

Collocation Instruction in English Writing Classrooms at The University Level in Thailand

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of collocation instruction to enhance the writing abilities of students in English writing classrooms at the university level in Thailand. Two groups of 25 students majoring in English at a private university in Thailand were asked to participate in the study. The experimental group received collocation instruction, and the control group received regular teaching for one semester. The researchers administered an essay-writing test before and after giving instructions. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was also used to assess the attitudes of students towards collocation instruction. The data from the posttest administration of the writing test were analyzed using a *t* test to determine whether or not there was a significant difference between the test scores of the students in both groups. The data from the questionnaire were analyzed by using a *t* test to find out if there was a significant difference between the pre-survey and post-survey administration. It was revealed that the students who received collocation instruction achieved significantly higher scores than those receiving regular instruction. There was also a significant difference in the responses of the students between the pre-survey and the post-survey phase. After instruction, the students agreed that collocation instruction helped to improve their writing ability, fostered language fluency, and boosted their confidence in writing. The results of this research may be useful for EFL teachers to consider incorporating collocation instruction in their writing classes.

Keywords: Collocation instruction; Writing ability; Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL)

Introduction

Collocation is an important element of the English language learning, especially for students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, collocation is one of the most challenging areas in the language. This is because only native users can instinctively master collocation knowledge. Thus, collocation instructions have not been widely promoted in EFL countries because of the inherent complexity and a variety of combinations and exceptions. These combinations are confusing for not only EFL students, but also EFL teachers. In Thailand, only a handful of classrooms employed collocation instructions due to the complexity. Despite the difficulty in implementing instructions in class, it is necessary for students to be exposed to collocations in order to develop language skills, especially writing (Hsu, 2007; Mongkolchai, 2008; Lerdejdecha, 2008; Sararit & Chumpavan, 2018; Suksaeresup, 2009).

Writing is one of the most challenging skills for English students in EFL countries (Boonyasaquan, 2009; Suksaeresup, 2009). English writing is an essential skill requirement for English users. It is not only the base language in many courses, but it is also a key to career success. Due to the importance of English writing skill, Thai students are generally taught the fundamentals of grammar without an emphasis on the application of the knowledge in speech, listening, reading, or writing. This results in the inability to express and converse their ideas in English precisely and concisely.

Statement of the Problem

Although it is generally accepted that collocation knowledge has an impact on language abilities (Hsu, 2007; Kim & Bae, 2012; Lerdejdecha, 2008; Lewis, 2000; Sararit & Chumpavan, 2015), a small number of activities and instructions used to promote collocation knowledge in class have been limited. This limitation results from various patterns and confusing combinations, as well as insufficient collocation competence among EFL teachers. Consequently, this research was conducted to ascertain that collocation instruction can significantly improve the writing skills of EFL students in Thailand, with the hope that the writing ability of students can be closer to the level of a native speaker. This study further attempts to reveal the attitudes of students towards collocation instructions. Positive attitudes towards the instruction can be used to certify that collocation instruction can help students construct their writing effectively and confidently.

Research Hypotheses

1. On the posttest administration of the English Writing Test, students who receive collocation instruction obtain significantly higher scores than those who receive regular instruction.
2. In the experimental group using collocation instruction, the scores of EFL students on the post-survey administration will be significantly higher than the scores on the pre-survey administration.

Review of Related Literature

Significance of Collocation

Collocation knowledge is crucial for language acquisition for several reasons. Since English collocations can enhance the abilities of EFL students in terms of communicative competence, mastering collocations allows students to use the language precisely and concisely (Hsu, 2007; Lewis, 2000). Students tend to produce long, convoluted sentences because of their limited collocation knowledge. For example, one student writes, “The service can be used in a wide area and it can be found from one country to another.” With collocation knowledge, he can replace his complicated sentence with a more precise and concise one: “The service is widely available across the country.” In this case, students who familiarize themselves with the collocations—widely available and international—will effectively express their ideas with precision and conciseness.

In addition, collocation knowledge helps students become proficient in using the language. According to Hill (2000), knowing collocation allows students to think more quickly and use the language more fluently. He stated that one of the key differences between native users and non-native ones is collocation knowledge. To illustrate, native users acquire collocations instinctively at an early age; this is obviously opposite to their counterparts whose knowledge of collocations develops only with the instruction (Radhi, 2013).

Besides, collocation knowledge is significant since it improves the ways students use their existing vocabulary knowledge (Lewis, 2000). Boonyasaquan (2005) stated that learning an isolated word might be insufficient and could cause communication errors, especially in writing and translation. For instance, students might use “a strong car” instead of the correct collocation “a powerful car.” Those who are exposed to enough collocations can produce more varieties of correct English than those who are not.

