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The Effect of Awareness Raising and Explicit Collocation Instruction on Writing Fluency of EFL Learners

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Abstract

Recent research in SLA indicates that collocations are an indispensable aspect of language learning. Its importance in learners' writing ability is, therefore, undeniable. Thus, the present study attempted to explore the effect of explicit teaching of collocations on learners' awareness and use of them in their writing. It differed from previous studies in that the main focus was on learning the collocations of the most important nouns. To this end, the present study used a mixed method approach with a pretest-treatment-posttest quasi-experimental design and qualitative analysis of questionnaire to investigate the questions. To collect data, an experimental and a control group were selected on the basis of the results of a proficiency test (PET). The participants were conveniently chosen as samples from a grand total of 58 students. The learners were further randomly assigned to two groups: one experimental group and one control group. The participants in the experimental group (N = 15) received weekly interventions based on explicit teaching of collocations but the control group (N = 15) received no instruction regarding collocations and had their regular procedure. The results of independent and paired sample t-tests (sig < 0.05) indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups' performances in the achievement collocation test. Thus it can be concluded that teaching English collocations to EFL learners and raising their awareness will enhance their proficiency in writing and improve their collocational competence. The qualitative analysis of the responses to questionnaire also supported a positive impact of the method on students' fluency in writing.

Keywords: awareness raising, explicit instruction, vocabulary, lexical approach, collocation, writing, fluency, EFL, learners.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary, in contrast to grammar, has long been neglected in language teaching and has mostly been taught through the other language skills; whereas grammar has always been considered as a separate module and this alone has led to assuming an inferior position for vocabulary. Fortunately, the shifts of sands in language teaching have influenced teaching practices resulting in an evolution in understanding the complex processes of language acquisition. Techniques improved as teachers gained insight into what kinds of courses and lessons might both accelerate language acquisition and make these courses and lessons more enjoyable. Above all, striking changes took place in the language classroom, as learners felt empowered to take control of their own learning. One of the most influential changes of the last decade of the twentieth century was the shift of focus, proposed by many theorists and practitioners, from grammar as the central anchor of language teaching to the lexicon. For example, McCarthy (1990) summarizes the importance of vocabulary teaching for second language (L2) learners in the following statement:

"No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings; communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way." (p. viii)

It is accepted that choosing words carefully in certain situations is more important than choosing grammatical structures (Harmer, 1991). Zimmerman (1997), too, comments that "vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner". Laufer (1998) contends that "learners associate progress in language learning with an increase in the number of words they know". In short, the importance of vocabulary cannot be better stated than in David Wilkins' statement, "Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Lewis, 1997a: 16), or by Sinclair, who stated that "A lexical mistake often causes misunderstanding, while a grammar mistake rarely does" (Lewis, 1997a: 16).

Within the area of vocabulary research, researchers have stressed the importance of word combinations, which are usually referred to as formulaic language involving idioms, collocations, preferred ways of saying things, routines, set phrases, and proverbs. They argue that these formulaic expressions are widespread in language discourse and distinguish the speech of native from non-native speakers (Conklin, Schmitt, 2007). As a sub-category of formulaic language, collocations that are a transitional area between idioms and free combinations (Benson et al., 1986) have attracted the attention of language researchers who attempt to investigate their acquisition. For example, McCarthy (1990) states that "in vocabulary teaching there is a high importance of collocation", suggesting that "the relationship of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary, and collocation is an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language" (p. 12).

Although, some of the old approaches have tried to teach vocabulary, words have been introduced only in lists which proved to be useless. Many researchers have raised the importance of teaching vocabulary like Michael Lewis who questioned "the grammar-vocabulary dichotomy" and advocated a lexical approach (1993, 1997, 2000) which is mainly interested in teaching collocations or "common word combination" (2000: 127).

Finally, the 1990s saw the development of the Lexical Approach, based on the idea, proven by research, that much of the mental lexicon of a native speaker consists of prefabricated chunks, fixed and semi-fixed phrases and collocations; and that s/he uses these chunks in order to express or interpret language (Lewis, 2000; 1997a; 1997b). In fact, learning a language is the result of many competences grouped together; hence, we should work on these competences to achieve the learning objectives. We are used to hearing of communicative and linguistic competence but "collocational competence" is usually an unfamiliar phrase. Collocational competence is "the ability to accurately combine chunks of language thus enabling production of fluent, accurate and stylistically appropriate speech." (Heikkilä, 2005: 1). Without this competence students are facing many problems in writing their assignments. One of these problems is the mistakes as "students tend to create longer utterances because they do not know collocations which express precisely what they want to say" (Hill, as cited in Michael Lewis, 2000: 49). Crystal (cited in Heikkilä, 2005: 2) also claims that collocations "differ greatly between languages, and provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages". Therefore, they need help in the classroom to pass over collocational problems.

As for English language teaching in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, although many EFL learners have a good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, they still seem to

have serious problems with acquiring the ability to use English. The majority of communication relies on the numerous combinations of quite limited word bank rather than a vast number of individual items. This inefficiency seems to be, to some extent, due to the lack of collocational knowledge among EFL students, and to a large extent, the inadequate emphasis given to collocational patterns in their textbooks, and the type of instructions they receive. Moreover, collocations have not usually been a major focus of teaching and research in our country.

In order to enhance EFL learners' writing competence, English teachers have put a lot of efforts, spending lots of time devoting themselves to correcting students' writings and trying to find out the difficult areas in students' English compositions. However, the same errors keep happening. In fact, as Bahn and Eldaw (1993) state, it is usually the case that the majority of EFL learners have different problems in their oral and written production. These problems are due to inadequate or lack of knowledge about the companies that words keep; that is, collocation. Eventually, collocations are required to be taught so that the learners would be aware of them because they would help learners not only to understand lexis but also to communicate ideas more effectively when they write. Teaching collocations would provide the learner with a helpful device in writing. It could facilitate the task of writing by making it easier, more precise and more natural and native like.

In spite of the importance of collocation in EFL teaching, however, few studies have explored the collocational knowledge of Persian-speaking learners of English in an EFL environment (Salimi et al., 2010; Ghonsooli et al., 2008; Kralik, Mahrik 2019a, Kralik, Mahrik 2019b; Gadusova, Haskova, 2015; Haskova, Lukacova, 2017; Pushkarev, Pushkareva, 2018, Pushkarev, Pushkareva, 2019).

Therefore, following Michael Lewis's views, this study assumes that teaching collocations would raise students' proficiency in language learning. An examination of learners' writing, clearly indicated the "mis-collocations" that were widespread in their written assignments. It is therefore the goal of this study to directly teach or focus on teaching collocations, to guide learners to locate useful combinations in reading passages, and to provide practice in combining words so that the students would eventually develop the ability to transfer this knowledge to their writing.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the present research:

Q1: Is subjects' awareness of collocations raised as a result of instruction on collocation?

Q2: Does collocation instruction have any effect on learners' writings?

Q3: What are the kinds of changes in students' writings, if any, during the treatment period?

