

Research Article

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In Need of Academic Collocation Instruction: Vietnamese English Majors' Knowledge and Perception

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This study examined Vietnamese English majors' competence and perception of academic collocations to determine the need for targeted instruction. The research aimed to identify specific challenges these learners face in learning and using academic collocations in their writing.

Methods. The study involved 199 Vietnamese English majors (60 males, 139 females) aged 20-21 who completed a test of 50 academic collocations selected from widely used academic texts and expert-curated lists. Six of the students participated in a follow-up interview that aimed to explore their perspectives on collocation usage and challenges in academic writing.

Results. The test results revealed a significantly low understanding of academic collocations among the participants. Interview findings confirmed these challenges and highlighted specific difficulties Vietnamese learners encounter when using academic collocations.

Conclusion. The findings underscore a pressing need for specialized instruction to address the specific challenges Vietnamese learners of English face in acquiring and correctly using academic collocations in their writing. Specifically, explicit instruction in academic collocations should be prioritized, integrating multiple teaching approaches. Educators are encouraged to incorporate targeted collocation exercises into writing curricula, provide contextualized practice, and implement strategies that enhance retention and practical application in academic writing.



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1. Introduction

The acquisition of collocational competence, particularly within academic discourse, is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of English proficiency development for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Boers, 2019; Ellis, 2001; Nation, 2001). Collocations, defined as semi-fixed expressions formed by the co-occurrence of two or more words, are essential linguistic units for conveying idiomatic meaning accurately. These word combinations are particularly significant in academic writing as they enhance discourse coherence and fluency (Henriksen, 2013; Laufer & Waldman, 2011). Proficient use of second language (L2) collocations enhances comprehensibility and reflects a deeper understanding of the target language conventions and idiomatic expressions (Gyllstad & Wolter, 2016; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). Furthermore, collocational knowledge is closely linked to academic success, with the appropriate use of collocations often serving as a hallmark of skilled academic writing and a prerequisite for effective communication in academic contexts (Huang & Tsao, 2019; Peters, 2016). Consequently, mastery of common English academic collocations is crucial for EFL learners, including those from Vietnamese linguistic backgrounds, as it directly influences their ability to produce natural-sounding and effective discourse (Nguyen & Webb, 2017).

Despite the recognized importance of collocations, research has consistently identified challenges that EFL learners face in acquiring collocational knowledge (Nguyen & Webb, 2016; Zarei & Tondaki, 2015). These challenges are often attributed to linguistic differences between English and learners' first languages, creating barriers to accurate collocation use. In particular, Vietnamese EFL learners struggle with collocation acquisition due to structural and lexical mismatches between Vietnamese and English (Dang, 2020; Nguyen & Webb, 2017). Existing studies have examined general vocabulary learning strategies, but fewer have explored the specific challenges of academic collocations within the Vietnamese EFL context. This study, conducted at a public university in the Mekong Delta, addresses this research gap by assessing the knowledge of English academic collocations among English major learners and their perception of the challenges involved in the learning process. In this context, academic collocations refer to word combinations commonly encountered in academic texts, research papers, and scholarly discourse, elements that are indispensable for effective academic communication. By investigating learners' collocational competence and the obstacles they experience, this study provides pedagogical insights to support curriculum development and instructional strategies. A contextualized study on academic collocations is arguably necessary for the following reasons and objectives.

- To establish baseline data on learners' academic collocational knowledge to inform future studies (Schmitt, 2010).
- To identify strengths and weaknesses in collocational knowledge to guide pedagogical practices (Nation, 2001).
- To understand learners' perceptions, challenges, and expectations for improving their use of academic collocations in writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- To generate hypotheses about the nature of collocational knowledge acquisition and use among EFL learners, which can be tested in future research (Henriksen, 2013).

2. Literature Review

This section examines the background of collocations, defining their types, the challenges in acquiring collocational knowledge, and previous studies on collocational knowledge among EFL learners.

2.1. Conceptualization of Academic Collocations

Collocations are the co-occurrence of two or more words within a specific environment, forming semi-fixed expressions characterized by their conventionality and semantic unity (Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2005). These word combinations are often unpredictable and often exhibit arbitrary restrictions, making them challenging for language learners (Boers et al., 2014). Collocations can be classified into two main categories: lexical and grammatical (Benson et al., 1986; Howarth, 1998). This classification helps understand the nature of collocations and their role in language learning.

Lexical collocations consist of combinations of content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). On the contrary, grammatical collocations involve combinations of content words with grammatical elements (typically prepositions or specific structures). In academic contexts, academic collocations, word combinations common in scholarly discourse, are particularly important for conveying precise meaning and demonstrating linguistic proficiency (Coxhead, 2000; Durrant, 2009; Polio & Yoon, 2021). Patterns of these collocations with examples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A typology of academic collocation (based on Benson et al., 1986 and Howarth, 1998)

Collocation types	Structures	Examples
Lexical collocations	Verb + Noun	draw conclusions
	Adjective + Noun	a significant impact
	Noun + Verb	evidence suggests,
	Noun + Noun	research methodology
	Adverb + Adjective	deeply concerned
Grammatical collocations	Verb + Adverb	argue convincingly
	Noun + Preposition	research on
	Verb + Preposition	depend on
	Adjective + Preposition	interested in
	Preposition + Noun	in advance

2.2. Challenges in Acquiring Collocational Knowledge

Using appropriate collocations enhances the quality of academic writing, contributes to more natural and fluent expression, and demonstrates a higher level of language proficiency. However, acquiring collocations poses challenges.

