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The Interplay of EFL Learners' Vocabulary Depth and Their Writing Ability

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to find out the relationship between vocabulary depth and writing performance of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 150 male and female EFL learners of English in language institutes in Shiraz, Iran who were selected conveniently. In so doing, the Words Associate Test designed by Read (1998) was administered to the learners to measure their depth of vocabulary. A writing achievement test was also developed and administered by the researchers. The results showed that there is a Positive correlation between vocabulary depth and writing performance of Iranian language learners. Regression analysis showed that vocabulary depth moderately predicts the learners' writing.

Keywords: Vocabulary depth, writing performance, Iranian EFL learners

Introduction:

Writing in every language is a base skill and important ability to achieve a suitable understanding of that language. So, the importance of learning a foreign language and the importance of learning writing skills are the importance of this study.

English teachers, believe in the magic of writing, in the ways in which writing is a fundamental tool in understanding and experiencing life at a deeper, more enriching level. One also believes that writing is an essential way in which we share with others our experiences as human beings.

Despite the importance of writing in today's society, many students have difficulty acquiring this critical skill. The writing performance of EFL learners has been an issue more than 30 years now. Vocabulary, on the other hand, has been identified as an essential factor in language acquisition and development, an important component in reading comprehension, and a valid predictor of students' language development and writing performance.

Vocabulary has also been linked to people's perceptions of writing quality. Relevant studies conducted with struggling writers and their normally achieving peers found that vocabulary instruction helped these students acquire, retain, and access new word meanings more effortlessly and rapidly.

It is therefore tenable that effective vocabulary instruction in theme-related words enhances the quality of students' writing on the theme as a result of students learning and using new words in their writing.

Nagy (1988) states that vocabulary is fundamental to comprehension of various texts and that vocabulary teaching should be an integral part of language education. While there is a consensus on the importance of vocabulary in writing performance, ideas on how vocabulary should be taught and how much of it should be given to the learners may vary. While some put forward that vocabulary should be taught explicitly in classrooms, some others came up with different ways to teach vocabulary.

Another issue to be elaborated on in the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing is how much vocabulary and what vocabulary should be taught to students to facilitate their writing comprehension.

Conceptualizing Vocabulary Depth

Size of vocabulary knowledge is relatively straightforward to conceptualize, as it is basically counting known lexical items (typically operationalized as knowledge of the form–meaning connection), and most measurement and discussion of vocabulary to date have focused on size.

In contrast, there are a large number of overlapping ways in which depth of knowledge can be conceptualized. The diversity of depth conceptualizations makes it extremely difficult to know how to approach depth from a theoretical perspective. Thus, the conceptualizations discussed in this article will be largely driven by what measures of depth have been used in the research and can relate to knowledge of individual lexical aspects (e.g., knowledge of multiple polysemous meaning senses) as well as more holistic mastery (e.g., having a rich associative network formed around a word).

Some types of word knowledge (e.g., form, meaning) are particularly amenable to intentional study, which can lead to high learning rates and typically results in the ability to explicitly access this knowledge (i.e., declarative knowledge). Conversely, many word knowledge aspects are related to vocabulary in contextualized use.

Literature Review

In many societies, writing is an essential tool for communication, learning, and self-expression. Through writing individuals are able to maintain personal links with friends, family, and colleagues from a distance (Graham, 2006). Writing also makes it possible to gather, preserve, and transmit information with accuracy and detail (Diamond, 1999).

Individuals can further record their ideas, reflect on their thoughts, or extend their knowledge on a topic through the use of writing (Brodie, 1997). Perhaps even more importantly, many jobs in industrialized countries require a basic competence in written language. Writing is beneficial both psychologically and physiologically (Smyth, 1998); it fulfills emotional needs of communication and self-exploration, provides a source of entertainment and enjoyment, and can reduce the sense of loneliness.

Writing is also important in academic settings. Progress in school depends on developing an adequate degree of writing proficiency and fluency (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983).

Writing is the primary medium by which teachers evaluate students' performance. It also provides a flexible tool for assessing students' knowledge and academic competence in class and on high-stakes educational assessments (Christenson, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & McVicar, 1989; Graham & Harris, 1988).