The English Writing Skill of EFL Students

Of all the language skills, the ability to write is the most difficult one for EFL students. Hyland (2003) indicated that in order to write competently grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and communicative competence is required. Students should have the ability to use grammar, choose words appropriately, and understand genres and rhetorical patterns in order to write a quality piece of writing. However, EFL students tend to memorize words and basic structures to compose their writing. Hinnon (2004) stated that her students violated grammatical rules and misused a variety of words because of first language interference. Hourani (2008) stated that his students used word-by-word translation from their mother tongue. Suksaeresup (2009) also emphasized that the majority of EFL students in her study chose incorrect words and phrases, many of which should be collocated. Therefore, it is not surprising that EFL students have a number of problems when they are assigned English writing tasks.

The Relationship Between Collocation Knowledge and English Writing

For EFL students, collocation knowledge can be gained from the instruction. In order to teach collocation, the need to build vocabulary is the top priority (Conzett, 2000). Sararit and Chumpavan (2015) collected strategies to teach collocation in class. Instructors can employ the strategies in their classrooms. One of the useful ways is to raise the awareness of students and help them explore more connections of word combination. It is crucial that instructors keep all word chunks and collect as many collocation violations as possible. Instructors should not rush to correct the errors immediately after their making. Instead, collect as many errors as possible and later give them feedback for improvement. Activities and materials can also vary, ranging from finding collocations in the text to teacher-made materials (Sararit & Chumpavan, 2015).

Several researchers have investigated the relationship between collocation instruction and English writing. Hsu (2007) investigated the relationship between knowledge of lexical collocations and the writing ability of Taiwanese college students. The findings indicated that knowledge of students regarding lexical collocations was significantly correlated with their writing scores. Lerdejdecha (2008) conducted her research to explain the influence of collocation vocabulary instruction on how lower-secondary students in Thailand construct their pieces of writing. After the implementation of the instruction, the writing ability of the students was significantly improved. Similarly, there was an experimental study investigating the effectiveness of collocation instruction through communicative activities to enhance the writing abilities of Thai EFL students in Grade 10

and at the higher-secondary level. It was revealed that students who received collocation knowledge through communicative activities scored significantly higher than those who received regular instruction and that there was a positive correlation between collocation knowledge and writing ability (Sararit et al., 2018). All of these studies suggested that collocation should be taught to enhance the writing abilities of students.

Research Methodology

Selection of Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 50 students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) in a private university in Thailand. They were in their first year of the program and required to enroll a non-credit, compulsory English course for one semester (20 weeks). All of them were requested to sign participant consent forms in order to express their willingness to take part in this research. Regardless of their language abilities, the participants were randomly divided into two groups. The experimental group received collocation instruction, while the control group received general or regular instruction.

Instrumentation

The English Writing Test

The English Writing Test was used to evaluate the writing abilities of the students. The students in both groups were requested to write a 250-word essay before and after instruction. The topics used for the pretest and posttest were “My First Day at University” and “What I Would Do for My Future Career,” respectively. Then, three native experts in the field of English writing were asked to assess the validity of both topics and grade the writing of the students. The evaluation was based on writing criteria suggested by Sararit et al. (2018), which focused on content, organization, lexical resource, and language convention.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to reveal their attitudes toward student collocation knowledge and collocation instruction. A five-scale questionnaire, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) was used in this study. All of the questions in this study were tested for content validity by the three aforementioned writing experts. The questionnaire was also tested for internal consistency, using Cronbach’s alpha, and its reliability was 0.91.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: collocation and its importance, collocation knowledge and writing ability, and collocation instruction and the English language learning. The first section of the questionnaire included statements to investigate students' awareness of the significance of collocation. The second section comprised statements regarding the use of collocation knowledge in English writing. The last section consisted of statements revealing students' attitudes towards collocation instruction as a tool for students' learning.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected during the first semester of the 2019 academic year (August – November). The writing pretest was administered in the first week, and the writing posttest was administered in the final week. Both tests were graded by three native experts, and only the average scores on student writing were used in this study. For the experimental group, the questionnaire investigated the attitudes of students towards collocation knowledge and collocation instruction were also administered before and after receiving collocation instruction.

Data Analysis

For the first hypothesis, a *t* test was used to determine whether or not there were significant differences between the test scores of students in both groups. The data retrieved from the pre-survey and post-survey were analyzed for descriptive information and for significant differences using a *t* test.

Confidentiality of the Participants

The information on the students were kept confidentially. In addition, all documentation was destroyed on completion of the study.

Results

Research Hypothesis One

The objective of the first hypothesis was to investigate if collocation instruction was a significant indicator of the writing abilities of the students. In order to evaluate their writing, all of them were requested to write a 250-word essay on the topic “My First Day at University” as the pretest of the writing test. The raw scores of the writing pretests were analyzed using mean scores

and a *t* test to see if there was a significant difference between the experimental group and the control one in terms of their previous knowledge.

