

# USING ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS FOR FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS AT DONG NAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

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## TỪ KHÓA

*Collocations;*

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of using collocations in teaching writing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for first-year English majored students at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU), and the attitudes of these students towards the application of collocations in the writing course. The quantitative approach was employed in this study. A 3-week training course using collocations in descriptive paragraph writing for 38 English majored first-year students at DNTU was organized. Pre-test and post-test questionnaire surveys were conducted to explore the students' perspectives toward the application of collocations in the writing course. The results showed that using collocations in the English writing lessons helped improve writing skills for the English majored first-year students at DNTU, and the first-year students who participated in the study had positive attitudes towards the application of collocations in the English writing course.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is the world language and is the dominant foreign language in the national education system in Vietnam. Undergraduate students are required to attain a certain level of English proficiency whether they are English-majored or non-English-majored undergraduates to be eligible for graduation (MOET, 2008). Therefore, universities in Vietnam design various English programs to advance their students' English proficiency to meet the requirements of the Vietnam government and the demands of the labor markets (Le, T. T., Hoang, D. T. N., 2023). Similar to other universities in Vietnam, Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU) designs several English programs for English-majored

students, of which, teaching English writing is one of the mandatory components of the English program to improve undergraduates' communication skills. Writing proficiency is the ability to convey thoughts, ideas, and information in a coherent and articulated manner through writing. Therefore, teaching writing is essential for university students who are required to complete a high workload of assignments and other writing tasks to become proficient in writing English. Writing tasks often require a high level of correctness and are regarded as one of the most difficult subjects in teaching English to non-native English students (Phuong, W. T. N., 2021).

Teaching writing is a dynamic, multidimensional process that entails assisting people in navigating the challenging process of

putting ideas, feelings, and thoughts into comprehensible, persuasive written form. It includes teaching students the fundamentals of grammar, syntax, organization, and critical thinking to enable them to communicate clearly and precisely. Effective teaching writing not only transmits technical competency but also fosters creativity and creates an environment in which individuals can use written expression to explore their voices and viewpoints. It is a transforming experience that gives students a tool for expression that they can use for the rest of their lives, helping them to negotiate the challenges of interpersonal, professional, and academic communication (Nizonkiza, D., 2017). To facilitate the English-majored first-year students in improving their English writing competencies, a ten-week English writing course was designed as a part of the English program and offered to them at the beginning of the first year at DNTU. The course adopts a carefully structured curriculum that covers fundamental writing principles, including grammar, syntax, and essay organization. However, the short duration courses places great pressure on students to complete the course within a compressed timeframe and makes them compromise the quality and logical coherence of the written pieces. To help the English-majored first-year students acquire the required English writing proficiency within a constrained timeframe, a new innovative teaching English writing approach was applied which uses collocations in descriptive paragraph writing.

Collocation is the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. Collocation is a pair or a group of words that are often used together. Collocations are combinations of two or more words that frequently occur together in a language. As noted by Hill (2000), collocations are not just random word combinations but are predictable and often fixed patterns that native speakers use

naturally. Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) further categorize collocations into two main types: **lexical collocations** and **grammatical collocations**. Lexical collocations include combinations like **verb + noun** (e.g., "make a decision") or **adjective + noun** (e.g., "strong tea"), while grammatical collocations involve a content word + grammatical structure (e.g., "depend on," "interested in").

The important role of collocation in writing ability is exploring how thoughtful word choice can improve the clarity and quality of written communication. Collocations are important for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because they enhance student's writing style and facilitate them to convey their thoughts more naturally by using frequent word pairings (O'Dell, F., & McCathy, M., 2011). Similarly, Kim, H., & Bae, J. (2012) argued that using the appropriate collocations enhances student's writing. Therefore, acquiring an understanding of collocations' function in language competence is essential for teachers and students looking to improve their writing. Students may convey their thoughts more naturally by using frequent word pairings as the other word selection options that are more vivid, expressive, and accurate combinations. Students who master collocation will have the ability to select words that are appropriate for the situation. This ability is especially crucial for writing in academic and professional contexts, where relevancy and accuracy are crucial. Students can prevent typical language problems like word abuse and odd wording by being aware of collocation. This skill enhances the correctness and intelligibility of students' written work.

