without saying that writing helps learners show their viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings to readers. Ariana (2010) emphasized that *“writing is considered as one of the central pillars of language learning and it should become a major interest and concern to researchers, teachers and students”*. Moreover, writing has been considered a vital skill in learning English. As commented by Rao (2007) *“writing is useful in two respects. First, it motivates students’ thinking, organizing ideas, and development of their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Second, it strengthens students’ learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language”*.

If English is considered an effective means of communication, collocations are the color of language expressions. Collocations run throughout the whole of the English language and are used as a key factor to produce natural-sounding language. People like to use collocations so that their writing style becomes more vivid, lively, accurate, and easier to understand. Additionally, learners will have more feasible options and plentiful ways to show their ideas when writing. One more notable thing is that collocations are something special about any language. They reflect a certain culture and depict the national character. When learning collocations, learners not only enlarge their lexical resources but also have a chance to know about the typical culture behind them. It is obvious that collocations are interesting to learn and use, they make our written English become more flexible, colourful, attractive, and more native speaker-like. Poor collocations are also likely to lead to lower marks in exams. Otherwise, *“students who choose the best collocations will express himself or herself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something more precise”* (Oxford Collocations Dictionary for

students of English). Thus, collocations are considered an effective way to reduce boredom and rigidity in writing.

However, the more vital collocations are, the harder they are to learn because collocations are not easy to understand and use. It can be seen that collocations are conventional word combinations as well as arbitrary meanings. As a result, there are no clear rules and no specific regulations for learners to follow. Undoubtedly, it is overwhelmingly easy for students to make mistakes when using collocations if they do not know exactly what the collocations mean and the way words go together.

From the considerations above, the researcher decided to conduct a study "Difficulties in understanding and applying collocations in writing of juniors majoring in English at Tay Do University". The research was carried out with the purpose of finding out the difficulties of English-majored juniors when learning collocations. Besides, the researcher also suggested some appropriate solutions and tips for helping students be able to master collocations and use them accurately.

1.2 Research aims

This study was conducted to find out the difficulties in understanding and applying English collocations of English majored junior at Tay Do University. Regarding the results, students were able to know some common barriers in learning English collocations so that they can have a good understanding of how to understand and apply collocations correctly.

1.3 Research question

This study was undertaken with the purpose of dealing with the research question:

- What are the difficulties in understanding and applying collocations in writing of juniors majoring in English at Tay Do University?

1.4 The significance of the research

It is common knowledge that people inside the game see their own problems less clearly than people outside the game. Definitely, learning collocations is not an exception. In addition, to solve the difficulties, students must realize the source of them, so recognizing obstacles in understanding and using collocations are necessary things to help students master good writing skills. For those reasons, the research was conducted to point out some difficulties affecting students in understanding and applying collocations; suggesting some ways to help them overcome their difficulties to be better at writing and improve their English writing abilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Terms of definitions

2.1.1 Definition of writing

The term of writing has been defined in many different ways but all have some points in common. In general, writing is defined as a *“reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge”* (Charaverty and Gautum, 2000). Then writers need a suitable language to structure these ideas in the form of coherent discourse. Writing is an alternative that human beings employ in order to communicate besides speaking. In addition, writing is a method of representing language in visual or tactile form. It is one of the major language skills students must master to fulfill school requirements. Furthermore, Petty and Jensen (1980:362) defined that *“writing refers to the mental and physical act of forming letters and words. But it is much more than that. It is putting words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, spelling words correctly, and observing conventions in written forms and more”*. Additionally, Huges (1989) defined *“writing as an ability to communicate in a way which brings to the audiences satisfactorily. It also expresses the completely logical organizational structures which enable the messages to be followed easily”* while Brown (2000) stated that *“written products are often the result of thinking, drafting, revising that require specialized skills, skills that not every writer develops naturally”*. In his sense, written language requires learners to have many skills such as how to express ideas, how to organize them in a coherent and cohesive way, how to use the rhetorical conventions accurately in the written texts or how to use correct grammar in texts appropriately in case they differ from spoken language.

Similar to speaking, writing can sometimes be formal and informal. The choice depends on the situation, the purpose of the writer and the level of formality. Generally, writing for professional purposes or academic situations is, likely to require a formal style, although individual communications can use the informal style once the writer is familiar with the recipient. Good formal writing is concise, accurate and comprehensive. On the contrary, informal writing is used when we write to family, close friends or people we know well. Writers can use colloquial words or expressions, contractions and abbreviations, short and simple sentences, and show more empathy as well as emotion towards the reader regarding the complexity of thought. In fact, writing is an acquired art, which is learnt from practice and experience. Definitely, writing is regarded as a means of communication and writing products are the result of a complex thinking process that is aimed at conveying messages to readers.

In short, writing is the process of using symbols (letters of the alphabet, punctuation) to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form.

