

A STUDY ON THE DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING COLLOCATIONS FROM ENGLISH TO VIETNAMESE DURING THE TRANSLATION LEARNING PROCESS OF THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT DONG A UNIVERSITY

Võ Thị Thanh Trúc^a, Nguyễn Hồ Thúy Vy^b

Abstract:

This study investigates the challenges faced by third-year English majors at Dong A University in translating English collocations into Vietnamese. Emphasizing the role of collocations in natural and accurate translation, the study identifies common difficulties, types of collocation they often make mistakes, and the strategies they use when finding suitable Vietnamese equivalents. The study adopts a quantitative approach, gathering data from a survey completed by 76 students. The findings indicate that students frequently encounter difficulties in accurately interpreting the meanings of collocations and selecting suitable Vietnamese equivalents, particularly in cases involving prepositional combinations. Based on the results, the study recommends that teachers incorporate more collocation-focused exercises in translation lessons, provide real-life examples, and guide students in using reliable tools.

Keywords: *Difficulties, Translating collocations, Translating English to Vietnamese, Third-year English major students, Dong A University*

Rationale

In today's world, language serves as a crucial key for individuals, facilitating their integration and engagement with the global community. In the context of an increasingly integrated global economy, translators emerge as key players, facilitating cultural and informational exchange between nations.

Saroukhil, Ghalkhani, & Hashemi (2018, p. 101), mentioned that "translation is unavoidable in today's modern world" to emphasize on the importance of understading each other through translation. However, translation is a complex cognitive process that requires not only a profound understanding of both languages but also the ability to convey meaning, nuance, and idiomatic expressions accurately across linguistic boundaries. The transition from English to Vietnamese presents unique challenges, particularly when considering the structural, lexical, and cultural differences between the two languages. Among these challenges, translating collocations is one of the most significant, due to their polysemous nature and the capacity to convey hidden cultural meanings. Collocations may carry different meanings depending on the context of their

^a Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh, Trường Đại học Đông Á. email: trucvt @donga.edu.vn

^b Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh, Trường Đại học Đông Á. email: vy101307@donga.edu.vn

use, and often these meanings lack precise equivalents in the target language. Furthermore, collocations appear to be a challenging issue for second-language learners even for those who achieve a higher state of proficiency (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997). However, translation does not appear to be easy for university students, including translators. Obeidat and Sepora (2019) observed that while many students recognized the importance of collocation in translation, they tend to use inappropriate translation equivalents.

For these reasons, I have chosen “*A Study on the Difficulties in Translating Collocations from English to Vietnamese During the Translation Learning Process of Third-Year English Major Students at Dong A University*” as the topic for my research. This research was carried out to serve for the three following objectives. Firstly, the study aimed to identify the specific difficulties that third-year English major students encounter when translating collocations from English to Vietnamese during their translation learning process. Secondly, it examined the strategies and resources that third-year students currently use to translate collocations. Thirdly, the study proposed effective methods to improve students’ ability to translate collocations. The findings from this study not only provide valuable insights for both students and teachers into the obstacles in the translation process, but also contribute to the development of more effective teaching and learning methods in the field of translation. Ultimately, these insights aim to enhance students’ collocation translation skills and support the success of future translators.

Informants and research methodology

Informants

To support the research, the study concentrated on conducting a survey among third-year students majoring in English at Dong A University. The sample for this study was drawn from students from four classes, namely EL22A, EL22B, EL22C, and EL22D, all of whom were third-year English majors, totaling 76 students.

Research methodology

To investigate the challenges faced by third-year English major students at Dong A University when translating collocations from English to Vietnamese, this study employed a quantitative approach. To collect data, the researcher distributed a structured questionnaire to 76 third-year students. This method aims to assess the current status of students’ translation activities, identify specific difficulties, and explore the strategies and resources they use in their translation learning process. In addition, a descriptive approach was used to gain deeper insights into how these difficulties affect their translation performance and learning outcomes, thereby propose solutions to improve their ability to translate collocations in the translation course.

