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The relationship between Iranian EFL learner's collocational knowledge and their writing fluency

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Abstract

This study aims to explore writing fluency with the aim of investigating how it is related to learners' collocational knowledge. For this purpose, a group of 57 Persian learners of English in a language institute in Kazeroun (West of Fars) participated in weekly guided writing activities in the class on different topics. Using a words-per-minute (WPM) procedure, the researcher was able to gain scores for the learners' writing fluency. In addition, the students were given a test of collocation consisting of both lexical and grammatical collocation. Pearson correlation coefficient was used in order to determine the relationship between learners' knowledge of collocations and writing fluency. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was a significant relationship between students' knowledge of collocation and writing scores but there was no significant relationship between collocation and writing fluency. The results of the correlations between language proficiency, collocation scores, writing scores and writing fluency showed that there is a meaningful relationship between general proficiency and the students' writing and collocation scores but no significant relationship was observed between proficiency scores and writing fluency. One reason may be that the participants of this study were in lower intermediate level as is indicated by the mean of the proficiency test (17.8421 of 50) which is negatively skewed, showing that these students whose grade in the language institute was intermediate had a performance below their level. Another reason may be due to the way that writing fluency was calculated in this study. WPM is a totally quantitative way of measuring writing fluency, while today more emphasis is put on qualitative methods due to lexical and grammatical collocations. Meanwhile, the significant correlation between general writing scores and collocation knowledge may indicate that collocation competence could have a significant effect of a skill like writing but not on its components including writing fluency. Further research using more qualitative methods are needed to test these hypotheses.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning; Writing Fluency; Collocation Knowledge; Lexical Collocation; Grammatical Collocation

Introduction:

This paper provides general information on the main variables of the study and the problem that is going to be explored. Then, research objectives, the significance, questions and the hypothesis of the study are presented. Finally, the chapter ends with defining the key terms.

Today, with the introduction of different communicative approaches, great emphasis has been put on achieving fluency in a second or foreign language. While talking about fluency, most people think about fluency in oral skills. As well as in speaking and writing, fluency is of concern in literacy skills, i.e. reading and writing. In this way, the simplest definition of writing fluency can be the speed with which a learner is able to write in a foreign language. However, in technical sense of the word, different definitions have been proposed. These various definitions may have resulted from the different measures or indicators used for measuring writing fluency. Many L1/L2 writing process studies (e.g. Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Hatasa & Soeda, 2000) measured writing fluency in terms of the composing rate, i.e. the number of words written per minute which is obtained through dividing the number of the words by the time spent for composition. Other reported measures of writing fluency which are product-based are holistic scoring of the text (Ballator, Farnum & Kaplan, 1999), number of correctly spelled words written, number of sentences written, and number of letter sequences (Rosenthal, 2007). Of all these indicators, the composing rate has been the most frequently used one for assessing writers' fluency. It can be argued that producing longer or shorter text or writing fluency may be dependent on the specific types of words, phrases or collocations used in a text. Collocations, prefabricated forms or chunks are units of language which mostly co-occur or come together and convey a certain meaning. Knowledge of collocations is an important indication of natural language use (Bahns, 1993). Fluent natural language use is proved to be dependent upon the use of these formulaic expressions. In other words, collocations are definitely an important part of language knowledge that can lead learners to communicative competence (Yazdandoost, Amalsaleh, & Kafipour, 2014).

Research Background:

According to Brand and Brand (2006), the general meaning of fluency can be stated as completing an activity or a task effortlessly so that students complete that activity or task "automatically, fluidly, rapidly, quickly, and accurately".

In writing in a second or foreign language, the idea of flow is supported by Casanave's (2004) as writing fluency. Writing fluency can be defined as the "writers' ability to produce a lot of language without excessive hesitations, blocks, and interruptions" (p. 67).

