



The Effect of Pre-teaching Extended Prefabricated Lexical Bundles on the Writing Development of Advanced EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study attempts to shed light on how a teacher's instruction and guidance can cast aside writing inhibitions and bring about remarkable changes in the writing ability of advanced EFL students through the collaborative construction of extended chunks of language with the aim of enhancing lexical density and complexity and consequently injecting into learners a sense of satisfaction with their work. The sample included 40 TOEFL students selected out of 75 TOEFL students on the basis of their scores on a TOEFL test. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups-the control group and experimental group. After 20 instructional sessions both groups were assigned five writing tasks. The results reveal that the participants in experimental group outperformed their counterparts in control group. Overall, it is concluded that pre-teaching extended prefabricated lexical bundles can be a useful means of helping advanced students to improve their writing quality.

Keywords: prefabricated lexical bundles, extended prefabricated lexical bundles, negative transfer, writing fluency

1. Introduction

One of the tricky areas EFL learners face as they tread the steep pathway of learning a foreign language is to master the ability to write effectively and accurately. Taking into account the fact that most natives, as a matter of fact, shrink from putting pen to paper even to write about what they are fully aware of, casts no doubt on the fact that writing is the most challenging skill. Needless to say, it is not surprising that non-natives balk at doing something a typical native usually finds a grueling task to do.

Psycholinguist Lenneberg (1967) once noted, in a discussion of "species specific" human behavior, that human beings learn to walk and to talk, but swimming and writing are culturally specific learned behaviors. We learn to swim if there is a body of water available and usually if someone teaches us. We learn to write if we are members of a literate society and usually only if someone teaches us. In other words, writing is not a solitary process since students gain valuable insight into the writing process as they watch their teacher select a topic, plan, write, revise, and edit. Hence, teachers play an indispensable role in offering guidance on building the field; that is, providing them with opportunities to develop content knowledge for their writing in a supportive environment. In so doing, teachers provide appropriate scaffolds to ensure success and to boost students' confidence as writers.

What this study attempts to do is to prove how a teacher's instruction and guidance can efficiently stamp out writing inhibitions and give rise to noticeable improvement in the writing ability of advanced EFL students, bringing about a sense of satisfaction with their work. According to Lewis (2008), teaching lexical bundles and collocations plays a crucial role in enhancing students' exposure to the target language. Furthermore, the absence of such clusters might reveal the lack of the fluency of a novice or newcomer to that community. According to Yorio (1979), prefabricated language contributes to greater fluency and facilitates interaction. Regarding the relationship between lexical bundles and linguistic production fluency, Chambers (1998) and Wood (2001, 2004), also commented that lexical bundles and formulaic language units place in the hands of second language learners the opportunity to increase their speech speed by building sentences and increasing the length of their speech. They also believed that the memorization of a large number of bundles and automatically retrieving them is highly likely to earn language learners native like fluency and increase the length of the speech between pauses. Lewis (2000) urges teachers to help learners to notice the kinds of chunks they meet in text and the kinds of prefabricated chunks that are the prerequisite of fluency.

Interlingual transfer is considered a significant source for most L2 learner problems. (Brown, 2000; Erdogan, 2005; Mahmoud, 2005). Selinker (1972; as cited in Shahheidaripour, 2000) proposed negative language transfer as what could

be activated in order to learn another language among one of the five central processes existing in a latent psychological structure. Errors made due to negative transfer from the first language may occur at all levels of linguistic analysis such as phonology, syntax, lexis and grammar (Oldin, 1989). There is little doubt that one of the areas susceptible to interlingual transfer is collocation and recurrent multiword expressions, especially where the first language does not correspond with the target language in terms of collocational patterns and bundles. As Sadeghi (2009) rightly points out, a substantial portion of syntactic and semantic errors made by EFL learners may result from a discrepancy between collocational patterns in the L1 and the target language they are struggling to learn. As mentioned by Nesselhauf (2003), collocation and bundle instruction can help students to avoid erroneous forms involving interference by their mother tongue. One of the many things that has long been appealing in the realm of second language acquisition is the sequences of recurrent word combinations to refer to which a variety of terms have been used by different linguists Halliday (1971) provided a detailed definition of a collocation which emphasized ‘the tendency of a lexical item to co-occur with one or more other words’. Other terms suggested by linguists include conventionalized language forms (Yorio, 1979); speech formulas (Pawley, 1985), ready-made expressions and multi-word units (Cowie, 1988), and fixed expressions (Moon, 1992) (all quoted in Cortes 2004). The term lexical bundles was later coined by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), considering them as a specific and relatively recent category of word combinations with a formulaic status (Barbieri and Biber, 2007). They defined lexical bundles as recurrent expressions, regardless of their idiomaticity, and their structural status. To some linguists (Yorio, 1979), lexical bundles are referred to as prefabricated language units perceived to be helpful since they can be easily memorized and retrieved when the situation calls for them. Referred to as clusters, chunks, bundles or extended collocations, these multi-word expressions, the mastery of which is an indispensable prerequisite for fluent linguistic production, help to shape meaning in specific contexts and contribute to our sense of coherence in a text (Hyland, 2008b). What is more, it shifts the focus away from individual words to language structure of the discourse directing attention to the selection of units of language and the production of the selected units.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in the study included 40 female AEC (advanced English course) students, aged between 18 and 26, studying English as a foreign language in Goldis Institute, selected out of a population of 85 by employing a pre-test. Having been chosen for the study, the participants randomly fell into two groups A and B representing experimental group and control group, respectively, including 20 subjects each.