Review of the related Literature

The Importance of Learning English Collocations for L2 Learners

Many researchers have stressed the importance of collocations in language learning. Brown (1974) suggested that learning collocations improves the learner's oral proficiency, listening comprehension and reading speed. In addition, she argued that we speak and write in chunks and learning collocations helps learners observe how native speakers in both spoken and written contexts use language chunks. Moreover, Brown (1974) has contended that this knowledge helps language learners use these expressions themselves. According to Brown, together with context and concept, collocations should be included when we teach advanced learners new words because of their crucial significance in language learning. Like Brown (1974), Lewis (2000) stated that learning chunks of words helps language learners develop their communicative competencies better than learning words in isolation. Along the same lines, Pawley and Syder (1983) pointed out that collocations play a significant role in language learning. They lead to the improvement of language competence. Therefore, Pawley and Syder (1983) argued that the more fixed expressions, including collocations, language learners use in useful basic chunks, the more they produce native-like language structures. In addition, Ellis (2001) claimed that direct instruction for collocations is important in language learning because they represent an important aspect of L2 vocabulary development. Furthermore, some researchers like Nation (2001) argued that knowing a word involves knowing the words that co-occur with it. In addition, he emphasized that collocations are parts of the reception and production of vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, collocations should be taught to language learners to be able to produce the target language appropriately (Nation, 2001). Similarly, Laufer (1988) argued that collocations help in many levels of the development of vocabulary development, which she considers a crucial aspect in vocabulary learning. She further

stressed their importance in improving learning strategies, such as guessing. Hearing the word intense, the native speaker knows that it is connected with either pressure, heat, light, energy or feeling and that one of these words will follow. They also know that the word convenient is not used with people. So, a sentence like I am not feeling convenient about meeting new people is not judged as acceptable. This guessing strategy can be developed by learning collocations.

One problematic question that remains unresolved concerns whether or not having a large store of vocabulary and a basic knowledge of grammar are enough for fluent and successful communication in second language acquisition (Rudzka et al., 1985). But it is usually the case that the majority of EFL learners, even advanced ones, have various problems in their oral or written productions (Bahns, Eldaw 1993; Rudzka et al., *Ibid*; Taiwo, 2004). This is in spite of the fact that they apparently seem to have sufficient lexical or grammatical knowledge. Such erroneous utterances like 'the manager of the university', 'heavy tea'; 'to take fish' and 'to be bad in something' are not due to poor lexical or grammatical knowledge. These problems arise partly from lack of knowledge about the companies that words keep, i.e., collocation.

Hill (1999, p.4) states that lack of collocational competence can be a cause of EFL students' problems in learning English collocations. It may also be suggested that one reason for the EFL students' problems in learning English prepositions is that they usually try to learn the meaning and use of prepositions individually without paying sufficient attention to their collocational properties (Flowerdew, 1999).

EFL learners have trouble where collocations are language specific. Thus, in such a case, they tend to carry over the collocational patterns of their L1 (First Language) into L2 (Second Language) settings. Gabrys-Biskup (1992) contends that lexical transfer occurs in the learners' use of collocations. Consequently, the question of transferability of collocational patterns from L1 into L2 setting is an indication of cross-linguistic effect in the context of inter-language acquisition. There is now abundant empirical evidence that first language transfer is a real and central phenomenon that must be fully taken into account in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) (Ellis, 1986). And one of the areas of SLA that is strongly influenced by L1 is the transfer of collocational patterns (Gabrys-Biskup, 1992).

In the light of the abovementioned studies, it can be concluded that many researchers have studied the significance of collocations from different perspectives. Some of these involve memorization and fluency. Others address collocations in relation to language appropriateness, word knowledge, and teaching effectiveness. Since collocations are related to all these factors, they are important for language learners. Nevertheless, several L2 studies have reported L2 learners' low performance on collocation tests (Al-Zahrani, 1998; Bahns, Eldaw, 1993; Biskup, 1992; Caroli, 1998; Channell, 1981; Cowie, Howarth, 1996; Dechert, Lennon, 1989; Elyildirm, 1997; Farghal, Obiedant, 1995; Hussein, 1991; Gitsaki, 1999; Granger, 1998; Herbst, 1996; Koosha, Jafarpour, 2006; Lennon, 1996; Zhang, 1993; Mohamoud, 2005; Martynska, 2004; Matsuno, Sugiura, 2002; Nesselhauf, 2003; Shei, Pain, 2000; Zughoul, Abdul-Fattah, 2003; Zhang, 1993). Also, it seems uncontroversial that L2 learners' collocational errors are higher than other errors they commit (Ellis, 2001). Thus, learners' problems with collocations are an ingrained fact that has been confirmed by many studies in both ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environments.

Empirical Studies of Teaching Explicit Collocation and Language Skills

Zhang (1993) was the first scholar to explore the possible correlation between the knowledge and use of English collocations and the quality of college freshmen's writing. At a mid-size public university in Pennsylvania, in the United States, the 60 college freshmen in his study were categorized into two groups: 30 native and 30 non-native speakers of English. Within each group, two subgroups, i.e., Good writers and Poor writers, were established based on a writing test. Each subject completed one fill-in-the-blank collocation test and one writing task. The collocation test was used to measure the subjects' collocational knowledge; the writing task was used to elicit the subjects' use of collocations and writing proficiency. In this experiment, Zhang (1993) found that (1) native English writers performed significantly better than non-native writers on the collocation test, and Good writers within either group performed significantly better than Poor writers; (2) as for the use of collocations in their writing, native writers surpassed the non-native writers, and Good writers within either group surpassed Poor writers; (3) in terms of writing performance, a significant difference was found between non-native Good and Poor writers. Zhang drew two

conclusions based on the observed correlations. Collocational knowledge is a source of proficiency in writing among college freshmen. Besides, quantity, but more important, quality for use of collocations distinguish between native and non-native college freshmen writing as well as between Good and Poor college freshmen writing.

Al-Zahrani (1998) investigated the knowledge of English lexical collocations among four academic levels of Saudi EFL university students and the relationship between the participants' collocational knowledge and their general language proficiency. In his study, the collocational knowledge of 81 Saudi male university English majors was measured by a cloze test, comprised of 50 "verb+noun" lexical collocations. Furthermore, the participants' general English proficiency was assessed by a writing test and a paper-and-pencil TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test. Al-Zahrani found that there was a significant difference in his subjects' knowledge of lexical collocations among the different academic years. The knowledge of lexical collocations increased with the subjects' academic years. Besides, he reported that there was a strong correlation between the subjects' knowledge of collocations and their overall language proficiency.

Similarly, Nesselhauf (2003) analyzed the writing of German advanced learners of English and found that the most frequent miscollocation type is wrong choices of verbs. He explained that the verb in a collocation has a restricted sense, which makes its correct use more difficult if learners cannot fully distinguish subtle differences among verb collocates. The collocations not congruent in learners' first language (L1) and second language (L2) were far more difficult for learners to acquire.

