

Using Collocations to Enhance Academic Writing: A Survey Study at Van Lang University

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ABSTRACT

As a formulaic language, collocations have brought benefits and challenges to EFL learners' academic writing. These chunks' functions in academic writing need examining for a long time. Under certain constraints of the research setting, the current study explored both students' and lecturers' standpoints on using collocations to enhance academic writing. As one of quite a few studies in the Vietnamese context, the research included 47 English-major juniors and 5 English lecturers at Van Lang University, Hochiminh City, in the first semester of 2020-2021 academic year. Two research instruments were employed: the online questionnaire (to students) and the email interview (to lecturers). Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics by SPSS (version 20) were utilized to describe both stakeholders' insights into the research problem. Major findings illustrated that the students' demotivation of extensive reading and collocational practice were additional barriers to the collocational acquisition. Learners' and teachers' perspectives on the benefits of collocations in academic writing are congruent; however, the ignorance of collocations in language instruction and ineffective learning strategies might cause many constraints. The study results might provoke questions of whether using corpus-based tools (instructed or non-instructed) could have any impact on students' collocation use in their academic writing. Thus, the results might draw attention to the need of teachers' and learners' reflection and recommends a few ideas for future research.

Keywords: *collocations, formulaic language, academic writing, corpus-based tools*

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing skills have been a core subject in the curriculum at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University, especially *Writing* five aiming at these skills – summarizing, paraphrasing, citing information, and writing research essays [1]. Nevertheless, like many other tertiary contexts, learners' writing problems have been arising. The fact that EFL learners' academic writing is negatively influenced by many factors, leading to a number of errors found in essays, is apparent [2], [3], [4]. The use of collocations, therefore, have been confirmed as one of the most useful, but troublesome language mechanics [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13]. Collocations are also a variable in higher scores IELTS writing answers [14]. It was said

that EFL learners could use a variety of collocations, but it does not necessarily mean that they can perform the true mastery and fluency of the target language [15], [16], [17], [18]. Moreover, mother tongue impact, linguistic properties of collocations, educational context, learners' cognitive and metacognitive abilities, learners' language proficiency, teachers' and learners' perception of collocations, and the use of corpus-based materials might make contributions to learners' collocational acquisition [3], [4], [12], [13], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32], [33], [34], [35], [36], [37], [38], [39]. Understanding all of this, the explorations of learners' and teachers' insights into using collocations to enhance academic writing, including the role, arising problems, and practical solutions, might yield valuable results under the current research setting.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Collocations in Academic Writing

2.1.1. Definitions of Collocations

According to the research objectives and theoretical orientation [26].

Basically, the term *collocations* refer to "the way in which words are used together frequently" (Dictionary of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 2002, p.81) [40]. For instance, in English, the verb *perform* can be followed by a noun like *an operation*, but not *a discussion*. Celce-Murcia and Schmitt [41] mentioned collocations as "words co-occur together (e.g., *black coffee, strong coffee*)," which are formed in chunks and regularly used by native speakers (p.9). Similarly, McCarthy and O'Neil [8] defined collocations as word co-occurring together that native speakers feel natural but cause many difficulties to learners of English (p. 6).

In a broad sense, Walker [11] stressed that the term *collocation* is a countable noun referring to "the combination of two or more words which occur together or in close proximity to each other in both spoken and written discourse". A collocation is not always arbitrary, but it has its core meaning and context. This definition provided a broader sense since a collocation is not simply a co-occurrence of individual words but contexts, and the association between words determines what a collocation is.

Under the perspectives of researchers, as mentioned in Henriksen [42], collocations are "frequently recurring two-to-three-word syntactic units (eg, *soft noise, tolerance for*)" and smaller parts of formulaic language. Gablasova, Brezina, and McEnery [5] reported two prominent approaches to collocations in research: frequency-based and phraseology. While the former deals with the association strength inside a collocation by statistical evidence, the latter concerns semantic properties of collocations. Towards the frequency-based approach, we could understand that collocations are co-occurring words that are frequently used by language users, especially native speakers. Towards the phraseology, we could learn that collocations are fixed forms with their own semantic transparency.

Overall, despite the great number of definitions, the present paper focuses on key dimensions of a collocation - (1) its fixedness in forms with semantic transparency and (2) its popularity in native speakers' communicative repertoire. Therefore, collocations are considered as recurring fixed word combinations with apparent meanings used by native speakers.