2.2 Instruments

What was initially utilized as the chief instrument in this study included a proficiency test encompassing three sections of a PBT TOEFL test: listening (30 items), structure (15 multiple-choice questions, 15 error-recognition items), reading comprehension (5 passages each including 8 items).

The second instrument which was employed in the second phase of the study included 5 writing tasks on intended topics whose scorers were provided by scoring checklists designed based on Barron’s scoring checklists for TOEFL iBT writing.

2.3 Procedure

To begin with, to ensure the homogeneity of the participants in the study as far as their proficiency was concerned, a PBT TOEFL test was administered to 85 EFL students taking advanced courses in Goldis institute based on whose marks 40 subjects were selected for the study who randomly fell into control and experimental groups each including 20 subjects.

Running for 20 sessions through 10 weeks, the 90-minute treatment each session, from which both the experimental group benefited, involved choosing a topic lying within our students’ interest to heighten their motivation. Even though this work was mainly targeted toward writing development, each session of instruction prior to the writing session embraced practice on speaking skill with the aim of the internalization of the chunks as through speaking practice subjects are engaged in the discussion about the intended topic which stimulated students’ schemata in terms of the topic through brainstorming and generating needed vocabulary. Furthermore, a wide circle of key words and phrases lying within their passive knowledge of vocabulary that might have skipped their attention was reintroduced to equip them with some relevant background to facilitate writing. Simultaneous with teaching relevant vocabulary regarding the intended topic and providing them with useful prefabricated bundles, students’ attention was considerably focused on relevant collocations and the restrictions on how different words can be used together.

Nonetheless, what sets this work apart from the previously carried out ones is the way it takes a further step, shifting the emphasis away from clichéd lexical bundles to a bunch of more sophisticated chunks assembled from the combination of a host of lexical bundles and collocational patterns relevant to the intended topic. The specific treatment of which the control group was deprived involved engaging the subjects of experimental group in the process of constructing longer chunks of language comprising the already collected lexical bundles and collocations as well as incorporating nominalization in order to heighten the lexical density and consequently the complexity of the writing text. In other words, rather than placing the emphasis upon a string of clichéd lexical bundles, this approach to writing improvement aimed at stimulating students to put together appropriate bits and come up with extended chunks of language, incorporating them into their writing. As an example, in the case of the writing composition entitled “What are the main reasons for Iranian youths’ immigration to European and American countries?” the first step included engaging the participants in the discussion so as to elicit key ideas and paint a general image of the intended topic. Some of the emerging phrases and sentences included:

the main reasons for, factors which prevent young people's progress, high prices, weak economy, unstable politics, high rate of inflation, few job opportunities, lose hope of making progress, improve their status, university admissions keep changing every year, nepotism and high level of unemployment, starting a new job, starting a new life

Having elicited enough reasons for immigration, the teacher, in a collaborative effort with students, went on to paraphrase what they had come up with through the process of bringing to their attention more sophisticated terms and expressions, synonymous with or equivalent to what they had already produced but those bearing higher lexical density and complexity. For instance the above-mentioned terms changed to the following:

the prime reasons lying behind..., impeding factors which hinder progress, astronomical/fluctuating prices, frail/fragile economy, mounting rate of inflation, political instability, dwindling job opportunities, relinquish hope of making headway, inconsistency in university admissions procedures, selective policy of governmental bodies and nepotism, burnish their image, embarking upon a new career, settling down to a new lifestyle