2.1.2 Definition of collocations

The term *“collocation”* has been defined by different scholars. Although many researchers offer different definitions of collocations in the English language area, there is no consensus on the actual definition of collocations. Among many researchers, Firth

is considered the “father” of collocations because he was one of the earliest linguists who coined the term “collocation” in 1957. He defined it as a “combination of words associated with each other, for example, “take a photo”” (cited in Martynska, 2004:2). According to Cambridge Dictionaries Online, collocation is “a word or phrase that is often used with another word or phrase, in a way that sounds correct to people who have spoken the language all their lives, but might not be expected from the meaning”. Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated that collocation is a group of words that occur together regularly. For instance: “do the cooking”, “make a promise”, “make an effort”, “take a break”, “pay attention”, “break the rules”, “keep in touch” and so on. In this sense, McCarthy and Dell (2005) proposed that collocation is a pair or group of words that appear frequently. These combinations are natural to a native speaker. In the same vein, a typical definition of collocation from Lewis (2000:29) is “words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggests”. Crystal (2008:86) put forward that “collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency”. We also have a definition from Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, new 8th edition, where collocations are defined as a “combination of words in a language that happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance”. Collocations are inevitable and presented in any kind of text with no exception.

Based on these definitions, it can be claimed that collocations are word combinations or lexical units that occur consistently together in authentic written or spoken discourse.

2.2 Types of collocations

There are many types of collocations. In principle, fixed phrases and expressions of all types come under the umbrella of collocations. According to Benson (1985), there are several types of collocations. However, the concentration is on the most important types only, which occur frequently and are of the most interest. The classification of these types is purely grammatical, depending on the grammatical groupings of word classes according to their occurrence together in language use. The adoption of a grammatical description makes the structure of collocations easier to follow as well as to understand.

Types of collocations		Examples
Grammatical collocations	V+ prep/preposition	Replaced...with, prefer something to, prepare for, concentrate on, throw away, indulge in...
	Prep. + N	On offer
	Adj. + prep	Worried about, being able to, good at, interested in
	Adj. + to-inf.	Easy to listen to, delighted with, it is rude to point at someone
	V + to-inf./bare-inf/or V-ing	Continue to make, like+ V-ing
Lexical collocations	V + N	Take place, make use of, take a photo

	Adj. + N	Hard labor, net weight, warm reception, peaceful death, breaking news, bright color, major problems...
Others	Expressions	I quite agree with you That's a good idea I can't agree with you anymore, Yes, I'd love to I'm afraid I can't come because...

2.3 Common features of collocations

Collocations are the key elements that distinguish native speakers from non-native ones (Durrant and Schmitt 2010; Nation 2001). Therefore, the importance of learning collocations is undeniable. However, there are two main reasons that make the acquisition of collocations problematic.

2.3.1 Most collocations are fixed

Both grammar and the way words go together are fixed, and if we change them, we lose the true meaning of a collocation. Taking "chair a meeting" as an example means being in charge of a meeting or leading a meeting. If we replace its vocabulary to "table a meeting", then we must interpret the phrase literally, and finally, the collocation has lost its true meaning.

2.3.2 Collocations are arbitrary

The second feature is the arbitrary characteristic of collocations. This means that there are no certain rules or any logic behind them. It is not clear why "good chance" and "high probability" are acceptable collocations while "strong chance" and "good probability is not considered as acceptable" (Farrokh, 2012). Lewis (1997) explained these features by saying "the choice of the constituent words does not follow any logic, but is only based on the linguistic convention". Therefore, collocations vary across languages. Actually, we cannot guess their meaning from the words they consist of by simply translating word by word. Collocations tend to use language in a non-literal way. For instance, if we look at the sentence "please save you from the trouble. Don't stay here", the phrase "save you from the trouble" is a collocation which means "avoid involving someone in a useless and pointless effort". Actually, the phrase does not mean to stop yourself from being killed, or injured.

2.4 The role of collocations in writing

English is a language particularly rich in collocations. People use them as a good way to express their ideas more attractively and vibrantly. Expressions such as heavy rain, high winds, and fine weather are examples of collocations. They make the English sound warm, informal, easy-going, interesting and creative.

We cannot deny that learning collocation is a good idea because it helps learners improve their writing style, instead of saying "poverty causes crime", we can say "poverty breeds crime"; instead of saying "a big meal" we can say "substantial meal". By using

collocations, we can express our thoughts and ideas in a variety of ways. On the other hand, collocations are absolutely important to learners because they are very common and native speakers use them frequently. In many newspapers, we can easily catch sight of a full basket of collocations. We cannot avoid, ignore or leave it till later. It is not something we can leave until we reach an advanced level.

It is no exaggeration to say that collocations not only help learners write in a more interesting and colorful way. They also enrich their vocabulary and help them understand the culture of an English native speaker. We will have alternative and richer ways to show our ideas, feelings and emotions. Using collocations in writing makes our language more natural and easier to understand. One more notable thing is that learning and using are fun collocations because it is easier for our brains to remember and use language in chunks or blocks rather than single words. As a result, the language we are learning and using will be more colorful, vivid, accurate and more native-speaker-like. Thus, it is said that collocations are considered an effective way to cut down boredom and rigidity in writing. In order to have better writing skills, we should pay more attention to collocations and be aware of their importance in the acquisition of a word.

2.5 The difficulties faced by learners in understanding and applying collocations

It is noticed that collocations are expressions whose meaning differs from their literal ones. They make languages more flexible and livelier. Though in a second language learning classroom, collocations teaching is not usually offered and required but according to Roberto Decaro (2009) "*learners must be prepared to meet the challenge of collocations occurring frequently in spoken and written English*" because there are many obstacles that learners have to face in understanding and applying collocations in writing.

