# Effect of collocations on Iranian
# EFL learners' writing: Attitude in focus

**Seyedeh Maryam Mousavi**, Department of Foreign Languages, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Daneshgah Blvd., Arghavanieh, Jey Street, Isfahan 81551-39998, Iran

**Laya Heidari Darani**\*, Department of English, Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Daneshgah Blvd., Basij Blvd., Falavarjan 155/84515, Isfahan, Iran

**Abstract**

This study aimed at investigating the effect of collocations as language chunks on Iranian female intermediate English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing skill. Moreover, the researchers intended to find out the attitude of learners towards writing skill after collocations were taught. Study sample comprises 30 female Iranian EFL learners, aged between 18 and 26 years old, who were studying English in a language institute in Isfahan. The instruments used for data collection included three tests (Oxford Placement Test, writing pretest and posttest) and an attitude questionnaire developed by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff. The results of the statistical analyses revealed that there was a significant effect of using collocations on the writing skill of Iranian female intermediate EFL learners. Furthermore, it can be claimed that the learners' attitude boosted in the course of this experiment, indicating that using collocations had a significantly positive impact on the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards writing skill.

Keywords: Attitude, collocations, language chunks, writing skill.

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Heidari Darani Laya,** Department of English, Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Daneshgah Blvd., Basij Blvd., Falavarjan 155/84515, Isfahan, Iran. *E-mail address:* heidari@iaufala.ac.ir /
Tel.: +98-313-742-0134

## 1. Introduction

Writing is a significant language skill for English as Foreign Language (EFL)/ESL learners. Nobody pays attention to writing as a whole including the process of planning, generating and the organisation and in schools and universities they just pay attention to the English vocabulary, grammar and structure (Li, 2014). The current situation that the teachers disregard the English writing has caused the students' lack of motivation and interest in writing. In spite of the fact that they can learn a large number of new words, there are yet a lot of problems in the process of transferring from language input to language output (Li, 2014).

Lexical bundles are very common in any language. It might be assumed that they will naturally and easily be obtained. Nevertheless, as Biber and Barbieri (2007) and Cortes (2006) noted, these expressions do not seem to be naturally and easily acquired and the appropriate use of these expressions do not 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 encourage the readers, students in different fields and at different levels of expertise never or quite rarely use many lexical bundles which are favoured and used by experts (Chen & Baker, 2010; Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008; Jalili, Eslami Rasekh & Tavangar Rizi, 2008). Most studies respecting 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 kind and frequency of the lexical bundles used across different disciplinary fields, registers, genres and different degrees of writing expertise (Biber et al., 1999; Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004; Cortes, 2013; Herbal-Eisenmann & Wagner, 2010; Karabacak & Qin, 2012).

The latest trends in language teaching stress the centrality of lexis in language teaching as opposed to grammatical items and structures. They stemmed from the supposition made by Wilkins (1972) that without grammar little can be conveyed but without lexis, nothing can be conveyed. Learners sometimes write the words which are not combined together because they use improper word combinations. Thus, it makes their writing unnatural and meaningless. Consequently, it is recommended that the learners of English be taught the right combination of words to raise their collocation knowledge.

Vocabulary is central to language acquisition and the ability to understand language chunks successfully is a key to understand how language works (Lewis, 1997). Lexical chunk is regarded as a significant part of the second language learning by most of the linguists. Wie (2007) stated that prefabricated chunk is a language structure with both lexical and grammatical characteristics, usually multi-word units that have a linguistic function with specific characteristics of discourse function. Actually, the learners need to know many chunks, also they need to memorise the chunks deeply in their mind as they can, without hesitation, be accurately retrieved (Eyckmans, 2007; see also Oppenheim, 2000, for theoretical background).

Another main factor that may affect L2 learners' writing is their attitudes towards writing in English. Likewise, it could be interpreted that if negative thinking about writing skill eliminated gradually, surely L2 learners' writing skill and their possible negative attitudes towards writing in English will get eliminated. A focus made by the contemporary education community has brought the improvement in writing. It is not unexpected that researchers themselves have called for more studies concerning the relationship between attitudes and writing behaviour (Kear, Coffman, McKenna & Ambrosio, 2000).

