

Analysing English Collocation Usage and Errors in Cambodian Students' Essay Writing: Insights and Implications

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ABSTRACT

English has become the dominant global language, and the accurate use of collocations is a key component of language proficiency. In Cambodia, the role of collocation knowledge in English writing remains underexplored. This qualitative study employed a descriptive design to examine grammatical collocation use among 13 Cambodian students through their essay writing. The primary aim was to identify both the types of grammatical collocations produced and the errors made in their usage. The analysis revealed that the most commonly used collocation type was *Preposition + Noun*, followed by *Noun + Preposition*. Less frequent patterns included *Noun + To-infinitive* and *Adjective + Preposition*, while *Adjective + That-clause* and *Verb + Adverb* were rarely found. In terms of accuracy, *Preposition + Noun* yielded the highest number of errors (12), followed by *Noun + Preposition* (5). Other types showed minimal or no errors. These findings highlight the students' struggles with common collocation forms, particularly those involving prepositions. The most frequent source of error was interlingual transfer (88.45%), indicating influence from the native language. Other contributing factors included the learning environment (84.60%), intralingual transfer (53.80%), and communication strategies (50%). The study underscores the need for explicit instruction in collocation use, particularly in high-error patterns like *Preposition + Noun*. Addressing error sources such as native language interference can enhance students' collocational competence in academic writing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is crucial for sharing information and interacting with others, as people are born with unique differences. Human perceptions are shaped by the language their society uses for communication, which is influenced by factors like geography, culture, population, and environmental conditions (Sapir, 1929). Language also varies based on social attributes like class, ethnicity, and gender, as well as the social environment. People use language for various purposes, including sharing thoughts, emotions, and views, exchanging information, conducting business, advancing science, and transferring technology

(Trudgill, 2000). The diversity of languages presents a challenge in transferring one language into another. The four primary English language skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are essential for effective communication, with listening aiding understanding, speaking, writing, and sharing thoughts (Harmer, 2007). Writing is often the most used skill in learning and education, as it consolidates knowledge and aids in organizing thoughts in a clear, structured manner.

Writing is a crucial communication method that enables individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and knowledge. It is a progressive process, involving initial planning, expression, and revisions. Writing is not a single step, but a multi-stage process that is integral to human life, as per Oshima & Hogue (2007). Writing is the most challenging task for L2 learners, as it involves formulating and structuring ideas, conveying them into coherent text, and addressing both higher-order processes like planning and organization, and lower-order concerns like spelling, punctuation, and lexical selection, which is exacerbated when learners have limited language competence (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Writing is the most challenging task for L2 learners, requiring sophisticated skills like planning, organization, and spelling, which are exacerbated when learners have limited language competence).

Students with a strong vocabulary are better equipped to write academic essays, as they can understand others' expressions and express ideas clearly. Limited lexical knowledge can hinder writing tasks (Dhuli, Lamo, & Larsari, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for students to understand word connections and related terms. To write effectively, students require a broad vocabulary, as it is a crucial part of language proficiency and forms the basis for speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Mastering vocabulary is also essential for understanding English collocations, as they are also part of vocabulary.

Collocations are crucial for expressing ideas naturally, but can be challenging for language learners due to varying word pairings. They can be categorized into grammatical and lexical collocations, with grammatical collocations consisting of a main word and a preposition, and lexical collocations being formed from combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Misuse can lead to misunderstandings and awkward language (Benson et al., 1986). According to O'Dell & McCarthy (2017) Mastering collocations is crucial for accurate word usage, reducing mistakes, and improving speech and writing sound. It allows for varying language, avoiding overused words, and improving exam performance. It also allows for creative deviations from standard language patterns. English language learners face difficulties in choosing appropriate words for essays, as certain words are often linked or paired with others. Collocation errors can occur due to factors such as mother tongue interference, lack of collocational concepts, interlingual or intra-lingual transfer, paraphrase, and a lack of collocational knowledge (Hashemi, Azizinezhad, & Dravishi, 2011).

In the context of Cambodian students at the English Study Program at the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum, they are facing challenges in mastering the proper use of collocations in writing. Students often struggle with lexical and grammatical collocations, leading to unintended meanings and miscommunication. They also lack knowledge of correct word pairings within collocations, which is crucial for coherent and well-structured texts. This issue is similar to a study by Namvar & Ibrahim (2014), which found learners struggled with both lexical and grammatical collocations, with cultural differences between the target language and the native language causing odd lexical collocations.