2.5.1 Recognizing

Obviously, collocations are a kind of systematic relation, but not all systematic relations are called collocations, especially words that habitually appear together and convey meaning by association. This leads to the fact that it is not easy to recognize all collocations. It is clear that the first difficulty that learners come across while interpreting collocations, is the ability to recognize them. When reading, the writer may use some common collocations for the purpose of making their writing more colorful. If we are not able to recognize them, we only interpret them by translating them word by word. This in turn can lead to misunderstandings or understanding of the meaning in an unnatural way. In order to overcome this obstacle, learners can determine it as a start and consider whether the meaning fits, if the literal meaning does not make sense, they can recognize it as collocation and deal with it by putting it in the specific context or situation.

2.5.2 Analyzing the meaning of collocations

2.5.2.1 Vocabulary

It may be noticed that understanding and applying collocations are difficult tasks. If learners do not have a rich and plentiful vocabulary, it will lead them to confusion. For that reason, lacking a large vocabulary is one of the most difficult things that learners usually face. Furthermore, understanding the lexicon of English requires more than knowing the denotative meaning of the words. Learners need to have connotative word comprehension and an understanding of figurative language. Definitely, if the learners' vocabulary knowledge is not good, it can be a big obstacle to interpret and find the real meaning of collocations. If we want to write that we will gradually get something more and more over a period of time, we probably write as usual "*accumulate in many years*". In fact, that is not appropriate and correct. We need to write "*gradually accumulate over the years*".

2.5.2.2 Guessing meaning

Another notable difficult point in understanding collocations is that we have no clear rules and no specific regulations to follow. Undoubtedly, it is not easy to guess the meaning of collocations if we do not know exactly what the collocations mean and the way words go together. In fact, collocations are a phrase whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of the morphemes it comprises.

2.5.3 Cultural problems

According to Yowelly and Lataiwish (2000:107), "*the greater the gap between the source and the target culture, the more serious difficulty would be*". The culture may comprise geographical, religious, social and linguistic aspects. Collocations are a reflection of culture just as culture shapes a language. The metaphors of one culture will be different from those of another. That is the reason why learners face many obstacles if they lack knowledge about the cultural background behind the collocations.

2.5.4 Putting collocations in appropriate situations

It is undeniable that applying collocations in writing is not easy if we do not surely know their real meaning. For this reason, we need to pay attention to the way of using collocations. Because many collocations are quite an informal situation used in a normal situation while standard collocations are used in a formal context. Native English speakers can easily know the different uses of collocations and avoid the pitfalls of inappropriate ones. However, it can be difficult for non-native speakers to use collocations correctly and appropriately, it will be better for learners to learn collocations as much as possible and try their hardest to master collocations' appropriate contextual uses. The stable and enlarged knowledge about English collocations surely helps learners feel confident when applying that expression in writing.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Design

The survey research was conducted to answer the research question mentioned in Chapter 1. It was carried out at Tay Do University in Can Tho city. Participants were the main factor in this research. There were one hundred and six English majored juniors who would be delivered questionnaires so that the researcher could collect the information about their problem in understanding and applying collocations in writing. In addition, after collecting the information from the questionnaire, the researcher selected randomly fifteen students in order to complete the interview questions for the purpose of making the research more specific and objective. This survey was a combination of quantitative research and qualitative research.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 106 juniors of English majored class, course 13 at Tay Do University. In fact, there were 108 students; however, only 106 students took part in the questionnaire because 2 students were absent. There were 18 males and 88 females. Their age ranged from 20 to 22. They all speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue and English is considered their foreign language. Most of them have been learning English for 10 years and few had 11, 12 or 13 years of learning. In addition, they have known about collocations. However, they said that they hardly used collocations in writing.

3.3 Instruments

Questionnaire and interview were the instruments of the research. These were extremely helpful in collecting essential information from students. The questionnaire was used to figure out the problems of students in learning collocations because it was absolutely reliable. Along with the questionnaire, the interview was another helpful tool used for getting more specific details. By answering the questions in the interview, the students' obstacles in understanding and applying collocations could be revealed.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was really significant, without it the research could not be fulfilled. It was based on literature, research aims, and research questions. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. It consists of 11 questions and 26 statements and it is split into the following groups:

Group	Summary of the content of the question group
a. 1,2,3,4,5	Students' background
b. 6,7,8,9,10,11	Students' attitudes toward writing and learning collocation
c. From 12 to 16	The importance of collocation
d. From 17 to 35	The difficulties in understanding and applying collocation in writing

3.3.2 Interview

The paper interview is considered an effective way to collect specific information from juniors such as ideas, and thoughts directly and easily. After finishing the questionnaires, the researcher just chose randomly 15 students (4 boys and 11 girls) in total of 106 students to fulfill the interview questions. The researcher designed 5 questions that concentrated on the two main points. With the first two questions, the researcher would like to know students' attitudes toward writing skills. As for the rest, students were asked to figure out difficulties they have faced when understanding and applying collocations as well as some solutions from students. They could be free to share their ideas. It can be concluded that the researcher used an interview for the purpose of knowing more about the difficulties of juniors in learning collocations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

In this part, the research shows the findings of the questionnaire and the interview. The results of the study were analyzed after collecting all necessary data and ideas from 106 English-majored juniors. The results were divided into two groups: the results of the questionnaire and the results of the interview.

4.1.1 Results of the questionnaire

The findings of the questionnaire were split into three basic items including the students' background, students' attitude toward English and English writing skills and students' problems in learning collocations.