2.1.1. The Role of Collocations in Academic Writing

Two advantages of collocations were mentioned in McCarthy and O'Neil [8]. First, they help learners to express their spoken or written ideas naturally and concisely as native speakers. Second, learners can acquire lexical knowledge and increase their vocabulary size. This notion agrees with Wood [12] that collocations serve the need for fluency in language acquisition (for both children and adult learners). Hence, collocations as formulaic language have a close relationship with language acquisition and performance.

The benefits of collocations have also been tested in language assessment, whether speaking or writing. Granger and Bestgen [6] examined that low-level student writers tend to overuse high-frequency collocations in writing while high-level student writers incline to use more low-frequency, strongly associated collocations. Besides, collocations are among lexical resources that begin to emerge from band 7.0 in the IELTS writing rating scale [14]. Thus, collocations, among many other factors, could play an important role in learners' writing improvement, leading to higher test or exam scores. Similarly, Saito [9] recognized the value of collocations in speech assessment because collocations are perceived as comprehensible, appropriate language chunks produced by most high-level learners of English.

Briefly, the present study puts an emphasis on the most important use of collocations in academic writing: (1) native-like fluency, (2) the clarity or conciseness of written ideas, (3) lexical development, and (4) higher writing scores.

2.2. Collocational Errors and Problems in EFL Learners' Academic Writing

First and foremost, it is important to understand what variables might contribute to EFL learners' collocational acquisition in academic writing and language learning. Wood [12] reported that collocations as formulaic language, supportive of learners' language acquisition, are also connected to mental processing (the way learners retrieve or memorize collocations in their mind), pragmatic competence (the connection between meanings and context), and obviously educational context (teaching and learning). Hence, cognitive (relating to the capacity of memorizing or processing information), metacognitive (relating to the self-reflection on learning strategies) abilities, linguistic elements of a collocation (individual lexical items, grammatical combinations, and semantic properties), and pedagogical practices (teaching approaches) might have an effect on learners' collocational acquisition. Leśniewska [7] added that the difficulties in using

collocations are towards a continuum between restrictedness and free combinations. Whether using collocations is arbitrary may be a concern.

As reported in many studies, collocational errors and problems were remarkably found in EFL learners' writing and different educational contexts. The prevalence of written collocation errors as described in [2], [3], [4], [22], [27], [32], [33], [37]. Despite different research contexts, the similar research findings were found. Wrong choices of words or misused collocations, as a type of collocational errors, were made by many learners. Accordingly, the influence of the mother tongue was considered as one of many factors that inhibit learners' collocation use in academic writing. Such interlanguage interference greatly affected the way learners thought and wrote collocations.

Other factors were also discussed to describe the whole picture of the problem. Learners' collocational knowledge, notwithstanding long-term English learning, might be also related to the perception of componential words' frequency [28]. As presented in Peters [29], both interlexical (L1 influence) and intra-lexical factors (linguistic and semantic problems with collocations) might make contributions to the learning burden. Besides, learners' vocabulary size and word length might have certain effects on learners' collocation use [35]. This was also approved by Dang [19] under the Vietnamese context. Vocabulary knowledge was important for learners' language mastery. Many other difficulties might play a role, namely learners' memory capacity, language proficiency, and learning strategies [26]. Also, the studies of Zou [4] demonstrated that overgeneralization, the influence of native language, misused synonyms, learners' unfamiliarity with semantic properties of collocations might have the negative impacts. The acquisition of individual lexical items (node or pivot words and collocates) [27] & [36] as well as semantic prosody (the positive or negative meaning tendency of a collocation)

Understanding what factors might control learners' collocational acquisition is valuable because all measures taken should be derived from its sources, and teachers, even any relevant researchers, could suggest appropriate solutions. Key literature on this research theme has highlighted internal factors (linguistic elements of collocations; learners' cognitive and metacognitive abilities) and external factors (mother tongue; pedagogy; teaching and learning materials).

2.3. Corpus-based Tools for Collocations

In literature, a *corpus* refers to a large collection of spoken or written text with its own representativeness and balance [43] (p.91). With the emergence of advanced

technology, the use of corpus-based tools or concordances have appealed to many scholars and teachers, with the aid of computers [43]. Such tools are expected to promote language learning acquisition in which both learners and teachers pay more attention to many aspects of a collocation. Using corpus tools (or corpus-based tools) for teachers serves two primary purposes: (1) develop and adapt materials, and (2) instruct academic vocabulary to learners in classrooms. [7].