In addition to theoretical studies, numerous studies have been conducted worldwide also demonstrated the significance of collocation knowledge for learners' writing performance. For instance, some previous studies conducted by Hashemi et al. (2011), Thi Bui (2021), My & Thao (2023), Hong et al. (2022), Duong & Nguyen (2021) on the context of Vietnamese students. These studies examine the use of collocations in students' academic writing to gather information about the commonly used types of collocations, the errors made, and the underlying causes of those errors. Another study by Boonraksa & Naisena (2022) on the analysis of collocation errors among English and Business English students of Thai at Northern Rajabhat University, focusing on error levels, the influence of L1 and L2 transfer, and differences based on proficiency levels.

Besides, There are also several studies have been conducted on Indonesian students context by Sari & Gulö (2019), Prasetyo, Isnaini T R, & Fitrianiingsih (2007), Lateh et al. (2021), Handayani & Angelina (2020), Fadlilah (2016), and Rahman (2020). These studies also examine the use of collocations in students' academic writing, aiming to gather insights into the most commonly used types of collocations, the errors students make with collocations, and the causes of these mistakes. Other studies on the context of Chinese and Taiwan students, which the study by Chen (2017) focuses on the use of collocations by learners at different proficiency levels and their awareness of low-frequency collocations, while the study by Wu (2021) focuses on how Taiwanese students used a corpus to learn collocation patterns for change-of-state verbs in their essay writing and examines their learning outcomes and perceptions.

Based on the problems discussed above, further research was needed to examine students' collocation production, types of collocational errors, and the factors that contributed to grammatical errors in collocation use in essay writing. Although several studies had explored these aspects, they had focused on different contexts. However, research specifically addressing Cambodian students remained limited.

Therefore, this study aimed to identify the types of collocations and collocational errors produced by Cambodian students in their essay writing. Additionally, the researcher utilized Korpus Nusantara (KORTARA) to analyze students' collocation use, as the corpus linguistics approach represented a significant advancement in language learning and research. This approach had gained considerable attention from language researchers, as it played a crucial role in supporting language learning and research in higher education. Given the rapid development of digital technology, integrating corpus linguistics was essential for achieving more efficient and data-driven results (J.R & Ermanto, 2023).

2. METHODS

This section outlines the research type, participants, research instruments, and data analysis procedures.

2.1. Research type

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative method, which is a kind of method that can be used to investigate various aspects of the social world, including daily life, participants' experiences, social processes, institutions, discourses, and relationships. Descriptive studies focus on providing a detailed description of a situation, problem, or topic, rather than trying to change anything (Mason, 2002). They systematically outline a situation, problem, phenomenon, service, or program, providing insights into aspects such as living conditions or attitudes towards a particular issue (Kumar, 2018). The researcher used descriptive qualitative research to analyze the use of collocations in students' academic writing to understand the most common types of collocations, the errors they make, and the reasons behind those errors. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the social world and its implications for understanding and addressing issues.

2.2. Participants

This research took place at the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum in Cambodia, focused on students in the Department of English for Education, specifically seventh-semester students which consisted of 13. The study was conducted to examine their ability to produce language within an academic context. The seventh-semester students were chosen due to their advanced studies and prior exposure to relevant subjects, providing them with foundational knowledge and skills. This approach allows the study to target individuals with a deeper understanding of writing theories and practices, making their insights valuable for the research objectives.

2.3. Research instruments

This study uses a writing test, questionnaire, and interview to gather data on students' use of English collocations in essay writing. The test requires students to write an expository essay on three topics: regular exercise, technology in learning, and reading books. The test aims to provide authentic samples of students' written language, allowing for analysis of both types and incorrect collocation usage. To minimize external influences, the test will be administered in a controlled environment, ensuring students rely on their own knowledge without external resources. This approach ensures the data reflects students' actual collocation competence. Following the test, students' essays will be collected and analyzed to identify the types of collocations produced and errors. Results will be categorized based on established collocation types by Brown (2006). This approach ensures that the data reflects students' actual collocation competence.

