



AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE USE OF COLLOCATIONS IN ACADEMIC ESSAYS OF ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS OF THE HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAM AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

One of the main goals of language learners is to master all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing when it comes to their acquisition of the target language. However, during the process of learning English, learners inevitably face a variety of challenges related to their writing including grammatical errors, word choice, organization, idea development, and most importantly their difficulties in using collocations (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, this study has been conducted to investigate the students' use of English collocations in their academic essays associated with their difficulties so that appropriate pedagogical approaches and practices would be taken into consideration in order to help students improve their English collocational competences in academic writing. This descriptive study was carried out with 103 English-majored students of the High-quality program of the School of Foreign Languages at Can Tho University, Vietnam. A 5-point Likert scale survey with 18 questionnaire items was employed to examine the frequency of students' exposure to as well as their usage of English collocations, and their difficulties in using English collocations. The results of this study have shown that the most commonly used collocations in the students' academic essays were 'verb + noun', and 'adjective + noun' lexical collocations. Additionally, the research outcomes have revealed that the types of English collocations that the students were more likely to make the most mistakes belonged to 'verb + adverb', and 'adjective + noun' lexical collocations.

Keywords: collocations, academic essays, difficulties

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1. Introduction

In most languages, there normally exists an intrinsic order of words in which they are arranged or co-occur to make appropriate meaning for a certain text (Shitu, 2015). In English, such a linguistic phenomenon is referred to as collocation. In fact, the term collocation was initially coined by Firth (1957) to mean the co-occurrence of words by abstraction. In effect, both Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (McIntosh, 2009) and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) provide a highly comprehensive definition which is in accord with a majority of recent researchers and scholars (Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986, 1997, 2010; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005; McIntosh, 2009; Tanihardjo, 2017; Woodlard, 2000) who consider collocation as the combination of two or more words which frequently co-occur in a way that sounds correct and natural in the target language, namely English (e.g., heavy rain, comfort zone, strongly agree, deeply shocked). Lately, a great deal of attention has been paid to studies of collocations in both ESL and EFL contexts due to the fact that despite the paramount importance of collocations in showcasing the students' language proficiency as well as enhancing their lexical resources, which is the key to native-like production (Dokchandra, 2019; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008; Men, 2018; Saito, 2020; Wood, 2002), most learners in general and the students majoring in English in particular inevitably confront difficulties in using the target language's collocations, especially in their academic writing (Kuo, 2009; Mohamed, 2016; Mongkolchai, 2008; Osman & Abdalla, 2019; Phoocharoensil, 2011, 2014; Shitu, 2015). Thus, such an aspect of research should be of major concern in order to appropriately address any difficulties along with the causes that are involved.

Up to now, there have been a number of studies focusing on examining students' problems with their use of English collocations, and most of them have come up with relatively similar outcomes which have revealed that both ESL and EFL learners normally face significant challenges in using lexical and grammatical collocations (Begagić, 2014; Mallikamas & Pongpaibroj, 2005; Mohamed, 2016; Namvar, 2012; Osman & Abdalla, 2019; Saud, 2018; Thongviti & Thumwongsa, 2017; Wongpunya & Meesri, 2019). However, even though most of these previous studies on students' use of English lexical and grammatical collocations adapted the same model of classifying collocations framed by Benson et al. (1986, 1997, 2010) and Lewis (2000), their specific findings were somewhat diverse. For instance, Mallikamas and Pongpaibroj (2005) found that both grammatical and lexical collocations posed equal challenges to Thai EFL learners' acquisition of the target language's collocations. Thongviti and Thumwongsa's research results (2017) indicated that advanced Thai EFL learners most frequently used 'noun + preposition' collocations and 'adjective + noun' collocations; nonetheless, they encountered the most problems with 'noun + preposition' and 'verb + noun' collocations belonging to both grammatical and lexical categories. Saud (2018) who focused on EFL Arabian undergraduate students' use of English collocations discovered that 'adjective + preposition' collocations and 'verb + noun' collocations contained the most errors in the

students' use of English collocations. Conducted in various contexts with different populations, namely Namvar's study (2012) on the Iranian postgraduate students' use of collocations, Mohamed's research (2016) on Sudanese EFL secondary school students' use of English collocations, and Wongpunya and Meesri's investigation (2019) on low proficiency level Thai EFL students' misuse of collocations, all of these studies discovered that the students committed the most errors relevant to 'adjective + noun' collocations.

