The effect of lexical collocation awareness on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill

Accepted 23rd December, 2013

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to measure up the impact of lexical collocation awareness on pre-intermediate Iranian language learners' writing proficiency. For the purpose of this study, 50 male and female Iranian EFL learners studying at Ahvaz Islamic Azad University majoring in teaching English as a foreign language were selected through non-random convenient sampling procedure. The results of the proficiency test underlined the homogeneity of the groups. Then they were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. The control group was taught based on conventional methods of writing and the experimental group received treatment based on lexical collocation awareness in writing one paragraph essays. The design of the research was based on pre and post-test method. Pre-test was a lexical collocation test which included 35 items focusing on collocations proposed in McCarthy and O'Dell (2005). Pre-test was administered before the treatment period to ensure the researchers about the groups' homogeneity on lexical knowledge in writing paragraphs. During the treatment period five topics were administered to students to write one paragraph essay for each topic. Having done the treatment, the researchers administered a post-test on lexical collocation consisting of 35 items of multiple-choice, matching, and cloze task dealing with lexical collocations acquired through the treatment. Then, the results of the tests were analyzed through statistical analysis of Independent Samples t-test. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the scores of the participants in the control and experimental groups. In addition, all the one paragraph essays of the study were analyzed through analyzing the components of writing including grammar, vocabulary, fluency, relevance and mechanics based on the checklist extracted from Heaton (1990). The results also showed that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of control and experimental groups in writing these components (p<0.05). Lexical collocation awareness developed the writing components of vocabulary and mechanics rather than grammar, relevance, and fluency in writing one paragraph essays.

Key words: Lexical collocation, awareness, writing skill, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Many applied linguists (Zahedi and Mirzadeh, 2010) have emphasized the importance of drawing second language learners’ attention to standard multiword expressions such as collocations and idioms. Lewis (2000) claimed that the mental lexicon of a learner is larger than previously recognized and that it mainly consists of multi-word items rather than individual words. Hyland (2008) argued that multi-word structures are components of fluent linguistic production and key factors in language learning. Lewis (2008a) states language includes grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar (p. 89). Bahns (1993) also noted that lexical items and grammar are inseparable.
According to Lewis (2008b), lexical approach is based on the idea that language consists of meaningful chunks that combined, produce continuous coherent text. Lewis (2008a) believes that, it is the repertoire of ‘chunks’ which forms the raw data by which learners start to perceive patterns, morphology and other linguistic features. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) explain that language is not stored as individual words but in chunks that may take the form of multi-word items, sentence heads and fully institutionalized sentences. According to Ghonsooli et al. (2008), Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners may have a good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary but serious problems with acquiring the ability to use English language in a collective way. Bahns and Eldaw (1993) cite while students may have acquired a huge vocabulary, they still lack collocational knowledge. Also, Silk (2006) stated that students who suffer from the lack of collocational knowledge may have a store of “good vocabulary” but still produces unnatural language. Martynska (2004) claimed that collocations remain difficult to define. According to Koosha and Jafarpoor (2006), although phonological transfer is most common in Second Language Acquisition, lexical and collocational transfer seems to be major cause of poor proficiency. Bahns (1993) reports that learners may rely on a first language transfer in which majority of collocational errors could be found. McCarthy (1990) believed that collocational knowledge is a part of native speakers’ linguistic competence, and can make problems for learners who are using second language in communication. However, the collocational studies point to the impact of lexical collocation awareness on other specific aspects of general English proficiency (Hsu, 2010; Mounya, 2010).

Even though several studies have been done in the area of grammar, lexis and collocation, very few of them have investigated the relationship between teaching lexical collocation and EFL learners’ writing proficiency (Ghonsooli et al., 2008; Mounya, 2010). This study tries to fill this gap, thus the present study investigated the effect of lexical collocation awareness (noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) on learning lexical collocations and the impact of lexical collocation awareness on developing writing proficiency of EFL learners. The research questions were:

1. Does lexical collocation awareness (that is, noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) have any significant affect on learning lexical collocations?
2. Does lexical collocation awareness affect students’ writing proficiency?

