



Investigating Vietnamese ESL Learners' Understandings of Verb-noun Collocations Associated with Academic Verbs

Tran Minh Hoang

Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand
E-mail: tmharies@gmail.com

Abstract

Bahns & Eldaw (1993), Hoang & Puntai (2017), Nguyen & Webb (2016) and Yan (2010) found that ESL learners did not perform well on tests of recognizing verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs. This raised the question how far learners have achieved their understandings of academic collocations. In response to this, the current study investigated how Vietnamese college students came to understand academic verb-noun collocations. A semi-structured interview based on Nation's (1990, 2001) concept of vocabulary recognition and the frequency-based approach to collocation study was conducted with six English major students, selected by purposeful sampling technique. Results showed the participants could not distinguish between non-academic verb-noun collocations, phrasal verbs and academic verb-noun collocations. Additionally, they did not acquire the concept of collocations, and need to have more extensive practice exercises. All these indicated that a framework for teaching verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs is necessary. Steps for such an instruction derived from the participants' perceived shortcomings were provided.

Keywords: verb-noun collocations, academic verb nodes, collocation teaching, language competence, collocation receptive knowledge



1. Introduction

Academic vocabularies are of critical importance in the development of second language (L2) competence (Durrant, 2009; Gardner & Davies, 2014; Nation, 2001). They are requisite for ESL learners to expand their English vocabulary inventory after acquiring the size of 3000 high-frequency words (Milton, 2013; Nation, 2001). In addition, academic vocabularies frequently occur across a wide range of academic disciplines therefore learners should recognize them during university training (Gardner & Davies, 2014; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Nation, 2001). Notwithstanding their importance, academic vocabularies have been under investigated.

Recognizing collocations associated with academic vocabularies is a main part of the receptive knowledge of academic words (Nation, 2001). It enables ESL learners to use the right chunks of academic vocabularies rather than combine academic words freely in speaking and writing (Nation, 2001). Nevertheless, Bahns & Eldaw (1993), Hoang & Puntai (2017), Nguyen & Webb (2016) and Yan (2010) revealed that learners did not perform well on tests of collocation recognition. Hence, the instruction of collocations associated with academic vocabularies deems necessary.

Of collocations, verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs are particularly problematic for ESL learners (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead, & Webb, 2014; Gyllstad, 2007; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Marco, 2011; Nesselhauf, 2003). Empirical studies (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Yan, 2010) found that collocations constituted over 50% of lexical mistakes in college students' writing corpora. Additionally, Hoang & Puntai (2017) and Nguyen & Webb (2016) indicated that learners faced difficulty recognizing the most frequently occurred academic collocations. These show that verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs should be instructed priority to ESL learners.

Empirical studies (Detdamrongpreecha, 2014; Marco, 2011; Meechai & Chumworathayee, 2015; Supanfai, 2012) found that ESL teachers did not instruct properly academic verb-noun collocations. This resulted that learners lacked essential knowledge of recognizing academic collocations. The finding raised the question how far learners have achieved their understandings of academic verb-noun collocations. This question was also posed to Vietnamese ESL learners because the learners were found not to recognize verb-noun collocations as good as academic verb nodes (Hoang & Puntai, 2017).

To determine Vietnamese ESL learners' understandings of academic verb-noun collocations, this study investigates how the learners came to understand academic collocations. The study seeks to gain four objectives. Firstly, it attempts to determine how Vietnamese ESL learners describe academic verb-noun collocations. Secondly, it explores how the learners learn about the collocations. Thirdly, it investigates how academic verbs were instructed in schools. Lastly, it discusses how verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs should be instructed to Vietnamese ESL learners.

To fulfil these above objectives, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview based on Nation's (1990, 2001) concept of vocabulary recognition and the frequency-based approach to collocation study in order to interview face-to-face Vietnamese ESL learners. With obtained data, the researcher comes to pedagogic implications for teaching verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs which correspond to Vietnamese learners' demands.

This paper is a part of a master thesis, assessing Vietnamese ESL learners' receptive knowledge of academic verb-noun collocations, conducted in Mahidol University. The thesis encompasses two parts. The first part is about examining the relationship between Vietnamese ESL learners' receptive knowledge of academic verbs and their ability to recognize associated verb-noun collocations. It has been reported in the 7th National and International Conference on



Humanities and Social Sciences (NICHSS), organized by Political Science Association of Kasetsart University (PSAKU) (Hoang & Puntai, 2017). The second part is presented in this paper.

