USE OF LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS FROM THE TASK PROMPTS IN OPINION ESSAYS BY VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of prompt-based lexical collocations in opinion essays by Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Fifty second-year English majors at a Vietnamese university wrote 100 opinion essays on two topics as progress tests. The AntConc programme (Anthony, 2020) was employed to identify the frequencies of use of the prompt-based lexical collocations in the essays. Paraphrases of the target lexical collocations were further identified and calculated for their occurrences. The AntConc concordance lines that target the prompt-based collocations or paraphrases were analysed for errors, with the consultation of the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (OCD), the British National Corpus (BNC), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The results revealed that students repeated the source lexical collocations and replaced them with various word combinations, though recycling occurred to a greater extent. Erroneous use involved use of i) incorrect word combinations, mainly through wrong choice of verbs, adjectives, or nouns that do not collocate with adjacent words and ii) incorrect grammatical forms of the individual lexical words of the target collocations (i.e., omission of plural marker –s, misuse of parts of speech). Pedagogical implications are discussed to assist students in using lexical collocations appropriately in L2 writing.

Key Words: Vietnamese EFL students, opinion essays, prompt-based lexical collocations, collocational errors

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INTRODUCTION

The role of collocations has been much discussed in the landscape of English language learning and teaching. Collocations, a subset of multiword units, are considered one key dimension of lexical competence (Laufer & Waldman, 2011) and appropriate collocational use enhances fluency of written and oral communication and allows learners to achieve nativelike naturalness (Boers, 2020; Nation, 2013). Greater competence in collocations is often associated with overall language proficiency (Laufer & Waldman, 2011) and proficiency in other skills, particularly writing (Ariffin & Abdi, 2020; Kim & Bae, 2012).

As such is the importance of collocational competence, numerous studies have investigated English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) learners' use of collocations in terms of collocational patterns and frequencies, collocational errors and sources of erroneous use in various contexts of written language production (e.g., Ang et al., 2011; Durrant & Schmitt, 2010; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003, 2005). Writing in a foreign language is a meaning-making process where a multitude of factors could influence language use, such as writing task prompts and task topics, among others (e.g., Lee et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2020; Yoon, 2017). As a given writing prompt presents the task requirements and provides a source of language input, it is of critical significance to examine how learners make use of the lexical collocations from it (henceforth source collocations or prompt-based collocations) in their essays. Research has shown the role of task input in raising learners' awareness and enhancing noticing, though for the speaking skill (Boers et al., 2006), understanding prompt-based lexical collocations provides insights into learners' lexical understanding through their attempts to recycle or paraphrase the prompt-based collocations. In addition, the lexical resource is one of the key dimensions of the written essays to be graded in the EFL writing course in the current study and in many standardized English proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE), Certificate in Advanced English (CAE) and Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE).

Equally, it is crucial to understand the errors students commit while using the source collocations. Erroneous use could indicate gaps between what students want to write and the lexical means they have to express themselves (Swain, 2005), which is pedagogically useful for teachers to help students fix and prevent errors (Llach, 2011). Insights into how students use lexical collocations from task prompts in terms of occurrence and erroneous use could be helpful to shape classroom writing instruction and feedback giving to enhance students' lexical use in writing. Up to now, to the best of our knowledge, little is known about the use of prompt-based lexical collocations in writing compositions. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by examining how Vietnamese EFL university students use lexical collocations provided in the task prompts and collocational errors they make in their opinion essays. Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL university students utilise prompt-based lexical collocations in their opinion essays, and what does this indicate about their lexical understanding?
2. What types of errors do they commit while using prompt-based lexical collocations in their opinion essays?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collocations and Lexical Collocations

Definitions of collocations come in different ways, depending on the theoretical view each researcher adopts for their purpose of study. Typically, collocations are viewed from two main perspectives. From a frequency-based approach, "whether a word combination is a collocation or not is based on how frequently the words in the combination co-occur in written and/or spoken corpora" (Gyllstad & Wolter, 2016, p. 297). In this view, collocations denote "the relationship a lexical item has with items that appear with greater than random probability in its (textual) context" (Hoey, 1991, p. 7, cited in Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015, p. 149). Statistical measures (for example, t-scores and mutual information (MI)) could be used to identify

collocations and judge their correctness of use. From a phraseological perspective (e.g., Howarth, 1998), the identification of collocations is grounded in "grammatical structure and degree of semantic transparency as guiding principles" (Gyllstad & Wolter, 2016, p. 297). Although collocations could encompass a wide range of multiword units such as fixed expressions, idioms, and proverbs, from a phraseological stance, Laufer & Waldman (2011) define them "as habitually occurring lexical combinations that are characterized by restricted co-occurrence of elements and relative transparency of meaning" (p. 648). As these authors describe, restricted co-occurrence is distinct from free word combinations, where individual words could be easily substituted with a wide range of other words. In Duan and Qin's (2012) words, free word combinations are "temporarily-made phrases based on certain grammatical rules to express certain ideas" (p.1891). For example, *read a book/ a letter/email/message/poem/manual* is considered a free combination as long as the object of the verb *read* is something that is written. In other words, they follow the 'open-choice' principle (Sinclair, 1991), where the choice of words is constrained solely by grammaticality. Meanwhile, 'restricted co-occurrence' implies that certain words could just collocate with a limited number of other words (i.e., *make/commit an error (not do an error)* and *pay/direct/turn attention (not make/pass attention))*. 'Relative transparency of meaning' refers to the clearer meaning of a collocation than an idiom whose meaning cannot be derived from its individual words. For example, the meaning of *'apply for a job'* or *'make a decision'* is transparent if we know the meanings of the individual words (Laufer & Waldman, 2011, p. 649). According to these authors, free combinations and idioms could, therefore, be conceptually understood as the two extreme ends of a cline on which collocations are somewhere in between. Since collocations are formed in different patterns including lexical (content) words and grammatical (functional words), our focus was on the use of lexical collocations from the task prompts. Lexical collocations typically consist of lexical words, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs (Benson et al., 2010), such as noun-noun collocations (e.g., teacher training), adjective-noun collocations (e.g., online courses) and verb-adverb collocations (e.g., increase gradually) and

verb-noun collocations (e.g., make a mistake).

