The effect of lexical bundles on Iranian EFL learners' argumentative writing performance

Mansoure Sepasdar [1], Islamic Azad University , Department Of English Language ,Shiraz Branch , Shiraz, Iran

Firooz Sadighi, Islamic Azad University Shiraz Center, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Shiraz, Iran

Abstract

The present study examined the effect of raising awareness of lexical bundles on Iranian EFL learners' argumentative writing performance. Therefore, 52 EFL learners at the Talash Language Institute of Jahrom were selected from 73 students by administering the Nelson English Language Test. The selected students were divided into two groups and participated in a writing pretest. The participants in the control group wrote an essay on a topic provided by the teacher in each session without any particular treatment. In contrast, in the experimental group, before the experiment began, the participants were introduced to the use of lexical bundles in the first session, and they followed the procedure used in the control group. After ten writing sessions, a posttest was given to both groups to compare their writing competency after the treatment. The results of the data analysis indicated that raising Iranian EFL learners' awareness of lexical bundles improved their argumentative writing performance significantly.

Keywords: Argumentative writing; lexical approach, lexical awareness, lexical bundles, lexical chunks, lexical items, writing

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* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Mansoure Sepasdar , Islamic Azad University , Department Of English Language ,Shiraz Branch , Shiraz, Iran
   E-mail address: Mansoure.sepasdar@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Writing a foreign or second language (L2) has been challenging for language learners and a debating issue for scholars in the discipline (Teng et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2023). Owing to the steadily increasing number of students enrolled in language learning courses, it occupies a prominent position in pedagogy and research. The most effective sign system created by humans is writing (De Silva & Graham, 2015). According to Sadiku (2015), there has been much debate about whether speech has been a creation of nature or human intellect since ancient times. However, there is a universal agreement that writing is an artifact.

Students actively transform their passive knowledge and information into language by writing. They must think in a different language, express their thoughts verbally, and write texts and this improves over time note taking, tasks, and constant practice in writing (Courtney et al., 2022; Sánchez & Sunesson 2023; Lee 2019). According to Aliyu (2020), L1 writing research in English-speaking nations has mostly evaluated the impact of educational programs on students' writing outcomes to analyze the act of writing in the second half of the 20th century. Emig (1971) provides a fundamental framework for researching writing processes. L2 writing researchers often use the L1 writing process research methodology, and their results typically support those of their L1 colleagues. One of these areas of inquiry examines how lexical bundles help language learners strengthen their writing abilities.

Lexical bundles are described as multiword linguistic units that may be fully retrieved from memory and treated as single units (Myles et al., 1998; Wray, 2013). Because they are retained in chunks, learners do not process them word-by-word while applying them. According to Chen and Baker (2010), the word co-occurrence refers to various phrases. Therefore, successful writing requires the effective use of lexical bundles, instructions, and feedback to attain a level of assimilation and improvement in learners (Wilson et al., 2021; Troia et al., 2022 (Kim et al., 2021). As a result, target language learners' writing seems non-native when specific native-like patterns are not used (Li & Schmitt, 2009). The importance of lexical bundles in writing is emphasized by Hyland (2008), who claims that their absence might signal the lack of fluency of a beginner or newbie in that group (p. 5). In other words, regular sequences of subjects help learners develop their communication skills. Lexical bundles differ from idioms and other unchanging items (phrases) and are logically non-compositional. However, many lexical meanings are derived from the words that they contain. Some of the most frequent lexical phrases that are fully compositional were reflected in Biber et al. (1999).