4.1.1.1 Students' attitude towards English writing subject and learning collocations

The participants' viewpoints on English writing

There is no room for suspicion that the crucial role of writing has been widely recognized in the learning English process. Glancing at the figure, it is obvious that the percentage of students who claimed that English writing was very important was extremely high, more than three-fourths of the total number (77.36%). It dominated the percentage of students who thought that writing was important was nearly a quarter (22.64%) whereas no one agreed that writing was normal, not important and not important at all; therefore, the percentage was zero (see chart 4.3).

4.1.1.2 The importance of learning collocations

From the findings of the figure, it is undeniable that the percentage of students who considered that learning collocations were important was up to 66.98%. On the contrary, none of them (0%) said that learning English was not important at all. This means that their awareness of learning collocations has increased. Likewise, 25.47% of the English-majored juniors thought that learning collocations were very important. Besides, very

few students felt normal in studying collocations, with a rate (7.55%). Glimpsing the figure below to see how learning collocations are important to students.

4.1.1.3 Students' self-evaluation of their collocations' acknowledgement

When being asked "What do you think about your acknowledgement of collocations, there were no students believing that their acknowledgement of collocation was very good and good. Hence, the percentage demonstrated for those scales was (0%). They were not confident about their capacity for collocation. Conversely, the majority of juniors thought that their collocations' acknowledgement was average. It is not difficult to see that the highest column represents 79.25% (84/106) of the participants who have an average collocations' acknowledgement. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that approximately 16.04% (17/106) of them supposed that the capacity of acquiring English collocations was bad. It was revealed in the second column. Finally, the lowest one is the percentage of juniors who admitted that they were bad at collocations. In a little more detail, as a result, 4.72% (5/106) of students felt their collocations' acknowledgement was very bad.

4.1.1.4 Students' thinking about learning collocations

Another interesting point was that although 100% of the participants realized that collocations have a huge impact on writing skill, they did not deny that learning collocations were an absolutely difficult task. In fact, there is no doubt that collocations are considered an effective way to reduce boring writing. In contrast, the more vital collocation is, the harder they are to learn because collocations are not easy to understand and apply. From the finding in the chart, it can be deduced that only 1 student in the total of 106 students considered that learning collocations were very easy. Particularly, it made up 0.94% of the sum. Likewise, only 5.66% (6/106) believed that it was easy to learn collocations. Conversely, more than half of them, 52.83% (56/106), confirmed that it was extremely difficult for them to learn collocations. Actually, the researcher was not surprised to see that more than a quarter of students 33.96% (36/106) felt that learning collocations were normal, not easy, and not difficult. As for "very difficult" scale, there was approximately 4.72% of the participant thought that collocations were very hard. The following figure indicates what students think about learning collocations.

4.1.1.5 The participants' viewpoint about the role of collocations in writing

Learners' points of view play an indispensable part in learning collocations. The next content of the questionnaire found out what students thought about the role of collocations in writing. It was obvious that most of the juniors can concur with the importance of collocations that was represented in the chart above. Particularly, 76.42% (81/106) of them strongly agreed that learning collocations was important and 14.15% (15/106) of students believed that it was very important, but it was just a small number of the participants. As can be seen from the chart, the juniors paid much attention to learning collocations because they knew how important it was. In addition, only 9.43%

(10/106) of the participants supposed that the role of collocation was normal. Last but not least, there was any surprise that none of them thought that collocations were not important and not important at all (0%). This means that their awareness of learning collocations has increased.

Continuously, the juniors were asked "How often do you use collocations in your English writing skill?". Most of them revealed the answer that they sometimes used collocations when writing. It accounted for 70.75% (75/106) of the total 100%. Of all 23/106 students who did apply for collocations usually, it made up 21.70% of the sum. In contrast to this, only 7.55% (8/106) of them said that they seldom used collocations. It was regretful to see that none of them claimed that they always used collocations when writing and they have never used collocations (0%). Let's have a look at the chart below in order to see how often students use collocations in their English writing skills.

In writing, students need to use many varied structures and different types of sentences. However, it seems to be that word phrases as well as compound or complex sentences was their common favorite types that many juniors of English majored in course 8 normally used in writing whilst other types such as collocations, proverbs and idioms were not their cups of tea. For the purpose of observing clearly which object a major of participants used normally in writing, let's take a quick look at the bar chart below:

4.1.1.6 The importance of collocations

Without a shadow of a doubt, recognizing the importance of collocations in the process of learning is considered the core of success. It is undoubted that writing is a productive skill that all the students aim to get when studying a foreign language. Additionally, writing is a basic tool to take notes of students learning English because they can write down what they learn on their papers. This significance of writing skills was claimed by the data in the questionnaire. Looking at the table below, the percentage of the respondents who strongly disagreed with the four statements in Table 3 was zero. Nevertheless, the percentage choosing "strongly agree" and "agree" was almost overwhelming. In the little detail, 68.86% of them agreed that collocation actually was a good way to decrease colorless in writing, 20.75% of juniors strongly agreed, 8.49% had no idea and very few of them (1.88%) disagreed. In statement 2, more than half of the participants (65.09%) agreed that collocations could help them enlarge their vocabulary and understand the culture of the native speaker as well as 25.47% of them strongly agreed with this whilst only 9.43% of the students gave no comments. As for statement 3, 55.66% of the participants agreed that collocations had a crucial role in writing and native speakers used them usually. Besides, the percentages of juniors choosing "strongly agreed", "no idea" was 26.41%, 17.92% respectively. With the last one, it was apparent that 62.26% of students believed that thanks to learning collocation, they could show their ideas clearer, followed by "strongly agreed" at 16.98% and "no idea" at around 18.87% and only 1.88% of the sum disapproved.