2.2.1. First Language Interference

First language interference significantly hinders collocational knowledge acquisition among EFL learners. Collocational patterns vary across languages (Bahardoust & Moeini, 2012; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010), creating difficulties for learners in mastering target language collocations. Vietnamese EFL learners struggle with expressions like 'make a decision' or 'take responsibility' due to the lack of direct equivalents in their native language (Nguyen & Webb, 2016; Phoocharoensil, 2013). Learners often produce non-idiomatic expressions through direct L1 translation (Phoocharoensil, 2013; Tian & Della Amirulloh, 2024). This cross-linguistic incongruence contributes to collocation errors in academic writing (Laufer & Waldman, 2011), with even advanced Vietnamese learners showing persistent difficulties (Nguyen, 2021).

2.2.2. Limited Exposure and Inadequate Instruction

The development of collocational competence requires more than incidental exposure, as highlighted by numerous empirical investigations. Iranian EFL learners, for instance, exhibit difficulties in producing accurate collocations, a challenge attributed to insufficient exposure to authentic language input and inadequate collocation-focused instruction (Tian & Della Amirulloh, 2024). The instructional dimension of this challenge is further illuminated by research in Vietnamese educational contexts, where teachers report a lack of systematic pedagogical approaches specific to collocation instruction (Nguyen, 2024). This deficiency is compounded by the absence of contextualized learning materials designed explicitly for collocation acquisition in Vietnamese EFL classrooms (Nguyen, 2024). Moreover, research has revealed a substantial gap between learners' receptive and productive knowledge of collocations, emphasizing the necessity for explicit instructional interventions and focused practice opportunities to bridge this divide (Bahardoust & Moeini, 2012). These findings collectively underscore the inadequacy of current instructional practices and exposure opportunities for fostering robust collocational competence.

2.2.3. Inherent Complexity of Collocations

The intrinsic complexity of collocations, particularly their arbitrary nature, presents substantial learning challenges. Research has established that the meaning or acceptability of a word combination often cannot be deduced from its components (Boers et al., 2014; Howarth, 1998), creating a fundamental challenge for EFL learners. This phenomenon is illustrated by studies of Greek EFL learners who demonstrated limited awareness of collocational restrictions, resulting in errors across both written and spoken English production (Gitsaki, 1999). Furthermore, the sheer volume of possible collocations in English renders systematic learning exceptionally difficult (Nguyen & Webb, 2017; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). The unpredictable nature of collocations also presents significant retention challenges for EFL learners, who struggle to internalize and automatize these complex lexical relationships (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). This inherent complexity represents a formidable cognitive challenge beyond mere linguistic transfer issues.

2.2.4. Limited Acquisition Due to Word Frequency Effects

Empirical investigations have identified significant patterns related to word frequency and collocation acquisition. Durrant and Schmitt (2009) demonstrated that non-native writers tend to rely heavily on high-frequency collocations while underusing less frequent, strongly associated collocations that are more salient to native speakers. This pattern is particularly pronounced among Vietnamese learners, who demonstrate marked difficulty with collocations containing low-frequency words, achieving mean scores of only 33.87% on receptive tests (Nguyen & Webb, 2017). Additionally, research examining Vietnamese EFL learners across proficiency levels reveals limited development in their use of academic collocations, with error rates ranging from 35% to 48% across various collocation types (Men, 2018). Perhaps most significantly, even as vocabulary size increases across proficiency levels, Vietnamese learners' appropriate use of collocations shows limited corresponding development (Men, 2018). These findings suggest that collocation acquisition does not automatically accompany general vocabulary growth, highlighting the need for targeted instructional approaches.

Understanding these challenges can help educators develop targeted strategies for EFL learners acquiring and utilizing collocations in academic writing. The complexity of collocation acquisition requires approaches addressing L1 interference, exposure, inherent complexity, word frequency effects, and connections to writing quality.

The studies above highlight EFL learners' challenges in mastering academic collocations. While research has been conducted in various international contexts and different regions of Vietnam, a

notable gap exists in understanding collocational competence among learners in the Mekong Delta region, characterized by its distinct cultural and educational landscape. Addressing this gap would benefit EFL practitioners regarding their adoption of instructional approaches and methods that maximize students' learning. This study specifically aimed to examine the level of academic collocation knowledge and, simultaneously Vietnamese students' perception of academic collocation acquisition. The two research questions were formulated as follows.

RQ1. What is Vietnamese English-major students' competence level of English academic collocations?

RQ2. What challenges and expectations do the students perceive regarding acquiring academic collocations?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive research design to assess Vietnamese EFL students' knowledge of commonly used English academic collocations and explore their perceptions of experiences related to collocation use. Descriptive research, as outlined by Brown and Rodgers (2002) and Apuke (2017), systematically examines phenomena to provide a detailed understanding. The study focused specifically on learners' collocational knowledge and their experiences with academic collocations.

