

EXPLORING THANH HOA HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLOCATIONS AND TEACHING COLLOCATIONS

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Abstract: *This article aims to identify Thanh Hoa high school teachers' perceptions of collocations and teaching collocations. The study follows qualitative approach with the research design of a case study. The main data collection instruments are questionnaire and interviews. The findings of the study reveal that high school teachers of English have insufficient understandings about the nature of collocation. Besides, although they show great acknowledgement of the integral role of collocations in students' language development, the teachers still pay inadequate attention to collocation teaching. Therefore, some useful pedagogical implications are also suggested for this group of English teachers to deal with the existing problems.*

Keywords: *Collocations, compounds, idioms, teaching collocations, word combinations.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary has long been acknowledged to play a pivotal role in second language acquisition, as some of the most renowned scholars in linguistics once asserted that “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972, pp.111-112). Although the common practice of vocabulary acquisition merely involves the understanding of words' definition and pronunciation, the process of activating a word involves learning how that word collocates with others in order to form a meaningful phrase. For example, when learning the word “exam”, English learners also need to get familiar with “take an exam”, “pass an exam” or “fail an exam”. That is why it is stated that words do not exist in isolation (Lewis, 1993), but they rather appear in chunks. This idea about lexis leads to the emergence of collocation as an indispensable category in vocabulary learning and teaching.

Despite the widespread use of collocation and the acknowledgement of its fundamental role in the language (Nation, 2001), collocation has not received an adequate amount of attention in language teaching and learning and thus it has not performed its best to benefit learners. Once being treated with sufficient attention, collocational knowledge

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could make a significant impact on language proficiency of students, as it is believed to help upgrade intermediate learners to advanced level (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, there is an urge to integrate the teaching of collocations into the English learning curriculum.

There have been several international studies carried out with the aim to raise the awareness of the importance of collocation teaching such as those done by Hodne (2009) and Alfahadi et al. (2014). In Vietnam, the topic about teachers' perceptions of collocation and the importance of teaching collocation in ESL/EFL classrooms is still under investigated. The majority of previous studies related to collocation in Vietnam have only focused on the comparison and contrast between English and Vietnamese collocations (Nguyen, 2011; Do, 2010) and raising collocation awareness of students (Le, 2005; Vo, 2010).

It is evident that little literature regarding Vietnamese EFL teachers' perception of collocation was found. For the above reasons, I have conducted this research entitled "*Exploring Thanh Hoa high school English teachers' perceptions of collocations and teaching collocations*", aiming to orientate English teachers in Thanh Hoa city and elsewhere in our country to adopt more accurate views about collocation and its role in language learning generally and vocabulary learning particularly.

2. The Study

2.1. Subjects of the study

The participants in the current research include 30 high school English teachers from five public schools in Thanh Hoa city. The reason for choosing these participants is that public schools in Thanh Hoa city are widely acknowledged and proven by accomplishments of their students to be of better quality than private schools. Therefore, teachers' attitudes towards teaching in those schools are undoubtedly more serious and dedicated, which is believed to ensure the objectiveness and creditability for the research. In total, there are 30 teachers whose age ranges from 24 to 55 and females remarkably outnumber males with the ratio of 9 to 1.

2.2. Instruments

This study employed two main data collection instruments, namely a questionnaire and interviews.

The Questionnaire

Regarding the first instrument, the means of surveying by a questionnaire was chosen because the researcher desired to thoroughly investigate Thanh Hoa high school teachers' perceptions about collocation and collocation teaching in a large scale.

Answers from the questionnaire serve to provide valuable insight into the two research questions:

1. How do Thanh Hoa high school teachers perceive collocation?
2. What are their perceptions towards teaching collocations at high school?

In total, the questionnaire consists of 6 main questions. Questions 1 - 3 serve to give answer for the first research question, while the rest examine participants' views about the second research question.

Interviews

The second instrument employed to collect data is the semi-structured interview. A set of open-ended interview questions was designed to explore the perspectives of participants from multi-aspects.