Table 4.1: The importance of collocation

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Collocations are considered an effective way to reduce boring and rigid in writing.	20.75%	68.86%	8.49%	1.88%	0%
2. Collocations help you enrich your vocabulary and partially understand native English speakers' culture.	25.47%	65.09%	9.43%	0%	0%
3. Collocations are absolutely important because they are very common in English and native speakers use them frequently.	26.41%	55.66%	17.92%	0%	0%
4. Learning collocation is a good idea because you can express yourself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something more precise by choosing the appropriate collocations.	16.98%	62.26%	18.87%	1.88%	0%

4.1.1.7 Students' problems in understanding and applying collocation

a. Recognizing

In learning collocation, recognition is extremely important to students. Undoubtedly, it is easy to make mistakes in using collocations if they cannot recognize them in the contexts. The importance of recognizing collocations was shown in the table below:

Table 4.2: Difficulties in recognizing collocation of the participants

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5. It is difficult for you to recognize collocations in specific contexts	17.92%	49.06%	23.58%	8.49%	0.94%
6. You usually feel confused when using collocations because you do not know which words go together.	21.69%	56.60%	18.87%	2.83%	0%

Simply glimpse at Table 4.3, the first statement in the table stated that students had difficulties in recognizing collocations when it is put in specific situations. The majority of respondents who concurred were almost three-fourths (49.06% approved and 17.92% totally approved). However, there was 23.58% of them did not think so and 8.49% of them had no comment. As for statement 6, more than half of the sum (56.60%) said that they felt confused when applying collocations because it was hard for them to know the way words go together. In the same vein, this statement also got 21.69% of the participants who strongly agreed. On the contrary, the juniors having the opposite thought were 2.83% and the students who did not give any idea were 18.87%.

b. Vocabulary

Apparently, vocabulary is considered the stone to construct the foundation of English language knowledge. It is always needed in learning English, especially collocations. Actually, the larger vocabulary the speakers have, the better result they will gain in learning collocations. Hence, most of the students claimed that lacking vocabulary was one of the difficulties in learning collocations. These including 3 statements (8, 9, 10) was presented in the table below:

Table 4.3: Problems in the vocabulary of the respondents

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
7. Lack of vocabulary makes you confused when trying to understand collocations.	52.83%	40.56%	5.66%	0.94%	0%
8. You have a habit of translating all words in collocations that you caught into Vietnamese	20.75%	51.89%	16.04%	9.43%	1.88%
9. Collocations are arbitrary and based on linguistic convention; therefore, you feel bored and impatient when trying to remember words having in collocations	15.09%	61.32%	16.98%	3.77%	2.83%

Let's have a look at statement 7, lack of vocabulary seems to be a difficulty obstructing the students from being able to learn collocations well. Hence, most of the juniors thought that lack of vocabulary was one of the difficulties in acquiring collocation with a remarkable percentage of 52.83%. Likewise, 40.56% showed their agreement and 5.66% of them had no idea, very few of them (0.94%) disagreed. As for statement 8, it was uncomplicated to see that more than half of the participants (51.89%) admitted that they had a trend of translating all words in collocations into Vietnamese. Similarly, there was 20.75% of them strongly agreed with this statement. In contrast, 9.43% of them said they disagreed, very few of them thought that it was not absolutely true and 16.04% of them had no idea. Statement 9 revealed a number of the juniors approved that it was hard for them to remember words including in collocations. About 61.32% agreed and 15.09% strongly agreed felt that they could not remember words in collocation easily because collocations were arbitrary. The remaining ones were 16.98% having no idea, 3.77% disagreed and only 2 students (2.83%) totally disagreed.

c. Guessing meaning

Continuing with another problem in learning collocations, 4 statements were about difficulties of students in guessing meaning illustrated in Table 4.5.

Table 4.4: Problems in guessing the meaning of collocation of students

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
10. You usually misunderstand and cannot reach the real meaning of collocations.	18.87%	61.32%	15.09%	4.71%	0%
11. It is a real challenge to get the meaning of collocations because they cannot be translated word for word.	32.07%	47.17%	14.15%	6.6%	0%
12. You are afraid of using collocations because of their hidden meaning.	16.98%	62.26%	14.15%	6.6%	0%
13. It is not easy to guess the meaning of collocations if you do not know exactly what the collocations mean and the way words go together.	29.25%	58.49%	9.43%	2.83%	0%
14. It is hard for you to guess the meaning of collocations because they are conventional word combinations as well as arbitrary meanings.	21.69%	56.60%	18.87%	2.83%	0%

