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## THE COMPARATIVE EFFECT OF TEACHING FORMULAIC LANGUAGE ON FIELD-DEPENDENT VERSUS FIELD-INDEPENDENT EFL LEARNERS' WRITING ABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

*This study attempted to investigate the comparative effect of teaching formulaic language on field-dependent versus field-independent English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing ability. To fulfill the purpose of this study, 87 intermediate EFL learners were selected from a total number of 120 through their performance on a sample Preliminary English Test (PET) as a proficiency test. The 87 selected learners were then given Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) and the results were used to choose a sample of field-dependent and independent learners. Based on the results of GEFT, 31 learners were identified as field-dependent and 35 as field-independent. The rest of the learners were identified to have mixed tendencies and discarded. Since the participants were homogenized prior to the treatment, the study had post-test only design. Both groups underwent the same amount of teaching time by the researcher during 12 sessions of treatment, which included formulaic language for two groups and at the end of the course, the participants in both groups were given the writing section of another sample PET as post-test to measure their writing ability. The analysis of the test scores using a Mann-Whitney U Test revealed that the FI group did significantly better in their post-test. The implication is that formulaic language teaching can be included in regular English writing courses especially for field-dependent learners. This result may help EFL teachers to bear in mind the benefits of teaching formulaic sequences along with consideration of EFL learners' personality factors particularly when dealing with writing courses.*

**KEYWORDS:** Formulaic language, Cognitive style, Field dependent/independent learners.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is more complicated than other language skills, as it shows the extent to which individuals can use a language to express ideas, argue opinions, and synthesize a variety of perspective. Thus, writing in an effective and true way is one of the requirements for establishing successful communication (Crowhurst, 1990; Smith, 2013), consequently, writing ability is

considered as an indispensable component of second language (L2) learning. In this sense, the language skills of EFL learners in written communication and the challenges they may face have always been of great importance.

In recent years, the phenomenon of formulaic language has been a matter of interest to many scholars and has become one of the foremost issues examined in applied linguistics (Schmitt, Dörnyei, Adolphs, & Durow, 2004). According to Wood (2006), Formulaic expressions are multi-word units or chunks of words that are stored and recalled from memory as a whole and they have fundamental functions in production and communication. In addition, they have a remarkable effect on language processing by accelerating the language acquisition and development (Wei & Ying, 2011). The position of formulaic language has been challenged recently by a number of researchers (Jackendoff, 1995; Sinclair, 1991; Foster, 2001; Pawley and Syder, 1983; Hopper, 1998; Wray, 2002; Erman & Warren, 2000). Conklin and Schmitt (2012) propose that it would be reasonable to attribute 30 to 50 percent of all language produced to formulaic sequences. This suggestion is almost congruent with some oft-cited studies. Erman and Warren (2000) in particular indicate that formulaic language accounts for 58.6 percent of spoken English discourse that they analyzed and 52.3 percent of the written texts.

The correct use of the formulaic language is also a prerequisite for writing well; consequently, inability to deploy these native-like sequences makes target language learners' writing sound non-native (Li & Schmitt, 2009). According to Hyland (2008), the significance of this formulaic language in writing skill is so much that the absence or misuse of formulaic sequences may indicate "the lack of fluency of a novice or newcomer to that community" (p. 5). Additionally, Li and Schmitt (2009) argue that failure to employ these native-like expressions makes learners' writing sound non-native. Hyland (2008) emphasizes the role of formulaic expressions in language production as the use of these expressions helps to construct text meanings and contributes to sense of distinctiveness in a register. Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) claim that the use of formulaic language enhances the interpretation of messages in a text, makes comprehension easier in particular contexts, and increases the coherence of a text. Yorio (1989) indicates that there is a correlation between successful use of formulaic language and grammatical proficiency, and as a result, postulates the view that formulaic sequences are a marker of proficiency and therefore deserve to be further investigated.

