

## Teaching and Learning Collocations in the Vietnamese Context: Teachers' Voices

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### Abstract

This primary research focuses on teachers' perceptions of the teaching and learning of collocations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in the context of Vietnam. The study involves four teachers currently teaching in different educational settings in Ho Chi Minh City. A purposeful sampling technique is adopted to select the participants. The findings from semi-interviews can shed light on how teachers teach collocations to EFL learners, whether they apply technological applications or web-based platforms in teaching collocations and assisting learners to acquire collocations, as well as possible causes for some of the learners' collocation errors. Teachers' sharing about the procedure of teaching collocations in different classroom settings, including public schools and private classes in either secondary level or universities, is provided. Moreover, challenges during the process of conducting such practices based on the teachers' perspectives are discussed. As a result, suggestions for teachers and learners can be made to facilitate Vietnamese EFL learners' acquisition of collocations, in many cases, with the assistance of technology.

**Keywords:** teaching collocations, Vietnamese learners, technological tools, collocation errors

### Introduction

Collocations are believed to be essentially important to the development of English proficiency. The body of research into the knowledge of collocations has proven that there is a positive correlational relationship between the acquisition of collocational knowledge and language proficiency (Cantos & Sánchez, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2005). More interestingly, lexical collocations are found to play a crucial role in learners' English proficiency (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Sung, 2003). This indicates that the more collocational knowledge the learners acquire, the more competent the learners' communicative skills become. Thus, an investigation into how teachers teach collocations to Vietnamese EFL learners is necessary. This study investigates the procedures teachers follow to teach collocations to learners in different settings, their perceptions of the difficulties and learners' performance, and common collocation errors during the teaching and learning process.

### Literature Review

#### *Definitions of collocations and classification*

Collocation is generally defined as the grouping together of words; however, how words are grouped together is not the same by different researchers. While Sinclair (1991) believes that in the typical investigation of Collocation, the maximum range is 4-span, including the node

word, Kjellmer (1994) is more interested in strictly adjacent word co-occurrence. More interestingly, the span proposed by Sinclair (1991) was later viewed as unnecessary because the lexical hierarchy formed by collocates within linguistic units such as sentences and phrases truly matters (Cantos & Sánchez, 2001). Regarding the number of words in a collocation, there have been different views on how many words and what types of words are included that can form a collocation. Whereas Partington (1998) claims that traditionally, collocations are two-word combinations, there are combinations of more than two words that are still deemed collocations. In a broader sense, a collocation is considered a co-occurrence of a word with another word or other words, and the frequency of such combination is higher than expected to be a chance co-occurrence (Clear, 1993), while the span of those combinations can range from  $\pm 2$  (Clear, 1993) to  $\pm 5$  (Stuart & Trellis, 2006).

With regard to the classification of collocations, the most commonly adopted model divides the collocational items into two major categories, namely, grammatical collocations and lexical collocations (Benson et al., 1997). Regarding lexical collocations, they contain two or more content words and do not consist of prepositions or infinitives. According to the BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations, there are six sub-types of lexical collocations (Benson et al., 1997); however, the seventh sub-type, “noun 1 of noun 2” was then added (Hausmann, 1999; Kimmes, 2004, as cited in Hsu, 2007). Hence, there are seven sub-types of lexical collocations: (L1) *adjective + noun* (e.g., *strong tea*), (L2) *verb + noun* (e.g., *conduct an experiment*), (L3) *noun + noun* (e.g., *city transport*), (L4) *adverb + adjective* (e.g., *physically demanding*), (L5) *verb + adverb* (e.g., *jump happily*), (L6) *noun + verb (action)* (e.g., *wolves growl*), and (L7) *noun 1 of noun 2* (e.g., *a school of fish*).

Several empirical studies on collocations, especially on lexical collocations, have been conducted, and the correlation between lexical collocation knowledge and overall proficiency in English has been proven. Particularly in a study conducted by Al-Zahrani (1998), the knowledge of English lexical collocations of 81 Saudi EFL learners and the relationship between these learners’ knowledge of lexical collocations and general language proficiency were investigated. One of the most major findings is the strong correlation between the learners’ knowledge of collocations and their language proficiency measured using the TOEFL test, which means that the language mastery of EFL learners can be influenced greatly by the acquisition of collocations. Thus, it is evident that lexical collocations play an important role in a learner’s English proficiency.

#### *Teaching and learning lexical collocations*

Many studies in second language acquisition of collocations have discovered that learners’ mother tongue is vital to their L2 collocation learning (Bahns, 1993; Bahns & Eldaws, 1993; Bisk-up, 1992; Hama, 2010; Koya, 2004; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003, 2005). One major problem that learners have when acquiring collocations is language transfer, which takes place when learners find something in the L1 similar to the target language, which is considered negative transfer. A study conducted by Bahns (1993) concluded that inappropriate collocational usage may result from L1 transfer, especially when learners’ L1 is closely related to English. Similarly, in a study carried out by Biskup (1992) to investigate L1 transfer observed in German and Polish learners of English, most of the collocation errors are the use of inappropriate synonyms and L2 learners show too much reliance on a small number of some particular collocations when they are able to produce those correctly.

