

Corpus-Based Websites to Promote Learner Autonomy in Correcting Writing Collocation Errors

Pham Thuy Dung
phamthuydung@ftu.edu.vn
Faculty of Business English
Foreign Trade University
Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

The recent yet powerful emergence of E-learning and using online resources in learning EFL (English as a Foreign Language) has helped promote learner autonomy in language acquisition including self-correcting their mistakes. This pilot study despite conducted on a modest sample of 25 second year students majoring in Business English at Hanoi Foreign Trade University is an initial attempt to investigate the feasibility of using corpus-based websites to promote learner autonomy in correcting collocation errors in EFL writing. The data is collected using a pre-questionnaire and a post-interview aiming to find out the participants' change in belief and attitude toward learner autonomy in collocation errors in writing, the extent of their success in using the corpus-based websites to self-correct the errors and the change in their confidence in self-correcting the errors using the websites. The findings show that a significant majority of students have shifted their belief and attitude toward a more autonomous mode of learning, enjoyed a fair success of using the websites to self-correct the errors and become more confident. The study also yields an implication that a face-to-face training of how to use these online tools is vital to the later confidence and success of the learners.

Key words: Corpus-based websites, Collocation errors in EFL Writing, Learner autonomy

Introduction

Collocations, “a combination of words in a language, that happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance” (Oxford learners’ dictionaries), have long been considered a challenge EFL learners face in language production (both spoken and written). Even competent learners still make collocation errors (Altenberg & Granger, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003, cited in Hinkel, 2011). This is because collocation acquisition requires “some constraints that are completely unmarked for non-natives unless they are aware” (Lombard, 1997: 4, cited in Pei, 2008). The vital role of using collocations properly

in EFL learning has been well-documented in previous studies which shared a similar conclusion that collocation competence is particularly significant in helping EFL learners communicate more effectively (e.g to produce more fluent and natural language discourse) “coming close to that of a native speaker” (McCarthy, 1990; Ellis, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Produromou, 2003 (cited in Ebrahimi-Bazzaz et al., 2015)). It is therefore without surprise that ample past research has focused their attention on finding EFL learners’ collocation errors and suggesting solutions to support the collocation acquisition (Lombard,

1997; Altenberg & Granger, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003). Whilst research on collocation errors is not a new topic for discussion, literature shows that study on learner autonomy in correcting collocation errors remains under-researched. Given that writing is the area where language learners may frequently make collocation errors (Darvishi, 2011) where they need to learn autonomously (Kulsirisawad, 2012), finding out the measures to be taken for learners to self-correct collocation errors in writing is without doubt of an urgent essence.

The recent yet powerful emergence of E-learning and using online resources in learning EFL has helped promote learner autonomy in language acquisition including self-correcting their mistakes. One of which is corpora embedded in certain websites such as www.netspeak.org/, and linggle.com/# which allow users to search for collocations and how common they are used in a large corpus of various authentic sources of language. Past research, nevertheless, suggests that these useful resources are far from familiar to EFL learners the majority of whom still rely on teachers for spotting and correcting errors,

and that teachers are used to doing this jobs, especially in writing classes (William, 2003; Lee, 2003). This is perhaps the case of students and teachers of Faculty of Business English, Foreign Trade University. The researcher has been teaching academic writing courses for students of the faculty for almost 3 years and she recently found that underlining and correcting students' collocation errors in their essays are her must-do jobs. She also came to the realization that doing this met the expectation of her students who would dependently come to ask her for what problems with the chunk they made and how to rectify the error right after they received the essay back from her. It is therefore vital to have insights into the feasibility of using corpus-based websites to promote learner autonomy in correcting collocation errors in writing of the students. The recent participation of the researcher in a TESOL Talk event organized by RMIT and ACET Vietnam in Hanoi has in fact helped generate ideas of using websites to promote learner autonomy in collocation self-correction.

Literature Review

A very recent and remarkable attempt to uncover the feasibility of using collocation tools in second language writing is the study by Nurmukhamedov in 2015 that examined the effect of three collocation tools (two online namely the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and Macmillan Collocation Dictionary and one paper: wordandphrase.info on accurate production of collocations in L2 writing of 45 students taking an intensive English program (IEP) in

the southwestern part of the USA. After being trained to use the collocation tools, the students were asked to use the tools to correct 16 miscollocations (8 verb + noun; 8 adjective + noun) embedded in an essay-format collocation test. One of the important findings of the study is that although the level of effectiveness when using 3 different sources of collocation reference is not similar, the participants all showed more preference towards online tools as these are more time

saving and help the students better locate the correct collocations.

