# An Exploration of Lexical Collocations Employed in EFL Students' Essay Writing

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates the use of different types of lexical collocations and common errors made related to these collocations in essay writing. The participants included EFL students who wrote an essay as a class writing test in 60 minutes. A 5-level Likert close-ended survey questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data regarding students' perceptions of the categories of lexical collocations they have used and the difficulties they have encountered in using these. To get qualitative data for the study, students' essays were then analyzed to identify errors related to different categories of lexical collocations. The results revealed that adjective-noun collocations were the most frequently used by the participants while lexical collocations related to adverbs were used least frequently. Errors related to the wrong choice of component words and non-existent lexical collocations were most commonly made by students. Pedagogical implications are then discussed to assist students in enhancing collocational use in essay writing.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a key element in foreign language acquisition in general and in writing skill improvement in particular. In any sort of writing test, vocabulary is one indispensable criterion to assess the learners' writing competence. For example, in the IELTS writing test, a candidate's lexical resource is equally judged together with other factors such as task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and grammatical range and accuracy (https://ielts.idp.com/vietnam/results/scores/writing/en-gb). Similarly, language (including grammar and vocabulary) is one of the four main criteria under which a Cambridge C1 Advanced (CAE) test-taker is marked. Other areas of assessment in a CAE test include content, communicative achievement and organization. (https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/286979-improve-your-english-checklist-c1.pdf).

Vocabulary, or lexical resource, can be further divided into smaller elements such as vocabulary range, word choice, and collocation. Collocations are regarded as an important factor in communicative competence and in determining learners' level of proficiency (James, 1998; Nation, 2001, cited in Bilan Mohamad Abdi & Adlina Ariffin, 2020). This relation has been proved in many studies worldwide such as Bilan Mohamad Abdi & Adlina Ariffin, 2020; Zahra Yazdandoost1 et al, 2014; Dukali (2018); Dokchandra (2019); Asbulah, Aladdin and Sahrim (2020). For instance, in Dokchandra's (2019) research, collocation learning is said to be necessary for learners as they need to know how to combine words and use them correctly. More competent language users, therefore, are those who can produce natural and native-sounding collocations. In Asbulah, Aladdin and Sahrim's (2020) study, it is further added that

collocation mastery is an indicator used by teachers to recognise and differentiate between high and low-language proficiency learners.

It is obvious that the more collocations EFL/ESL students can utilize in English, the closer they are to the advanced level of the language. Learning collocations play a vital role in being a successful language learner. Yet, an EFL learner may find it really challenging to become a master of the target language's collocation. Very often, language learners are influenced by their mother tongues and create new collocations by translating word by word from their own language. These reasons motivate the researcher to conduct a research paper entitled "***An exploration of the use of lexical collocations in essay writing among English-majored students***" in order to investigate common types of lexical collocations used in students' essays, their perceived difficulties in using lexical collocations and common errors made by students regarding lexical collocations.

To achieve the given aims, the following research questions are put forward by the researcher: 1) What types of lexical collocations do students use in essay writing? 2) What are students' perceived difficulties in using lexical collocations? 3) What are their common lexical collocational errors?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW
### 2.1. Definition of collocations

Many scholars have defined the term "collocations" in various but seemingly similar ways.

McCarthy and O'Dell, 2005 (as cited in Dokchandra, 2019) defined collocation as a close word combination with other words. For example, *tall buildings* and *high mountains* are collocations because *tall* combines with *buildings* while *high* combines with *mountain*.

From the frequency-based approach, Jacquemin, 2001 (as cited in Yazdandoost et al, 2014) added that collocation is "recurrent combinations of words that co-occur more frequently than it would be expected just by chance and that correspond to arbitrary word usage" (p. 58). The arbitrariness of word combination is an important feature of collocations.

Lewis, 2000 (as cited in Hua & Azmi, 2021) defined collocation as 'the way in which words co-occur in natural text in statistically significant ways' (p. 132). In other words, collocations are the result of the natural language usage of native speakers and the words' frequent co-occurrence in the text.

In this study, combining the mentioned definitions, "collocation" is understood as the co-occurrence of word combinations that are used frequently and naturally by native speakers.