2. Research Methodology

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature, ABC University (pseudonym), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The population was 72 English major students who were in the second academic year, and at the age between 19 and 23. These students are of intermediate English proficiency level based on their performance of the faculty's test battery. They were divided into three classes according to the alphabetical order of their names. By purposeful sampling technique, the researcher selected six participants (two from each class), who were consent voluntarily and have studied academic vocabularies for two years, so as to participate in semi-structured interviews.

Research Instrument

The researcher employed a semi-structured interview to investigate Vietnamese ESL learners' understandings of academic verb-noun collocations. The interview was developed based on Nation's (1990, 2001) concept of vocabulary recognition and the frequency-based approach to collocation study (Hill, 2000; McCarthy, O'Keeffe, & Walsh, 2002; Sinclair, 1991).

The semi-structured interview was utilized due to two reasons. Firstly, it helps the researcher gain in-depth information. By open-ended questions, the researcher could use probes or follow-ups to delve into the participants' responses for clarification (McMillan, 2012). Secondly, compared to an unstructured interview, the semi-structured interview facilitates in preparation for interview questions (McMillan, 2012). In other words, the researcher could prepare needed questions before interview time.

Furthermore, to make sure the reliability of interview questions, the researcher required two professors in M.A. (Applied Linguistics) program, Mahidol University to review question content. Based on their feedback and comment, interview questions were revised. In addition, the researcher piloted interview questions with nine participants who did not participate in the main study, and were in the same English proficiency level and major. This assures that interview questions were appropriate for the study.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher conducted data collection following gaining the approval from the Institute Review Board (IRB), Mahidol University, and the permission of Dean and three teachers in-charge in Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature. At each class, the researcher presented interview purposes and research plan, and then selected two students for semi-structured interviews. These selected participants were interviewed face to face in the university library according to the timetables arranged with the researcher. They were coded form 1 to 6 in order to ensure their identities. Additionally, the participants were inquired if the researcher could record and take note during the interviews to clarify their response. The interview timing for each participant was 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Obtained data were analysed by means of content analysis technique. Specifically, data were organized, summarized and interpreted through a three-step process: coding,



categorizing and creating patterns (McMillan, 2012). Moreover, to enhance the trustworthiness of findings, the researcher used the peer-debriefing technique which is about the examination of the researcher's data interpretation with peers who are unbiased (McMillan, 2012). This assures that obtained findings ascertained to be accurate. The peers for this examination were two professors of Master (Applied Linguistics) program, Mahidol University.

3. Results

3.1 Vietnamese ESL Learners' Description of Academic Verb-noun Collocations

The study found that the interview participants described academic verb-noun collocations as non-academic verb-noun collocations and phrasal verbs. They in addition could not offer correctly illustrative examples.

Non-academic Verb-noun Collocations

All participants defined academic verb-noun collocations as non-academic verb-noun ones, containing non-academic verbs and nouns. This demonstrated that the participants did not acquire the concept of academic verb-noun collocations, consisting of an academic verb node and noun collocates. For instance, Participants 6 and 3 told:

Academic verb-noun collocations are the combinations of verbs and nouns, for example, *drink coffee*, *do homework* and *play guitar*. In addition, *drink*, *do* and *play* are academic verbs, and *coffee*, *homework* and *guitar* are nouns.

Phrasal Verbs

Three participants added that a phrasal verb, which encompasses a verb and a preposition and whose meaning could not predict from two components, was a kind of academic verb-noun collocations. Correspondingly, the interview participants contended that the meanings of academic collocations could not be predicted from the meanings of two components. Participants 1 and 2 hold the same view:

In my view, phrasal verbs are another name of academic verb-noun collocations. They consist of verbs and prepositions, and have new meanings. For example, the verbs *hang* and *find* mean hooking something on the wall, and search something. The phrasal verbs *hang out* and *find out* mean going out and discovery respectively.

In general, the interview participants mistook non-academic verb-noun collocations and phrasal verbs for academic verb-noun collocations. They did not have the concept of academic verb-noun collocations, constituted of an academic verb node and noun collocates; nor could they distinguish between academic verbs and non-academic ones. Additionally, the participants had a misconception that the meanings of academic collocations could not be predicted from the meanings of their components.