Human beings, as superior creatures of the universe, share various commonalities with one another and at the same time, they are endowed with their own discrepancies. The divergence and variance among people can go up so high that some psychologists have claimed that every human is an exception (Witkin, Moore, Goodenough & Cox, 1977), and certainly, the way people learn is not an exception to these differences. Brown (1987) declared, "The way we learn things in general and the particular attack we make on a problem seems to hinge on a rather amorphous link between personality and cognition" (p. 84). The difference that Brown is referring to at this point is usually known as different cognitive styles in the world of psychology (Hansen, 1995). Of the various cognitive styles, models offered so far, one of the most popular ones and the most investigated one is the field dependence/independence theory introduced by Witkin, et al (1977).



Witkin, et al (1977) believed that the Field Dependence-Independence model identifies an individual's perceptive behavior while they are trying to distinguish object figures from the field that surrounds them or from the field where the objects are set. In other words, in the Field-Dependent/Independent cognitive style model, Field-Independent cognition style could be defined as a tendency to separate details from the surrounding context, whereas Field-Dependent learning style could be explained as a relative inability to tell apart detail from other information around it.

Brown (1987) stated that field-dependent people see the world as a whole (an unanalyzed whole), and since they are part of this whole, they are person-oriented and feel the need to reach out to other people, mingle with them, and interact with them. Besides, Davis (2006) added that the person-oriented drive that field-dependent people have in their personality tends to lead them toward identifying themselves with a group. Hence, it is very important for them to ask around and seek other individuals' ideas on things such as their clothes, vacations or decision. On the other hand, according to Brown (1987), people with field-independent cognitive style tend to be analytic, and learn effectively if they are faced with a body of material to be assimilated. Rollock (1992) also proposed that field-independent individuals are able to develop their own internal referents and as a result, they are more able to restructure their knowledge. Besides, he added that field-independent people are usually more individualistic in their behavior, and as a result they are not usually influenced by other people. In other words, they are not very much affected by the approval or disapproval of their superiors.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

In line with the objectives of the current study, the following research question was proposed:

**RQ:** Is there any statistically significant difference between the effect of teaching formulaic language on field-dependent/field-independent EFL learners' writing ability?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

To fulfill the objectives of this study, 87 intermediate EFL learners with the age range of 17-40 studying English at a private language institute in Tehran initially participated in this study. These participants were homogenized through a piloted PET among 120 learners. The participants whose score was one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the target sample of the study. This group then were categorized as Field-dependent and Field-independent through the group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT). The participants who scored above 11 were considered as field-independent (35 participants), and those whose score fell under six were identified as field-dependent (31 participants). Apart from the main participants of the study, a group of 30 learners having similar characteristics to the main participants was also used for piloting PET. It is worth mentioning that another experienced English language teacher also participated in the study for rating the writing and speaking section of PET along with the researcher.



### ***Instrumentations and Materials***

In order to carry through the purpose of the study the following instruments were utilized:

#### *The Writing Pack*

The material used in the study by students in two groups is the writing pack, which included explicit instruction of formulaic language and practice with various activities. Based upon considering related literature and searching different websites related to the topic of the study, all materials and activities in the writing pack were arranged so that they were comprehensible for the learners and suitable for language training. Because of the different functions, multiplicity and variations of the formulaic language expressions (only multi-word meta-discourse markers were considered in the present study), and they were categorized such as comparison and contrast, cause and effect, reformulation etc.

#### *Preliminary English Test (PET)*

The Preliminary English Test (PET) is an international examination sanctioning a certain level of mastery of the English language developed by Cambridge ESOL. It covers all four language skills (Reading, Listening, writing and speaking) and knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

To make sure that PET was appropriate for the context of the current study, it was piloted on 30 EFL intermediate learners from the same language institute and Cronbach's alpha was run on the scores. The Cronbach's Alpha index obtained was 0.85 on 65 items, which was considered satisfactory.