The degree of congruence of the collocations between their L1 and L2 is associated with the likelihood of learners producing incorrect collocations, which also means that congruent collocations, which sound natural in both their L1 and L2, cause less difficulty to learners than

non-congruent collocations. These findings are consolidated in Ying's (2009) study as it is concluded that collocations congruent and translatable collocations from L1 to L2 are easier for learners to acquire. This study also discovers that overgeneralization is a major cause, as learners tend to look for the equivalent collocation in L1 without realizing that incongruity exists between their L1 and L2. Besides, specifically in the context of Vietnam, Nguyen (2020) also identified interlingual interference as a primary source of the majority of Vietnamese EFL learners' erroneous collocations.

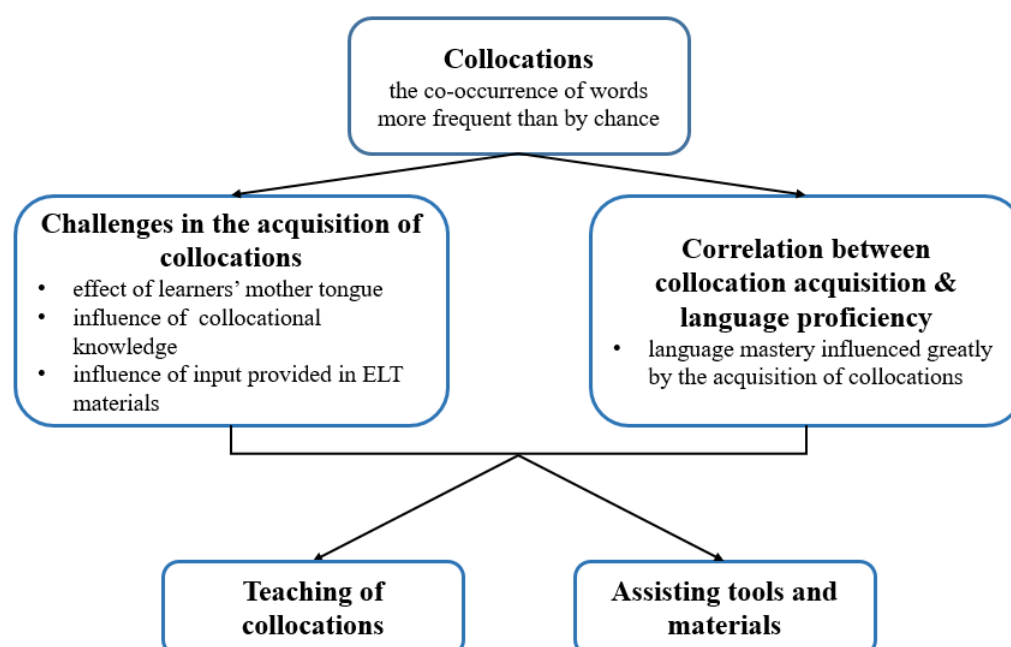
It is also pointed out that the insufficiency of collocational knowledge or lexical items may hinder the acquisition and production of certain collocations. In other words, the insufficient, ineffective instruction of collocations to learners can negatively influence the acquisition of those (Shitu, 2015). Liu (1999) finds out that the lack of collocational concept leads to learners' inability to know which word collocates with the node word, although they know the basic meaning of the node word. The inability to produce collocations correctly or use appropriate collocations can make non-native speakers sound unnatural and even unintelligible to target language speakers. Moreover, too much reliance on a small number of collocations can become an obstacle to language users in academic contexts, as collocations are ubiquitous. Thus, a high level of collocational competence is crucial if learners aim for advanced proficiency.

Regarding the input factor, textbooks are believed to play a part in providing useful input for learners. The usefulness of lexical phrases, including collocations, idioms, and phrasal verbs, provided in ELT coursebooks was investigated in a study by Koprowski (2005). Koprowski (2005) concluded that not very useful collocations were included in the coursebooks and that the usefulness of lexical phrases was compromised, which was also found in a study by Koya (2004) to investigate ELT materials. Furthermore, Cao, Pho, and Dangnguyen (2021) also discovered that the repetition of the same collocations or less-frequently used collocations (compared with reliable collocation lists) is unnecessary, as the deliberate teaching time should be allocated for teaching new target collocations. This implies that the recycling of target collocations should be systematic and effective. It is evident that collocations deserve attention, and the collocation input presented in textbooks is even more necessary for learners to acquire and consolidate their collocational knowledge for production. ELT materials must manage to highlight the collocations of the target words in the lexical syllabus. Moreover, in many foreign language teaching and learning contexts, a textbook is the primary source of target language exposure, which means that the collocational knowledge contained in the textbook can be crucial to non-native learners.

Learners' learning styles and habits, as well as assisting tools and materials, can greatly contribute to their acquisition of vocabulary in general and collocations, more specifically. The use of dictionaries or exposure to concordances and examples is reported to bring about significant benefits to learners' retention of lexical items (Cao, 2018; Hadley, 2002; Kolln, 1992; Lew & Doroszewska, 2003; Rahimi & Mohemi, 2012). Because the context in which a lexical item is used, along with the accuracy of a collocation, is provided, the process of acquiring such items is more enhanced and facilitated. Simultaneously, a variety of exercises and activities for learning and practicing collocations, as Lewis (1997) suggested, can play an important role in teaching and learning collocations. Considering our contemporary world, with the rapid development of technologies and the Internet, virtual platforms where learning can take place in an interactive way can be of great importance. According to Trinh et al. (2022), EFL learners think digital games can provide vital assistance when learning vocabulary. They believe that the games are fun and interesting, providing them with a means to easily memorize the words and understand them better. The process of making sense of and learning word families becomes more exciting and simpler, and this corroborates the findings in the study by