Results and discussions

The reality of awareness, difficulties, strategies and resources of third-year English major students at Dong A University when translating collocations

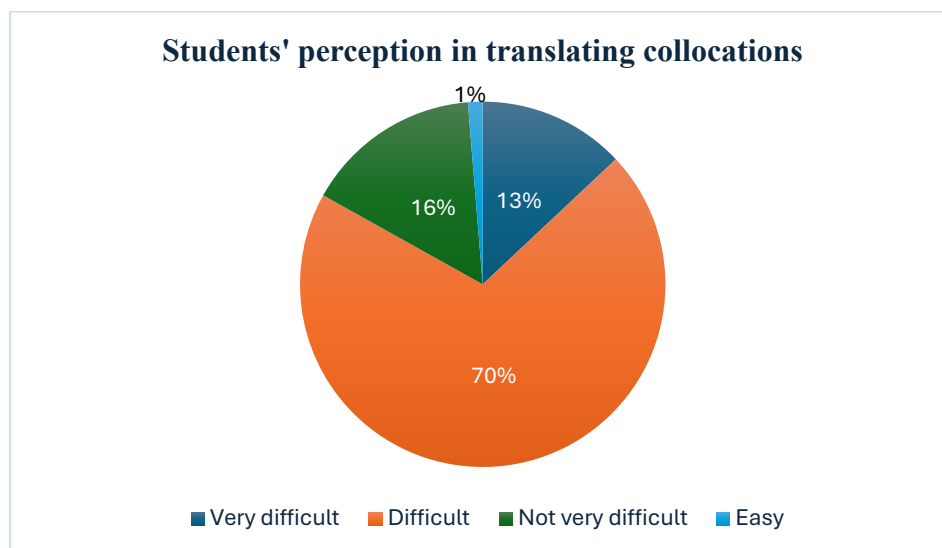


Figure 1. Students' perception in translating collocations

When asked about their challenges in translation, a majority of students approximately 83% reported struggling with this task. Of these, 70% classified the task as “difficult,” while 13% considered it “very difficult.” These figures indicate that the majority of students perceive collocation translation as a demanding skill that requires further improvement. In contrast, only 17% of students did not consider collocation in translation to be highly challenging. Among them, 16% found it “Not very difficult,” and merely 1% considered it “Easy.” This suggests that only a small fraction of students feel confident in their ability to translate collocations effectively. This finding indicates that difficulties in translating English collocations are widespread among third-year English majors at Dong A University.

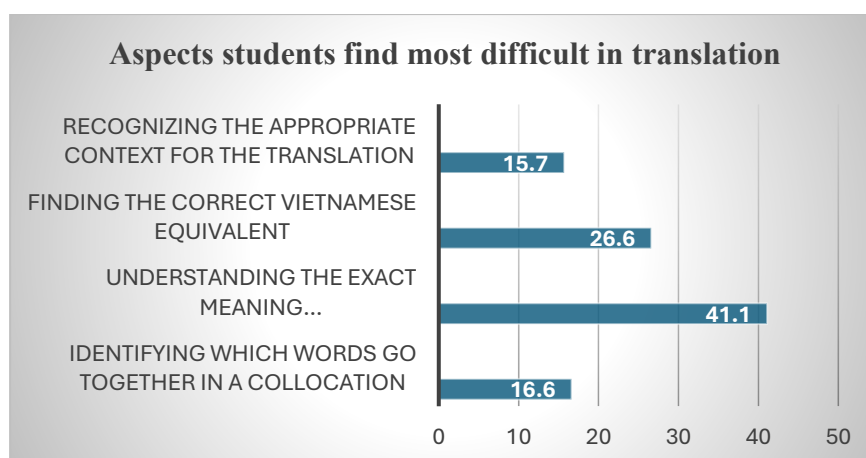


Figure 2. Aspects students find most difficult in translation

Overall, the chart highlights the various difficulties students encounter when translating English collocations into Vietnamese. These findings highlight the diverse challenges students face in translating English collocations into Vietnamese, ranging from difficulties in understanding the exact meaning to finding the correct equivalent and recognizing the appropriate context for translation.