The quantitative component followed a one-shot survey design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), collecting data at a single point in time. This involved administering a self-developed Academic Collocation Test (ACT) to measure participants' knowledge of academic collocations. The qualitative component used semi-structured interviews with six randomly selected participants to explore their perceptions and experiences with academic collocation learning.

3.2. Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at a public university in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam with a strong English language program. The university's English Studies Department includes academic writing and research skills in its curriculum. The participants comprised 199 third-year English major students (60 males and 139 females) aged 20 to 21. All participants were native Vietnamese speakers who had completed at least 12 years of English education, including 7 years in secondary and high school and 2 years in their current BA program in English Studies.

The selection of participants was based on the following criteria, including (1) Enrollment in the third year of the BA program in English Studies; (2) Completion of at least two years of university-level English studies; (3) Completion of prerequisite courses in Academic Writing and English for Academic Purposes. The GPA requirement ensured a relatively homogeneous group regarding overall academic performance, as previous research suggests a correlation between academic achievement and collocational knowledge (e.g., Hsu, 2007; Nizonkiza, 2017). Participants' English proficiency was estimated at the upper-intermediate level (approximately B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) based on their performance in previous English courses. This proficiency level was appropriate as research indicates that collocational competence develops alongside overall language proficiency (Gyllstad, 2007; Henriksen, 2013). Thus, focusing on upper-intermediate learners enabled an exploration of collocational knowledge at a stage where students have some familiarity with academic language but may still encounter challenges with advanced aspects like collocations.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Academic Collocation Test

This investigation involved the development and validation of an Academic Collocation Test (ACT) designed to assess students' knowledge of academic collocations. The instrument was constructed from a meticulously selected inventory of academic collocations derived from Durrant's (2009) Academic Collocation List and the Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner & Davies, 2014). The ACT employed a constrained production methodology, specifically utilizing fill-in-the-blank items with initial letter cues, to evaluate both the breadth (the range of collocations recognized or used across contexts) and depth (the level of understanding and nuanced use of these collocations) of collocation knowledge. This approach was adopted following the theoretical frameworks established by Laufer and Nation (1999) and Read (2000), who posit that constrained production tasks effectively measure productive knowledge while simultaneously providing sufficient contextual information for examinees to demonstrate comprehension of collocational relationships.

The constrained production format with initial letter cues was deliberately selected to minimize the possibility of alternative correct responses while still requiring examinees to retrieve appropriate collocational partners from their mental lexicon. This methodological decision aligns with Nation's (2001) conceptualization of vocabulary knowledge, enabling the assessment of both receptive recognition and productive recall abilities. The format offers enhanced validity in measuring collocational competence compared to multiple-choice formats, which predominantly assess recognition, or entirely open production tasks, which introduce excessive variability in response evaluation.

The initial test comprised 60 frequently occurring academic collocations identified through a systematic selection process. These collocations were drawn from an extensive review of authoritative works in the field, including Ackermann & Chen (2013), Lei & Liu (2018), Nguyen & Coxhead (2023), Bitchener (2009), Cooley & Lewkowicz (2003), Paltridge & Starfield (2007), Basturkmen (2015), Biber et al. (2000), Coxhead (2017), Ellis (2003), Gao (2016), Hyland (2004), Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011), Mackey & Gass (2015), Nation (2001), Richards (2001), and Swales & Feak (2012). This comprehensive literature review informed the selection criteria, emphasizing lexical and grammatical patterns particularly relevant to research writing contexts.

A corpus-informed verification approach was implemented utilizing Google Advanced Search techniques to ensure ecological validity and contemporary relevance of the selected collocations. Following methodological precedents established by Cheng et al. (2006) and Durrant (2014), only collocations yielding a minimum threshold of two million search results were retained in the item pool, thus ensuring the assessment of high-frequency academic collocations with demonstrable usage patterns.

Content validity was established through expert judgment involving two experts in Testing and Assessment, one with expertise in collocation testing and validation. Based on their critical evaluation, several substantive revisions were implemented: (a) the number of items was reduced from 60 to 50 to optimize test administration efficiency; (b) some particular items were linguistically simplified to enhance clarity and accessibility; and (c) the validation criteria were refined to ensure items met standards of clarity, academic level appropriateness, domain relevance, and naturalness of expression.

Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of 25 third-year English major students to evaluate the preliminary version of the instrument. Empirical data and feedback obtained from this pilot administration, combined with the expert evaluations, informed the final revision process, culminating in the definitive 50-item Academic Collocation Test (see Appendix I).

3.3.2. Interview Questions

The interview questions were formulated to gain insights into Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of the importance of academic collocations in research report writing, their self-evaluation of their ability to use academic collocations in research report writing, and their challenges when learning and using academic collocations in their writing. The complete set of questions for the interviews is presented in Appendix II.

