

# USING ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS OF FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS

● TRAN THI LE THUY

## ABSTRACT:

This study aims to find out whether English collocations could help to improve writing in English as Foreign Language (EFL) for first-year English majored students at all. Writing effectively is a challenge for most of EFL students. One of the problems is that they do not know how to use the words appropriately. In this study, a 3-week trial teaching program is carried out for thirty-eight English majored freshmen at Van Lang University (VLU) and the writing type is descriptive paragraph. In addition, pre- and post- trial questionnaires are conducted to gain information about students' use of collocations, and to evaluate students' attitudes towards learning collocations. Data are then collected and qualitatively analyzed. The study's results confirm the hypothesis that using collocations contributes to improve English writing.

**Keywords:** English, student, first-year English majored student.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to the study

Writing skill is an important part of communication. Teaching writing skill is considered to be one of the hardest one to deal with because it requires high accuracy to every detail. It is clearly that the importance of writing skill should be emphasized. However, writing effectively is a challenge for most of EFL students.

First-year English majored students at Van Lang University (VLU) are at pre-intermediate level, therefore academic writing courses at school are quite a big obstacle for them.

The current course book is a collection of books

compiled by lecturers at VLU. The course lasts thirty periods which includes ten writing lessons. That shortage of time leads to inadequate knowledge for studying especially writing skills. Students do not know how write a paragraph effectively. One of the problems is that they do not know how to use the words appropriately which could be related to lacking of knowledge about collocations. This reality stimulates the researcher to conduct the study to investigate the students' difficulties, and to figure out how English collocations could be applied to writing courses.

### 1.2. Objectives of the study

This study aims to find out whether English

collocations could help to improve writing in English for first-year English majored students at VLU. It also has the objectives of investigating the students' difficulties and their attitudes towards the application of collocations in writing.

### 1.3. Research questions

To achieve the above purposes, the study sets up the following research questions:

- Does using English collocations contribute to improve English writing?
- What are the students' attitudes towards the application of collocations in writing courses?

## 2. Literature review

This chapter first presents major issues relevant to the traditional concepts in teaching writing skill including paragraph writing and descriptive paragraph. It then continues with the issues of collocations in relation to writing.

### 2.1. Teaching writing

Doff (1988) states that at the lower levels of learning English, students' need for writing is most likely to be for studying purposes and also for examinations. Moreover, writing new words is one of the helpful ways for students to remember them, and to focus on what they are learning.

### 2.2. Paragraph

Smalley & Ruetten (1986:3) point out that 'paragraph is a group of sentences and that the first sentence of this group is intended.' They also put paragraph as 'a group of sentences that develops one main idea; in other words, a paragraph develops a topic.'

### 2.3. Paragraph Organization

According to Savage & Shafiei (2012), a paragraph includes a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. The first sentence is the topic sentence. It introduces the topic and a controlling idea. The following are the developing sentences that further explain information about the topic and the last is the conclusion.

### 2.4. Descriptive Paragraph

Savage & Shafiei (2012) cite that a descriptive paragraph gives the reader a picture of a person, place, or thing in his or her mind. Smalley & Ruetten (1986) also agree that the detail in a

descriptive paragraph needs to be logically arranged, and vivid. The writer is like a painter with words, he or she can give the reader a precise picture. Specific detail makes writing more interesting.

### 2.5. Collocations

McIntosh, Francis & Poole (2009) define in their dictionary that 'collocation is the ways words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing.' McCarthy & O'Dell (2005:6) put the definition of collocations as 'a pair or a group of words that are often used together.'

It is very difficult to give a list of collocations, because there are so many of them. In fact, I think that almost every word in English has other words that usually accompany it.

Overall, there are six types of collocations: adjectives and nouns (*heavy smoker*), verbs and nouns (*make my bed*), nouns and nouns (*bars of soaps*), verbs and prepositions (*look up*), verbs and adverbs (*speak softly*), adverbs and adjectives (*deeply concerned*). (Savage & Shafiei, 2012)

### 2.6. The roles of collocations in writing

Recent studies have demonstrated the importance of collocations for ESL and EFL learning. McCarthy & O'Dell (2005) advise that the common pairing of words can help students express their ideas in the most natural way. It also provides them with alternative ways to decide on, which are more colorful, more expressive and more precise combinations. Moreover, collocations can improve students' style in writing, it means, with the support of collocations, students can make their text more vivid and make it read better.