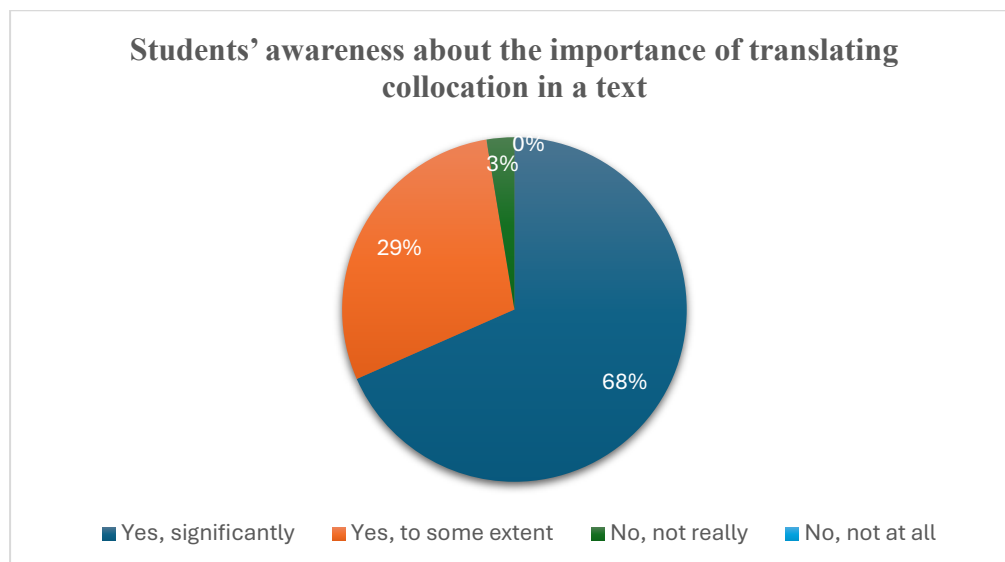


Figure 3. Students' awareness about the importance of translating collocation in a text

As shown in the chart, the data illustrates the extent to which the challenge of translating collocations affects students' translation learning, with 68% of respondents stating that this challenge significantly impacts their learning. Additionally, 29% of students reported that translating collocations affected their learning to some extent, suggesting that while they encountered difficulties, the impact was not overwhelming. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of respondents, approximately 3%, stated that this challenge did not significantly impact their learning. None of the students claimed that collocation difficulties had no impact at all. These findings underscore the prevalent difficulties students experience when translating collocations, with most acknowledging its effect on their learning process.

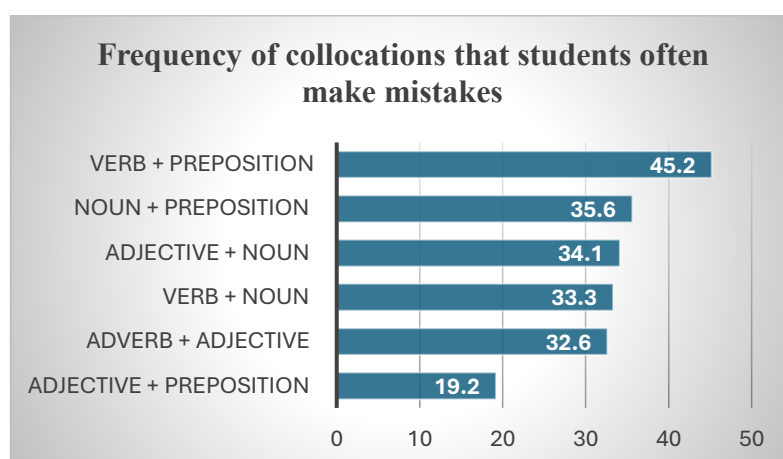


Figure 4. Frequency of collocations that students often make mistakes

The chart illustrates the frequency of collocations that students often make mistakes when translating. Among the six categories presented, the most frequent error occurs with verb + preposition combinations, accounting for 45.2% of the mistakes. This is followed by noun + preposition at 35.6%, and adjective + noun at 34.1%. Errors involving verb + noun and adverb + adjective are slightly lower, at 33.3% and 32.6% respectively. The least common mistakes are related to adjective + preposition combinations, which represent only 19.2%. Overall, these results indicate that students tend to make more mistakes with collocations involving prepositions.