Table 1:

Writing Pretest Scores between an Experimental Group (n = 25) and a Control Group (n = 25)

Group	M	SD	t	p
Experimental	13.14	2.11	1.00	.33
Control	13.50	1.60		

* $p < 0.05$

According to Table 1, the writing ability of students in both groups was not significantly different. The control group ($M = 13.50$, $SD = 1.60$) had slightly higher scores than the experimental group ($M = 13.14$, $SD = 2.11$).

After the administration of the pretest, the experimental group received collocation instruction for one semester and the control group received regular instruction. The students in both groups were asked to write an essay of at least 250 words on the topic “What I Would Do for My Future Career” as the posttest. The comparison of the posttest scores between students in the experimental group and those in the control group is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2:

Writing Posttest Scores between an Experimental Group (n = 25) and a Control Group (n = 25)

Group	M	SD	t	p
Experimental	20.00	2.13	5.10*	.00
Control	17.86	1.85		

* $p < 0.05$

As seen in Table 2, it was revealed that the students in the experimental group ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 2.13$) scored significantly higher than those in the control group ($M = 17.86$, $SD = 1.85$), ($t(24) = 5.10$, $p = .00$). Consequently, the statistics supported the first research hypothesis.

Research Hypothesis Two

The purpose of the second hypothesis was to reveal attitudes towards collocation knowledge and instruction of the students receiving the instruction. The students in the experimental group

were asked to complete the questionnaire twice: before and after the instruction. The difference between pre-survey administration and post-survey administration is demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3:

The Comparison of Attitudes towards Collocation Instruction Between Pre-survey and Post-survey Administrations of Students in the Experimental Group

Group	M	SD	t	p
Post-survey	4.25	.51	6.79*	.00
Pre-survey	2.45	.54		

* $p < 0.05$

According to Table 3, the difference between the responses of the students during the post-survey administration ($M = 4.25$, $SD = .51$) and those during the pre-survey administration ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .54$) were statistically significant ($t(13) = 6.79$, $p = .00$). Thus, the data supported the second hypothesis.

Discussion

To begin the study, students in both groups were required to write an essay on the topic “My First Day at University” as the pretest. The pretest scores of both groups did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference. The control group ($M = 13.50$) obtained slightly higher scores than the experimental group ($M = 13.14$). However, both groups still obtained relatively low scores. Statistically, their writing scores accounted for 45 percent for the control group and 43.8 percent for the experimental group. Thus, it can be inferred that both groups of students had limited writing ability. It is not surprising that EFL students generally encounter writing problems. This is true as Hinnon (2004), Hourani (2008), and Suksaeresup (2009) stated that writing is the most difficult skill for EFL students due to a number of complicated grammatical patterns, insufficient knowledge of vocabulary, and first language interference. EFL students tend to rely on their grammatical patterns in their first language when constructing their writing. Choosing words is also their problems, so they generally use a word-by-word technique, regardless of the correct combination of words (Boonyasaquan, 2009).

The first hypothesis attempted to investigate if collocation instruction was the indicator of improved writing ability. The findings demonstrated that the students in the experimental group

who received collocation instruction had significantly higher scores than those in the control group who were taught with regular instruction. The results were consistent with those of Lerdejdecha (2008) and Sararit et. al (2018). According to Lerdejdecha (2018), the collocation vocabulary instruction was beneficial for EFL students since it improved their writing. Sararit et al. (2018) also concluded that collocation instruction was effective in enhancing the EFL writing ability of the students because it allowed the students to have a set of ready-to-use words for their writing.

The implementation of collocation instruction also satisfied the students. According to the findings of this study, the students agreed that collocation instruction helped to improve their fluency. This conclusion is similar to Hill (2000). He stated that students who learn collocation can think faster than those who do not. Besides, the students agreed that they felt more comfortable with writing because they had more words to choose from; as a result, they felt much more confident when being asked to write an essay. What the students felt was confirmed by Conzett (2000), in that vocabulary was the key to teaching writing. Thus, it is highly recommended that collocation instruction be used to enhance the writing ability of EFL students (Boonyasaquan, 2009; Hsu, 2007; Lerdechdecha, 2008; Mongkolchai, 2008; Sararit et al., 2018; Suksaeresup, 2009)

Conclusion

Collocation instruction was effective in enhancing the writing ability of EFL students. The students receiving collocation instruction can obtain significantly higher scores in their essay writing test than those receiving regular instruction. One of the most plausible explanations is that collocation instruction allows students to choose correct word combinations and use such combinations fluently, resulting in high-quality pieces of writing. Due to the effectiveness of collocation instruction, students feel confident when they write and are highly satisfied with the instruction. The findings of this research indicate that collocation instruction can be used to promote students' writing ability. Thus, teachers can employ collocation instruction as an alternative method to teach writing in their EFL writing classrooms.

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