Lewis (2000) claimed that teaching collocations constitute the central part of vocabulary teaching; hence, it should not be disregarded. Thus, Michael Lewis could be deliberated as the father of the lexical approach and collocations. He maintained that, when learners are able to analyse the language into lexical 'chunks', they can acquire a language. In other words, learning the knowledge of collocations would make the speech and the writing of foreign language learners' sound native-like. In this respect, grammar is ordered as a second factor that aims at organising chunks of vocabulary, while vocabulary learning plays the main role in language acquisition.

'Attitudes are learned self-tendencies which guide an individual's thoughts and feelings and which emerges as being for or against an object or an abstract concept. Attitudes are actual orientations which are presumed to lead to certain observable behaviour but cannot be observed themselves. It is known that attitudes are composed of cognitive, emotional and behavioural constituents and show changes and development in time' (Kagitcibasi, 1992, p. 53). Insufficient attitude towards writing most of the time causes insufficient writing skill. Nobody has considered writing attitudes relatively in the literature (Graham, Berninger & Fan, 2007). Research proposes that students who demonstrate a positive attitude towards writing are more likely to write more often and expend more effort on writing tasks than their peers who hold negative attitudes towards the same tasks (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995). One of the substantive problems related to writing instruction is attitudes towards writing. Most of the composition lessons are looked tiresome, monotonous and boring, which also causes failure. Through positive attitudes to practice on written expression, this problem will eliminate. It should be noted that to foster the development of positive attitudes in students, writing about events about which students have experience and the topics that they are interested in may be the best for the students.

An article by Nattinger (1980) was among the earliest ones to raise awareness over the significance of language chunks. We should probably base our teaching on the assumption that, for a great deal of the time, language production includes joining together the ready-made units well-suited for a particular condition and that comprehension relies on knowing which one of these patterns to predict in these conditions. Hence, our teaching should centre on these rules and the ways they can be joined together, along with the ways they vary and the conditions in which they occur (Nattinger, 1980). According to his theory of lexical phrases, authors within the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1997, p. 3) declared that 'language consists of not only traditional grammar and vocabulary but also multi-word prefabricated chunks', and also that the learning burden can be reduced by using formulaic chunks which maximise communicative ability by providing 'islands of reliability' (Ellis, 1994, p. 86).

Zhang (1993) measured the relationship between EFL learners' writing fluency and their use of lexical collocations. He used 60 college students and divided them into two groups. They included 30 native and 30 non-native English speakers. He appointed two tasks that included one fill-in-the-blank collocation test for the purpose of portion learning of collocation and one writing task to identify the collocation use and writing proficiency. He found out that native English writers were better than non-native writers on the collocation test, and native writers did better than non-native writers in writing. Accordingly, he came to the conclusion that among college students, collocational learning led to proficiency in their writing.

Marton (1977), in an earlier study, found that although collocations did not seem to cause comprehension problems since his learners could comprehend and translate English sentences containing collocations, the fact that they could not produce those same collocations in English meant that collocations did constitute problems at the level of production. Hendricks and Yang (2002) discovered that L1-Chinese EFL students could not reliably judge whether English 'simple verb' collocations were correctly or incorrectly used and that their production ability was even weaker than their judgment ability. This lack of collocational competence often leads learners to create longer utterances/paraphrases because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say (Lewis, 2000). Thus, they produced what Morgan Lewis (2001) labels as 'intermediate' sentences and make them 'sound odd but perfectly correct'.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) administered a research to find out advanced German EFL students' learning of collocation. For this purpose, they used translation and cloze tasks. The results showed that, in both tests, only half of the students responded correctly to English collocation items. As a result, the students produced more errors in translation of verbal collocations as in the translation of general lexical words. Therefore, they found that the advanced German EFL learners face a major problem in producing correct English collocation. Similarly, Lennon's (1996) investigation of a group of

German learners of English showed that even the advanced learners used high-frequency verbs incorrectly which pointed out their lack of learning of collocations.