1.1. Literature review

Much research has been done regarding lexical bundle teaching and its efficacy in different aspects of language learning. Relevant studies show that students' higher exposure to lexical chunks improves their writing proficiency significantly. Moreover, using lexical items positively correlates with their writing proficiency (Wang, 2021). In a revised lexical teaching approach, Xue (2021) demonstrated the positive impact of lexical awareness based on Data Driven Learning (DDL) on intermediate EFL learners` writing performance using iWeb corpus to create a virtual corpus for any language learning topic. iWeb can browse a list of at least 60 thousand words in the corpus to give language teachers a great lexicon corpus. Over 16 weeks, the researcher compared the outcomes of two groups of freshmen intermediate EFL college learners. They participated in a teaching pattern composed of Exposing, Identifying, Observing, Discovering, and Internalizing different activities (EIODI cycle) to internalize lexical chunks learning. Following this course curriculum, students increased their lexical awareness through real communicative teaching materials such as TED Talks, BBC news, news articles, and original language textbooks. Data revealed that most students had positive attitudes toward the lexical teaching approach; moreover, it positively affected their overall English proficiency.

Kazemi et al. (2014) investigated the usage of lexical bundles in applied linguistics to determine their relevance in students' written work. Twenty MA TEFL students were taught 40 lexical bundles that were determined to be the most common, relevant, and functionally significant to applied linguistics. Before and after the lesson, participants were instructed to create a piece of writing on a predetermined subject. The purpose of the bundles was to assist the students in structuring their thoughts into paragraphs. Students' writings and their opinions about lexical bundles in improving writing skills were included in the data. The results showed that bundles significantly boosted the students' writing skills, and students highly valued lexical bundles. Therefore, every writing course should emphasize the teaching of lexical bundles.

Eidian et al., (2013) sought to assess how well pre-intermediate Iranian language learners could write after receiving lexical collocation teaching. They selected 50 Iranian TEFL students from the Azad University of Ahvaz through a non-random handy selection approach. The proficiency test results highlight the groups' commonalities. The selected individuals were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received treatment based on lexical collocation writing training in one paragraph, whereas the control group received traditional writing instruction.

Their study's structure was based on the pretest-posttest methodology. A lexical collocation exam of 35 items was used as a pretest. Before the treatment, a pretest was conducted to ensure group homogeneity regarding lexical proficiency in paragraph writing. The participants were given five subjects to write one paragraph during the treatment. After completing the treatment, the researchers gave the participants a posttest on lexical collocation, including 35 multiple-choice items, cloze tests, and matching. The post-test outcomes were then examined statistically using an independent sample t-test. The findings demonstrated a statistically significant difference between participant ratings in the experimental and control groups. Syntax, vocabulary, fluency, relevance, and writing mechanics were also examined in paragraphs written. The findings also revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in lexical component writing.

Hsu (2007) investigated how Taiwanese college students used English lexical collocations in their online writing. Data were collected from 41 English language students and 21 non-English students from southern Taiwan national science and technology institutions. To assess how well the students used lexical collocations in terms of variety and frequency, he requested each student to complete a 45-minute online English writing examination using the web-based writing tool Version 7.1 of the Educational Testing Service. Finally, he examined the test results to find answers to two key questions: (1) is there a relationship between the subjects' writing and the frequency of lexical collocations? (2) Is there a correlation between subject writing and the diversity of lexical collocations? The findings showed a positive correlation between Taiwanese college EFL College learners' frequency of lexical collocations and online writing scores. Moreover, there appeared to be a significantly positive correlation between the variety of lexical collocations of subjects and online writing scores.

In a mixed method, Rashtchi and Mohammadi (2017) aimed to investigate whether lexical awareness could boost EFL academic writing in 3 phases. Through this design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed. The comparison of pre-and posttests revealed that students were more fluent in using lexical bundles in cloze tasks and were more interested in the explicit teaching of lexical items. Furthermore, focusing on the usage of lexical bundles via cloze tasks increased the learner` understanding of academic writing and elevated their self-esteem in using a variety of appropriate words to express their ideas.