#### *GEFT*

In order to identify learners as field-dependent or field-independent, the GEFT (Group Embedded Figures Test) was employed. GEFT is a visual test with multiple-choice format developed by Witkin, Oltman, Raskin and Karp (1971). The test comes in two sections: the first section contains seven very easy problems to solve, so that the test takers can be familiarized with the testing style and get the know-how of the test. This section is not considered in the scoring of the test. The second section, however, is made up of 18 questions, which are much more demanding and far more complicated than the initial seven problems. In each problem, the test simply expects the test takers to look at the test and locate the simple figure. The rationale behind the test is that those who tend to rely on external cues are less able to find the simple figures and they hence tend to be field-dependent. Nonetheless, the ones who rely on internal cues are abler to find figures, and they thus are field-independent. There is no penalty for wrong answers. A high score (12-18) means that the candidate could separate the simple figure from the complex figure and has tendencies considered to be FI. The converse is true for those who have low scores (0-5) on the test and they are considered to be FD. Candidates with mid-level scores (6-11) are considered to have mixed tendencies. With regard to the reliability of the test Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, and Karp (1971) reported a reliability of 0.82.

#### *Design*

The design of the present study was quasi-experimental, because the researcher did not have the opportunity of random selection. It is also post-test only since the researcher homogenized the participants in their writing language proficiency. Considering there are no control groups in the

study, so it is a comparison group design, as well. Furthermore, the independent variable is teaching context with one modality (formulaic language); the moderator variable is cognitive style of the participants with two modalities (field-dependent and field-independent EFL learners). It is worth mentioning that language proficiency is the control variable. Finally, writing is the dependent variable.

### Procedure

In this section the steps the researcher took in order to select the participants, provide them with the treatment, and compile the data are explained in a chronological order.

### Pre-Treatment Stage

Initially, a PET was administered to a group of 30 students with almost similar characteristics to the target sample in order to carry out item analysis and examine the reliability of the test. The results of item analysis indicated and examined the reliability of the test. Then, the researcher administered the piloted PET to 120 intermediate students in order to select a homogenized sample of participants in terms of their language proficiency. Then, the group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT) was administered to the 87 participants in order to categorize them into two groups of FD and FI. Based on the results of GEFT, 35 learners' scoring 12 to 18 were identified as field-independent and 31 learners' scoring 0 to 5 as field-dependent. The rest of the learners' scoring within the range of 6 to 11 were identified to have mixed tendencies and discarded.

### The Treatment Process

The treatment of this study lasted 6 hours, which was offered in 12 30-minute sessions during 4 weeks. Both classes were taught by the researcher. To do so, the researcher administered the formulaic language treatment based on the following process, which has been demonstrated in the following table:

Table 1: The Instruction Plan for Each Week

Week	Main plan
1	Distributing formulaic expressions (blank discourse markers). Explanation of categories and functions of formulaic expressions by utilizing meta-discourse markers. Matching columns and rewriting the statements using formulaic sequences within meta-discourse markers. Sentence completion by meta-discourse markers. Underling meta-discourse markers in a text.
2	Adding meta-discourse markers where necessary to an essay. Scrambled paragraphs within meta-discourse markers. Supplying suitable meta-discourse markers with deleted ones.
3	Underling meta-discourse markers in an essay. An essay with full of formulaic sequences. Writing an essay by integrating suitable formulaic language expressions by utilizing meta-discourse markers. Writing an essay according to outline by using meta-discourse markers. Classifying meta-discourse markers into categories.
4	Making sentences by given meta-discourse markers. Writing an essay with more use of meta-discourse markers. Using formulaic expressions by meta-discourse markers in order to generate meaningful and coherence sentences. Complement of the sentences with appropriate formulaic sequences (discourse markers).