### 2.2. Classification of collocations

Collocations have been categorized differently based on various criteria. However, the categorization of grammatical and lexical collocations from the perspective of Lewis (2000, as cited in Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022) seems to be the most comprehensible. Grammatical collocation consists of a content word (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.) and a function word (prepositions or other structures that serve grammatical functions) such as "*speak through*". Lexical collocation refers to the relations between content words that ''naturally'' appear together in a sentence. According to Benson et al, 1986 (as cited in Bahns, 1993, p. 57), lexical collocations are subdivided into six types, as shown in Table 1. This classification will be adopted in the current study.

**Table 1. Lexical collocation subtypes**

| No. | Type | Example |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Verb + Noun | Withdraw an offer |

| 2 | Adjective + Noun | A crushing defeat |
| 3 | Noun + Verb | Blizzards rage |
| 4 | Noun + Noun | A pride of lions |
| 5 | Adverb + Adjective | Deeply absorbed |
| 6 | Verb + Adverb | Appreciate sincerely |

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

### 2.3. Common errors in using lexical collocations in essay writing

Boonraksa and Naisena (2022) employed a collocation test to collect data on collocation errors of Thai EFL learners. It is found that students commit a high level of both grammatical and lexical collocational errors with Adverb + Adjective being the most popular one. This finding is different from previous studies. For example, in Quping and Pramoolsook's (2014) study, Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun are the two most frequent lexical collocation errors committed by Chinese non-English major students. Similarly, Shitu (2015) found that Verb + Noun is the most frequently made collocational error in students' essay writing. Bartan (2019) studied lexical collocation errors in the translation of L2 learners of English. The findings were that Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun take up the largest percentage of lexical collocation errors. Harta et al (2021) investigated Indonesian students' lexical collocation errors from writing samples. It was found that students have problems mostly in Verb + Noun and Adjective + Noun combinations.

In the Vietnamese context, a study by Tran Ngoc Quynh Phuong & Nguyen Thi Bao Trang (2022) revealed that students' most common errors include the omission of the pluralization marker -s for countable plural nouns, the overuse of morpheme –s in singular or uncountable nouns, use of incorrect component words and nonexistent collocations.

### 2.4. Causes of lexical collocation errors

### 2.4.1. Interlingual errors

The sources of lexical collocation errors were proved to come from ***interlingual interference and synonym misuse***. For example, in Boonraksa and Naisena's (2022) study, lexical collocation errors are caused when Thai verbs are literally translated into English. Besides, it was found that English words and phrases that have similar equivalents in Thai are used by the learners, leading to collocational errors. Results from other researchers such as Bartan, 2019; Gitsaki, 1997, as cited in Setiarini, 2018; Harta et al, 2021; Shitu,2015; Trung & Thao, 2021 also suggested similar reasons for lexical collocation errors.

Interlingual interference also refers to other interchangeable terms such as "native language interference", "language transfer", etc. According to Brown (1994, as cited in Nunan, D. (1989).., 2012), a learner's native language serves as the main reference in his L2 acquisition process. Therefore, lexical collocation errors are mostly caused by L1 interference when learners adopt literal translations from their mother tongue to the target language.

### 2.4.2. Intralingual errors

Besides interlingual errors, other collocational errors resulting from learners' limited knowledge in the L2 acquisition process are named as intralingual errors. For example, in Kuo (2009)'s study, the use of wrong synonyms is one main cause of lexical collocation errors. It was explained that learners are able to use the right synonyms but fail to use the correct collocation. For example, instead of using the correct collocation "accept with opinions" and "broaden with vision", they wrote "receiving other people's opinions" and "broaden your eyesight" (Kuo, 2009, p. 149).