In different types of writing, lexical bundles are defined as building blocks that differ in writing genres. In a study, Yang (2017) compared different lexical items that Chinese students chose in narrative and argumentative writings. Based on Bieber et al.'s (1999) framework, he categorized them into

functional and structural. The findings showed that students used more functional and four-word bundles in argumentative writing than in narrative writing. Apart from the frequency and structure of lexical items in argumentative writings, lexical bundles should be instructed in a way that learners can differentiate between language use of different genres and text types (Oktavianti & Sarage, 2021)

In a corpus-driven investigation, Liu et al., (2020) compared pretests and posttests of 34 ESL undergraduate students to demonstrate the efficacy of Lexical chunks teaching in academic writing proficiency. Findings underpinned the positive relationship between teaching lexical bundles and elevated writing scores of students. Moreover, students` attitudes toward lexical awareness through explicit usage in their academic writings were positive. Gender showed no effect on academic writing teaching via lexical items` awareness.

Birhan (2021), showed the effects of teaching lexical bundles on abstract academic writing of students majoring in computer sciences. Students participated in eight-week explicit instructions of different lexical items for composing their abstract. The researcher used a posttest to gather quantitative data and a questionnaire to receive students` perceptions of different lexical items taught in the process. Findings proved that students` lexical awareness and writing skills were developed after using them in academic writing. In addition, more than 80 percent of questionnaire respondents perceived that lexical bundles helped them write a coherent and cohesive abstract.

Similarly, Alsheri (2022) scrutinized the lexical diversity in Saudi EFL learners` writing proficiency. To this end, 75 Arab EFL learners in 2 different proficiencies levels, the second and seventh proficiency levels based on the Saudi educational system, participated in the study. All participants were asked to write 250-word writing about one topic out of two given topics. Finally, all their written works were processed through a web-based language analysis tool called Text Inspectors. Findings indicated a significant positive correlation between lexical richness and writing proficiency. This study proved that lexical diversity has a positive relation with writing proficiency. It means that vocabulary as a lexicon is essential in writing proficiency, and more attention should be paid to vocabulary learning for writing proficiency. A person's vocabulary mastery indicates underlying vocabulary knowledge and lexical richness displayed in written work (Ha, 2019).

Even though EFL students are particularly familiar with multiword lexical bundles, they struggle to use them efficiently and correctly in their writing. They were more inclined to write phrases consecutively without integrating them, which might prevent their thoughts from flowing smoothly. Additionally, a lack of multiword chunks or improper usage by a student might result in uneven writing that hinders communication between the writer and reader. Readers may find it challenging to follow ideas from one phrase to the next and connect them. This issue is because these concepts are inconsistent and disjointed. EFL learners may be unable to reach their communicative aim in writing because of difficulties in effectively communicating their intended messages to their audience. All of these factors might make their writing unsuccessful.

1.2. Purpose of study

This study aimed to determine whether lexical teaching bundles would enhance Iranian EFL learners' writing abilities and usage of lexical bundles in their writing. The following research question was proposed for this study:

Does raising Iranian EFL learners' awareness of lexical items improve their writing performance significantly?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were 52 female and male EFL learners at the Talash Language Institute of Jahrom. All students participated in this study and were at an intermediate level of proficiency. The participants were selected from 73 students from three institute classes. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, the authors administered the Nelson English Language Test (NELT). Students who got one score above or below the mean were selected as intermediate students. The participants were selected from the intermediate level because they had prior proficiency in writing skills and had already experienced different argumentative writing tasks.

2.2. Data collection instrument

The following instruments were used in the present study:

Nelson English Language Test (NELT): it is used to select a homogeneous group of EFL learners. The test is organized into ten proficiency levels, from beginner to advanced, and each level consists of four different parallel tests. 50 test items are used in each test. An upper-intermediate level test was used in this study.

Topics for pretest and posttest: Two topics were given to the participants to determine their argumentative writing competency levels before and after the treatment. The following topics were used as the pretest and posttest.
- How do movies and television influence people's behavior?
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement, 'Television destroys communication among friends and family members?