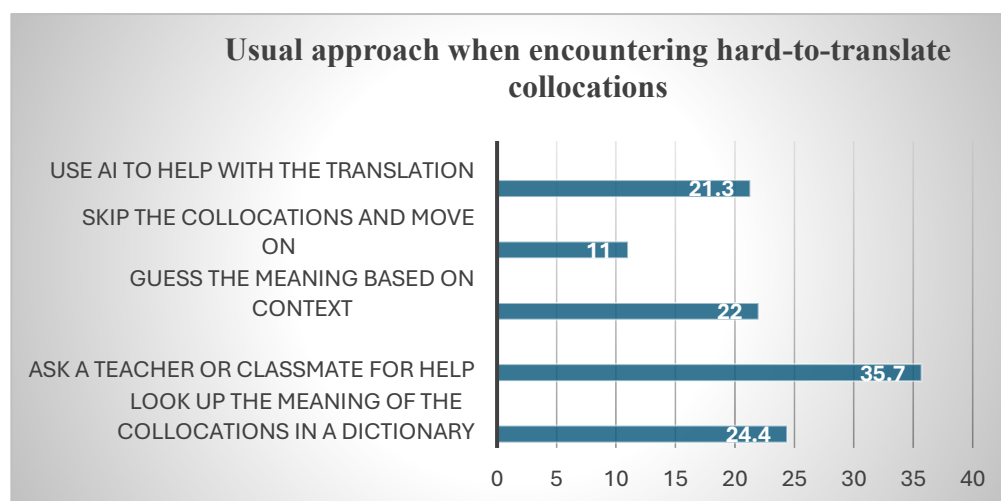


Figure 5. Usual approach when encountering hard-to-translate collocations

The data from the bar charts provide a clear view of how students tackle translation challenges, particularly with difficult collocations. The most common approach is asking teachers or classmates for help, accounting for 35.7%, followed by looking up collocations in a dictionary at 24.4%. Guessing the meaning based on context is another strategy used by 22% of students, while AI assistance is slightly less popular at 21.3%. A smaller portion, 11%, chooses to skip the collocations entirely.

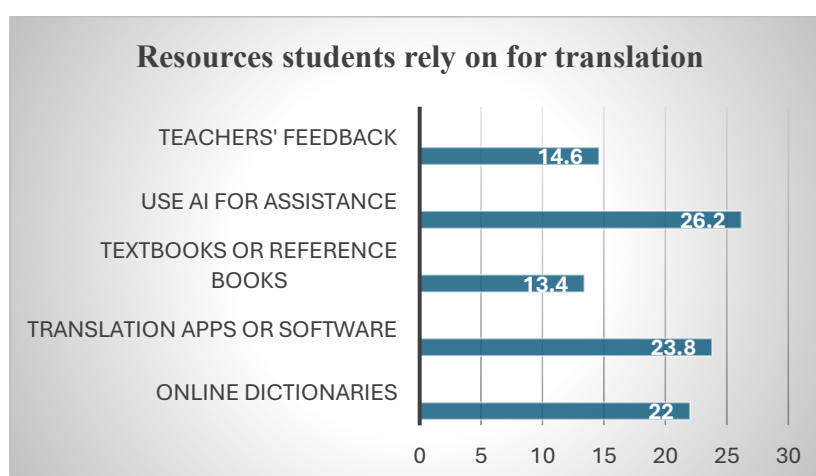


Figure 6. Resources students rely on for translation

In terms of translation resources, AI tools are the most frequently used, with 26.2% of students relying on them. Translation apps or software come next at 23.8%, closely followed by online dictionaries at 22%. Teachers' feedback is a resource for 14.6% of students, whereas textbooks or reference books are used the least, at 13.4%.