Shortly, the present paper considers corpus-based tools as any materials that support learners' collocational acquisition, namely traditional (books and printed dictionaries) and modern (concordance programs) as cited in Daskalovska [20] because of a broader sense of this term.

In terms of dictionaries, Laufer [23] emphasized that learners' abilities to use them for collocations vary, and teachers need to instruct learners how to use them properly. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) seems to be the optimal choice because of the well-displayed content.

Contemporary trends in this research theme have included the use of a computer, mobile, or corpus technology in the instruction and assessment of learners' collocation use [39]. The development of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) have provoked contemporary ideas of collocational instruction [31]. Online corpora and corpus-based tools were seen to be useful tools for learners to practice learning autonomy as well as writing correction [30]. However, it also poses learners with major difficulties and even weakens cognitive abilities for collocation use [44]. Further examination can be done to confirm the effectiveness of these tools for a long time.

2.4. Teaching and Learning Collocations

The role of collocations in language acquisition is transparent; however, there have still been concerns arising in teaching and learning procedures [35]. More or less, as stated in [23], teachers' role is to help learners overcome the challenging task of collocational acquisition.

Wray [13] supported that explicit collocation teaching should be welcomed, but the instruction procedure needs carefully considering. It is not as simple as presenting grammatical and semantic features of collocations to learners. This notion might be developed by Shin and Nation [34] that a more meticulous selection of collocations for teaching is necessary. Therefore, frequency is merely a factor among other variables,

namely semantic prosody, learners' need, curriculum, teachability, and difficulty.

In addition to memorization, noticing, and other suitable learning activities, the cognitive analysis of collocations needs to be employed in language classrooms [26]. It includes comparing, contrasting, and explaining patterns of different collocations in L2; comparing and contrasting L1 and L2 collocations; utilizing dictionaries and corpora; and arranging collocations by meanings.

Also, Webb and Kigamoto [36] stressed that collocational teaching should focus on learning strategies. Accordingly, the number of collocations retrieved in students' minds can result from the range of collocates standing with the node word, but not the position. It means that teachers could draw learners' attention to drill patterns in which collocates vary with the same node.

Under the strong influence of corpus technology, using corpus-based materials for teaching and learning might be inevitable [31]. By means of authentic language input, teachers could highlight remarkable features, including collocations and other linguistic elements, in real contexts. This practice could facilitate learning autonomy because EFL learners are able to explore collocations by themselves.

Overall, the fact that teachers' perception of collocations might partly determine learners' collocational learning [24]. Whether teachers and learners can have appropriate self-reflection on the importance of collocations and the way to use these chunks in language classrooms and production might be a concern in reality.

2.5. The Current Study

The theoretical background has provided significant insights into the research theme: collocations in academic writing. The benefits of these chunks are highlighted and tested in different research settings, but it seems that learners' and teachers' reflection on the topic might be a concern, especially under a Vietnamese tertiary context where just a few studies examined the role of collocations in teaching and learning. The teachers' and learners' reflection could provide further meaningful ideas and formulate all pedagogical practices.

Accordingly, the present study aims to address these questions.

Research question 1: What do Van Lang University's English-major juniors think about the use of collocations in academic writing?

Research question 2: What do English lecturers at Van Lang University think about the students' collocation use in academic writing?

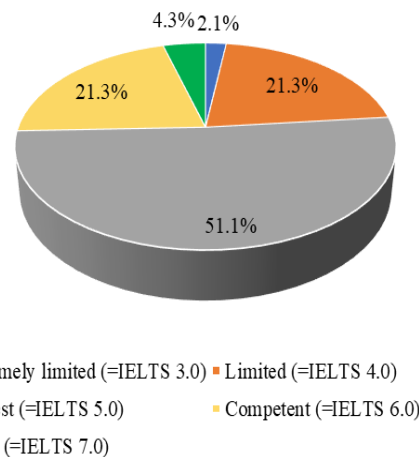
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and Setting

Two hundred and thirty-six English-major juniors were randomly selected to answer the questionnaire. They naturally belonged to nine different writing class units. Eventually, a total of 47 respondents (N=47) was included in the study, meeting two important criteria. First, they voluntarily answered the survey. Second, there was a variety of students' writing competence, from Extremely Limited to Good (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants' writing competence

Therefore, the number of modest student writers



(equal to those obtaining 5.0 IELTS scores) prevailed in the survey, constituting 51.1%.