In the present study, we adopted a phraseological perspective to select the target prompt-based lexical collocations and a frequency-based approach to evaluate the correctness of use of these lexical collocations by reference to dictionaries and corpora such as the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (OCD), the British National Corpus (BNC), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The purpose was to examine not only the occurrences of source collocations but also their quality of use.

Related Research on Lexical Collocations in Writing

Research on collocations in written language production has varied in its approaches, data sources and learner groups. One common line of research draws on existing corpora and compares collocational use by non-native learners with native users and documented rates of underuse, overuse and misuse of collocations (Altenberg & Granger, 2001; Choi, 2019; Durrant & Schmitt, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2019). Typical results are that non-native learners use more high frequency collocations and fewer restricted, less frequent collocations than native speakers.

Prior research has also shown that lexical collocations continue to be a challenge for learners (Ang et al., 2011; Gao et al., 2019; Nesselhauf, 2003, 2005; Thewissen, 2013). For example, Nesselhauf (2005) analysed a subset of data from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) and found that incorrect verb choice was the most frequent in the verb-noun collocations that advanced German EFL learners in her study used; misuse of prepositions in collocational phrases was also common. Other studies have also revealed inappropriate prepositions in collocational use by Malaysian learners (Ang et al., 2011) and incorrect choice of verbs and nouns in verb-noun collocations produced by Chinese middle school and university EFL learners (Gao et al., 2019). Wrong noun choice was also common in the verb-noun collocations produced by Libyan EFL university students (Dukali, 2018). Laufer and Waldman (2011) focused on Hebrew L1 learners of English and their argumentative and descriptive essays extracted from the Israeli Learner Corpus of

Written English. They found that erroneous use of collocations made up one-third of all the verb-noun collocations learners used in their essays. Similarly, Siyanova-Chanturia and Schmitt's (2008) study revealed that one-fourth of the collocations their Russian EFL students used were atypical combinations which are non-existent in the BNC. Overall, the studies reviewed here, though having different foci, have indicated that using collocations is challenging for L2 learners. Indeed, collocational errors persist even with advanced learners (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003; Thewissen, 2013).

Previous research has also shown L1 influence is among multiple factors that cause erroneous collocational use. The L1 impact is often viewed in the degree of congruency or non-congruency with the learners' L1 when it comes to formulating lexical combinations (Wolter, 2020). For instance, Nesselhauf (2003, 2005), mentioned above in her research on the use of collocations in essays by L1 German learners of English, found that half of the collocational errors were influenced by L1 German, and especially a large majority of the cases of erroneous use involved word-by-word translation. The reported errors were attributed to a similarity in form and meaning between an L2 word that learners employed in their self-formed collocations (e.g., *'make'* in *make homework*) and its equivalent L1 German word (*'machen'* in *hausaufgaben machen*). Dukali (2018) mentioned earlier also found that use of incorrect verbs was due to translation from L1 to L2 words, since Arabic L1 in his study has verbs that could accompany a wide range of other words. In other words, learners combined individual lexical words without being aware of the different meanings in L2, resulting in collocational errors. Similarly, Laufer and Waldman (2011) found that 50% of the collocational errors their participating students committed were L1-induced. One of the explanations given was because English L2 collocations and L1 Hebrew equivalents contain at least one different word (*'Give examples'* in English vs. *'bring examples'* in Hebrew), which caused the errors (Laufer & Waldman, 2011, p. 665). Further research has revealed that congruent collocations in L1 and L2 are easier to acquire than non-congruent ones (e.g., Wolter & Gyllstad, 2013; Wolter & Yamashita, 2017), which further reiterates L1 as a

potential source of misuse of collocations. The additional impact of L1 is more obvious with high frequency collocations since the high frequency elements in these collocations have transparent meaning and "may go unnoticed" (Boers, 2020, p. 146), thus providing an account for interlingual (L1-related) errors (e.g., Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003; Wolter & Gyllstad, 2013).

Lexical collocation errors could also be due to L2 influence which is called 'intra-lexical interference' (Boers, 2020). This refers to elements of the target collocation being inappropriately replaced by a similar word in L2. Overgeneralisation and/or insufficient L2 collocational knowledge have led to malformation of word combinations or lexical errors (Chan, 2010; Llach, 2010; Thewissen, 2013). Collocations are even more demanding as EFL learners tend to operate collocations in the 'open choice principle' (Sinclair, 1991) by adding synonymous words which are inappropriate (Boers, 2020; Wolter, 2020).

The review of the literature so far has shown that research attention has been devoted to examining learners' use of collocations in terms of *frequency* (compared to native speakers' use) and *inappropriacy* (errors) via different types of written data produced by different groups of learners. The question of how students (re)use lexical collocations from the task prompt in written language production and their appropriateness of use has remained largely unexplored. The present study thus aims to fill this gap by investigating the use of prompt-based lexical collocations in opinion essays by Vietnamese EFL learners, an underrepresented group in collocational research.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Fifty second-year English majors from two intact classes at a university in central Vietnam participated in this research. Of the 50 students, 42 were female and eight were male. Students were aged from 19 to 21 and had about nine years of learning English on average. They were taking an academic writing course in which opinion essays

were one major component, which provided a suitable context for investigating how students utilised prompt-based lexical collocations because essay writing allowed students to write in greater lengths than paragraph or email writing targeted in other courses at the research site. Prior to this writing course, all the participants had already passed the achievement writing test for intermediate level or B1 equivalent according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). From the classroom observation of the teacher in charge of these two writing classes (the second author), these students were aware of collocations in general. However, they were not informed of the specific focus of the current study, that is lexical collocations from the task prompts, and in their class writings, many students committed collocational errors.