3.4. Procedure

The data collection and analysis followed a systematic process to ensure reliability, validity, and ethical compliance. First, the ACT, comprising 25 grammatical and 25 lexical academic collocations, was administered to the participants according to their existing classes in a supervised classroom setting. They were briefed on the study's purpose and provided written consent before the test. Then, they were allotted 50 minutes to complete the test. Two independent raters rated the test results. Each correct item received 1 point, and incorrect answers were scored 0.

Six students were randomly selected from the 199 participants for semi-structured interviews after the ACT based on their voluntariness. Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese within approximately 20 minutes. A quiet, private space was chosen to encourage open and honest responses with comfort. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of Academic Collocation Test Results

The results of this study revealed significant limitations in participants' knowledge of frequently used academic collocations. Quantitative data from the Academic Collocation Test (ACT) demonstrated consistently low performance across both grammatical and lexical collocations, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of ACT Performance

	Number of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
Total collocations	50	0	35	7.12	6.78
Grammatical collocations	25	0	20	3.7	3.76
Lexical collocations	25	0	16	3.42	3.37

Analysis of the test scores showed that participants achieved a mean score of 7.12 out of 50 possible points ($SD = 6.78$), with individual scores ranging from 0 to 35. This relatively low average performance, coupled with the substantial standard deviation, indicates considerable variation in students' mastery of academic collocations while highlighting an overall gap in collocational competence.

When examining specific categories of collocations, participants demonstrated similar difficulties with both grammatical and lexical forms. For grammatical collocations, students achieved a mean score of 3.70 out of 25 ($SD = 3.76$), with scores ranging from 0 to 20. Performance on lexical collocations was similarly challenging, with a mean score of 3.42 out of 25 ($SD = 3.37$) and scores ranging from 0 to 16. These results suggest that students face substantial obstacles in both

recognizing and utilizing both types of academic collocations, with slightly more pronounced difficulties in lexical combinations.

The distribution of scores across different performance ranges provides additional insight into the extent of these challenges. The majority of students (63.8%) scored between 1 and 10 points, while 11.6% received zero. Only 4.5% scored above 20, with just 0.5% in the 31-35 range. No participants reached 36-50 points (Figure 1).

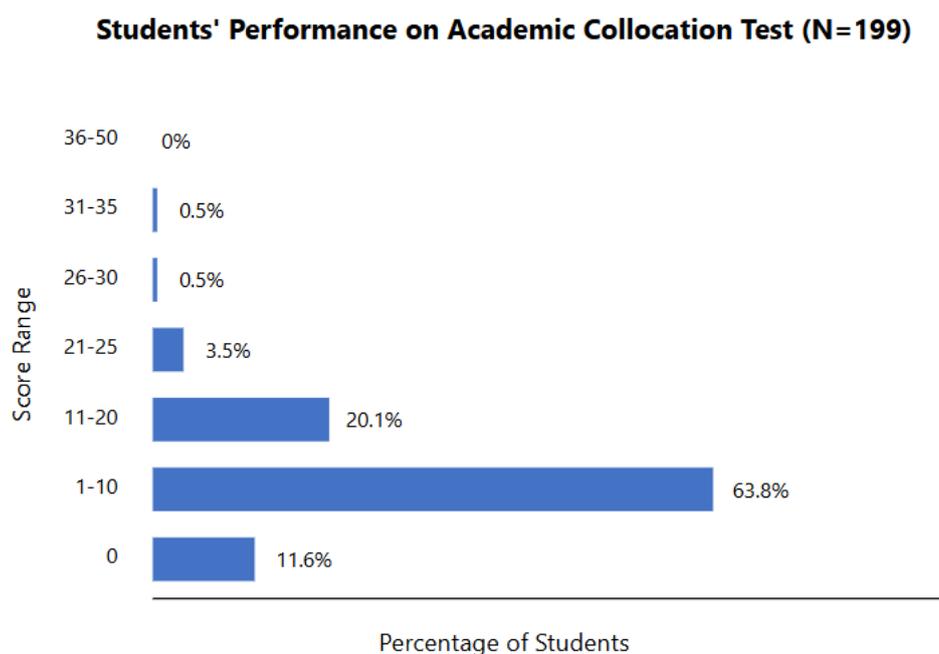


Figure 1. Distribution of Student Performance on Academic Collocation Test

A more detailed comparison of performance on grammatical and lexical collocations revealed similar patterns of difficulty, as shown in Table 3. The majority of participants scored between 1 and 12 on both grammatical (77.9%) and lexical collocations (78.9%), with very few achieving scores in the 13-20 range (3.0% and 1.5%, respectively), and none scoring above 20. Additionally, the percentage of participants scoring zero was comparable for both types (19.1% vs. 19.6%), suggesting a consistent challenge across collocation types.