Rasti-Behbahani (2021), in which learners can effectively recall the form and the meaning of the target words thanks to the visual aids and audio files from the games. Simultaneously, the teachers in this study all think that digital games provided on platforms such as Quizizz, Kahoot and Quizlet can motivate learners when learning new vocabulary. For EFL learners at the tertiary level, a study conducted by Pham et al. (2024) revealed that university learners enjoyed using an AI-based chatbot called POE, or Platform of Open Exploration, created by OpenAI in 2020. This chatbot is believed to help learners with their vocabulary learning process as this tool provides them with ideas and necessary vocabulary for assignments. Lastly, it has been found that electronic dictionaries contribute greatly to the vocabulary learning process of EFL learners thanks to their interactivity and flexibility (Le, 2023; Trinh et al., 2021). The majority of Vietnamese EFL learners in a number of previous studies think that electronic dictionaries provide useful assistance when they learn vocabulary because they can quickly and conveniently look up the meaning of a word and understand the context in which the word is used. By and large, the use of technological tools in teaching vocabulary, or more specifically, collocations, is promising.

**Figure 1.** Summary of theoretical notions investigated in the study



Although the topic of identifying learners' collocation errors in their production has been investigated worldwide (Shin, 2015), very little research on exploring Vietnamese EFL learners' difficulties and teachers' teaching collocations in the Vietnamese context is seen. In other words, collocations have not received sufficient attention in the process of teaching and learning English in Vietnamese contexts, especially in different settings from lower secondary to higher education levels. Insights into how Vietnamese teachers teach collocations and the difficulties or challenges they face during this process can be shaped through this study, which then results in appropriate implications and suggestions for improvement and enhancement in the teaching of lexical collocations to EFL learners of different education levels in Vietnam.

### *Research questions*

This study aims to shed some light on (1) how teachers teach lexical collocations to their Vietnamese EFL learners in different settings and (2) teachers' perceptions of the challenges

and assisting tools during the process of teaching lexical collocations. The following research questions are formulated to guide the study:

1. How do teachers teach lexical collocations to Vietnamese EFL learners?
2. What are the realities and challenges of the teaching and learning of collocations in the Vietnamese context?

## Methods

### *Participants*

With a view to investigating the procedures of teaching lexical collocations to Vietnamese EFL learners in different teaching contexts, four English teachers were invited to four separate semi-interviews. The first teacher (Teacher #1) has more than 25 years of teaching experience at a public secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, and this teacher works mostly with the ninth-graders. Participating in the semi-interview, the second teacher (Teacher #2) teaches IELTS classes at a private English center in Ho Chi Minh City. The students enrolling in these classes are tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-graders coming from a variety of public high schools in the same city. The third participant (Teacher #3) is an English teacher for non-major university students at a Ho Chi Minh City college. This teacher has provided IELTS classes for non-majored students for more than two years. The fourth teacher (Teacher #4) is a young in-service teacher who started teaching at a public high school in Ho Chi Minh City two years ago, and this teacher's students are in grades ten and eleven. Purposeful sampling and convenience sampling techniques were adopted to select the participants for the interviews, as teaching collocations in the classroom, either formally and separately, or opportunistically and incidentally, is not compulsory in the curriculum, and therefore, the researchers had to initially ask different teachers whether they teach collocations in their classrooms to choose the appropriate participants for this study. The table below summarizes the information of the participants and the context in which they teach collocations to EFL learners.

**Table 1.** Demographics of the participants

	<b>Experience &amp; Setting</b>	<b>Work with</b>	<b>Teach collocations</b>
<b>Teacher #1</b>	> 25 years of teaching experience public secondary school	students of grade 9	from EFL textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education
<b>Teacher #2</b>	> 2 years of teaching experience private English center	students of grades 10, 11 and 12	from IELTS materials and coursebooks
<b>Teacher #3</b>	> 2 years of teaching experience College	non-majored university students	from IELTS materials and coursebooks
<b>Teacher #4</b>	> 2 years of teaching experience public high school	students of grades 10 and 11	from EFL textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education

### *Design of the study*

This study adopted the qualitative approach by setting up semi-interviews in order to gain deeper insights into the participants' perspectives and perceptions. According to Creswell (2001), the qualitative design of a study can help build a holistic picture of the detailed views and experiences of the participants, providing the understanding of a problem, reality or

challenges. Additionally, as the researcher aimed to explore the way teachers teach and facilitate learners' acquisition of collocations, a qualitative approach with the application of semi-interviews is the most appropriate way to thoroughly comprehend the phenomenon.

### *Data collection and analysis*

In order to interview the participants, the researcher prepared a number of questions related to teaching collocations in their specific context, their perceptions of the importance of collocations, learners' common collocation errors, and causes, as well as the difficulties they have while teaching collocations, along with some technological tools or platforms they use to help learners. Probing questions were also asked to obtain more information or to prompt clarification for a point. Each interview took place within 30 minutes. A consent form was provided before the interview started and anonymity was maintained during and after the interviews.

The interviews were held virtually via Google Meet due to geographical constraints. Despite this, the interviews were conducted smoothly with recorded audio for transcript after the interviews. Vietnamese was used during one interview because this teacher felt more comfortable expressing thoughts and opinions. The permission to record audio of the interviews was given through the approved consent form. After four semi-interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio and typed it into a Microsoft Excel file to store the data. The researcher attempted to translate the qualitative data obtained in Vietnamese into English with the help of another English teacher who was not one of the participants. This assistant teacher checked the English translation and gave suggestions for revisions.