The Writing Tasks

The data were collected in two writing classes of about 35 students each in their regular class schedule. The students in these two classes were informed of the research before the test began and participated in this study voluntarily. Each student wrote one opinion essay about the topic of online learning and one about the topic of volunteer work (See Appendix for the task prompts) as progress tests. These topics were selected because they were included in the syllabus of this writing course. There was a one-week interval between the two essays to minimise the potential effect of time on language development (Laufer & Nation, 1995). Students were required to write at least 250 words in 60 minutes without using any reference materials such as smartphones or dictionaries. They were not allowed to seek assistance from the teacher or their fellow students. Before the test started, no linguistic materials or cues of any kind were offered.

Data analysis

Handwritten essays that were not readable and/or shorter than 200 words were excluded, as advised by Laufer and Nation (1995) that a minimum length of 200 words would reflect more consistent lexical use. Some students were absent on either of the two writing days, and thus their essays were not included. In total, the learner corpus

consisted of 100 essays (50 per topic) with 28,105 running words, of which 14,152 words from the topic of online learning (M= 283.04; SD= 64.20) and 13,953 words from the topic of *volunteer work* (M= 279.06, SD=57.73). All essays were original and misspelling errors were not taken into account. The collected essays were typed and stored as doc. files, which were then reviewed by the first author and double-checked for accuracy by a fourth-year English major whose proficiency level was upper intermediate. After that, the doc. files were automatically converted into plain text files using Anthony's free Antfileconverter (available at https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/) for additional analysis with the AntConc freeware (Anthony, 2020) (see details below).

Identifying Use of the Prompt-Based Lexical Collocations in Students' Essay Corpus

As the present study focuses on lexical collocations, defined as combinations of lexical words (content words) and thus it does not include collocates with grammatical words (Benson et al., 2010), the lexical collocations derived from the task prompts were first identified.

The targeted lexical collocations from the *online learning* task prompt include *online courses, online learning, traditional classrooms, and offer online courses*. The first three are categorised into adjective + noun collocations and the last verb + noun collocations. The phrase '*on campus*' as a preposition + noun collocation was thus not included in the analysis. The source lexical collocations of the *volunteer work* prompt were *volunteer work, local community, free time* and *do volunteer work*. In other words, the target lexical collocations from the task prompts happened to be adjective-noun and verb-noun collocations, exclusive of other types.

The phrase *'made traditional classroom unnecessary'* in the first topic and *'help the local community'* and *'benefit both the individual teenager and society'* in the second one were not included as we consider them free combinations, since any object can follow the verb *'make'*, *'help'* and *'benefit'*. In other words, little or no mutual restriction or expectation between the two word components makes

them free word combinations (Duan & Qin, 2012). According to McKeown and Radev (2000), "a word combination fails to be classified as a free word and is termed a collocation when the number of words which can occur in a syntactic relation with a given headword decreases to the point where it is not possible to described the set using semantic regularities" (p.3). In the present study, the selected prompt-based lexical collocations presented in the preceding paragraph were selected because the semantic restrictions of the word components are tighter, thus limiting the number of words that co-occur. As such, we adopted a looser definition of what is not qualified as a free combination than McKeown and Radev's (2000) to avoid data waste because the number of lexical collocations from the task prompts was limited. The prompt-based lexical collocations and the excluded word combinations in both tasks are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Prompt-Based Lexical Collocations and Free Combinations Excluded

Online learning		Volunteer work	
Prompt-based lexical collocations	**Free combinations excluded**	**Prompt-based lexical collocations**	**Free combinations excluded**
online courses	made traditional classrooms unnecessary	volunteer work	help the local community
online learning		local community	
traditional classrooms		free time	
offer online courses		do volunteer work	benefit both the individual teenager and society

Each of the identified source lexical collocations was then inputted into the search box in the AntConc (Anthony, 2020), a freeware available at Anthony's website (https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/) to obtain their frequencies of use in each essay and across essays with a view of examining the extent to which learners recycled these collocations (see Figure 1). Exact wording included the exact plural form (e.g., *online courses*) and its singular form (e.g., *online course*), as the focus was on the occurrence of the word elements (see Table 2).

Figure 1

An Example of Using AntConc to Search for the Frequency and Use of Prompt-Based Lexical Collocation

Table 2

Examples of Exact Wording and Replacements of the Prompt-Based Lexical Collocation 'Online Courses'

	Examples from students' essays
Exact wording	Due to the Covid 19, *online courses* are becoming more popular in many universities.
Replacement of 1st word	Nowadays, a large member of universities recommend *virtual courses* as an alternative to physical classroom.
Replacement of 2nd word	Nowadays, *online classes* are suggested to be an alternative to face-to-face classes in some universities.
Replacement of both words	Educators might claim that *remote classes* is extremely convenient for learners and teachers.