As reported in a series of previous studies, students' difficulties in using English collocations mainly resulted from their L1s' negative transfer (Begagić, 2014; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Fan, 2009; Osman & Abdalla, 2019; Phoocharoensil, 2011, 2014; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013). Another leading cause of students' misuse or incorrect choices of English collocations was due to their lack of appropriate collocational knowledge (Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Detdamrongpreecha, 2014; Dokchandra's 2019; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Fan, 2009; Namvar, 2012; Saud, 2018; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013). In addition, there have been a set of research findings which pointed out that synonymy strategy was one of the underlying factors giving rise to students' inappropriate use of English collocations (Boonyasquan, 2006; Kuo, 2009; Mongkolchai, 2008; Phoocharoensil, 2011; Zughoul & Abdul-Fattah, 2001). Apart from these fundamental causes, some other elements contributing to students' improper use of English collocations might include limited vocabulary size, paraphrasing strategy, low language proficiency, lack of explicit instruction, overgeneralization, pedagogy, and learning materials (Begagić, 2014; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022; Detdamrongpreecha, 2014; Dokchandra, 2019; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Namvar, 2012; Saud, 2018; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013).

Although more and more attention has been given to students' use of English collocations, there still exist several gaps in the previous investigations. One of the major limitations of the majority of the above-mentioned studies is that they have not clearly highlighted what types of collocations EFL university students with their intermediate level of English proficiency were able to use in their academic writing and which kinds of English collocations were still problematic for their practical usage. Hence, this current research attempts to bridge such gaps in order to gain more insights into how EFL students with their intermediate level of English would actually express English lexical collocations in their academic essays. To be more specific, this study seeks the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What kinds of English collocations do EFL students with their intermediate level of English frequently use in their academic essays?
- 2) What difficulties do these students have when using English collocations in their academic essays?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition

The term collocation was initially coined by Firth (1957) to mean the common co-occurrence of particular words. In this sense, it is understood as a combination of words by abstraction. Since then, linguists, researchers, and scholars have shared a various but seemingly similar view that collocation is a combination of a pair or group of words which frequently co-occur in a certain context of communication to sound appropriate and natural in the target language, namely in English (Benson et al., 1986, 1997, 2010; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005; McIntosh, 2009; Tanihardjo, 2017; Woodlard, 2000). Specifically, Woolard (2000), and McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) agreed that collocation refers to the co-occurrence of words in a natural use with a greater frequency rather than randomness. The Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary (2013) offers a basic and concise definition considering collocations as two or more words that are often combined in a natural way to produce correct and coherent speech and writing (e.g., bear in mind, market share, critical analysis, genuinely happy).

Overall, collocation can basically be comprehended as a combination of two or more words which often occur together in a manner that is appropriate and natural in the target language. In particular, within the scope of this research, the two key dimensions of collocation are taken into account including its appropriateness in lexicogrammatical forms with semantic transparency and its popularity in native speakers' communicative practice.

2.2 Classifications of Collocations

With regard to categorizing English collocations, there have been a wide range of collocational terms derived from numerous linguistic scholars' various perspectives of classification.

Based on the degree of fixedness and frequency, Lewis (1997) classified collocations into four categories, namely strong, weak, frequent, and infrequent. Within this classification, strong collocations refer to word combinations which are very closely associated with each other such as 'auburn hair' or 'deliriously happy' (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 1997, 2000; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008, 2017). In contrast, weak collocations are made up of words that have a wide range of collocates that can easily be guessed; for example, the word 'broad' can collocate with a number of other words (e.g., a broad agreement, a broad smile, a broad accent).

Mahmoud (2005) claimed that collocations could be grouped into open collocations and restricted collocations. Such a classification is in fact in accordance with the categories of weak and strong collocations suggested by Hill (2000), Lewis (1997, 2000), and McCarthy and O'Dell (2008, 2017). To be more precise, open collocations refer to certain words which can cluster with a number of other words; for instance, the word 'good' can be combined with plenty of other words (e.g., a good book, a good chance, a good idea). On the contrary, restricted collocations have just a few possible collocates; for

example, 'heavy rain' is a typical collocation while 'strong rain' and 'thick rain' are more likely to be inappropriate and untypical in academic writing as well as in the formal communication setting. Particularly, when word combinations are so strong that cannot be changed in any way or are irreplaceable by any other words (e.g., to and fro, rain cats and dogs), they are called fixed collocations which are also referred to as idioms or idiomatic expressions (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008, 2017; Wei, 1999).