The focus of the study was not on the teaching and learning of vocabulary items, but on a pairing of the lexis combined in lexical collocations. Research on the individual vocabulary items is very extensive (Hunt and Beglar, 2005; Nation, 2005) but studies in lexical collocations are very much lacking. Also, this study may show the relationship between lexical collocation awareness and students’ writing proficiency. Accordingly, the teaching of vocabulary has not been in its rightful status, vocabulary errors would be treated as trivial. On the other hand, Taiwo (2004) regarded lexical errors as equally important as grammatical errors. However, Lewis (2008b) noted that fluency can be acquired through the acquisition of a several fabricated items. The current study attempted to show that the relationship between teaching lexical collocations and the learners’ writing proficiency and the role of lexical collocation awareness (that is, noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) in learning lexical collocations. Since recent studies on collocations are set in a foreign environment (Hsu, 2010; Hsu and Chui, 2008; Mounya, 2010), this study serves to add on to the list of research on collocations already carried out. So, this study may help those practitioners who are dealing with foreign language teaching, such as textbook designers, syllabus designers, test developers, teachers, learners, translators and the like.

METHODS

Design

This study was conducted based on an experimental design which involved control and experimental groups, a pre-test, a post-test, and a treatment with experimental group. Each group was taught the same materials with different methods of teaching. The participants of experimental group received 10 sessions treatment. To teach the participants of the experimental group lexical collocation awareness (that is, noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) was applied. Furthermore, five topics were administered to students of two groups to measure the effect of lexical collocation awareness on developing writing proficiency of students at the end of study.

Participants

The participants of this study were fifty male and female students of Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz (including twenty two male and twenty nine female). They were majoring in Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) and their age ranged from 20 to 30 years old. They were studying writing courses in English at the third semester. They were selected through non-random convenient sampling procedure. In order to see whether they were homogenous, a simulated proficiency test of English extracted from Nelson English language tests. Book 1 elementary developed by Fowler and Coe (1976) was administered. No significant difference was found between the participants. Then they were divided into experimental
and control groups (that is, each included 25 participants) based on systematic random sampling method through which learners were given odd and even numbers from 1 to 50. Students' odd numbers were classified in experimental group and the students' even numbers were put in control group.

**Instrumentation**

Initially, the subjects took the simulated proficiency test extracted from Nelson English language tests: Book 1 elementary developed by Fowler and Coe (1976) to ensure the homogeneity of the groups at the very beginning of the course. The test included seventy five multiple-choice items. The reliability of the instrument was estimated through KR-21 approach and the obtained reliability index as (0.77) which seemed to be an acceptable reliability value.

The second instrument was a pre-test that contained thirty five items of cloze task and matching task from English Collocations in Use and English Vocabulary in Use developed by McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) and Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2009) was administered to measure the learners' actual knowledge at the beginning of treatment. The reliability of the test was measured through Cronbach Alpha as (α = 0.85). Finally, a post-test including thirty five items of cloze task and matching task and multiple-choice administered to determine the effectiveness of experimental and control groups' lexical collocation awareness. The reliability of the test was calculated through Cronbach Alpha as (α = 0.93). In addition, 5 topics were being selected to write one paragraph essay including one hundred and fifty words and the analytic method of scoring was being employed. Heaton's (1990) rating scale was used to assess grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, fluency, and relevance of the essays; moreover, the researchers allocated 1.40 points to each of these components in order to correct the learners' writings analytically. Also, the students' writings were corrected holistically (on a scale from zero to 7) and were scored by two raters. Inter-rater reliability was run to examine the reliability of scoring the essays. The inter-rater reliability of control group's scores on the essays was estimated through Cronbach Alpha as (α = 0.747). The inter-rater reliability of experimental group's scores was estimated through Cronbach Alpha as (α = 0.873).

**Procedure**

A simulated proficiency test of written English extracted from Nelson English language tests: Book 1 elementary (1976) by Fowler and Coe administered to determine the homogeneity level of the participants. Then a pre-test was being run to ascertain both groups' knowledge on collocational elements at the initial stages of the study. Then, the explicit awareness was being occurred during one academic semester including 10 sessions. The English Collocation in Use and English Vocabulary in Use developed by McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) were being effectively used for teaching lexical collocations in each session. Since one of the obstacles to teaching collocations as pointed out by Bahns (1993) is that we deal with samples of collocations here. In experimental group first, we restricted our examples to verb + noun mis-collocations. For instance, the first sentence was: I have to make my homework. This is an extremely common verb + noun mis-collocation in which the verbs make and do are used with inappropriate nouns, so "make and do" collocations provide a useful starting point for introducing the notion of collocation to learners. An effective platform for raising awareness of collocation is to focus on a selection of students' mis-collocations (Lewis, 2000).