Collocation in Second Language Writing

The word collocation originated from a Latin word named ‘collocare’ which means to ‘set in order’ or ‘to arrange’ (Martynska, 2004: 2, cited in Ridha & Riyahi, 2011). Although scholars have attempted to define collocation from a number of perspectives ranging from morphology (Nation, 1990, cited in Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013) where “col-“ means “together”, ‘with’; -loc- means “to place or put”; -ate is a verb suffix, and ion is a noun suffix to syntax (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2005: 5, cited in Yumanee & Phoocharoensil, 2013) as the syntagmatic relationships between words e.g. rotten+food=rotten food; putrid + fish =putrid fish; rancid + butter=rancid butter etc., agreement seemed to be reached on what is generally meant by collocation. Researchers have all come to the same idea that collocation refers to the co-occurrence of lexical items with high chances rather than random frequency (Hill, 2000; Li, n.d; J.R. Nattinger & J.S. DeCarrico, 1992; J. Sinclair, 1991, cited in Hatami, 2015). In the same light, collocation in this study is understood as the combination of two or more words which are likely to be put together according to the common practice made by native speakers of the English language.

In writing in a second language (L2), using collocation properly is considered a challenging task even to students fluent in speaking, listening and reading. This is because using collocations require an in-depth understanding of the native speakers’ common norms and practice of combining words into chunks, which may go beyond the basic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Approaches to Correcting Collocation Errors

Providing feedback is undoubtedly one of the most important jobs of a teacher who wishes to help students with the errors they make and help improve the students’ performance. Among four language macro-skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing, writing together with speaking are two most essential areas where feedback plays vital roles. Although there remain disputes over the necessity of teacher’s feedback in writing, past research show that feedback in writing help enhance the development and confidence as a writer of students (Peterson, 2010).

There are generally two types of teacher’s feedback namely direct and indirect. While the former refers to a combined job of teachers who do not only point out learners’ errors but also provide a particular correction, the latter is the type supplied when the teachers just simply mark the errors without suggesting any alternatives to replace the erroneous words and phrases (Jafarpour & Sharifi, 2012). In English writing classrooms, writing teachers commonly use direct feedback (Williams, 2003). Lee (2003) claimed that most writing teachers corrected student’ essays because they felt that it was their duty to mark and correct all students’ errors and previous studies have also shown that “learners expect accurate correction of writing assignments by teachers” (Jennings, 2008). The underlying reason of this approach can perhaps be traced back to teacher-centred learning where teachers are supposed to be the transmitter of knowledge and students are the receivers whose job is to copy down the correction passively (Kulsirisawad, 2012). Jafarpour & Sharifi (2012) also further argued that some teachers tend to give very detailed

indirect feedback by coding mistakes to indicate the precise location as well as the type of error, while others provide encoded feedback with the location in the paper without any suggestion about the type, which leaves the task of errors correction to the learners. Indirect feedback thus may be of a greater help than direct type in “activating writers to pass from composing processes to the final written product” (Keh, 1990, cited in Jafarpour & Sharifi, 2012).

Online Corpora

Corpus, as a large database of texts, has been shown effective in “draw learners’ attention to word patterns, collocation information, and contextual environments ... and increase learners’ depth of vocabulary knowledge” (Lai, 2015). Being aware of the role of language corpora, a substantial number of websites have taken advantage of corpus and used concordance software to extract instances of a specific search word or search phrase from a corpus and present these instances in their immediate linguistic context. The output is referred to as a concordance and can be used by language learners, as Conroy (2010) claimed, to learn about specific grammatical and lexical patterns in the L2 in a form of data-driven learning (Cobb, 1997; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Johns, 1994; Kaur & Hegelheimer, 2005; Milton, 2006; Shei, 2008a, 2008b; Sun, 2003; Todd, 2001). According to Kaur and Hegelheimer (2005: 290), this type of data-driven learning can “help [students] become autonomous learners and also provide them the opportunity to act as researchers” (cited in Conroy, 2010). Aligned with the above, Kirk (2002) and Chambers (2005) argued that university students become more independent and better at critical thinking and

problem-solving when learn the language using data-driven approaches. The learners become less dependent on their teachers and their teachers become less concerned with the textbook and more focused on their role as a coach for learners rather than as a language expert (Aston, 1997).