In Korean context, in YiBoon Chang (2018)'s study of lexical collocation use, the researcher mentioned some intra-lingual factors that cause big troubles to students. First, students fail to distinguish synonyms and near-synonyms in the English language which are further classified into formally related but semantically unrelated synonyms ("humane

imagination" vs "human imagination"), formally unrelated but semantically related synonyms ( "unknown people" vs "new people"), and formally and semantically related words ("great progression" vs "great progress"). Another intra-lingual factor was called 'stretched-verb construction' (Nesselhauf, 2005, cited in YiBoon Chang (2018 ) in verb-noun combinations. Stretched verbs (also called 'light verbs' or 'delexical verbs') refer to verbs which does not carry meanings in verb-noun combinations. In these verb-noun combinations, noun elements mainly carry meanings while verb elements carry little semantic content. Some examples of light verbs include *take, make, give, have* etc. The final interesting intra-lingual factor was the cases when the L2 combinations themselves were correct as existing collocations, but used in wrong contexts and resulted in the misrepresentation of intended meaning.

Besides, lexical collocation errors can result from other sources such as ***lack of collocation knowledge, overgeneralization of rules, approximation*** (Harta et al., 2021; Shitu, 2015; Do, N.H.M and Le P. T's (2023)), ***false concepts hypothesized, and ignorance of rule restrictions*** (Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011). An overgeneralization can be defined as the case when learners use incorrect structures of the target language based on their previous learning experience; for example, learners might add "s" to irregular plurals (Richard, 1974, as cited in Sari, 2016). An approximation is described as the use of incorrect structures or vocabularies; e.g., "success in our education" instead of "succeed in our education" (Dravishi et al., 2011, as cited in Harta et al., 2021, p. 24). False concepts hypothesized result from misunderstood differences at the word level in the target language; for example, "make" and "do" are interchangeably used by the learners. In addition, the ignorance of rule restrictions refers to the inability of learners to observe and obey the restrictions of structure in the target language.

### 2.5. Students' perceptions of collocation errors

Studies related to students' perceptions of their collocation errors seemed to suggest contradictory results. While collocation errors are claimed to come mainly from the negative transfer of the mother tongue, Duong and Nguyen's (2021) study showed an interesting result that students do not perceive the negative influence of their mother tongue as one of their problems. In contrast, Yuvayapan and Yükselir (2021)'s study indicated Turkish learners' awareness of the negative influence of L1 interference on their collocational errors.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
### 3.1. Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study took place at the Faculty of Legal Foreign Languages, Hanoi Law University, Vietnam. A convenience sampling method was employed by the researcher. The participants included 34 English major students at the aforementioned institution. These students have completed three writing courses which cover instructions of paragraph writing and essay writing. Overall, they are expected to have acquired the following key skills.

Writing Course 1: Students can write different kinds of paragraphs (descriptive, example, opinion, process, narrative).

Writing Course 2: Students can write a short essay of different genres (descriptive, narrative comparison-contrast, causes and effects, opinion) on a variety of topics.

Writing Course 3: Students can write a description of visual information (line graph, chart, diagram, table) and write a longer essay (process analysis, classification, argumentative, reaction, cause and effect).

After having completed these courses, students are supposed to have writing competency equivalent to upper-intermediate (higher B2 to lower C1 level). In addition, as they have already taken the Semantics course, in which the topic of collocation is discussed, they should be knowledgeable about the nature of this research.

### 3.2. Design of the study

This paper used both qualitative and quantitative data to fulfill the research questions. Written essays and a 5-Likert scale questionnaire are instruments employed in the study.

Students were asked to write an opinion essay of at least 250 words in 40 minutes. The essay proposition is "To what extent has the Internet made life more convenient? Give reasons for your answers and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience". The teacher-researcher observed the writing session to make sure that references were not allowed to minimize cheating.

In the questionnaire, participants were asked about their opinions on different types of lexical collocations used in their essays and the difficulties they met in using them. Questions in the questionnaire were constructed on the basis of the literature review by the researcher and reviewed by two other colleagues to ensure comprehensibility.

### 3.3.Data collection and analysis
### 3.3.1.  Students' essay data

After the respondents were done with the essays, the writer collected the raw data, then tabulate them based on the Benson et al (1986)'s classification of lexical collocations (Table 2 below).

