

The Effect of Homework Writing As an Academic Extra-Curricular Activity on Second Language Vocabulary Development of Upper-Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners

Sepideh Samieifar¹ and Mohammad Reza Oroji²

¹Department of English, Damavand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Damavand, Iran.

²Department of English, Zanzan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zanzan, Iran.

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ABSTRACT

Contract farming which was virtually unknown in the poultry sector half a century ago, has proliferated rapidly. The growth of poultry sector in India was also marked by an increase in the size of poultry farm. Like wise, the practice of integration or contract farming caught up the imagination of the people in the rural areas also. A study was conducted to know the reasons for preference towards contract broiler farming among 200 broiler farmers in Coimbatore and Erode districts. Conventional analysis like mean and percentages were used for the study. The results showed that, except for the chick quality the respondents were contented with all the inputs supplied.

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Introduction

The role of extra-curricular activities in the development of different language skills has been researched in the ELT literature: Warger (2011) has focused on the development of second language reading comprehension through employing specific homework. In her view, homework accommodation which she defines as “any necessary modifications made to the assignment before asking the learners to deal with it” (p.13), can be a useful tool for the learner and also helps the teacher to identify practices that will be most helpful to individual learners and have the potential to increase their involvement, understanding, and motivation to learn.

Homework varieties as an extra-curricular activity can affect various language skills and components (Wang & Shiveley, 2011). Homework writing and practices are related and connected by the context where learners are learning on their own and applying new knowledge. Effective teachers approach this kind of learning experience as any other activity, matching the planned activity to the learning goal. Some researchers believe that homework as an extra-curricular activity should be approached not as an afterthought to the English class, but as a focused strategy for increasing understanding (Antunez, 2000; Atkinson, 2011; Cooper et al., 1999, cited in Atkinson, 2011).

Statement of the problem

Learners spend just a fraction of their time at language classes or institutes where they are developing a second language, and the rest is devoted to out-of-classroom activities. Educators believe that this free time should be spent on organized and structured programming (Smith, 2005). Many researchers have investigated the effect of extra-curricular activities on GPA of learners however rarely have they narrowed down this effect to one of linguistic skills like writing. Another intriguing issue is that educational researches have rarely focused on the effect of academic activities (e.g. homework writing) on the development of second language vocabulary in the learners, in an EFL context. Most of the researches in the

ELT field have concentrated on the ESL situations (see Antunez, 2000; Atkinson, 2011, and Petersen, 2003) and the EFL context therefore has been vastly neglected. Another point which is worth mentioning is that few of the previous researches (if any) in the field has compared various forms of extra-curricular homework writing concerning their effect on the learners’ language proficiency achievement or one of the skills or language components.

The significance of the study

Considering extra-curricular activities, homework writing can be a helpful activity in developing the feeling of success in learners. Finding the effect of out-of-school activities on the second language vocabulary of the learners provides useful information for ELT practitioners, curriculum developers, and **ELT educators in some ways**

1. ELT curriculum designers might use the results of the study in their work, giving more room to the second language vocabulary development through extra-curricular academic activities.
2. The study provides syllabus designers (especially in Iran) with new ideas to revise their syllabus and pay more attention to the methods of clarifying learners’ attitude towards vocabulary learning.
3. The research could play an intriguing role in energizing other studies in the field of ELT concentrating on other areas of second language development such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing which might be influenced by each and every of the extra-curricular homework.

Research Questions

RQ 1: Does homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affect second language vocabulary development of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners?

RQ 2: Is there any statistically significant difference between the male and female learners concerning their second language vocabulary development affected by homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity?

Research Hypotheses

Considering the research question presented above the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H01. *Homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity does not significantly affect second language vocabulary development of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners.*

H02. *There is no statistically significant difference between the male and female learners concerning their second language vocabulary development affected by homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity.*

Review of literature

Jugovic's (2011) positive perspective about extracurricular activities was concerned about the power of such activities to overcome some difficulties in the language classroom. He believed that it is advantageous to "think outside the box," and in various contexts, to consider and apply the physical aspect of language learning such as integrating simple activities like talking and walking, which occur in natural communicative situations (Jugovic, 2011). Darling et al. (2005) found that the adult learners participating in such activities achieved higher grades, efficient positive attitude toward schooling, and as a whole, higher academic achievements.