The idea of using corpus-based websites to promote learner autonomy is not totally novel to the literature of EFL teaching and learning. Researchers all agreed that using these online resources has two-fold benefits. On the one hand, it “can help relieve teachers of the need to act as proofreading slaves” (Milton, 2006: 125). In the same vein, Yoon (2011) further suggested that the role of the teacher is changed radically to a coordinator whose task is to empower learners as researchers to analyze the corpus data and make their own discoveries. On the other hand, doing this essentially means offering learners a great chance “to acquire the means and confidence to self-edit in the future” (Milton, 2006: 131). Sharing a similar viewpoint of using corpora to enhance autonomous learning, Mull (2013) called for assistance from the teacher to create room for learners to self-answer and become confident in the course of searching for the answer. In brief, using corpus-based websites allows students to play a more active role in their learning and become more autonomous (Bloch, 2007; Keck, 2004; Baghestani, 2009; Boulton, 2010; Gavioli, 2005, cited in Yoon, 2011). Dobb (1997) encourages the use of a corpus for the purpose of enhancing active and discovery-style learning in which students use a corpus and create their own grammatical rules.

Learners' Beliefs and Attitudes. Despite the fact that language teachers introduce paper-based or CALL-mediated collocation tools to their students, it is still up to their learners to accept these tools or not. Learners' attitudes also play a role in the successful use of collocations (Nurmukhamedov, 2015). Towards the use of corpora in identifying and correcting writing mistakes, EFL learners generally hold positive attitudes and find corpora helpful in writing (Yoon & Hirvela, 2004; O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006). Beside providing the learners with authentic language, fast and convenient access is another plus of using corpus-based tools to detect writing errors and searching for the solution. For example, Chambers and O'Sullivan (2004) found that students preferred using a corpus over a dictionary because the corpus was faster (cited in Baghestani, 2011). Regarding collocation errors, a recent study by Nurmukhamedov (2015) which aims to evaluate the effectiveness of 3 different websites as collocation tools in helping L2 writers deal with miscollocations found that

in general L2 writers favor online collocation tools over paper dictionaries because of easy navigation. In his study, the students showed very positive perceptions of collocation tools which are said to be helpful and user-friendly.

Problems of Using Corpora for Self-Correction. Despite the great benefits of using corpus-based online collocation tools discussed above, such tools do have certain limitations. When navigating corpora, learners may face a number of difficulties that are even the obstacles of native speakers of the language (Yoon & Hirvela, 2004; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Kennedy & Miceli, 2001, cited in Jagusztyn, 2014). Besides, it is quite time-consuming and frustrating to face a large number of "authentic sample sentences" (Granger & Tribble, 1998, cited in Lai, 2015). Also, taking the target information from the corpora seems to be challenging to some groups of learners (Gabel, 2001, cited in Lai, 2015). This is probably because the output is shown in unfamiliar formats to the learners' level of knowledge and experience (Yoon & Hirvela, 2004).

Methods

This pilot study seeks the answer to the following questions.

1. How much change is there in the students' belief and attitudes toward learner autonomy in correcting collocation errors in their writing before and after using the two suggested websites?
2. To what extent do the students succeed in self-correcting the collocation errors in their writing using the two suggested websites?
3. To what extent do the students feel confident about their ability to self-correct collocation errors in writing before and after using the two suggested websites?

Research Participants

This pilot study was carried out on 25 second year students of Business English major at Foreign Trade University, who took the writing class of the researcher from April to June, 2016. The main objectives of the writing course were first to provide the students with paraphrasing, summarizing and synthesizing skills and rhetorical techniques. By the end of the course, the students are able to write summary, response and persuasive essays effectively. The research took response essays, one of 3 assignments of the course to investigate collocation errors and the students'

willingness and ability to self-correct the errors using suggested websites by the researcher, thereby working out the feasibility of generating using these online resources in learning and correcting collocation errors autonomously by the students. In detailed, as the last assignment of the writing course before taking the final exam in which they are asked to write a persuasive essay, the students were assigned to write a response paper to an article in *The Economist* outside class within one week. As the students were not restricted

about the length of the paper and they were permitted to write at their own pace away from pressures of writing the paper in class within an allotted time, together with the comfort and encouragement made by the researcher for the students to write down whatever they think and their reactions are in the paper, the researcher hoped to collect as much and unbiased information as possible regarding the collocation mistakes made by her students.