Table 3. Distribution of Scores by Collocation Type (N=199)

Score Range	Grammatical Collocations	Lexical Collocations
0	19.1%	19.6%
1-12	77.9%	78.9%
13-20	3.0%	1.5%
21-25	0%	0%

These findings align with the results of the paired samples t-test, which indicated no statistically significant difference between grammatical collocations ($M = 3.6985$, $SD = 3.76447$) and lexical collocations ($M = 3.4221$, $SD = 3.36841$), $t = 1.744$, $p = .083$. Although the mean difference (0.27638) suggests slightly better performance on grammatical collocations, the p-value exceeds the conventional 0.05 threshold, meaning the observed difference is not statistically significant. The strong correlation between these two ($r = 0.809$, $p < .001$) further supports the conclusion that students faced similar difficulties with both types of collocations.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the academic collocation performance of male and female students. The results indicated that while male participants ($M = 8.47$, $SD = 7.00$) performed slightly better than female participants ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 6.63$), this difference was not statistically significant, $t(df) = 1.850$, $p = .066$. These results suggest that gender does not have a significant impact on academic collocation performance within the study population.

4.2. Students' Perceptions

4.2.1. Perceived Value of Academic Collocations

The participants demonstrated high awareness of the importance of academic collocations, unanimously rating their significance at the highest level (10/10). They recognized several crucial benefits of collocational competence, including enhanced linguistic quality in academic reports, improved professionalism and objectivity in writing, and more precise communication of scientific ideas.

Firstly, they emphasized that academic collocations contribute significantly to the linguistic quality of research writing. As one participant noted, *"Academic collocations will make the report better, easier to understand, and easier to grasp for the reader."* (Student 1). Similarly, another participant highlighted that *"It becomes more coherent because collocations are commonly used in specific academic communities."* (Student 2). These insights suggest that students recognize collocations as essential tools for producing well-structured and academically sound writing.

Secondly, the students acknowledged that proper use of academic collocations would enhance professionalism and objectivity in academic writing. One participant explained, *"In scientific reports, we only have ideas. Even if the ideas are good, if we don't express them smoothly, professionally, and objectively, our paper won't be highly evaluated."* (Student 1). Another student reinforced this point, stating that *"Using academic collocations not only enhances the quality of the writing but also increases the credibility of the research."* (Student 2).

Lastly, they identified the role of collocations in facilitating clearer and more accurate communication of scientific ideas. One interviewee remarked, *"I think academic collocations play a very important role because they help convey ideas more clearly and understandably."* (Student 1). Another participant added that *"When we use academic collocations correctly, we can convey ideas clearly to the reader."* (Student 3). These statements reflect students' awareness that collocations function as linguistic scaffolds that allow for precise expression of complex academic concepts.

4.2.2. Self-Perceived Competence and Challenges in Acquiring Academic Collocations

The qualitative analysis further revealed that third-year English major students generally assessed their own competence in academic collocations as average. Many students expressed their struggles, stating that *"If I had to assess my ability to use academic collocations in research report writing, I would rate it as... just average"* (Student 1). This self-evaluation was attributed to several challenges they faced.

One of the primary difficulties identified among students was the selection of appropriate collocations for specific sections of academic writing, such as research methods, data analysis, and conclusions. One student stated, *"The main difficulty is not memorizing collocations but using them correctly in context. Which collocation is suitable for the methods section? What about data analysis? And in the conclusion, which collocation should I use?"* (Student 1). These statements highlight that students not only struggled with understanding collocations but also with knowing which collocations were appropriate for each section of their research papers.

In addition to selecting suitable collocations, students also faced challenges in using them accurately across different contexts. A student expressed, *"I think using collocations in the right*

context is the hardest part. Many collocations have different meanings and functions depending on the context, and I often get confused.” (Student 2). According to one interviewee, “Some collocations have different meanings depending on the section of the paper, and I find it hard to determine which one fits best.” (Student 4). As a result, many students resorted to informal language as a fallback strategy. During the interview, one student remarked, “If I am unsure about the academic phrase, I often use everyday words instead.” (Student 5).

The participants identified several other interrelated challenges impeding their mastery of academic collocations. Foremost among these was limited exposure to academic vocabulary and research-based writing contexts. As Student 1 acknowledged, “In my curriculum, this is the only course that allows exposure to research writing.” This lack of exposure was compounded by insufficient pedagogical guidance, with Student 4 noting that “Professors mentioned academic collocations, but they didn't focus on them in-depth, so I didn't have a clear method to learn.” Many participants reported receiving minimal explicit instruction on collocations, leaving them to navigate this aspect of academic discourse through self-directed study. The absence of dedicated instructional materials further exacerbated these challenges, as Student 3 emphasized: “There is no dedicated textbook or guidance specifically for academic writing or research report.” Additionally, participants highlighted the inherent complexity of academic collocations themselves, with Student 5 expressing that “Academic collocations are too technical and difficult to memorize since they are not commonly used in everyday language.” This combination of factors—limited prior engagement with research writing, insufficient time to internalize specialized phraseology, lack of systematic instruction, and difficulty accessing reliable resources—significantly constrained students' ability to effectively incorporate appropriate collocations into their academic writing.

4.2.3. Specific Areas of Difficulty

Students identified several specific areas where they faced pronounced challenges. These included terms related to research methodologies, collocations used in quasi-experimental research, and specialized terms such as “experimental group” and “control group.” One student stated, “I think terminology related to research methods and data analysis is particularly difficult because there are so many research methods, and each has its own specialized terminology.” (Student 1). They also explained that quasi-experimental research terminology posed additional challenges, “For example, in quasi-experimental research, we often use terms like ‘experimental group’ and ‘control group.’ There are so many related terms, and unless I understand the research type well, I struggle to use them correctly.” (Student 1).