McIntosh, Francis & Poole (2009) suggest that choosing the right collocations makes a student's writing more native-speaker-like, and reflects an "intermediate" writing while, on the other hand, poor collocations risk the possibility to get lower marks in exams.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

Participants in this study included thirty-eight English majored freshmen at VLU. These students were voluntary to experiment with the application of collocations in writing courses. The course book

chosen for writing skill is “Writing 1” which is compiled by the lecturers at Faculty of Foreign Languages at VLU in 2021. The current curriculum consisted of thirty periods for writing course. The type of writing they study is paragraph writing.

### 3.2. Instrumentation

In order to fulfil the objectives of the study, the following instruments were utilized:

#### 3.2.1. Questionnaire

The same questionnaire was delivered at two stages. The pre-trial questionnaire was given at the beginning of the trial teaching program, whereas the post-trial questionnaire was conducted towards the end of the teaching. They both consisted of thirteen questions, which focused on the students’ knowledge and their attitudes and evaluations before and after the trial teaching. The first part included five questions which aimed to check the students’ competence of learning the collocations in the trial teaching. The next part had eight questions to find out the students’ difficulties in learning writing, and their assessment on the effectiveness of collocations in their writing. Combining the two sources of information provided by the two parts of questionnaire, the researcher conducts the trial teaching program.

#### 3.2.2. Trial teaching program

The trial teaching program was carried out in three weeks. Three lesson plans were made (see Appendix) for ninety-minute classes.

1. During the first class, collocations for describing people were presented and practiced in writing sentences and then writing the relevant paragraph.

2. During the second class, collocations for describing landscapes were introduced and practiced in writing sentences and the relevant paragraph.

3. During the third class, collocations for describing food were given and practiced in writing sentences and the relevant paragraph.

### 3.3. Research procedure

To begin with, the pre-questionnaire was delivered to the students to find out the students’ potentiality and difficulties in learning writing.

Following was the trial teaching program based

on the lesson plans. At the same time, the observation was taken place to see the students’ feedback of the teaching.

The next phase of the research involved in post-questionnaire to test the students’ competence and evaluations after the trial teaching.

Subsequently, the data were collected and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

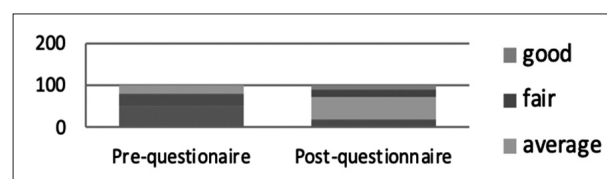
## 4. Data analysis and findings

### 4.1. Analysis of the results from the questionnaires

#### 4.1.1. Results of part A

Part A of the questionnaire, which included five questions, aimed to test the students on some basic knowledge of collocations. The total scores were 100. Each questions got 20 marks. The scores for each question were divided into five scales: below weak (0 - <7), weak (7 - <10), average (10 - <13), fair (13 - <16), and good (16 - 20).

**Chart 1: Question 1 - Adjective and noun collocations**

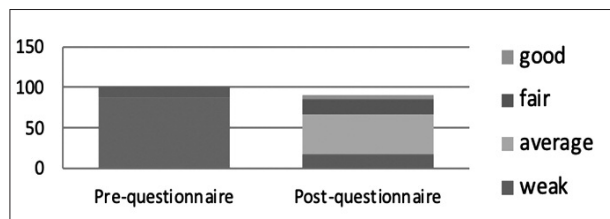


As seen from the chart 1 above, most of the students did not know which adjectives go with which nouns in the pre-questionnaire. Half of the students (50%) were ‘below weak’, 28% took ‘weak’, and only 4% got ‘average’, whereas in the post-questionnaire, there were no students ‘below weak’. Nearly half of the students (55%) got ‘average’, 17% could achieve ‘fair’, and even 11% was ‘good’.

There was an improvement of the scores between the pre- and post-questionnaire. Inferentially, the teaching of collocations in describing people’s appearance was effective.

Question 2’s purpose was to test whether the students knew the meaning of some collocations to describe people’s characters. The chart 2 showed that there was a big improvement of the scores between pre- and post- questionnaire. In the beginning, 88% of the students could get only three answers right, which was ‘below weak’, and 12% got

**Chart 2: Question2 - common expressions of people's characters**



'average'; meanwhile, at the end of the teaching, only 17% was 'weak', half of the students (50%) was 'average', 28% had 'fair', and 5% got 'good'.