Al-Zahrani (1998) investigated the connection between four academic levels of Saudi EFL university students' collocational learning and their common language proficiency. He found that among the different academic levels, there was a substantial difference in his subjects' learning of lexical collocations. The learning of lexical collocations upgraded with the subjects' academic years. In addition, he reported that there was a powerful correlation between the subjects' learning of collocations and their language proficiency.

According to Ghonsooli, Pishghadam and Mahjoobi (2008), Iranian EFL learners may know English grammar and vocabulary very well but they have severe problems to use the English language in a collective way. Hsu and Chiu (2010) did a research to probe the impact of direct collocation instruction on Taiwanese learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. The participants who joined in this study were assigned to three groups based on their academic level. Different collocation instructions, such as single-item vocabulary instruction, lexical collocation instruction and no instruction, vocabulary test and reading comprehension tests were received by each group. Consequently, after 9 weeks it showed that direct lexical collocation instruction and using first language glosses as a vocabulary-facilitating activity ameliorated the learners' vocabulary learning and improved the learners' performance on the three recall tests. Moreover, when Taiwanese learners received collocation instruction, their reading comprehension promoted.

Rahimi and Momeni (2012) conducted a project to investigate the effects of using collocation and concordance techniques on language proficiency. They found that teaching vocabulary has an impact on the enhancement of language proficiency and vocabulary teaching, be traditional techniques such as translation, explanation and definition or new orientation of collocation teaching of the words can bring about an important growth in language proficiency.

Enhancing knowledge of collocations not only causes learners to improve the level of correctness but also causes increasing fluency (Webb & Kagimoto, 2011). Eidian, Gorjian and Arghavan (2013) carried out a study to find out the effect of lexical collocation instruction on their writing proficiency. This research was done on pre-intermediate Iranian language learners. The participants of this research were 50 male and female Iranian learners who were assigned to control and experiment groups. The experimental group received treatment based on lexical collocation instruction in writing one paragraph essay, although the control group was taught based on conventional techniques of writing instruction. Accordingly, it showed that based on the *t*-test results, there was a critical difference between the mean scores of control and experiment groups in writing.

In the study conducted by Shi and Wang (2015), it was aimed to find out the lexical chunks preferred by Chinese learners in their writings and indicated what they mean by the overuse of lexical chunks. For the purpose of producing a list of refined lexical chunks, the key criterion of the length and frequency thresholds was four-word lexical chunks occurring three times or more. Four-word sequences are found to be the most investigated length for writing studies, likely because the number of four-word chunks is often within a manageable size for manual categorisation and concordance checks (Chen & Baker, 2010). The findings from this research denoted that Chinese EFL learners applied more functional lexical chunks in writing but their chunk variety is fairly limited. These lexical chunks are such as 'as far as', 'on the other hand', 'last but not least', etc. which EFL learners use in their writing a lot.

For success in learning English, the attitude of students towards collocation knowledge is significant. As a result, lecturers and educators should take into account attitude items when preparing English language training and pedagogy (Hall, 2009). Attitude is adopted as a significant notion to perceive human behaviour and is interpreted as a mental state that consists of opinions and thoughts (Latchanna & Dagnew, 2009). Some factors have a relation with learning; one of the most necessary of them is an attitude (Ajzen, 1988).

Students' attitudes can be a hindrance if they recognise that they cannot acquire the new language and any type of skills like writing, listening, speaking and reading successfully (Lennartsson, 2008). Negative attitude can delay acquiring a language (Ellis, 1994). In other words, a student's negative attitudes can be altered and turned into positive ones and simplify getting a positive result (Lennartsson, 2008). Learning a language is facilitated by having a positive attitude towards it and actually, it can be a good start to learn a language. Kramsch (2006) declared language learners are persons with hearts, bodies and intelligence, with remembrances, fantasies, faithfulness, personalities and they are not just communicators and problem-solvers.