Besides, the proportion of female students outnumbered (38 females, 80.9%/ 9 males, 19.1%). Twenty participants (42.6%) have studied English for more than 10 years. Thirty-eight of them (80.9%) self-reported that they could understand the term "collocations". Thirty-five (74.5%) experienced learning to use collocations before. Twenty-seven (57.4%) confirmed that they had used collocations in academic writing.

Purposeful (or purposive) sampling was used for the selection of interviewees to gather more in-depth information as expected. After carefully researching the current educational setting, five lecturers of English were asked for their participation. These instructors have been teaching academic writing skills to English-major students at the faculty. Prior to the official interview, they received the list of questions. Then willing interviewees were included, comprising five instructors with background information (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewees' background information

Pseudonyms	English teaching experience	Previous research themes
Lecturer X	> 20 years	speaking, pedagogy, CALL
Lecturer Z	20 years	reading, culture, pedagogy, translation
Lecturer J	> 10 years	communication, writing, pedagogy, culture, CALL
Lecturer Y	> 10 years	writing, pronunciation, CALL, translation and interpretation, language testing and assessment, pedagogy
Lecturer N	> 10 years	pedagogy, learning strategies

The interviewees' background information demonstrated that all had had more than 10 years of English teaching. Despite different previous research themes, all shared pedagogical motivation. All of this was expected to help yield meaningful insights into the current research problem.

This research was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University, Hochiminh City, in the first semester of 2020-2021 academic year. The study subject was Writing 5, the last course of writing in accordance with the curriculum. According to the official syllabus of this course, the students were instructed fundamental and advanced academic writing skills, namely summarizing, paraphrasing, citing information, and writing expository, argumentative, and compare/contrast essays. The students took this course in 10 weeks. The coursebooks used were *Academic Writing Skills (Student's Book 1 and 2)*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012.

3.2. Design of the Study

This survey employs both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to form more solid findings. To explore learners' perspectives on the research problems, the online questionnaire was delivered to the students via email on December 9, 2020. To explore lecturers' reflection, the email interview was conducted on December 21, 2020.

3.3. Instruments, Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the present study was self-designed. It includes two sections. The first (questions 1 – 3) gathers respondents' background information: gender, English learning experience, and writing competence. The scale of writing competence was adapted from the IELTS Score Band Descriptor [45]. The second (questions 4 to 18) deals with their perspectives on using collocations to enhance academic writing. Collocational background knowledge, learning experience, and use in academic writing are major themes in questions 4, 5, and 6, respectively. From questions 7 to 13, 5-point Likert scales (ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*, 1 to 5 respectively) are given to confirm the students' agreement on collocations' usefulness in academic writing. Question 14 is an open-ended question aiming at expressing further insights from the learners about the role. Question 15 determines how many participants confronted collocational problems in academic writing. Question 16 is a multi-response question, collecting students' votes for possible difficulties in their collocational learning to use. The final two regards the respondents' corpus-based tool use for collocations.

Prior to the actual online survey, the questionnaire was proofread by an expert who was working in another tertiary context. The official form, an online platform available from Microsoft Form, was delivered to school emails of 236 English-major juniors on December 9. The round of questionnaire ended on December 15, 2020. The final report was downloaded, and important data was coded into SPSS (Version 20) for descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis was applied for open-ended question items in the survey.

3.3.2. Email Interview

The email interview was applied to gather lecturers' insights into students' collocation use in academic writing. This instrument was employed because of its convenience for the researchers and interviewees at the setting. The lecturers had had at least 4 days since December 21 to clarify their ideas. Then thematic analysis was applied to extract and synthesize the responses.

In terms of the structure, three questions were addressed in the interview as follows.

Question 1: In your opinion, what is the role of collocations in academic writing? Do you agree or disagree with the usefulness of collocations in academic writing?

Question 2: Do your students have any difficulties in using collocations in academic writing? What are they?

Question 3: What factors do you think can influence your students' collocation use in academic writing? Do you have any suggestions for them to overcome the problems?

As seen in the list, the first question aims at the interviewees' perspectives on collocations' functions in academic writing. The other two concern the lecturers' viewpoints on the students' practical problems.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. EFL Learners' Perspectives

4.1.1. The Usefulness of Collocations in Academic Writing

Findings from the questionnaire illustrated that Van Lang University English-major juniors confirmed the soundness of using collocations to enhance academic writing.

To commence with, they tended to acknowledge that collocations are helpful in their academic writing (M= 1.98, SD= 1.011). The mean score of question item 7, "Do you think that collocations are useful for your academic writing?" was under 2.0, so it was concluded that the participants approved of the advantage of collocations.