In the next step of data analysis for Research Question 1, replacements of either the first or the second word in each of the targeted collocations were searched through the AntConc search tool (see Figure 2 and Table 2). The essays were also manually screened for alternative expressions (see Figure 3 and Table 2). Each time a completely new alternative phrase was manually detected, it was noted in an Excel sheet and then fed into the AntConc search tool to calculate its occurrences. The results of the alternative phrases for the prompt-based lexical collocations were then synthesized and displayed in a separate Excel sheet in terms of frequency and range (the number of source texts where each collocation was discovered) for further examination.

Figure 2

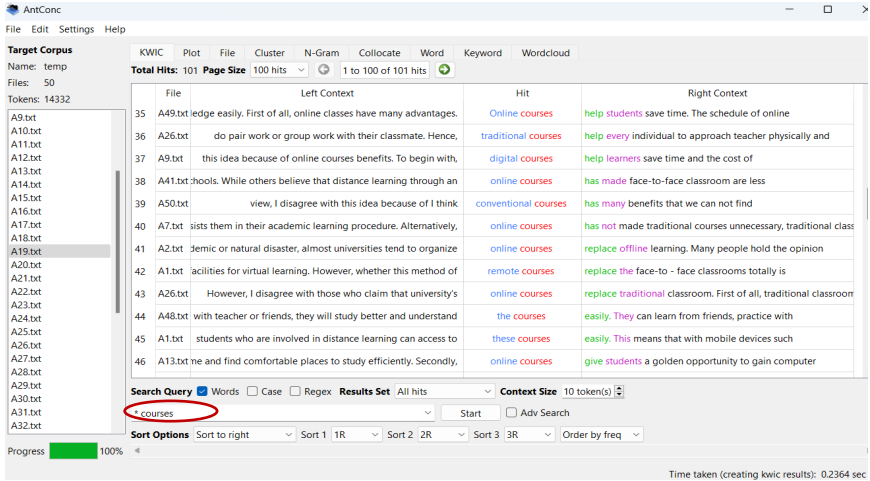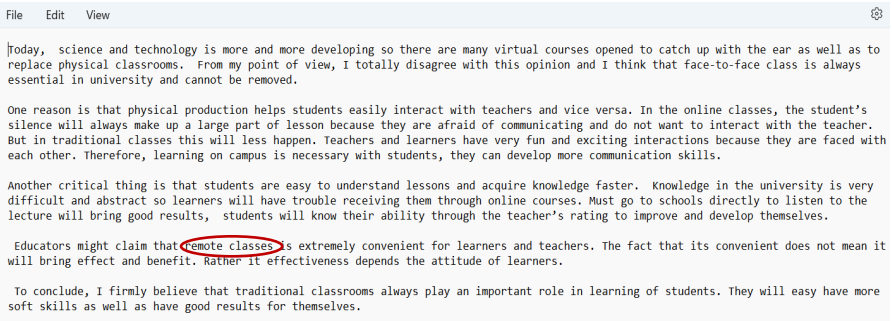*An Example of Using AntConc to Search for Replacements of the 1st Word in a Prompt-Based Lexical Collocation*

Figure 3

An Example of Manual Screening for New Alternatives to a Prompt-Based Lexical Collocation in Students' Essays

Identifying Errors Related to the Use of Prompt-Based Lexical Collocations

The analysis of learners' erroneous use of the prompt-based lexical collocations (Research Question 2) were manually conducted on the concordance output from the AntConc and the original essays. In the present study, we aimed to investigate two major categories of errors: (a) *incorrect word combination* and (b) *incorrect form of collocational elements*. The former refers to instances where the employed lexical collocations contained words that do not co-occur or collocate, whereas the latter focuses on the misuse of the *grammatical form* of each individual component of the target lexical collocation. These two error types, coupled with the original extracts from students' essays, are presented in Table 3, with the suggested corrections supplied in square brackets. Only the errors related to the source lexical collocations from each task prompt were analyzed; errors involving the use of other collocations in the essays and other types of misuse were not considered in this paper. It should be noted that the focus of the present study was not on lexical errors, but rather the use of lexical collocations from the task prompts. Erroneous use of these lexical collocations could therefore involve grammatical issues such as omission of prepositions and plural marker –s related to the use of the lexical words in the target collocations only (not grammatical errors in general).

Table 3

*Coded Collocational Error Types and Examples from Students'
Essays*

Major error category	Type of error	Extracts from students' essays
Incorrect word combination	**1. Wrong choice of verb** Using inappropriate verbs that do not collocate with the noun that follows.	Nowadays, several universities **require virtual courses** as a choice for classes delivered on campus. [offer virtual courses]
	2. Wrong choice of adjective Using inappropriate adjectives that do not collocate with the noun that follows.	Some people argue that virtual learning has made **customary classrooms** needless. [traditional classrooms]
	3. Wrong choice of nouns Use inappropriate nouns that do not collocate with the adjective or verb that comes before.	Thus, if students are forced to **do philanthropy**, they will have some panic feelings. [do charity work]
Incorrect form of collocational elements	**4. Non–existent adjectives** Forming adjectives using incorrect prefixes.	Secondly, **unvirtual classroom** promotes mutual interaction between learners and teachers which virtual classrooms still struggle to solve. [physical classrooms]
	5. Omission of plural marker –s Omitting inflectional morpheme –s that marks plurality of countable nouns	I am convinced the advantage of **traditional classroom** are more significant. [traditional classrooms]
	6. Overuse of plural marker –s Using the plural marker –s where it is not required.	Doing **charity works** creates opportunity for teenagers to meet and work with many people from all walks of life. **[charity work]**

Major error category	Type of error	Extracts from students' essays
	7. Omission of the preposition in a prepositional verb Omitting the preposition that goes with the verb in a verb-noun collocation.	Work and learn from other whom they could meet while **participating voluntary activities**. [participating in voluntary activities]
Mixed	**8. More than one type of error above** Using incorrect part of speech and incorrect word combination	Nowadays, because of Covid-19, many universities **proposal online classes** as an alternative to traditional classes. [offer online classes]