Sinclair (1991) categorized collocations into upward collocations and downward ones. Indeed, this classification is somewhat similar to the distinction between frequent and infrequent collocations proposed by Lewis (1997), which is based on the frequency of co-occurrence of a certain word combination. More specifically, the upward collocations are supposed to be composed of English words which often cluster with the other words more often than they are themselves. One obvious example of this category is from the word 'back' which can collocate with a number of prepositions (e.g., at, in, on, to, from), which means that all of them are more frequent in the corpus than 'back' itself. Conversely, the downward collocations include words which habitually collocate with other words with more frequency than they are themselves. For example, some verbs like 'drive, head, push' can merge with 'back' even though they tend to occur less frequently in the corpus than 'back' itself.

By and large, although the aforementioned classifications have provided valuable insights into diverse aspects of collocations, their limitations lie in the fact that collocations are sorted at the two extremes of a continuous spectrum, which means those in between are left behind or commonly overlooked. Additionally, the notions of upward, downward, frequent, and infrequent collocations might contribute to a new trend of exploring collocations from the corpus-linguistic perspective. However, these categorizations pose significant challenges to the EFL teaching context mainly because it is too hard to determine which word combinations would be used more frequently as well as which words would more frequently collocate with each other than other words unless corpus-based tools for collocations are taken into consideration.

From the lexico-grammatical perspective, a more basic and comprehensive model of classifying collocation has been widely accepted and adapted in various studies (Dokchandra, 2019, Kuo, 2009; Shitu, 2015, Vi & Tran, 2021; Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013) is from Benson et al. (1986, 1997, 2010) who systematically sorted collocations into two major groups including grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. The former refers to a word combination with a prominent content word (i.e., noun, adjective, verb) and a preposition, an infinitive or a clause. In contrast, the latter normally consists of two or more content words, namely noun, verb, adjective, and adverb without containing any prepositions, infinitives, or relative clauses.

In order to investigate how Vietnamese EFL students have used collocations in their academic essays, this current study would rely on Benson et al.'s (2010) model of classifying collocations because it is concrete and comprehensive. More precisely, lexical collocations with the seven subtypes would be closely examined in this investigation

since they are contextually relevant to the reality of using collocations in formal written texts by EFL students.

- adjective + noun (e.g., heavy rain, major issue, bright color);
- adverb + adjective (e.g., highly controversial, fully aware, deeply shocked);
- adverb + verb (e.g., firmly believe, totally agree);
- noun + noun (e.g., comfort zone, communication skills);
- noun + verb (e.g., water freezes, economy collapses);
- verb + adverb (e.g., increase significantly, change dramatically);
- verb + noun (e.g., conduct research, create opportunities).

2.3 Importance of Collocations

In reference to the significance of collocations in the language learners' and users' competencies, most researchers and scholars have concurred with the three major roles of collocations for language competence. First and foremost, collocational knowledge is an indispensable part of a language learner and user due to the fact that collocations are ubiquitous with nearly three-fourth of what is said, heard, read, or written relevant to collocational knowledge (Hill, 2000). This is also in accordance with Carter, McCarthy, Mark, and O'Keeffe (2011) who reported that a large number of collocating words exist in all languages. Likewise, Erman and Warren (2000) found that about 58% of multiword units occur in spoken texts and approximately 52% of word combinations appear in written discourse.

The second important role of knowing collocations is that it helps learners and users speak and write in a more natural and accurate way, which is key to native-like production (Dokchandra, 2019; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008; Men, 2018). According to Wood (2002) and Men (2018), since fluency and accuracy are made possible by having a strong command of collocational knowledge and competence, to be successful in communicative practices, L2 learners should empower themselves with good knowledge of collocations because the extent to what collocations L2 learners are able to speak and write with ease will indicate how proficient they are in the target language.

The last and perhaps most salient importance of collocational knowledge and competence lies in the fact that it contributes to lexical development so as to vary the use of vocabulary and avoid lexical repetitions (Dokchandra, 2019; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2005). In fact, McCarthy and O'Dell (2008) emphasized that collocations would provide effective alternative ways to express something in the target language, which would make the users' speech and their writing more colorful, expressive and precise. Especially, by using collocations properly, the students' written ideas are more likely to get straightforward to express what they thought in their mind in an accurate and smooth manner (Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Saito, 2020; Wood, 2002). As a result, they could enhance their competences in diversifying word choices to get rid of lexical repetitions in order to achieve conciseness and lexical diversity in their academic writing to match with the band score and marking criteria of the standardized examination, namely the IELTS test (2020).

In brief, it cannot be denied that collocations play a crucial role in the language learners' lexical development, in their natural and fluent use of the target language to sound more like the native speakers. Hence, collocational knowledge and competence are regarded as one of the core competencies of a successful L2 learner. It is therefore imperative that students of all English levels should fluently master the target language's collocations so that they can produce accurate and appropriate spoken as well as written texts to match the standards of English.