### The Post-Treatment Stage

After the treatment, participants in both groups were tested in terms of their writing ability through another sample of writing section of PET, which is considered as post-test in the present

study. Data analyses were performed by the help of SPSS 25 and using the statistical technique of independent samples *t*-test before the treatment and Mann-Whitney U Test after the treatment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to homogenize the participants of the study in terms of their language proficiency prior to the treatment, it was first needed to check their language proficiency by administering PET. After piloting the test, PET was administered to 120 learners based on which 87 learners whose scores lay within the range of +/- one standard deviation were selected. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of PET scores for the initial 120 learners.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of PET Main Administration

	N Statistic	Range Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Deviation Statistic	Variance Statistic	Skewness Statistic	Std. Error
Main PET	120	49.00	38.00	87.00	62.1583	10.15427	103.109	.087	.221
Valid N (list wise)	120								

The mean score of the sample was 62.16 (SD=10.15), with the minimum score of 38 and maximum score of 87. Those students with scores below and beyond  $\pm 1SD$  from the mean were removed leading to the selection of a homogeneous group of 87 learners in terms of language proficiency. Next, the 87 selected learners were given GEFT. The results of the test showed that there were 31 as field-dependent and 35 learners as field-independent. Then, to make sure that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of writing ability prior to the treatment, an independent samples *t*-test was run on the learner's writing scores of PET in the two groups consisting of 31 learners in FD and 35 in FI. As the dependent variable of the study was writing, the researcher checked the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their writing scores prior to the treatment. Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics of FD and FI participants in their PET writing scores prior to the treatment.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Test after Group Assignment

	N Statistic	Range Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Deviation Statistic	Variance Statistic	Skewness Statistic	Std. Error
Pre Writing FD	31	5.00	8.00	13.00	10.8710	1.68804	2.849	-.228	.421
Pre Writing FI	35	7.00	7.00	14.00	11.1143	1.74510	3.045	-.150	.398
Valid N (list wise)	31								

As presented in table 3, the mean score for the pre-test of field-dependent and independent learners is 10.87 and 11.11, respectively. To see whether the difference in the means of the two groups was significant, an independent samples *t*-test was run on the pretest scores of the two groups.

As indicated in the next table (4), the significance value equals .568, which is higher than the significant level of 0.05, and thus it can be inferred that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of writing ability prior to the administration of the treatment. After making sure that, there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of writing ability, the treatment was given to both groups. After the treatment was over, another sample of writing section of PET was administered to both groups as post-test.

Table 4: Independent Samples T-test for the Pretest Scores

		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	
Writing Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.053	.818	-.574	64	.568	-.24332	.42387	-1.09009	.60345
	Equal variances not assumed			-.574	63.485	.567	-.24332	.42300	-1.08849	.60185

Before starting, the statistical analysis related to the comparison of scores between the two groups of FD and FI students on the post-test, it deemed necessary to examine the data for normalcy and decide accordingly on parametric or non-parametric statistics. Therefore, the descriptive statistics of the learners' writing ability were extracted and normality of the data was explored. The descriptive statistics of data are found in table 5.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of the Writing post-test of FD/FI EFL Learners

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Pre Writing FD	31	8.00	10.00	18.00	13.5161	2.52812	6.391	-.007	.421
Pre Writing FI	35	9.00	13.00	22.00	16.8286	2.46726	6.087	.807	.398
Valid N (list wise)	31								

Looking at the data demonstrated in the table, it could be seen the field-independent group has outperformed the field-dependent one with a mean of 16.83 as opposed to 13.52. It is clear that both groups showed an increase in the writing scores. The standard deviation was 2.83 and 2.47 respectively. Although the post-test scores for FD participants showed normalcy, the skewness/std error of skewness for FI group was 2.03, a few beyond the permitted range of -1.96 and +1.96 and not meeting the assumption of normality.

In order to answer the research question of the study and investigate a possible significant difference between two experimental groups' writing ability, inferential statistics had to be employed. However, as the FI group writing scores in the post-test did not show a normal distribution, the researcher had to resort to nonparametric statistical analyses. Accordingly, a Mann-Whitney U Test was run instead of an independent samples *t*-test.

Table 6: Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Post-writing FD & FI
Mann-Whitney U	209.500
Wilcoxon W	705.500
Z	-4.314
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: Grouping

As shown in table 6, the significance value is .00, which is lower than the significant level of 0.05 and therefore it can be inferred that the two groups were significantly different in terms of writing ability after the treatment. Since the mean for the post-test scores of field-independent learners was higher than that of field-dependent learners (table 5), it was concluded that formulaic language teaching influenced field-independent learners more than field-dependent learners.