Question 3 was to test the students' knowledge of collocations of describing landscapes. It was clearly a real challenge for the students in the beginning. As shown in the chart 3, no students could choose the correct answers in the pre-trial questionnaire. Remarkably, in the post-trial questionnaire, there were five students (28%) 'weak', eight students (44%) 'average', and five students (28%) 'fair'. From the results, there is a belief that the students now can describe landscapes with the use of collocations.

Question 4 was designed to check the students' understanding of the phrases about food. As in the chart 4, the number of 'below weak' students dropped from 15 (84%) to 0 (0%). "Weak" scale decreased 1 student (5%). 'Average' increased from 1 student (5%) to 10 students (56%). 'fair' and 'good' rise from 0 (0%) to 6 students (34%) and 1 student (5%).

Question 5 investigated the students' evaluations of using collocations in writing.

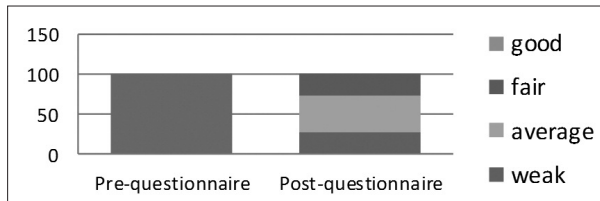
At first, most of them thought that collocations did not have much relation with writing. But later, most of them highly evaluated the use of the collocation in their writing.

#### 4.1.2. Results of part B

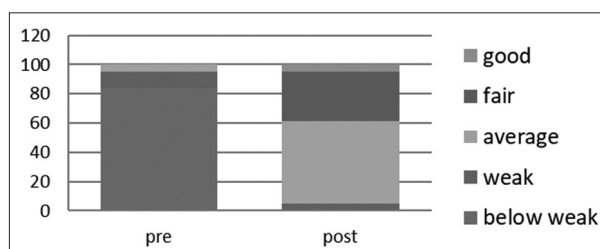
Part B of the questionnaire composed of 7 questions to assess the students' attitude and evaluation of using collocations in writing.

Question 1 in part B was conveyed to find out the

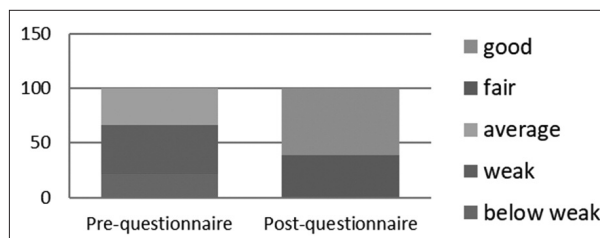
**Chart 3: Question 3 - common collocations of describing places**



**Chart 4: Question 4 - common collocations of describing food**



**Chart 5: Question 5 - students' self- evaluation of using collocations in writing**



students' difficulties in learning writing. In The result showed that they had almost the same problems of studying writing: lack of vocabulary, lack of background knowledge of the topics,