**Table 2.** Lexical collocation types

| Collocation types | Examples from students' essays |
|---|---|
| 1.   Verb – noun | "boost the economy", "do online jobs", "build relationship" |
| 2.   Adjective – noun | "referential materials", "minimal effort", "global village" |
| 3.   Noun – noun | "generation gap", "living standard", "living condition" |
| 4.   Adverb – adjective | "increasingly reliant", "completely deprived", "forever backward" |
| 5.   Verb – adverb | "work hard", "access daily", "download easily" |
| 6.   Noun - Verb | "The chance comes up", "the problem remains", "the music plays". |

Then, the researcher made an attempt to find out the collocational errors by comparing the raw data with Oxford Collocations Dictionary (OCD) and Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary (third edition) (CALD). If the lexical collocation exists, it was labeled correct collocation and its frequency was noted down. In contrast, if it did not appear in either OCD or CALD, the collocation is labeled incorrect. Both correct and incorrect collocations were then grouped, counted for frequency and percentage and finally evaluated. The types of errors found are classified based on the classification adapted from Tran, N.Q.P and Nguyen T.B.T (2022). In this study, the author focuses on five types of lexical collocational errors namely ***Wrong choice of component words, Wrong word order, Misuse of parts of speech, Non-existent component word*** and ***Non-existent lexical collocation.***

**Table 3**. Lexical collocational error types

| Error type | Explanation | Example from students' essays |
|---|---|---|

| Wrong choice of component words | Either one or both component words of a lexical collocation were incorrect | "The Internet is the most <u>convenient tool</u> to <u>transmit information</u> to millions of people in the world". (Student 5) => ***effective tool, circulate information*** |
|---|---|---|
| Wrong word order | Component words of a lexical collocation were put in the wrong order | "We <u>have the life balanced and healthy</u>" (Student 25) => We ***have a balanced and healthy life***. |
| Misuse of parts of speech | Words of an incorrect part of speech were used in a lexical collocation | "In the past people have to <u>work hardly</u>" (Student 13) => ***work hard*** |
| Non-existent component word | One component word that does not exist in English was used in a lexical collocation | "In recent times, human <u>life conditions</u> are more convenient than the time before" => ***living condition*** |
| Non-existent lexical collocation | Lexical collocation that does not exist in English was used | "The Internet has a <u>strong development speed</u>" => ***rapid development*** |

### 3.3.2. Questionnaire data

To understand students' perceptions and practices when using lexical collocations in writing essays, a questionnaire containing all closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data was used in this study. It employed a five-point Likert scale to measure the extent of the participants' agreement or frequency ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/never) to 5 (strongly agree/ frequently).

The results from the questionnaire data were subsequently analyzed using the IBM SPSS statistics program and converted to mean scores and interpreted as follows:

1.0  – 1.80: Strongly disagree / I never use this.

1.81 – 2.60: Disagree / I rarely use this.

2.61 – 3.40: Undecided / I occasionally use this.

3.41 – 4.20: Agree / I usually use this.

4.21 – 5.00: Strongly agree/ I frequently use this.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Research question 1: What types of lexical collocations do students use in essay writing?

Through the questionnaire, students are asked to state the frequency of their using LC in their essays (ranging from *rarely, occasionally, usually, frequently* to *always*). As shown from Table 1, ***Adjective – noun*** is perceived as the most popular type of collocation being used in students' essays (Mean = 4.09). Students tend to employ adjective – noun collocations *frequently*. The respondents' second favorite type of LC is ***verb–noun*** collocation  (Mean = 3.26), which is *usually* used by essay writers. ***Noun–verb*** and ***noun – noun*** collocations are preferred nearly the same by the students at the medium of 3.12 and 3.15 respectively. These types of collocations are also *usually used* by the participants but they are less popular than verb – noun collocations. The least chosen types of LC are those related to adverbs including

***Verb – adverb*** (Mean = 2.62) and ***Adverb – adjectives*** (Mean = 2.38). While students tend to *usually* employ verb – adverb, they *occasionally* use adverb – adjectives in their essays.