2.4 Difficulties in Using Collocations

Despite the prominence of English collocations in almost every aspect of the learners' language competences, it is not easy for them to acquire all of the target language's collocational knowledge and competence within a certain period of time. In fact, they always face a variety of challenges not only in understanding collocations, but also in applying them in their real production and communication.

As reported in plenty of studies, learners of English encounter a number of difficulties mostly in using both lexical and grammatical collocations. More specifically, Mallikamas and Pongpairoj (2005) who focused on investigating the collocational knowledge of Thai EFL learners in both receptive and productive modes discovered that lexical collocations and grammatical collocations were equally challenging for them to acquire. Begagić (2014) closely examined the receptive and productive knowledge of lexical collocations among the first and fourth-year English-majored students in Zenica, concentrating on three types, namely 'verb + noun', 'adjective + noun', and 'verb + adverb' collocations through receptive and productive tests. The results indicated that in spite of their overall poor collocational knowledge, all of them seemed to have greater knowledge of receptive collocations than of productive collocations with the 'verb + adverb' collocation type being the most difficult to acquire for both groups of learners.

Within the same context in Thailand but using a different method of data collection and analysis as well as looking at more advanced EFL learners, Thongviti and Thumwongsa's study (2017) has provided some new insights into exploring the actual use of collocations by Thai English learners. More precisely, Thongviti and Thumwongsa (2017) examined the types and the frequency of grammatical and lexical English collocations utilized in the research article abstracts by Thai EFL writers in the field of liberal arts and humanities from 2010 to 2015 through the use of Antconc and TagAnt softwares coupled with the Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (2009) to analyze data and identify misused collocations. The findings demonstrated that 'noun + preposition' collocations and 'adjective + noun' collocations were used most frequently by the Thai EFL writers; however, 'noun + preposition' and 'verb + noun' collocations were the most misused categories of English collocations in the study.

Similar research about collocational problems is Namvar's investigation (2012) on the Iranian postgraduate students' use of collocations based on multiple choice collocational tests and a writing task to find out the kinds of collocational errors they made as well as the main causes of their problems with collocations. The results indicated

that the learners faced problems with both lexical and grammatical collocations with their most errors falling into 'adjective + noun' collocations, and 'noun + verb' collocations while 'verb + noun' collocations seemed to be the easiest category for them. Likewise, Mohamed (2016) examined the difficulties and challenges that faced Sudanese EFL secondary school students in learning English collocations. The exploration employed a multiple-choice test on both lexical and grammatical collocations which are based on Benson et al.'s model (1997). The outcomes of this study showed that Sudanese EFL students confronted more difficulties with lexical collocations than grammatical ones with the most challenge falling into 'adjective + noun' collocations.

In support of Mohamed's study (2016), Osman and Abdalla (2019) further investigated collocational difficulties encountered by Sudanese EFL postgraduates in using English collocations through a diagnostic test. The findings confirmed that the students faced difficulties in using English collocations to enhance their fluency in the target language. Saud (2018) looked into collocational errors made by EFL Arabian undergraduate students through a multiple-choice test to identify the types of English misused collocations. The findings were in line with previous studies which revealed that students met problems in both lexical and grammatical collocations. The most frequent collocational errors were 'adjective + preposition' collocations, followed by 'verb + noun' collocations; nevertheless, 'verb + preposition' collocations were the least common. Another noticeable study was conducted by Wongpunya and Meesri (2019) exploring low-proficiency Thai EFL students' misuse of collocations by collecting data from the tests involved with lexical and grammatical collocations. The results showed that the students committed more errors relevant to lexical collocations than grammatical collocations with the most errors pertaining to the use of 'adjective + noun' collocations, which consistently supported Mohamed's previous findings (2016).

In Vietnam, up to now, there have been just a few studies focusing on analyzing students' use of collocations as well as the problems facing them. One of the most noticeable studies has been conducted by Trng and Thao (2021) who examined the use of lexical collocations in Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students' academic writing based on the collocational classifications of Benson et al. (1986). The qualitative analysis of the students' written essays revealed that among 187 collocations found, 51 of them were incorrectly used. More specifically, although 'verb + noun' collocations and 'adjective + noun' collocations were used more commonly than other categories in the students' essays, they were also the two types receiving the largest number of collocational errors in addition to 'noun + verb' collocations.