A thematic analysis was carried out through three main stages. Firstly, the researcher reads the transcripts and gives specific pieces of information a specific code. Then, the researcher goes through all the codes to identify the common themes. Last but not least, the themes were reviewed and reported. Four main themes are emerging from the data collected from the interviews. They are (1) *the procedures of teaching collocations*, (2) *challenges in the process of teaching and learning collocations*, (3) *supporting materials and technological tools to facilitate collocation acquisition*, and (4) *suggestions and hopes for improvements in the process of teaching and learning collocations*. Interestingly, in the second theme regarding the challenges during the process of teaching collocations and learners acquiring collocations, there are two sub-themes, which are (a) *learners' common errors and causes* and (b) *teachers' difficulties*. Regarding the common collocation errors and causes, there are four causes identified in this study.

### **Findings and discussion**

Four main themes emerged from the process of analyzing the interview transcripts and their codes. The themes help visualize the reality of the process of teaching and learning collocations in the context of Vietnam in general and specifically in three distinct settings: classes in public schools, IELTS classes at a private center, and IELTS classes in a university. The subthemes of the challenges in this process also demonstrate both learners' and teachers' difficulties, which can result in a number of interesting suggestions for improvement. In addition, teachers' sharing related to supporting materials and web-based applications in the process of teaching and learning collocations can greatly assist other teachers with the same teaching context.

### *The procedures of teaching collocations*

When asked about whether the importance of collocations in language proficiency is introduced in the classroom, all interviewed teachers assured that collocations are taught and explained carefully in their settings. Regarding teachers currently teaching at public schools, despite the rare appearance of collocations in the textbook used in the classroom, these teachers insisted that when a collocation emerges, it is explained and taught with great emphasis, as the teacher is concerned that the students may easily forget it, which they may encounter in exams. Similarly, the teachers that teach IELTS classes either in a university or at a private language center claimed that at the beginning of any new courses, the definition of collocations and examples of those are always provided and illustrated with great emphasis, as collocations play a crucial role in making IELTS learners' speech and writing natural and native-like.

*"I introduce how collocations are formed; for example, a verb goes with a noun, an adjective goes with a noun, and so on. I emphasize that collocations have fixed meanings and are like blocks of language. For instance, "terribly sorry" cannot be understood as the words are separated, like "xin lỗi kính khùng". I teach the collocations and how to understand their meanings." (Teacher #1)*

*"Collocations are often mentioned in most of my classes. I explain what collocation means at the beginning of any course so that my students are aware of collocations and their importance in language production. I give them examples of lexical collocations and their use in writing and speaking." (Teacher #2)*

*"I explained collocations to them in our first lesson. I think letting the students know about them is crucial since they need to have a range of collocations used in speaking or writing for better band scores in IELTS. I often teach collocations together with vocabulary lessons when the textbook provides some information on it. I also tell them about collocations when correcting their writing essays." (Teacher #3)*

*"I usually teach collocations in skills lessons rather than spend a whole separate lesson just for them. I'll show students the node word first. Then, I give them the meaning and ask them to guess the verbs, nouns, and adjectives that go with the word. Finally, I'll ask students to make some sentences using the Collocation." (Teacher #4)*

Regardless of the teaching contexts, all four teachers prefer to take advantage of the reading texts in the textbooks or materials to pick out some interesting collocations to teach learners. With regards to the teachers teaching IELTS courses, it is believed that the use of authentic texts from IELTS reading practice tests is of great importance, and the authenticity of the language is guaranteed. Moreover, by emphasizing brainstorming activities during writing classes, the teachers can create opportunities to provide learners with new collocations that they wish to use in their essays. This way of introducing collocations is not seen in teachers' procedures at public schools because of time constraints and the shortage of communicative activities related to writing and speaking skills.

*"While correcting the reading tasks, there would usually be a number of collocations embedded in the reading text. I always point out those collocations and explain to them carefully what those mean. I do not pick out or select the lexical collocations that are going to be taught in my classes on my own because all of the collocations come from the reading texts in the textbooks or the materials I use. In both Vietnamese and English, the students are required to brainstorm ideas for a writing task as a group. Then, I would always check whether their ideas are sufficient for the essay and whether they are coherently connected and supported. When students have difficulty coming*

*up with a suitable collocation, they would write the idea in Vietnamese, and I would provide them the best Collocation in English to use.” (Teacher #2)*

Another interesting point extracted from the interviews of three out of four teachers is the use of various exercises and tasks for learners to consolidate their collocation knowledge. Except for the IELTS teacher who claimed to be able to hold separate sessions dedicated to teaching collocations, other teachers teaching at public schools do not have similar experiences. Instead, teaching collocations at schools is not far from incidental teaching, as that is not the main goal in their classrooms. However, three teachers agreed that they had utilized a number of different exercise types to help learners remember some collocations. Those types of exercises are mostly multiple-choice questions, word formation exercises and guided-cloze tests.