The interview questions were organized into two main parts, namely “perceptions about collocation” and “perceptions about collocation teaching”. In the first part, participants are asked to share about how they define collocations in their own words. In the second part, participants are asked to share about their collocation teaching experience as well as how they view the impacts of learning and teaching collocations on learners' language competence.

2.3. Research methods

To acquire knowledge about high school English teachers' perceptions of collocations and their collocation teaching, and then provide valuable implications to improve the teachers' awareness of the fundamental role of collocation, the qualitative method was utilized to collect data.

Among a number of qualitative approaches, a case study approach was chosen as its nature fits what the research demands. Since the research participants are a particular group of people, specifically high school English teachers in Thanh Hoa, the case study approach is proved to be appropriate. Stake (1978) asserted that the case study is ideally suited to research where the aims are understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known” (p.6). Additionally, Yin (2003) affirmed that the case study approach is suited to deal with “how” and “why” questions.

Therefore, based on the setting, the aims and research questions of the study, it could be categorized into the research design of a case study.

2.4. Data collection procedure

The data collection procedure consists of three main stages as follows:

Stage 1 (instrument design): The researcher constructed a questionnaire and a set of interview questions with the reference to conceptual framework from literature review.

Stage 2 (instrument piloting): After sketching the questionnaires and interview questions, the researcher asked 3 teachers from two high schools to give her comments on the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Then, the questionnaire and the interview were revised and necessary changes were made. When the final versions of the instruments were produced, they were used for data collection. In the period of 2 weeks, the questionnaires were delivered to 30 participants who were high school English teachers in Thanh Hoa city.

Stage 3 (interview): Based on the results collected from the questionnaires, the researcher conducted interviews with 5 chosen participants who showed above-average understandings about the topic of research at their convenience. Each interview lasted for roughly 20 minutes.

3. Findings and Discussions

The study's results are presented under two major headings, including (1) *teachers' perceptions about collocation*; and (2) *teachers' perceptions about collocation teaching*. Furthermore, the findings of this study are thoroughly discussed in relation to literature in order to provide insights into the ways Thanh Hoa high school teachers perceive about collocation and collocation teaching.

3.1. Teachers' perception about collocation

3.1.1. Definition about collocation

3.1.1.1. Recognition of the arbitrary nature of collocations

The perception of teachers about the definition of collocation could be explored by examining their answers for the first question in the questionnaire. In this multiple-choice question, teachers had to select the definition of collocations among the three given options which are the definitions of collocations, idioms and compounds.

In general, roughly one-third of the teachers offered accurate understanding of collocations. The distribution of answers from participants is illustrated in the pie chart below.

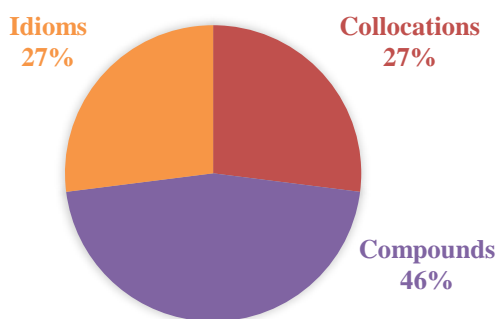


Figure 1. A summary of teachers' perceptions of collocation's definition

As can be clearly seen from the charts above, only 27% of the participants gave the correct answer when answering the question about the definition of collocations. To specify, the main difference among the three given options lies in the degree of fixedness of those types of word combinations. Therefore, the prevalent misunderstandings might have been caused by the wrong perception that collocations are fixed or even frozen expressions. 73% of the participants who failed to correctly recognize the nature of collocations might have been unaware of collocations' arbitrary nature.

This inaccurate perception is also clearly shown in the answers from the interviews. A certain number of teachers shared their belief that collocations are considerably fixed word combinations. For example, Teacher 2 reported that “*collocations are fixed phrases, which are used as a habit of native speakers.*” Sharing similar views, Teacher 4 stated that “*Collocations are groups of words that have to go together. For example, it has to be ‘make progress’ but not ‘take progress’.*”

3.1.1.2. Differences between collocations and other word combinations

The teachers’ ability to differentiate collocations with other word combinations is clearly reflected in their answers for question number 2 in the questionnaire. This question required participants to pick out 3 options which were collocations among the total of 14 options, which are compounds, idioms, transitional combinations and free combinations.