A simulated proficiency test of written English extracted from Nelson English language tests: Book 1 elementary (1976) by Fowler and Coe administered to determine the homogeneity level of the participants. Then a pre-test was being run to ascertain both groups' knowledge on collocational elements at the initial stages of the study. Then, the explicit awareness was being occurred during one academic semester including 10 sessions. The English Collocation in Use and English Vocabulary in Use developed by McCarthy and O'Dell (2005) were being effectively used for teaching lexical collocations in each session. Since one of the obstacles to teaching collocations as pointed out by Bahns (1993) is that we deal with samples of collocations here. In experimental group first, we restricted our examples to verb + noun mis-collocations. For instance, the first sentence was: I have to make my homework. This is an extremely common verb + noun mis-collocation in which the verbs make and do are used with inappropriate nouns, so "make and do" collocations provide a useful starting point for introducing the notion of collocation to learners. An effective platform for raising awareness of collocation is to focus on a selection of students' mis-collocations (Lewis, 2000).

**Data analysis**

To analyse the data quantitatively, descriptive statistics and Independent Samples of t-test for comparing the performance of the two groups at the pre-test and post-test were being employed. Also, the students’ writings were being scored analytically based on the checklist provided by Heaton (1990). To analyse the subjects' process of learning and to explore the possible effects of collocational teaching, the mean scores of different writing components on each topic (five topics in total) for both groups were being analysed. Essays were scored by two raters. Inter-rater reliability coefficients were calculated to meet the reliable
scoring on the essays. Then an Independent Sample t-test was run to calculate any significant difference between the means gained by experimental and control groups in five topics as well as in pre and post-tests at the level of significant (p<0.05).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics including minimums, maximums, means, and then standard deviations of pre-test and post-test of all groups were computed. They are presented in Table 1. Results indicated that the mean score of control group which had been 18.28 in pre-test exam promoted to 23.2400 in post-test exam. It also indicated that the mean score of experimental group which had been 20.4400 in pre-test exam promoted to 26.8000 in post-test exam.

Pre-test

As there were one dependent variable and one independent variable, a t-test was run; the results are shown in Table 2. Table 2 Indicates the observed t (t= -1.281) is less than the critical t (t= 2.044) with df (48); therefore, the difference between the two groups is not significant at the level (p<0.05). This shows the groups’ homogeneity at the beginning of the experiment.

Post-test

After there were one dependent variable and one independent variable, a t-test was run; the results are shown in Table 4. Since the observed t (t= -5.245) is greater than the critical t (t= 2.044) with df (48), the difference between the two groups is significant at the level (p<0.05). In other words, the treatment of lexical collocation has been effective in developing participants' knowledge of lexical collocation. Thus it indicates that students' knowledge of lexical collocation in experimental group improved significantly.

Figure 1 indicates that the subjects’ learning process for vocabulary and mechanics components develops quite significantly while this process regarding relevance and fluency takes place to a lesser extent. This learning process develops to a small extent with regard to grammar component. A comparison of the experimental group curve for the whole treatment period would reveal the process of experimental subjects' writings improvement by the type of awareness. In sum, the polygon shows the positive effect of lexical collocation awareness on vocabulary and mechanics components of writing. The comparison of vocabulary and mechanics lines on the graph shows that the mean of vocabulary and mechanics was greater than the other components of writing.

DISCUSSION

Regarding research question one, results showed the positive effect of lexical collocation awareness on experimental students' post-test was significant compared to control group. The results of Independent Samples t-test analysis showed that there was a significant difference between control and experimental groups in terms of lexical collocation knowledge (p<0.05). By the comparison of mean scores of participants, the method of lexical collocation appeared much more beneficial to experimental group rather than to the control one. The post-lexical collocation test scores indicated that the lexical collocation knowledge has been positively gained by the experimental group. The post-test scores of the experimental group indicated that the group had better retention rate compared to the control one. Participants received method of lexical collocations in the paragraphs included noticing, highlighting, consciousness-raising, translation activities, and dictionary use to increase their knowledge of lexical collocations. Therefore, lexical collocation awareness had positive effects on learning collocational elements. This finding is consistent with Lewis (2008a) who suggests that encouraging learners to notice language, especially collocations, is central to any methodology connected to a lexical view of language. Lexical collocation awareness is a method to help students notice these lexical chunks through using them in writing process.

Results dealing with the second research questions showed the experimental group outperformed the control group. Descriptive statistics also showed that the mean scores of the experimental group were greater than that of control group in each topic.