Writing is the expression of sensibility, thinking, desires and schemes in black and white. Skill of writing is more significant than knowledge of writing; in spite of that, the skill is improved by practice (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Oz, 2006). To become competent in writing skill is so complex and always there are plentiful requisitions on writers. As a result, if a learner intends to be master in writing skill, he needs hard working, skill improvement and exercise for many years. Many students' writings are ambiguous and they cannot write obviously or state their opinions and thoughts in a right way (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1986; Collins & Cross, 1993; Collins & Parkhurst, 1996; Ganopole, 1988).

Akkaya and Susar Kirmizi (2010) investigated the relationship between attitudes to reading and time appointed to writing in primary education. Consequently, attitudes to writing were found to be a critical predictor of time allotted to writing. According to the results gained, it can be expressed that there is a positive relationship between attitudes to writing and time appointed to writing.

Tahriri, Shabani and Zokaei (2016) investigated EFL learners' attitudes towards writing instruction based on critical language awareness (CLA). The findings of the research and semi-structured interview showed an overall positive attitude towards critical language awareness (CLA-based) writing class. This study might help the writing instructors and textbook and syllabus designer in that they can bring CLA into consideration in EFL context.

Setyowati and Sukmawan (2016) did a research on EFL Indonesian students' attitude towards writing in English. The findings revealed that nobody has a low attitude in writing, while 58% of them have the moderate attitude towards writing and the rest of them have a positive attitude towards writing. The result showed that writing is difficult and stressful for students; however, they have a moderate attitude towards writing. Writing is interesting and challenging for those students who have a high attitude towards writing. The finding also showed several attempts the students do to develop their writing skill, among others are practice writing, reading a lot for learning and opinions and using diary writing.

Considering what went above, collocations should be taught so that the learners would become familiarised with them because it would help them understand the real use of English, which can make their writing seem natural. Collocations have a crucial role in simplifying language production and being the key to fluency. Actually, when students are not familiar with collocations, they make unnatural chunks which are meaningless in English. For example, Iranian students usually write sentences which are grammatically correct but lexically incorrect because they don't have any knowledge about collocations. Thus, as writing is an important skill for Iranian EFL learners and they have shown the problem with the use of collocations, and also, to the knowledge of the researchers, no research has been performed exploring the effect of collocations on Iranian female EFL learners' writing skill who learn English at language institutes and also exploring their attitude towards collocations and writing, the researchers decided to conduct this project to fill this gap in the literature. Concerning this problem, the present study proposed the following research questions:

1. Does teaching collocations as language chunks improve the writing skill of the Iranian female intermediate EFL learners?
2. Do Iranian female intermediate EFL learners have a positive attitude towards using collocations in their writings?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research design

The design of this research was a true experimental one. The true experimental method of research is the strongest method in educational research to answer a question. In a true experimental method of research, the subjects are selected randomly and divided into two groups, one group called the experimental group, receives treatment and the other group did not receive any treatment. Both groups receive a test before and after the treatment (Farhady, 1996). Random selection was used and a pretest–posttest design was followed. The first part of this section which focuses on the participants includes a detailed description of the participants' characteristics such as age and their level of proficiency in English. The second section deals with the instruments, including three tests such as the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), writing pretest and posttest. The attitude of EFL learners was tested by the attitude questionnaire developed by Elbow and Belanoff (2004). The last part explains how data were collected and statistically analysed.

### 2.2. Participants

The first group of participants in the present study included 30 Iranian EFL learners who were studying English in a language institute in Isfahan. The participants' age range was between 18 and 26 years old and they were all native speakers of Persian. The participants were female Iranian intermediate learners. As gender was to be controlled, only the female students were chosen. Thus, gender was considered as the control variable. The sample of this study was randomly selected from 50 Iranian EFL learners after they took the OPT. The students whose scores on the test fell one standard deviation above or below the mean score were selected as the intermediate level students and formed the sample of the study. All 50 students were at the same level of proficiency according to the institute report; however, to make sure that the sample was homogeneous in terms of proficiency, the placement test was administered to select the intermediate EFL learners.