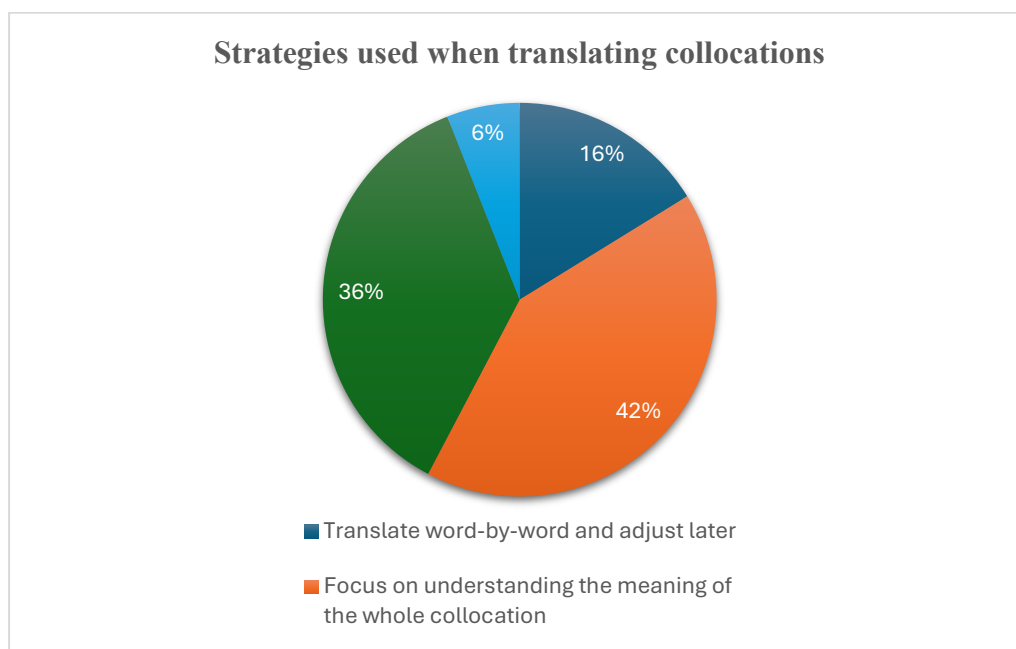


Figure 7. Strategies used when translating collocations

The chart provides a clear depiction of the different strategies students use when translating collocations. The most popular approach is focusing on the overall meaning of the collocation, which is chosen by 42% of students. Another commonly used strategy involves finding synonyms or alternative phrasing in Vietnamese, accounting for 36% of responses. Meanwhile, 16% of students prefer to translate word by word before making adjustments, indicating a structured approach to translation. The least favored strategy is breaking the collocation down into individual words and translating them separately, with only 6% of students choosing this method.

