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The Impact of Teaching Lexical Bundles on Improving Iranian EFL Students' Writing Skill

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Abstract

The present study aims to examine how significant the use of lexical bundles prevalent in the field of applied linguistics can be in students' writing materials. Forty lexical bundles which were judged to be the most frequent, most relevant and functionally important to the discipline of applied linguistics were chosen and taught to twenty MA students of TEFL. They were asked to write a piece of writing on a given topic prior to and after the instruction. The bundles were intended to help them develop their ideas into organized paragraphs. The data included students' writings, as well as their elicited views, collected through a questionnaire, regarding the helpfulness of the bundles in writing skill. The findings indicated that the bundles were of significant help to the students' writing ability and that students attribute great importance to lexical bundles. The findings indicate that every course in writing should give significance to the teaching of lexical bundles.

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Introduction

Writing skill gains great importance in higher education and being identified as a member of the disciplinary community of expert writers is one of the aspirations of many students in almost any field of study. To this end, students should try to use those word combinations that are part of disciplinary conventions, which are typically used by established academics (Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a, 2008b; Schleppegrell, 1996).

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Lexical bundles, also known as chunks or clusters (Hyland, 2008a), are a type of relatively recently introduced word sequences defined as the most frequently occurring fixed-form sequences of three or more words that are usually neither idiomatic nor complete structural units although they have strong grammatical correlates (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999; Biber, 2006). Examples of lexical bundles include expressions such as *on the other hand*, *the end of the*, and *it is important to*.

Since lexical bundles are very common in language, it might be assumed that they will naturally and easily be acquired. But as Biber and Barbieri (2007) and Cortes (2006) note, the acquisition and proper use of these expressions does not seem to naturally happen. Although expert academic writers in different disciplines and genres make use of a wide variety of lexical bundles to develop their arguments and persuade the readers, many lexical bundles favored and used by experts are never or quite rarely used by students in different fields and at different levels of expertise (Chen & Baker, 2010; Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008a, Jalali, Eslami Rasekh & Tavangar Rizi, 2008).

Most studies regarding lexical bundles take a corpus-based approach and focus on determining the bundles used in a given discipline and on the variability or the similarity in the type and frequency of the lexical bundles used across different disciplinary fields, registers, genres, and different degrees of writing expertise (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004; Cortes, 2013; Herbel-Eisenmann & Wagner, 2010; Karabacak and Qin, 2012).

There are also studies suggesting different ways of introducing students to the use of frequently recurring word combinations. Lewis (2000) introduces many innovative ways of teaching collocations. Pang (2010) also describes several strategies and techniques that will enable second language (L2) students to expand their repertoire of academic rhetorical features to include these multi-word sequences.

Very few studies have dealt with explicit instruction and practical applications of lexical bundles or with students' attitudes toward the helpfulness of these multi-word sequences in their writing ability (Cortes, 2006). Jones and Haywood (2004) instructed a group of university students who were all non-native speakers of English on the use of certain word combinations during a 10-week period. Their results showed minor gains in the production of formulaic language after the instruction but they reported high motivation and predisposition towards the use of these expressions by the participants in their study. They also emphasized that students' underuse of formulaic expressions in their academic writing may result in unacceptable writing. In another study, Cortes (2006) found her five 20-minute sessions of teaching lexical bundles to a group of university students in a writing-intensive history class too short to make significant differences between pre- and post-instruction production of lexical bundles but they indicated an increase in students' awareness of and interest in these expressions.

To date, to researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated the impact of instructing advanced EFL learners on the use of lexical bundles in writing in the discipline of applied linguistics, more specifically in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Advanced TEFL learners are supposed to have little difficulty in the perception of lexical bundles since these expressions are so prevalent in the discipline. But it is not clear whether these learners can use lexical bundles in writing without difficulty and if providing them with a list of most related, most frequent, and functionally important lexical bundles in the field can improve their writing ability.