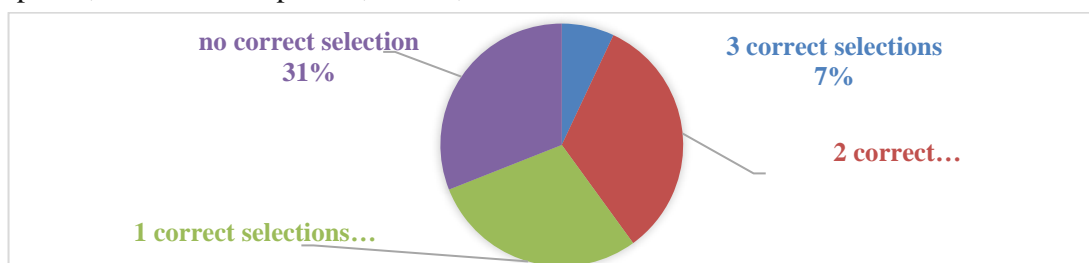


Figure 2. A summary of teachers’ perceptions of differences between collocations and other word combinations

As is clearly shown in the chart above, the percentage of participants who managed to pick all 3 correct options is the smallest (at 7% or 2 out of 30) while that of those who selected all wrong options is the greatest (at 31%). The main differences among the chosen types of word combinations lie in the degree of fixedness in the connection between words and the ability to reflect the meaning of the compositional elements in the phrases.

To discover the underlying reason for the misunderstandings, the teachers were asked to clarify the differences between collocations and idioms and collocations and compounds was purposefully included in the interviews.

Understandings about the difference between collocations and idioms: It is notable that all of the participants being interviewed realized the most distinctive feature that distinguish collocations from idioms.

Almost all of them mentioned about the role of compositional elements in contributing to the meaning of the whole phrase when comparing idioms and collocations. It became clear from an interview with Teacher 3 that “*The difference between collocations and idioms is in the meaning. Normally, in idioms we cannot guess the meaning of the whole phrase based on the meaning of compositional words, but with collocations we can*”.

Another difference between collocations and idioms that was pointed out in the interview with Teacher 5 is the distinction of connotation. She believed that “*They are different in connotation. For example, some collocations have academic meaning while most of idioms are informal.*” Although this discovery sounds true to some extent, it has not been backed up by any research of recognized scholars.

Understandings about the difference between collocations and compounds: When it comes to the question of how collocations differ from compounds, the majority of interview participants stated that compounds are more fixed than collocations. However, their understandings about compounds seemed to be limited as they could only give very brief answers about the topic and failed to give further details when being asked by the researcher.

Talking about compounds, Teacher 5 could only share that “*Compounds are quite fixed and they need to be learnt by heart.*”. Holding the same view, Teacher 4 defined compounds as “*The combinations of two nouns and the connection between words is quite fixed compared to collocations.*”.

3.1.2. Categorization of collocations

Findings about this issue can be gained from answers for the 3rd question in the questionnaire. Generally, the teachers showed limited understandings about the categorization of collocations. The proportions of number of correct answers for the question is illustrated in the bar chart below.