3.2 Vietnamese ESL Learners' Learning of Academic Verb-noun Collocations

Obtained data disclosed that all interview participants learnt academic verb-noun collocations from their teachers. The teachers accounted for what an academic collocation was, provided collocation meanings, and offered sentential examples in their instruction. Participant 1 shared:

My teacher instructed academic verb-noun collocations when they popped up in lessons. He explained that collocations were groups of words going together. Following providing collocation meanings, the teacher employed sentences in the lesson as examples to demonstrate



how collocations were used.

Similarly, Participants 3 and 4 narrated:

At the end of a reading lesson, my teacher often lists academic verb-noun collocations, found in the text. Then, she introduces collocation meanings, and asks us to learn the collocations by heart (Participant3).

In the lesson of Vietnamese-English translation, my teacher first presents Vietnamese sentences on the board. Second, he highlights phrases which are academic verb-noun collocations. Then, the teacher provides the phrases in English and requires us to use them for translating presented sentences (Participant 4).

Generally, Vietnamese teachers instructed learners to recognize collocation units and related meanings. They did not introduce the collocation concept, containing an academic verb node and noun collocates, and offering intensive collocation exercises for further practice. Accordingly, learners had inadequate knowledge of academic verb-noun collocations.

3.3 Instruction of Academic Verbs in Schools

The study showed that Vietnamese teachers instructed academic verbs by elaborating verb meanings and offering sentential examples, using images to illustrate verb meanings, and providing word family for learners to guess verb meanings.

Elaborating Verb Meanings and Offering Sentential Examples

All interview participants reported that teachers spelt out verb meanings in English and Vietnamese following introducing verb forms. In addition, teachers presented some examples to instruct how academic verbs were used. For example, Participants 1 and 3 said:

At the onset of the lesson, my teacher often presents new academic verbs. Next, she restates verb meaning in English and Vietnamese. Then, the teacher introduces some sentential examples for illustration.

Also, Participant 6 exemplified:

For the verb *foresee*, my teacher explains its meaning *knowing about something before it happens*. Also, he provides an illustrative example *it is impossible to foresee how life will work out*.

Using Images to Illustrate Verb Meanings

Two participants supplemented that teachers utilized verbal images to help them understand verb meanings. By doing this, learners could know what context verbs were used, and recognize verb meanings effortlessly. Participant 4 stated:

When I learnt about writing a graphic report, my teacher used the photos of upward and downward trends to illustrate two verbs *rise* and *decline*. Then, she provided verb meanings, and illustrative examples on the basis of provided photos.

Providing Word Family for Learners to Guess Verb Meanings

Participants 2 and 5 asserted that Vietnamese teachers made use of word family such as adjectives and nouns in the instruction of academic verbs. This enables learners to elicit their prior knowledge of verbs and to anticipate verb meanings. To illustrate this, Participant 5 stated:

For the verb *observe*, my teacher indicates noun *observation* or *observer*, and adjective *observational*. Then, he requires us to guess the verb meaning.

All in all, Vietnamese teachers instructed learners to recognize academic verb units and meanings, and to know how to use the verbs. They did not indicate associated verb-noun



collocations, and emphasize academic verbs as determinant of possible noun collocates. Correspondingly, learners have not been developed the ability to recognize associated verb-noun collocations of academic verbs.

3.4 Learners' Suggestions for Teaching Verb-noun Collocations Associated with Academic Verbs

The interview participants recommended that ESL teachers should instruct verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs by mind-map and according to contexts, and provide additional sources for collocation study.

Instructing Verb-noun Collocation by Mind-map

Three participants suggested teachers instruct verb-noun collocations by mind-map. By doing this, learners could recognize possible noun collocates of an academic verb, and remember instructed collocations easily. Participant 5 described:

In a lesson, teachers could indicate academic verbs, and ask students to write down noun collocates. These nouns could be derived from the lesson or their own knowledge. This enables learners to generalize their receptive knowledge of associated verb-noun collocations of academic verbs.

Additionally, Participant 2 supplemented:

Teachers should introduce impossible noun collocates of academic verbs. By this introduction, learners could enhance their ability to recognize incorrect verb-noun collocations, and avoid using them.