The technical nature of these terms and their frequent occurrence in academic writing made their proper use crucial for clarity and accuracy. However, students expressed difficulty in incorporating these collocations into their research papers effectively. As one interviewee admitted, “Even though I recognize the terms, I sometimes don't know whether they fit the academic context appropriately.” (Student 4). Additionally, without adequate support and exposure, students found it challenging to apply these collocations naturally. During the interview, a student remarked, “There are so many academic terms, and I'm not always sure which ones are the most appropriate. I often end up using simpler words instead” (Student 2).

5. Discussion

This study's findings on Vietnamese EFL learners' limited mastery of academic collocations align with a substantial body of previous research both nationally and internationally. Nguyen and Webb (2016, 2017) documented similar deficiencies in Vietnamese learners' collocational knowledge, particularly highlighting struggles with opaque semantic relationships. These challenges mirror those identified in international contexts by Durrant and Schmitt (2009), Farrokh (2012), and Laufer and

Waldman (2011), who observed comparable difficulties among diverse EFL populations, especially in written academic production.

When situated within established theoretical frameworks, these results reveal significant developmental gaps. According to Knowles' (2004) language acquisition model, learners should progress sequentially through stages of familiarization, recognition, comprehension, and ultimately automaticity. The present findings indicate most participants remain at the preliminary stages, failing to achieve deeper comprehension or automaticity in academic collocation usage. This developmental assessment gains further validity, considering Richards' (1976) and Nation's (2001) measurement criteria, which examine both breadth and depth dimensions of collocational knowledge.

Henriksen's (1999) model, with its emphasis on qualitative aspects of collocational competence, provides an additional interpretive context. The participants demonstrated insufficient mastery of functional dimensions of collocations, struggling to deploy these combinations effectively within academic contexts. This comprehensive evaluation across multiple theoretical perspectives underscores the profound challenges these learners face in developing robust academic collocational competence.

The identified deficiencies can be attributed to several interconnected factors. From a linguistic perspective, academic collocations constitute complex lexical combinations that transcend basic vocabulary knowledge, demanding sophisticated understanding of grammatical and semantic relationships. Pedagogically, traditional language instruction approaches frequently lack explicit collocation teaching and provide insufficient exposure to authentic academic materials, thereby impeding the development of collocational competence.

The disparity between students' self-perceived proficiency and their recognition of collocations' importance merits particular attention. While students unanimously rated the importance of academic collocations at the highest level (10/10), they simultaneously assessed their own competence as merely average. This stark contrast aligns with Hyland's (2011) and Nation's (2001) findings regarding insufficient specialized language instruction as a significant impediment to collocation mastery. Similarly, Basturkmen's (2015) assertion that academic collocations play a vital role in conveying complex ideas effectively within scholarly discourse reinforces the significance of this awareness-mastery gap. This discrepancy represents a critical area for pedagogical intervention in academic writing instruction for EFL learners.

The contextual and functional challenges reported by students further illuminate specific areas requiring instructional attention. Mackey and Gass (2015) observed that non-native speakers frequently struggle to align collocation use with contextual demands—a finding strongly corroborated by the present study. The participants reported particular difficulty selecting appropriate collocations for specific sections of research papers and employing terminology related to research methodologies correctly. These challenges fundamentally inhibit students' ability to produce well-structured, academically sound writing.

The underlying causes identified by students, limited exposure to academic vocabulary, insufficient instructional guidance, and difficulty accessing reliable resource, indicate systemic issues in academic language pedagogy. As Ellis (2003) emphasized, systematic and explicit instruction is essential for overcoming these barriers, particularly for EFL learners who require structured guidance to develop academic writing proficiency. The lack of dedicated resources mentioned by students directly corresponds with Ellis's assertion that deliberate pedagogical intervention is necessary for collocational mastery.

The pronounced difficulties with research methodology terminology highlight a critical area for targeted instructional support. These findings suggest that academic writing instruction should not

merely address general collocations but also provide specialized guidance for discipline-specific terminology. The challenges students face with technical research terms indicate the need for contextualized learning materials that demonstrate appropriate collocation use across different sections of academic papers.

These findings collectively underscore the critical need for instructional interventions that systematically address both breadth and depth dimensions of academic collocational knowledge. Such interventions should focus on developing learners' ability to recognize, comprehend, and appropriately use academic collocations across various contexts. Future pedagogical approaches should consider the identified gaps while accounting for the specific challenges Vietnamese EFL learners face, including structural differences between Vietnamese and English language systems. By addressing these areas systematically, educators may better support learners in progressing toward higher levels of academic collocational competence and help them avoid resorting to simplified language that falls short of academic writing standards.