Following that, particular perspectives on the benefits were apparent from the analysis of the questionnaire (see Table 2).

Table 2. The particular benefits of collocations

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
8. Collocations for lexical development	47	1	5	1.98	.989
9. Collocations for the clarity of ideas	47	1	5	2.06	.965
10. Collocations for idea expansion and text length	47	1	5	2.19	1.173
11. Collocations for academic writing style	47	1	5	2.45	.974
12. Collocations for native-like fluency	47	1	5	2.19	1.154
13. Collocations for higher scores	47	1	5	1.87	.947
Valid N (listwise)	47				

Table 2 demonstrated that "Collocations for higher scores" and "Collocations for lexical development" were two prominent benefits (M= 1.87, SD= .947 and M= 1.98, SD= .989 respectively). The third value, "Collocations for the clarity of ideas," was also credited (M=2.06, SD= .965). "Collocations for native-like fluency", which was highlighted in the literature, was also confirmed through the mean score extended 2.0 (M=2.19, SD= 1.154). The congruent mean score belonged to "Collocations for idea expansion and text length" (SD=1.173). The participants were particularly inclined to agree less with "Collocations for academic writing style" (M=2.45, SD= .974).

Themes and content analyzed further responses to collocations' function in academic writing. Results revealed additional insights into the perceived impacts as in the following table (see Table 3).

Table 3. Students' further insights into the usefulness of collocations in academic writing

Further responses	Participants
logical flow of ideas	5, 6 & 33
straightforward ideas	9 & 10
professional writing	16 & 27
appealing writing	33 & 34
naturalness	24 & 43
convenience (good for condensed writing)	43
popularity	43

It seems that more participants are inclined to express that using collocations help them connect ideas in an essay more effectively. Their written ideas become straightforward because good collocations help omit redundant words. Professional, appealing, and natural writing are also stated in their responses. They admitted that using collocations helps them vary word choices and the rate of lexical repetition can somewhat decrease, leading to catching more attention of readers. Especially, respondent 43 agreed that these three factors –

convenience (more condensed writing), popularity (standardized), and naturalness (native-like sound), determine the significance of collocations in academic writing.

To summarize, Van Lang University English-major juniors were likely to perceive that collocations play an important role in their academic writing. Using them makes their written ideas become clear, attractive, concise, and smooth. The students also gained more benefits from using collocations because their lexical knowledge could be improved, and in the end, writing test scores could be higher.

4.1.2. Difficulties in Using Collocations

Advantages of collocational use are inherent; however, possible problems might be a concern. The respondents also voted their difficulties in acquiring collocations (see Table 4).

Table 4. Difficulties in using collocations

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Mother tongue's negative impact	17	10.6%	36.2%
Limited lexical knowledge	35	21.9%	74.5%
Limited grammatical knowledge	24	15.0%	51.1%
Limited collocational knowledge	33	20.6%	70.2%
Underrated collocations in Vietnamese educational context	25	15.6%	53.2%
Limited use of relevant tools	13	8.1%	27.7%
Low learning motivation	13	8.1%	27.7%
Total	160	100.0%	340.4%

The students' votes for their striking problems represented the prevalence of "*lexical knowledge*" and "*collocational knowledge*" in their collocational acquisition (74.5% and 70.2% of cases respectively). However, it was surprising that not many votes were for the negative influence of mother tongue (36.2%). This case was even smaller than "*underrated collocations in Vietnamese educational context*" (53.2%) and "*limited grammatical knowledge*" (51.1%). The least votes (equally 27.7% each) were for the other two: "*limited use of relevant tools*" and "*low learning motivation*".

To further explore whether the students' use of tools for collocational acquisition had any problems, more data analysis was done to question item 17 in the survey.

Results clarified that more students were inclined to retrieve collocations from their memory or use them arbitrarily instead of using any tools (n=26, 55.3%). As for specific materials applied by the other students, online dictionaries outnumbered. Among 18 students who added the name of the tools, there were thirteen mentioning online dictionaries as follows.

<https://www.freecollocation.com/>;
<https://www.ozdic.com/>;
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>;
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

Four students out of 18 confirmed that they used printed books for collocations, and only one student used a collocation list from English websites of language centers.

Hence, there was a tendency that the participants did not utilize any relevant tools for collocational self-study. When they really needed to check, online dictionaries tended to be ubiquitous.

In addition to the perceived positive influences of collocations in academic writing, these chunks were also considered to be a source of problems. Van Lang University English-major juniors encountered difficulties primarily due to their inadequate lexical and collocational knowledge. Nevertheless, it seemed that they did not consider corpus-based tools to help much and primarily relied on online dictionaries.