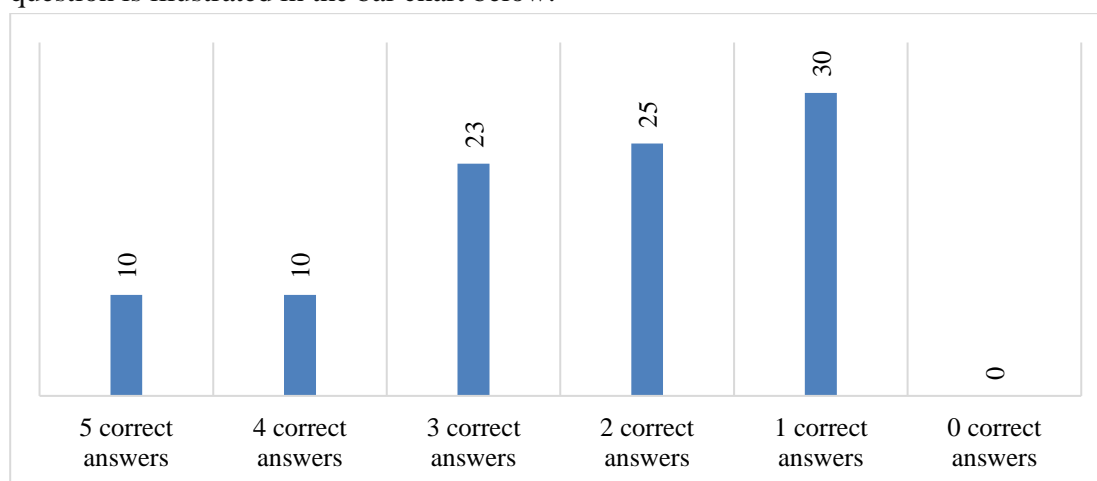


Figure 3. A summary of teachers' perceptions of collocation categorization

As can be seen, all the teachers had at least 1 correct answer. To clarify, while only a small number of the teachers provided 4 and 5 correct answers (10% each), the figures of the teachers having 2 and 3 correct answers are significantly greater, which reach 25% and 23% respectively. It is also noticeable that the largest group of teachers (30%) gave only 1 correct answer.

The fact that well over half of the research participants had only 1-3 correct answers revealed their little understandings about the categorizations of collocations. According to the interviews, Teacher 2 confessed that “*I do not have the habit of grouping types of collocations as I do not know much about the categorizations of collocations.*”. Sharing the same confusion, Teacher 3 said “*I am not sure about the types of collocations*”.

3.2. Teachers' perception about collocation teaching

3.2.1. The position of collocations in vocabulary teaching

To uncover how the research participants view the position of collocations in vocabulary teaching, the 4th question in the questionnaire was designed with reference to the framework of Nation (2001) about "what is involved in knowing a word" (p.2).

Generally, the teachers' responses in this question indicate that they viewed collocations as a less important aspect in knowing a word compared to others. The following table provides a summary of the teachers' perspectives regarding this matter.

Table 1. 7 aspects of a new vocabulary item ranked in terms of attention priority by teachers

Aspects	Mean	Rank
Meaning	1.92	1
Spelling	2.4	2
Pronunciation	2.54	3
Parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc.)	3.48	4
Synonyms, antonyms, etc	5.6	5
Connotation (formal, informal, positive, negative)	5.96	6
Collocation	6.03	7

The table above presents that meaning, spelling and pronunciation are the top three priorities that teachers in the research pay attention to when they teach vocabulary. It appears that in the perceptions of teachers, aspects related to *use* (collocations, parts of speech, and connotation) are not as important as those involving *meaning* (meaning and synonyms & antonyms) and *form* (spelling and pronunciation). It is remarkable that collocation was ranked bottom in the attention priority when being put in comparison with the other 6 aspects of vocabulary by the participants, which could reveal that the position of collocation in vocabulary teaching is still depreciated.

3.2.2. The importance and benefits of teaching collocations

The 5th question in the questionnaire designed in form of a Likert-scale question with a 5-point agreement scale is a means to make findings on the issue.

3.2.2.1. Language knowledge requires collocational knowledge

The first part of the Likert-scale question aims to study how teachers view the role that collocations play in English language.

Table 2. Teachers' views toward the position of collocations in English language

	Mean	SD
1. Collocations appear densely in English language	3.87	0.994
2. Collocational knowledge is a fundamental part of language knowledge	3.95	1.074

The data analysis shows that the respondents generally agreed that collocations take a great proportion in the language and thus collocational knowledge is one of the prerequisites for the accomplishment of language knowledge.