In the first category, if the individual words in a detected paraphrase of the prompt-derived collocation do not go together as a collocation, it was regarded as an incorrect word combination. The steps are as follows. First, each lexical collocation used was checked by reference to the Oxford Collocation Dictionary (OCD). If it did not appear in the OCD, it was further fed into COCA; if its occurrences were found in at least one text (frequency >=1), it was judged as "correct collocation". The frequency of ≥1 was used in order not to exclude too much data given its quite small sample size (100 essays) (see Wang & Shaw, 2008; c.f., Ang et al.,2011; Nesselhauf, 2003; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008). If the phrase did not exist in COCA (frequency = 0), it was further checked in the BNC. If it was then found in COCA or the BNC, it was judged as a "correct" combination. However, if the searched phrase appeared in none of the above-mentioned reference sources (OCD, COCA, and BNC), it was coded as "incorrect collocation". The identified correct collocations were recorded in a separate Excel spreadsheet for subsequent calculation of frequency and percentage while the incorrect lexical collocations were further analysed for types of errors as they occurred.

In the second category, the incorrect forms of the component words of the paraphrased collocations were identified and annotated manually as they emerged from the data.

Inter-reliability

Thirty per cent of the students' essays were independently coded by another EFL teacher who was an MA student in TESOL with an IELTS score of 7.5 (or C1 equivalent according to CEFR), to identify each original prompt-based collocation and its paraphrased items using the AntConc software. There was complete agreement between the first and the second coder. The same EFL teacher also independently coded 100% of the AntConc concordance output related to the paraphrased items for errors that occurred. The levels of agreement regarding coding lexical collocation errors were 88.8% for incorrect forms of collocational elements and 100% for incorrect word combinations and the mixed type. These agreement values were acceptable, according to Yin (2015). Any mismatch was resolved through discussion and undecided cases where no agreement was reached were excluded.

FINDINGS

Students' Use of Lexical Collocations Taken from the Task Prompt

In the following sub-sections, findings on how students reused the lexical collocations from the task prompts as well as how they paraphrased them are presented to answer Research Question 1.

Students' Reuse of the Lexical Collocations from the Task Prompts

The occurrences of the lexical collocations taken from the task prompts are presented in Table 4. Overall, as for the topic of *online learning*, the four target lexical phrases were reused 338 times, a higher frequency than the occurrences of their paraphrased alternatives (263 instances). Recycling involved 134 instances of *'traditional classroom(s)'* in both singular (53) and plural (81) forms, followed by 127 and 71 instances of students repeating *'online learning'* and *'online courses'*, respectively. There were six times of repetition of *'offer online course(s)'* of which two were in the singular form.

Table 4

Use of the Prompt-Based Lexical Collocations

Online learning	Exact wordings		Paraphrases	
	Frequency	**Range**	**Frequency**	**Range**
online course(s)	71	34	83	34
online learning	127	44	29	19
traditional classroom(s)	134	38	139	43
offer online course(s)	6	6	12	11
Total	*338*	-	*263*	-
Volunteer work				
volunteer work	156	44	143	41
local community	54	39	5	4
free time	65	37	18	13
do volunteer work	49	28	67	27
Total	*324*	-	*233*	-

The number of essays in which the target collocation appeared is shown in the range column. While *'online learning'* was used in 44 out of 50 essays, *'traditional classrooms'*, *'online courses'* and *'offer online courses'* appeared in 38, 34 and six out of 50 essays, respectively. This indicates a majority of the essays replicated the source collocations, but not all students did so.

Regarding the topic of *volunteer work*, students reused the four source collocations (324 instances) more than they reworded them (233 instances). In particular, the phrase *'volunteer work'* was repeated 156 times while repetition of *'free time'*, *'local community'*, and *'do volunteer work'* occurred at a lower frequency of 65, 54 and 49 instances, respectively.

Students also reworded the prompt-based collocations and the details of the paraphrased items are described in the next section.

Students' Paraphrases of the Prompt-Based Adjective + Noun Collocations

Table 5 illustrates how students paraphrased the prompt-based adjective + noun collocations in the topic of online learning. In total, there was 251 paraphrased items (out of a total of 263) of the target adjective + noun collocations, with *'traditional classrooms'* being reworded more than the other two (*'online courses'* and *'online learning'*). Students had a tendency to replace the second word (noun) of the target adjective + noun prompt (108 instances) more often than the first word (adjective) (81) and both words (62). For example, in *'online courses'* and *'online learning'*, the first constituent was replaced by a variety of adjectives such as *'digital'*, *'virtual'*, *'Internet-based'* or *'remote'*. However, the tendency of substituting the noun while preserving the adjective was more popular. For instance, *'courses'* and *'learning'* were replaced by different nouns such as *'class(es)'*, *'classroom(s)'*, *'education'*, *'session'*, or *'lecture'*. Note that in total, there were 50 essays and the range column shows that not all the students employed paraphrasing.

