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The Effect of Teaching Formulaic Expressions Through Contrastive Lexical Approach on Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL Learners' Writing Skill

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of the contrastive lexical approach on Iranian EFL learners' writing skills. For this study, forty pre-intermediate students from a private English language institutes in Ahvaz, Iran were selected. Then, they were randomly divided into two equal groups of 20; one experimental and one control group. To have two groups of equal numbers, we used a block randomization sampling method. All of these students were female, ranging in age from 18 to 30. Their level of English language proficiency had already been determined by the Institute to be pre-intermediate. First, they were given a pre-test to determine their writing ability. Afterward, the experimental group received writing practices through the Contrastive Lexical Approach (CLA), during 14 sessions. Each session lasted for an hour and a half. The teacher sensitized learners in the experimental group towards the presence of L2 equivalents for L1 formulaic expressions, while the control group received an ordinary, traditional instruction, during which learners read texts containing the same formulaic expressions as for the experimental group without receiving any translation and were then asked to write about the same topics. At the end of the course, a post-test was administered to the two groups. Data were analyzed through independent and paired samples *t* tests after ensuring the normality of the data. Finally, to discover the power of the statistical tests, the effect size was also calculated. The study showed that using a contrastive lexical approach has a significant positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing skills. As the findings in this study propose, the writing skill can be improved through the use of a contrastive lexical approach. Teaching through a contrastive lexical approach, hopefully, gives the learners the chance to fathom their skillful writing competence, which requires the proper use of varied forms of structures and expressions and this, in turn, may sensitize them to know more about what language features to work on to increase their writing proficiency.

Keywords Contrastive lexical approach · Writing skill · Formulaic language

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Introduction

Writing has always been considered to be a challenging and complicated skill on the part of both native and non-native language learners (Jahin & Idrees, 2010). In this regard, Richards and Renandya (2002) claim that doubtlessly writing is the hardest skill for L2 learners to master. This complexity has also been highlighted by Graham, (2005) who claim that writing is quite challenging and difficult to acquire. Students in English as a foreign language context are required to gain English writing skills which may range from simply writing paragraphs to the capability to write essays and professional articles. If students' writing skill is developed, it will permit the students to graduate with a skill that will benefit them forever (Alber-Morgan et al. 2007). Good EFL writing, as Lee (2003) asserts, is an urgent concern for professors, researchers, textbook authors, and program designers in the area of foreign language teaching. Organization matters to a great extent in writing and as Richards and Renandya (2002) claim, the difficulty in writing comes from language learners' need to develop the ability to create and organize ideas through properly drawing on vocabulary, sentences, and paragraphs and to embody those ideas in a text of acceptable quality. Language learners' manipulation of essential elements of writing such as words and sentences cause them to strengthen their vocabulary and grammar and facilitate to express of their thoughts in a more effective manner (Bello, 1997; Namaziandost, Fatahi, et al., 2019; Namaziandost, Neisi, et al., 2019; Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, et al., 2019).

Writing plays an important role in organizing and conveying knowledge. The fact that EFL learners are notoriously incapable of putting their messages across through writing may never escape our minds as language teachers and learners. Writing has always been a great challenge to EFL learners and even experienced language teachers believe that it is so difficult to help learners to properly master this skill (Abdel-Hack, 2002; Namaziandost, Fatahi, et al., 2019; Namaziandost, Neisi, et al., 2019; Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, et al., 2019). Lack of proficiency reveals to be an urgent problem for those studying at universities in English speaking countries where they have to read and write properly in English.

Some learning strategies are promising in ameliorating this problem. In this regard, Sturm and Rankin-Erickson (2002) advocate a strategy instruction through which language learners are taught how to employ different strategies through breaking down writing processes into more manageable and more explicit subskills and subprocesses. One strategy to deal with this difficulty in learning writing may be helping language learners to transfer their writing skills from L1 to L2. Berman (1994) proved that this is quite possible and further claimed that the success of doing this depends on one's grammatical proficiency in L2. Marzban and Esmaeelnia-Jalali (2016) also revealed that there exists a high correlation between Iranian EFL learners' L1-L2 writing at an advanced level. This transferability has been supported by Garcia (2009) who showed that students' literacy in Spanish influences their writing performance in English.

