

Investigating the Impact of Explicit Collocation Instruction on ESL Learners' Writing Ability

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The present study was conducted to explore the impact of explicit collocation instruction on the ESL learners' writing ability. Furthermore, this study was an attempt to find if there is any significant difference between male and female learners on their use of collocations in writing tasks. In so doing, 63 advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (35 male and 28 female) who were studying English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte were conveniently sampled. At first, all participants received a writing pretest; then, they were divided into two groups randomly, experimental group and control group. The experimental group received explicit collocation instruction in writing class for seven sessions, while control group was taught using conventional techniques for writing. Finally, both groups received another writing posttest. Data were collected numerically and statistical analysis was used to show the difference between the two groups at the end of the study. The obtained data were analyzed using independent samples *t*-test procedures. The results indicated that collocation instruction has impact on writing ability of learners. In addition, it was found that no significant difference between male and female learners in their use of collocations in writing tasks could be seen.

Key words: Explicit collocation instruction, Writing, ESL learners, Conventional Techniques

1. Introduction

Collocations played a crucial role in second language learning (Brown, 1974). Schmitt (2000, p.76) referred to collocation as "tendency of two or more words to co-occur in discourse". According to Clark (2011, p. 378), explicit knowledge arises when there is a focus on the language code and the acquisition of explicit knowledge is facilitated by formal practice.

Writing is a very complex process (Hyland, 2003; cited in Al Shalabi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2009; Bhatia & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Birjandi, Alavi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2004; Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Karami & Salmani Nodoushan, 2011, 2014; Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan & Ashrafzadeh, 2010; Salmani Nodoushan, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006a,b,c, 2007a,b,c,d,e, 2008a,b,c,d,e, 2009a,b,c,d,e, 2010a,b,c, 2011a,b,c, 2012a,b,c,d, 2013a, 2014a, 2015a,b,c,d,e,f, 2016a,b, 2017; Salmani Nodoushan & Alavi, 2004; Salmani Nodoushan & Daftarifard, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan, & Khakbaz, 2011, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan & Montazeran, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan & Pashapour, 2016). We write differently at different times, depending on whom our readers are and what conditions are. That is, we write about a definite topic, to a particular reader, with a specific purpose in mind, using appropriate language we prefer for that occasion. This is what Wolfson (1989) refers to as context (cited in Salmani Nodoushan, Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995, 2006d,e, 2007f,g,h,i, 2008f,g,h, 2009, 2013b,c, 2014b,c,d,e, 2015g,h, 2016c,d,e,f, 2017a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan & Mohiyedin Ghomshei, 2014).

In fact good ESL/ESL writing probably, as Lee, (2003) states, is the key concern for teachers, researchers, textbook writers and program designers in the domain of Second Language Teaching.

Conventional writing technique is a type of formal writing style, used by many academic disciplines, that has a specific set of rules governing grammar, proper use of words and text organization and it is taught in academic settings.

2. Literature review

The term 'collocation' had its origin in the Latin verb "collocare" which means to set in order/to arrange'. Moreover, Skorupka (as cited in Martynska, 2004) defined collocation as a combination of

words which did not convey the meaning individually, he pointed out that co-occurrence of some words could be determined and in some cases restricted by their meaning.

Many scholars have maintained that collocation knowledge is one important factor that contributes to the differences between native speakers and second language learners (Aston, 1995; Fillmore, 1979; Kjellmer, 1991; Pawley & Syder, 1983).

According to the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2009), collocation exists in nearly all domains of English. Relatively no one can speak or write naturally without benefiting from collocation. With regard to students, selecting the appropriate collocation can enormously aid them to speak and write more naturally, and sound more native-like as a speaker or writer, even without considering their intelligibility degree.

English written by native speakers. Immersion in native idiomatic In order to improve the quality of interlanguage and enable the students to produce idiomatic English, teachers of English must attach sufficient importance to the teaching of collocation when teaching vocabulary. The teaching of a new word must be conducted in a given context (but not in isolation).