The second group of participants was two non-native English raters who were Iranian and their ages were 30 and 42. They were English language teachers who had IELTS certificates and their overall band scores were 8.0. They were M.A. Teaching English as a Foreign Language holders and their English teaching experience was 8 and 15 years. They were female and their mother tongue was Persian. They were recruited to rate the writings of the participants during the pretest and posttest.

### 2.3. Instruments

In this project, the data collection instruments were three tests, including the OPT, writing pretest and posttest and an attitude questionnaire developed by Elbow and Belanoff (2000). The detailed information of the instruments is as follows:

According to the purpose of the study, the researchers needed intermediate EFL learners. Hence, this test was employed to select intermediate EFL learners. The OPT was divided into three parts. Part one included 1–40 questions, part two 41–60 questions and part three was the writing section. Parts one and two were multiple-choice questions. Questions 1–5 were about visual comprehension questions. There were some notices and the students had to answer this question: 'Where can you see these notices'? There were three multiple-choice questions for which the students must guess the

correct answer. And questions 6–60 were a mixture of grammar and vocabularies. It was developed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2001).

The pretest and posttest which were parallel tested the participants' writing skill. The pretest was administered to the students before the treatment and posttest was given after the treatment. The topic which was given to the learners was related to the respective collocations which were taught during the treatment. The students were asked to write a paragraph whose length was 200 words. They wrote about travel in pretest and posttest.

The attitude of EFL learners was tested by the attitude questionnaire developed by Elbow and Belanoff (2000) before the treatment and after the treatment. It had six parts and 30 questions, for example, attitudes towards writing, generating, revising, feedback, collaboration, awareness and control of the writing process. It was three-point Likert scale; indeed, it had three items: Yes, Sometimes and No. The questionnaire was in English and the items were scored from 1 to 3. Thus, the maximum total score was 90 and the minimum total score was 30.

### 2.4. Data collection procedure

At first, the Oxford Placement Test was administered to the students. Then, according to the results of the test, 30 intermediate-level students were selected as the participants of the study. After a 2-day interval, an attitude questionnaire, known as the pre-experiment questionnaire, was distributed to the selected participants. Then, a topic was given to them to write paragraphs on for which the word limit was considered to be 200 words. The topic was related to collocations which were taught to the students during the treatment. This writing test was regarded as the pretest of the study. The pretest was followed by the treatment which lasted for 10 sessions and each session took 45 minutes. After the end of the treatment, the same test was given to the participants as the posttest. Then, the same attitude questionnaire was given to the participants. After the participants took the posttest and post-experiment questionnaire, the questionnaires and writing tests were scored. The pretest and the posttest were scored by two raters. Each participant must have two scores for the questionnaires and two scores for the writing tests as the pretest and posttest. After the pretest and posttest were administered, the two raters scored the tests individually. Then, inter-rater reliability of the tests was computed and its Cohen's Kappa coefficient was reported 0.79. Therefore, the tests had acceptable reliability and the participants' mean score of the two scorings was determined as their performance in the pretest and the posttest. In this study, the teaching material was a book on collocations: English Collocations in Use authored by McCarthy and O'Dell (2005). Four chapters of this book were taught to the students. In chapter 1 of English Collocations in Use what collocation is was explained. Chapter 2 of English Collocations in Use was about finding, recording and learning collocations. Chapter 3 of English Collocations in Use was about using your dictionary for collocations and types of collocation. Chapter 14 of English Collocations in Use was about travel and any kind of collocations about travel was taught to the students (travel arrangements, boat trip, business travel, safe journey, run-down hotel, smart hotel, etc.). This was the topic which was used in the pretest and posttest. These four chapters were taught during the 10-session treatment.