The effect on students’ grammar failed to be of great significance. One possible justification for this is the fact that the experiment was conducted on 10 teaching sessions and learners required more time to be able to extract the grammar themselves. Also, just five topics were given to the learners during the treatments. So, the participants had not received enough exposure and feedback to develop their grammar themselves.

In addition, the analysis of paragraph writings showed that the subjects’ learning process for vocabulary and mechanics components (that is, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) developed quite significantly while this developmental process regarding relevance and fluency takes place to a lesser extent. Therefore, there was a positive effect of lexical collocation awareness on vocabulary and mechanics components of writing skill. Exposure and feedbacks received by teacher may have the positive impacts on vocabulary and mechanics components of writing skill. In addition, exposure to language materials (e.g., dictionary) was an influential factor for EFL learners to
develop their vocabulary knowledge.

The results of the present study are; therefore, in line with the findings of studies conducted by some scholars (Bahardoust, 2012, 2013; Mounya, 2010). According to these results, collocational knowledge is a source of fluency in written communication among students. The commonality of these studies is that awareness on lexical collocation should be encouraged to replace conventional single-item vocabulary awareness for the purpose of enhancing EFL learners’ writing abilities. Therefore, in line with the earlier mentioned studies and the present study, it could be strongly argued that lexical collocation awareness can significantly influence EFL pre-intermediate language learners’ developing writing proficiency.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was an attempt to investigate whether lexical collocation awareness had any impact on writing proficiency of Iranian pre-intermediate language learners. It also sought to find out whether lexical collocation awareness (that is, noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) had any significant effect on learning lexical collocations by Iranian pre-intermediate learners of English as a foreign language. In doing so, two groups were selected; one group was taught on the basis of traditional approach. The other group was taught through noticing, highlighting, consciousness-raising, translation activities, and dictionary use to teach lexical collocations in each paragraph. Then five topics were administered to write one paragraph essay by students. Next, each paragraph was scored and the result was analysed through specific statistical analysis Independent Samples t-test. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the scores of the participants on traditional approach and their scores on the other approach. Students have used lexical collocations in their paragraphs of the examination because they have become aware of the fact that using lexical collocations can improve their writing and make it more natural. There was a positive impact of the method on students’ mechanics and vocabulary components of writing. That is, lexical collocation awareness can significantly influence EFL pre-intermediate language learners’ writing proficiency. Therefore, it could be claimed that lexical collocation awareness should be included in the writing syllabus at the university so that collocational competence could be developed in order to enhance students’ communicative competence.

The results also indicated lexical collocation awareness (that is, noticing, highlighting, and consciousness-raising) had significant effect on students’ learning lexical collocations. The results obtained by experimental group were compared with the mean score of control group which was taught on the basis of traditional approach. The results of Independent Samples t-test analysis showed that there was a significant difference between the mean score of experimental group and mean score of control group. The descriptive statistics also showed that the mean scores of the experimental group were greater than that of control group. On the basis of the results of the present study, teaching lexical collocations is the major endeavour to reach proficiency in writing. They are taught explicitly through highlighting, noticing, consciousness-raising. Teaching individual words come in the second position, and it is useful only if these words are taught in context. Feedback on mis-collocations is very important because it will raise learners' collocational competence and consequently communicative competence (Jeremie, 2013). Exposure to language materials (collocation dictionaries and concordancing) are influential factors for EFL learners. Therefore, activities that enhance students’ knowledge and use of lexical collocations are required. In addition, compared to vocabulary, grammar has a minor role in raising writing proficiency. So, lexical collocation should be included in the criteria of evaluating compositions.

Many Iranian EFL learners have serious problems with collocations. Awareness on collocation should be encouraged to replace conventional single-item vocabulary awareness for the purpose of enhancing EFL learners’ writing abilities. Besides, collocation awareness is what most EFL students would prefer and believe to be useful in enhancing their writings. Future investigations may again look into the role of knowledge of collocations and writing, by stretching the study to a long period of time instead of 10 sessions and involving more participants. In addition, the study can be wider in scope, to include all the possible lexical collocations and going beyond the two-word collocations so that the data could be more representative of the participants’ knowledge of collocations. Another area of improvement over the present study could be the selection of texts within which the phrases could be found. Future research should also consider grammatical collocations and similarly its effectiveness in improving written fluency.

REFERENCES

Hsu JY (2010). The effect of collocation instruction on reading comprehen-