Definitely, it was clear that no one chose the column “strongly disagree”, so the percentage was zero. Getting started with statement 10, the difficulty was their misunderstanding of words, so it led to the drawback that they were not able to reach the real meaning of collocations. It can be deduced that approximately fourth-fifths of students (61.32% agree and 18.87% strongly agree) had a big problem guessing meaning. Conversely, 15.09% of them had no comment on this statement and 4.71% of them did not have difficulty guessing the meaning of collocations. The next one, statement 11, stated that getting a real meaning of collocation was a challenge for them because collocations could not be translated word by word. The percentage of the respondents who concurred was over three-fourths (32.07% strongly approved and 47.17% approved). 14.15% of them had no opinions and 6.6% of them did not think so. Additionally, as the statement 12 “You are afraid of using collocations because of their hidden meaning” was stated, more than half of juniors showed agreement with this (62.26%). Similarly, 16.98% of them agreed with the fact that their capacity of using collocations was limited because of their hidden meaning. Yet, 6.6% of them believed that it was not a big deal and the participants who had no idea were 14.15%. In statement 13, around three-fourths of the participant confirmed that it was hard for them to guess the meaning of collocations because they did not know the way words combine together (29.25% fully approved and 58.49% approved). However, there was 9.43% of them hesitated to choose whether they should have agreed or disagreed and 2.83% of them decided to select the column “disagree”. Furthermore, collocations were conventional word combinations as well as arbitrary meanings. Therefore, they made students feel impatient and bored when trying to guess meanings. The evidence was that 21.69% of students totally agreed and 56.6% of them agreed with this statement. On the contrary, only 2 juniors (2.83%) of them did not

think so. 18.87% of them did not give an opinion and 0% of the selected “strongly disagree” with this statement.

d. Cultural problems

It is apparent that apart from vocabulary, guessing meaning and recognizing collocations, cultural problems are also the factors that limit students’ collocations capacity. The below table represents the results of the survey about cultural obstacles of the participants in learning collocations.

Table 4.5: Difficulties in cultural background knowledge

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
15. Collocations are difficult to understand because of lacking cultural background behind them.	16.98%	60.38%	15.09%	7.54%	0%
16. Cultural background restricts your ability in understanding collocations.	11.32%	52.83%	33.19%	2.83%	0%
17. Collocations are reflections of culture including geography, religion, society and culture also form language. You usually feel complicated because of lacking cultural background.	18.87%	42.45%	23.58%	14.15%	0.94%

From the finding in the table, markedly the first two statements have no people dissenting and the answer “agree” is the one making up the highest percentage. Particularly, in statement 15, more than half of the juniors (60.38%) shared that they could not understand collocations well because they had not enough knowledge about culture. Besides, 16.98% of them agreed, 15.09% of them had no idea and 7.54% of them showed their disagreement with this statement. Moving to the next one, around 64.15% of the participants supposed that cultural background knowledge absolutely limited their ability in understanding collocations (11.32% fully agree and 52.83% agree). In contrast, very few of them disagreed and surprisingly, more than a quarter of them did not think so (33.19%). With the last one, statement 17, over 61.32% of the respondents (18.87% totally agree and 42.45% agree) thought that they found it hard to know the meaning of collocations as well as apply them in the specific situations unless they had no good cultural background knowledge. On the opposite side, 14.15% of them did not believe that and only 1 student (0.94%) strongly disagreed. Moreover, 23.58% of the respondents had no opinion about the last statement.

e. Putting in the appropriate situations

This is the final part of the questionnaire illustrating the percentage of the participants who had difficulties with the way of putting collocations in the appropriate situations. There were only 2 statements and here is the chart representing the results of all the statements and no juniors ticked “strongly disagree”.

Table 4.6: Difficulties in putting collocations into the appropriate situations

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
18. It can be difficult for non-native speakers to use collocations correctly and appropriately.	22.64%	55.66%	16.98%	4.72%	0%
19. You can remember collocations but you face a difficulty that you do know how to put them into specific situations accurately	18.87%	65.09%	10.38%	5.66%	0%

Referring to the table above, it is undeniable that the percentage choosing “strongly agree” and “agree” is almost overwhelming. In the little detail, 55.66% of them agreed that non-native speakers could not use collocations properly and accurately and 22.64% of them strongly agreed. Nevertheless, the percentages of juniors choosing “strongly disagreed”, “no idea” was 4.72%, 16.98% respectively. Luckily, students revealed through statement 19 that they were able to remember collocations pretty well but they faced another difficulty that they did not know how to put them into specific contexts appropriately. In fact, over 65.09% of them agreed and 18.87% of them fully agreed that because many collocations were quite an informal situation used in a normal situation while standard collocations were used in formal contexts. Hence, it was hard for them to know how to put them correctly. The percentage that students disapproved was very low (5.66%). The rest was 10.38% had no opinions.

f. Other difficulties

Table 4.7: Other difficulties in understanding and applying collocation

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
20. You have a poor memory, so you easily forget what you just learnt about collocation	18.87%	42.45%	23.58%	14.15%	0.94%
21. You have no interest and passion in learning and using collocations.	4.71%	16.03%	46.23%	28.30%	4.71%
22. You rarely spend time practicing to use collocations in your English writing skill.	17.92%	59.43%	13.20%	9.43%	0%
23. Collocations are difficult because you do not have enough appropriate materials to learn.	18.87%	65.09%	10.38%	3.77%	1.88%
24. You cannot remember collocations because there are no certain rules or any logic for them to follow.	18.87%	56.6%	18.87%	5.66%	0%
25. Collocations are so hard because they are not taught well in class.	24.52%	46.22%	22.64%	6.6%	0%