3.2.2.2. Efficient language acquisition requires collocational knowledge

The next two statements revolve around how the ability to chunk words can promote efficient language acquisition

Table 3. Teachers' views toward the role of collocations in facilitating language acquisition

	Mean	SD
3. Language acquisition happens more efficiently when words are learned in chunks	3.83	0.685
4. Only when learners can chunk language successfully do they truly understand how language works	3.93	0.583

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean of 3.83 indicates that most of the teachers agreed on the ideas that learning words in chunks makes language acquisition happen more efficiently. Moreover, they showed an agreement with the belief that the success in chunking language can lead to the true understandings about the way language works, since the mean of 3.93 nearly arrives at 4 which means “agree”.

3.2.2.3. Fluent language use requires collocational knowledge

In the next 6 statements, the positive impacts of collocations on learners' language proficiency, especially on four language skills, are emphasized.

Table 4. Teachers' views toward the role of collocations in improving learners' language proficiency

	Mean	SD
5. Collocational knowledge can improve learners' language fluency	4.25	0.848
6. Collocational knowledge can improve learners' language accuracy	3.89	0.993
7. Collocation can be one of the most noticeable aspect to differentiate between native speakers and non-native speakers	4	1.082
8. Collocations play an essential role in reading competency	3.89	0.95
9. Collocations play an essential role in listening competency	3.95	0.968
10. Collocations play an essential role in writing competency	4.42	0.616
11. Collocations play an essential role in speaking competency	4.09	0.779

Data from Table 4 indicates that despite the variety in the answers, the teachers shared the belief that collocations can help to make improvements on learners' language fluency and accuracy, especially fluency whose mean is well above 4.

Furthermore, they came to the agreement with the idea that the mastery of collocations can be the sign that helps distinguish native and non-native speakers, although the SD of above 1 shows the diversity in opinions of the teachers about this matter. This idea was also mentioned in the answer of Teacher 1 in the interview, as she believed that the conventional errors in applying Vietnamese thinking in using English could be prevented by equipping oneself with more English collocations. She said *“learners with sufficient knowledge about collocations can produce language in a more native-like way and thus avoid using Vietlish.”*

As far as the roles of collocations in enhancing the four language skills are concerned, the respondents generally reached a consensus on the idea that collocations greatly benefit the development of those skills. Remarkably, the data from Table 3.7 discloses that their acknowledgement with the impacts of collocations on productive skills is greater than with those on receptive skills. Notably, the highest mean of 4.42 coupled with the lowest SD of 0.616 make it clear that the effect of collocations on writing skill is the most recognizable to the teachers. Teacher 2 also believed that *“Collocations have the greatest impact on students’ writing competency. Students who are good at collocations are often proficient in writing skill.”* In terms of speaking competency, Teacher 3 has pointed out that students can *“produce chunks of words more quickly in speaking and thus their fluency is improved significantly”*. Concerning listening competency, the teachers also noticed some positive impacts of collocations on this skill of English language, as Teacher 1 believed that *“Students who are equipped with collocational knowledge can catch more words and understand the content better”*.

3.2.2.4. Teaching collocations is necessary

The last two statements in the Likert-scale question involve the necessity to prioritize collocation teaching and the teachers showed acknowledgement for the importance of teaching collocations as follows.

Table 5. Teachers’ views toward the necessity of teaching collocations

	Mean	SD
12. Obtaining more new and rare words is less beneficial to learners than transforming already-known words into a great number of collocations	3.06	0.72
13. The more frequently learners are taught English collocations, the more accurately they can use collocations	4.23	.728

What data from Table 5 reveals is that teachers kept a neutral stance towards the belief that turning the vocabulary resources into numerous collocations is more beneficial than acquiring more new and rare words. However, the mean of 4.23 proved that they reached high agreement with the opinion that the frequent teaching of collocations can result in learners’ more accurate use of this part of language.

3.2.3. Methods of teaching collocations

The following table illustrates how the teachers perceive the effectiveness of 5 methods of teaching collocations.