Table 5

Paraphrasing of the Prompt-Based Adjective + Noun Collocations in the Topic of Online Learning

Prompt-based collocations	Replacement of 1st word		Replacement of 2nd word		Replacement of both words		Total	
	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range
Online courses	3	3	47	29	33	19	**83**	**34**
Online learning	21	15	6	6	2	2	**29**	**19**
Traditional classrooms	57	28	55	30	27	17	**139**	**43**
Total	**81**	-	**108**	-	**62**	-	**251**	-

Table 6 presents the paraphrasing of the prompt-based adjective + noun collocations in the topic of volunteer work. In total, there were 166 paraphrases of the three original adjective + noun collocations, of which 143 were replacements of *'volunteer work'*. There were 67

alternative expressions in replacement of *'do volunteer work'* and 18 of *'free time'* and five of *'local community'*. Students tended to substitute the first component word (90 out of 166 instances) more often than the second word (33) or both words (43). Note that rewording of *'local community'* involved changing only the second word 'community' into other nouns such as *'area'*, *'society'*, and *'place'*, and paraphrasing of *'free time'* all involved replacing the first word *'free'* with *'spare'* and *'leisure'*. Slightly more than half (72) of the 143 paraphrases of *'volunteer work'* were replacements of the first component with other lexical items such as *charitable, charity, unpaid, voluntary, social, and community*. The source collocation *'volunteer work'* was also rephrased by changing the second word (28) (e.g., *volunteer projects, volunteer activities, volunteer programs*) and both words (e.g., *charity programs, community service, charity projects, charitable activities*). Again, there were a total of 50 essays and the range column shows that not all of the students paraphrased the source items.

Table 6

Paraphrasing of the Prompt-Derived Adjective-Noun Collocations in the Topic of Volunteer Work

	Replacement of 1st word		Replacement of 2nd word		Replacement of both words		Total	
	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range	Frequency	Range
Volunteer work	72	24	28	16	43	21	**143**	41
Local community	0	0	5	4	0	0	**5**	4
Free time	18	13	0	0	0	0	**18**	13
Total	**90**	-	**33**	-	**43**	-	**166**	-

Students' Paraphrases of the Prompt-Based Verb + Noun Collocation

Table 7 illustrates students' paraphrases of the verb + noun collocation *'offer online courses'*. There was a total of 12 instances of the collocation "offer online courses" being reworded in a number of

essays. The first word, the verb, was replaced six times, the most frequently of all. Substitution of the first two words ('offer' and *'online'*) occurred three times, and other replacements were quite rare, with just one instance each.

Table 7

Paraphrasing of the Prompt-Based Verb + Noun Collocation in the Topic of Online Learning

"offer online courses"	**Frequency**	**Range**
Replacement of the 1st word	6	5
Replacement of 2nd word	0	0
Replacement of 1st and 2nd words	3	3
Replacement of 3rd word	1	1
Replacement of 1st and 3rd words	1	1
Replacement of all words	1	1
Total	**12**	**-**

Table 8 shows how students rephrased the source collocation 'do volunteer work' and most often this involved replacing the second word (25 examples) (e.g., do unpaid work, do charitable work, do voluntary work). There were 13 replacements of the last two words (e.g., do community service(s), do charity program(s)) and 10 new alternative expressions (e.g., participate social activities, participate in community service) in seven and nine essays, respectively. Students also formed similar word combinations by changing the first word (8), the first two words (6) and the third one (5). Overall, in both writing topics, by forming alternative expressions, students created different word combinations, both correctly and inaccurately.

Table 8

Paraphrasing of the Prompt-Derived Verb-Noun Collocation in the Topic of Volunteer Work

'do volunteer work'	Frequency	Range
Replacement of 1st word	8	7
Replacement of 2nd word	25	18
Replacement of 3rd word	5	5
Replacement of 1st and 2nd words	6	2
Replacement of 2nd and 3rd words	13	7
Replacement of all words	10	9
Total	**67**	-

Collocational Errors

In response to Research Question 2, Table 9 summarizes the error types of students' prompt-based lexical collocations, their frequency, and percentage. Regarding the topic of *online learning*, students formed incorrect word combinations through wrong choice of verbs (21.15% of a total of 52 errors) and wrong choice of adjectives (9.62%). Regarding incorrect form, the most dominant error involved omission of the plurality marker –s for plural countable nouns (61.54%) followed by the use of non-existent adjectives (5.77%) where students formed an adjective using incorrect affixes (e.g., *unvirtual, undirect learning*).

In the topic of *volunteer work*, in total, there were 53 errors involving the use of the prompt-based collocations and they were mainly related to the plural/singular form of countable nouns. Most dominant was omission of the morpheme¬¬ –s that marks plural count nouns (43.40%). Overuse of this morpheme also occurred, at 15.09% (e.g., *'social works', 'community works'*). There were five cases of omission of a preposition in a prepositional verb as students were trying to paraphrase the prompt-based verb + noun collocation *'do volunteer work'* (e.g., *participate volunteer activities*). Mixed errors were infrequent in both topics.

Table 9

Respondents' Perspectives on the Relative Importance of the Macro-Skills

Types of collocational errors		Online learning		Volunteer work	
		Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Incorrect word combinations	Wrong choice of verbs	11	21.15	13	24.53
	Wrong choice of nouns	0	0	1	1.89
	Wrong choice of adjectives	5	9.62	0	0
Incorrect form of collocational elements	Non-existent adjectives	3	5.77	0	0
	Omission of noun plurality markers	32	61.54	23	43.40
	Overuse of noun plurality markers	0	0	8	15.09
	Omission of the preposition in a prepositional verb	0	0	5	9.43
Mixed errors		1	1.92	3	5.66
Total		**52**	**100**	**53**	**100**

DISCUSSION

The present study set out to examine how Vietnamese EFL students (re)used the lexical collocations from the task prompts and the errors they committed in attempts to paraphrase the prompt-based word combinations. The findings show that students both repeated the same collocations from the task prompt and substituted them with various word combinations, though recycling occurred to a greater extent. This indicates, on the one hand, that the given task prompt provided a source of linguistic input for reuse and on the other hand, that students had attempted to paraphrase the target lexical words in the tasks by replacing single or multiple component words. In reality, the students were informed of the criteria for assessing their essays of which lexical resource was one important aspect which values use of non-repetitive and diverse words. It could be that students' awareness of the necessity to diversify their language use and increase their score for the lexical resource criterion might have motivated them to use alternative expressions, although accuracy was not always achieved.