Collocations are seen as conventionalized, recurring word combinations. Brown (1974) was one of the first who proposed the incorporation of collocations in the EFL classroom. She emphasized that learning collocations not only increases EFL learners' knowledge of collocation but also improves learners' oral fluency, listening comprehension, and reading speed. Moreover, Brown contended that learning collocations causes learners to be able to gradually recognize language chunks used by native speakers in speech and writing and to give them the sense of using words in a natural way (Hashemi, Azizinezhad & Darvishi, 2011). Similarly, Liu (2000) observed that the more often students are taught English collocations, the more correctly and appropriately they are able to make use of collocations to express what they mean.

The fact that foreign language learners avoid using collocations in their production or make many errors about them is because of their lack of exposure to the natural language. Learners, who have the habit of reading magazine articles, novels and other books, watching English movies and listening to English news, make less collocationl errors than those who do not have such exposures.

Research methodology

The population, sample and sampling

The data for the study was gathered from English students in Jahad Institute in Kazeroon, Iran. There were 57 students studying English for the coming semester. Their ages range from 17 to 25. Their first language is Persian while English is their foreign language. Their proficiency level is intermediate based on the grade they were studying in. They were asked to take the Oxford Placement Test (OPT, Allan.

1985, Appendix A). It was given to them in the first session in order to omit very weak and very strong students and normalize the data. It were required that they get a score of 25 from 50 (the mean). Then the one standard deviation at the highest and one standard deviation at the lowest ranks were omitted. The OPT test consists of 50 items to choose the correct answer by underlining it.

Research tools:

As well as the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the data collocation instruments used in this study were a writing task and a collocation test. Students were asked to write about five topics in five sessions. Two of the topics were taken from their book (*Top Notch Summit*) and the rest were suggested by the teacher according to their abilities. The topics were studied in their previous sessions and they were asked to write in the following sessions. They had 5 minutes time to write about the topic and use as many sentences and vocabularies as they can. The writings were also expected to be accurate in terms of grammaticality and written in due time. Each student had 5 writings during 5 weeks.

The holistic measure of writing proficiency was used to score the papers. This holistic scoring was done for the purpose of gaining a general English writing proficiency score for each student. This approach to writing assessment has been advocated by Nakamure (2004) who has placed special emphasis on the issue of validity of holistic scoring. The validity as well as the reliability of the writing task in this study has been accounted for through the following procedure: the writing samples were scored on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being the least competent and 4 the most competent. Based on Nakamure (2004), each writing sample was scored by two raters who had M.A. degrees in TEFL. The two scores for each writing sample were averaged out to produce a single score.

The second instrument used in this study was a multiple-choice test of collocation (Appendix B). It includes 34 items selected from *Oxford Collocation Dictionary* (Namvar, 2014). The students took the collocation test in the first session. It contains both lexical and grammatical collocations and is divided into 3 parts. These parts offer the following types of collocations:

1. Noun + Verb
2. Adjective + Noun
3. Noun + Preposition

The test of collocation consists of 34 sentences or items in a multiple-choice format which proposed by Namvar (2014). The scores on the collocation test show the participants' knowledge of collocations. The maximum score for answering 34 questions correctly was 34 points.

Data analysis procedures:

All writings were placed into folders with an identifying number on each. To assure participants' anonymity, identifying numbers were used instead of names. The word per minute procedure (WPM) was used to calculate the participants' writing fluency. WPM can be used for measuring writing fluency score because it does not demand a lot of time (Peterson, 1908). According to Fellner and Apple (2006, p. 5), writing fluency is defined in term of "the number of words produced in a specified time frame." This is the definition of WPM which was also adopted in this paper. As a result, after the compositions received the general writing score, the number of words in the whole composition was counted and then divided by the time which was 5 minutes to gain a WPM score for each writing. This procedure was continued all through the 5 sessions and at the end, the average of all these tasks was calculated as the total WPM or writing fluency score for each student.

After gaining the subjects' score on the collocation test and their writing fluency scores through WPM, Pearson correlation coefficient was used in order to determine the relationship between knowledge of collocations and writing fluency.

Research Findings:
The statistical measures carried out clearly showed that there is no relation between students'knowledge of collocations and their writing fluency.

Table 1: Pearson correlation between collocation knowledge and writing fluency

		Collocation	WPM
Collocation	Pearson Correlation	1	.166
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.217
	N	57	57
WPM	Pearson Correlation	.166	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.217	
	N	57	57

As the results of the Table1,indicates, there was no relationship between collocation and writing fluency as measured by WPM.