### 3. Results and discussion

At first, to ensure that the data collected were normal, the test of normality was used. To this end, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the pretest scores.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics results for the pretest**

| Pretest | | Statistic |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | | 16.98 |
| 95% Confidence interval for mean | Lower bound | 16.39 |
| | Upper bound | 17.56 |
| 5% Trimmed mean | | 17.06 |
| Median | | 17.75 |
| Variance | | 2.44 |
| Standard deviation | | 1.56 |
| Minimum | | 13.50 |
| Maximum | | 18.75 |
| Range | | 5.25 |
| Interquartile range | | 2.56 |
| Skewness | | −0.68 |
| Kurtosis | | −0.71 |

The normality of the distribution was checked by a rigorous statistical test (i.e., Kolmogorov–Smirnov), the results of which are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Kolmogorov–Smirnov results for the pretest**

| | Kolmogorov–Smirnov | | | Shapiro–Wilk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | Df | Sig. |
| Pretest | 0.22 | 30 | 0.001 | 0.90 | 30 | 0.009 |

The *p*-value (i.e., 0.001) represented a value lower than 0.05, which indicates that the distribution of scores for the pretest was not normal.

Similar steps were taken to check whether the distribution of scores for the posttest was normal or not. The results are depicted in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics results for the posttest**

| Posttest | | Statistic |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | | 18.76 |
| 95% Confidence interval for mean | Lower bound | 18.39 |
| | Upper bound | 19.13 |
| 5% Trimmed mean | | 18.81 |
| Median | | 19.25 |
| Variance | | 0.98 |
| Standard deviation | | 0.99 |
| Minimum | | 16.50 |
| Maximum | | 20.00 |
| Range | | 3.50 |
| Interquartile range | | 1.56 |
| Skewness | | −0.85 |
| Kurtosis | | −0.51 |

To see whether or not the distribution was normal, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted. The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Kolmogorov–Smirnov results for the posttest**

|  | Kolmogorov–Smirnov | | | Shapiro–Wilk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | df | Sig. |
| Posttest | 0.26 | 30 | 0.000 | 0.87 | 30 | 0.002 |

In Table 4, the *p*-value (i.e., 0.000) showed a value lower than 0.05, which indicates that the distribution of scores for the posttest was not normal, either. Thus, instead of a paired-samples *t*-test, its non-parametric counterpart (i.e., Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test) was conducted to compare the learners' pretest scores with their posttest scores. The results of this test are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5. Wilcoxon signed rank test results comparing the learners' pretest and posttest**

|  | Pretest–Posttest |
|---|---|
| *Z* | −4.78 |
| Asymp. Sig. (two-tailed) | 0.000 |

As shown in Table 5, the Sig. value was lower than 0.05 (i.e., 0.000), thus, it was found that teaching collocations as language chunks had significant effects on EFL learners' writing. It also shows the superiority of the posttest scores over those of the pretest, indicating the effectiveness of the explicit teaching of collocations. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of the pre-experiment attitude questionnaire scores.

**Table 6. Descriptive statistics results for the pre-experiment questionnaire**

| Pre-experiment | | Statistic |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | | 59.96 |
| 95% Confidence interval for mean | Lower bound | 56.87 |
|  | Upper bound | 63.06 |
| 5% Trimmed mean | | 60.03 |
| Median | | 60.00 |
| Variance | | 68.72 |
| Standard deviation | | 8.28 |
| Minimum | | 41.00 |
| Maximum | | 76.00 |
| Range | | 35.00 |
| Interquartile range | | 10.25 |
| Skewness | | −0.01 |
| Kurtosis | | 0.08 |

In addition, skewness and kurtosis values of −0.01 and 0.08 indicated that the distribution must not be very different from a normal distribution. However, the normality of the distribution had to be checked by the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The results are demonstrated in Table 7.

**Table 7. Kolmogorov–Smirnov results for the pre-experiment questionnaire**

|  | Kolmogorov–Smirnov | | | Shapiro–Wilk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | df | Sig. |
| Pre-experiment | 0.11 | 30 | 0.20 | 0.97 | 30 | 0.80 |

Since the *p*-value was higher than 0.05 (i.e., 0.20), it could be concluded that the distribution of scores for the pre-experiment questionnaire was normal. If the same occurs with post-experiment questionnaire data, paired-samples *t*-test could be used.