It is interesting to note that students tended to replace the noun component in the prompt-based adjective + noun collocations (online courses, online learning and online classrooms), yet substituting the verb in the source verb + noun collocation *'offer online courses'*. This could imply that while these students perhaps had a larger repertoire of alterative nouns, they tended to use them differently in different positions of the sentence. The low frequency of occurrence of the paraphrased items of the *'offer online courses'* might suggest rewording this phrase was perhaps more challenging for them. The restricted co-occurrence of *'offer online courses'* with only a limited number of verbs collocating with *'online courses'* in this particular meaning (other verbs include *deliver/teach/run online courses*) as informed by the OCD and the BNC further added the challenge. None of these verb collocates was used as paraphrases by these students. It is even more intriguing to observe a different pattern of paraphrasing of the source collocations in the topic of *volunteer work*. For example, for the source adjective + noun collocations *volunteer work*, *local community,* and *free time*, students tended to replace the first component word, the adjective *'volunteer', 'local'* and *'free'* and also

they most often substituted the second word *'volunteer'* in the verb + noun collocation *'do volunteer work'*. This indicates students might display different collocational behaviours that could be collocation-specific and perhaps subject to students' lexical competence.

The greater number of the repeated prompt-based lexical collocations might, at first glance, suggest that rewording could be challenging for many of these learners considering that paraphrasing requires them to use their own words to encode their intended meanings under writing time pressure. However, given that the participants in the *present study were English majors, the target lexical collocations such as '(offer)online courses', '(do) volunteer work'*, and *'local community'*, and *'free time'* might not be sufficiently challenging for them. The non-revision of the source lexical collocations could be because these collocations are simpler to memorize and recall and as such, ease of access in memory might have prevented learners from paraphrasing. Recalling collocations that contain familiar or new words poses different levels of challenge (Boers, 2020). The findings also show that while a majority of the essays replicated some lexical collocations from the task prompts, not all students did so. Students' attempts at finding alternative collocations to rephrase the ideas in the prompt are a good signal, albeit with variable output (i.e., correct and incorrect word combinations). While the greater level of repetition of the prompt-based collocations should deserve instructional attention, it should not necessarily be seen as a worrying issue, since input is seeded and thus at least taken up. Rather, reuse could be at least viewed as a sign of learning which could form the preliminary step to plan more varied vocabulary use. In the speaking mode, Boers et al. (2006) found that learners also recycled about one-fourth to one-third of the formulaic sequences from the input provided before the interview task. Unfortunately, no previous research has been undertaken to examine students' usage of prompt-based lexical collocations in writing, thus no comparisons can be drawn regarding this issue. Therefore, this should be viewed as an exploratory finding that awaits further research.

Regarding the inappropriate word combinations, the findings show students replaced the adjective online with words that do not

collocate with the subsequent noun. They tended to translate from Vietnamese L1 *'lớp học bình thường'* (customary/usual classrooms), *'lớp học trực tiếp/gián tiếp'* (direct/indirect class), *lớp học 'sống'* (live class). In Vietnamese these adjectives could have similar meanings but these self-created combinations could source from a lack of awareness of the contextual constraints of the new substituting word. A case in point is that 'customary' denotes 'normal' and is frequently used with other nouns such as 'customary laws', 'customary practice', and 'customary rights' (as cited from COCA) but not 'customary classrooms'. Similarly, additional to the correct replacements of the source collocation *'do volunteer work'*, many students used the verb 'do' *(làm)* with other nouns such as *'do philanthropy' (làm từ thiện)*, *'do charity programs' (làm các chương trình từ thiện)* as in Vietnamese while other verbs would be more appropriate (e.g. *'do volunteer work'/ 'engage in philanthropy'*, and *'run charity programs'*, respectively). This could be again perhaps due to literal translation, which corroborates previous research findings that a considerable number of collocational errors were L1-related (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003, 2005). Other research also reveals that discrepancies in L1 and L2 collocational expressions create problems for L2 learners (Wolter & Gyllstad, 2013; Wolter & Yamashita, 2017), thus causing errors in their L2 collocation creation.

The issue of intra-lexical interference where erroneous use involves substitution of one component of the target lexical collocation with another word with similar forms or meanings (Boers, 2020) also requires greater attention. For example, the error in *'participate volunteer activities'* could be influenced by the semantic resemblance between the two words "participate" and 'attend' in *'attend volunteer activities'* in English. Equally, although L1 influence as explained above appears legitimate, perhaps learners might have equated 'custom' with 'tradition' in creating 'customary classrooms' in place of 'traditional classrooms' because of their similar meanings. Confusion might occur when two items are not distinct in meaning (*do* vs. *make*) (Boers, 2020) could be another factor that accounts for such errors as *'do volunteer work'* and *'make volunteer work'*. Errors such as *'visual class'* instead of *'virtual class'* could be perhaps because *'visual'* and *'virtual'* are similar in written

and spoken forms. It is also important to note that the 'learning burden' of a word depends on how it patterns with other words (Nation, 2020), and the collocational burden could be very heavy due to the "restricted co-occurrence of elements" (Laufer & Waldman, 2011, p. 648) in a lexical collocation in ways that could be unpredictable. In other words, "it is not unlikely that the learning burden of collocations is higher because it is more difficult to allocate attentional resources to the formal properties of two (or more) words compared to one" (Peters, 2014, p. 90). This shows students formulated their word combinations based on the 'open choice principle' (Sinclair, 1991) rather than fine understanding of its constraints of use, which led to erroneous use. Yet, on a positive note, the new collocational formulations, and derivatives of individual words, though incorrect, are an interesting indicator of the active meaning construction in EFL writing for these learners, and that said, how to drive learning from here is pedagogically important (see the next section).

