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The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Creativity and Their Knowledge of Lexical Chunks

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Abstract

Both knowledge of lexical chunks and learners' creativity are important indicators of learning quality and play pivotal role in foreign language learning success. This study, thus, is mainly designed and conducted to determine to what extent learner creativity is associated with their knowledge of lexical chunks. In so doing, a creativity scale and a M-C test of lexical chunks were first administered to 70 male and female learners conveniently selected. The gathered data were then analyzed through Pearson correlation coefficient and Cronbach Alpha. The findings indicated that there is a significant relationship between learner creativity and their lexical chunk knowledge. It was also realized that lexical chunk knowledge had the strongest correlation with the '' fluency'' component of creativity and no correlation with the '' originality'' component.

Keywords: Lexical Chunk- Creativity- L2 Learning- Pearson Correlation

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Introduction

The importance of creativity in education has been greatly emphasized. Creativity is a skill through which one mix concepts which normally are not seen as related in to one another; so that practical novel ideas or answers can be created (Mednick, 1962; Ansburg, 2000). Creativity as a cognitive concept is a notion which has a long history in this field due to the fact that it impacts both language teaching and learning (Albert & Kormos, 2004).

After Guilford's 1950's introduction of creativity in a novel way, a lot of scientific studies have been carried out on this subject in various fields besides teaching (Sternberg, 2006). According to these studies, particularly the ones in the psychology field, creativity is a hidden aptitude which all humankinds possess (Amini Naghadeh, Kasraey, Maghdour, Eyvezi, 2014). Appropriate environment and education may assist individuals to benefit from this trait and enable them to express and use their true potentials (Amini Naghadeh, Kasraey, Maghdour, Eyvezi, 2014). As some scholars hold, psychologically creativity is an essential factor since it provides a framework to describe an individual, and clarifies the differences between them. It is important to be aware of such individual distinctions as they can be utilized to foretell future acts of people such as their academic achievement or their language achievement (e.g., Naderi, Abdullah, Aizan, Sharir, & Kumar, 2009).

Fasco (2001) as cited in Asadi Arashlou (2014), asserts that all people are creative, though some people because of factors such as knowledge, motivation, culture, etc. are more creative in particular areas. Moreover, creativity is considered as a field- general talent which could be enhanced and used in distinct fields, it also would be significant in the language teaching and learning domains. Some scholars hold that basic tenets of creativity are usually spread in the population (Barkóczi & Zétényi, 1981). Thus, creativity which implicitly includes, flexibility, risk-taking, unconventionality, imagination and creating new categorizations and systematizations of knowledge (Sternberg, 1985), it can be a factor which influences second language acquisition.

Defining lexical chunks

Lexical chunks (Lewis, 1993) have been explained in many ways: They may be called "prefabricated patterns" (Hakuta, 1976), "lexicalized stems" (Pawley & Syder, 1983), "speech formulae" (Peters 1983), "lexical phrases" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992), "ready-made (complex) units" (Cowie 1992), etc. That there are many terms for this language phenomenon**,** shows both the significance and the complexity of this linguistic area.

Among all of the definitions, Nattinger & DeCarrico's and Wray's definitions of this linguistic phenomenon are the most prestigious. In *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) label the lexical chunks as lexical phrases. They describe lexical phrases as „chunks" of language of varying length, and each is associated with a particular discourse function. The two researchers also point out that they are "multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:1). According to this definition, lexical phrases have not only syntactic structure, but also functional meanings, such as greeting (*how do you do*), expressing summary (*in short* or *above all*), and expressing relationships among ideas or things (*notonly_, but also_)*, which is the main

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difference from other conventionalized or frozenforms,such as idioms or clichés. On the other hand, Wray's definition of lexical chunks is:

A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (Wray 2000, p.465).

This definition expresses the basic characteristic of the lexical chunks, that is, fixed or semi-fixed lexical phrases, which can be stored and retrieved automatically as a whole unit in the process of language acquisition. Learners do not have to analyze and focus on the individual words of the phrases, but should pay more attention to the whole chunks. This can enhance both the fluency and efficiency of the language production.

Functions of lexical chunks

Nyyssonen (1999, p.160) claims that "communicative competence is a highly complex ability. It includes grammatical accuracy, intelligibility and acceptability, contextual appropriateness and fluency". Previous studies show that lexical chunks are helpful to L2 learning, because chunks contribute to the aspect of language fluency, accuracy, creativeness and cohesion to a large extent. Meanwhile, lexical chunks increase learners‟ motivation greatly. Therefore, exploring the functions of lexical chunks is pedagogically useful. On the one hand, it shows the importance of lexical chunks in L2 learners' written and spoken language; on the other hand, it also shows the orientation of lexical chunks applied in L2 teaching process.

Research Question

Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' creativity and their knowledge of lexical chunks?