The study may have both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of applied linguistics. Theoretical to the sense that it may contribute to a redefining of the characteristics of a good writing class and practical in the form of recommendations to EFL students and novice writers as well as to writing course instructors about the importance and helpfulness of lexical bundles in improving students' ability in writing.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the usefulness of teaching lexical bundles on improving students' writing ability. So, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What is the impact of teaching lexical bundles on improving Iranian advanced TEFL students' writing skill?
2. What are the attitudes of Iranian advanced TEFL students about the helpfulness of lexical bundles in improving their writing ability?

2. The study

2.1. Participants

Twenty master's (MA) students (9 males and 11 females) majoring in English language at two different universities in Iran (i.e., universities of Isfahan and Sheikh Bahaie) participated in this study. They had completed their BA programs in English-related fields of TEFL, linguistics, or translation studies.

2.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were: (1) students' writings prior to and after the instruction, scored by two independent university instructors with a simple percentage agreement of 81%, , and (2) a questionnaire, consisted of 16 items, through which students' views regarding the helpfulness of lexical bundles in their writing was elicited. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert Scale. Since the participants were all advanced level students of applied linguistics, the questionnaire was written in English. Three university instructors judged and confirmed the validity of the questionnaire. After pilot testing with 10 students, using KR-21 formula, the reliability value for the questionnaire was calculated to be 0.76.

2.3. Procedures

The study took four 90-minute sessions, over a period of one month to complete. In the first session, after describing the project, as a pre-test of writing the participants were asked to write a passage of about 1000 words on the topic 'The role of vocabulary in EFL reading comprehension'. In the second and third sessions, the students were provided with a list of 40 lexical bundles which based on corpus studies (Jalali et al., 2008; Hyland, 2008a, 2008b) were considered the most frequent in and the most related to the field of applied linguistics. As expected, all the students affirmed that they had no difficulty understanding the bundles provided. The participants were given instructions on the importance, frequency, and appropriate use of lexical bundles in academic advanced writing. Then, following Cortes (2006), the students worked in pairs analysing functions and possible uses of the bundles introduced in contextualized examples taken from the corpus of applied linguistics journal articles. Then they went through some application exercises of the type multiple-choice, filling in the blanks, and inappropriate use correction.

In the last session, the students were asked to write a passage of about 1000 words using about 10 bundles on the topic 'The role of vocabulary in EFL reading comprehension' (the same length and the same topic as pre-test). After collecting the students' writings, they were asked to fill in the questionnaire provided to give their opinions about the experience and how useful the bundles were in helping them to write more fluently and to produce a more organized text.

In order to numerically codify the data gathered, two independent university instructors of writing courses scored the students' writings in both pre- and post-test on a scale of 1 to 20 and the mean of the two scores for each text was taken as each subject's score in writing. As for the questionnaire, the rating scale was coded as 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree mostly, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree mostly, and 5-strongly agree. The data collected was subjected to analysis at item level through descriptive statistics. The frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of each item were calculated.

3. Results

3.1. The results of students' writings in pre- and post-test

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for students' writings in pre-test (i.e., before teaching lexical bundles) and post-test (i.e., after teaching lexical bundles).

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	14.75	20	2.04875	.45811
Post-test	15.95	20	2.28208	.51029

Table 2 shows the results of running a paired samples t-test between pre- and post-tests of writing. It indicates that the difference between the pre- and post-test scores is significant at .05 level. It can be concluded that teaching lexical bundles significantly improves Iranian advanced TEFL students' writing skill.

Table 2: Paired Samples Test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test - Post-test	-6.990	19	.000

3.2. The results of students' responses to questionnaire items

Table 3 shows the summary statistics for the responses the students provided for each item in the questionnaire.