For some children, writing even represents an alternative medium for expressing thoughts and ideas that they might be unable or unwilling to express in a different way (Polloway & Smith, 1982). Persistent writing problems, therefore, make it difficult for students to reach their educational, occupational, and personal potential (Graham, 2006).

Finally, writing is considered a fundamental means for passing the social aspects of a culture from one generation to the next (Rohr, 1994). Lindemann (1995) indicated that human beings are social animals who use language (and its form of written language) to make sense of the world, and to remember and organize their lives. He also claimed that many financial, legal, or other transactions require writing, and thus in our society, putting it in writing has a greater force than speaking.

The importance of writing is also illustrated by Gelb (1952) who suggested that written language is necessary for a civilization to exist. According to Chastain (1988), "writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language," (p 244). However, since the introduction of audio-lingual method, writing has received less importance and has been regarded as the least useful of the four language skills.

Teachers all over the world have for long considered writing as an independent construct in foreign language courses and have often sacrificed it to spend more time on practicing the other three skills.

Research Question

Is there any significant relationship between vocabulary depth and Iranian EFL learners' writing performance?

Methodology

Participants

The population in this research study was 150 male and female EFL learners aged between 12 and 25.They were studying English in language institutes in Shiraz, Iran.

Instrument

The Words Associate Test by Read (1998) was administered to students to measure their depth of vocabulary. This test was adapted by Qian (1999), and its reliability was found to be 0.88 by Qian (2002). In his own reliability check of the primitive form of the test, Read (1993) found that its reliability level was at least 0.90. There are 40 stimulus words in this test, all of which are adjectives and free from context.

Data collection procedure

Data collection is the systematic approach to gathering and measuring information from a variety of sources to get a complete and accurate picture of an area of interest. In this research, after choosing samples, they has been asked to fill questionnaires and tests to collect data.

Data analysis procedure

Both descriptive (frequency tables, figures, graphs) and inferential statistics has been used to analyze the data collected during data collection. Use has been made of the SPSS software, Pearson correlation test and Regression analysis to answer the research question.

Results

This part is a description of the data analysis of the present research. First the descriptive statistics is presented and then the second part deals with the inferential statistics.

Reliability analysis

At first, it was important to calculate the test reliability. The reliability of 30 items of the writing performance ability tests determined value of Cronbach alpha equaled 0.697nand 40 items of the vocabulary depth Test equaled 0.753 reliability which was acceptable based on the reliability standards.

Descriptive statistics

variable	Min.	Max.	mean	SD
Vocabulary depth	44	145	108.98	33.47
Writing performance	49	140	97.18	27.86

Table 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics for the writing performance ability test scores of the participants. Measures of central tendency (mean: 97.18, median, and mode) and measures of dispersion (range, variance, and standard deviation: 27.86) along with measures of distribution (Skewness and Kurtosis) were computed for the writing performance ability test.The mean and standard deviation for vocabulary depth are 103.98 and 33.47 respectively.

Inferential Analysis of the Data

This study aims to measure the relationship between vocabulary depth and writing performance in Iranian EFL learners. To answer the research question for Iranian EFL learners, inferential analysis of the data were used by Pearson correlation test. The results of the inferential analysis could be seen in the following Tables.

Table 1. Correlation coefficient between vocabulary depth and writing performance

Pearson Correlation	**N**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
0.876	50	0.000

As it can be seen from Table 1, Positive and significant correlation has been observed between the vocabulary depth and Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. It is clearly shown that the learners who received high score in vocabulary depth Test, also received high score in writing performance tasks.

Table 2. Regression analyzed for study effect of vocabulary depth on writing performance

	Beta	**T**	**sig**
vocabulary depth Test	0.022	12.60	0.12

As it can be seen from Table 2 vocabulary depth has moderate effect on writing performance.

Conclusion

In this study, a hypothesis about the relationship between the vocabulary depth and EFL learners' writing ability and writing performance learners was proposed. Inferential analysis of the data were used by Pearson correlation test and Regression analyzed to show the relationship. Positive correlation has been observed between the vocabulary depth and EFL learners' writing performance learners. It is clearly shown that the learners who received high score in vocabulary depth Test, also received high score in writing performance task. Regression analysis also showed that vocabulary depth has moderate effect on writing performance.

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