Students should be encouraged to listen to or read genuine English is helpful for developing good sense of English, especially good sense of collocation.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were sixty three ($N=63$) English as a Second Language (ESL) advanced learners ($n=35$ males; $n=28$ females), learning English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The researcher used an English placement test (based on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT)) to ascertain the homogeneity of the participants. In this way, there would be no doubt that the participants' proficiency level was the same. Then they were all randomly divided into two groups: experimental group that received explicit collocation instruction, and control group that were given conventional techniques of writing instruction as placebo.

3.2. Instruments

To check the impact of explicit collocation instruction on the writing ability of the participants of this study, the researcher asked the participants of both groups to take part in a pre-test before the instruction and a post-test after it with three weeks of rest between the pre- and post-tests. The pre-test was a kind of composition writing. The post-test was also a writing task, which was a composition type. A standard scale was also used to decrease the subjectivity to the most possible level.

3.3. Data collection procedure

First, the proficiency level of learners was determined in order to select advanced learners, using the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), to make sure that they were in the same level. Then, as it was mentioned in the previous part, they attended a pre-test and a post-test. Both tests were composition writing tests. It must be mentioned that participants were divided into two groups, each learning writing through different techniques. One group learned writing through explicit collocation and the other group learned writing through conventional techniques. The rater scored the participants of both groups by correcting the recorded written papers based on a pre-designed standardized scale which had been developed based on the TOEFL IBT writing scale, after correcting the paragraphs inter rater reliability was calculated. Their mean scores were derived for each learner. At the end, a series of *t*-tests, adjusted with bonferroni corrections of *alpha*, were conducted.

So as to analyze the data collected, the statistical methods using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 22) was used. In order to examine if explicit teaching of English collocations improves ESL learners' writing ability, a paired samples *t*-test was run, and in order to answer the second research question, the mean score was applied to show the difference between male and female on the use of collocation in writing task

4. Results

This section relates to the descriptive and inferential statistics, concerning the impact of explicit collocation instruction on the writings are displayed in tables followed by their interpretations.

As the table 1 shows, the results of independent samples *t*-test run shows that the proficiency level of control and experimental group does not differ significantly, In fact they are homogeneous. The *sig.* value is above .05.

Table 1a: Group Statistics

	Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
proficiency	Experimental	31	11.9032	2.22643	.39988
	Control	32	11.8750	1.75518	.31027

Table 1b: Independent Samples Test on Proficiency

	Levene's Test		<i>t</i> -test				
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error Difference</i>
Equal variances assumed	1.703	.197	.056	61	.956	.02823	.50423
Equal variances not assumed			.056	57.002	.956	.02823	.50614

4.1. Pre- test result

Table 2, below, shows: A *t*-test was run using the total score of the students of the two groups on pre collocation (pretest). The data analysis of the pre-test using SPSS is summarized in table 1 and that of the *t*-test is presented in table 2. The homogeneity of the groups was confirmed at ($\alpha=.05$) significance level. As the table 1 reveals: the mean of the control group was 11.0625 and that of the experimental group was 11.7742. Table 2 shows that the difference was not significant at ($\alpha=0.05$) significance level ($p>.05$). It confirms the homogeneity of the groups.

The results of the *t*-test analysis is shown in table 2, the results of independent samples *t*-test run also shows that the writing ability of all participants does not differ significantly prior to the study. The *sig.* value is above .05.

Table 2a: Descriptive group statistics of the total pretest result

	Group	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Pre collocation	Experimental	31	11.7742	2.06090	.37015
	Control	32	11.0625	1.79493	.31730

Table 2b: Independent Samples *t*-test for equality of means

	Levene's Test		<i>t</i> -test				
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error Difference</i>
pre-collocation Equal variances assumed	3.012	.088	1.463	61	.149	.71169	.48646
pre-collocation Equal variances not assumed			1.460	59.301	.150	.71169	.48754