Corpus-based Websites

Corpus-based websites	Features	Corpus
http://www.netspeak.org/	A search engine which allows users to search for missing words in a phrase, check which of two or more words is most common, check in which order two or more words are commonly written, and to check which of its synonyms are commonly written.	Corpus comprises about 3.8 billion phrases up to a length of 5 words (so-called n-grams) which were collected by Google from the English web (Frendo, 2012)
http://linggle.com/#	A search engine permits its users to search for various targeted parts of speech missing in a phrase.	Corpus contains parts of speech from British National Corpus and example sentences from <i>The New York Times</i> . (Chang, 2013)

Data Collection Instruments.

The research uses both quantitative and qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. The main instruments are a questionnaire consisting of 7 questions and an interview composed of 3 questions. The questions of the pre-questionnaire aims to find out the students' willingness to self-correct collocation errors autonomously, the reasons, their uses of websites in the self-correction, the difficulties they think they may encounter and the extent of confidence to find out the relevant collocation among various options suggested by the websites. The post

interview seeks answers to the matters of whether the students find the websites effective to the improvement of their writing and to their capacity to learn autonomously, whether they feel more confident to use these online resources in their writing and which problems they faced when working with the websites.

Data Collection Procedure.

The research data was obtained through a step-by-step procedure as follows.

1. The researcher obtained the consent of the students to participate in the study.

2. The researcher delivered the pre-questionnaire one day after the participants handed in their response paper. The participants had another one day to complete the questionnaire.
3. The researcher sent a manual of how to use 2 websites: to check and self-correct collocation errors to the participants via email after the submission of the assignment as the students stay at home preparing for their final exam and the researcher could not meet them in person. The manual was written by the researcher in Vietnamese and included snapshots taken from the 2 websites to illustrate for each use of the websites to facilitate the students' comprehension of how they were about to work with the websites.
4. The researcher sent the soft copy of each participant's paper along with the highlight in yellow of collocation errors and asked the participants to use the 2 recommended websites to self-correct the errors and send her back their paper including the correction within one week.
5. The researcher launched a short online interview to the participants.

Data Analysis.

The collected data was first put into tables corresponding to each question of the pre-questionnaire. The data obtained from the interview was then added to see changes regarding the participants' perception and willingness to self-correct their collocation errors using suggested websites.

Main Findings and Discussion

Research question 1. How much change is there in the students' belief and attitudes toward learner autonomy in correcting collocation errors in their writing before and after using the two suggested websites?

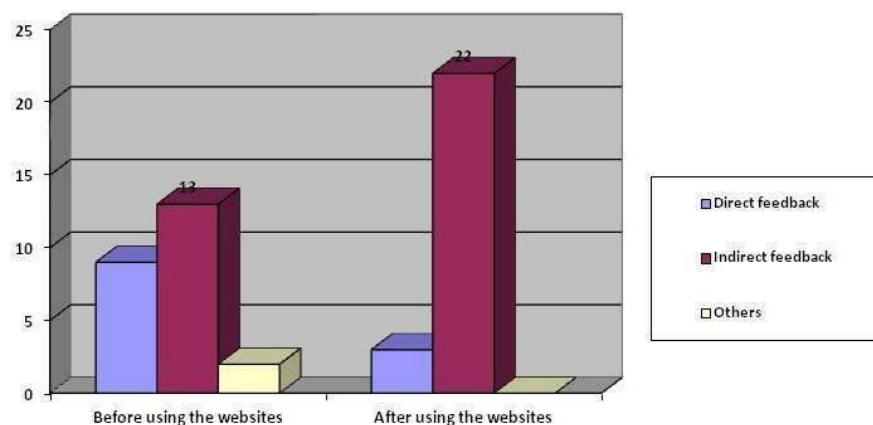


Figure 1: Students' choice between direct and indirect feedback in writing

There was one response invalid of the pre-questionnaire as the participants did not follow the instruction in the questionnaire that she would go to question 3 and 4 respectively if she chose A and B in question 2. In fact,

she answered both question 3 and 4 which make her contribution irrelevant.