*“I always remind them the “spell” “danh động tính trạng” (i.e. noun, verb, adjective, adverb) whenever new words are introduced. I do the same when I teach collocations because in many word formation exercises, they are required to provide the correct part of speech of the given node word, and most of the time, the test item is a part of a collocation.” (Teacher #1)*

*“For vocabulary lessons, I let them read the collocations at home before coming to class. Then, in class, they have some time to practice with collocations (probably with exercises like matching and filling in the gaps...) for about 10-15 minutes. For the practice session (writing or speaking), I ask them to choose 3-4 collocations to use in their essay or speech. At first, they often found it difficult to meet the requirements, but later on, once they are used to it, they perform better at thinking of situations to apply the collocations when speaking/writing. Homework assignments include making sentences or producing writing/speaking work. When doing so, the students often show weaknesses in collocations. Though they have learned the correct collocations, some of them still have difficulties applying to the correct contexts.” (Teacher #3)*

*“In the speaking and writing lesson, I'll ask students to use those collocations again. I think this way of teaching is quite straightforward and, therefore, does not take much time. The students can remember most of the collocations and use some of them in their speaking and writing if they review the lesson [...] Written exercises are the ones I use the most frequently. These exercises can be done and checked easily.” (Teacher #4)*

Although teachers at public schools may resort to incidental teaching when encountering collocations, according to Hill and Laufer (2003), this method is only suitable for reviewing words that learners have already met previously, which also means that incidental teaching may not positively support the learning of new words or collocations. Indeed, the teaching of collocations should stem from the notion that language production is putting pieces of chunks or blocks of language or ready-made units and lexical items together, appropriate for each specific situation (Rahimi & Momeni, 2012).



**Table 2.** Summary of participants' procedures of teaching collocations

	<b>The procedure of teaching collocations</b>	<b>Materials/Activities utilized</b>
<b>Teacher #1 (public school)</b>	rare appearance of collocations >< explain carefully	reading texts in the textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education exercises (multiple-choice questions, guided-cloze, word formation)
<b>Teacher #2 (private center)</b>	explain and give examples	authentic reading texts from IELTS materials and books brainstorm activities in writing/speaking sessions
<b>Teacher #3 (college)</b>	explain and give examples	authentic reading texts from IELTS materials and books exercises (matching, filling in the gaps, making sentences)
<b>Teacher #4 (public school)</b>	rare appearance of collocations >< explain carefully	reading texts in the textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education exercises (multiple-choice questions, guided-cloze, word formation)

Generally, teachers participating in the interviews are aware of the importance of collocations and the teaching of collocations to learners of different levels, and they take advantage of the available texts or materials to extract useful collocations for learners to acquire. In addition, the use of a variety of exercise types, though not data-driven and corpus-based yet, is believed to offer learners opportunities to review the collocations and ensure their retention.

#### *Challenges in the process of teaching and learning collocations*

##### *Learners' collocation errors and causes*

##### *Negative transfer*

One major problem that hinders learners' collocation acquisition is their mother tongue. All interviewed teachers believed that this is a challenge that is hard for the students to overcome instantly or within a short period of time, because when they lack vocabulary knowledge of the words or collocations they are looking for, they are not able to produce a correct collocation without trying to make sense with their mother tongue, as Teacher #3 shared, *"They sometimes use inappropriate words in the collocation because they attempt to translate from Vietnamese to English."* Combinations that are not correct are deemed "weird" by Teacher #4, *"I think this is normal because students cannot remember everything they are taught. Students usually make "weird" combinations of words due to the influence of their mother tongue."* This point can be found in the sharing of the other teachers.

*"They may not know that collocation, so they may use their mother tongue to work out the meaning they need, like in a multiple choice question, they are required to choose an adjective to describe "heavy rain", which means "mưa to" in their mother tongue. They are likely to choose "big", because they translate from Vietnamese, and they have not heard of the chunk "heavy rain" before." (Teacher #1)*

*"There are multiple times my students use incorrect collocations, and I think it is mostly because of their mother tongue. They attempt to translate the phrase they want from Vietnamese to English. They would say, "This figure is impressive", without*

*knowing that this is not a collocation suitable for writing task 1 in IELTS.” (Teacher #2)*

Vietnamese EFL learners in many settings have the tendency to translate from their mother tongue to get the phrases they are looking for. In a study conducted by Bahns (1993), it is said that when learners' mother tongue is closely related to English, L1 transfer may result in inappropriate collocational usage. This corroborates the findings in the study carried out by Nesselhauf (2003), which states that the degree of congruence of the collocations between learners' L1 and the second language is linked with the chances of learners producing inaccurate collocations. This notion is strengthened thanks to the findings of a study conducted by Hama (2010) to explore the sources of collocational errors produced by EFL learners in a university in Iraq. This study found that L1 interferences caused 56% of the erroneous collocations extracted from learners' essays. Regarding the context of Vietnam, a Vietnamese study conducted by Nguyen (2020) on university students revealed a causal effect of Vietnamese interlingual interference found from the collocational errors made in these EFL learners' essays. The implication is that Vietnamese learners tend to overgeneralize and translate to get the Collocation they want without realizing the incongruity between their L1 and L2.

#### *Lack of vocabulary knowledge*

One of the interviewed teachers insisted that in the classroom, when introducing a collocation, she always emphasizes the part of speech of each component in a collocation. The main reason for this is that students are required to do many types of exercises in which the part of speech of a word is tested, such as in a word-formation exercise or a guided-cloze. Hence, the teacher finds it vital to carefully explain the part of speech of the components of a collocation to the students. Without sufficient knowledge of the part of speech, the production of correct collocations of learners may be greatly hindered, and then, they may resort to translating from their mother tongue.