Although various studies have been carried out in different contexts, relatively similar findings have been found among those investigations which have confirmed that misused collocations or incorrect choices of English words, as a type of collocational error, were committed by many learners and users. However, all of the above-mentioned studies have not specifically focused on what types of collocations university students with intermediate English proficiency were able to use in their academic writing and which kinds of English collocations were still challenging for their acquisition. Thus, this

current research endeavors to bridge such a gap so as to gain more insights into how Vietnamese EFL students with their intermediate level of English could utilize English collocations in their academic essays.

3. Material and Methods

This descriptive study was carried out with 103 consented students belonging to four different writing classes, who were first-year students majoring in English Studies in the High-quality program of the School of Foreign Languages at Can Tho University in Vietnam. All of the EFL participants including 75 females and 28 males were between 18 and 20 years old at the time of data collection. They had been officially learning English for more than 7 years since their secondary school with one academic year at university. The textbook used in their writing course was *Mindset for IELTS level 2* (Crosthwaite, De Souza, & Loewenthal, 2017). Thus, their English proficiency level was estimated as intermediate EFL learners. The population of this research was selected through the convenient and purposeful (or purposive) sampling method to include all the English-majored freshmen of the High-quality program in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022 because this population highly supported the scope and the aim of the current study, which focused on the intermediate EFL learners who were attending the course of Writing 2 for English academic essays. Nearly 67% of the participants self-reported in the questionnaire that they were explicitly instructed and already learned some basic English collocations while 33% of them stated that they knew very little about English collocations and had not been explicitly taught or learned English collocations systematically before.

In order to answer the research questions, a survey with 18 questionnaire items was utilized to explore the frequency of using English collocations, and the students' problems in their use of English collocations. The questionnaire includes a cover letter from the researchers to get the participants' consent and their willingness to respond accurately and conscientiously to the survey questionnaire. Furthermore, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity are also guaranteed in the cover letter, which is followed by the three parts of the questionnaire. The first part is about the personal information where the participants would provide their relevant demographic information such as age, gender, level of English, and the like to support the research. The second part consists of 9 questionnaire items using the 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1=very infrequently, 2=infrequently, 3=occasionally, 4=frequently, 5=very frequently) to investigate the frequency of the students' exposure to and their usage of English collocations. The final part includes 9 Likert scale-based questionnaire items (i.e., 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree) to examine the students' attitudes towards their difficulties in using collocations. All the Likert-scale items from the collected questionnaire would be subsequently computed by SPSS 26.0 for quantitative descriptive analysis. All the questionnaire items were designed and

developed based on the research aims associated with the theoretical frameworks embedded in the literature review to support the scope of this investigation.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, pilot testing was conducted on 21 students who were the representatives of the target population of this study before it was administered to all the participants for the full data collection. The quantitative analysis of the collected data from the pilot testing computed by the SPSS statistical package version 26.0 resulted in the Cronbach's alpha of .834, which means that the instrument was significantly reliable to employ for the whole data collection of this research. One week after the pilot testing, the questionnaire was electronically distributed to all the participants of this study. After the data collection, all the Likert-scale questionnaire items were quantitatively analyzed through the SPSS program to seek the answers to the research questions.

4. Results

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed through the SPSS version 26.0 with the Cronbach's alpha of .857. This result indicated that the questionnaire was significantly reliable. Thus, all the collected questionnaire items from the survey could be used for further analysis to answer the research questions.

4.1 Students' Use of English Collocations in Academic Writing

The students' use of English collocations was presented through descriptive statistics obtained from analyzing the questionnaire items in part 2 of the survey for mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages which were tabulated in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Students' Use of English Collocations

Frequent use of English Collocations	M	SD
Use of collocations in class	3.06	.802
Use of collocations in academic writing	3.14	.897
The overall use of lexical collocations	3.42	.724
Adjective + noun	3.57	1.006
Adverb + adjective	3.40	1.003
Adverb + verb	3.55	1.055
Noun + verb	3.01	.934
Noun + noun	3.26	.990
Verb + noun	3.68	.931
Verb + adverb	3.51	.895

Notes: M: mean; SD: standard deviation.