Literature Review

In the educational domain, Ely (1980) investigated the effect of creativity on the utilization of the second language learning strategies among students of Spanish at the university level. In this study, it was assumed that learners' use of strategy is influenced by creative thinking process in the ways that lower creativity leads to relatively greater reliance upon the L1 when using the language and strategies that focus on specific details are used more by students low in creativity. In accordance with Ely (1980), Kazamia (1998) tried to assess the degree of tolerance of ambiguity as one significant aspect of creative thinking process that Greek Civil Servants demonstrated when learn English as a foreign language. The results indicated that because of differences between participants' degree of creativity, their tolerance of ambiguity in all skills and in all language learning strategies was different.

In addition, in investigating the role of creativity in teaching and learning second language, Mc-Lain (1993) foundthat individuals who were more creative, were also more willing to take riskand more receptive to change in ESL classes. Loveless , Burton and Turvey (2006) explored how a conceptual framework for creativity with information and communication technology (ICT) might be developed and expressed in professional development for primary education pre-service and newly qualified teachers. For the purpose of this study, one of the areas in which creativity is a relevant topic can be a more specific type of cognitive demand of knowledge of lexical chunks.

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Paul (1992), in his study, demonstrated that students' creative thinking can be promoted through a variety of techniques. Herecommends that instructors ought to use cooperative learning more often; they should speak less in order for students to have more time to think, think out loud before other students, utilize suitable questions which examine different aspects of their thinking, use tangible instances to demonstrate abstract concepts, and overall design all tasks in a way that students "must think their way through them". Teachers can promote creative thinking by provoking active learning through encouraging well supported outcomes, and by building from learners' experiences, because it can result in effective and long-lasting education (Chaffe, 1992).

Finally, Allison (2004) explored what students and teachers in one setting had to say about creativity and related topics as they commented upon academic writing in a university English language degree program. He found that only a small number of comments included the word creative or a cognate term; this makes it possible to report all data selected on the key word basis. With a focus on previous studies, it can be understood that they expressed the impact of creative thinking process in the second language writing performance, but did not express the tendency of putting individuals' different levels of creative thinking and its relationship with the writing performance to the test.

With respect to lexical chunks, most studies have focused on the effect of individuals' knowledge of lexicalchunks and their writing rather than oral performance. Hassan Abadi (2003) researched on Iranian EFL learners. He studied about learning English lexical and grammatical chunks by them. Hassan Abadi examined learners' collocations types, so he realized that learners showed different performance according to the patterns of collocation "in favor of verb-noun collocations" and they learnt lexical collocations easier than grammatical ones.

Mallikamas and Pongpairoj (2005) studied the university students' receptive and productive knowledge of English collocations in multiple -choice, error recognition and gap-filling tasks. Results indicated that students had difficulty dealing with the collocations in both reception and production tasks.

Koc (2006) investigated to show to what extent explicit instruction of vocabulary in collocations, using different techniques, developed collocational awareness in students, and whether such instruction has any enhancing effect on the retention of vocabulary. The results of the quantitative data showed that vocabulary instruction in collocations had better results in terms of vocabulary retention Also, findings of this study, explicit instruction of vocabulary in collocations, using different techniques, is highly recommended for developing collocational competence and better retention of vocabulary.

Seesink (2007) studied vocabulary teaching and knowledge of chunks in order to find how it can help to promote learners' writing ability. He realized that focus on collocations had a positive effect on the students' results. Participants included Arab, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Students learnt collocation through an online program. But, In her study she did not reveal what kinds of collocations were used by learners and what types of lexical chunks were difficult for them.

Mongkolchai (2008) also considered the university students' knowledge of English chunks. The Jesuits showed that the students' ability with the *noun + noun* pattern was at the highest level, whereas *adverb + adjective* at the lowest level. The students' errors explained the students' insufficient knowledge of English collocations, negative transfer from Thai, the students' strategy of using synonyms, etc.

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Methodology

Participants

70 male and female upper intermediate learners learning English in foreign language institutes in Shiraz were conveniently selected to participate in this study. The proportion of participants' gender was uneven since gender differences was not our main concern in this study. The participants were divided in to three groups regarding their knowledge of lexical chunks on the basis of a 20 item M-C lexical chunk test designed by the researcher. The classification of the participants into high, moderate and low groups was based on the mean and standard deviation of the distribution.

Instruments

Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) developed by Guilford (1967) was administered to determine learners' levels of creativity. TTCT is applicable for recognizing high as well as low creative potential (Millar, 2002). Therefore, it is an appropriate instrument to assess creative thinking in the three levels of elementary to advanced. This test has been translated into 35 languages and is the most valid one in comparison with the other creative tests (Millar, 2002). Through administering this test researchers are able to measure creativity dimensions of fluency, flexibility, and originality and assign a number from 0 to 10 to student's amount of creativity in speaking.