The second instrument of this research is questionnaire. This tool is widely used by many researchers. It is employed by individuals, researchers, private and public organizations, and even governments. A questionnaire contains a series of questions arranged in a specific order, either printed or typed on one or more forms (Kothari, 2004). Thus, the questionnaire of this study is designed to find out the factors that cause errors in producing collocation in essay writing based on the theory proposed by Brown (2006). The Yes/No questions was used for this study questionnaire.

2.4. Data analysis techniques

The data collected from the writing test which is about the types of collocation and the collocation error types, will be analyzed accordingly to the collocation types theory by Benson et al. (2010). Specifically, the researcher will use the "KORTARA" corpus to evaluate the proximity or frequency of word co-occurrence. A higher frequency in the corpus indicates that the words are more natural or have greater value. The corpus frequency results will help the researcher find out the types of collocation as well as the errors that the students produce in writing essay.

On the other hand, the questionnaire data was used to analyzed using (Sugiyono, 2013) formula, $P = \frac{f}{R} \times 100$, where P represents percentage, f represents response frequency, and R represents the total number of respondents. The researcher used Excel for data analysis, following Marshall & Rossman (2016) steps: organizing data, familiarizing with it, creating case summaries, coding data, developing interpretations, exploring alternative interpretations, and composing a final report or presenting findings in another format. This quantitative analysis ensures comprehensive and accurate data analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The findings of this study provided insights into the grammatical collocations and errors made by EFL students in the seventh semester of the English Education Study Program at the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum.

3.1.1. Types of grammatical collocation produced by Cambodian EFL students

Table 1. Types of grammatical collocation produced by the students

Types of grammatical collocation	Frequency of text 1	Frequency of text 2
Preposition + Noun	362	376
Noun + Preposition	297	256
Noun + To-infinitive	57	72
Noun + That-clause	37	33
Adjective + Preposition	29	25
Adjective + To-infinitive	2	13
Adjective + That-clause	0	1
Verb + Adverb	21	2

The data from text 1 reveal the overall frequency of various grammatical collocations produced by students. Preposition + Noun was the most commonly used collocation type, with 362 occurrences, indicating students' familiarity and comfort with this structure. Noun + Preposition followed with 297 occurrences, demonstrating a thorough understanding and application of this form. Noun + To-infinitive was used 57 times, indicating moderate usage, whereas Noun + That-clause appeared 37 times, indicating less emphasis on this structure. Adjective + Preposition appeared 29 times, while Predicated Adjective + To-infinitive was used twice, indicating relatively limited proficiency. Finally, Adjective + That-clause and Verb + Adverb had the fewest occurrences, with only 0 and 21, respectively.

Moreover, the data from text 2 show varying levels of usage for different types of grammatical collocations. Preposition + Noun emerged as the most commonly used structure, with 376 occurrences, indicating students' greater familiarity and comfort with this form. Noun + Preposition followed closely with 256 occurrences, indicating that the students also understand this structure. In contrast, Noun + To-infinitive appeared 72 times, indicating moderate usage, whereas Noun + That-clause was produced 33 times, indicating less frequent use. Furthermore, Adjective + Preposition was used 25 times, and Predicated Adjective + To-infinitive 13 times, indicating relatively low levels of familiarity. Adjective + That-clause and Verb + Adverb were the least common collocation types, with only one and two occurrences, respectively, indicating significant challenges or limited exposure to these structures.

3.1.2. Types of grammatical collocation errors made by Cambodian EFL students

Table 2. Overall collocation error types produced by EFL Cambodian students

Types of collocation errors	Collocation error frequency
Noun + preposition	5
Noun + to infinitive	1
Noun+ that-clause	0
Preposition + noun	12
Adjective + preposition	0
Predicated adjective + to infinitive	0
Adjective+ that-clause	0
Verb + adverb	0

The analysis of grammatical collocation errors in students' essay writing revealed several patterns in collocation use. The errors were categorized into eight types: Noun + Preposition, Noun + To-Infinitive, Noun + That-Clause, Preposition + Noun, Adjective + Preposition, Predicated Adjective + To-Infinitive, Adjective + That-Clause, and Verb + Adverb (Benson et al., 2010).

The most frequent type of error occurred in Preposition + Noun collocations. Many students struggled with the correct use of prepositions and verb forms following prepositions. Examples included "creating a serene and spiritual atmosphere in the pagodas," which should have been "at the pagodas." Errors in verb forms were also observed, such as "by provide content" instead of "by providing content" and "by read novels" instead of "by reading novels." Additionally, there were errors like "better in speaking and writing," which should have been "better at speaking and writing." These mistakes suggest difficulty in recognizing appropriate prepositions and verb forms in prepositional phrases, possibly due to structural differences between Khmer and English.