Discussion:
The main objective of this study was to examine the relationship between collocation knowledge and English writing fluency. Also of concern was to examine the relationship between English proficiency and general writing proficiency, the collocation knowledge and writing fluency.
In contrast to what was expected, collocation knowledge had no significant relationship with writing fluency. However, a significant relationship was observed between collocation knowledge and general writing ability. Additionally, writing fluency showed no significant relationship with general proficiency of the learners which the latter showed a significant relationship with collocation knowledge and general writing scores. In other words, writing fluency showed no significant relationship with either collocation knowledge or the general writing ability of the learners. The fact that collocation knowledge correlated highly with general language proficiency and L2 oral fluency has been confirmed by previous research (Adelian, Nemati, Falahati, 2015; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000; Brown, 1994; Fillmore; 1979; Hsu & Chiu, 2008; Nattinger, 1980; Shin, 2007; Sung, 2003). However, the result of this study disagrees with sporadic studies done on the influence of collocation knowledge on writing fluency (Hsu, 2007; Zhang, 1993), which have shown that knowledge of collocations can be an influential factor in writing in a second language. Furthermore, in this study, the correlation coefficient between writing fluency, as measured by WPM, and language proficiency, as measured by Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was not significant. In other words, writing fluency showed no significant relationship with either collocation knowledge or language proficiency.

Conclusion:
The results showed that in contrast to expectation, collocation knowledge had no significant relationship with writing fluency though there was a significant relationship between this knowledge and general writing ability of the learners. In addition, writing fluency showed no significant relationship with the general proficiency of the learners.This may be related to the quantitative procedure used to measure writing fluency in this study, i.e. WPM. Some researchers have argued in favour of more qualitative methods of measuring writing fluency (Garcia-Amaya, 2009; Jamatlou, 2011; Kormos & Denes, 2004; Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Secondly, a significant relationship was observed between collocation test scores and general writing proficiency while a moderate correlation was observed between collocation knowledge and general English proficiency scores. It was argued that the students low proficiency (X= 17.82) and low correlation knowledge (X= 14.52) may have resulted in the low correlations observed between the variables of the study.

However, the high correlation observed between general writing proficiency and general writing proficiency is in line with previous research (Adelian, Nemati, Falahati, 2015; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bonk, 2000; Brown, 1994; Fillmore; 1979; Hsu & Chiu, 2008; Nattinger, 1980; Shin, 2007; Sung, 2003).

Finally, the fact that collocation knowledge correlated significantly with the general writing proficiency but not with writing fluency may propose that collocation competence and knowledge of formulaic expressions of the language may have an effect on overall nature of a skill and not particularly on specific aspects of that skill. Many studies have shown the effect of certain variables on general proficiency in a skill without necessarily affecting the specific components of that skill. This proposal can be examined in future research.

Limitations of the study:

As was mentioned in chapter 4, this study had some limitations which could have been addresses in future research. One limitation was the quantitative writing fluency procedure utilized in this study. Other qualitative methods could have been used with WPM procedure in order to increase the credibility of the research results (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010).

The other limitation of this study was using intermediate language learners who were lower than average in both the collocation and proficiency tests. Using an advanced group language learners could have resulted in gaining more valid results as the tests (especially the collocation test) need higher levels of language proficiency. In addition, more advanced students could have provided longer stretches of texts which might be a better and more reliable measure of writing fluency.

Incorporating writing fluency or free writing activities as well as collocation units and chunks is another implication of this research for materials developers and foreign language teachers. Language teaching curriculum must provide for the development of all aspects of language especially those which help to the naturalness of the language use in particular collocations and fluency.

Suggestions for further research:

Interested researchers can examine how L2 general writing ability and its different aspects including fluency can be affected by the students' knowledge of collocations. In doing so, an experimental research design can be more helpful. In addition, using an experimental design in teaching lexical and grammatical collocations can give a better insight to the researcher in establishing a cause and effect relationship between collocation competence and L2 writing fluency rather than a correlational relationship.

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