**Table 4.** Students' perceptions of different types of LC they use in their essays

| Types of lexical collocations | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Verb – noun | 34 | 2 | 4 | 3.26 | .828 |
| Adjective – noun | 34 | 3 | 5 | 4.09 | .712 |
| Noun – verb | 34 | 2 | 4 | 3.12 | .686 |
| Noun – noun | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.15 | 1.282 |
| Adverb – adjective | 34 | 1 | 3 | 2.62 | .652 |
| Verb + adverb | 34 | 1 | 3 | 2.38 | .817 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 34 | | | | |

Students' essays were also analyzed to investigate the types of LC used by students. As can be seen from Table 5, ***adjective-noun*** collocations accounted for around half of all lexical collocations (52.65%), and were the most common type while ***verb-noun*** collocations came in second with 29.55%, which is around one-third of all lexical collocations. The percentage of ***noun-verb*** collocations was nearly as similar as that of ***noun - noun*** collocations and verb – adverb collocations (at 6.82%, 5.68% and 4.16% respectively). ***Adverb-adjective*** were by far the least common in student essays, constituting 1.14% of the cases.

**Table 5.** Percentage of LC as calculated from students' essays.

| Types of lexical collocation | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1.   Adjective – Noun | 139 | 52.65% |
| 2.   Verb – noun | 78 | 29.55% |
| 3.   Noun – verb | 18 | 6.82% |
| 4.   Noun – noun | 15 | 5.68% |
| 5.   Verb – adverb | 11 | 4.16% |
| 6.   Adverb – Adjective | 3 | 1.14% |
| **Total** | **264** | **100%** |

### 4.2. What are students' perceived difficulties in using lexical collocations?

Upon being asked about their perceptions of the difficulties they encountered in using collocation, students' responses reveal some interesting insights.

#### 4.2.1.   Difficulties related to the learners

Table 6 shows that although most learners realize the importance of collocations, they confess that they "***have limited knowledge of collocations***" (Mean = 3.41) and many of them "***do not spend enough time to learn collocations***" (Mean = 3.26). One indicator of their limited knowledge is by their "***overgeneralizing the rule of matching words in English***" (Mean = 2.94).

**Table 6.** Difficulties related to the learners

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D1- I have limited knowledge of collocations. | 34 | 2 | 5 | 3.41 | 1.131 |
| D2- I am not aware of the importance of collocations. | 34 | 1 | 4 | 2.59 | .892 |
| D3- I tend to overgeneralize the rule of matching words in English. | 34 | 2 | 4 | 2.94 | .649 |
| D4 - I do not care much about grammatical rules in English. | 34 | 1 | 3 | 1.59 | .657 |

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D5 - I do not spend enough time to learn collocations. | 34 | 2 | 4 | 3.26 | .666 |

### 4.2.2. Difficulties related to the teachers

**Table 7: Difficulties related to the teachers**

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D6- My teachers do not emphasize collocations in essay writing. | 34 | 1 | 4 | 1.94 | .886 |
| D7- My teachers do not teach collocations in class. | 34 | 1 | 2 | 1.56 | .504 |
| D8- My teachers do not instruct us how to learn collocations. | 34 | 1 | 3 | 1.76 | .606 |
| D9- Collocations are not emphasized in the courses taught at my university. | 34 | 1 | 2 | 1.68 | .475 |

As shown in Table 7, 'the teacher' doesn't appear as a source of difficulty for students in using collocations. The responses of the participants towards teacher-related problems ranged within 1.56 to 1.94, which means they disagree or strongly disagree with the statements above concerning teachers' role in their lexical collocation challenges.

*Difficulties related to the linguistic factors*

**Table 8**: Difficulties related to the linguistic factors

| | N | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D10-My Vietnamese affects the way I use collocations in English. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.12 | 1.149 |
| D11-Rules of collocations in English are complex. | 34 | 3 | 5 | 4.00 | .651 |
| D12-The number of collocations is so huge that I cannot remember them all. | 34 | 2 | 5 | 3.74 | .994 |

A large number of students agree that "***Rules of collocations in English are complex***" (Mean = 4.00) and "***The number of collocations is so huge that I cannot remember them all.***" (Mean = 3.74). However, students are not certain whether "***their Vietnamese affects the way they use collocations in English***".