Table 3: Summary Statistics for Students' Responses to Questionnaire Items

	Mean	%	SD
1. I didn't have much experience with lexical bundles before this program.	2.4	48	1.23
2. I found this experience with lexical bundles satisfying.	3.55	71	0.94
3. I will pay more attention to using lexical bundles in my future writings.	4.2	84	0.83
4. I really like to learn more about lexical bundles because my current knowledge about and ability to use is not enough.	3.55	71	1
5. I haven't received sufficient help, training and helpful advice from my writing instructor on appropriate use of lexical bundles.	4	80	1.21
6. Advanced writing instructors should give special importance to teaching lexical bundles.	4.7	94	0.47
7. Getting familiar with lexical bundles is mostly needed by students who want to write and publish in my field, i.e., applied linguistics.	4.5	90	0.69
8. Using lexical bundles helps me point out my ideas more clearly.	4.15	83	1.14
9. Using lexical bundles in writing is meaningful and improves the organization of my writing.	4.3	86	0.66
10. The application of lexical bundles promotes my writing interests.	3.75	75	0.72
11. Using lexical bundles enhances my thinking ability.	3.75	75	0.64
12. I believe that appropriate use of lexical bundles improves the quality of my writing.	4.35	87	0.59
13. Knowing and using lexical bundles will respond to some of my needs in writing.	4.15	83	0.88
14. By knowing lexical bundles I will be better prepared to work through my future problems in writing.	4.1	82	1.02
15. By using lexical bundles I will be more successful in academic writing.	4.45	89	0.69
16. Overall, I think lexical bundles are very important and useful for improving my writing ability.	4.7	94	0.47

As shown in table 3, the results indicate that although the students are advanced learners and will soon be MA graduates in TEFL, about half of them (48%) had little or no previous experience with lexical bundles. About two-third (71%) of the participants feel some degrees of satisfaction about this experience. It is very important to

note that even though 90% of the participants believe that getting familiar with lexical bundles is mostly needed by students who want to write and publish in the field of applied linguistics, a great majority of them (80%) believe that they haven't received sufficient training from their instructors in this respect. Interestingly, almost all of the participants (94%) assert that advanced writing instructors should give special importance to teaching lexical bundles. Most items in the questionnaire try to elicit the participant's views about the different aspects in which lexical bundles are supposed to be helpful regarding their own ability in writing. In short, with regard to these different aspects (e.g., improving the organization of text, solving some future problems in writing, etc.) about 82% deem lexical bundles helpful. But in their overall judgment, almost all of the students (94%) think lexical bundles are very important and useful for improving their writing ability.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed important points regarding the usefulness of lexical bundles in improving Iranian advanced EFL learners writing skill. The findings were all in favor of the positive impact of lexical bundles on students' writing ability. Although the duration of the instructional program was short, unlike the participants in Cortes (2006) and Jones and Haywood (2004) studies, according to the results of pre- and post-test descriptive statistics and the t-test (Tables 1 & 2), the participants of the present study could significantly improve their scores in writing after being trained in using lexical bundles. This outcome may have been because the participants in the present study were all advanced English-major EFL students who supposedly know the bundles and just need some practice to enhance their awareness of and attention to these neglected, but important, discourse elements and use them appropriately to improve their writing quality. Based on the results of the survey of students' attitudes toward the helpfulness of lexical bundles, we can conclude that Iranian EFL learners, even at advanced levels, are not familiar with these recurrent sequences of words and that they get very little, if any, training about lexical bundles. While this is the case, almost all of the students attribute great importance to lexical bundles and feel the urgent need to get thorough understanding of this important and almost completely overlooked dimension of foreign language learning.

Based on these findings, it is important that advanced writing course designers and instructors, as well as EAP specialists, recognize the great importance of lexical bundles and try to develop research-based instructional packages appropriate with regard to the student's specific target context. There should be opportunities for students in writing courses, as well as in EAP courses, especially in advanced levels, to become familiar with and use those word combinations that are more relevant to their target genres and are used by expert writers in the field. Repeated exposure in reading materials, lists of clusters, noticing (Cortes, 2004, 2006), consciousness-raising tasks (Lewis, 2000), concordances (Hyland, 2008a), activities such as item identification and matching, as well as activities which makes learners produce the items in their writing can be among many other techniques which instructors can use with their students.

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