Mastering collocations not only helps improve students' writing skills but also expands their lexical range by encouraging the use of diverse and contextually appropriate word combinations (Bahardoust, M., & Moeini,

M. R., 2012). This not only enriches the language but also demonstrates a higher level of vocabulary mastery. Writing proficiency in collocation is best developed through continuous practice and exposure. Regular writing tasks, reading authentic texts, and engaging in language-rich activities contribute to the gradual internalization of collocational patterns.

A paragraph is a group of sentences that develops one main idea or a topic (Smalley & Ruetten, 1986). A paragraph consists of a main sentence, supporting sentences, and a conclusion phrase (Savage & Shafiei., 2012). The topic sentence appears first and presents the main concept. The topic's material is further explained in the following phrases, and the conclusion comes last. Effective paragraph organization is a fundamental aspect of clear and cohesive writing. It begins with a strong topic sentence that introduces the main idea, guiding the reader on what to expect. Supporting details or examples follow, logically arranged to provide depth and context. Transition words ensure smooth connections between sentences, maintaining a fluid flow of ideas. Unity and coherence are crucial; every sentence should contribute to the central theme established in the topic sentence. A concluding sentence summarizes key points, offering closure. Varied sentence structures, consistent verb tense, and the elimination of redundancy enhance the paragraph's readability. Revision and proofreading ensure clarity, coherence, and correct usage. By adhering to these principles, writers can create well-organized paragraphs that effectively convey their intended message.

There are several types of paragraphs, and the descriptive paragraph is like a painting with words that help the reader visualize a certain person, place, or object (Savage & Shafiei, 2012). A descriptive paragraph is like a snapshot captured with words, painting a vivid picture in the reader's mind and providing

sensory details to create a rich and immersive experience (Smalley & Ruetten., 1986). It often begins with a topic sentence that introduces the main subject, setting the stage for the following detailed description. A combination of expressive language, adjectives, adverbs, and figurative devices are used to appeal to the reader's senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The arrangement of details follows a logical sequence, allowing the reader to visualize and feel the described scene or object progressively. Descriptive paragraphs aim to evoke emotions, engage the reader's imagination, and convey a strong sense of presence. Whether depicting a serene natural landscape, a bustling city street, or a cherished childhood memory, the artful use of descriptive language brings the narrative to life, making it more vibrant and memorable.

A descriptive paragraph is a way of writing that helps the reader imagine things clearly. Instead of just saying something, it uses colorful language to make you feel like you are right there. To write a good descriptive paragraph, students need to pay attention to details using their senses - what they can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell when they describe things. For example, to describe a beautiful beach, students would start by talking about the bright sun, the sound of waves, and the warm sand under the feet. Students might use words that make the reader feel the cool breeze or taste the salty air. It is like creating a movie in the reader's mind.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Research design**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of using collocations in teaching writing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for English-majored first-year students at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU) and explore their attitudes toward the application of collocations in the writing course. The

quantitative approach was employed to examine the impacts of using collocations on the English writing skills of the English-major first-year students through a ten-week experiment English writing course using a descriptive paragraph writing style. The course book selected for the writing course named "Writing 1" which was carefully prepared by the lecturers of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at DNTU in 2021. The writing course included thirty ninety-minute sessions with a focus on the following topics:

1. Collocations for characterizing persons were introduced and practiced in writing sentences before the appropriate paragraph was written during the first lesson.

2. Collocations for depicting landscapes were presented and practiced in writing sentences and pertinent paragraphs in the second session.

3. Collocations for describing food were introduced and exercised in writing sentences and pertinent paragraphs during the third lesson.

In addition, the pre-test and post-test surveys were conducted before and after the course to examine the understanding of the students about the use of collocations in writing and to explore their perceptions toward the collocations.

## 2.2 Participants

Convenient sampling was employed to select thirty-eight English-major first-year students at DNTU, who voluntarily participated in the study. The selected students have a similar level of English proficiency based on the English placement test results.

## 2.3 Research instruments

The questionnaire survey comprises twelve questions with an emphasis on the knowledge, attitudes, and judgments of the students. The

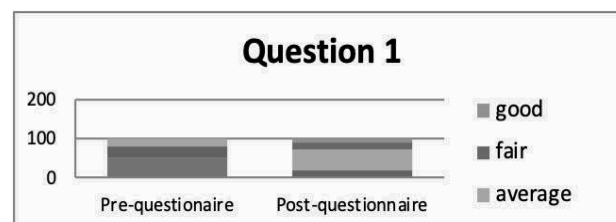
questionnaire surveys were conducted before and after the experiment writing course. The first five questions in Part A were designed to assess the students' foundational understanding of collocations. The remaining seven questions in Part B assessed the students' attitudes toward using collocations in the English writing course.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1. Results of Part A

The first five questions in Part A were designed to assess the students' foundational understanding of collocations. There were 100 points awarded overall. Every question received a score of 20. There were five different scales created from the results for each question: below weak (0 - <7), weak (7 - <10), average (10 - <13), fair (13 - <16), and good (16 - 20).