4.1.3. Discussion

In the light of the students' perspectives on using collocations to improve academic writing, Van Lang University English-major juniors approved of the role in lexical development. This notion is in alignment with [8], [12], [38]. In the acquisition of collocations, the students are exposed to various lexical resources and increase their vocabulary size. In academic writing, conciseness or clarity is essential, and collocations help the students achieve this. As respondent 43's insights, collocations help delete useless or redundant lexical items from students' minds, making the writing sound more cohesive and coherent somehow. This function might be relevant to academic writing. More or less, the more appropriate collocations are used in academic writing, the higher scores in lexical resources a candidate can have [14]. The fact that native speaker raters are more sensitive to collocational errors to form their judgment is apparent, similar to [9]. The finding, hence, supports much literature.

Nonetheless, because of the research objectives, learners' insights might make more contributions to the research problem. Certain features of effective academic writing under the students' perspectives – professional,

attractive, straightforward texts, somewhat were stressed. Collocations were used as a tool to support the students to reach their goal in academic writing: expressing what they thought in mind accurately and smoothly and touching the heart of readers or even scorers.

Problems and errors are unavoidable; consequently, the students did pay attention to their primary barriers to collocational acquisition. Even though they did not stress the negative influence of the native language, mentioned in [2], [3], [4], [22], [27], [32], [33], [37], they concerned the inadequacy of lexical and collocational knowledge predominated. This finding is somehow in agreement with [10], [19], [25], [28], [29], [35], [36]. Students' foundation on collocations as well as their vocabulary size and understandings of single lexical items in a collocation, might control their collocational acquisition. Also, the prevalence of low-level writing students in the survey might contribute to their perception and highlight the obstacles of collocations' linguistic properties, supportive of [6], [7] & [16]. The results might also be in favor of [13], [24], [26], [31], [35], who put an emphasis on collocational teaching and learning. Collocations are inevitably from native speakers' natural language, so suitable explicit teaching might help. More or less, the participants in the survey reflected that the Vietnamese educational context, which might disconcert the use of collocations, might constrain their collocational acquisition. Grammatical knowledge seemed to be minor, notwithstanding its votes of 51.1% in the survey. This might be explained by the nature of collocations, as in [13], [34], [43]. Collocations are strongly related to lexical development and might limit grammatical features' constraints.

However, the findings also presented some challenges of using corpus-based tools in students' collocational acquisition. The students tended to rely much on online dictionaries, which was reported in [44] as a negative habit and could destroy learners' collocation use. As stated in [23], instructed dictionary use should be implemented. Therefore, the role of these tools (whether in print or online) needs examining more carefully so that students can obtain optimal learning results. The fact that the students in the survey did not use any tools for their collocations rather than their arbitrary use or collocational retention might be related to [26]. The cognitive abilities of learners are also a variable to consider. The present study's finding did not reveal that students considered low learning motivation much affect their collocational acquisition. This result might be in connection to [12] that adult learners pertain to a variety of collocational learning strategies and motivation. Because the participants experienced long English learning and all of them were more than 19 at the time of the study, such background might confirm that they had different learning strategies for collocations.

4.2. Lecturers' Insights

4.2.1. The Role of Collocations in Academic Writing

Interview responses of the five lecturers displayed the usefulness of collocations in academic writing.

The lecturers' insights showed that they confirmed the positive influences of using collocations in academic writing for these reasons. Firstly, the native-like fluency in writing is fostered, which facilitates communication. Second, lexical resources become various and accurate, which somewhat helps them achieve the academic writing style. Finally, as mentioned in Lecturer N's viewpoints, condensed writing might be expected. Students can write shortened but more concise sentences. All of this leads to the outcome: Students can self-improve their language proficiency.