**Chart 6: The students' difficulties in their writing**

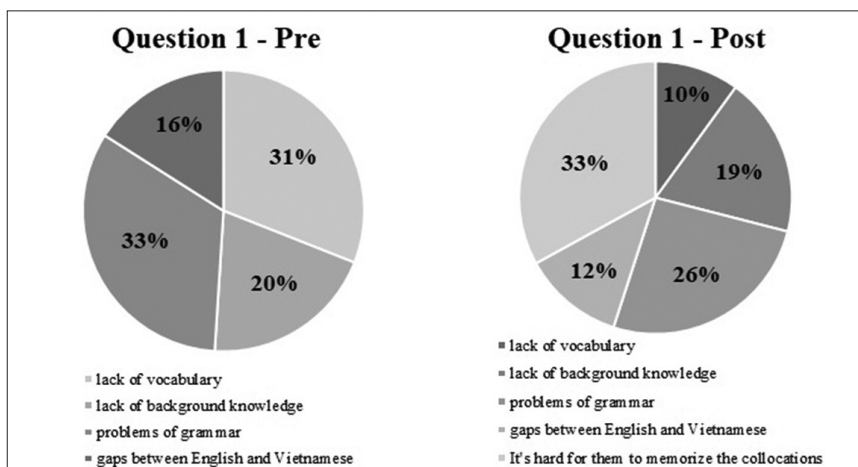


Chart 7: Teaching English collocations in writing courses

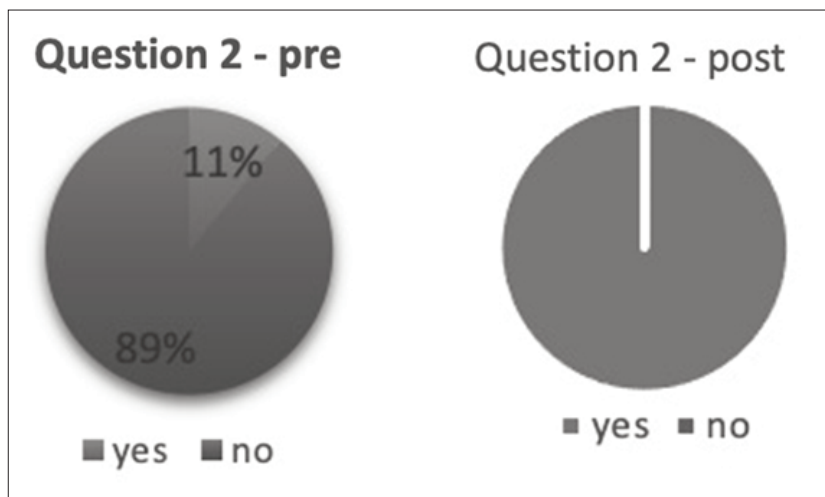


Chart 8: How teachers taught vocabulary in writing courses

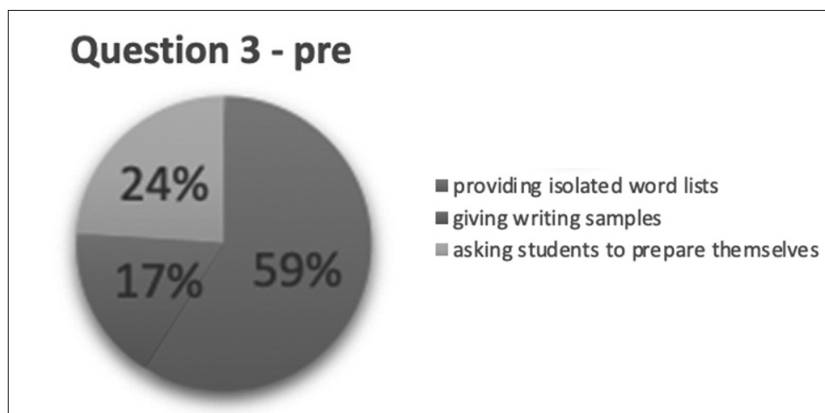
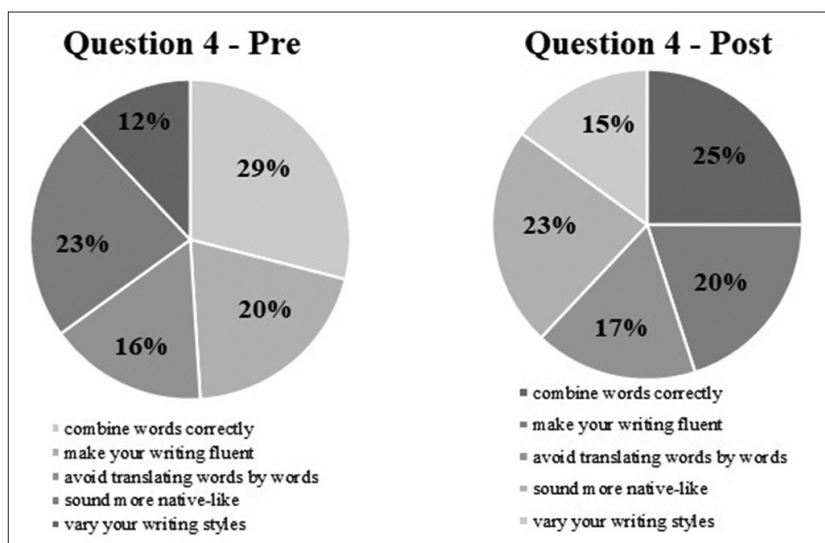


Chart 9: The students' self-evaluation on the roles of using collocations in their writing



problems of grammar, gaps between English and Vietnamese translation. However, after studying using collocations in writing, they found it hard for them to memorize the collocations.