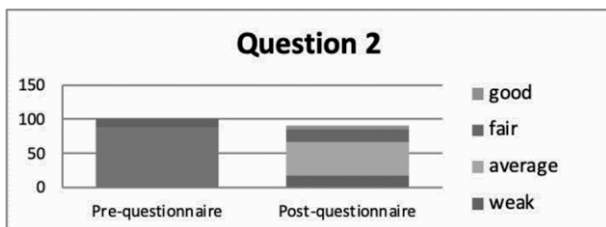
**Chart 1:** Question 1 - Adjective and noun collocations.



The first question aimed to explore the students' understanding of adjective and noun collocations. The pre-course survey results as seen in Chart 1 indicated that only 4% of students answered "average" as the highest level. However, the post-course survey results showed that 55% of students answered "average", 17% as "fair," and 11% as "good" respectively.

The results of the pre-and post-course survey showed improvement in students' awareness and understanding of collocations. This suggests that teaching collocations to describe people's appearances was successful.

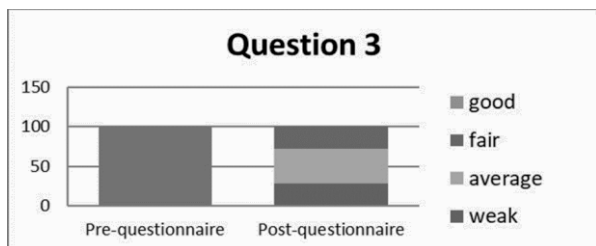
**Chart 2:** Question 2 - Common expressions of people's characters.



If Question 1 focused on exploring students' general understanding of the collocations which are formed by adjectives and nouns, the subsequent questions were designed to measure students' understanding of how collocations were used to describe common things in daily life. The goal of Question 2 was to evaluate students' understanding of the meaning of several collocations used to characterize persons. As shown in Chart 2, the pre-course survey showed that 88% of the students answered as "below weak," and 12% answered as "average", compared with only 17% of the students answered as "weak", 50% as "average", 28% as "fair", and 5% as "good".

The results of the pre-and post-course survey indicated a significant improvement in understanding the meaning of collocations that were used to describe persons' characteristics.

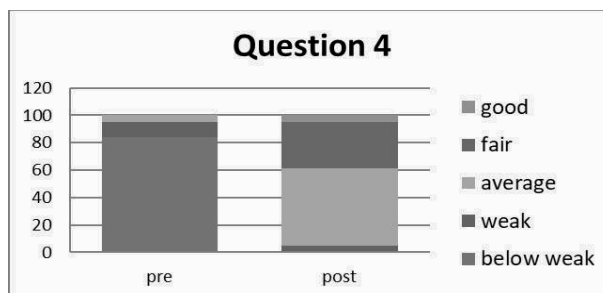
**Chart 3:** Question 3 - Common collocations of describing landscapes.



Similar to Question 2, the third question was designed to assess students' understanding of collocations which were used to describe landscapes. It was evident that the students had a significant struggle to complete the survey before the experiment course as there was not any student who was able to choose the right

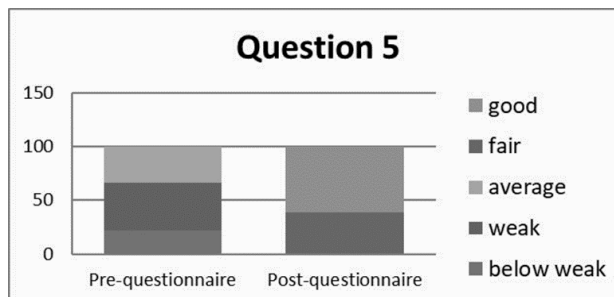
responses as shown in Chart 3. However, 28% of students were rated as "weak," 44% as "average," and 28% as "fair" in the post-course survey. The survey results indicated that the students gained more understanding and are able to use collocations to depict landscapes after attending the experiment English writing course.