In so doing a rough outline of the writing was agreed on and the assembled bundles were ordered in a proper sequence. What is more, what resided in participants' passive knowledge began to surface which contributed substantially to bringing out the best in students. More importantly, not only did this awaken students to the fact that as an advanced student they had a wide range of vocabulary at their disposal but also enlightened them as to the creative and delicate nature of writing. Subsequently, being the focal centre of this work, the process of putting together the assembled bundles to come up with extended chunks of language was steered under the tight control of the teacher and commenced with pairing up relevant chunks and bundles. As an example:

Young people whose career has been stagnated by impeding factors such as dwindling job opportunities, inconsistency in university admissions procedures and selective policy of governmental bodies, relinquish hope of making headway in their own country and pin their hopes on embarking upon a new career in a foreign country.

This was followed by the introduction of some clichéd sentences to give students some ideas on the initiation and conclusion of their writing.

The second phase of the research involved assigning 5 writing tasks to both groups regarding the already practiced topics. In order to reduce scorer unreliability, two different scorers both teaching EFL advanced students in Goldis Institute were asked to score the writing tasks. Furthermore, the researcher kept under tight control the whole process of treatment in experimental group weighing students' constructions of extended chunks of language and refining them. That is, even though the primary purpose of this study was to foster a sense of creativity, the ultimate decision in terms of the final choices of the chunk to be incorporated into students' writings lay with the teacher.

3. Results

The data obtained from the PBT TOEFL test and composition tests were analyzed by means of the statistical package for social sciences version 16 (SPSS, 16). An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the pretest test scores of the experimental and control groups on the PBT TOEFL test taken to ensure the homogeneity of the participants in both groups. As indicated in Table 1 and 2, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group ($M = 70.35, SD = 4.42$) and control group ($M = 70.80, SD = 4.74$); $t(38) = -.31, p = .76$.

Table 1. Descriptive group statistics for the results of the proficiency test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	experimental	20	70.35	4.42	.99
	Control	20	70.80	4.74	1.06

Table 2. Independent samples t-test for the proficiency test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
scores	Equal variances assumed	.493	.487	-.31	38	.76	-.45	1.45	-3.38	2.48
	Equal variances not assumed			-.31	37.81	.76	-.45	1.45	-3.38	2.48

Having confirmed the initial homogeneity of the groups, we found it possible to proceed with two different treatments: the experimental group received specific treatment of which the control group was deprived. An analysis of the post-test results, in the form of a composition, was done using the same procedures to find any significance difference after the

inter-rator reliability of the test scores, computed through the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient $\rho(p)$, was acceptably large as follows:

Spearman's rho for the Control group test results = .85

Spearman's rho for the Experimental group test results = .93

Table 3. Correlation between the scores of scorer1 and scorer2 for control group

		Scorer1		Scorer2	
Spearman's rho	Scorer1	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	.85**	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.00	
		N	20	20	
	Scorer2	Correlation Coefficient	.85**	1.00	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.	
		N	20	20	

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

The results in table 3 reveal that there is a significant large and positive correlation between the scores of scorer 1 and 2 for control group, $r = .85$, $n = 20$, $p = .00$.

As indicated by the results in table 4, there is a significant large and positive correlation between the scores of scorer 1 and scorer 2 for experimental, $r = .93$, $n = 20$, $p = .00$.

Table 4. Correlation between the scores of scorer1 and scorer2 for experimental group

		Scorer1		Scorer2	
Spearman's rho	Scorer1	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	.93**	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.00	
		N	20	20	
	Scorer2	Correlation Coefficient	.93**	1.00	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.	
		N	20	20	

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

Similarly, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the writing scores of the participants in the experimental and control groups. The results as shown in Table 5 and 6 revealed significant difference between the mean scores of the participants in the experimental group ($M = 17.40$, $SD = 1.56$) control group ($M = 14.55$, $SD = 2.21$); $t(38) = 4.73$, $p = .00$. The mean difference in statistics scores was 2.85 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 1.63 to 4.07.