Instructing Academic Verb-noun Collocations According to Contexts

All participants proposed that teachers should use contextual examples in the instruction of academic verb-noun collocations. This enables learners to recognize how collocation meanings are reflected in contexts. Additionally, they could know how to use verb-noun collocations in their speaking and writing. To illustrate this, Participants 3 and 4 maintained: I often study academic collocations according to contexts such as environment, music or film. What I found is that I could recognize what contexts collocations are used, and it is easy for me to remember collocation meanings. Thus, the teaching of academic verb-noun collocations according to contexts is vital.

Providing Additional Sources for Collocation Study

Participants 1 and 6 added that teachers should provide additional sources for collocation study in their instruction. The sources could be exercises from collocation books, online collocation dictionaries, and webs which contain collocation exercises. By this provision, learners could practice instructed collocations. Additionally, they could increase their exposure to academic collocations outside classroom, and enlarge their collocation inventory by studying collocations in other English topics by themselves.

On the whole, the interview participants suggested teachers use mind-map and contexts in the instruction of verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs. This could help learners enhance their ability to recognize instructed collocations. In addition, the participants emphasized teachers on providing additional sources for collocation study. By doing this, learners could further expose to academic collocations.



4. Discussion and Conclusion

Similar to Detdamrongpreecha (2014), Laufer & Waldman (2011), Marco (2011), Meechai & Chumworathayee (2015) and Supanfai's (2012) findings which verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs were not instructed properly in universities, the current study indicated that Vietnamese ESL learners did not acquire the collocation concept through teachers' instruction. They accordingly thought academic verb-noun collocations as non-academic verb-noun collocations and phrasal verbs. This corroborated the findings from earlier studies (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Hoang & Puntai, 2017; Nguyen & Webb, 2016; Yan, 2010) which learners did not perform well on tests of collocation recognition.

Scholars further explained learners' mistake of non-academic verb-noun collocations and phrasal verbs for academic verb-noun collocations. To mention a few, academic vocabularies merely feature in university readings, texts and tutorials (Ackermann & Chen, 2013; Durrant, 2009; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Nation, 2001). They did not get attention from learners in vocabulary learning therefore learners could not distinguish between academic verb nodes and non-academic verb ones. Next, teachers overemphasized phrasal verbs in vocabulary instruction because phrasal verb meanings differed from their component ones (McCarthy, O'Keeffe, & Walsh, 2002). Accordingly, learners having inadequate knowledge of collocations contended that academic collocations shared the same concept of phrasal verbs. These explanations could be applied to Vietnamese ESL learners.

Moreover, the study found that the instruction of academic verbs and verb-noun collocations could not equip learners with essential knowledge and skills of recognizing academic collocations. This shows that a new framework for teaching verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs deems necessary. The framework needs to contain following points.

To begin with, it should indicate that the recognition of verb-noun collocations is a part of the receptive knowledge of academic verbs. The ability to recognize associated collocations need be developed following the one to recognize the verbs. Next, the framework should provide learners with the knowledge of academic verb-noun collocations by presenting the collocation concept and illustrative examples. It should also stress that an academic verb is a requisite to determine possible noun collocates. Then, the framework should offer additionally sources for collocation study for learners to further expose to academic collocations inside and outside classroom.

Hence, the framework for teaching verb-noun collocations associated with academic verbs would be as followed.

Firstly, to render learners the collocation knowledge, teachers should elaborate the concept of academic verb-noun collocations, consisting of an academic verb node and noun collocates after instructing the verb units. To illustrate the concept, teachers should list possible noun collocates of a verb by mind map. Additionally, they could provide some impossible noun collocates to help learners recognize incorrect verb-noun collocations.

Secondly, to account for collocation meanings, teachers should compare the meanings of an academic verb and nouns with the meanings of verb-noun collocation units. In addition, they should provide some contextual examples in which collocations were embedded for illustration.

Lastly, to reinforce instructed collocations, apart from in-class exercises, teachers should provide exercises from collocations books, online collocation dictionaries and webs containing collocation exercises for learners to further practice academic collocations.