It is notable that omission of the plurality marker –s for countable nouns constituted the majority of errors. More errors with this category could be because of the predominance of the source adjective + noun collocation occurrences in the data. In addition, the absence of the inflectional morpheme –s that marks the plural form of the noun collocate could be attributable to the learners' L1 Vietnamese influence, since Vietnamese is an isolating language which does not mark plural nouns or third-person singular inflectionally (Ngo, 2001). In Vietnamese, the same noun form is used for both singular and plural nouns. For instance, the same form *người bạn* is used to express both singularity and plurality*: một người bạn (one friend), hai người bạn (two friends), nhiều/vài người bạn (many/some friends)*. This morphological incongruence (Jiang et al., 2014) could account for the dropping of the inflectional morpheme –s that indicates plurality. Perhaps the absence of plurality –s could also be due to the fact that the plural marker has a low communicative value (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001), and as such it was perhaps not sufficiently attended to in the meaning-driven process of writing an opinion essay. The additional pressure of a timed writing performance could further make this grammatical feature redundant. It could be just that these learners might not have sufficient time to check for accuracy as they prioritised

their attention to message expression (see Nguyen et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined how Vietnamese EFL students reused the lexical collocations from the task prompts in their written opinion essays and found that students both reused the same lexical collocations from the task prompt and replaced them with various word combinations, though reusing exact wordings was more frequent. The findings also indicated that the replacements of the prompt-based lexical collocations could be inappropriate and the sources of erroneous use could be attributed to both L1 and L2 influence. The findings of this study suggest a number of important pedagogical implications regarding how to enhance L2 learners' collocational variation and appropriacy of use. While students repeating the task wordings should not be taken as disheartening as discussed earlier, using alternative words should be encouraged, as diverse vocabulary is made explicit as a marking criterion in the writing course for these Vietnamese learners as well as in several popular standardized proficiency tests of English such as IELTS and the FCE. Research has shown lexical variation correlates quite strongly with highly - rated written performances (e.g., Crossley et al., 2012; González, 2017). The pedagogical question is how to assist students to use not only *more* diverse words but also use them *appropriately*. To this end, it is important to train students to use collocations dictionaries and other native corpora, such as the the BNC or COCA for the development of collocational knowledge. Attention should be directed to the *restricted co-occurrence* of the individual elements of a collocation in order to prevent incorrect word combinations. Exposure to various sources of oral and written input would also be useful to increase encounters with collocations in context (Webb, 2020). It is important to note that the ease of access to the prompt-based lexical collocations for the English majors in the present study perhaps prevented paraphrasing attempts, suggesting that task prompts might need to 'seed' lexical collocations that should be challenging enough for the target learners. In this way, they will

have more space to showcase their lexical repertoire in their writing. In addition, writing instruction that targets on-topic collocations could be helpful to size up learners' lexical repertoire. Equally important, teacher feedback should address the issue of *congruency or lack of* in L1 and L2 collocation formation through awareness-raising activities which compare and contrast L1-L2 collocational patterns to prevent L1/L2-induced errors. Knowing collocations is obviously not sufficient; it is equally important that students use collocations in their grammatical patterns (Nation, 2013). Timely 'treatment' sections that aim to remedy the form-related errors such as omission of the plural marker or mis-prefixation are pedagogically necessary while additional explicit instruction on affixation could empower students to acquire more lexical means to form words with greater accuracy. Accordingly knowing how to operate software tools such as the AntConc would facilitate feedback giving on the part of the teachers (see Nguyen, 2021).

There are some limitations in this study that need acknowledgement. First, the present study focused on only a limited number of the prompt-based lexical collocations sourced from a quite small corpus of 100 opinion essays about two writing topics and thus the findings might not be generalizable to other types of writing and other topics. Future studies could obtain richer insights by investigating the use of lexical collocations in the entire corpus in addition to the prompt-based targets. In addition, this study employed a corpus-based approach to judge the acceptability of collocations; further studies might consider using a combination of both phraseological and frequency-based methods to obtain richer understanding (Xia et al., 2022). Moreover, the current research documented the occurrences of the reused and reworded lexical collocations from the task prompts without examining their grammatical functions as subject, verb, and object in sentential contexts, a direction that future research might want to take. Further research could explore how learners' different proficiency levels might affect their collocational use. Since the students in this study were English majors, the target lexical collocations might not provide sufficient challenge for them, pointing to the need to investigate the use of prompt-based lexical collocations by other groups of learners.

Finally, to add more substantive evidence regarding students' use of task prompts as lexical sources, future research can generate qualitative data from follow-up interviews or stimulated recalls. Such additional data help clarify learners' cognitive processing of prompt-based lexical collocations and how that translates into their copying or paraphrasing of the source words/phrases.

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APPENDIX

The Writing Tasks

Task 1

These days, many universities offer online courses as an alternative to classes delivered on campus. Some people say that online learning has made traditional classrooms unnecessary. To what extent do you agree/disagree?
You should write at least 250 words. You have 60 minutes to write.

Task 2

Some people think that all teenagers should be required to do volunteer work in their free time to help the local community. They believe this would benefit both the individual teenager and society as a whole. To what extent do you agree/disagree?
You should write at least 250 words. You have 60 minutes to write.

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