Formulaicity may also represent yet another major strategy to be used in mastering writing skills. This becomes even more prominent considering the claims made by Pérez-Llantada (2014) based on the findings of a corpus-driven approach which shows that:

> "Formulaicity is a key feature of the academic written register across language variables and that genre determines writers' choice of formulaic sequences in terms of frequency, structural constituency, semantic non-idiomaticity, syntax, and overall discourse style" (p. 92).

The term formulaic language is sometimes used to refer to multi-word collocations which are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated de novo with each use. Specific definitions are widely accepted on what comprises the formulaic sequence and the features those sequences share that differentiate them. The opinion appears to be that they are multi-word language units that are retained as single lexical units in the long run. In this regard, the formulaic sequences described by Wray and Perkins (2000) as multiword language units:

"A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar". (p. 1).

In a major work that focuses on lexical sentences, Pawley and Syder (1983) refer to formulas as "sentence stems," i.e. regular form-meaning pairings" (p. 192), which was repeated by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) in a different word for formulaic language unites:

Lexical phrases [are] form/ function composites, lexico-grammatical units that occupy a position somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax; they are similar to the lexicon in being treated as units, yet most of them consist of more than one word, and many of them can, at the same time, be derived from the regular rules of syntax, just like other sentences. (p. 36)

Formulaic language unit meanings apply to multi-word or multi-form strings that are generated and recalled as a chunk, like one lexical object, rather than produced from individual elements and regulations.

The most detailed taxonomy and definition of formulaic language units are given by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), which they call lexical expressions. Two types of lexical phrases exist sequences of individual lexical entities such as what is or is commonly and as it were on earth and abstract frames composed of category symbols and basic lexical elements are given a special pragmatic purpose. These frames are the foundation of unique lexical phrases including *a year ago*, *could you pass the salt*, or *Adv + direction + with + NP*, for example, *off with his head, down with the king.*

In Iran, considering the importance of English as a global language, how it is taught and learned in English as a foreign language (FL) has not gained much coverage. While writing has been one of the most effective methods to convey new perspectives, it has been left out in the Iranian curriculum (Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007). For Iranian pupils, the way to write in English in the academic sense in schools and Universities is conventional and most of the pupils are strictly taught following the official curriculum developed and approved by instructional designers. Namaziandost, Fatahi, et al. (2019), Namaziandost, Neisi, et al. (2019), Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, et al. (2019)) claim that the performance in essay writing and content is still below standards among the English students considering their excellent read skills and expertise. The reason why this lackluster result can be shown is insufficient writing ability and comprehensive skills in writing essays. One of Iranian EFL students' major concerns, regardless of their area of study, is their struggle to interact effectively in English after graduation. This has to do with their failure to know the English language, in specific the writing skill that is fundamental to the transmission of their knowledge. This inevitably impacts their educational achievement.

The lexical approach can be outlined in only a few terms, as seen by Lewis (1997a), language does not consist of standard grammar or vocabulary but instead of prefabricated

chunks of multiple words. Lexical approach teachers are not going to examine the target language in the classroom, but are more likely to focus emphasis on these chunks for learners. This new method is taken as a serious re-evaluation initiative for the particular instructor and the career, as many of the basic concepts promoted by communicative methods have been established. The other most key distinction is a clear understanding and possible contribution to the language pedagogy of the character of lexis in the natural language. The teaching of languages appears to be a specialty. In other words, the practitioners can not only focus on formulas and techniques; their classroom practices often encompass a clear theoretical basis. Lewis says that only some language teachers display academic interest and desire to make improvements that are typically related to their professional standing. It is surprising that only too few teachers wish to hear about recent developments in linguistics and issues related to the way of teaching and much more disappointing that many teachers are resistant to everything that questions the core position of grammatical instruction and correction, which exposes or throws down any ideas that the Lexical Approach demotes or discards.

Furthermore, Lewis (1997a) considers that there are two key viable options for handling lexical anomalies, a lexicon comprising the unique contrasting details, which define each language of a word. One is based on its lexical characteristics and codes its distinctive characteristics directly into the lexicon as a distinctive lexical entry that encapsulates their distinction from non-exceptional terms. Therefore, in the case of obesity, the term in its underlying representation may be preventively listed in /iy/ in its underlying representation. The other tactic is to concentrate on overall procedures and to index, the phonological rules or restrictions extremely detected or not detected on extraordinary, lexical objects.

In opposition to Kumaravadivelu 's arguments, Maftoon and Ziafar (2014) argues that a modern approach can be called a post-method, not because it was introduced after the severe assault on the teaching methods, but because it did its best to overcome the difficulties set towards previous prototypical methods and, indeed the post-method period is felt to not be accepted as a watertight proposal that is to be recognized at the expense of systemic methodological efforts at language instruction. Bell (2003) shows that approaches work top-down compared with post-method pedagogy's bottom-up trend. The value of both the top-down and the bottom-up systems can be obtained in such a situation. Bell asserts after ignoring the complexities of local requirements, the methods and post-methods together empower schooling. They contribute to analytical coherence and deconstruct the whole propensity of methods after the technique. While most post methodologists abstain from the idea of method, Tosun (2009) argues that it is not sensible to ignore it. Besides, Tosun insists that in the coming years the outdated definition of the method can revert to the post-method context.

The status of writing skills in English as a foreign language background has been seen in multiple experiments. Writing is seen as a dynamic and complicated master skill (Graham et al., 2005). Pérez-Llantada (2014) was successful in revealing the effect of drawing on formulaic language in L1 writing in fostering the successful use of formulaic language in L2 writing. Some other scholars have found that through resorting to formulaic language the odds of overcoming the challenges in L2 writing increase. For example, Murray (2017) performed a study on 115 first-year undergraduate students at a national university in Japan. He claimed that compared to other similar studies he had tried a less controlled treatment in which the participants were asked to edit academic formulaic sequences included in given paragraphs and he found that the experimental groups' academic writing skill had been positively influenced by the treatment. Other similar studies reveal either the positive effect of formulaic language on writing skill (e.g., Al-Hassan & Wood, 2015;

Jones & Haywood, 2004; Lewis, 1997b; Li & Schmitt, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2013; Tang, 2012) or a positive relationship between formulaic competence and writing skill (Namazi-andost et al., 2020; Ohlrogge, 2009).

A further analysis was performed by Tang (2012) in Shandong Jiaotong University, which carried out longitudinal studies into the lexical approach to the writing abilities of the subjects. Tang delivered an experimental lesson with the help of the experimental group and the control group. Outcomes have shown that lexical teaching can promote student understanding of lexical chunks, boost their lexical frequency, and increase the standard of English writing.

Recent research on the effect of lexical collocation learning content on improving the writing abilities of English as a foreign language student was carried out by Eidian et al. (2013). The aimed at scrutinizing the influence of lexicon colloquial training on the writing skills of pre-intermediate Iranian language students. In doing so, a non-random convenient sampling method has been used to choose 50 Iranian men and women studying English at Ahvaz Islamic Azad University in Iran who are teaching English as their foreign language. The findings revealed that the experimental group surpassed the control group's competence in writing.

In one parallel academic writing research, Li (2014) carried out an experimental study at Shandong Jiaotong University, China on the teaching of lexical chunks in college English writing classes. I enhanced the contribution of English lexical chunks to the college of English and examined the influence of this approach on the writing of students and indicated that increasing lexical chunk entry could minimize the negative transition of the native language by improving the wording of textual collocations, the construction of sentences, discourse continuity, and speech.

Even though copious research has been done on the role of formulaic language and translation on EFL learners' writing and considerable arguments have been put forward regarding the use of lexical and contrastive approaches in teaching and learning L2 writing, no research has been done whatsoever to investigate the role of both of these strategies combined on writing skill. Contrastive Lexical Approach (CLA) which was first introduced by Maftoon and Ziafar (2014) incorporates both strategies and may prove to be effective in teaching and learning writing skills. CLA which involves making comparisons between lexical chunks present in the first language and second language has proven to be relevant to and effective in promoting some competencies in language learning (Ghaemi & Ziafar, 2011; Khatib & Ziafar, 2012; Khazami & Ziafar, 2017; Ziafar, 2020; Ziafar & Maftoon, 2015; Ziafar & Seyyedrezaei, 2014).

CLA can be launched as a modern teaching method that compares and finds parallels for set phrases among languages and discusses the way these set phrases can be used in order to fulfill clear functions. Teaching through contrastive lexical approach involves a perpetual focus on finding the closest equivalents for lexical chunks in languages. This is done to enable language learners to grasp the practical units of a language to be used most effectively in their productions when they gradually break the links between L1 and L2 lexical chunks and begin to use them independently. The main idea is that language learners who learn through this approach have more chances to both keep and retrieve such readily used structures in their speech and as they gain more competence they opt for L2 lexical chunks more automatically with less reliance on the L1 counterparts which is believed to scaffold the whole process.

EFL students may find themselves incapable of effective writing due to their lack of familiarity with proper lexical chunks which readily facilitate their performance. The fact that EFL learners are notoriously incapable of putting their message across

through writing may never escape our minds as language teachers and learners. This lack of proficiency reveals to be an urgent problem mostly for those studying at universities in English speaking countries where they have to read and write in English. One's lack of knowledge about the existence, importance, and advantages of lexical chunks may deprive language learners of the chance to appreciate the urgent need to draw on such an invaluable repertoire in boosting both competence and performance in writing. This may also stem from their negligence of the support they may get from translating formulaic language between L1 and L2.

The findings of the current study may contribute to more effective language learning and teaching by promoting learners' awareness about the benefits of using contrastive lexical chunks in writing. Language teachers may also take advantage of the findings of the current study owing to their genuine concerns regarding their learners' literacy skills and their need for a more facilitative approach to be used as a head start in mastering writing skills. Material developers may also see this research as an illuminating endeavor that may prove to be effective in revealing the positive effect of contrastive tasks as a supportive practice in teaching writing. Consequently, the present study focuses on CLA and tries to find out whether it promotes language learners' writing skills or not. The present study thus seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: Does teaching formulaic expressions through CLA significantly influence EFL learners' proficiency in writing skills?

Based on the research question the following null hypothesis was proposed to be investigated:

H0. Teaching formulaic expressions through CLA does not significantly influence EFL learners' proficiency in writing skills.

Methodology

Participants

This study was carried out by selecting 40 pre-intermediate EFL female students from an English language institute in Ahvaz, Iran. Eighty pre-intermediate EFL students in a private English language institute in Ahvaz were contacted and the 40 students who agreed to be part of the study served as the participants in this study. Indeed, the participants were selected based on a convenience non-random sampling method. The participants were then randomly assigned to two equal groups of 20; one experimental group and one control group. To have two similar-size groups, a block randomization sampling method was used. All of the participants were female, ranging in age from 18 to 30. Their level of English language proficiency had already been determined by the institutes to be pre-intermediate. They reported that they had been studying English for almost three years. They were ensured that their personal information and performance would remain confidential. It should be mentioned that the authors considered the participants' consent by filling out a consent letter.

Instrumentation

To score the writings, Jacobs et al's (1981) rubric was adopted (Ghanbari et al., 2012). This is the most widely used and agreed upon rubric for scoring non-native essay writing in Iran and contains five components: (1) content, (2) organization, (3) vocabulary, (4) language use, and (5) mechanics. Each component has a four-level score corresponding to four sets of criteria. The maximum score one may obtain is 100 (See appendix A for a sample copy).

Data Collection Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following procedure was carried out: At first, from the Safir English language institute in Ahvaz, two groups of learners with the same level of language proficiency were selected. These two groups were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. Each group is composed of 20 learners. Next, both groups took a pretest. The students were asked to write essays with topics based on some writing tasks from a book titled: *Cambridge IELTS 11 Student's Book with Answers: Authentic Examination Papers from Cambridge English Language Assessment* (2015). They were asked to write at least 250 words in 40 min. The pretest was carried out in the class under the supervision of the teacher (one of the authors) to make sure that the students do it by themselves. After the test, all the essays were collected and graded by scorers who followed the same criteria for scoring.

Afterward, the experimental group received writing practices through CLA, during 14 sessions, which lasted an hour and a half. In the experimental classroom, the teacher sensitized learners toward the presence of L2 equivalents for L1 formulaic expressions that represented higher levels of acceptability and were decided to be closer to what native speakers would choose given the same situation. Also, she encouraged learners to gather as many L1-L2 formulaic contrasts as possible from texts (20 texts were used) and motivated them to use the formulaic language they learned in their oral and written productions, as a way to expand their knowledge and to stabilize formulaic pieces within their repertoire of native-like knowledge. It should be mentioned that there were 5 contrasts in each passage. The control group, on the other hand, engaged in the ordinary program of the classroom and the participants were supposed to read texts which incorporated the same formulaic expressions without any translation tasks. They were supposed to write on the topics they had already read about without giving them any hints on the presence or meaning of formulaic language.

The participants in both groups were taught by the same instructor who is one of the authors of the present study. Finally, to check the effectiveness of instructions and to assess learners' knowledge the same test used as a pretest was repeated at the end of the experiment as the post-test. The administration of the tests took place in one session for both groups. In the posttest, the students were asked to write an essay on the same topic they had already written about in the pretest. This happened under the supervision of the teacher. Two authors of this article served as the scorers. After collecting the essays two scorers graded all the essays and the agreement between the two scorers were checked through calculating inter-rater reliability analysis (r = 0.986). The acceptable alpha level was set as 0.7. When the agreement between the raters was ensured, the average scores given by them was used for the final statistical analysis.

Table 1 Shapiro–Wilk normality tests

Shapiro–Wilk tests			
Tests	Statistics	*df*	*Sig*
Pretest	.987	40	.931
Posttest	.976	40	.533

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for the pretest

	Groups	*N*	Mean	SD	SE mean
Pretest	EG	20	75.05	3.44	.76
	CG	20	75.90	2.53	.56

Data Analysis

In order to answer the research question, after gathering the data the authors analyzed the data using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software, version 22. After ensuring the acceptable level of inter-rater agreement and calculating the average values from the two sets of scores given by the raters, data were further analyzed to discover if the authors had to deal with parametric or non-parametric data analyses through checking the normality of the data. Finally, to discover the power of the statistical tests, as the major criterion for the trust we can put on the existence of significant or non-significant results, the effect size values were also calculated.

Results

Before conducting any analyses on the pretest and posttest, it was necessary to check the normality of the distributions. Thus, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test of normality was run on the data obtained from the above-mentioned tests. The results are shown in Table 1:

The non-significant results (*Sig* = 0.931 and 0.533) indicate no violation of normality. All these results show that the test distribution is rather normal and this allows the use of parametric tests in order to further analyze data.

After ensuring the normal distribution of scores, Independent and paired-samples t-tests were performed in order to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores before and after the experiment. Results can be found in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

Table 2 shows that the EG learners' mean score on the pretest equaled 75.05 and the CG learners' mean score was 75.90. To see whether the difference between these two mean scores, and thus the two groups on the pretest, was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the *p* value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column in the *t* test table.

Based in the information presented in Table 3, there was not a statistically significant difference in the pretest scores for EG ($M = 75.05$, $SD = 3.44$) and CG ($M = 75.90$, $SD = 2.53$), $t(38) = -0.89$, $p = 0.37$ (two-tailed). This conclusion was made since the *p* value was larger than the significance level ($p > 0.05$). Hence, it could be inferred that the learners in the two groups were at the same level in the pretest.

Table 4 depicts the descriptive statistics experimental group on the pretest and posttest. Based on the above table, the mean of the experimental group on the pretest and

Table 3 Results of independent-samples *t* test comparing the pretest scores of EG and CG

	Levene's test for equality of variances		*t* test for equality of means				
	F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	SE difference
Pre							
Equal variances assumed	1.05	.31	− .89	38	.37	− .850	.95
Equal variances not assumed			− .89	34.91	.38	− .850	.95

Table 4 Paired samples *t* test descriptive results (experimental group)

Paired samples statistics

	Mean	N	SD	SE mean
Pair 1				
Pretest. Experimental Group	75.05	20	3.762	.841
Posttest. Experimental Group	80.30	20	3.435	.768

Table 5 Paired samples *t* test results (experimental group)

Paired samples test

	Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	SE mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1								
Pre. Post	− 5.25	1.410	.315	− 5.910	− 4.590	− 16.657	19	.000

Table 6 Paired samples *t* test descriptive results (control group)

Paired samples statistics

	Mean	N	SD	SE mean
Pair 1				
Pretest. Control	75.90	20	3.243	.725
Posttest. Control	75.80	20	3.427	.766

posttest is 75.05 and 80.30, respectively. The mean score of the experimental group has increased from pretest to posttest. To see whether the difference between these mean scores was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the *p*-value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) the column in the paired-samples t-tests table. In this table, a *p*-value less than 0.05 would indicate a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest, while a *p*-value larger than 0.05 indicates a difference which failed to reach statistical significance.

Table 7 Paired samples t test result (control group)

	Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	SE mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1								
Pre. Control – Post. Control	.100	.553	.124	− .159	.359	.809	19	.428

Table 8 Descriptive statistics results comparing control and experimental groups' mean scores on the posttests

Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE mean
Posttest				
Experimental	20	80.30	3.435	.768
Control	20	75.80	3.427	.766

Table 5 indicates the results of paired samples t-test on pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. It was found that the pre-test scores (*M*=75.05, *SD*=3.76) were significantly lower than the post-test scores (*M*=80.30, *SD*=3 0.43) t=− 16.65, *p*=00<0.05. The magnitude of the difference of the means was very high (eta-squared=0.92); this means that the magnitude of the intervention has been high and that CLA explains 92 percent of the variance in writing skill. The Cohen's d also revealed to be 1.45 which is quite large and further proves that the intervention has been effective.

As Table 6 shows, the control group learners obtained the mean scores of 75.90 on the pretest and 75.80 on the posttest. To determine whether the difference between these two mean scores was statistically significant or not, the researcher needed to consult the paired-samples *t*-test table (Table 7).

In the case of the control group, it was found that the pre-test scores (*M*=75.90, *SD*=3.24) were not significantly different from the post-test scores (*M*=75.80, *SD*=3.24), *t*=0.8, *p*=0.42>0.05. The Cohen's d also revealed to be 0.03 which is quite small.

Independent samples t-test was also carried out to compare the performance of experimental and control groups' post-test scores.

As presented in Tables 8 and 9, the results show that there is a significant difference in the post-test scores of the experimental group (*M*=80.30, *SD*=3.43), and the control group (*M*=75.80, *SD*=3.42), *t*=4.14, *p*=00<0.05 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means is rather large (eta squared=0.31), which shows that CLA explains 31 percent of the variance in writing skill. Cohen's d also shows to be 1.31 which is quite large and is further proof that the intervention has been influential.

Table 9 Independent samples t test for Comparing SG, MG and CG mean scores on the posttest

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means					95% Confidence interval of the difference	
	F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	SE difference	Lower	Upper
Posttest									
Equal variances assumed	.088	.769	4.147	38	.000	4.500	1.085	2.303	6.697
Equal variances not assumed			4.147	38.000	.000	4.500	1.085	2.303	6.697

Discussion

This finding is supported by scholars who have shown that formulaic language is influential in promoting writing skills, and especially by those whose studies have been conducted in the Iranian EFL context (e.g., Eidian et al., 2013). Additionally, studies that reveal the positive influence of L1 on L2 writing (e.g., Berman, 1994; Garcia, 2009; Marzban & Esmaeelnia-Jalali, 2016) are quite in keeping with the finding that CLA enhances EFL learners' ability in writing.

The influence we observed in this study is further supported by Erman's (2009) finding that having less fluency in L2 writing may be due to knowing fewer collocations. It is also backed by Tang's (2012) findings which show that a lexical approach to SLA teaching can boost students' knowledge of lexical chunks, significantly enhance their rate of recurrence of using lexical chunks and improve their English writing competence.

The study which may best explains the results we obtained in this study is the one carried out by Li (2014) who found that the higher the frequency of lexical chunk input, the lower the negative transfer of the native language in L2 writing, and this may result in the more proper use of wording collocation, sentence building, discourse cohesion, and expression. This may be related to the idea that L2 processing cannot be cut off from L1. On the other hand, L2 users have access to their L1 in processing their L2. This is supported by Abutalebi (2008) who claimed that collocations in both languages are stored in the same area of the brain and this makes such access even more prominent and based on his neuroimaging studies he further claimed that:

> "The activations found for L2 also overlapped with those underlying L1 lexical retrieval in the same bilinguals, underlining the fact that the same neural structures can be utilized to perform identical tasks for both languages" (p. 471).

The highly significant effect of CLA as observed in this study and the remarkable effect size values may be attributed to the effects of both translation and formulaic strategies combined in addition to the positive influence that these two strategies may have had on each other during the treatment.

All in all, these studies prove the prominence of adopting the contrastive lexical approach in developing writing skills. Other studies corroborate these findings and seem to give us the courage to make claims regarding the significance of CLA in helping language learners to boost their ability in fulfilling their writing tasks. Being equipped with ready-made pieces with their meanings and use already consolidated through translation may enhance language learners' capacity to write more effectively. Possibly, translation of such fixed structures jump starts EFL learners' writing practices and prepares them to be more spontaneous when it comes to relaying their thoughts in written words. Lastly, CLA provides a basis to rely on when it is challenging and cumbersome to initiate writing proper

sentences as this approach to teaching writing has already equipped one's mind with valuable information about practical units of language to be drawn on.

Since the L1 acquisition of formulaic expressions resembles that of L2 processing of formulaic expressions, knowing how to use L1 formulaic structures facilitates L2 acquisition of formulaic phrases. This is an instance of skill transfer which some believe happens to some learning competencies including writing skill -as has been shown in the present study. As any other skill, writing proficiency undergoes radical changes on the part of language learners through constant practice and use of writing processes in L2 similar to L1 which may enhance the odds of effectuating the same advancement in L2 writing.

Contrastive exercises help learners get better at writing through gaining insights into the proper use of language by taking advantage of their L1 as their already learned and well-established ingrained pragmatic knowledge deep inside their minds. Thanks to the contrastive nature of CLA, EFL learners get the chance to weigh their capacities in conveying their messages and intentions against their already set L1 proficiency in doing the same tasks. Learners may better understand L2 context if defined through L1 since naturally L2 learners better understand descriptions in their L1.

Conclusion

It seems that CLA provides a good opportunity for language teachers to help learners improve their writing skills. Familiarizing language learners with equivalents of L2 formulaic expressions in their L1 and vice versa is most probably an advantageous practice in bringing about the ability to write more proficiently.

Language learners are suggested to explore how the collocation system works in the two languages which may enable them to boost their writing performances in both L1 and L2. Learners can more easily keep the structures and expressions they need to write in their minds as they have availed themselves to contrastive memorizations strategy. Keeping contrastive logs is recommended as a reminder of how to convey thoughts in writing without taking too much time to think with low odds of successfully opting for the best expressions available. It is worthy to mention that despite serious attempts made to instill in learners' formulaic pieces through CLA tasks, there is still the limitation that language learners may not easily activate formulaic language when putting their pen to paper.

This study may be quite useful for language teachers in that this may obviate the bias they may have had against the use of L1 in their teaching practices. Through revealing the weaknesses of EFL learners in proper writing, CLA may demystify teachers of the mindset that making comparisons is less than effective in enabling language learners in being qualified writers. Language teachers are invited to think twice before making decisions against

the use of L1 expressions in teaching writing. Teachers can take contrastive practices as apt opportunities to trigger metacognitive discussions over how the two languages work in making prose a reality to language learners. Comparisons and contrasts facilitate criticism and questioning as the main features of effective higher-order thinking that teachers should always appreciate and encourage. Teachers may take benefit of contrastive assessments to check their students' learning when at the same time raising their awareness about the presence and importance of such rather fixed structures in writing. Teaching this way helps learners notice their weaknesses and strengths in putting their thoughts on paper through using varied forms of structures and expressions which may provide them with precious feedback on what to work on and how to promote themselves.

Last but not least, a very beneficial language teaching strategy utilized extremely by language instructors and by language students is paying especial attention to the comparisons of formulaic expressions among L1–L2. Despite such prominence in usage, there has never been any clear attempt to implement a new method of teaching focused on contrasts between L1 and L2 formulaic utterances. This may be attributed to the infamous implications of the behavioralists' suggested use of L1 in L2 instruction. The point is that despite this assumption, L1 can be seen as a very valuable support for teaching and learning L2. If one does not know the L2 form, making reference to one's L1 should not be precluded; instead, efforts should be made to create such a solution a constructive and beneficial one. By providing students with L2 equivalents for L2 formulaic utterances, which are assumed to have occurred via CLA, the students have an opportunity to refer back on their L1, but this time they do not match the literal translations of L2 forms for their L1; instead, the right equivalent is available for them.

This study suffers from some weaknesses which may limit the scope of the results obtained. Firstly, it was conducted on small groups of Iranian EFL learners (only 40 learners participated in this study). The next studies are suggested to include more participants from all parts of the country. Secondly, the participated learners in the present study were pre-intermediate learners regarding language proficiency; next studies are offered to include other levels- intermediate and advanced learners. Thirdly, this research was carried out in the Iranian EFL context; it can be done in other countries. Fourthly, only female students were included in this study, therefore; the results may not be generalizable to male students. Lastly, the allocated time for applying the treatment was short.

During conducting the present study some suggestions came across the researcher's mind. The first suggestion for future studies is to include more participants to get more reliable results. The second suggestion for the next studies is to work on other language proficiency levels- elementary, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. The third suggestion for the next studies with a similar topic is to take gender into account, meaning that both female and male students should be involved. The fourth suggestion is that the next researches are recommended to conduct similar topics in other geographical areas. Finally, future researchers are offered to do comparative contrastive studies among different pairs.

Appendix 1: Jacobs et al.'s (1981) Rubric for scoring writings

Student   Date   Topic

_____

Score   Level   Criteria   Comments

Content

30–27 EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: knowledgeable • substantive • thorough development of
thesis • relevant to assigned topic
26–22 GOOD TO AVERAGE: some knowledge of the subject • adequate range • limited development of thesis • mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail
21–17 FAIR TO POOR: limited knowledge of the subject • little substance • inadequate development of topic
16–13 VERY POOR: does not show knowledge of the subject • non-substantive • not pertinent •
OR not enough to evaluate

Organization

20–18 EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: fluent expression • ideas clearly stated/supported • succinct • well-organized • logical sequencing • cohesive
17–14 GOOD TO AVERAGE: somewhat choppy • loosely organized, but main ideas stand out •
limited support • logical, but incomplete sequencing
13–10 FAIR TO POOR: non-fluent • ideas confused or disconnected • lacks logical sequencing
and developing
9–7 VERY POOR: does not communicate • no organization • OR not enough to evaluate

Vocabulary

20–18 EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: sophisticated range • effective word/idiom choice and
usage • word form mastery • appropriate register
17–14 GOOD TO AVERAGE: adequate range • occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice,
usage *but meaning not obscured*
13–10 FAIR TO POOR: limited range • frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage • *meaning confused or obscured*
9–7 VERY POOR: essentially translation • little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form • OR not enough to evaluate

Language Use

20–18 EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: effective complex constructions • few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions

<table>
<tbody>
<tr><td>complex

negation,

•</td><td>17–14 GOOD TO AVERAGE: effective but simple constructions • minor problems in complex constructions • several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions *but meaning seldom obscured*
13–10 FAIR TO POOR: major problems in simple constructions • frequent errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/or fragments, run-ons, deletions *meaning confused or obscured*
9–7 VERY POOR: virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules • dominated by errors • does not communicate • OR not enough to evaluate</td></tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mechanics	
	5 EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: demonstrates mastery of conventions • few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing 4 GOOD TO AVERAGE: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing *but meaning not obscured* 3 FAIR TO POOR: frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • poor handwriting • *meaning confused or obscured* 2 VERY POOR: no mastery of conventions • dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • handwriting illegible • OR not enough to evaluate

Total Score	Reader	Comments

Declarations

Ethics approval This study was approved by the Ethical Board of Iranian English language Institutions.

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Consent to participate All participants provided written informed consent and they were fully understood the study purpose.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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