2.3. Procedure

The present study included a pretest and posttest of one control group and one experimental group. Since the participants were not selected randomly, the study was quasi-experimental. Awareness of lexical bundles was the independent variable, and the effect of this variable on students' argumentative writing performance was investigated as the dependent variable.

In the first stage, the researcher tried to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. To this end, NELT was administered to the students. Students with scores within the one standard deviation range below and above the mean participated in this study. The chosen students were divided into two groups: the experimental and the control group. Both groups took an argumentative writing pretest.

In the control group, participants wrote an essay about the topic provided by the teacher in each session. The teacher read the students' essays and provided oral comments and written feedback where needed. Participants in the experimental group wrote essays on the same topic. The same procedure was followed. The difference was that the students were introduced to the course in the first session before the experiment began. So, they became familiar with useful lexical bundles. The instructed lexical bundles constituted a subset of formulaic sequences obtained from the Academic Formulas List (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010). Lexical bundles were selected based on two main criteria.

First, lexical bundles should be significantly worthwhile for students to learn. Second, they should be concluded in the course environment as a part of the academic discourse and relevant to topics discussed in the classroom. Fifty lexical bundles were taught in both classes.

After ten sessions, the argumentative writing posttest was given to both groups to compare their writing performance. Two independent raters assessed the essays based on Jacob et al.'s scoring profile,

and the inter-rater reliability index for the scores was calculated to be 0.88. As the reliability index was sufficiently high, the two writing raters' mean scores were considered each participant's argumentative writing score.

3. Results

3.1. The results of NELT

First, 73 students participated in the NELT. Then some students were selected with scores one standard deviation below or above the mean score. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of participants' NELT scores.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' NELT Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
NELT	73	46	80	65.58	8.209
Valid N (listwise)	73				

Table 1 shows that the overall mean and standard deviation of the NELT scores were 65.58 and 8.209, respectively. From all the initial participants, 52 students with scores ranging from 58 to 73 were selected.

3.2. Descriptive statistics for the control group

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the argumentative writing scores in the control group.

Table 2
The Results of the Participants' Pretest and Posttest Scores in the Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing Pretest in CG	26	56	80	66.77	7.399
Writing Posttest in CG	26	64	88	75.85	8.038
Writing Pretest in EG	26	52	76	65.85	7.176
Writing Posttest in EG	26	68	100	84.77	8.002
Valid N (listwise)	26				

According to Table 2, the mean score of the argumentative writing pretest in the control group was 66.77 with a standard deviation of 7.399, and the mean score of the argumentative writing posttest was 75.85 with a standard deviation of 8.038. Furthermore, the participants' pretest mean score of argumentative writing in the experimental group was 65.85, with a standard deviation of 7.176. The mean score on the argumentative writing posttest was 84.77, with a standard deviation of 8.002.

3.3. The *results regarding the research question*

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to answer the research question. (Dornyei, 2007). The ANCOVA test reduces the initial group differences in quasi-experimental studies. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for argumentative writing scores

Dependent Variable: Writing Posttest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1582.821[a]	2	791.410	14.533	.000	.372
Intercept	1504.590	1	1504.590	27.630	.000	.361
Writing Pretest	547.744	1	547.744	10.059	.003	.170
Groups	1129.901	1	1129.901	20.750	.000	.297
Error	2668.256	49	54.454			
Total	339616.000	52				
Corrected Total	4251.077	51				

a. R Squared = .372 (Adjusted R Squared = .347)

The first highlighted line in Table 3 shows that the argumentative writing pretest was related to the argumentative writing posttest ($p< 0.05$) with a magnitude of 0.170. The second line indicates the main effect of teaching lexical bundles on the dependent variable, the argumentative writing posttest. After adjusting for the pretest scores, the group had a significant effect, $F(1,49) = 20.750$, $p < 0.05$, partial η^2 = 0.297. The significance level was less than 0.05, so the two groups were different.