Liu (1999) investigated collocational errors in 127 Chinese college students' final examination papers and their 94 compositions. The error analysis revealed that verb – noun collocation errors (verb + noun/pronoun, verb + propositional phrase) appeared most frequently. In one of her collocation studies, Liu (2000) led the field in investigating the effects of collocation instruction on students' writing performance. Forty-nine freshmen English majors at a Taiwanese university participated in the study. During an 18-week semester, in a three-hour weekly class, Liu (2000) gave her students a series of twenty-minute mini-lessons on collocations (e.g., the introduction of six major lexical collocation patterns, collocations without direct L1 equivalents, and de-lexicalized verbs as collocates of nouns). To assess their writing ability and use of collocations, the subjects were asked to write a composition in class at the beginning and the end of the semester without using a dictionary. The two compositions were analyzed and compared for the patterns of acceptable and unacceptable lexical collocations. It was found that the students in the second composition generated a greater number and variety of acceptable lexical collocations although they did not improve much in their writing of the second composition.

With the help of computer technology, Liu (2002) examined V–N miscollocations in Chinese learners' essays through lexical semantic investigation. She indicated that 87 % of the lexical miscollocations (233/265) were attributed to V–N miscollocations and 93 % of them were due to the misuse of verb collocates. As for reasons behind miscollocations, 56 % of missed collocations were semantically related such as synonyms (e.g. *carry out my goal instead of achieve my goal), hypernyms (e.g. *create songs instead of compose songs), and troponyms (e.g. *break the foundation instead of damage the foundation). Another 38 % of the V–N miscollocations were traceable to L1 interference: split category (e.g. add and increase) and direct translation (e.g. *write homework instead of do homework). Among various types of collocations, the verb – noun lexical collocation was found to be particularly difficult for learners to acquire; further, V–N miscollocations can be attributed to three main reasons: (a) L1 interference; (b) misuse of de-lexicalized verbs; and (c) lack of knowledge of collocational restrictions in semantically related lexemes such as synonyms, hypernyms, and troponyms.

Recognizing the importance of collocation for foreign language learning, some researchers provided explicit collocation instruction on Chinese EFL learners in classroom settings, and found positive effects (Lin, 2002; Liu, 2002; Tseng, 2002). Liu (2000) has found that after collocation instruction, learners produced more 232 T. Chan and H. Liu varieties of collocations in their writing, particularly in de-lexicalized verbs. In a traditional classroom context, Lin (2002) examined the effects of collocation teaching on receptive and productive collocation competence of high-achievers and low-achievers in a group of EFL high school students regarding the V–N lexical collocation structures. The results indicated that all students made more progress in receptive collocation tests than productive ones, but low-achievers performed better in productive tests after

collocation teaching. Both groups held positive attitudes toward collocation teaching activities. Tseng (2002) divided 94 high school participants into an experimental group, who received 12 weeks of explicit collocation instruction, and a control group, who did not receive any training. Before the instruction, the students took a pre-test on collocation, wrote a composition, and filled in a background questionnaire about vocabulary learning behaviors. The results in questionnaires indicated that students knew little about the concept of collocation. After collocation instruction, the experimental group far exceeded the control group in the post-test regardless of their prior collocation levels. The experimental group's performance was found to have no significant difference across the six collocation types they investigated, while at the beginning of the collocation teaching they found de-lexicalized verb collocations easier to produce.

Furthermore, Hsu has investigated the influence of using collocations on fluency in writing. In 2007, he has conducted an empirical study about the impact of lexical collocations on the writing of Taiwanese College English majors and non-English majors. His empirical study consists of an on-line writing test on the same topic which has been evaluated through a web-based writing programmer. Correlation has been found between writing proficiency and using collocation. But none of the researchers has tried to teach collocations as a treatment to see whether teaching collocations could lead to fluency in writing. This research has approached the problem of mis-collocations in foreign language writing by trying to teach collocations in order to see if there is a correlation between using collocations and writing proficiency after the treatment.

From studies discussed above, it is clear that collocations as one important type of knowledge in foreign language have posed learning difficulties to EFL learners; specifically for those from a Chinese background. Moreover, types of collocations seem to behave differently under the influence of collocation instructions.

2. Materials and methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 EFL Iranian students who were learning English in an Institute in Mazandaran province, located in the north of Iran. The participants were male and female with the age range of 16 to 19. They all spoke Farsi as their mother tongue and were mainly from middle socio-economic background. They belonged to two groups with similar Linguistic proficiency. They were recognized as intermediate level through the results obtained from PET. The participants were conveniently chosen as samples from a grand total of 58 students. The learners were further randomly assigned to two groups: one experimental group and one control group. From these, those who eventually realized the full requirements comprised the participants. That is, in the experimental group, those participants who did not write all their paragraphs for the study were removed from the pool of the participants. Twenty-eight in all had to be excluded. Therefore, 15 students remained in each group.

Data Collection Instruments

In order to test the research hypotheses, five testing instruments, two types of teaching materials, and one questioner were developed and used by the researchers in this study. A variety of exercises and tasks were used as well. The last tool of enquiry used by the researchers was students' writing samples. They are as follows:

1. As it was already mentioned, in the first phase of this study, the PET was given to the participants to determine their levels of proficiency and to homogenize them.

2. To determine the collocational knowledge of the participants, an integrative test of collocations of the most important nouns was given to the students as the pre-test. It included five collocation exercises extracted from McCarthy and O'Dell textbook (appendix) and organized in five sections: A, B, C, D, and E. The standardization was done through a pilot study on five students. Then the test was given to 30 participants who had been selected through cluster random sampling. The pre-test consisted of two parts: part one tested learners' collocations knowledge, and part two tested their use of collocations in writing.

3. After twenty half-an-hour sessions instructions on collocation of nouns with specific treatment for each group, the integrative test on collocation of nouns was administered as the post-test in order to determine the impact of specific instructions the participants received. Students were also asked to take another writing exam at the end of the term with identical topics to assess

their writing and use of collocation. To closely analyze the process of learning, students were asked to write six writing samples.

4. Another tool of enquiry was the questionnaire for students. It aimed at investigating students' collocation knowledge and use on one hand, and their writing fluency on the other hand. It was developed by the researchers to try to collect information intended for this study. However, the items were collected from a similar questionnaire which was done on first year English students at Guelma University in Algeria. The questions were framed clearly so that the respondents could understand what was meant and provide the relevant information. Additionally, to ensure the clarity and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire, it was pilot tested with a number of students with appropriate characteristics similar to the intended population. The internal consistency for the questionnaire came out to be 0.68 using $\text{kr}20$ formula. In fact, an item analysis revealed that certain questions demonstrated low item-to-scale correlation (0.28) and thus were removed. The content validity of the questionnaire was also satisfactory. It was designed by the researchers and then some experts examined and made the necessary changes to it. However, the questionnaire could not provide access to what is "inside a person's head" (Tuckman, cited in Cohen and Manion: 305) and as Cohen and Manion claim: "...at the heart of every case study lies a method of observation" (1980: 125), it is better to put the target sample under observation through experiment to gain "research-relevant information". Both the experiment and the questionnaires would help the researchers to collect data about the status of teaching collocations and the problems that students encounter in writing especially mis-collocations. Before the pretest, the researchers had investigated students' writing fluency and knowledge of collocations by administering a questionnaire directed to the students. The questionnaire had been administered in the first session of the class, precisely at the beginning of the experiment on June, 24th, 2011. Summer term had started on June, 18th but the questionnaire had not been administered until all the students had joined the class. A total of 20 minutes was sufficient for students to answer all the questions. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: part one aimed at getting information about students' background knowledge, and part two made a survey about students' knowledge of collocations on one hand and their writing fluency on the other hand.