26. Collocations are varied, so you easily lose your patience when trying to remember them.	11.32%	52.83%	33.19%	2.83%	0%
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Apart from the difficulties mentioned above including recognizing, guessing meaning, cultural background and putting in the appropriate situations, unfortunately, students had to deal with many other obstacles causing difficulties in learning collocations. Actually, in statement 20, it would be great if students had a good memory in order to remember collocations that they learnt already. More than half of the participants (18.87% chose “strongly agree”, 42.45% “chose agree”) admitted that they had a poor memory and easily forgot what they just studied about collocation. In contrast, 14.15% of them did not think they had a not good memory and 1 student (0.94%) believed that he could remember collocations pretty well. Moreover, the rest was 23.58% of them who had no idea. One notable thing that the researcher figured out from the questionnaire was that students had an interest and passion in learning and using collocations. The evidence was that around 33.01% of the respondents refused that they were not keen on learning collocations (28.3% chose “disagree” and 4.71% chose “strongly disagree”) about the statement 21. It is interesting to see that this is the only statement that had many students were in disagreement and strong disagreement with statement 21 in the questionnaire. Conversely, there was about a half of them gave no opinions with the rate 46.23% and 4.71%, 16.03% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed respectively. As for statement 22, the majority of students 77.35% (17.92% fully agree, 59.43% agree) shared that they rarely spent time practicing to use collocations in writing. On the other hand, 13.02% of them did not give any comment and 9.43% of them disapproved. Moving to the next one, statement 23, it was undeniable that materials that support students in learning collocations were definitely significant. However, more than three-fourths of the juniors thought that they had not enough appropriate materials for learning collocations, with the rate 83.96% including 18.87% fully agreed and 65.09% agreed. Nevertheless, the percentages of juniors who did select “no idea”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree” were 10.38%, 3.77% and 1.88% respectively. In statement 24, collocations were arbitrary and conventional words; therefore, we had no certain rules or any logic to apply. There was 56.6% of the students claimed that having no certain rules to follow when learning collocations was one of their difficulties. Likewise, 18.87% of the sum strongly agreed with this. However, nearly a quarter of the total 18.87% had no opinion and 5.66% of them strongly disapproved. Actually, there is no room for practicing to use collocations in class. That was the reason why collocations were not taught well and proved through the answer of the juniors in statement 25. The percentage of the participants who did choose “strongly agree”, “agree”, “no idea”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 24.52%, 46.22%, 22.64%, 6.6% and 0% respectively. With the last one, statement 26, to be successful in anything, attitude partially plays an indispensable role. Especially, learning collocation is a long and difficult process. Collocations have many types and are varied as well as arbitrary that leading to students’ impatience when trying to acquire them.

When the difficulty was stated, there was 11.32% fully agreed and more than a half of them (52.83%) agreed. 33.19% gave no comments on this statement. Very few of them (2.83%) strongly disagreed.

4.1.2 Results of the interview

After analyzing the interviews of fifteen juniors seriously, the researcher got the final results that there was something in common with the questionnaire's results. Firstly, when being asked "do you like writing? Why or why not", 11/15 students gave the answer "yes", which revealed their positive attitude towards studying writing. In fact, they did like writing because they believed that they used writing as a good way to show their ideas, thoughts and emotions. In addition, they said that the writing product was a combination of many elements such as vocabulary, grammar and knowledge that they learned in class. They thought that "writing skill is also the best way to record many documents such as writings, poem, story, application and so on". On the contrary, there were 4 juniors who reported that they did not like writing because it was a difficult and boring skill. Besides, "I did not have enough vocabulary and I was not good at grammar as well as structures and it consumed much time to write down what I think in my head smoothly," said the students. Secondly, after reading the answers to the next interview question, the researcher found out that almost all 15 interviewees (15/15) considered writing as the most difficult skill among speaking, listening and reading. For some reason, "I sometimes had ideas, thoughts but I did not know the way to arrange them logically." said the student. Additionally, it was hard for them to write sentences grammatically and correctly because of lacking vocabulary, grammar, structures as well as background knowledge. As for interview question 3, "Which difficulties do you face in understanding and applying collocations in writing English?". They listed out some difficulties such as they could not knowing the way words go together because collocations had no rules or logic to follow. Moreover, guessing meaning was also one of their difficulties when learning collocations. They shared ideas that they did not know how to put collocations in the specific contexts as well as recognize collocations. When being asked among those difficulties which was the most difficult factor that made them not understand and use collocations well. Of all 15 students, there were 12 students who did think that guessing the meaning of collocations was the most difficult key factor affecting them when learning collocations. Since they had a trend of translating word by word and it did not make sense. Furthermore, it was not easy for them to use collocations correctly and appropriately. Aside from this, students themselves also suggested some solutions to overcome difficulties in understanding and applying collocations such as taking notes when learning new collocations and their usage, making a collocation dictionary of their own, and when hearing or reading collocations we could write down and put it into sentences to remember it, reviewing collocations that we learnt frequently.