**Chart 4:** Question 4 - common collocations of describing food.



Question 4 aimed to assess the student's comprehension of the food-related expressions using common collations. The survey results, as shown in Chart 4, indicated that the "below weak" answer decreased from 84% in the pre-course to 0% in the post-course, whereas the "fair" and "good" answers increased from 0% to 34% and 5% respectively.

**Chart 5:** Question 5 - students' self-evaluation of using collocations in writing.

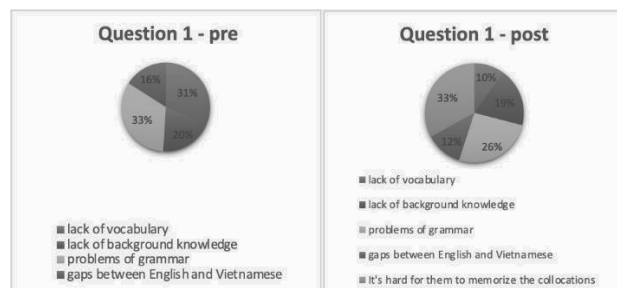


Question 5 was designed to examine students' self-evaluation of using collocations in their writing work. The result, as shown in Chart 5, indicated that most students in the pre-course survey believed that collocations do not help improve English writing. However, most of them rated the use of collocations as "good" in improving writing in the post-course survey.

### 3.2. Results of Part B

Part B comprises 7 questions which were designed to assess the students' attitudes and perspectives of using collocations in English writing.

**Chart 6:** The students' difficulties in their writing.



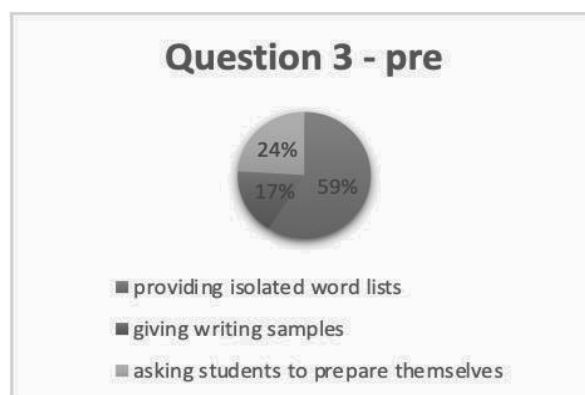
Question 1 was designed to ascertain the students' challenges in learning English writing with collocations. The pre-and post-course survey results indicated that the percentage of students who had problems with grammar decreased from 33% to 26%, and the percentage of students who lacked vocabulary and background knowledge decreased from 20% to 10% and from 16% to 10% respectively. This means the English writing course using collocations helps improve students' writing skills.

**Chart 7:** Knowledge and experience in using English collocations in writing.



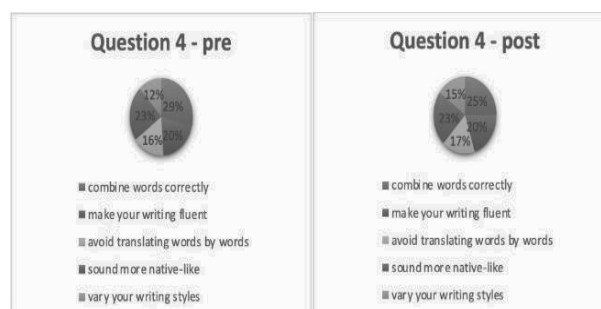
Question 2 in part B examined students' previous knowledge and experience in learning and using collocations in English writing. The results as shown in Chart 7 indicated that only 11% of students had knowledge and experience in using English collocations in writing prior to the experiment writing course. This percentage increased to 100% after the course.

**Chart 8:** How teachers taught vocabulary in writing courses.



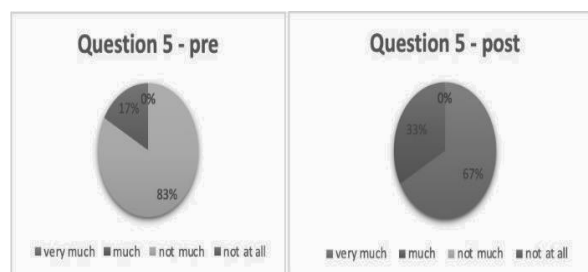
Question 3 sought to elucidate the methods used by instructors to teach vocabulary in writing classes. Of the replies, 59% were "providing isolated word lists", 24% were "Asking students to prepare themselves", and 17% were "giving writing samples".