As shown in the chart above, question 2 investigated whether the students used to learn English collocations in writing courses. The answers showed that most of them (89%) did not have a chance to learn English collocations in writing courses.

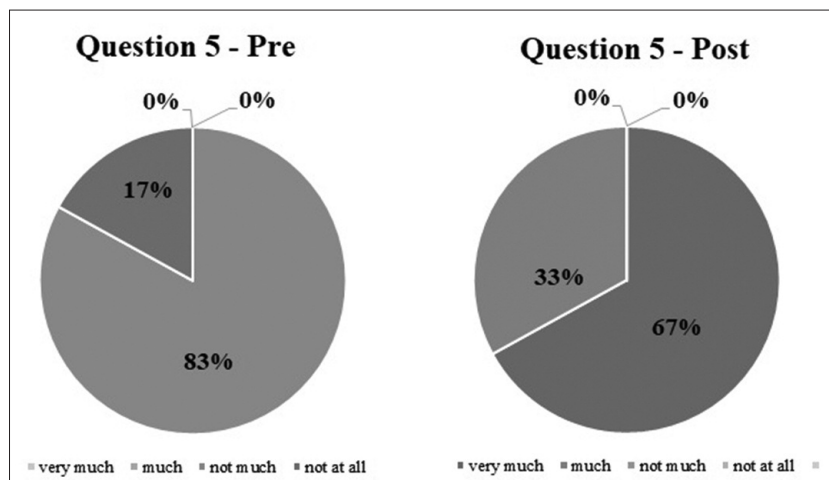
Question 3 aimed at clarifying how teachers taught vocabulary in writing courses. More than half (59%) of the respondents were “providing isolated word lists”. The other two common methods were “asking students to prepare themselves” and “giving writing samples”.

Question 4 identified the students' self-evaluation on the roles of using collocations in their writing. Most of the students can recognize the usefulness of English collocations in writing pieces.

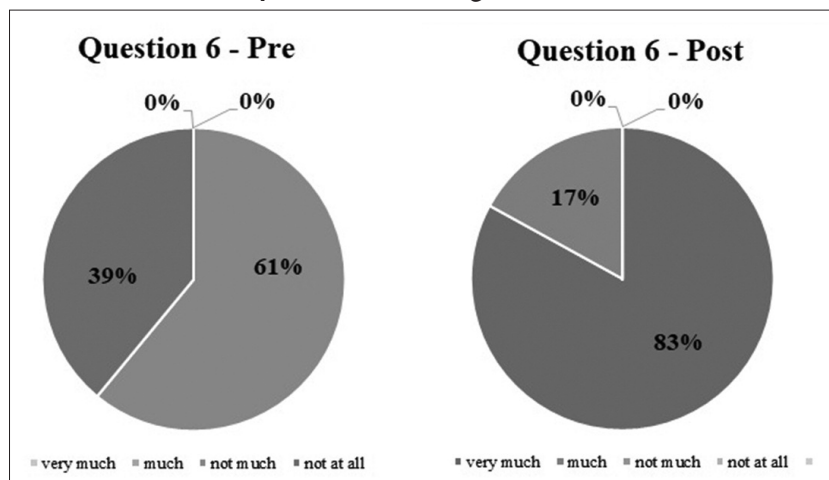
Question 5 explored how much the students were interested in studying English collocations. The results in the chart showed that there was a remarkable change between pre- and post-trial teaching from “not much interest” and “not at all” to “much” and “very much”.

Question 6 was designed to find out the students' self-evaluation the usefulness of English collocations in their writing. As shown in chart 11, in