5. The collocational information about the words came from the Cobuild Collocation Sampler and Oxford Collocation (2002). This particular dictionary was chosen for its wealth of information regarding word collocations. Students' writing samples were measured by the Sampler at <http://www.Collins.Co.UK/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx> to determine which combinations to accept as collocations. It should be noted that Lewis (2000) points out that in evaluating collocation, co-occurrence should not by itself be a criterion. The Cobulid Collocation Sampler provides the 100 most frequent words for the collocates of a word, using T-scores.

6. When preparing the materials, the researchers bear some criteria in mind. Woolard (2000) and Lewis (1997a, 2000) claim that it is impossible to teach thousands of words within limited class time and that students should be encouraged to fly with their own wings. In addition to this, it is believed that students acquire language by noticing it. Furthermore, the aim was not to teach "brand new" vocabulary. Both new and previously "known" nouns were selected. The purpose was to make students as collocationally competent as possible within the limitations of the study. According to the above mentioned points, for materials preparation, one book "Key Words for Fluency" by George Woolard (Intermediate collocation practice) was first scanned and target nouns selected, following Woolard' (2005) claim that "nouns are the most important words we know. All the other parts of speech are important too, but they do not tell us as much as nouns do." Thus, in some chapters, as all the words had already been presented to the students, the aim was to show them that there might still be something to learn about a word they thought they knew. For example, the students were already familiar with business, work and job for which the Persian equivalent word was provided. To show the differences in meaning and in usage, their collocations were given. Hill (2000) also asserts that "when teaching collocations, teachers need to pay close attention to individual collocations. We should present collocations as we would present individual words." At higher levels, when students learn less common vocabulary items, they need to be made aware that some words are used in a very restricted number of collocations. As it was observed that there was a time-constraint and that students might not be as familiar with the words in the coming chapters as in the previous ones, the numbers of collocates provided in the lists were decreased in the weeks after this. Accordingly, ten chapters and total of 60 nouns were organized.

Each chapter was supposed to be taught per week. According to Hill (2000), Students also need to know how to use new vocabulary items, which makes it necessary to know about their collocational field and contexts in which they are used. Contextualizing the taught collocations, then, the researcher chose some parts of "English Collocations in Use" by Michael McCarthy. As a matter of fact, following teaching collocations, in each session, the combination of collocations was also prepared in a context. Here it should be noted that it was the teacher's responsibility to draw students' attention to the meaning of the words, the context, and the collocations, as these students were being given an awareness-raising instruction. "English Idioms in Use" another book by Michael McCarthy was chosen due to participants' desires. In addition to the context provided for the selected nouns, the researcher prepared some more sentences which were carefully selected and applied either from the internet, the concordances, or oxford Collocation Dictionary. The aim was to expose students to as much probable English as possible. The researchers would also use translations of the chunks whenever possible or asked, as like Lewis (1997a) believes, translation is inevitable and necessary. Both Lewis (1997a, 2000) and Harwood (2002) point out, recycling is very important in teaching. Recycling is not doing the same thing twice, but revisiting the same thing in different ways and adding variety and novelty to it. Keeping this suggestion in mind, revision materials were prepared for every three units holistically also covering what had been presented in the previous chapters. Accordingly, four revision chapters were prepared with a holistic view. That is, the first of these chapters was designed to revise the collocations presented in the first three chapters; the second covered the collocations in the first six chapters and the last was designed to revise the collocations presented in all the chapters. Because of this, the last revision chapter was longer than the previous ones. All in all, the materials chosen for the treatment were selected due to involving a series of common topics and related tasks which formed the backbone of the course. While Experimental group exposing collocation related to each word, the Control group only provided by the list of words and context in which those words used. Without calling their attention to the collocations used in the context.

Procedure

To conduct the present study, five general patterns of collocation of nouns were recognized and investigated by the researchers. These patterns were as follows:

1. adjective + noun collocation: a busy road, a safe journey, strong tea;
2. noun + noun collocation: a birthday party;
3. verb + noun collocation: make coffee, serve tea, run a shop;
4. noun + of + noun: a loaf of bread;
5. noun + verb naming an action: bomb explodes, bees buzz;
6. common expressions: be free for lunch, dress for dinner, a pile of dishes;
7. idiomatic expressions: to be at best, to be in the air.

As a matter of fact, following Lewis' (1997a, 2000), and Woolard' (2005) claim that nouns are the heart of collocations, the researcherS chose 60 nouns for instruction. For each noun, students were prepared by the above mentioned patterns. Previous studies put emphasis on only one or two patterns of collocation. However, in this study the focus is on different combinations of collocations with nouns, as well as, common expressions. The main focus of this study was supposed to be on lexical collocation; however, due to students' interests in common expressions and idiomatic expressions, these two issues were added to the course as well. Consequently the prepared chapters involved both lexical and grammatical collocations. Twice a week the students attended their regular one hour and 30 minutes classes, where they developed their English to improve their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. An extra 30-minute session, however, was allotted to work on the collocation with the experimental groups.

Then the participants went through a twenty-session treatment, i.e., the control group (N-15) underwent their term materials including audio, video and textual input without explicit teaching of collocation. On the other hand, the experimental group received an explicit instruction. During exploration of those materials, the experimental students (N-15) were made aware of word combinations, specifically, collocations through different techniques such as textual analysis, dictionary use, storing collocations, translation activity etc. During the semester, the instructor taught 10 chapters chosen from the two text-book materials that were provided and special attention was paid to the collocation. Moreover, the researcher asked students to write a journal related to the topic that they have been taught in each session. However, due to time constraints,

students agreed to write about six topics. In addition, they were informed about the special correction coding, especially the meaning of FIC (Find Its Collocation), that when a student used a wrong word for a combination, the noun was circled and the student asked to find its collocation. The students' job was to check the dictionary and use the correct collocation in their work. Finally, Students rewrote their paragraphs correcting the mistakes. If there were still mistakes, the teacher gave the right answer and asked the students to rewrite the completely corrected paragraph. Although both groups were asked to prepare writing journals, only the experimental group was informed about the special correcting coding. In other words, the control group was only made aware of their mistakes by the teacher without raising their attention to the FIC. Furthermore, for every chapter the instructor designed additional exercises of the types suggested by Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000), Nation (1994, 2001) and Thornbury (2002) to promote vocabulary acquisition. These activities included word families and parts of speech relations, collocations, phrasal verbs, cognate awareness, and dictionary use.