In general, this study shows that learners did not have a fully developed collocation instruction in schools thus they mistook non-academic verb-noun collocations and phrasal verbs



for academic verb-noun collocations. Future studies could investigate learners' understandings of other collocations associated with academic verbs (e.g., verb-adjective) to examine if the same mistake was found. The findings could confirm whether or not the framework for teaching associated verb-noun collocations in this study should be popularized for the instruction of other academic collocations. Additionally, further studies could investigate learners' recognition of academic collocations after the teaching framework is applied in a certain period of time. The findings could help scholars assess the efficiency and validity of the framework.

5. Bibliography

- Ackermann, K., & Chen, Y.-H. (2013). Developing the academic collocation list (ACL)- A corpus-driven and expert-judged approach. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 12(4), 235-247.
- Bahns, J., & Eldaw, M. (1993). Should we teach EFL students collocations? *System*, 21(1), 101-114.
- Boers, F., Demecheleer, M., Coxhead, A., & Webb, S. (2014). Gauging the effects of exercises on verb-noun collocations. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(1), 54-74.
- Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 213-238.
- Detdamrongpreecha, B. (2014). The acquisition of basic collocations by Thai learners of English. *Susan Dusit University Research Journal*, 10(3), 37-53.
- Durrant, P. (2009). Investigating the viability of a collocation list for students of English for academic purposes. *English for Specific Purposes*, 28(3), 157-169.
- Durrant, P. (2016). To what extent is the academic vocabulary list relevant to university student writing. *English for Specific Purposes*, 43, 49-61.
- Gardner, D., & Davies, M. (2014). A new academic vocabulary list. *Applied Linguistics*, 35(3), 305-327.
- Gyllstad, H. (2007). *Testing English collocations: Developing receptive tests for use with advanced Swedish learners*. Stockholm, SE: Lund University.
- Hill, J. (2000). Revising priorities: From grammatical failure to collocational success. Dans M. Lewis, *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach* (pp. 47-69). Hove, UK: Language Teaching Publications.
- Hoang, T. M., & Puntai, W. (2017). Examining the relationship between Vietnamese ESL learners' receptive knowledge of academic verbs and their ability to recognize associated verb-noun collocations. *The 7th National and International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences*. 3, pp. 17-23. Bangkok: Political Science Association of Kasetsart University.
- Laufer, B., & Waldman, T. (2011). Verb-noun collocations in second language writing: A corpus analysis of learners' English. *Language Learning*, 61(2), 647-672.
- Marco, M. L. (2011). Exploring atypical verb-noun combinations in learner technical writing. *International Journal of English Studies*, 11(2), 77-95.
- McCarthy, M., O'Keeffe, A., & Walsh, S. (2002). *Vocabulary matrix: Understanding, learning, teaching*. Boston, MA: HEINLE ELT.
- McMillan, J. H. (2012). *Educational research fundamentals for the consumer* (éd. 6th). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Meechai, D., & Chumworathayee, T. (2015). Verb-noun collocational competence of Thai university EFL students: A comparative study of a regular program and an English program. *Language Education and Acquisition Research Network (LEARN) Journal*, 8(2), 145-160.



- Milton, J. (2013). Measuring the contribution of vocabulary knowledge to proficiency in the four skills. Dans C. Bardel, & B. I. Christina Lindquist, *Eurosla Monographs Series 2: L2 vocabulary acquisition, knowledge and use new perspectives on assessment and corpus analysis* (pp. 57-78). Essex, UK: European Second Language Association.
- Nagy, W., & Townsend, D. (2012). Words as tools: Learning academic vocabulary as language acquisition. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(1), 91-108.
- Nation, P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. Boston, MA: Heinle ELT.
- Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nesselhauf, N. (2003). The use of collocations by advanced learners of English and some implications for teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 24(2), 223-242.
- Nguyen, T. M., & Webb, S. (2016). Examining second language receptive knowledge of collocation and factors that affect learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 21(3), 1-23.
- Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus concordance collocation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Supanfai, P. (2012). *Thai students' English collocation awareness and collocational ability: A case-study of second year students majoring in English for international community in Mahasarakhan university*. Récupéré sur <http://macrothink.org/journal/index.php/jse/article/viewFile/1615/1525>
- Yan, H. (2010). Study on the causes and countermeasures of the lexical collocation mistakes in college English. *English Language Teaching*, 3(1), 162-165.