### 4.3. Research question 3: What are students' common lexical collocational errors?

Table 9 shows the percentage of various lexical collocational errors identified in student essays. There were five major error types detected in total, with the most common being the ***Wrong choice of component words*** (at 50.52%), followed by the ***Non-existent lexical collocation*** (at 35.05%). The ***wrong choice of component words*** accounted for half the numbers of errors made and included the incorrect choice of verb, noun, adjective, and adverb. Among these kinds, the incorrect adjective choice was the most prevalent with 28 out of 49 instances, followed by the wrong choice of verb, noun and adverb with 9, 6, and 6 out of 49 examples respectively.

The ***non-existent lexical collocation*** is the second most popular source of lexical errors found which accounted for approximately one-third of all errors made. It is far more commonly made than the ***misuse of parts of speech*** (6.19%) and ***word order error*** *(5.15%)*. The least frequent errors were the ***Non-existent component words,*** accounting for only 3.09%.

**Table 9.** Distribution of lexical collocational errors in students' essays

| Lexical collocational errors | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Wrong choice of component words | 49 | 50.52 % |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Non-existent lexical collocation | 34 | 35.05 % |
| Misuse of parts of speech | 6 | 6.19 % |
| Word order error | 5 | 5.15 % |
| Non-existent component words | 3 | 3.09 % |
| **Total** | 97 | 100% |

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Lexical collocation types

The results from the questionnaires and the analysis of student essays both indicate that *adjective-noun* and *verb – noun* are the most common collocations used. These findings are compatible with those of Vi Thi Trung & Tran Thi Thao's study (2021) and Tran Ngoc Quynh Phuong & Nguyen Thi Bao Trang's (2022) study. In the previous study, verb – noun and adjective – noun collocation accounted for 40.6% and 36.9% respectively whereas in the latter one, adjective – noun collocation took up 57.82% of the collocations used; verb – noun was used as frequently as noun – noun in the analyzed essays at 10.68% and 12.18% respectively. Nguyen Thi Hong Ha (2020) (cited in Tran Ngoc Quynh Phuong's (2022)) stated that using an adjective as a modifier for a noun is a common practice in Vietnamese L1, therefore, students may employ this method to produce adjective-noun collocations. Also, students typically chose these collocations because they were simpler and more common words to explain their ideas.

Another important finding in this study is that *adverb-related collocations* such *adverb-verb* and *adverb-adjective* had the lowest frequency among all categories. This result is in line with Tran Ngoc Quynh Phuong's (2022) findings that adverb-adjective collocations were the least frequently used of all categories. This low frequency of adverbs may possibly come from the idea that adverbs are optional, as a sentence can be created without them (Hinkel, 2002, cited in Tran Ngoc Quynh Phuong's (2022).

### 5.2. Students' perceptions of their difficulties in using lexical collocations

From the students' perceptions, one source of their errors in lexical collocations come from *their limited knowledge of collocations.* These findings are in line with Harta et al., 2021; Shitu, 2015 and Do, N.H.M and Le P. T's (2023)'s conclusion. For example, in Do, N.H.M and Le P. T's study, the interviewed participants named their misunderstanding of vocabulary usage as a source of lexical collocation errors. In other words, students do not know precisely how words combine. In this research, students are not certain whether their Vietnamese affects the way they use collocations in English. Similarly, most of the students in Do, N.H.M and Le P. T's study did not acknowledge the negative influence of their mother tongue.

Another source of students' difficulties in using lexical collocations is attributed to *the nature of collocations in English which is complex and plentiful.* These challenges can be named as intra-language factors (L2 influence) which was asserted in Kuo's (2009) and YiBoon Chang's (2018) study.

Even though the error analysis results proved the L1 influence on students' use of lexical collocations in English, they are not aware of this factor. The mean score for the statement "My Vietnamese affects the way I use collocations in English" is only 3.12, indicating that students are not certain whether their L1 affects their lexical collocation usage, which is consistent with Duong and T. Nguyen's (2021)'s findings. In their study, only 36.2% of the students perceive the negative influence of their mother tongue as one of their problems.