Finally, after the specific treatments were given to the experimental group, a post-test was administered to check the effects of the instructions. The control group, too, was given explicit vocabulary instruction. They sometimes used traditional vocabulary materials in which words were taught as individual items and sometimes only the meanings of the words were taught, but the group was not given the collocation instruction or collocation materials.

The post-test involved the integrative collocation test and the second writing exam as well. At these stages, the students' writings were corrected holistically (on a scale from zero to 30) and were scored twice. In addition to the researchers, students' papers were corrected by another rater. They first underlined all possible lexical collocations recognized in the students' writing according to the five subtypes of lexical collocations and grammatical collocations which were investigated in this study. The researcher judged whether a lexical collocation was acceptable with the help of the BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations (Benson et al., 1997), Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Learners of English (Lea, 2002), and the online corpora: American National Corpus (<http://americannationalcorpus.org>), and Cobuild Collocation Sampler (<http://www.Collins.Co.Uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>). Online corpora were utilized in this study because evidence showed that a corpus could illustrate how words collocate (Aghbar, personal communication, 2002; Schmitt, 2000; McCarthy, 2004b). The two online corpora were used because they were free of charge. In addition, they were designed to include a wide range of samples from different registers and language domains. Besides, although the purpose of the writing was to elicit the subjects' use of collocations, it was also used as a measurement for the subjects' writing fluency. When an acceptable lexical collocation was found with spelling or grammatical errors, it was also counted as a valid one. It was deemed as an effort to use lexical collocations.

3. Results and discussion

Findings related to Students' Questionnaire

Since students' level in English may indicate their level in writing, they have been asked how they appreciated their level. A percentage of 66.66 %, which constitutes the majority of students in the experimental group, represents those who have a medium level. 53.33 % of students in the control group are medium. In the experimental group 20 % of students claims that their level in English is bad. In the control group there is a percentage of 26.66 % that represents students with bad level in English. Less than 20 % in the experimental group and just 20 % in the control group claim that they are good; none has claimed that s/he is very bad or very good. Table 1 indicates students' responses to the items of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Students' Appreciation of their English Level

	The experimental group		The control group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Very bad	/	/	/	/
Bad	3	20 %	4	26.66 %
Medium	10	66.66 %	8	53.33 %
Good	2	13.33 %	3	20 %
Very good	/	0 %	/	0 %
Total	15	100 %	15	100 %

Source: own research

Table 2. The Most Difficult Skill for Students

	The experimental group		The control group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Listening	3	20 %	2	13.33 %
Reading	/	/	/	/
Speaking	6	40 %	5	33.33 %
Writing	6	40 %	8	53.33 %
Total	15	100 %	15	100 %

Source: own research

As indicated in [Table 2](#), 53.33 % of the population of the control group has selected writing as the most difficult skill. However, in the experimental group speaking and writing are in the same rank with 40 %, and listening comes in the second rank with a percentage of 20 %. In the control group speaking comes in the second rank with a percentage of 33.33 %. Concerning listening, only a few students have opted for it. None has considered reading as the most difficult skill. We can notice, here, that the two productive skills (speaking and writing) represent a challenge for the majority of the students.

Another issue raised in the questionnaire was related to students' appreciation of their level in writing. [Table 3](#) reports the results.

Table 3. Students' Appreciation of their Level in Writing

	The experimental group		The control group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage

Very bad	/	/	1	6.66%
bad	8	53.33 %	7	46.66%
Medium	7	46.66 %	6	40%
Good	/	0 %	1	6.66%
Very good	/	/	/	/
Total	15	100%	15	100%

Source: own research

As shown in [Table 3](#), concerning students' level in writing, only one student in the control group has claimed that it is very bad, and one student has claimed that it is good. 40 % of students in this group have said that it is medium, whereas the rest has considered it as bad. In the experimental group more than half the students have claimed that their level is bad, the other half has said that it is medium.

As for the sources of difficulty in writing, [Table 4](#) illustrates the percentages.

Table 4. Sources of Difficulties in Writing

	The experimental group		The control group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Grammar	3	20 %	1	6.66 %
Vocabulary	7	46.66 %	8	53.33 %
Both	5	33.33 %	6	40 %
Total	15	100 %	15	100 %

Source: own research

In the experimental group nearly a little less than half of students (46.66 %) has claimed that the source of difficulties in writing is vocabulary. 33.33 % of them have stated that it is both grammar and vocabulary that make their writing difficult. 20 % represents three students who have claimed that it is grammar. In the control group nearly half the students have stated that lack of vocabulary hinders their writing, while 40 % have claimed that both grammar and vocabulary make writing a difficult task. A small percentage of 6.66 % (1 student) has stated that the problem is due to grammar.

Another area that was investigated through some items of the questionnaire was related to students' knowledge of collocations. [Table 5](#) describes the results.

Table 5. Students' Knowledge of Collocations

	The experimental group		The control group	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	1	6.66 %	1	6.66 %
No	14	93.33 %	14	93.33 %
Total	15	100 %	15	100 %

Source: own research

According to the above table, a high majority of students do not know collocations except one in each group. Fourteen students have answered “no” which indicates that 93.33 % of the whole sample do not know “collocations”.

Findings Related to the Effect of Collocation Instruction on Students' Awareness of Collocation

This section presents results from the quantitative analysis of the data derived from the pre-test and post- test scores of learners' achievement test of collocation scores. A test of normality was run first based on the results of the pre-test to ensure that the participants are all at the same level of knowledge at the beginning of the study. As shown in Table 6, the data is normal and participants are not different in terms of the variable under study.

Table. 6. Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Score	0.101	29	0.200*	0.966	29	0.339
*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.						
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction						

In order to answer the first research question, an independent sample t-test was run to see whether the two groups differed in their performance on collocations. The descriptive statistics of t-test for comparing the performance of the two groups on achievement test of collocation are presented in Tables below.

Table 7. Independent Sample T-Test of Collocation Achievement Test

	Leven'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
DV Equal variances assumed	8.723	.006	11.147	28	.000	7.67	.688	6.258	9.075
			11.147	17.776	.000	7.67	.688	6.220	9.113
Equal variances not assumed									

Source: own research

In the experimental group the mean was 8.67 and the standard deviation was 2.498. The mean for the control group was 1.00 and the standard deviation was .926. The result illustrated that the sig < 0.05, so the mean for the experimental groups' scores was higher than the mean for the control groups' scores. In order to determine whether subjects in the experimental group had been made aware of collocations as a result of instruction on collocation, an independent t-test was performed on the students' scores derived from achievement collocation test. According to Leven's test, the conclusion was drawn that there was a significant difference between variances at 0/05 level of significance. By 95 % confidence interval of the difference (9/113, 6/220), it could be concluded that there was a significant difference between the two groups' performances in the achievement collocation test.

In order to investigate whether there were any gains in the collocational knowledge in the experimental group, a two-tailed matched t-test was run. Table 8 presents the results related to the participants' performance.