A 20 item M-C test was also designed and developed by the researcher. The suitability of the content of the questions and the difficulty of the items were checked through expert judgment. Two Ph.D. holders at TEFL were requested to give their comments. The reliability of the test was also estimated through KR-21 formula.

Data collection procedure

Group and person to person administrations were used to gather the required data. TTCT and LCT were simultaneously administered to be filled out in 10 and 15 minutes respectively. The participants were provided with some explanations regarding the objective and the content of the instruments to enhance the validity of their responses and they were also ensured that their cooperation will be kept confidential.

Data analysis procedure

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized to answer the research question. The reliability of TTCT and LCT were first determined through Cronbach Alpha and KR- 21 formula respectively. The significance of the relationship between the two variables of the study were calculated through Pearson correlation coefficient. Descriptive statistics were also employed to determine learners' levels of creativity.

Findings

In this study, Cronbach's Alpha was used to compute a reliability score for each of the following scales: learner creativity and its components, fluency,flexibility and originality. Based on the findings, all the reliabilities computed were above 0.7 (note that a reliability score of 0.7 or above is considered convenient or highly reliable. This entails that the questionnaires drawn on in this study were reliable and accordingly suitable to be used as instruments in this study.

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Table 1. Cronbach Alpha Computed for creativity and its components

Scale	Cronbach Alpha	No. of Participants
Learner creativity	0.838	70
Fluency	0.887	-
Flexibility	0.795	-
Originality	0.821	-

To analyze the data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were drawn on. To test the hypothesis of the study use was made of inferential statistics including Pearson correlation and independent t-test. In order to use these tests, the data needed to be normally distributed. Hence, prior to getting to the hypotheses of the study, normality of the variables distribution were checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Thus, before using Pearson correlation Coefficient, normality of the distributions was first checked.

Table 2. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Variable	Z	Sig.
Learner creativity	0.472	0.981
Fluency	1.237	0.114
Flexibility	1.244	0.086
Originality	1.221	0.065

The above table shows the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Since the p–values obtained were all greater than 0.05 ($p>0.05$) for all the variables, learner creativity and its components, the statistics were not significant which means that all the distributions were normal. Therefore, Pearson correlation was used to determine if there exists a significant relationship between the two variables of the study. Table 3 depicts the results.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation between learner creativity and lexical chunk knowledge

Statistics / Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Learner creativity and lexical knowledge	0.391	0.035	70

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As presented in Table 3, the correlation between learner creativity and their knowledge of lexical chunkswas significant at the level of 0.05 (P=0.035<0.05). Thus, there was a significant relationship between learner creativity and their knowledge of lexical chunksas a whole. The Pearson correlation was 0.391 which is an average correlation. Based on the results, the two variables are directly correlated, since the correlation is positive. In the following parts, a correlation was also computed between each subpart of learner creativity and knowledge of lexical chunks.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation between lexical chunk knowledge and components of learner creativity

Statistics / Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Fluency and lexical chunk knowledge	0.572	0.016	70
Flexibility and lexical chunk knowledge	0.381	0.030	70
Originality and lexical chunk knowledge	.112	0.061	70

The results in Table 4 illustrates that '' fluency'' and ''flexibility'' subscales are significantly related to learners' knowledge of lexical chunks. What it means is that the more lexical chunks learners know, the more fluent and flexible they are using structures of the target language. There was not, however, any significant relationship between learners' knowledge of lexical chunks and the ''originality'' component of learner creativity.

Discussion

This study attempts to find empirical evidence of the relationship between L2 learners' knowledge of lexical chunks and their creativity. Through the multiple-choice chunk test and the creativity scale, the statistical analysis shows that testees with a higher knowledge of lexical chunks are prone to achieve higher scores in creativity. It turns out that lexical chunks have a positive effect on L2 learners'creativity.
Lexical chunks are fixed or semi-fixed frequently used lexical phrases with functional meanings, which are stored and produced automatically as whole units in the process of language acquisition. Therefore, chunks provide an easily retrievable frame for creative language use and decrease L2 learners' pressure to decode individual words. In line with the findings of this study,previous studies show that lexical chunks can promote language fluency, enhance language accuracy, facilitate creative language use and guide learner flexibility.Moreover, by means of the M-C test, it can be seen that Iranian English learners' knowledge of lexical chunks is far from satisfactory. In the multiple-choice chunk test, it is found that testees are prone to prefer some grammatically correct, but not appropriate or idiomatic lexical chunks.

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An implication of this study is the possibility of producing EFL materials which triggers learner's creative thinking and involving learners in task and activities which will eventually leads to better speaking ability of learners. This finding has important implication for teachers since it makes them aware that the more creative learners need to know more lexical chunks so instructors can make use of strategies which improves learner's knowledge of lexical chunks and in turn enhances their speaking.

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