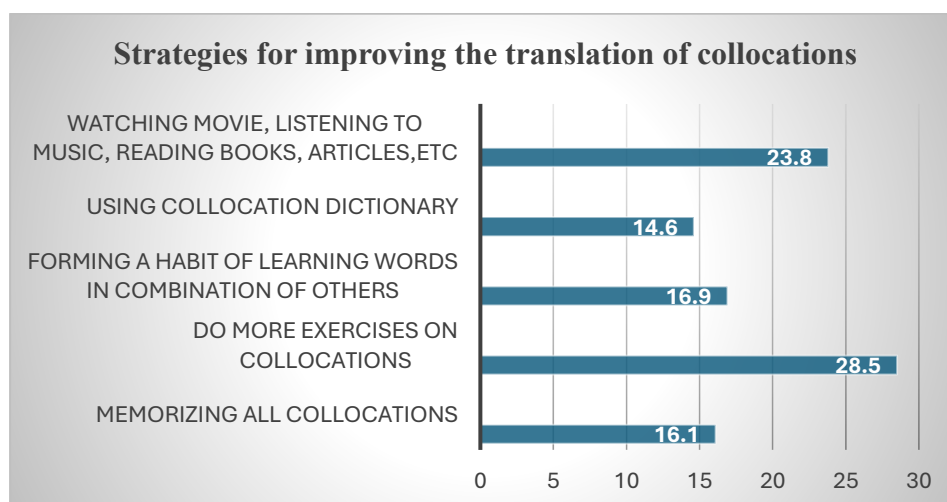


Figure 8. Strategies for improving the translation of collocations

The chart illustrates various strategies students adopt to enhance their translation of collocations. The most commonly adopted approach is doing more exercises on collocations, with 28.5% of students applying this method. Engaging with media, such as watching movies, listening to music, and reading books or articles, is also a popular strategy, chosen by 23.8% of respondents. Forming a habit of learning words in combination with others ranks third, with 16.9% of students practicing this technique. Memorizing all collocations is slightly less preferred, utilized by 16.1% of participants. The least favored method is using a collocation dictionary, with only 14.6% of students relying on this resource.

Some recommended practical solutions to improve the ability to translate collocations for third-year English major students

Drawing from the findings of this study and the strategies reported by students, several practical suggestions can be proposed to help learners translate English collocations into Vietnamese more effectively.

In order to address the problem of comprehending the precise meaning of collocations, which 41.1% of students stated was their greatest difficulty, educators can concentrate more on context-based learning. Using role-plays, short dialogues, or stories helps students see how collocations work in real situations. Encouraging learners to keep a vocabulary journal with meanings and example sentences also makes it easier for them to remember and use these expressions naturally.



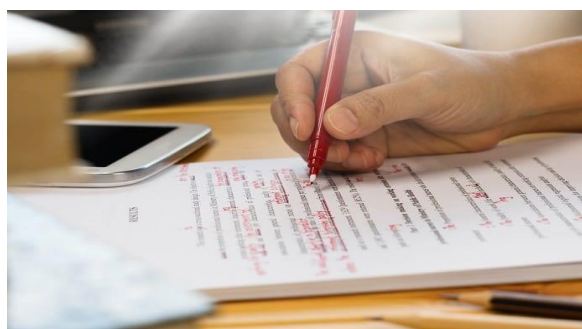
Picture 1. Short dialogues

Group discussions can be an effective to address the challenge of identifying the accurate Vietnamese equivalent, which was mentioned by 26.6% of students. After translating short English texts individually, students can work in groups to compare their choices and explain why they used certain Vietnamese expressions. This collaborative process helps learners notice more natural-sounding translations and understand different ways collocations can be interpreted. It also encourages critical thinking and raises awareness of cultural and contextual nuances in translation.

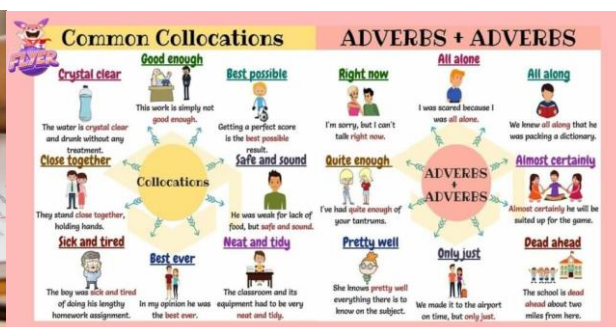


Picture 2. Group discussion

It is important to integrate structured collocation exercises more regularly into the translation curriculum. Given that a significant number of students (28.5%) identified “doing more exercises on collocations” as their preferred strategy, instructors should consider organizing activities based on different collocation types – such as verb + noun or adjective + preposition – and embedding these in relevant and realistic contexts. By working with meaningful examples, students are more likely to develop an intuitive sense of how collocations are used in everyday language.



Picture 3. Exercise



Picture 4. Collocation types

Another approach is to encourage learners to actively engage with authentic English-language media. Approximately 23.8% of participants mentioned that watching movies, listening to music, and reading books or articles helped them improve their collocation translation skills. Teachers can build on this by designing tasks that prompt students to identify and analyze collocations within real-life content—for example, by noting collocations from a specific film scene or news article. Weekly classroom activities based on excerpts from TED Talks or magazine columns can further reinforce this exposure and turn passive language input into purposeful learning.