Table 6. *Five methods of teaching collocations ranked in terms of effectiveness by teachers*

Methods	Mean	Rank
Explicit teaching	1.85	1
Input enhancement	2.83	2
Output enhancement	3.1	3
Dictionaries	3.6	4
Concordances	3.7	5

As is clearly shown in the table above, according to the perspectives of teachers in the research, explicit teaching is the most effective method while using concordances is the method that was rated as the least effective among the five. This is explicable because using concordances, a method of analyzing language by studying structures and lexical patterns found in digital database, in teaching might be a novel concept to teachers in less developed areas like Thanh Hoa city because a number of teachers in such areas are not very willing to apply information and communication technology into teaching practice.

According to the result of the questionnaire, the majority of the teachers answered that they teach collocations explicitly along the way they introduce new words. Besides, many of them highlight the useful and worth-learning collocations in reading texts for students as a method of input enhancement. It is understandable why the two methods become the favorite of the research participants. The underlying reasons might come from the fact that they are both time-saving and resource-saving. Moreover, those teaching methods are not too demanding for the English level of students.

3.2.4. Perceived difficulties when integrating collocational knowledge into syllabus at high school

All of the interviewed teachers agreed on the fact that it is necessary to teach collocational knowledge in English classes at high school or even as early as secondary school. However, there comes some challenges that both teachers and students might encounter when collocations become an integral part of syllabus for English classes.

First of all, the teachers reported that time was a problem the matter of time restriction, with only 3 periods included for English lessons per week at school and each period lasting for only 45 minutes. With that limited amount of time, the fact that there is a great deal of knowledge to cover renders it difficult for teachers to add more teaching

content about collocations into their lessons. Teacher 3 reported that *“For normal classes at school, teachers do not have enough time to introduce collocations, so they need extra time to help students with this”*.

The second problem is the insufficient understandings about collocations of high school teachers. Some of them admitted their lack of understandings about the nature of collocations in the interviews. They also revealed that many of high school teachers in less developed areas might not even be aware that there is a part of English language called “collocations”. In the interview with Teacher 2, she said *“As I notice, there are quite a lot of questions about collocations in the mock tests for entrance exam to university these days and teachers do not know how to explain these questions and just directly give students the answers. Many teachers are not aware that in English language there is a great part about something called ‘collocations’”*.

Another challenge when it comes to incorporating collocational knowledge into English classes at high school is the teachers’ wrong assumption that collocational knowledge is only suitable for students of high level in English. Some teachers stated in the interviews that collocations are regarded as advanced knowledge that requires a good command in English to comprehend. For example, Teacher 6 believed teaching collocations in a class of varied language proficiency would be very difficult because collocational knowledge was more comprehensible to advanced learners. Therefore, students who are not well-equipped with a sufficient amount of knowledge about the English language might find it quite overwhelming for their comprehension.

4. Conclusion

It could be generally concluded that the understandings of Thanh Hoa high school teachers about collocations remains surficial; or in other words, they showed the lack of adequate knowledge about this fundamental part of English language while the findings of the research revealed their understandings about other types of word combinations. Regarding the teachers’ perception about teaching collocations at high school, their attitudes toward this matter were generally positive. Teachers in the study widely acknowledge the prevalence of collocations in the English language and their role in facilitating language acquisition. In addition, they showed great recognition for the importance of learning collocations in enhancing four language skills, especially for writing skill. Although an overall agreement on the need to prioritize collocation teaching was found among the teachers, collocation was still ranked bottom in terms of attention priority in their teaching when being put in comparison with other aspects of vocabulary. To mitigate the negative impacts that the teachers' insufficient understandings about collocations and their related issues may cause, there is an ultimate need for further professional training for high school teachers in Thanh Hoa city in particular and high school teachers in less developed areas in Vietnam in general. Besides, textbook

designers and syllabus designers should take the issue of collocation teaching into consideration accordingly. They need to include more practice exercises and in-class activities involving collocations. Secondly, despite the wide acknowledgement about the necessity of collocation teaching, teachers in Thanh Hoa city still paid inadequate attention to collocations in their teaching practice. Thus, there is an urge to raise the teachers' awareness about giving more priority for collocation teaching in formal English classes at high school, because it can help students to become efficient language learners and fluent language users.

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