It can be clearly seen from the above bar chart that there has been a remarkably positive shift in the belief and attitudes of the students toward their willingness and awareness of the responsibility to self-correct

collocation errors they make in their writing before and after using the websites. One of the striking features is that there was nearly one third of participants still relied on their teacher for collocation correction before being introduced to the websites. The figure is quite similar to what Jennings (2008) found concerning the dependent learning style of students in writing class, which has been discussed earlier in the paper. This number, however, has decreased two-third to merely 3 respondents expecting their teachers to supply the correct collocations for the wrong ones they make in their essay. In the pre-questionnaire, nine students chose to ask their teacher to correct all of the collocation mistakes in their essay as they believed it would help save time and effort on searching for the correct answer as well as guarantee the reliability of the answer thanks to the wide range of vocabulary the teachers are supposed to know.

There was a significantly two-fold rise in the students who showed their willingness and perhaps their awareness of learner autonomy in collocation self-correction. While the traits of independent learning of some students and the long retention of collocations in the memory were to be explained for why about a half of the sample went for making self-correction, further reasons involving the usefulness of the suggested websites were revealed for the choice of self-correcting collocation errors among a huge 90 percent of the participants.

Interestingly, a student in the pre-survey despite willing to find the correct collocation herself using the sources the teacher suggests, still expected that “In the end, I also hope teacher give or suggest me right answers.”

Similarly, another student both wished to be provided with the correct collocation and the sources as she wanted to “see the immediate condition in which collocations are used.” After using the two suggested websites, these two students changed their viewpoints and chose to make the correction themselves as long as the teacher helped detect the errors.

Research question 2. To what extent do the students succeed in self-correcting the collocation errors in their writing using the two suggested websites?

Table 1
Students' collocation errors and errors correction

Student	Number of	Number of errors
Average	collocation errors	corrected successfully
1	6	5
2	3	2
3	16	11
4	6	3
5	12	12
6	15	10
7	5	4
8	4	3
9	15	14
10	9	7
11	9	9
12	7	7
13	8	8
14	6	2
15	10	6
16	16	12
17	4	4
18	11	9
19	5	4
20	13	11
21	7	7
22	8	7
23	12	12
24	6	5
Mean	9	7

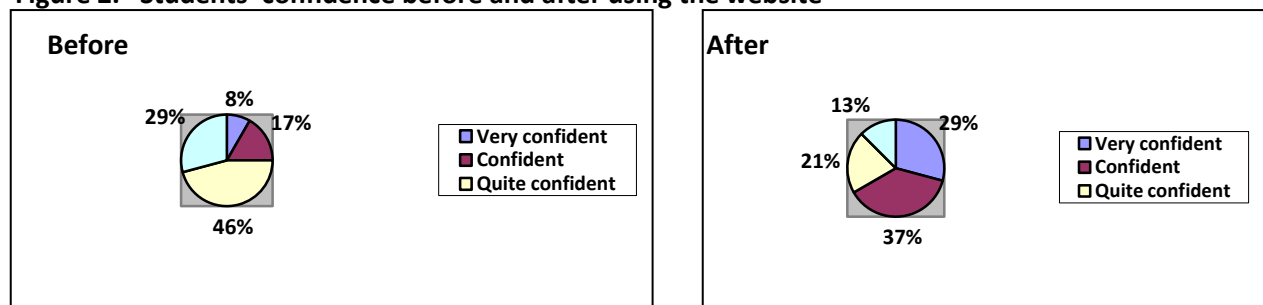
From the above table, it can be concluded that a remarkable approximately 80% of the students have succeeded correcting the

collocation errors using the two suggested websites. According to the post interview, the majority of these students shared it was the relevant formulated search terms that resulted in the successful correction of the collocation errors. However, not all of the participants succeeded in their first search. Participant No.3, for example, shared that she had failed several times and became exhausted and bored. Fortunately she then did not give up but kept typing other possible key words and finally arrived at the correct answer. She also further insisted that as she had never checked collocation online but been more familiar with looking it up in a paper dictionary, she found it quite difficult to decide the key words and symbol to search and later to select the most relevant option to the context of her

writing among various ones suggested by the website. The problem of navigation and selecting the most appropriate phrase among a large number of output in the corpora this student encountered is in line with Granger & Tribble's findings in their research in 1998. It can be inferred then that patience is one of the keys to the success of EFL learners in using online resources to self-correct collocation errors in writing and that if the learners become more familiar with the tool, they are more likely to be motivated to make use of the resource for better learning, which has once been suggested by Yoon & Hirvela (2004).