6. Conclusion

This empirical investigation confirms a significant deficiency in academic collocation competence among Vietnamese EFL learners, despite their awareness of collocations' importance. The competence gap stems from inadequate exposure to authentic collocational patterns, the absence of explicit pedagogical interventions, and insufficient engagement with targeted learning activities. Vietnamese EFL learners face domain-specific challenges including difficulties adapting collocations across different rhetorical sections of academic manuscripts, limited exposure to discipline-specific lexical combinations, and inadequate instructional support. Notably, participants struggled with research methodology terminology and contextual adaptation of collocations to fulfill varying rhetorical functions. Addressing this deficit requires systematic interventions: explicit collocation instruction, diversified learning opportunities, and sustained pedagogical support. Critical to learners' development is exposure to collocational patterns from diverse English varieties to facilitate participation in global academic discourse communities. To conclude, the integration of linguistic theory (Halliday, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978), pedagogical innovation (Boers et al., 2014; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), and technological affordances (Chen et al., 2020; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) presents promising pathways for enhancing Vietnamese EFL learners' academic writing proficiency, ultimately facilitating more effective scholarly communication in international research contexts (Hyland, 2004; Swales, 2014; Chen et al., 2020).

7. Implications, Limitations and Suggestions

This study reveals a critical need for specialized academic collocation training in Vietnamese EFL contexts (Do & Le, 2023; Nguyen, 2024; Phuong et al., 2024). The significant gap between students' awareness of collocations' importance and their application ability necessitates systematic intervention through various evidence-based approaches. Explicit instruction, as advocated by Boers et al. (2014) and Webb and Kagohara (2009), should incorporate contextual analysis activities, visual aids, and tasks that integrate all four language skills. Additionally, corpus-based approaches following Huang and Tsao (2019) and Radhi (2013) through guided concordance exercises and scaffolded activities using authentic research materials should be implemented. Furthermore, task-based learning approaches (Ellis, 2018; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Bryfonski & McKay, 2019) can be applied through research-focused discussions and writing assignments that require collocation use in meaningful contexts.

Curriculum development should integrate academic collocation training within existing research writing and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, moving beyond isolated vocabulary instruction toward embedded collocation teaching throughout the curriculum. Courses should be structured to progress systematically from recognition to production of collocations, with

instructional design prioritizing explicit instruction supplemented with contextualized examples and guided practice. Course design implications include restructuring existing frameworks to accommodate collocation-focused learning. Akbari and Chua (2017) and Khonbi and Sadeghi (2017) further emphasize the value of incorporating technology-assisted learning through concordance software and interactive applications to provide personalized practice opportunities. Resources should be developed to provide accessible and user-friendly materials focused on collocation use in academic contexts.

This study has several limitations that warrant further investigation. The primary constraint lies in the sample composition, as the study focused on English-major students from a single university. This limited scope restricts the generalizability of the findings, given that institutional, regional, and linguistic differences may influence learners' collocational competence. To enhance external validity, future research should include students from multiple institutions across different regions, thereby accounting for a wider range of learning contexts and individual learner variations. Methodologically, while this study combined test performance data with qualitative interviews, the approach remains limited in capturing the full complexity of learners' experiences. Although the interviews provided valuable insights, incorporating additional methods, such as reflective tasks, would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of how learners internalize and apply academic collocations across different contexts. Future research should adopt mixed-methods designs that incorporate diverse data sources to gain richer insights into learners' challenges and cognitive processes.

Another key limitation is the cross-sectional nature of this study, which does not account for the developmental trajectory of collocational competence over time. Since collocation acquisition is a gradual process influenced by instructional and experiential factors, longitudinal studies tracking learners' progress at different stages of their academic development would provide deeper insights into acquisition patterns, retention, and long-term learning outcomes. Such research would also help identify the instructional strategies that best support the sustained development of collocational knowledge. Furthermore, while this study highlights the significance of academic collocations in EFL learning, future research should integrate investigations into explicit and implicit instructional approaches to examine their combined effectiveness in facilitating collocation acquisition. Alternatively, comparative studies exploring explicit and implicit instruction alongside technology-enhanced learning environments could provide empirical evidence on their role in promoting sustained collocational competence. Understanding how these instructional approaches interact and contribute to learners' ability to internalize and produce academic collocations would offer a more comprehensive foundation for developing evidence-based pedagogical interventions. By addressing these limitations, future studies can offer a more thorough understanding of the complexities of academic collocation acquisition and inform the design of instructional strategies that better support Vietnamese EFL learners in developing their academic writing proficiency.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Vo Thi Diem My: Reviewing literature, collecting and interpreting data, writing the manuscript; Nguyen Van Loi: Conceptualizing the manuscript, supporting data collection and interpretation procedure, critical review and editing of manuscript.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I - ACADEMIC COLLOCATION TEST (ACT)

(Duration: 50 minutes)

Complete the academic collocations by filling in the blanks with words beginning with the given letters.