Table 8. Paired Samples Test of Collocation Achievement Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Vocabulary-pre-test- Vocabulary-post-test	-8.67	2.498	.645	-10.05	-7.28	-13.439	14	.000

Source: own research

As shown in Table 8, the t observed was (-13.439) at .000 level of significance. Thus it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the experimental group's performance in the pre-test and post-test. Therefore, it can be claimed that this difference is due to the kind of instruction the experimental group received and this gives further evidence for rejecting the null hypothesis.

Findings Related to the Effect of Collocation Instruction on Writing (Quantitative Method)

This section presents results from the quantitative analysis of the data derived from the pre-test and post-test scores of learners' writing. The descriptive statistics of t-test for comparing the performance of the two groups on writing test are presented in Table 9. An independent sample t-test was used to compare the two groups' performance with regard to writing. Results are illustrated in the following table.

Table 9. Independent Sample T-Test of Writing Test

	Leven'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
DW Equal variances assumed	.556	.462	8.899	28	.000	6.27	.704	4.824	7.709
Equal variances not assumed			8.899	22.526	.000	6.27	.704	4.808	7.725

Source: own research

The result illustrated in [Table 9](#) shows that the sig < 0.05, so the mean for the experimental groups' scores was higher than the mean for the control groups' scores. By 95 % confidence interval of the difference (4.824, 7.709), it could be concluded that there was a significant difference between the two groups' performances in the writing test. Furthermore, collocational teaching had impact on improvement of experimental group's writings. Thus, it is quite safe to reject the null hypothesis. Hence, it can be claimed that subjects' writing abilities improved through collocational teaching.

In order to explore students' gain in writing in the experimental group, a paired sample t-test was run. [Table 10](#) indicates the results obtained.

Table 10. Paired Samples Test of Writing

Pair		Paired Differences					t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
1	Writing-pre-test- Writing-post-test	-6.47	2.356	.608	-7.77	-5.16	-10.629	14	.000

Source: own research

It was observed that the mean of writing scores for the experimental group in pre-test was 10.87 and in post-test was 17.33. Regarding the significance level (sig < 0.05), it resulted that there was a significant difference between writing scores of pre and post-test. Thus, it indicates that students' writing abilities in experimental group improved significantly. This result again gives

evidence to reject the H₀ and conclude that the difference between the two mean scores reflects that the experimental improvement is due to collocation instruction.

Findings Related to the Effect of Collocation Instruction on Students' Writings (Qualitative Method)

This section presents the qualitative examination of the data which was done during the term. To come up with a clear picture of subjects' performances during the treatment (throughout the semester), the students' writings were scored analytically based on the guidelines provided by Heaton (1990). To closely analyze the subjects' process of learning and to explore the possible effects of collocational teaching, the different component mean scores on each topic (six topics in total) for both groups were measured and their learning processes were depicted graphically and compared both between groups as well as within the experimental group in terms of their mean gain scores. The experimental and control subjects' performance at the beginning of the term up to the mid-term (third topic) at grammar component of rating scale are almost at the same level and show no progress but from this time onwards, the experimental grammar curve shows rather significant improvement compared to that of their counterparts in the control group. No considerable improvement is observed for the control group during the same period of time (from topic 3 to topic 6, Figure 1).

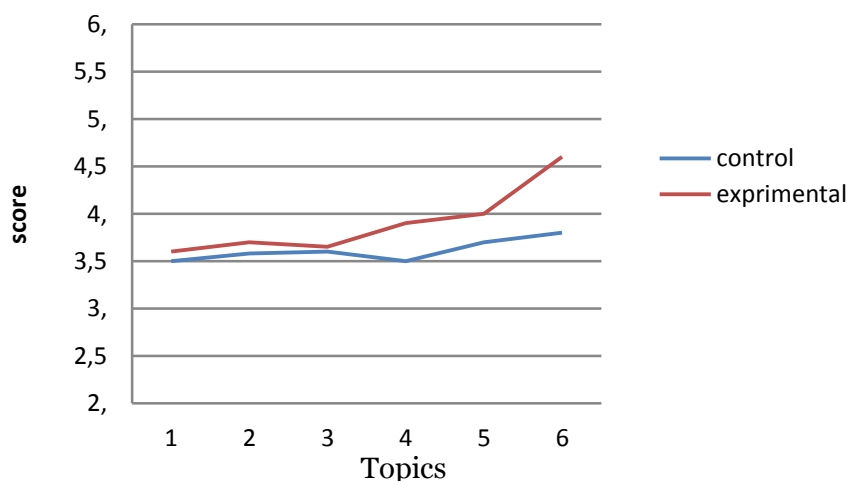


Fig. 1. The control and experimental groups' learning processes at Grammar component

According to Figure 2, both the experimental and control subjects have comparatively improved at vocabulary component but the slope of line for the experimental group grows steeper.

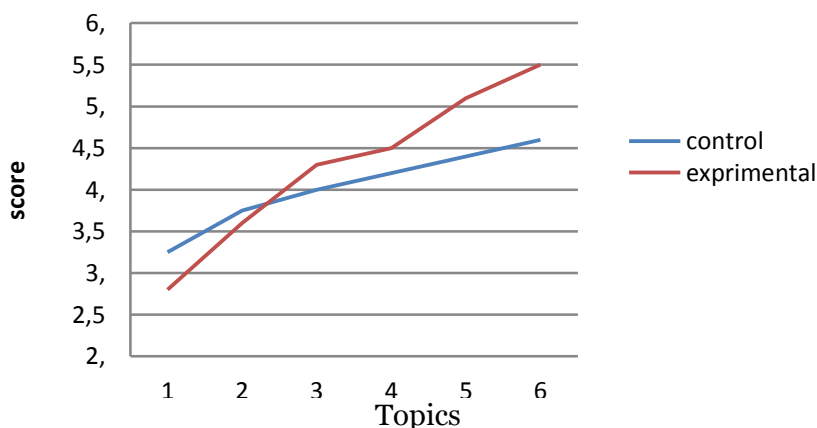


Fig. 2. The control and experimental groups' learning processes at Vocabulary component

This learning process for fluency starts tracing its steady progress right from the beginning of the term until the end. As it is evident in Figure 3, the mean scores of the experimental group are lower than those of the control group for the first topic.