**Table 8. Descriptive statistics results for the post-experiment questionnaire**

| Post-experiment | | Statistic |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | | 71.86 |
| 95% Confidence interval for mean | Lower bound | 69.34 |
| | Upper bound | 74.38 |
| 5% Trimmed mean | | 72.07 |
| Median | | 72.50 |
| Variance | | 45.49 |
| Standard deviation | | 6.74 |
| Minimum | | 59.00 |
| Maximum | | 81.00 |
| Range | | 22.00 |
| Interquartile range | | 9.75 |
| Skewness | | −0.59 |
| Kurtosis | | −0.62 |

**Table 9. Kolmogorov–Smirnov results for the post-experiment questionnaire**

| | Kolmogorov–Smirnov | | | Shapiro–Wilk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | Df | Sig. |
| Post-experiment | 0.11 | 30 | 0.20 | 0.92 | 30 | 0.02 |

Table 9 displayed that the *p*-value was greater than 0.05 (i.e., 0.20), indicating that the distribution of scores for the post-experiment questionnaire scores was in fact normal. Paired-samples *t*-test could thus be safely conducted. The results of the paired-samples *t*-test are shown in Table 10.

**Table 10. Results of paired-samples *t*-test comparing the pre-experiment and post-experiment attitude questionnaire scores of the learners**

| | Paired differences | | | | | | | Sig. (two-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Standard deviation | Standard error mean | 95% confidence interval of the difference | | *t* | df | |
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| pre–post | −11.90 | 7.39 | 1.35 | −14.66 | −9.13 | −8.81 | 29 | 0.00 |

Based on the information in Table 10, the *p*-value under the Sig. (two-tailed column) was lower than the significance level (i.e., 0.71), it could thus be understood that there was a statistically significant difference in the pre-experiment questionnaire scores and the post-experiment questionnaire scores, $t(29) = −8.81$. It can be concluded that the learners' attitude boosted in the course of this experiment, indicating that using collocations had significantly positive impacts on the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards writing skill.

This study aimed at investigating the effect of collocations as language chunks on Iranian female intermediate EFL learners' writing skill. Moreover, the researchers intended to find out the attitude of learners towards writing skill after collocations were taught. The results of the first research question showed the superiority of the posttest scores over those of the pretest, indicating the effectiveness of the explicit teaching of collocations as language chunks on writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Collocation expressions are a concern for those people who want to learn a new language. Indeed, collocations and use of them were highly helpful to be implemented in writing. Absolutely, students who know a large number of collocations could imagine everything which they want to write about and write them on the paper immediately. Actually, they could convey their ideas in the right way and through using meaningful structures.

In line with the results of the current study, Zhang (1993) measured the relationship between EFL learners' writing fluency and their use of lexical collocations. He found that among college students, collocational learning gave rise to proficiency in their writing. Moreover, Al-Zahrani (1998) investigated the learning of English lexical collocations among four academic levels of Saudi EFL university students and the connection between the participants' collocational learning and their common language proficiency. The conclusion that was made is that among the different academic years, there was a substantial difference in his subjects' learning of lexical collocations. The learning of lexical collocations upgraded with the subjects' academic years. In addition, he reported that there was a powerful correlation between the subjects' learning of collocations and their language proficiency. In addition, Hsu and Chiu (2010) showed that direct lexical collocation instruction and using first language glosses as a vocabulary-facilitating activity ameliorated the Taiwanese learners' vocabulary learning and improved the learners' performance on the three recall tests. Moreover, when learners received collocation instruction, their reading comprehension promoted. In the same vein, Shi and Wang (2015) conducted a study on lexical chunks preferred by Chinese learners in their writings and indicated Chinese EFL learners trust more functional lexical chunks in writing but their chunk variety is fairly limited.

Parallel with the results of the present study, Rahimi and Momeni (2012) found that teaching vocabulary has an impact on the enhancement of language proficiency and vocabulary teaching, be traditional manners such as translation, explanation and definition or new orientation of collocation teaching of the words can bring about an important growth in language proficiency. Similarly, the findings of Eidian et al. (2013) study denoted that lexical collocation instruction affected learners' writing proficiency.