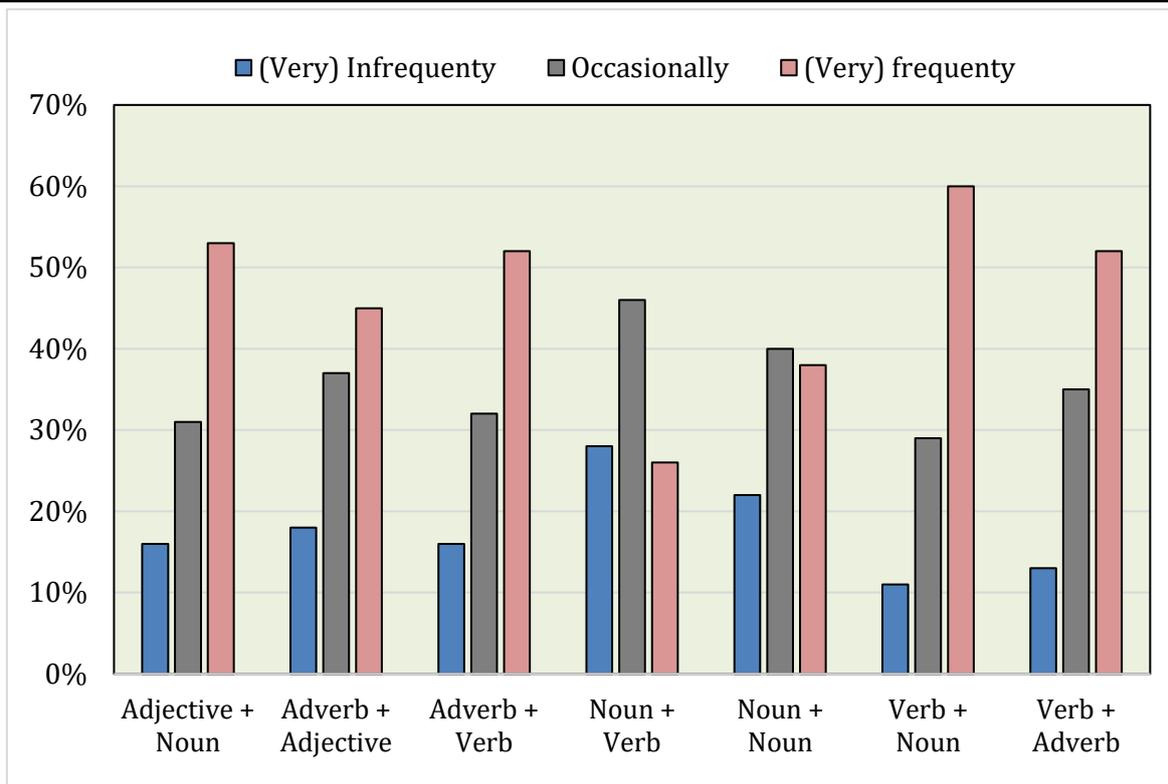


Figure 1: Percentage of Students' Use of English Lexical Collocations

As can be seen from Table 1 and Figure 1, the results from the quantitative analysis of the collected questionnaire items have shown that by and large, most of the students agreed that they sometimes employed English collocations in their classroom activities ($M=3.06$, $SD=.802$), and in their academic writing at an occasional level ($M=3.14$, $SD=.897$). Overall, they believed that their use of English lexical collocations stood at a regular degree ($M=3.42$, $SD=.724$). Specifically, among all the seven types of lexical collocations, more than half of the students were in agreement that they frequently used 'verb + noun' collocations ($M=3.68$, $SD=.931$) in their writing, followed closely by 'adjective + noun' collocations ($M=3.57$, $SD=1.006$), 'adverb + verb' collocations ($M=3.55$, $SD=1.055$), and 'verb + adverb' collocations ($M=3.51$, $SD=.895$). In contrast, nearly a quarter of the students thought that 'noun + verb' collocations were used the least frequently in their academic essays ($M=3.01$, $SD=.934$). Plus, about forty percent of the participants perceived that they occasionally employed 'noun + noun' collocations ($M=3.26$, $SD=.990$), and 'adverb + adjective' collocations ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.003$) in their academic writing.

4.2 Students' Difficulties in Using English Collocations in Academic Writing

The students' difficulties in using English collocations in their academic writing were reflected through the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire items in part 3 of the survey, which was computed for mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages, as reported in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Students' Difficulties in Using English Collocations

Difficulties in using English collocations	M	SD
Being not confident in using collocations	4.25	.589
Committing many collocational errors	4.28	.584
Errors of lexical collocations	3.40	.848
Adjective + noun	3.28	1.070
Adverb + adjective	3.52	.927
Adverb + verb	3.33	1.023
Noun + verb	3.59	.923
Noun + noun	3.45	1.026
Verb + noun	3.37	1.019
Verb + adverb	3.29	1.044

Notes: M: mean; SD: standard deviation.