### 5.3. Lexical collocational errors

A major finding of the present study is that the highest proportion of students' collocational errors involved *Wrong choice of component words* and *Non-existent lexical collocation.* This echoes previous research by Tran and Nguyen (2022). These errors can result from students' first language, Vietnamese, in which Vietnamese collocations affect either

students' choice of component word in English collocation or students' formation of lexical collocations which might exist only in the Vietnamese language.

For example, students misused the adjective "strong development", "leading position", or "wrong users" which should have been "rapid development", "dominant position", or "novice users". These self-made collocations might happen when students try to replace words that seem to be equivalent to the target word without thinking about how well the new word can collocate with the base word in a collocation. The result of this research was also consistent with Liu's (1999) study on the abuse of synonyms as a source of collocation errors. To help students avoid such errors, Liu (1999) suggested that learners must pay attention to "the idiom principle". Accumulation of idioms in vocabulary will reduce the frequency of such errors.

Other examples related to incorrect use of verbs in collocations include "transmit information", "enrich their knowledge" or "bring trouble" which should have been "circulate information", "broaden their knowledge" and "cause/make trouble".

In some instances, students may translate directly from their native language to English, resulting in incorrect collocations. One example is "*The Internet is a convenient tool to search for information*". The self-made collocation "*convenient tool*" is translated from the Vietnamese collocation "*công cụ tiện lợi*", which should have been called "*effective tool*" in English. Another example is "*Life conditions nowadays are much better than before*". The collocation "*life condition*" does not exist in English. The student writer's indented meaning of "*điều kiện sống*" should have been "*living condition*".

It is also significant to point out that errors related to verb–noun and adjective – noun occurs most frequently. This comes from the fact that students employ these collocations more frequently in their writings. Thus, their errors regarding these types are unavoidable. This results agree with conclusions made by previous researches made by Quping and Pramoolsook (2014), Shitu (2015), Bartan (2019) and Harta et al (2021).

Other lexical collocational errors appear to be rare. However, such errors cannot be overlooked and should also be taken into account by English teachers.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined English-majored students' use of different lexical collocation types, their errors in 34 opinion essays and their perceived difficulties in using these lexical collocations. The results indicate that adjective-noun and verb-noun were the most common types of collocations, whereas adverb-related collocations were infrequent.

The most common collocational error committed by students was the wrong choice of component words and non-existent lexical collocations. These lexical collocational errors could result from various reasons, ranging from native language interference, learners' habitual language practice, or time pressure during the exam.

From students' perspective, their difficulties in using lexical collocations originate from both intra-lingual factors and student-related factors. To be more specific, collocations in English are perceived by students as complex and plentiful. Also, as students have limited knowledge of collocations and do not spend enough time learning collocations, they have encountered many challenges in using lexical collocations when writing essays.

The findings suggest different measures could be taken into account to improve students' collocational competence in writing. First, teachers should encourage students to use more varied types of lexical collocations in their written essays by designing exercises that raise their awareness of less popular types of lexical collocations. Second, because of the differences between students' native language and English language, it is essential to provide students with more practice activities. Additionally, English language teachers should teach new words in chunks to help students be well aware of lexical collocations rather than teaching

isolated words. This approach was suggested by Li (2014) who claimed that the lexical chunk teaching and learning strategy helps college students improve their English writing. Furthermore, to provide students with more meaningful input for writing sessions, it is necessary to encourage students to practice extensive reading and listening to increase their exposure to the form, meaning, and use of lexical collocations. At a broader scale, lexical collocations should be emphasized in English courses and explicitly taught by teachers, so that students can gradually and naturally acquire them the way native speakers do.

Although the research aims and objectives have been achieved, limitations are unavoidable in this study. First, the data sample of the present study focused only on 34 argumentative essays, thus, the results may not apply to other genres of writing. Future researchers could consider investigating lexical collocation use with a larger number of essays of different genres. Also, as learner proficiency levels could affect their use of lexical collocations, future studies could explore the relationship between learners' different levels and their use of lexical collocations. Furthermore, because the errors in students' essays were calculated manually in this study, future research should employ IT-based data analysis instruments such as the application of computer software for a bigger population of participants.

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