Table 5. Lecturers' perception of collocations' usefulness

Ts	Extracted ideas	Themes
X	"[...] Collocations play a pivotal role in academic writing. They help students write more academically, express ideas concisely and naturally like native speakers and well convey messages to readers [...]"	<i>academic writing style</i> <i>native-like fluency</i> <i>conciseness</i> <i>clear communication</i>
Z	"Collocations may assist students in enhancing their vocabulary fluency and accuracy in L2 writing."	<i>vocabulary fluency and accuracy</i>
J	"Collocations help enhance academic writing style and lexical resources. They help students improve cohesion and coherence and avoid some errors like repetition and colloquialism [...]"	<i>academic writing style</i> <i>improved lexical resources,</i> <i>reduced repetition rate and colloquialism</i>
Y	"Collocations are of utmost importance in that it helps to increase language fluency and accuracy as well as boost the natural language use. [...] Also, students will very much suffer from L1 without a proper acquisition of collocations and tend to transfer word combination logic, or syntax, from L1 into L2. This may lead to the incomprehensibility of the produced language and may lead to the collapse of communication.[...] Of course, with productive skills such as speaking and writing, collocations are essential."	<i>language fluency and accuracy</i> <i>natural language use</i> <i>clear communication</i>
N	"Personally, I think that collocations are very important because if EFL learners have their knowledge of collocations, which means that they can produce combinations of words, and it is a good indication for their EFL proficiency. Specifically, in academic writing, if learners lack collocational competence, they may make long sentences to express their ideas about assigned tasks, and the use of long sentences will lead them to the risk of committing errors. [...]"	<i>language proficiency</i> <i>condensed writing</i>

4.2.2. Students' Problems with Collocations in Academic Writing

Undoubtedly, the lecturers realized the students' problems with the collocation use. Basically, lecturer Z, J and N agreed that students have difficulties in word

choice, namely verb-noun, noun-noun, adjective-noun, verb-adverb, and adverb-adjective. Furthermore, lecturer J added

"Students may have a misconception of collocations and apply word-for-word translation instead of using correct collocations."

This view is in alignment with Lecturer Y's insights.

"Students tend to have very little understanding concerning English collocations and their uses."

Students' problems with lexical and collocational knowledge might also be clearly demonstrated in Lecturer X's standpoints.

"Students seem to have insufficient collocational knowledge. They incline to look up single lexical items and combine arbitrarily without much consideration into the context, leading to the incomprehensibility of their writing."

"Word-for-word translation" or combine words arbitrarily might be a consequence of negative language transfer from the mother tongue, which was clearly presented in Lecturer Y's and N's viewpoints.

"As a result, students will definitely transfer Vietnamese word order logic and word representations such as connotation and analogy to English language use. And this is a hard-wired habit of many Vietnamese students that sometimes I've found hard to deconstruct. This habit is also reinforced when they have to complete writing assignments beyond their language proficiency in a short time."

(Lecturer Y, Interview response)

In addition to wrong word choice, limited lexical resources and collocational knowledge, and the negative impact of Vietnamese, further practical difficulties were highlighted.

Lecturer X raised awareness of students' improper reading habits, shortage of valid learning materials and strategies, and inadequacy of extensive practice.

"The first factor is students' poor reading habits. They tend to be lazy to read extensively and jot down useful collocations. [...] The second factor is their lack of valuable materials and strategies. They could not apply much of what they have read into what they learn in classrooms. [...] The final factor is their shortage of extensive practice. They have not practiced using learned collocations in productive skills – speaking and writing, so they were unable to retrieve them [...]"

The overall description of possible matters was stated in lecturer Y's perspectives. Many factors that may inhibit learners' collocation use in academic writing were mentioned: teaching and learning (relating to educational context), learners' cognitive and metacognitive abilities, and motivation.

“[...] Maybe, teachers do not draw enough attention to this aspect in teaching English. It is my observation that when teaching writing, teachers tend to pay more attention to grammar or isolated words instead of chunks of language. [...] It's hard to name all the factors, since they can originate from their cognitive level, meta-cognitive, motivation, context, and teachers. At the cognitive level, it is my observation that some students have a better ability to digest language patterns, and they can figure out this collocation stuff and have a sense of it with some proper guidance from teachers. Students who have the habit of reflection on their writing process will tend to acquire this better at the metacognitive level. Motivation also plays a high in this spectrum since students with a deep desire to achieve more in their writing can grow conscious of this.

However, I believe context is also important too. For example, students with high exposure to native language will tend to be aware of this issue better and acquire this much more easily. [...]”

In short, the English lecturers at Van Lang University perceived that the students actually confront numerous problems with using collocations in academic writing because of their constrained lexical and collocational knowledge, grammatical knowledge, the negative language transfer from L1, underrated collocations in teaching and learning, students' cognitive and metacognitive abilities, students' motivation, and especially their bad reading habits and learning strategies.

4.2.3. *Suggestions for Teaching and Learning*

The interviewees also suggested a few solutions to this problem.

EFL learners could improve collocational retention by their greater exposure to the target language through reading and taking notes of useful collocations for use. This recommendation was contributed by lecturer X, J, and N.