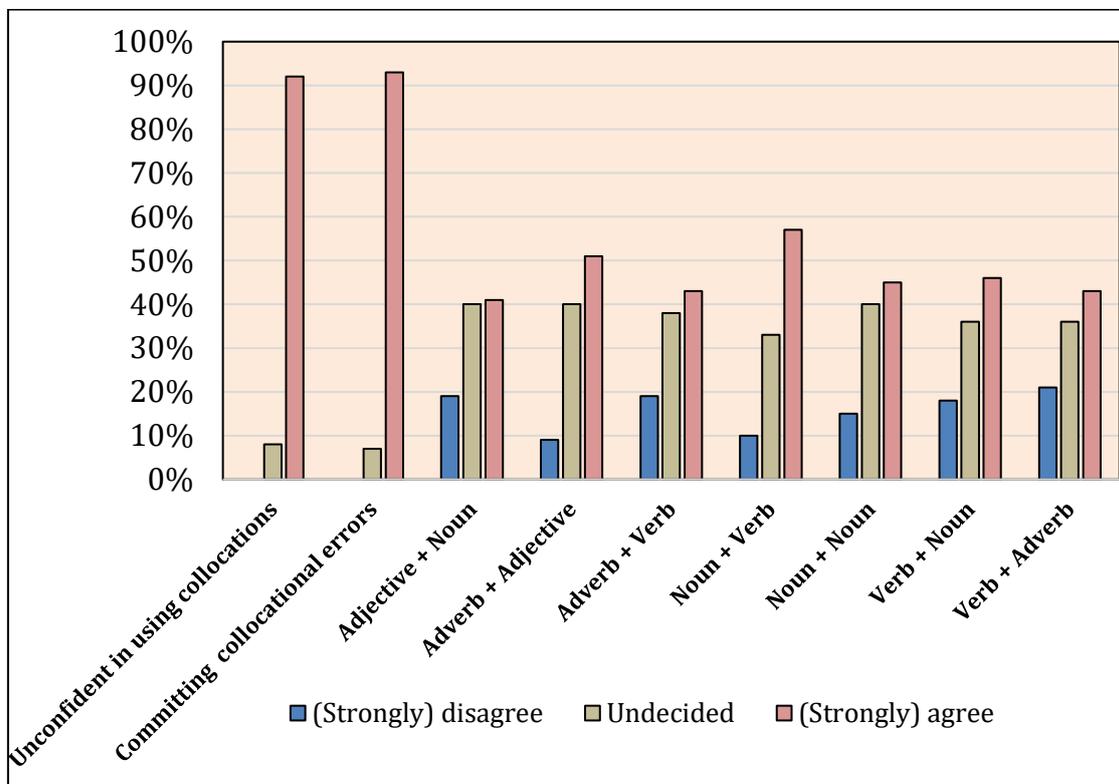


Figure 2: Percentage of Students' Difficulties in Using English Collocations

With regard to students' difficulties in using English lexical collocations, the results yielded from analyzing the questionnaire items, as illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 2, have disclosed that more than 90% of the students felt unconfident in utilizing English lexical collocations in their academic essays ($M=4.25$, $SD=.589$) and they thought that they had committed numerous errors of using English collocations in their writing ($M=4.28$, $SD=.584$). Moreover, approximately half of the participants agreed that they might make errors in all seven types of English lexical collocations ($M=3.40$, $SD=.848$). In particular, among the seven categories of English lexical collocations, the students believed that they would commit the most errors related to 'noun + verb' collocations ($M=3.59$, $SD=.923$), followed by 'adverb + adjective' collocations ($M=3.52$, $SD=.927$). In

addition, they thought that they might make fewer errors relevant to 'adverb + verb' collocations (M=3.33, SD=1.023), 'verb + adverb' collocations (M=3.29, SD=1.044), and 'adjective + noun' collocation (M=3.28, SD=1.070). Additionally, 'noun + noun' collocations (M=3.45, SD=1.026), and 'verb + noun' collocations (M=3.37, SD=1.019) were the two types of English lexical collocations that the students generally perceived that they might inevitably misuse or easily make mistakes in their writing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Vietnamese EFL students' Frequent Use of English Collocations

The first research question involved the kinds of English collocations which were frequently used in the Vietnamese EFL students' academic essays. The results obtained from the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire items have revealed that the students believed that their use of English lexical collocations stood at an occasional rate. More precisely, among the seven types of English lexical collocations, they perceived that 'verb + noun' collocations were most frequently employed in their writing, followed closely by 'adjective + noun', 'adverb + verb', and 'verb + adverb' collocations. The least common types of English lexical collocations were supposed to belong to 'noun + noun', and 'noun + verb' collocations. Such research outcomes seem to be in line with Thongviti and Thumwongsa's study (2017), which demonstrated that 'adjective + noun' collocations were one of the most frequent types of English lexical collocations employed by Thai EFL writers. These findings are also somewhat in accordance with Trng and Thao's research (2021), which supported that 'verb + noun', and 'adjective + noun' collocations were utilized more commonly than other types of English lexical collocations.