4.2. Post-test results

Table 3, below, shows the means, standard deviations, standard error mean and the number of participants for the post tests in each group and for the two dependent variables. The mean scores

show the superiority of the experimental group over the control group and this superiority is more visible in the scores of receptive and productive form task than the receptive and productive meaning tasks. The highest scores were achieved by the experimental group on the receptive and productive knowledge of form task ($M = 14.6774$, $SD = 1.57$) and the lowest scores were obtained by the control group on the same task ($M = 12.0938$, $SD = 1.08$). The results of independent samples t -test run show that the experimental group significantly outperform the control group on the writing post-test which indicates that explicit collocation instruction has been more effective than the conventional instruction. The sig. value is below .05

Table 3a: Descriptive group statistics of the total post-test results

	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Post-writing	Experimental	31	14.6774	1.57876	.28355
	Control	32	12.0938	1.08834	.19239

Table 3b: Independent samples t -test for equality of means

		Levene's Test		t-test				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Post-writing	Equal variances assumed	6.904	.011	7.583	61	.000	2.58367	.34070
	Equal variances not assumed			7.540	53.091	.000	2.58367	.34266

Independent sample t -test was used to determine whether Male/Female ESL learners use collocation in writing differently. They were significantly different.

Finding illustrated in table 6 reported that the mean score was ($M = 12.9143$, $SD = 1.61558$) for males 'attitudes towards the impact of explicit collocation instruction and was ($M = 13.1786$, $SD = 1.65672$) for females'. In this table the t score was -0.636 . Although there was a difference between mean scores for males and females, this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 4a: Independent samples t -test for males and females' mean scores

	gender	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Post-writing	male	35	12.9143	1.61558	.27308
	female	28	13.1786	1.65672	.31309

Table 4b: Independent samples t -test for equality of means

		Levene's Test		t-test				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Post-writing	Equal variances assumed	.000	.990	-.638	61	.526	-.26429	.41427
	Equal variances not assumed			-.636	57.350	.527	-.26429	.41545

As Table 5 depicts the Pearson correlation between the ratings of the two raters is .92 indicating that the two rater have consistently evaluated the performance of learners on the writing test. Therefore, the test has a high level of internal consistency.

Table 5: Inter-rater reliability of writing test

	rater1	rater2
rater1 Pearson Correlation	1	.926**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	63	63
rater2 Pearson Correlation	.926**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	63	63

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

5. Discussion

As stated before, the goal of this study was to identify the impact of explicit collocation instruction on ESL learners' writing ability and then, to clarify the probable difference among male and female ESL learners concerning their use of collocation in writing tasks. Based on the results, the answers to the research questions are as follows:

RQ1. Does explicit collocation instruction have any effect on the ESL Learners' writing ability?

The first research question was asked to see if explicit teaching of English collocations improves ESL learners' writing ability. In order to examine any considerable change in the performance of the participants in English who received explicit method of teaching, a paired samples *t*-test was run. The *t*-test was used in order to compare the mean scores of the participants in English on the pretest and posttest to determine the usefulness of the treatment. The descriptive statistics and the results of the *t*-test for English, are illustrated in tables 2 to 5, separately.

RQ2. Are there any statistically significant differences between Male and female ESL learners on the use of collocations in writing tasks?

With regard to the second research question that deals with the difference between males and females on their use of collocation in writing task, it was found there is no significant difference among male and female ESL learners concerning their use of collocation instruction. And according to table 4 that the mean score was ($M=12.9143$, $SD=1.61558$) for males and ($M=13.1786$, $SD=1.65672$) for females and *t*-test result was -0.636 . Although there was a difference between mean scores for males and females, this difference was not statistically significant.

6. Conclusion

As the results of the study reveal, the participants in the both groups (control and experimental) performed similarly in pre- test. In other words, no significant difference was found between the performance of the first group and second group at the beginning of the study. But after classroom treatment and employing explicit collocation instruction for experimental group and conventional writing for control group during seven sessions, the results showed that the participants' performances in two groups were significantly different and the subjects of the experimental group outperformed in posttest, because the mean score of the control group was 12.0938, while the mean score of the experimental group was 14.6774. So, according to the participants' performance in the both groups, the first null hypothesis of the study was rejected: "Ho.1 explicit collocation instruction does not have any significant effect on the ESL Learners' writing ability." while "Ho.2. There are not any statistically significant difference between male and female ESL learners on the use of collocations in writing." was confirmed.

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