The formal extracurricular activities are those structured activities, like learning to play a musical instrument or joining athletics programs. On the other hand, informal extracurricular activities are those activities done in leisure time; they are less structured. Activities like watching television, and reading books are under this category. Different studies on leisure studies have indicated that the formality and informality of activities have different effects on motivation and attitudes of the participants (Guest & Schneider, 2003). One study found "that more time in leisure activities was related to poorer academic grades, poorer work habits, and poorer emotional adjustments," while more time in "structured groups and less time watching TV were associated with higher test scores and school grades" (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002, p.5).

Methodology of the Research

Participants

The participants of the study were 100 upper intermediate learners (both girls and boys) in Mojtama Fani Institute, Tehran, Iran. These participants were selected out of 150 ones who took part in a pretest (which was a copy of paper-based TOEFL standard test) for the purpose of homogenizing the sample of the study. The age range of the learners was 18 and above. These participants were of various disciplines and they had different educational backgrounds. There were 46 learners in the experimental group while 54 learners were placed in the control group.

Instrumentation

The first instrument used for the purpose of sample homogeneity and was a copy of paper-based TOEFL which is a reliable and consistent measure of how well learners are doing in the skills of listening, speaking and reading and writing.

The second instrument, which was used in the pre-treatment level, was a pretest of vocabulary (selected from among the vocabulary section of TOEFL) which was firstly piloted among a group of EFL learners including 30 participants who were similar in terms of their educational characteristics.

The third instrument used in the study was a posttest of vocabulary which was the same pretest which had been piloted and standardized. The test was given to the participants at the end of the instruction. The results of this test revealed how well the treatment had affected learners' second language vocabulary development

Procedure

The first phase of this study was the pilot phase during which 30 upper intermediate students with similar features to the target sample took all the assessment instruments comprising the sample TOEFL used for homogenizing and the pretest/posttest of vocabulary.

In the second phase of this study the participants were selected. First, the piloted TOEFL was administered to 150 Upper Intermediate EFL learners studying English conversation in Mojtama Fani Institute to homogenize them regarding their general English proficiency. There were 69 female learners and 81 male learners among the 150 participants of the study before the process of subject selection. Both groups of the learners (experimental and control) took similar instruction for their ordinary conversation courses; meanwhile the experimental group also received its own specific extra-curricular program.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of the present study enjoyed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to calculate the mean and standard deviation of the piloted TOEFL which was used for homogenizing participants and the calculating results of the vocabulary pretest. The inferential statistics employed was "Analysis of Co-variances" ANCOVA to compare the effect of the treatment on the 2nd language vocabulary development among the learners.

Design

The selection of the participants in this study was non-random, but the assignment of the participants to the experimental and control groups was random, therefore the design is a quasi-experimental one. Having pre and posttest also confirmed the quasi-experimental nature of the present research.

Result and Data Analysis

TOEFL Test of General Language Proficiency

The TOEFL test was administered to 150 subjects. Based on the mean plus and minus one standard deviation, 100 subjects were selected to participate in the main study. The TOEFL test enjoyed a reliability of .91.

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the TOEFL test in order to prove that both groups enjoyed the same level of general language proficiency prior to the main study. Table 4.3 displays the means for the experimental ($M = 57.76$) and control ($M = 57.19$) groups on the TOEFL test.

The results of the independent t-test ($t(98) = .60, P > .05, R = .06$, enjoying a weak effect size) (Table 4.4) indicated that there was not any significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the TOEFL test. Thus it was concluded that they enjoyed the same level of general language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatment.