However, to determine whether teaching lexical bundles affected participants' argumentative writing performance, the authors compared the estimated marginal means of scores in the two groups (Table 4).

Table 4

Estimated Marginal Means of Argumentative Writing Performance Scores

Groups	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
CG	75.637	1.449	72.725	78.548
EG	84.979	1.449	82.068	87.890

As shown in Table 4, the estimated marginal mean of the EG was higher than that of the CG (84.979>75.637), which indicates the positive effect of teaching lexical bundles on raising the awareness of EFL learners on their argumentative writing performance.

4. Discussion

This study sought to determine the effect of raising awareness of lexical bundles on Iranian EFL learners' argumentative writing performance. The results revealed a positive effect of teaching lexical bundles on both argumentative writing performance and EFL learners' use of lexical bundles. The positive effects of teaching lexical bundles can be interpreted in several ways. The findings of this study support the idea that teaching lexical bundles that foster writing ability in EFL situations empowers students in three ways. First, they may speak a language that they partially understand. Language is processed and produced much faster by learning lexical bundles. Additionally, learners' awareness of strong text associations increases (Forquera, 2006).

According to Mounya (2010), learning isolated words is less effective than memorizing chunks because recalling phrases is easier than individual words. He also added that native speakers consciously anticipate what they would say. Therefore, it is difficult to understand foreign-language speakers when

they use unfamiliar terms. Therefore, the growth of learners' lexical bundle knowledge enhances both their productive and receptive abilities, whereas ignoring grammar, vocabulary, and meaning together to help students become more fluent in a foreign language would be wrong.

Additionally, the outcomes of this study support those of Zhang's (1993) research. He discovered a link between writing abilities and understanding of the lexical bundles. Although the participants in Zhang's research were identical to those in the current study, they were divided into two groups: those who spoke English as their first language and those who did not. According to Zhang's research, native English speakers write more lexical bundles than non-native writers. Sung (2003) discovered a weak association between argumentative writing proficiency and lexical bundle knowledge in language learners.

5. Conclusion

To answer the research question, the researchers selected two groups of participants. In one group, the teacher did not explain the structure of lexical bundles to the participants, and they only wrote an essay on a topic provided by the teacher in each session. In the other group, the teacher familiarized the participants with some useful lexical bundles and followed the same procedure as the control group.

Understanding the meaning of a term is important and may be sufficient in many circumstances. Providing a word definition is a traditional vocabulary teaching technique that does not help students learn and retain new vocabulary words. Instead, it is preferable to develop new vocabulary teaching strategies, one of which is to teach words in chunks.

According to current research findings, teaching lexical bundles is a key strategy for achieving writing competency. Providing feedback on erroneous lexical bundle use is crucial, as it will help students become more proficient communicators and lexical bundle users. Exposure to language resources such as collocation dictionaries is important for EFL learners. Furthermore, it is necessary to enhance learners' understanding and lexical bundle use through instructions. The findings of this study may be useful to EFL instructors. So, it is important to increase EFL instructors' knowledge of lexical bundles and the value of such lessons. However, EFL instructors must improve their understanding of lexical bundles to make their lessons more realistic. Language instructors may not understand lexical bundles sufficiently. By placing words next to one another, instructors well-versed in lexical bundles may help their pupils learn new words more effectively. Learners are less likely to match words carelessly and produce strange or inaccurate word combinations if they are familiar with the most prevalent lexical bundles associated with a given term. For teachers to focus on issue domains, the current study will provide hints on difficulties with lexical bundles. Additionally, understanding the causes of lexical bundle issues will undoubtedly assist teachers in preparing their students to solve them.

The individuals` gender was not controlled in this study. Therefore, future research may investigate the impact of raising awareness of lexical bundles on the writing abilities of an equal number of boys and girls. In addition, the participants' argumentative writing proficiency was the only factor considered in this study. So other research can examine the impact of teaching lexical bundles on writing characteristics, such as correctness, complexity, cohesion, and coherence.

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