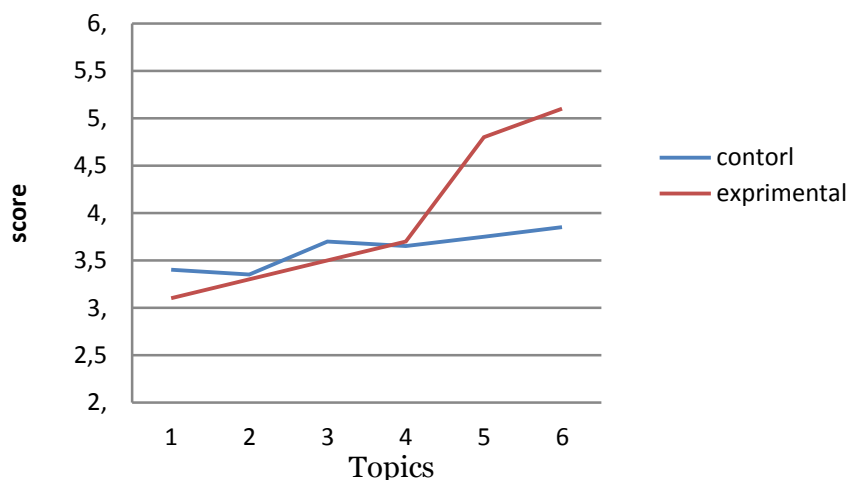


Fig. 3. The control and experimental groups' learning processes at fluency component

As Figure 3 shows the control group makes very slow progress in fluency all throughout the semester whereas the experimental group tracks an ordinary progress from the beginning up to the mid-term (the third topic). Totally as the figure shows the slope moves up quite significantly and continues in the same developmental pattern until the end of the semester. This indicates the experimental subjects' dramatic improvement in fluency takes place over the last few weeks of the term. It seems that the type of instruction has an effect on experimental subjects' fluency from mid-term onwards. Regarding relevance component, as it is evident in Figure 4, both the experimental and control groups are found to make an ordinary progress comparatively. However, both groups' lines on the graph rise and drop. This indicates that there is not much considerable difference between these two groups at relevance component of writing although the experimental group shows more improvement in this component.

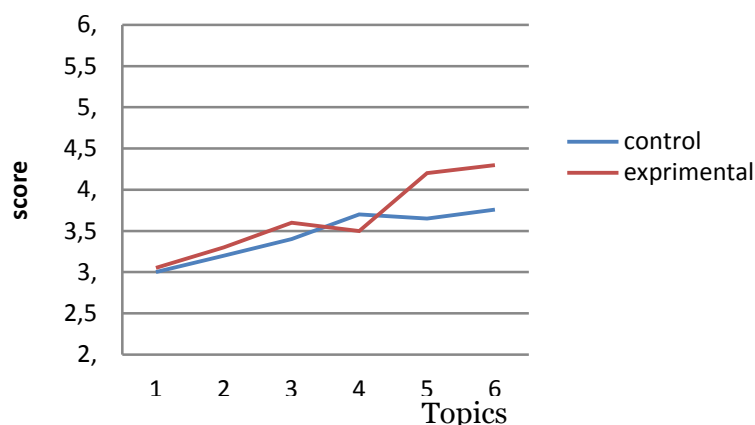


Fig. 4. The control and experimental groups' learning processes at relevance component

As to mechanics (Figure 5) shows that there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups and both groups follow similar patterns although the control group at the beginning of the semester outperforms in mechanics while at the end of the term it appears that the experimental group does better at this component.

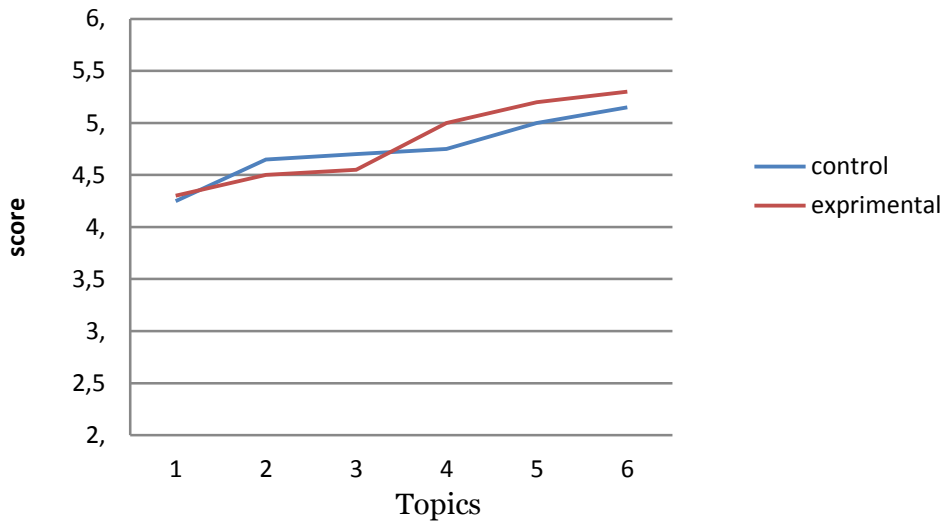


Fig. 5. The control and experimental groups' learning processes at Mechanics component

Figure 6 shows that there has been no significant difference between the experimental and control groups regarding writing until the mid-term but from this time period onward, the experimental group's curve on the graph starts increasing dramatically compared to the control group's curve so that in topic 6 their difference reach a maximum of 4.72. It seems that if the treatment period were expanded for experimental group, it would lead to their radical improvement in writing skill.

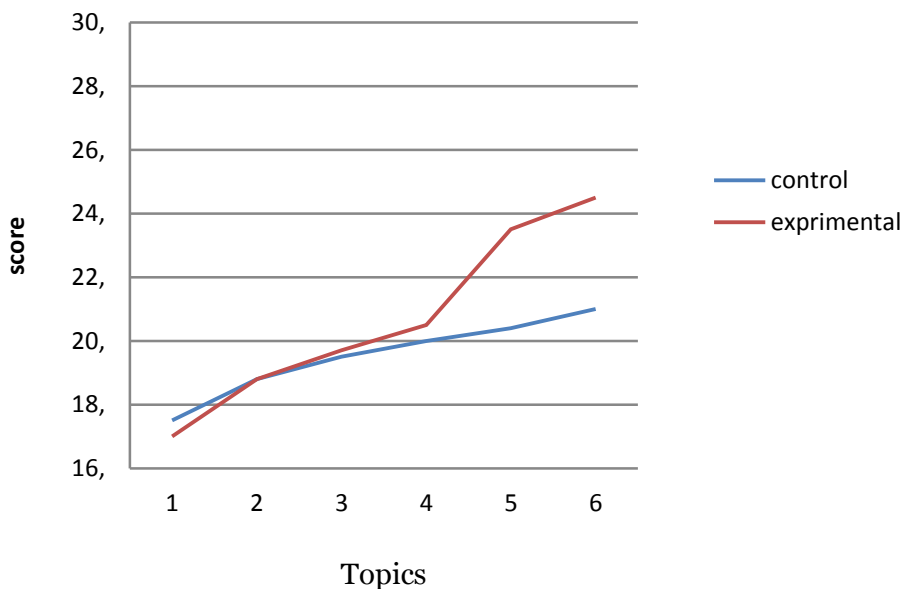


Fig. 6. Comparison of the overall learning processes of control and experimental groups at writing components

A comparison of the experimental group curves for the whole treatment period would reveal the process of experimental subjects' writings improvement by the type of instruction (Figure 7).