Errors in Noun + Preposition collocations were the second most frequent type. For example, some students used "ability for improve knowledge" instead of "ability to improve knowledge" and "welcoming for both monks and visitors" instead of "welcoming to both monks and visitors." Similarly, phrases like "integration in technology" instead of "integration of technology" and "benefits in using technology" instead of "benefits of using technology" were found. The confusion between prepositions such as for and to was likely influenced by the students' first language, as in Khmer, these prepositions may not function in the same way as in English.

Errors in Noun + To-Infinitive collocations were much less frequent. One example was "ability expand horizons" instead of "ability to expand horizons." This error suggests an influence from Khmer, where prepositions like *to* are sometimes omitted after nouns.

No errors were recorded in Noun + That-Clause collocations, indicating that students may have a stronger grasp of this structure. Similarly, no errors were identified in Adjective + Preposition, Predicated Adjective + To-Infinitive, Adjective + That-Clause, and Verb + Adverb collocations.

3.1.3. Factors cause errors in collocation production by EFL students at the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum

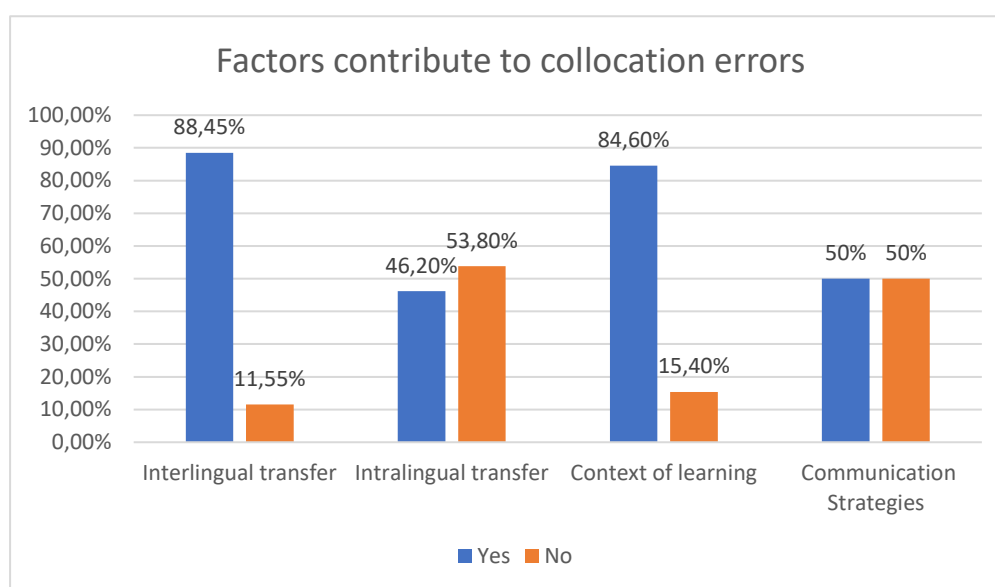


Figure 1. Overall factors cause errors in collocation production by the EFL students

The questionnaire results revealed that several factors contribute to errors in collocation production among EFL students, with both contributing and non-contributing responses providing useful insights. Interlingual transfer emerged as the most significant factor, with an overwhelming majority of students (88.45%) citing it as a major influence on their errors, emphasizing the importance of native language interference. In contrast, only 11.55% of students reported no influence of interlingual transfer, indicating a stronger dependence on L1 than other factors.

The context of learning was also highly significant, with 84.60% of participants agreeing that it contributes to their errors, which is slightly lower than the proportion for interlingual transfer. Meanwhile, 15.40% of students reported no impact from the learning context, indicating that some students are better able to navigate challenges in the classroom. Compared to these two factors, intralingual transfer had a more balanced impact, with 53.80% of students acknowledging its role in their errors, while a nearly identical 46.20% did not see it as a contributing factor. This implies that misapplication of English rules may not be as universally difficult as native language interference or the learning context.