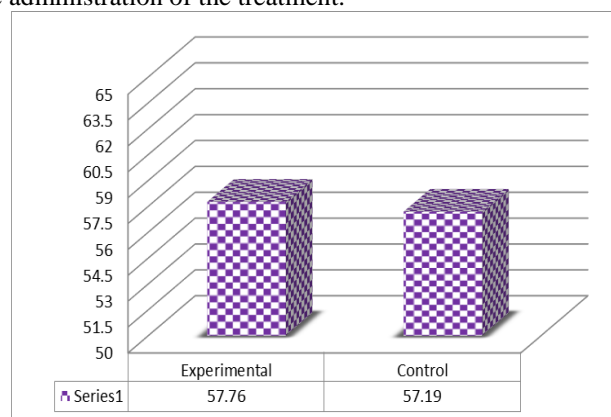


Figure 4.1. TOEFL of by Groups

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, TOEFL

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	KR-21
TOEFL	150	52.19	16.193	262.211	.91

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, TOEFL Test by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TOEFL	Experimental	46	57.76	3.796	.560
	Control	54	57.19	5.422	.738

Table 3. Independent Sample Test, TOEFL Test by Groups

Levene's Test

for Equality

of Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.373	.069	.605	98	.547	.576	.952	-1.31	2.46
Equal variances not assumed			.622	94.63	.536	.576	.926	-1.26	2.41

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics, Posttest by Groups

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimental	28.818	.238	28.345	29.291
Control	24.480	.219	24.046	24.914

Table 5. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pretest	756.163	1	756.163	307.695	.000	.764
Group	422.121	1	422.121	171.768	.000	.644
Gender	.531	1	.531	.216	.643	.002
Group * Gender	1.333	1	1.333	.542	.463	.006
Error	233.464	95	2.458			
Total	72013.000	100				

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics, Posttest by Gender

Gender	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	26.722	.222	26.282	27.162
Female	26.576	.224	26.130	27.021

A two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run to investigate the effect of homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity on second language vocabulary development of male and female Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners while controlling for the possible differences on pretest. That is to say, the ANCOVA aimed at investigating the effect of treatment on the posttest (dependent variable) and at the same time controlling the possible effects of the entry vocabulary knowledge of the subjects as measured through the pretest (covariate).

The experimental group ($M = 28.810$) outperformed the control group ($M = 24.48$) on the posttest of vocabulary (Table 4.6).

The results of two-way ANCOVA ($F(1, 95) = 171.76, P < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .76$ enjoying a large effect size) indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest. Thus the first null-hypothesis as "homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity does not significantly affect second language vocabulary development of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners" was rejected.

The subjects' gender did not have any significant effect on the posttest of vocabulary ($F(1, 95) = .21, P > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$ enjoying a weak effect size). As displayed in Table 4.8 the male ($M = 26.72$) and female ($M = 26.57$) subjects showed almost the same performance on the posttest of vocabulary.

There was not any significant difference between the subjects' gender in the groups ($F(1, 95) = .54, P > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$, enjoying a weak effect size). Thus the second null-hypothesis as "there is no statistically significant difference between the male and female learners concerning their second language vocabulary development affected by homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity" was supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of the present study firstly revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of vocabulary. Thus it was concluded that homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affects second language vocabulary development of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners. The findings secondly revealed that there is no statistically significant difference between the male and female learners concerning their second language vocabulary development affected by homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity.

Findings of the research are in line with the ideas asserted in the literature in the ESL situation (Beck, 1999; Brown & Herrity, 2001; Halpern, 1992; Ross et al, 1992) which provide support for using homework programs to build self-esteem of the learners and lead them towards creativity, while also finding that self-esteem can be a predictor of academic performance. The researchers cited above found that participation in an out-of-classroom academic oriented program such as watching a film, listening to a story, summarizing the talks and the like designed to build self-esteem in the learners had positive effects on the learners' standardized test scores in English writing and reading.