4.2 Discussion

Let's look back at the findings of the questionnaire, as for the background knowledge part, it shows that most of the students from English majored class, course 8 are from the rural area (more than three-fourths of the sum), so this is a drawback for the participants. It proved that students had different experiences and knowledge about English writing. There is no doubt that students living in the city had more opportunities in learning writing than those in the countryside. Although collocations were a useful way to make their writing style more attractively and vibrantly, they were unfamiliar with collocations because generally teachers in the countryside mainly concentrated on teaching grammar and reading. Also, they have never known collocations. Therefore, they surely met many difficulties. Based on the research results, their difficulties in understanding and applying collocation mainly fell on recognizing, vocabulary, guessing meaning, cultural background, put collocations in the appropriate situations.

First of all, recognition was one of the barriers that students had to face. Because words habitually go together and convey meaning by association. Also, this led to the fact that it was not easy to recognize all of the collocations. When reading, the writer may use some common collocations to make their writing more colorful and if we were not able to recognize them, we surely interpreted them by translating them word by word. One more notable difficulty belonged this category was the students' misunderstanding or understanding of meaning in an unnatural way. Hence, the useful solutions are supposed that the juniors would be better if they had a high awareness of acquiring collocations. When they catch sight of collocations, they can record it into a diary or notebook to remember it when meeting again.

Secondly, vocabulary and guessing meaning were two typical problems of the respondents. Actually, it is extremely advantageous for those who have varied vocabulary knowledge in learning collocations. Unfortunately, students had no rich and plentiful vocabulary which led them to confuse. Besides, guessing meaning was not easy for students since they could not translate words by words. In addition, they did not know the way words appear together because there were no certain rules and specific methods to apply. Moreover, the cultural background was also the difficulty that limited students' capacity. The juniors could not understand the meaning of collocations if they lack knowledge about nations' cultures.

Finally, it can be seen that putting collocations seemed to be no easy task for the students. Each collocation has its own usage, in the formal situation or informal one. Based on the results of the questionnaire, some students revealed that they could remember collocations pretty well but they did not know how to put them into the specific contexts correctly. What is more, using collocations was easy for native speakers but it can be difficult for non-native speakers to use collocations appropriately. The juniors will be great if they pay attention to the way of using collocations and try their best to master collocations' appropriate contextual uses.

5. Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

In this day and age, the English language indeed has played an important part in social life as no one can exist without the air. The number of people, who have learnt English dramatically increases every day. In fact, it is undeniable that English is one of the most common languages in the world. It is considered the key to opening the globe's barriers consisting of education, medical care, economy, tourism, technology and so on. However, studying English is not easy. Actually, the truth is that the students often face difficulties when studying a new language, particularly English. Indeed, English-majored juniors at Tay Do University are a specific example. They revealed that writing skill is the most challenging for them to master and applying collocations in writing that makes their writing style more interesting is students' unfamiliar task. During the process of learning English, they recognize many difficulties that limit their collocations' acknowledgement. After collecting and analysing the information and data, the researcher figured out some common difficulties of the juniors in understanding and applying collocations in writing. Thanks to the important information that students had proved in the questionnaire and the interview question, we could see that the barriers were vocabulary, recognizing, guessing meaning, cultural background and putting in the appropriate situations. For instance, having difficulties in vocabulary and guessing meaning could be inferred from the information that students lacked the necessary vocabulary in understanding and guessing the meaning of collocations. Taking recognizing as a typical example, it could be seen that the juniors were not able to recognize collocations when they met it in the essays, articles or daily newspapers. Those factors above cause remarkable difficulties for students in the process of learning collocations. When conquering or mastering anything, one needs a positive attitude, and motivation as key factors to be successful. To overcome those obstacles mentioned above, students also need those elements. Learning English as well as learning how to use collocations effectively take much time. Therefore, non-native speakers in general and English-majored juniors at Tay Do University in particular usually find that learning collocations are too difficult and long a process. Thus, they themselves also make lots of effort, try their hardest and spend time self-studying or working in groups to stimulate the interest in acquiring collocations.

In brief, the research "Difficulties in understanding and applying collocations in writing of English majored juniors at Tay Do University" intended to figure out the problems that the juniors faced in learning collocations. Furthermore, some appropriate solutions, useful advice and tips are suggested for them for the purpose of using collocations accurately.

5.2 Implications

After analyzing the results of the questionnaire and the results of the interview, it can be concluded that the students realized the significant role of collocations in writing. However, they met some difficulties in the learning process. The researcher hopes that

through this study, the participants can perceive their problems as well as their weak points in recognizing, vocabulary, guessing meaning, and putting collocations in suitable situations for the purpose of finding out the appropriate learning methods for themselves. Furthermore, this study also helps teachers realize their students' difficulties in order that the teachers can find out the proper teaching methods to make students' writing smoothly and accurately. Apart from that, they can offer their students pertinent materials that help them study collocations effectively.

5.3 Recommendations

This research can be seen as a basis for further research. Based on the results of this survey, other research can expand the scale to investigate in a longer time. Actually, the researcher can develop their research more deeply with a larger number of the participant not only English majored juniors; but also, English majored freshmen, sophomores and seniors; even non-English majored students about their difficulties.

What is more, the researcher hopes that in the near future, there will be some research about consistent solutions and effective methods for students to overcome their difficulties in understanding and applying collocations in writing. Moreover, the university library will furnish more and more good reference books and practical materials to support juniors in learning collocations. Last but not least, students should put a high motivation toward English writing particularly collocations as well as get more promotions to master English writing skills.

Conflict of interests statement

The authors' whole names are listed immediately below to certify that they have no conflicts of interest, authorship, and disclosures in publication. They confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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