**Picture 5. Ted Talks****Picture 6. Online English platforms**

The habit of regularly reviewing collocations also plays a key role in long-term retention. With 16.9% of students recognizing the value of consistent practice, educators might consider encouraging learners to keep personalized vocabulary journals or “collocation notebooks.” These can be organized thematically or structurally, allowing students to track their progress and revisit expressions over time.

**Picture 7. Collocation notebooks****Picture 8. Vocabulary journals**

By implementing these strategies in translation courses, educators can provide students with both the tools and habits necessary to approach collocation translation with greater confidence and proficiency.

Conclusions

This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by third-year English major students at Dong A University when translating collocations from English to Vietnamese, with the intention of providing valuable insights into the translation learning process. The findings of this study reveal that third-year English major students at Dong A University encounter various difficulties in translating collocations from English to Vietnamese, with the most common problems involving understanding the meaning of collocations and identifying appropriate Vietnamese equivalents. Particularly in cases involving prepositional combinations, which seemed to pose more problems than others. Another notable observation is the tendency among students to rely heavily on AI-based translation tools and word-for-word strategies, which can result in translations that lack fluency and naturalness. Based on the results, the study recommends that teachers

incorporate more collocation-focused exercises in translation lessons, provide real-life examples, and guide students in using reliable tools. These recommendations indicate the importance of strengthening students' awareness of collocations and equipping them with more effective translation techniques to support their development as competent translators.

References

- Ad Astra. (2022). *What makes a good translation good?* Retrieved October 27, 2024, from <https://ad-astrainc.com/blog/what-makes-a-good-translation-good>
- Al-Darawish, H. (1983). *Arabizing university education in Arabic, Jerusalem, Arab studies society. Cited in Hamdallah, R., Problems and approaches to translation with reference to Arabic. Language and translation*. J. King Saud University, 10, 23-38.
- Arnaud, P. J., & Savignon, S. J. (1997). Rare words, complex lexical units and the advanced learner. In J. Coady, & T. Huckin (Eds.), *Second language vocabulary acquisition* [e-book] (pp. 157-173). Cambridge University Press.
- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A course book on translation*. London: Routledge.
- Bell, R.T., & Candlin, C. (1991). *Translation and translating: Theory and practice*. London: Longman.
- Benfoughal, A. (2010). *Students' difficulties and strategies in translation: The case of third year students, Mentoury University Constantine* (Master's Thesis, University of Constantine).
- Benson, M., Benson, E., & Ilson, R. (1986). *The BBI dictionary of English word combinations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Barnwell (1980). *Introduction to Semantics and Translation*. High Wycombe: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Bui Tien Bao and Dang Xuan Thu. (1997). *Interpreting and Translation*. Retrieved October 9, 2024, from <http://www.ebook.edu.vn>
- Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical semantics* [e-book]. Cambridge University Press.
- Dai, G. (2009). The applications of keywords and collocation to translation-studies and teaching based on the translation corpora - A tentative research on the parallel corpus of 17th NCCPC report. *Translational Journal*, 13(3).
- Deuter, M., Greenan, J., Noble, J., & Phillips, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Oxford collocations dictionary for students of English*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Duff, A. (1989). *Translation*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Elhajahmed, M. S. (2017). Lexical and Textual Translation Problems Encountered by Palestinian Professional Diploma Students at the Islamic University of Gaza. *IUG Journal of Humanities Research*, 25(2), 1-13. Available at <https://search.emarefa.net/detail/BIM790338>
- Fakhoury, S. (1995). *Collocation in Interpretation from English into Arabic*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Yarmouk University.
- Farghal, M., & Obeidat, H. (1995, November). *Collocations: A neglected variable in EFL*. XXXIII(4), 316-330, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1995.33.4.315>
- Firth, J. R. (1957). *Papers in linguistics, 1934-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Fontenelle, T. (1992). Collocation acquisition from a corpus or from a dictionary: A comparison. *Conference proceedings of the 5th Euralex International Congress on Lexicography in Tampere*, (pp. 221-228). Tampere.
- Greenbaum, S. (1970). *Verb intensifiers in English: An experimental approach*. The Netherlands: The Hague Mouton.
- Ghazalah, H. (2004) Cross-Cultural Link in Translation (English-Arabic). In H. Ghazalah (Ed.), *Essays in Translation and Stylistics* (pp.79-115). Beirut: Dar El-Ilm LilMalayin. (Reprinted from: International Journal of Translation 14(1), 2002, pp.138-162.)
- Glaser, R. (1998). The stylistic potential of phraseological units in the light of genre analysis. In A. P. Cowie (Ed.), *Phraseology: Theory, analysis, and applications* (pp. 125- 143). Clarendon Press.
- Hartmann, R.R.K., & Stork, F. C. (1972). *Dictionary of language and linguistics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hatim, B., & Mason, I. (1990). *Discourse and the Translation*. London: Longman
- Hill, J. (2000). Revising Priorities: from grammatical failure to collocational success. In M .Lewis (ed.). *Teaching Collocation: Further Developments in the Lexical Approach* (pp. 47-69). London: Commercial Colour Press plc.
- Husni, R., & Newman, D. (2015). *Arabic-English-Arabic Translation: Issues and strategies*. London: Routledge.
- Jabbari, J. M., & Kavooosi, N. (2017). An investigation into the collocations used in the translation of official documents from Persian into English. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, 3(2), 15-21.
- James, C. (2013). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315842912>
- Kharma, N. and Hajjaj, A. (1997). *Errors among Arabic Speakers: Analysis and Remedy*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.
- Lan, M. (2015). *Insight into students' use of lexical collocation in Vietnamese-English translation*. 69-82.
- Lewis, M. (2000). Learning in the lexical approach. In M. Lewis, *Teaching collocation - further development in the lexical approach* (pp. 155-185). Hove: Language Teaching Publications.
- Mounya, A. (2010). *Teaching lexical collocation to raise proficiency in foreign language writing*.
- McCarthy, M. (1990). *Vocabulary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meidasari, V. E. (2007). *Strategies of translating collocation*. 26-30,
- Munday, J. (2001). *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications*. Routledge.
- Nesselhauf, N. (2005). Collocations in a Learner Corpus. (E. Tognini-Bonelli, & W. Teubert, Eds.) *Studies in Corpus Linguistics*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.14>
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. New York: Prentice Hall International.
- Obeidat, A., & Sepora, T. (2019, September). Collocation translation errors from Arabic into English: A case study of naguib mahfouz's novel "Awlad Haratina". *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language*, 2(7), 129-138.
- O'Dell, F., & McCarthy, M. (2017). *English collocations in use advanced*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Parks, T. (2010, April 25). *Why translators deserve some credit*. *The Observer*. Retrieved October 12, 2024, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/25/book-translators-deserve-credit>