*“When the students do not know the collocations, they cannot find out what that Collocation means, and they cannot choose the correct word to fill in the blank in a guided-cloze or a multiple choice item. That is what they find most daunting.” (Teacher #1)*

The teacher teaching IELTS courses at a university pointed out that the learners tend to use single words to express their ideas because they do not know many collocations. Hence, it leads to some inappropriate language use, making their speech or writing unnatural. Teacher #3 stated, *“Some of them did quite well, but some habitually use “single words” rather than collocations. They sometimes use inappropriate words in the Collocation.”* It can be clearly seen that when learners have insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and part of speech of a lexical item, they may find it hard to memorize the collocations and produce the correct versions of those, leading to the use of strategies such as coinage and approximation. According to Liu (1999), even when learners may know the meaning of the node word in a collocation, but without the proper collocational concept, they may be unable to know the collocates. Meanwhile, Shitu's (2015) study investigating Nigerian university learners' production of collocations discovered that one of the major causes of students' erroneous use of collocations is ineffective instruction or teaching of collocations. This implies that EFL learners are more likely to fail to produce syntactically and semantically correct collocations without proper knowledge of collocations.

### *Insufficient provision in ELT textbooks and materials*

The teacher who teaches at the secondary school stated that collocations are not emphasized in the teaching-learning English process at the lower secondary school level. Collocations are not separately introduced, which means that teachers are required to pick out the collocations and decide, on their own, whether this Collocation should be taught or not. This is said to put more burden on teachers' shoulders. Even in the new textbook, collocations are occasionally introduced, and mostly (L2) *verb + noun* collocations. Similarly, the teacher who teaches at the public high school in the study confirmed that the number of collocations provided in the ELT textbook used in the classroom is not sufficient for students to convey their messages and opinions with optimal effectiveness. Teacher #1 shared, *"In the old textbook, there are no collocations introduced. We must pick out the collocations necessary to teach the students. Even in the new textbook, there isn't a Learning Box to contain all the necessary collocations."* The reason for this may lie in what Koprowski (2005) claimed, which is that the usefulness of lexical phrases or collocations in coursebooks may be compromised, leading to insufficient provision of useful collocations for learners to equip themselves. Simultaneously, another interesting point regarding the provision of collocations in textbooks used in those educational settings is shared.

*"I think the collocations in the books are only enough to complete the task in the books. Teachers must add a few more to help students communicate more effectively. Therefore, I usually add some more collocations besides those from textbooks."*  
(Teacher #4)

This implies that the number of collocations provided in the ELT textbooks is insufficient for learners to communicate more effectively in the target English. Because of that, Teacher #4 felt obliged to supply learners with additional collocations so that they could acquire and produce them in their writing or speaking.

Moreover, when Koya (2004) investigated whether ELT textbooks in Japan introduce common collocations extracted from collocation dictionaries, it was revealed that few collocations were introduced in the textbooks and were not recycled to an extent that can facilitate learners' acquisition. It can be understood that in order for learners to memorize and produce correct collocations, the provision of collocations in textbooks and materials is of great importance and should be made explicit and recycled frequently. Interestingly, the findings of a study conducted by Cao, Pho and Dangnguyen (2021) to investigate the collocational profiles of English textbooks for Vietnamese learners and whether the collocations are recycled to an extent that can assist learners in acquiring them provide another insight into the provision of targeted collocations in textbooks for EFL learners in Vietnam. It is found that one-third of the targeted collocations are either repeated multiple times in different places or they are not of great importance according to some reliable collocation lists. This may indicate that the more effective approach to recycling a target collocation is by embedding it in exercises or activities in the textbook, while the standard teaching time should be integrated into teaching frequently used collocations. This point corroborates the notion of incidental teaching by Hill and Laufer (2003) mentioned in the first theme covering the procedures of teaching collocations of the participants. Incidental teaching is not useful for introducing new target collocations; instead, it is more useful for revisiting taught collocations through the use of exercises and activities.

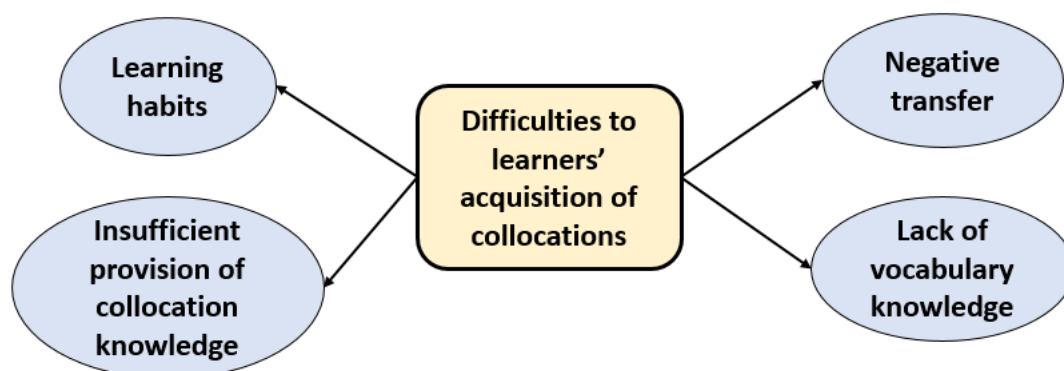
### *Learning habits*

Besides the challenges related to knowledge of the collocational concept, interference of mother tongue and inadequate supply from ELT textbooks, learners' habits of learning collocations can

be a contributing factor. The most major difficulty is that learners may fail to remember the collocations that have been taught in the classroom due to the lack of review and suitable learning strategies. Teacher #4 shared, *“My students cannot remember everything I teach.”* This resonates with other teachers. Teacher #1 mentioned the findings observed from multiple choice questions and said, *“Some of my students fail to produce correct collocations or choose the correct collocate of a node word in multiple choice questions because they do not review their lessons regularly.”* Meanwhile, Teacher #3 mentioned the process of memorizing collocations and stated, *“I think it's the memorization process. When students learn new collocations, they don't have the habit of using them right away. Rather, they prefer to use single words because it's more approachable.”*