Table 5. Descriptive group statistics of the results of the writing tasks

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Experimental	20	17.40	1.56	.34
	Control	20	14.55	2.21	.50

Table 6. Independent samples t-test for the writing scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
scores	Equal variances assumed	3.523	.068	4.73	38	.00	2.85	.60	1.63 4.07
	Equal variances not assumed			4.73	33.87	.00	2.85	.60	1.63 4.07

4. Discussion

What poses grave difficulties for EFL learners at any level of learning is, as even most professional writers agree to be, the ability to write in the foreign language. Not surprisingly, writing, in a majority of cases, is believed to be the last thing learners tend to deal with, in the light of the hardship it imposes even on advanced level learners. Particularly, prevalent among EFL learners is the feeling of apathy when it is realized that their writing skill does not advance in parallel with other skills; in other words lagging behind them. Without a shadow of doubt, the ability to write effectively is not confined to the mastery of a set of grammatical rules to put sentences together; rather, it is by far very complicated in nature and demands certain instruction and guiding on which this study attempted to focus. This research was carried out with the aim of helping advanced EFL learners to improve their writing ability which had been suffering and had stagnated over time, giving rise to the frustrating feeling of dissatisfaction with their ability to write effectively and accurately. Taking into account that every literate person can write but few can do it exceptionally well and in the light of the fact that all professional writers perceive writing to be a painfully arduous task, one can be forgiven for thinking that the difficulties which reside in writing can inhibit writing development. What particularly caught the researcher's attention was advanced EFL learners' dissatisfaction with their writing performance which as they firmly maintained had not substantially developed over time. This study was conducted with the intention to remedy this problem and the findings on the effectiveness of extended prefabricated lexical bundles reveal that not only does the collaborative construction of longer chunks of language by putting together the relevant bundles assembled in terms of the topic of the writing, activate relevant elements stored in memory, but also triggers students' interest and motivation and assists learners to improve their writing skill, injecting into them a sense of satisfaction with their work which; consequently, bears higher lexical density and complexity.

The data analysis of the proficiency test showed that the difference was not significant at (0.05) significance level ($p > .05$) which confirmed the homogeneity of the groups. To minimize scorer unreliability, two independent scorers were asked to correct the papers and the means of the two sets of scores were used as a base for the analysis of writing scores. The data analysis of participants' writing scores showed that the obtained P value (.000) is less than 0.05 ($p > .05$) and, therefore, there is a significant difference between the groups at a =0.05 significance level. Furthermore, this research confirms evidence that placing emphasis upon extended prefabricated bundles and the restrictions on how different words can be used together can substantially lead to writing fluency which is totally in line with Yorio (1979) who asserts that prefabricated language contributes to greater fluency. An additional consistency the findings of this study bear with previous ones is the reduction of the threats negative transfer poses to the native-like production of EFL learners which is in accordance with Bahns' (1993) and Nesselhauf' (2003) assertions that collocation and bundle instruction can help students to avoid erroneous forms involving interference by their mother tongue. In other words, by drawing upon two theories of writing fluency and negative transfer, it can be concluded that the outperformance of the subjects in the experimental group was due to the facilitative effect of the extended chunks, bundles and collocational patterns constructed prior to the writing process.

The ultimate results of this study brought home the fact that advanced EFL learners' writing skill needs to be fostered when they feel overwhelmed by the unsatisfactory nature of their writing. What our deep probe into their predicament detected as the major problem was not for lack of trying but rather for the need for someone to put them on the right track and steer their course. The thing that particularly caught our attention was the way these learners were groping for words to come up with appropriate sentences relevant to the topic of writing in spite of the wide circle of the lexical knowledge they possess. This inability proved to have placed an obstacle on their way from which the feeling of frustration and apathy stemmed. By drawing upon the lexical knowledge of these learners and through their collaborative effort besides the significant contributions of the instructor, brainstorming initiating each instructional session followed by the bilateral negotiations to come up with relevant chunks and bundles was decided to be the fundamental base of each session. The way the instructor made the lexical items lying in learners' passive knowledge come alive and be utilized boosted the learners' confidence and morale as whatever included in their writing was the product of their own memory and knowledge and imagination. The process of activating their schemata injects a sense of self-confidence into students as they find themselves totally involved in the emergence of each sentence. However, what was held under the researcher's tight control was the process of joining the already assembled bundles and collocational patterns to come up with longer chunks of relevant language to be incorporated into students' writing. In so doing, the students are also equipped with some bundles, chunks and sentences to start and end their writing as a majority of students struggle with how to put pen to paper and how to bring it to an end. Hence, apart from the contribution of such prefabricated language to writing fluency, it provides a framework for students within which they can paint an image of the topic based upon the rough outline extended prefabricated lexical bundles create.

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