Research question 3: To what extent do the students feel confident about their ability to self-correct collocation errors?

Figure 2. Students' confidence before and after using the website



It can be clearly seen from the pie charts that in general the students have become more confident after using the suggested websites to self-correct the collocation errors in their paper. The number of students confirmed to be very confident and confident has enjoyed more than two-fold and three-fold rise respectively, making these sectors up to substantially two-third of all students population. On the other hand, although there is now on average one in three students still unready to use the websites to self-correct

collocation errors in writing, this is undoubtedly a radical change compared to up to a vast majority of three quarters with limited confidence before using these online tools. This is indeed a positive sign and to a certain extent demonstrates the usefulness of the corpus-based websites in improving learners' confidence – one of the determining factors of learner autonomy when it comes to correcting collocation errors. Among a number of explanations to be made for this change, teacher's help via detailed guide of

using the websites together with the willingness to explore and learn and the patience of the students themselves play the most vital role. A student revealed in the interview that she found it quite easy to find the correct collocation because the teacher had given her a very detailed guide, especially in Vietnamese which made the whole process much simpler, about which key words and symbols to be used in the search box for which targeted type of collocation. Another

student, however, admitted that although she found the guide of some help, she failed to find the correct answer until up to 3 times of failure, she finally arrived at the result perhaps mainly thanks to her patience. Although the two cases seem to be of opposite concerning the helpfulness of the guide, the students all end up showing more confidence after being introduced to these new tools.

Conclusion

The results of this pilot study open opportunities to the use of the corpus-based websites investigated in the study and other similar websites in promoting EFL learners autonomy regarding correcting collocation errors in writing. The study reveals that EFL students when introduced to the online collocation tools are more willing and ready to learn autonomously, able to correct more miscollocations in their writing and become more confident to correct the errors.

The study has several implications. First, it is essential that EFL students be introduced and familiarized with available online collocation tools, especially those free of charge as many of them may be willing and ready to use the tools for better writing and may miss a valuable chance to self-correct collocation errors in writing without such an introduction. Oftentimes, learners “have no knowledge of collocation dictionaries or other potential resources for working with collocations independently” (Henriksen, 2013, p. 42). For example, a participant shared in interview that she would like to say thank to the researcher for introducing her to such a new and effective type of collocation reference that she had never heard of, which

has helped her correct miscollocations herself. She also further stated that this indeed changed her belief about the ability and responsibility of students in revising writing assignments.

Second, introducing is inadequate and training must go hand in hand. It is essential that learners be provided with strategies on how to find collocations using collocation tools in writing (Ranalli, 2013; Seesink, 2007, cited in Nurmukhamedov, 2016). Kaur and Hegelheimer (2005) also reminded language teachers that in order to improve learners’ CALL competence, teachers need to provide students with guidance. This is because learners are believed to make progress with the application of a new tool as long as learners are not “left on their own to complete the tasks” (p. 299). Thus, whenever CALL-mediated collocations tools are employed, teachers need to train the students. In this study, although the researcher has made effort to train the participants how to use the 2 corpus-based websites via a detailed guide in their mother tongue containing illustrations in an effort to motivate the students to use the websites, some students still complained having difficulties formulating the search

terms and selecting the best options among a varied number of suggestions. This is perhaps because the guide was sent via email and the students may have needed a face to face training in which the teacher demonstrates how the websites work and how to use them in searching for targeted formulaic sequences, and then the student practice in consultation with the teacher. It is therefore more likely to be of a greater help if the teacher had organized a training session.

Last but not least, it is possible to draw from the study that no matter how user-friendly online collocation tools might be, it is

self-motivation of the students that decides whether or not they would give up the task of using the tools to self-correct writing miscollocations. As mentioned earlier, some students honestly shared that they have overcome frustration of failing to find the correct collocations and finally succeeded mainly thanks to their patience. It is therefore important that learners be exposed to benefits of using online collocation tools so that they become more motivated to take advantage of the online resources to learn autonomously and effectively.

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Pham Thuy Dung is a faculty member of Business English, Foreign Trade University, teaching Business English. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pham Thuy Dung, Faculty of Business English, Foreign Trade University, Hanoi, Vietnam. Contact: phamthuydung@ftu.edu.vn

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