The frequency with which collocations occur to learners can become the driving force for learners' acquisition of those. Hence, it is important that learners pay more attention to the acquisition of collocations and adopt a suitable learning strategy to assist them in memorizing and producing the collocations accurately and effectively. Here, it should also be noted that a number of useful tools, such as online corpora, can be introduced to learners (Tran & Nguyen, 2022) so that they can check for the frequency and accuracy of a collocation. This is believed to enhance learners' autonomy to assist their acquisition of collocations.

**Figure 2.** Summary of learners' difficulties when acquiring collocations



### *Teachers' difficulties*

The biggest challenge to teachers when it comes to teaching collocations is time constraints, especially for teachers at public schools. They cannot cover many collocations in their periods or attempt to provide more collocations for learners because they do not have sufficient time. Teacher #1 claimed, *“But we cannot be very ambitious, as we cannot have enough time to cover them all.”* Meanwhile, teacher #4 stated, *“There are too many collocations. I don't know which ones I should teach first.”* This implies that especially in the context of Vietnam, time constraints cause great difficulties for teachers, preventing effective teaching of collocations from taking place on a regular basis in the classrooms.

This aspect of a challenge has not yet been investigated or revealed in the previous bodies of research focusing on teaching and learning collocations in Vietnam. However, despite this issue, with appropriate sets of activities and proper explanations of the importance of collocations, teachers can still manage to draw learners' attention to useful collocations and the production of those in both spoken and written forms. Another important thing to note is the

allocation of time during a lesson to take advantage of the deliberate teaching time and incidental teaching. Important target collocations should be taught throughout the deliberate teaching time, while recycling taught collocations or introducing less-frequent collocations can be conducted incidentally.

### *Supporting materials and technological tools to facilitate collocation acquisition*

Teachers who are in charge of IELTS classes either at the private center or at a university agreed that *ozdic.com* is an informative tool to help learners look up collocates of a node word. The part of speech of the collocates of the node word is noted in a straightforward manner, making it easy for learners to do quick research. Also, the interface is user-friendly and simple enough for even learners in at the secondary school level. Another significant piece of sharing is the use of dictionaries as a reliable reference when learning about collocations. Therefore, Online dictionaries are believed to bring about many benefits.

Generally, effective vocabulary retention of EFL learners after using dictionaries is reported to be significant in many previous studies (Bruton, 2007; Lew & Doroszewska, 2009). More specifically, Cao (2018) concluded that electronic dictionaries can bring about more benefits compared with physical dictionaries as learners are exposed to more language input, facilitating the acquisition of vocabulary more efficiently. The database of examples written in authentic language provides learners with the context in which the Collocation is used. Teacher #3 mentioned the utilization of *ozdic.com*, “*For most of the classes, I often introduce them to ozdic.com, which is a website to search for suitable collocations. The students respond quite positively to the website, and after the introduction, they use it more often.*” Agreeing with the sharing of this teacher, Teacher #2 also allows learners to resort to *ozdic.com* to assist with vocabulary learning.

*“I usually introduce ozdic.com to my students because it is easy to use and it provides a very large source of collocations. Any students can visit the website to look up the collocates for a word and strong collocations. Actually, I do tell them that there is another, much easier way: to type the Collocation they have in mind in the search engine on Google and see if this Collocation appears in any reliable English sources.”* (Teacher #2)

More generally, Teacher #4 expressed deep appreciation for both paper and electronic dictionaries as learners are exposed to many examples with contexts in which the collocations are used. This is said to help learners to understand one lexical item more effectively.

*“I think dictionaries are great tools to learn collocations effectively. We can not only check the meaning but also read the examples with the Collocation in a specific context to understand how these collocations are used, which helps us remember the collocations faster. Online dictionaries are of great assistance.”* (Teacher #4)

The use of *ozdic.com* tool or dictionaries as the main reference for collocations is the fundamental idea of the data-driven learning approach, which advocates the consultants of concordances and collocation dictionaries in the classroom to learn about collocations from sources of authentic language (Kolln, 1992), and the use of digital software to create a database of linguistic resources or language examples (Hadley, 2002). This approach has proven its positive effects on learners’ overall language proficiency in an investigation carried out by Rahimi and Mohemi (2012), in which learners of the experimental group performed better after vocabulary was taught through collocations and concordancing techniques.

### *Suggestions for improving the collocation teaching-learning process*

All interviewed believed that collocations should receive more attention from the teaching staff and textbook developers. The importance of collocations in making our speech more natural

and effective has been proven, and yet, collocations are still not perceived as a major aspect of English teaching and learning in the context of Vietnam, especially in the case of public schools and ELT textbooks for public schools. Another interesting point in these teachers' sharing is the techniques or approaches teachers can adopt to help facilitate learners' acquisition of collocations. Different activities can be organized and various exercises can be provided to encourage learners to review the collocations and practice producing the correct collocations.