The most evenly distributed responses came from communication tactics, with 50% of students acknowledging that they had guessed or simplified their language, which could have led to more mistakes. This group has a comparative predisposition to value precision and caution, as seen by the remaining 50% reporting no reliance on these tactics. Overall, the results show that intralingual transfer and communication techniques have more balanced or diverse effects on collocation errors, but interlingual transfer and the learning context have a greater influence.

3.2. Discussion

This study examined the grammatical collocations used by seventh-semester EFL students at the University of Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum. The findings showed that *preposition + noun* combinations were the most frequently used, followed by *noun + preposition*, *noun + to-infinitive*, and *noun + that-clause* collocations. Less commonly produced were *adjective + preposition* and *verb + adverb*, while *predicated adjective + to-infinitive* and *adjective + that-clause* collocations were rarely used.

These results partly align with Paris et al. (2023), who found that *noun + preposition*, *verb + preposition*, and *adjective + preposition* were the most frequently used collocations among Asian EFL learners, though they reported no use of *preposition + noun* structures. In contrast, studies by Ervansyah et al. (2019) and Paris et al. (2023) highlighted *verb + adverb* as the most dominant collocation type, followed by *noun + that-clause* and *predicated adjective + to-infinitive*. These differences suggest that Cambodian students exhibit distinct usage patterns, likely influenced by specific teaching practices that emphasize certain collocation types, particularly *preposition + noun* and *noun + preposition*.

Underused collocations, such as *noun + to-infinitive*, *noun + that-clause*, and *adjective + that-clause*, may reflect either insufficient exposure or instructional emphasis. The minimal use of *verb + adverb* and *predicated adjective + to-infinitive* forms implies a lack of familiarity or perceived difficulty. These findings are consistent with Alsulayyi (2015), who reported avoidance of more complex collocation types, such as *adjective + that-clause*, by Saudi EFL learners due to proficiency limitations.

In terms of error patterns, the most frequent mistakes occurred in *preposition + noun* and *noun + preposition* combinations. Fewer errors were observed in *noun + to-infinitive*, and no errors were recorded for the remaining categories. This may indicate greater familiarity with or avoidance of these structures. These findings differ from Sari and Gulö (2019), who found that *verb + noun* collocations posed the greatest challenge for Indonesian EFL learners. Similarly, Tungyai and Rakpa (2021) identified *adjective + preposition*, *preposition + noun*, and *noun + preposition* as the most error-prone among Thai university students. Such variation points to contextual differences in curriculum design and teaching methods.

Concerning error sources, this study adopted Brown's (2006) classification, which includes interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context-related errors, and communication strategies. Interlingual transfer emerged as the dominant factor (88.45%), highlighting strong L1 influence. Contextual factors, such as instructional methods and materials, were also significant (84.60%). Intralingual transfer, accounting for 53.80%, indicated issues like overgeneralization. Communication strategies, such as guessing, were the least influential (50%).

These findings mirror those of Setiarini (2018), who found that Indonesian learners struggled with translating native-language collocations into English, primarily due to interlingual transfer. Other studies (e.g., Wicaksono, 2014; Hong et al., 2011; Namvar & Ibrahim, 2014; Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022) have similarly identified intralingual transfer as a key contributor to collocational errors. Taken together, these results underscore the importance of addressing both L1 interference and internal learning challenges to enhance collocational competence.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the types of grammatical collocations used by Cambodian EFL students, the common errors in their usage, and the underlying factors contributing to these mistakes in essay writing. The findings revealed significant variation in students' proficiency across collocation types. *Preposition + Noun* and *Noun + Preposition* structures were the most frequently used, reflecting moderate confidence, but also accounted for the highest number of errors. In contrast, complex forms like *Adjective + That-clause* and *Predicated Adjective + To-infinitive* were rarely used, suggesting either limited exposure or deliberate avoidance. Among the factors influencing collocational errors, interlingual transfer emerged as the most significant, followed by intralingual transfer and learning context, while communication strategies played a relatively minor role. Despite providing valuable

insights, the study was limited by its small sample size and focus on a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger, more diverse populations and explore collocation use in both spoken and written modalities. Additionally, examining the role of digital tools—such as corpus-based learning platforms—in developing collocational competence could offer innovative pedagogical insights. There is also a need to investigate the long-term effects of targeted instructional interventions designed to reduce collocation errors. Overall, this study underscores the importance of curriculum development that emphasizes underutilized and error-prone collocation types and encourages instructional strategies that reduce L1 interference while enhancing authentic language exposure.

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