- Peter, N. (1988). *Translation and culture. A textbook of translation* (pp. 94-103). New York: Prentice Hall International.
- Saroukhil, M. A., Ghalkhani, O., & Hashemi, A. (2018). A critical review of translation: A look forward. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, 9(2), 101-110,
- Sinclair, J. (1990). *Corpus concordance collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, J. M. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford University Press.
- Smadja, F. (1993). Retrieving collocations from text: Xtract. *Computational Linguistics*, 19(1), 143-177.
- Steiner, G. (1975). *After Babel: Aspects of language and translation* [e-book]. Oxford University Press. Retrieved October 12, 2024, from https://books.google.com.vn/books?id=rGkC6q6OyEC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_s ummary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
- Trang, N. H., Anh, K. H., & Khanh, T. N. (2021). The Use of English Collocations in Written Translation-A Case of University English-Majored Students. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 10(1), 252-272. Retrieved November 7, 2024, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1286012.pdf>
- Van der Wouden, T. (1997). *Negative contexts. collocation, polarity, and multiple negation* [e-book]. NY: Routledge.
- Vasiljevic, Z. (2014). Teaching collocations in a second language: Why, what and how? *ELTA Journal*, 2(2), 48-73.
- Wu, J. (2008). The analysis of cultural gaps in translation and solutions. *English Language Teaching*, 1(2).