The fact is that allotting extended within-the-classroom time to complete their homework did not have the same positive effects on self-esteem or achievement of the same learners. This signifies that extracurricular activities of academic type have proved to be more successful than the curricular-based activities the learner experiences. Rahbar (2012) asserts that "students working with journals and newspapers as homework support could achieve high command of writing and presented wider scopes of creativity" compared to the students who dealt with

ordinary types of writing supports and homework" (p. 134). Googol (2012) also argues the effect of extra-curricular activities on the ESL listening comprehension and asserts that such activities have proved useful in helping the learners improve their listening comprehension ability.

English language learner participants in the homework project in the present study developed well in their second language vocabulary. The fact is that second language development in general and SL vocabulary enhancement in particular are process-oriented and learners take relative control over what they learn through a continuous mode of feedback they receive from the teacher and sometimes the peer. The findings strengthen the idea that out-of-class academic support does the greatest achievement when it enhances the students' perceptions that they can be successful at English classes.

The findings of the first research question of the present study, however, is not in line with the idea presented by some other scholars (Morrison, et al, 2000) who are against the presentation of out-of-class after-school academic activities such as writing homework as an extracurricular activity. Such scholars believe that the non-academic after-school activities are more preferred in an attempt to increase the performance of the second language learners.

The second finding of the study which was addressing the effect of the treatment on the gender achievement of second language vocabulary showed no significant difference between the two. It means that gender was not an effective factor in this regard. Hulstijn (2001), however argues that gender is an effective factor in SL development. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) also present that incidental vocabulary acquisition is different between girls and boys, stressing the girls' more success in the construct of task-induced involvement.

Boyle (1987) determined that, exceptionally, boys are superior to girls in the comprehension of heard vocabulary. Similarly, Scarcella and Zimmerman (1998) found that men performed significantly better than women in a test of academic vocabulary recognition, understanding, and use. In Lin and Wu (2003), Lynn et al. (2005), and Edelenbos and Vinjé (2000), males also outperformed females in vocabulary knowledge in the foreign language (henceforth FL). By contrast, in Nyikos' (1990) and Sunderland's (2010) studies women performed better than men in a memorization test of German vocabulary. Nevertheless, Jiménez and Terrazas (2005-2008) discovered no significant gender differences in performance in a receptive vocabulary test. Meara and Fitzpatrick (2000) and Jiménez and Moreno (2004) also pointed out that female learners performed better than males in productive vocabulary.

Llach and Gallego (2012) who have studied vocabulary knowledge development and gender differences in a second language in Spain stress that "size differences in the mean scores of male and female learners were non-existent. In spite of these findings, female learners showed higher vocabulary gains than males for the first three intervals. For the last two intervals, this tendency reversed and male learners were found to incorporate more new words into their lexicons than their female peers (p.47).

Gass (2013) in this regard mentions that gender is an effective factor in developing second language acquisition, but it differs from one component to the next.

Considering the fact that Iranian students are dealing with English as a foreign language, the researcher might feel in ease to propose that extracurricular academic homework can be more effective than the conventional method of teaching English and its vocabulary to the learners.

The results of pre and posttests were compared and analyzed and then the following conclusions were drawn:

The findings of the study revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of vocabulary. Thus it was concluded that homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity significantly affects second language vocabulary development of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL learners. The findings also revealed no statistically significant difference between the male and female learners concerning their second language vocabulary development affected by homework writing as an academic extra-curricular activity.

Learners dealing with homework writing outperformed the conventional vocabulary learning group. This revealed that the homework writing plays a significant role in the development of one's second language vocabulary development.

The present study demonstrated that extracurricular academic activities (homework writing) can influence the learners' second language vocabulary. EFL learners need to get acquainted with principles of autonomous learning for a better, native-like, more appropriate performance. Therefore, homework writing does deserve a place in language teaching and learning (Nation and McAlister, 2010). According to the results of the present study, some implications for employing extracurricular academic activities in teaching and learning second language creative writing can be suggested.

Making a connection between the inside-class activities and out-of-class tasks could expand the scope of learning and the time devoted to learning a second language or one of its skills or components. This is possible through employing homework writing as an extracurricular activity.

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