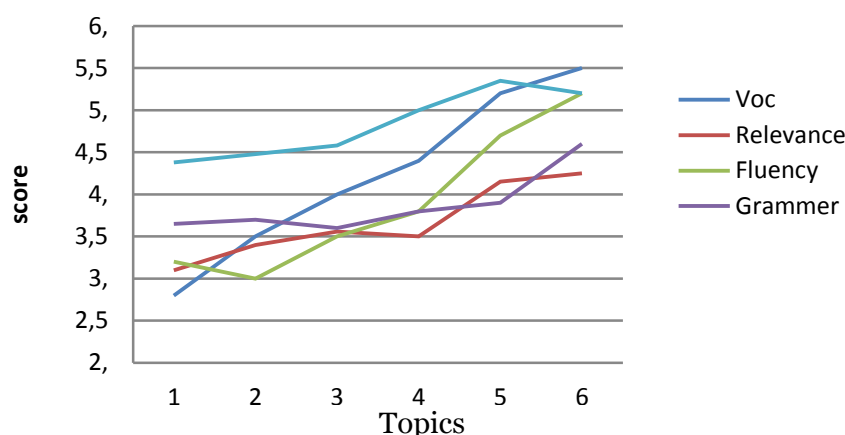


Fig. 7. The comparison of experimental group's developmental process at each writing components

As it can be observed in [Figure 7](#), the subjects' learning process for vocabulary and fluency components develops quite significantly while this developmental process regarding relevance and mechanics takes place to a lesser extent. This learning process develops to a small extent with regard to grammar component. In sum, the figure shows the positive effect of collocational teaching on vocabulary and fluency components of writing. The comparison of vocabulary and fluency lines on the graph shows that the vocabulary learning process develops more significantly compared to fluency component until the mid-term but from this time onwards the fluency curve develops more rapidly in comparison with vocabulary curve so that it gets a very similar pattern to vocabulary curve toward the end of term.

To recap, this study intended to investigate the effects of collocation instruction on awareness of chunking and students' compositions. The literature indicates that L2 learners have difficulty when writing in the L2. One of the problems in L2 writing is a lack of vocabulary. Some learners themselves are aware of this limitation. Nation (2001) stated that Leki and Carson (1994) “found that second language learners see lack of vocabulary as the major factor affecting the quality of their writing” (p. 178). Nesselhauf (2003) and Kaur and Hegelheimer (2005) would probably add that lack of collocation knowledge also impacts on L2 learners' writing ability. In the beginning of the project when students signed up in the institute, students barely knew the concept of collocation, and they did not pay much attention to collocation knowledge in English vocabulary learning, according to the results of the Background Questionnaire. They did not even know that there was a dictionary of collocations. These explained why students performed poorly in the collocation pre-test.

In this study, the first hypothesis was that learners will not be aware of collocations as a result of collocation instruction. Students who received collocation instruction would be aware of the idea of chunking and specially collocations, and as a result of this would gain good results in the post-test. In fact, three most important basics of collocation instruction, exposure to the natural language, consciousness-raising and explicit teaching ([Hill, 2000](#); [Lewis, 2000](#); [Nesselhauf, 2005](#); [Woolard, 2000](#)), were pursued in this study; significant results were obtained between the groups in addition to the number of collocations used in the students' written paragraphs. The findings were consistent with those of [Lin \(2002\)](#), [Sun and Wang \(2003\)](#), and [Tseng \(2002\)](#): explicit collocation instruction was effective in promoting EFL learners' collocation knowledge. The findings reported here indicate that the control group did not show any significant results when displaying collocation achievement test. It was the experimental group which showed remarkable performance gains in knowledge of collocations between pre- and post- tests. Therefore, the best conclusion to be drawn from the findings related to the collocation awareness might be that collocation instruction has positive effects on students' knowledge of collocations.

The second hypothesis claimed that collocation instruction would not help students to develop their writing ability. In order to investigate this, the grades of the first and the last paragraphs and the number of collocations used in students' paragraphs were compared within and between the two groups. The positive effect of collocation instruction on experimental

students' writings turned out sufficiently profound to be of statistical significance through quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of the data. This finding is consistent with Zhang's finding (1993) which suggests a correlation between knowledge and use of English collocations and the quality of college freshman's writing.

The third research question looked at the students' use of collocation in their writing after being explicitly taught what collocations were and examples of them. This qualitative examination of data also supports a positive impact of the method on students' fluency and vocabulary. Only the effect on students' grammar failed to be of great significance graphically. Hill (1999) and Thornbury (1998) believe that learning lexical strings seem to enable students to extract the grammar themselves as they begin analysing acquired language. One possible justification for this is the fact that the experiment was conducted over 20 teaching sessions and learners required more time to be able to extract the grammar themselves. These findings confirm Farghal and Obiedat's (1995) emphasis on teaching vocabulary collocationally instead of individually and also support Zhang's conclusion (1993) that collocational knowledge is a source of fluency in written communication among college freshmen. All in all, the samples that the students produced indicated that directing the students' attention to collocations had a positive impact on their results. In the students' writing samples the researcher noticed that the students at times had some problems understanding of the words, and yet they could not use the words appropriately. In addition she observed that collocation was one of the problems.

Nation (2001) pointed out that "while it is possible to make significant changes in vocabulary knowledge, it is not easy to move this knowledge to productive use" (p. 182). Nation's comment was observed in the students' use of words in their samples. In some cases, while the students seemed to understand the meaning of the words, they sometimes struggled to collocate some of them. In addition, they did not know the appropriate context in which to use certain words. Finally, as Kennedy (1990) commented: What text-based collocation studies do suggest is that the description of grammar is, from the teacher's point of view, an essential part of methodology, but it needs to be based on more than the orthodox grammatical and lexical description. Just as the teacher of botany does not take students into the jungle and expect them to learn all the plants by simply being exposed to them, so the language curriculum designer and classroom teacher can facilitate learning by systematic presentation of the role of important language items and their linguistic ecology – the company words keep (p. 228).

Another point observed in the students' writings was the transfer of a certain collocation pattern to others. In his study, Howarth (1998) noticed that his learners transferred knowledge of certain combinations to others. For instance, Howarth's students came up with "draw a conclusive comments" from "draw a conclusion." The students also created "reach a high achievement" which appeared to be a combination of "high achiever" and "a high level of achievement" (p. 180). A similar type of transfer was observed in the present study in the use of "cooperative working," "physical working," and "individual working." Even though one collocation example led the students to create inappropriate combinations, the fact that they were creating combinations was an indication that they were attending to the collocations. However, the results of the present study may not be conclusive and, a lengthy study with more subjects in number might enable the achievement of more significant and reliable results. It goes without saying that by the small number of subjects and the relatively small difference in instructional methods administered to the experimental and the control group, the positive effect of 'collocation-noticing' on experimental students' writings turned out to be significant.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, English students are usually incompetent in writing, mis-collocations are widespread in their writing, and their words are associated inappropriately. Therefore, they need to use collocations in order to write more proficiently. As indicated in the statistical findings of this study, teaching English collocations to Iranian learners would enhance their proficiency in writing and raise their collocational competence. In addition to this, the experimental group was observed to take more risks and make more complicated sentences using more collocations in their sentences. In their compositions these learners used more collocations than did those in the control group. The data also support a positive impact of the method on students' fluency and vocabulary until the end of the term.

In addition, Gitsaki (1999 in Smith, 2005) believes that the amount and length of exposure to the target language is an important aspect in collocation development. Lewis (1997a), too, points out that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach and acquisition is non-linear.

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