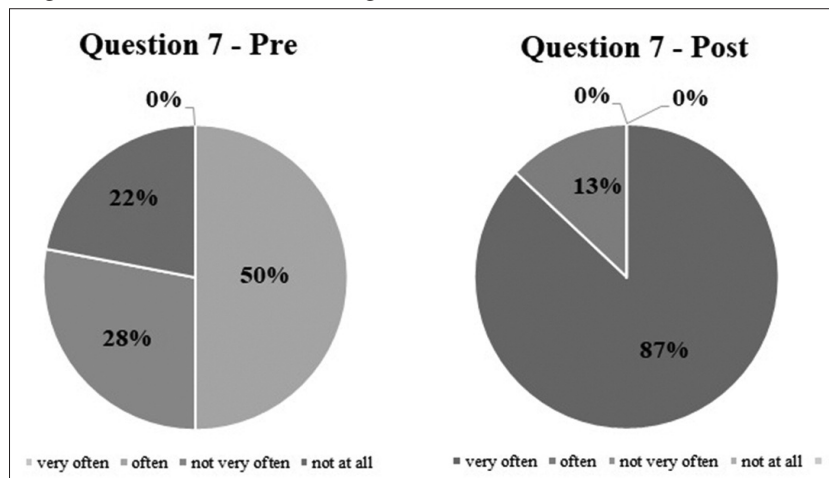
**Chart 10: The students' interest in studying writing using collocations**



**Chart 11: The students' assessment of how much English collocations can improve their writing**



**Chart 12: The students' expectation of frequency of teaching English collocations in writing courses**



the pre-trial questionnaire, most of the students were not highly appreciated the roles of English collocations in their writing; whereas in the post-trial questionnaire most of the respondents were contrary.

Question 7 showed the students' expectation of frequency of teaching English collocations in writing courses. In the pre-trial questionnaire, not many students expected English collocations to be taught very often in the class, however, in the post-trial questionnaire most of the students hoped to be taught very often.

## 5. Conclusion

As in the title, the researcher tried to investigate the effectiveness of using English collocations in writing for first-year English majored students. Basing on the findings, it can be concluded that using English collocations can contribute to improve writing more effectively. Using collocations can help the students make their writing more accurately and more colorful, therefore it helps enhance their level of writing. Moreover, the students' attitudes are positive. They recognize the importance of using collocation in their academic writing although there are some difficulties in memorizing these collocations. One suggestion is that they should put these collocations in contexts and practice them more regularly. By those ways they can improve their writing not only in paragraph but also in other types of writing later ■

**REFERENCES:**

1. Butler, L. (2007). *Fundamentals of Academic Writing 1*. NY: Pearson Education.
2. David, B. (2012). *Skillful Reading & Writing 1*. London: Macmillan Education.
3. Doff, A. (1988) *Teach English - A training course for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Folse, Keith S., Munchmore-Vokoun, and Solomon, Elena Vestri. (2014), *Great Writing 1 Great Sentences for Great Paragraphs (3rd, ed.)*. MA: Cengage Learning.
5. O'Dell, F., & McCarthy, M. (2011) *English Collocations In Use (2nd, ed)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Savage, A. & Shafiei, M. (2012) *Effective Academic Writing 1 (2nd, ed.)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. Smalley, R. L. & Ruetten, M.K. (1986) *Refining Composition Skills Rhetoric and Grammar for ESL Students (2nd, ed)*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

**Received date: August 4, 2022**

**Reviewed date: August 15, 2022**

**Accepted date: August 23, 2022**

*Author information:*

**TRAN THI LE THUY**

**Van Lang University**

## **SỬ DỤNG CÁC KẾT HỢP TỪ ĐỂ CẢI THIỆN KỸ NĂNG VIẾT TIẾNG ANH CỦA CÁC SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH NĂM THỨ NHẤT**

● **TRẦN THỊ LỆ THỦY**

Đại học Văn Lang

### **TÓM TẮT:**

Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu việc sử dụng các kết hợp từ (collocations) có thể giúp cải thiện kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh của các sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh (EFL) năm thứ nhất hay không. Hầu hết sinh viên EFL gặp khó khăn trong việc viết tiếng Anh hiệu quả, bao gồm việc không biết cách sử dụng các từ thích hợp. Nghiên cứu này đã triển khai một chương trình giảng dạy thử nghiệm kéo dài 3 tuần cho 38 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất của Trường Đại học Văn Lang (VLU) và thể loại viết là đoạn văn mô tả. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu cũng sử dụng các bảng câu hỏi trước và sau thử nghiệm để tìm hiểu về sự sử dụng các kết hợp từ của sinh viên, cũng như để đánh giá thái độ của sinh viên với việc học cách sử dụng các kết hợp từ. Các dữ liệu này sau đó được phân tích định tính. Kết quả nghiên cứu xác nhận giả thuyết rằng việc sử dụng các tập hợp từ, góp phần cải thiện việc viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên.

**Từ khóa:** tiếng Anh, sinh viên, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất.