

The Effects of Lexical Approach on Non-English Majors' Writing Proficiency: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Conducting an experiment of applying lexical approach for one semester in college English reading and writing course, this study aims to explore the effects of lexical approach on non-English major's writing proficiency. There were 80 subjects involved in the experiment, and half of them were in controlled group (CG), the rest in experimental group (EG). Lexical approach was used in EG and traditional approach was applied in CG. All subjects attended both pre- and post-tests. The comparisons of composition scores of both tests were made between and within groups through independent and paired *t* tests. The findings are: 1) Students in EG have shown greater improvement than those students in CG in writing proficiency. They get higher composition scores on average than those in CG. 2) Students in EG have achieved significant progress in writing proficiency after the application of the lexical approach. 3) Students in CG show no significant progress in writing proficiency under the instruction of traditional teaching approach. So it can be concluded that the lexical approach has positive effects on non-English majors' writing proficiency.

Key words: Lexical approach; Experiment; Writing proficiency; English teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term "lexical approach" was firstly coined by Lewis and his associates in 1993. It holds the view that lexis, or words and word combinations play an important role in developing learners' proficiency. It makes a clear distinction between lexis and vocabulary. The former does not only refer to those single words but also includes word combinations stored in our memory, while the latter is traditionally a stock of individual words having fixed meanings. The concept of a large vocabulary is extended from words to lexis, but the essential idea is that fluency is based on "the acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed pre-fabricated items, which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity" (Lewis, 1997, p.15). That is lexis rather than vocabulary is the basic unit of language learning and teaching. This implies that a vital part in language teaching is developing learners' competence to acquire and output lexical chunks as unanalyzed wholes, and they become the raw data for learners to perceive patterns of language that are traditionally considered as grammar. Therefore, the lexical approach offers a middle ground between the structural approach and the communicative approach and it has aroused great interest of linguists and researchers in the world.

Lewis (1993) and other researchers advocate that lexical chunks should be taught in classroom teaching. After Lewis implemented the lexical approach to the actual classroom teaching in 1997, more researchers have employed the lexical approach to conduct studies in various ways relying on their own interest and their learners' level. Most of the studies (Ellis, 1999; Ding & Qi, 2005; Xu & Huang, 2010; Han, 2011) have found that lexical chunks play a central role in both L1 and L2 acquisition and they are believed to be the smallest units

of memory and production of a language. And some of the studies (Wiktorsson, 2003; Yamashita and Nan, 2010) are concerned about the learners' difference in acquiring lexical chunks and they have confirmed that different-level learners have different ability of using lexical chunks and chunking ability is influenced by learners' L1.

Still others focus on the application of lexical approach in classroom teaching. Yu (2008) has verified that the lexical approach is more effective than single words in improving students' English competence. Xu and Huang (2010) have found that it is feasible to incorporate the lexical approach into traditional teaching methods in English teaching and lexical chunks could enhance students' writing proficiency.

However, there are not enough empirical studies on the application of the lexical approach. Even though there do exist some studies (Yu, 2008; Yamashita and Nan, 2010; Xu & Huang, 2010;) which apply the lexical approach to classroom teaching, most of them are mainly concerned with comprehensive English competence and few of them focus on writing proficiency, particularly the studies through applying the lexical approach to college English reading and writing course for non-English majors. Therefore, the present study aims to find whether the lexical approach has the effects on non-English majors' writing proficiency and to what kind of degree it is through applying the lexical approach to college English reading and writing course. It's hoped that the study can provide an effective way to L2 teaching.

Table 1
Independent Samples T-test of Composition Scores for EG and CG in the Pretest

		Levene's test for equality of variances			T-test for equality of means			
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Pretest	equal variances assumed	0.02	.88	-0.34	78.00	.74	-0.10	0.30

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Pre-test

Before the experiment, a pre-test was carried out to examine whether students' writing proficiency were at the same level. Moreover, it provided the data to make a comparison with that of the post-test. In the pre-test, all the subjects were required to write a composition of 120-150 words in 30 minutes on the topic "On Online Shopping" (see AppendixII). The writing test was carried out in the normal class time. The theme of the composition was carefully chosen by the author with reference to CET-4 (a very popular and reliable test in China to assess undergraduates' English proficiency) as well as on the basis of students' English level. Two criteria were adopted to choose the title. For one thing, the topic was in close tie to students' daily life and they could be familiar with the topic. For another, the type of writing should be familiar to students. According to the above two criteria, "On Online Shopping" was chosen as the topic for the pre-test.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

The present study aims to find out the effect that the lexical approach has on non-English majors' writing proficiency through its application in college English reading and writing course. The research intends to answer the following three questions:

- 1) What difference(s) do students show between EG and CG in writing proficiency after they have received different treatments?
- 2) What difference(s) do students in EG show in writing proficiency after the lexical approach is applied in English teaching?
- 3) What difference(s) do students show in CG in writing proficiency after one semester's learning?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects of the research were 80 non-English sophomores from two natural classes in a Chinese University and they were at the same level in writing proficiency before the experiment ($p > 0.05$ as shown in Table 1, see its raw data in Appendix I). One class was assigned as experimental group (EG) at random, while the other as control group (CG). In each group, there were 15 males, accounting for 37.5%, and 25 females, taking up 62.5%. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20. All of the subjects were not informed that they were participating in an experiment and they only believed they were taking regular English courses.

2.3.2 Post-Test

After a whole term's experiment, a post-test was undertaken among all the subjects. The form and requirements of the post-test were completely the same as the pre-test. In the post-test, each subject was required to write a composition of 120-150 words in 30 minutes on the topic "On Online Chatting" (see Appendix III). A similar topic was given to all the subjects and this can ensure the facility value of both writings was at the same level. The main purpose of the post-test was to evaluate whether the application of the lexical approach was beneficial to improving students' writing proficiency by making a comparison between the results of the two tests.

2.4 Procedure

The experiment lasted for a whole term, from September, 10th, 2020 to January, 6th, 2021. In the process of experiment, the traditional teaching methods were used in the reading and writing course for CG and the lexical approach was applied for EG. In the process of

teaching in EG, the teacher designed many activities such as identification of lexical chunks, translation with lexical chunks to raise students' awareness of lexical chunks. Meanwhile, the teacher also provides as many opportunities as possible for students to produce and consolidate the lexical chunks learned through productivity training methods. In a word, all the teaching designing and input- and output-activities are centered on the concept of lexical chunks. However, this study will not cover the activities about the learning and teaching of lexical chunks due to the limited space in this paper.

On the other hand, the traditional teaching methods were applied in CG: 1) The teacher required students to pre-read the text, but not required them to pick out the lexical chunks in the passage. 2) In the learning and analysis of the text, the teacher mainly explained language points in details, including grammars, new words and phrases, and sentence patterns, but never mentioned anything about chunks. 3) At the end of each passage, the teacher required students to summarize the passage they learned, but without either requirements on the use of lexical chunks or any reference to them. 4) The students were required to recite new words and phrases listed in glossary at the end of each passage. The textbook taken and class hours in CG were the same as that in EG.

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The compositions were immediately collected on September, 3rd, 2020 after the pre-test and on January, 6th, 2021 after the post-test. There were 80 compositions in each test, showing that there was no one absent from the test.

After collecting the compositions, the author invited three colleagues to rate the compositions based on the writing criteria of CET-4. All of them are experienced. One of them has been teaching College English for 20 years; the other two for 10 years. Furthermore, two of them have been rating compositions of CET-4 or CET-6 many times. The average score of these three teachers' was the final score for each composition. They rated all students' compositions of the two tests

Table 3
Independent Samples T-test of Composition Scores for EG and CG in the Post-test

		Levene's test for equality of variances			T-test for equality of means			
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Posttest	equal variances assumed	0.76	.40	3.48	78.00	.00	1.22	0.35

Table 3 is the independent sample t-test about writing scores of the post-test for EG and CG. It further shows there is significant difference in students' writing proficiency between EG and CG after the application of different teaching methods. It can be clearly seen that the mean score of EG is 1.22 higher than that of CG, which reflects that the students in EG have achieved more progress in writing proficiency. What's more, there

and the composition scores can reveal students' writing proficiency respectively in the pre-test and the post-test. Then, the composition scores of two tests were processed by the statistical software SPSS 20 to find the answers to the research questions of this study.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Comparisons of Compositions Scores Between EG and CG

After the experiment, the post-test was carried out to find out what differences students of two groups show in writing proficiency after they have received different treatments. The post-test composition scores (see the raw data in Appendix IV) were analyzed in comparison with those in the pre-test by using descriptive statistics and t-tests.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Composition Scores for EG and CG in the Post-test

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum
EG	40	9.17	1.60	6.00	13.00
CG	40	7.95	1.55	4.00	12.00

The author firstly made a comparison on composition scores of the post-test between EG and CG to find out whether students' writing proficiency still stays at the same level after they have received different treatments. The results are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of the writing in the post-test for CG is 7.95 and the standard deviation is 1.55; while the mean score of the writing for EG is 9.17, which is higher than the mean score in CG and the standard deviation is 1.60. The lowest score is 6.00 and the highest score reaches 13.00 in EG; while in CG, it is 4.00 and 12.00 respectively. This result implies that the students in EG have higher level in writing proficiency than students in CG after the experiment. This can be further proved by the data in Table 3.

is significant difference ($t = 3.48, p < .05$) between CG and EG in writing proficiency after they have received different treatments, suggesting that the students in EG have higher writing proficiency than those students in CG after the application of the lexical approach.

3.2 Comparison of Composition Scores in EG

After making comparisons on composition scores of

the post-test between EG and CG, the author conducted within-groups comparisons on composition scores.

The author firstly conducted comparisons on composition scores of the pre-test and the post-test for EG. Table 4 lists paired samples *t* test of composition scores for EG.

Table 4 shows that the average score of EG has increased by 1.49 points in the post-test in comparison with that of the pre-test. This indicates that students in EG have made improvement in writing proficiency. Moreover, it can be known from the table that there is significant difference ($t = 7.52, p < .05$) between the pre-test scores and the post-test scores for EG, suggesting that students in EG have made obvious progress in their writing proficiency under the instruction of the lexical approach for one semester.

Table 4
Paired Samples T-test of Composition Scores for EG

	Paired differences			<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean		
Posttest -Pretest	1.49	1.26	0.20	7.52	.00

3.3 Comparison of Composition Scores in CG

In order to examine what difference students in CG show in writing proficiency after learning for one semester, the author conducted comparisons on composition scores of the two tests for CG. Table 5 presents paired samples *t* test of compositions scores for CG.

Table 5
Paired Samples T-test of Composition Scores for CG

	Paired differences			<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean		
Posttest -Pretest	0.17	0.93	0.15	1.19	.24

Table 5 shows that average score for the students in CG has increased by 0.17 points in the post-test in comparison with that of the pre-test. This indicates that students in CG have made improvement in writing proficiency. However, the table demonstrates that there is no significant difference ($t = 7.52, p > .05$) between the mean scores in the pre-test and the post-test for CG, suggesting that the students in CG do not make significant progress in writing proficiency.

4. DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Lexical Chunks' Role in L2 Learning

Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) describe lexical chunks as multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time.

Therefore lexical chunks are prefabricated composites of form and function and they can be stored and retrieved as a whole without necessity to be analyzed and segmented into smaller units. They are not only words but also word combinations and they can account for 90% in human's natural language (Xu & Huang, 2010). Lexical chunks rather than words are the basis for most of the human communication and they can be believed to be the smallest units of language reception and production.

Writing is in fact a process of expressing one's mind in written form. In this process, one's thoughts are transformed into concrete forms of words that are, lexicalized. In this experiment, when students are asked to write an English composition both in pre- and post-tests, the students in CG tend to have some ideas in mind at first in their mother tongue, then translate their minds into corresponding English words, and eventually combine these words into a sentence based on certain grammar without taking lexical chunks into consideration. So after one semester's learning they don't attain much progress in writing proficiency and their compositions still result in the lack of fluency, accuracy and idiomaticity although they have mastered a lot of words. However, with more lexical chunks in storage, the students in EG have significantly enhanced their composition scores, implying that their writing proficiency have been improved. This is in accordance with the finding from the research (Ding & Qi, 2005) that the use of lexical chunks is conducive to fluency, accuracy and coherence in writing. This experiment also provides more evidence that in the process of language reception and production the acquisition of certain formulaic chunks is of more importance than that of grammatical rules (Widdowson, 1989).

4.2 Lexical Approach's Advantages in L2 Teaching

Structural teaching method and communicative approach are always in domination of all kinds of traditional teaching approaches (Li, 2005). The former is much conducive to language learners' linguistic competence but neglects function of language, resulting in learners' incompetence in appropriately applying language. On the contrary, the latter concentrates on the appropriate use of language in certain contexts and stresses the exposure to natural language, but neglects the mastery of necessary grammatical knowledge. This is affirmed by a conclusion to the two approaches that "the structural approach accounts for one aspect of competence by concentrating on analysis but does so at the expense of access, whereas the communicative approach concentrates on access to the relative neglect of analysis" (Widdowson, 1989, p.132). Both of the approaches cannot meet the purpose of language teaching and learning, and this leads to a phenomenon that the teachers and students in China have dedicated much time to improving learners' L2

writing proficiency, but the result seems to be far from satisfactory. Statistics in CET-4 and 6 show that college students' writing proficiency stagnates and remains at the same level while their overall performance manifests a tendency of improvement (Qi, 2005, p.64). Therefore, the lexical approach could be a middle ground for them since it holds the idea that lexical chunks as composites of form and function are at the center of language learning and teaching (Feng, 2008). In this experiment, the students in both groups have shown differences in writing proficiency after they have received different treatments. But students in EG have shown more significant differences than students in CG. In other words, all of the students have made progress in writing proficiency, but students in EG have made much greater progress than students in CG. As is mentioned in the second section of this paper, the students in both EG and CG have the same teaching goal, teaching plan, textbooks as well as the teacher in the experiment and the sole difference between them lies in the teaching method: the traditional teaching method is applied to CG, the lexical approach being applied to EG. Therefore, the progress made by students in EG can be attributed to the lexical approach applied in EG's reading and writing course.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

From the analysis and discussions of relevant data, the major findings can be summarized as follows: 1) Students in both EG and CG have made progress in writing proficiency after one semester's learning, but students in EG have shown greater improvement in writing proficiency. They get higher composition scores on average than those in CG. This can be mainly attributed to the lexical approach used in EG. 2) Students in EG have achieved significant progress in writing proficiency after the application of the lexical approach. 3) Students in CG show no significant progress in writing proficiency under the instruction of traditional teaching approach. So all the findings can verify that the lexical approach has positive effects on non-English majors' writing proficiency and it is quite feasible and effective to apply the lexical approach to English teaching, especially in English writing teaching.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Although the author has made his efforts to explore the effect that the lexical approach has on writing proficiency through its application in college English reading and writing course, because of some subjective factors, the present study is far from perfect in a real academic sense and there still exist some limitations in this study that

should be pointed out. On the one hand, the teaching experiment lasts only for one semester, which is not long enough to well verify the effect of the lexical approach. Because it takes time for students to adapt to this unfamiliar teaching method, and this might affect the effect of English learning. On the other hand, this study is only concerned about applying the lexical approach and analyzing the data of composition scores without a questionnaire. If there is a corresponding questionnaire, more information would be obtained from the study and the study would be more reliable and valid.

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APPENDIX I

Composition Scores of the Pre-test for EG and CG

Number	Pre-test	
	EG	CG
1	7	9
2	11	7
3	7	7
4	8	8
5	6	6
6	6	7
7	7	7
8	7	8
9	8	7
10	6	9
11	8	7
12	9	8
13	7	9
14	8	5
15	7	6
16	8	8
17	5	8
18	8	6
19	6	8
20	7	7
21	7	10
22	9	8
23	7	8
24	10	6
25	8	9
26	9	10
27	8	9
28	8	8
29	8	7
30	10	6
31	6	9
32	7	10
33	7	7
34	10	9
35	10	7
36	7	7
37	7	8
38	6	7
39	8	8
40	9	11

APPENDIX II

The Pre-test Writing

You are allowed 30 minutes to write a composition on the topic: *On Online Shopping*. You should write at least 120-150 words, and base your composition on the outline given in Chinese below:

1. 网络越来越普及，很多人愿意网上购物；
2. 对于网上购物，有些人支持，有些人反对；
3. 你的看法。

APPENDIX III

The Post-test Writing

You are allowed 30 minutes to write a composition on the topic: *On Online Chatting*. You should write at least 120-150 words, and base your composition on the outline given in Chinese below:

1. 网络越来越普及，很多人愿意网上聊天；
2. 对于网上聊天，有些人支持，有些人反对；
3. 你的看法。

APPENDIX IV

Composition Scores of the Post-test for EG and CG

Number	Post-test	
	EG	CG
1	8	10
2	11	8
3	10	7
4	9	7
5	7	7
6	6	8
7	9	8
8	9	7
9	11	8
10	7	8
11	8	8
12	10	7
13	10	8
14	10	4
15	10	6
16	13	8
17	9	9
18	8	6
19	8	8
20	8	8
21	10	11
22	12	8
23	10	7
24	9	7
25	9	9
26	11	10
27	8	11
28	10	9
29	9	8
30	11	7
31	7	10
32	9	10
33	8	7
34	11	7
35	12	8
36	8	7
37	7	7
38	7	6
39	8	7
40	10	12