The more practice students have, the more fluently they can use collocations in writing and in speaking, as mentioned in Lecturer X's idea.

“Students need to read extensively and write down useful collocations. They need to invent a clear context in which they apply those collocations in speaking, for example, to memorize well and convert the collocational knowledge into productive language.”

Explicit teaching was supported by lecturer Y and N. It is teachers that play a role in facilitating learners' self-motivation and collocational acquisition.

“raise their understandings of collocations so as to upgrade their ability of writing accuracy by asking them to think of their own language or other language(s) they know ask them to learn new collocations when they encounter by repeating exposure to typical collocations in both spoken and written

texts or guide them when they learn a new word, then ask them to write it down not just the meaning or translation of its, but also its common collocations. For instance, students may fail to use different types of lexical collocation--> de-lexicalized verbs= get/ have/ make/ do/ put/ take --> make an attempt/ pull out/ tend to provoke fierce disagreement and encourage learners to be engaged more in extensive reading texts which are written in English literature.”

(Lecturer N, Interview response)

It is clear that noticing techniques, extensive reading, and expanding collocates from node words were major suggestions from lecturer N. Students need to be instructed explicitly in authentic texts, and they themselves self-construct collocational knowledge.

4.2.4. *Discussion*

Teachers' perception of collocations and their students' problems might not be a very common research theme. This survey gathered their insights into the problem with remarkable responses under a Vietnamese educational context.

There was a congruence of the students' and the lecturers' perspectives on using collocations to enhance academic writing. Pivotal roles of collocations were much highlighted in the language fluency and accuracy, enhanced academic writing style, lexical resources, and condensed writing. Accordingly, the finding somehow agreed with [8], [9], [12].

The interview responses might add important practical problems with collocation use in many EFL learners' academic writing. In addition to certain constraints of their lexical, collocational, grammatical knowledge as well as cognitive and metacognitive abilities and educational context, students' demotivation of extensive reading and collocational practice might inhibit their collocation use. As explicated by lecturer X, students are inclined to be lazy to read extensively, notice and take notes of useful academic collocations, and be unable to apply these chunks into practice.

The lecturers' recommendations for collocational teaching and learning might be in agreement with [13], [26], and [36] that explicit teaching is necessary. Thanks to noticing or highlighting techniques as well as using collocation lists, students' exposure to collocations in context can be promoted. The corpus-based tools were also stated in the interview responses. As in lecturer X's view, these materials are neither completely useful nor useless. The impact might depend on learners' use. Students should seek effective strategies for using materials. This notion is somehow in alignment with [20] and [23]. A variety of corpus-based materials in the modern world provide benefits and challenges to learners. They need to select and apply proper strategies

for the sake of better outcomes. This learning practice could gradually promote learner autonomy [31]. Finally, similar to [24], teachers' perception of collocations might control their collocational teaching. Thus, understanding teachers' perspectives on this research problem, especially in Vietnamese educational contexts, is still necessary.

5. CONCLUSION

Data analysis revealed the congruence of Van Lang University English-major juniors' and English lecturers' perspectives on the use of collocations for academic writing. The formulaic language helps student writers improve language fluency and accuracy in writing and widen lexical knowledge. More condensed sentences and professional, appealing, natural writing are values gained from using more suitable collocations. In contrast, various problems could arise, which demands both students' and lecturers' awareness. The background lexical, collocational, grammatical knowledge, students' cognitive and metacognitive abilities, L1 influence, pedagogy, the use of corpus-based materials, and particularly, learners' demotivation of extensive reading and collocation practice.

Many constraints had emerged prior to the data collection of this study. Due to its small scope, time, financial resources, and restricted educational policy at the setting, students' written corpora were not permitted to retrieve while understanding the collocation use in essays might help the researchers have a closer look at the problems. Besides, the researchers couldn't meet the student participants in person, somewhat resulting in a modest student sample for the analysis.

Despite such challenges, the current study might have a few implications for future research. Other studies could be conducted to analyze Vietnamese EFL learners' development in using collocations in academic writing over time across different language proficiency levels. Further research could examine the effects of mediating factors, namely writing topics, genres, and reading or writing strategies on learners' collocation use. Last but not least, contemporary corpus-based materials and concordance programs are inherently available for teachers and researchers to implement in their own projects.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The group of researchers as authors of the paper designed and collected data throughout the final two months of 2020. We hereby confirm that all findings and discussion were based on our own work, without any use of other sources except for relevant ideas from literature as cited.

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