Contrary to the results of this study, Marton (1977) found that learners have problems at the level of production. Similarly, the results of Bahns and Eldaw's (1993) study showed that only half of the students responded correctly to English collocation items. As a result, the students produced more errors in translation of verbal collocations as in the translation of general lexical words. Therefore, they found that the advanced German EFL learners face a major problem in producing correct English collocation. In addition, Hendricks and Yang (2002) discovered that L1-Chinese EFL students could not reliably judge whether English 'simple verb' collocations were correctly or incorrectly used and that their production ability was even weaker than their judgment ability. This lack of collocational competence often leads learners to create longer utterances/paraphrases because they do not know the collocations which express precisely what they want to say (Lewis, 2000).

The results of the second research question showed that the learners' attitude boosted in the course of this experiment, indicating that using collocations has a significantly positive impact on the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners. Writing is the most complicated skill for most foreign language learners. Generally, EFL students those who are learning to write or novice writers viewed writing as a difficult and stressful task; hence, they felt they could little do it and it causes a negative attitude towards writing. Because they do not know any collocations to write in the right way and with meaningful structures. Absolutely, when they learn collocations, writing becomes easier for them and they are persuaded to write more, as a result of their negative attitude which has altered to a positive one.

In line with the results of the present study, Akkaya and Susar Kirmizi (2010) who investigated the relationship between attitudes to reading and time appointed to writing in primary education, it can be expressed that there is a positive important relationship between attitudes to writing and time appointed to writing. Similarly, Tahriri et al. (2016) showed an overall positive attitude towards critical language awareness (CLA-based) writing class. On the other hand, Setyowati and Sukmawan's (2016) study concluded that writing is difficult and stressful for students; however, they have a moderate attitude towards writing.

## 4. Conclusion

As it was shown, findings of the study revealed that using collocations had a significant effect on the writing skill of Iranian female intermediate EFL learners who were learning English as a foreign language in a language institute. Furthermore, based on the results obtained from the statistical analysis, it can be claimed that the learners' attitude boosted in the course of this experiment, indicating that using collocations had a significantly positive impact on the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards writing skill. The findings of this study demonstrated that female intermediate EFL learners enjoy using collocations in their writing. Thus, it can be concluded that collocations as language chunks affect the writing skill of these learners. The next conclusion drawn is that Iranian intermediate EFL learners have a positive attitude towards using collocations and this attitude can encourage them to learn English with more success. As writing is one of the most demanding skills among Iranian EFL learners, success in it can promote the learners to do their best even in other language skills.

Since this study was done among Iranian female intermediate EFL learners and revealed the effect of using collocations so as to improve writing skill, it can be a starting point to improve the writing skill of the EFL learners. The findings also have pedagogical implications for foreign language teachers and learners. Teachers can use collocations as language chunks in their teaching programme to improve writing skill. Language teaching institutes can train teachers in their teacher training courses and train their teacher to employ collocations as language chunks in their teaching. Authors of English books can use the results of this research in writing their books which relate to writing skill. Hence, authors can write books which can help more EFL learners in writing skill through the use of collocations. Because writing attitudes have received relatively little attention in the literature, research results would suggest that students who display a positive attitude towards writing are more likely to write more often and expend more effort on writing tasks than their peers who hold negative attitudes towards the same tasks.

The preliminary purpose of this study was to probe the effect of collocations as language chunks on the writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. However, in order to complement the findings of the present study, the topic needs to be explored further in some other research projects. With regard to the present study, further research may be necessary for the following areas: Different age groups with diverse educational backgrounds can be the participants of a similar study to see if they come up with the same results. It would be fruitful to investigate the effect of collocations on other language skills (e.g., listening, speaking and reading) as far as attitude towards collocations is concerned. As the next recommendation, other researchers can replicate this study by larger sample sizes and in other contexts to ensure the generalisability of the findings. Eventually, in this study, gender was controlled. Therefore, it is recommended that future research compare male and female EFL learners in the effect of collocations on their writing skill and their attitude towards writing skill and collocations.

Since the data in this study have been taken from a small sample of learners at one language institute in Isfahan, Iran, it is important not to overgeneralise the results of the study. It is noteworthy that replicational studies can help build a rich body of knowledge.

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