*"There are expressions introduced in the new textbook, but not many collocations. If yes, mostly they are verb + noun collocations, while there are very few adjective + noun collocations. More collocations should be introduced so that students can seriously learn these to use in communication."* (Teacher #1)

*"I hope that there is going to be a book focusing on collocations that are useful for IELTS learners. It would be more systematic and helpful to both teachers and students. Also, I think ELT textbooks used in school can also include a list consolidating all collocations that are presented throughout the book, so that students can use the list as reference."* (Teacher #2)

The application of collocations is mentioned by Teacher #4, as it is stated as, *"I just hope that more teachers will make students aware of the importance of collocations."* The sharing of Teacher #3 further supports this, as this teacher claimed, *"Hopefully, the textbooks will provide more activities for learning collocations. Furthermore, teachers should require students to apply collocations more often."* With the rapid growth and prevalence of technology in every aspect of our modern society, it is undeniable that technological tools and digital software should be applied and utilized in schools and classrooms to adopt the data-driven learning approach, especially in the context of Vietnam.

## **Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion**

This study was carried out to investigate teachers' perceptions of the process of teaching and learning collocations in the context of Vietnam. Four teachers coming from four different educational settings in Vietnam were invited to share their thoughts and challenges. Interesting opinions and perspectives were expressed, painting a more vivid picture for a deeper understanding of the reality and difficulties encountered by both teachers and learners.

In order to improve the reality of teaching and learning collocations in the Vietnamese context, it is important to keep in mind that collocations play a crucial role in a person's language proficiency. Without the use of appropriate collocations, one's speech can become unnatural. According to Hill (2000), teachers are supposed to make learners aware of the importance of collocations when learning English, and noticing collocations is an essential stage in their learning process. A key note to remember is that teachers need to make sure that learners understand a lexical item's context of usage sufficiently, which means that they can produce the items or collocations appropriately. This can be done through a variety of in-class exercises or activities such as the ones proposed by Lewis (1997) (see Appendix A). The utilization of such exercises provides learners with opportunities to understand how a collocation is formed, the meaning of a collocation and be aware of the part of speech of each component in a combination. Another interesting suggestion is that teachers can introduce a number of electronic dictionaries for EFL learners to look up the meaning of a collocation or find the suitable collocates for a node word, since electronic dictionaries are interactive and time-saving (Le, 2023; Trinh et al., 2021). The use of electronic dictionaries should be encouraged both in the classroom and outside the classroom so that learners can have reliable tools to resort to when they need assistance.

Regarding learners' learning habits when it comes to storing lexical items and collocations, teachers can encourage learners to keep a journal of vocabulary and collocations by topic so that they can use them when writing essays or making speeches. The act of writing the taught collocations down and storing them by a means that matches their own learning style can help enhance the acquisition of any lexical item, including collocations. Also, it is worth noting that with the advent of technology and the prevalence of technological tools serving educational purposes, learners can be instructed to create digital journals on applications and virtual platforms, which may allow them to adopt various methods of recording vocabulary items of collocations such as mind maps and tables. Those applications and platforms can be *canva.com* (to create presentation slides with multi-media content), or *padlet.com* (to create an interactive platform for learners to record and share collocations with each other). Teachers can take advantage of reading texts or listening to audio files to extract useful collocations for learners to notice and learn. Furthermore, to successfully create a learning environment full of excitement and enthusiasm, teachers can create digital games and adopt a blended learning approach in order for learners to practice at home by playing those games. Digital games have been proven to assist EFL learners' vocabulary learning process (Trinh et al., 2022). Besides digital games created on platforms such as Quizizz and Kahoot, teachers can introduce AI-based chatbots to EFL learners of higher education levels, which can help them brainstorm ideas and equip them with the necessary vocabulary for writing or speaking assignments (Pham et al., 2024).

Last but not least, textbook developers and authors should pay more attention to the clear plan of regulating target collocations throughout the content of the book so that the number of target collocations is introduced evenly in a single unit or section and recycled effectively in exercises and activities throughout other parts of the book. This also suggests a more systematic recycling of collocations in ELT materials so that learners can easily notice and acquire those lexical items. Teachers can also benefit from a more convenient approach of introducing and consolidating textbook collocations, especially during exam periods or for testing purposes.

Suggestions for teachers, students, and even textbook developers are formed with the valuable sharing of teachers from four different settings. These are believed to make some improvements to the reality of teaching and learning collocations in Vietnamese context. It is important to ensure that the positive link between knowledge of collocations and language proficiency has been proven, so all stakeholders can consider this seriously and make possible changes to their own situations. Yet, changes on a larger scale and in a more systematic way are required to maximize all the potential. More empirical research on Vietnamese EFL learners' erroneous collocations in productive skills and causes of errors explored from their perceptions can become great contributions to the existing literature.

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## Biodata

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**Appendix A**

**Examples of exercises and activities to teach collocations proposed by Lewis (1997)**

**Table A.1.** A matching exercise to teach collocations (p.88)

<b>List 1</b>	<b>List 2</b>
1. daily 2. short-term 3. regular 4. healthy 5. to follow 6. to control 7. to eat 8. to set	a. a balanced diet b. your weight c. an exercise program d. routine e. weight-loss f. targets g. food h. benefits

**Table A.2.** A deleting exercise to teach collocations (p.94)

One word in each group does not make a strong word partnership with the word in capitals. Which is the odd one?	
<b>BRIGHT</b>	idea green smell child day room
<b>HIGH</b>	season price opinion spirits house time
<b>STRONG</b>	possibility doubt smell influence views coffee