5.2 Vietnamese EFL Students' Difficulties in Using English Collocations

The second research question focused on Vietnamese EFL students' difficulties in using English lexical collocations in their academic essays. The descriptive analysis of the questionnaire items indicated that the students assumed that they would commit many collocational errors of all the seven subtypes of English lexical collocations. To be more specific, they supposed that their most frequent errors of English lexical collocation were related to 'noun + verb' collocations, followed closely by 'adverb + adjective' collocations. In addition, they believed that 'verb + adverb', and 'adjective + noun' collocation were the two categories of English lexical collocations receiving the least mistakes from their performance. In effect, these findings appear to be consistent with Namvar's study (2012), which indicated 'noun + verb' collocations were one of the most problematic categories of English lexical collocations for Iranian postgraduate students. However, the outcomes from this research are incongruent with a couple of previous studies (Begagić, 2014; Thongviti & Thumwongsa, 2017; Wongpunya & Meesri's, 2019). More specifically, Begagić's exploration (2014) showed that 'verb + adverb' collocations posed the most challenges to both the first and fourth-year English-majored students in Zenica whereas Thongviti and Thumwongsa's research (2017) discovered that 'verb + noun' collocations

were the most misused English lexical collocations for Thai advanced EFL writers. Wongpunya and Meesri's study (2019) revealed that the most difficult type of English collocations was 'adjective + noun', which caused the most common errors in the Thai EFL students' use of English lexical collocations.

All in all, it is clear that the results obtained from this present study strongly support the previous research findings although several specific aspects seem to be quite contrary to some of them. Such possible dissimilarities have indeed added more spice to the literature review in the field of collocations in particular and lexis at large. The probable explanations for any differences that have been found thus far could be due to the fact that all the aforementioned studies with the current one included have been conducted in various settings with diverse participants from different backgrounds of English as well as through various processes of data collection and analysis. Consequently, the research outcomes have yielded more insights into this essential topic of the investigation.

6. Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to investigate the use of English collocations in the academic writing of the students majoring in the English Studies at the High-quality program at Can Tho University. This study has been conducted to answer the two research questions 1) What kinds of English collocations do EFL students frequently use in their academic essays?, and 2) What difficulties do these students have when using English collocations in their academic essays?

First, the results obtained from analyzing the survey indicated that among the seven types of English lexical collocations, 'verb + noun' collocations and 'adjective + noun' collocations were most frequently used in the students' academic writing. On the contrary, the three least common categories of English lexical collocations belonged to 'adverb + adjective', 'noun + noun', and 'noun + verb' collocations. These research outcomes indeed support Thongviti and Thumwongsa's study (2017), and Trng and Thao's investigation (2021), which disclosed that 'adjective + noun' collocations were one of the most frequent types of English lexical collocations expressed in the EFL students' writing.

Second, the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the students thought that they would commit the most errors relevant to 'noun + verb' collocations, and 'adverb + adjective' collocations. However, the types of English lexical collocations which were more likely to pose the least challenges for them were 'verb + adverb' and 'adjective + noun' collocations. Such findings are quite in accord with Namvar's research results (2012), but incongruent with other researchers' study outcomes (Begagić, 2014; Thongviti & Thumwongsa, 2017; Wongpunya & Meesri, 2019).

7. Limitations and Recommendations

Although this study has been cautiously carried out, there still exist several limitations. The first restraint is its limited scope. Since this research mainly focused on examining the students' use of English lexical collocations in their academic essays, other aspects and classifications of English collocations, namely grammatical collocations have not been specifically taken into consideration because such concerns go beyond the scope of this current investigation. Hence, there will be more room for further research to delve into exploring how EFL students use both grammatical and lexical collocations in their academic writing as well as in their academic speaking in order to paint a complete picture of the L2 learners' use of the target language's collocations. The second constraint lies in the fact that this study only included the population of EFL intermediate-level students, which means that the results obtained from such research could hardly be broadly generalized for all EFL learners. Therefore, it is suggested that there should be more investigations on this significant topic by getting involved with more participants from various L1 backgrounds as well as with their different levels of English so that the research findings would be widely generalized. Last but not least, it is believed that in order to gain deeper insights into the students' perspectives of their difficulties as well as the causes of their problems in using English collocations, more data from in-depth interviews with the prospective participants should be included to further triangulate the research results on this field of study.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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