**Chart 9:** The students' self-evaluation on the roles of using collocations in their writing.



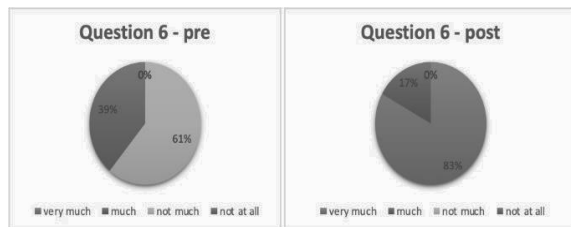
The pre-and post-course survey results of Question 4 revealed that most students identify the value of using English collocations in written assignments.

**Chart 10:** The students' interest in learning English collocations



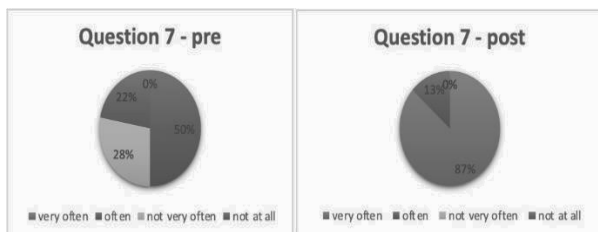
The 5th question explored the students' interest in learning English collocations. The survey results revealed a significant shift in collocation learning interest in the pre-course survey which is from 83% "not much interest" and 17% "not at all" to 67% "much interest" and 33% "very much interest" in the post-course survey. This means students are much interested in learning English collocations.

**Chart 11:** The students' assessment of how much English collocations can improve their writing.



The purpose of Question 6 was to ascertain how the students perceive the value of using English collocations in their writing work. As shown in Chart 11, most students did not value the use of English collocations in their writing before the experiment course. However, 83% of students changed their perceptions and valued the use of collocations in improving writing competence post the course completion.

**Chart 12:** The students' expectation of frequency of teaching English collocations in writing courses



The last question of Part B was to explore the expectations of students about the frequency of teaching English collocations in writing courses at DNTU. The pre-course survey results revealed that 50% and 28% of students did not expect or expected their teachers not very often to teach English collocations in the writing courses. However, the post-course survey results indicated that 87% and 13% of students wished their teachers

often and very often to teach collocations in the English writing course respectively.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study aims to explore the impact of using collocations in teaching writing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for English-major first-year students at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU) and to investigate their perspectives on the application of collocations in the writing course. The study results indicated that the first-year English-major students benefited from the intensive English writing course which promoted the use of collocations. The students had developed their understanding of the collocations and their roles in improving writing skills. At the same time, most of the students positively perceived learning English collocations and applying them in writing as a good method to improve their English communication. It is recommended that English-major and non-English-major students at various levels of competency should often learn new collocations and practice them in real contexts. By doing this, students will enhance their writing in paragraphs as well as other forms of writing in the future.

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SỬ DỤNG CỤM TỪ TIẾNG ANH ĐỂ NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG VIẾT CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHỆ ĐỒNG NAI

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THÔNG TIN CHUNG

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TỪ KHÓA

*Collocations;*  
*Kỹ năng viết Tiếng Anh;*  
*Sinh viên năm nhất tiếng Anh.*

TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này điều tra tác động của việc sử dụng các cụm từ trong giảng dạy viết tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai (DNTU) và thái độ của những sinh viên này đối với việc áp dụng các cụm từ trong khóa học viết. Cách tiếp cận định lượng đã được sử dụng trong nghiên cứu này. Một khóa đào tạo kéo dài 3 tuần sử dụng các cụm từ trong viết đoạn văn miêu tả cho 38 sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại DNTU đã được tổ chức. Các cuộc khảo sát bằng câu hỏi trước và sau kiểm tra đã được thực hiện để khám phá quan điểm của sinh viên đối với việc áp dụng các cụm từ trong khóa học viết. Kết quả cho thấy việc sử dụng các cụm từ trong các bài học viết tiếng Anh đã giúp cải thiện kỹ năng viết cho sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại DNTU, và các sinh viên năm nhất tham gia nghiên cứu có thái độ tích cực đối với việc áp dụng các cụm từ trong khóa học viết tiếng Anh