Example: The participants were re_____ to use their existing knowledge to fill in the blanks. Answer: required

1. The books are ca_____ into beginner and advanced. (categorized)
2. Many scholars d_____ literary criticism into two categories: external and internal. (divide/ divided)
3. In academic research, studies can be cl_____ as qualitative or quantitative based on their methodology. (classified)
4. Dr_____ conclusions from these findings, students could improve their academic performance by dedicating more time to studying. (drawing)
5. At this point, we can m_____ generalizations about the nature of this literary theory. (make)
6. We decided to administer the preliminary tests in a_____ due to our limited timeframe. (advance)
7. A dynamic character is d_____ as one who undergoes major development throughout the narrative. (defined)
8. A_____ to several recent papers, previous assumptions may be questionable. (according)
9. The term "metaphor" often r_____ to a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. (refers)
10. Several critics took i_____ with this Freudian interpretation of the text, arguing that it overlooks essential themes. (issue)
11. Students will need to r_____ upon what they have learned in the course and write a report. (reflect)
12. In t_____ of critical thinking, respondents indicated a marked increase. (terms)
13. The findings have shed l_____ on the value of digital tools in studying English. (light)
14. Our findings are c_____ with previous explanations of the phenomenon, providing new insights into its complexity. (consistent)
15. Due to time constraints, the study was r_____ to a single semester. (restricted)
16. Due to limitations, our options were l_____ to only two choices. (limited)
17. Since we had determined the cause, all other hypotheses could be r_____ out. (ruled)
18. The present study is a_____ at investigating the effectiveness of the strategic reading techniques. (aimed)
19. These findings may also have i_____ for researchers in linguistics and literature. (implications)

20. Pushing learners to produce output can c_____ to their language development. (contribute)
21. The recent studies in this field r_____ the possibility of new treatment approaches for the condition, suggesting that existing methods may need reevaluation. (raise/ raised)
22. The significant increase in test scores was in_____ of the effectiveness of the new teaching method. (indicative)
23. This study has a significant im_____ on digital literacy and its role in promoting lifelong learning. (impact)
24. 180 intermediate-level EFL learners, both male (90) and female (90), p_____ in the study. (participate/ participated)
25. This chapter c_____ of five sections, beginning with key definitions and ending by analyzing the results in each category. (consists)
26. The k_____ finding of this study is the method's stability and consistency. (key)
27. At the end of the t_____ period, professors often assign final papers or projects. (treatment)
28. Informed c_____ was obtained from all participants before the data was collected. (consent)
29. The participants were randomly a_____ to six groups. (assigned)
30. The researchers utilized a t_____ framework based on the principles of constructivism to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of a new instructional approach. (theoretical)
31. Several risk f_____ for misinterpretation could be identified in the experiment. (factors)
32. In order to ac_____ their academic goals, students needed to earn a graduate degree. (achieve)
33. The preliminary analysis suggests a potential breakthrough, yet f_____ investigation is required to confirm the results. (further)
34. Despite rigorous methodology, the study acknowledges the potential b_____ that could have influenced the results. (bias)
35. No causal l_____ could be determined between the author's childhood experiences and the novel's themes of alienation and isolation. (link/ links)
36. An important step is attempting to formulate a h_____ before collecting data for the study. (hypothesis)
37. In order to obtain objective evidence, an em_____ study is needed. (empirical)
38. To gain a deeper understanding of the topic, researchers must c_____ a study that addresses the relevant questions. (conduct)
39. Close reading is highly r_____ by literary scholars for careful and deep analysis. (recommended)
40. No s_____ differences appeared when the lenses were applied to analyzing the text. (significant)
41. In literary analysis essays, students who utilized close reading techniques consistently o_____ those who relied solely on summarization. (outperformed)
42. The survey included a d_____ range of questions. (diverse)
43. After gathering data, we performed statistical a_____ to verify it. (analysis)
44. The new teaching method had a positive e_____ on students' language acquisition. (effect)
45. The e_____ group used strategic reading techniques, while the control group did not receive any training except for the regular method. (experimental)
46. The accuracy of the results is often influenced by the sample s_____ of the participants involved in the research. (size)
47. A major c_____ of researchers is the statistical certainty of their findings. (concern)
48. The researchers disclosed any c_____ of interest to maintain transparency in the study. (conflicts)
49. Using the two critical lenses alternately proved h_____ effective. (highly)
50. The study u_____ the relevance of incorporating technology into modern educational practices. (underscores/underscored)

APPENDIX II - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1/ How would you evaluate your ability to use academic collocations in research report writing?
 - Did you study and practice academic collocations in previous courses?
 - Do you frequently encounter academic collocations in your study materials or research articles?
 - How challenging do you find using academic collocations in your writing? (easy, moderate, difficult)
 - Can you share a specific example where you did not know how to use an academic collocation in your writing?
- 2/ In your opinion, how important are academic collocations in writing research reports?
 - Do you think using academic collocations affects the professionalism or clarity of your writing? Why?
 - On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the importance of academic collocations?
 - Do you believe correctly using academic collocations can help your research paper be more likely to be accepted or rated higher?
- 3/ What are your main difficulties when learning and using academic collocations?

- What do you find most challenging about learning academic collocations: understanding their meaning, remembering them, or using them in the correct context?
- Are there any academic collocations you find particularly difficult, such as those related to classification, definition, or description?
- When writing, do you often get confused between academic collocations and regular expressions?
- Have you ever felt a lack of learning materials or clear guidance for academic collocations?