### Discussion

The results of the present study demonstrated that formulaic language teaching is a suitable methodological approach in order to enhance the learners' writing ability of field-independent learners more than field-dependent ones. Strictly speaking, the writing ability scores of the field-dependent were enhanced from 10.87 to 13.52 and the writing scores of the field-independent learners from 11.11 to 16.83. However, statistical analysis proved that the writing ability improvement was significantly better in field-independent learners.

The purpose of the current study was, therefore, to discover the effect of teaching formulaic sequences by utilizing meta-discourse markers on field-dependent and field-independent learners' writing ability. Just like those whose mother tongue is other than English try to walk a balance beam between the demands of achieving correct and natural form of English language, it is obscure how formulaic language fits into the discussion of effective L2 writing instruction, and ultimately the role it should play in preparing non-native speakers for success in higher education. However, the question is whether formulaic language teaching would be beneficial to students with two common cognitive styles; field-dependency and field-independency.

Yang and Sun (2012), in their study based on the positive impact between formulaic language deployment and writing abilities of the students, analyzed undergraduate EFL learners' use of formulaic language sequences when writing compositions based on the selected given topics, and found positive relationship between the (correct) use of formulaic expressions and the writing scores. Likewise, Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) analyzed the use of meta-discourse markers in persuasive essays written by 12 English as second language (ESL) learners. The results of their study demonstrated a remarkable relationship between the deployment of formulaic language expressions (meta-discourse markers) and learners' writing quality.

The finding of this study are also parallel with the previous ones that investigated the effect of formulaic language exposure on writing ability. In their study, Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) examined the effect of instruction of formulaic language expressions on EFL learners, who were at different proficiency levels. In that they both revealed when students are provided with

instruction on meta-discourse markers, it is possible to affect their writing performance regardless of their cognitive styles. Other researchers, Cheng and Steffensen (1996), in their quasi-experimental study, also explored how the use of meta-discourse was related to the quality of students' writing. It was found out that the students who received instruction regarding meta-discourse markers gained significantly higher scores than those who were not taught the use and function of these discourse markers. Therefore, the explicit teaching of formulaic language might have developed the participants' writing performance since they organized their ideas and thoughts in a better way by linking them using more discourse markers. This finding might support Hyland's (2005) assertion that learners should receive instruction on these multi-word units in order to integrate them into their writing effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of those persons who are involved with EFL/ESL research, most of the Iranian EFL learners at lower or upper levels of English language proficiency have not enough familiarity with different types of formulaic expressions and consequently meta-discourse markers knowledge and to them they are really obscure, problematic and perplexity phenomena. It becomes even more complicated if being implemented in courses with focus on production and comprehension skills, since it deals with issues of ideology, presentation, and interaction with readers and audiences. We may find there are lots of attempts in revealing the effect of formulaic language knowledge on listening and speaking skills, yet still the role of this knowledge in improving major skills being required in any language learning/teaching contexts videlicet comprehension skills as well as various types of writing more and more coherent, cohesive and reader friendly have received little attention and even some extent have been ignored its effects on the enhancement of FD/FI EFL learners' writing ability. The major for which the researcher conducted on the present study was providing a preliminary investigation to see whether this knowledge could be used in EFL courses with paying more attention on production skill along with considering learners' cognitive styles. Bringing the research findings in operational settings, it seems necessary to include formulaic expressions, including meta-discourse organizers in course teaching writing abilities. So far, only limited focus has been concerned with teaching of this knowledge with any kind of regularity. Thus, helping students to know how to implement this knowledge along with their skills improvement should be a teaching priority. As a result, EFL teachers should try to incorporate longer teaching hours and give correct directions to the use of these formulaic sequences that learners may use themselves without being aware of them. EFL teachers and learners should raise their awareness of different cognitive styles (FD/FI), which may result in maximizing learning opportunities and better learning outcomes.

### *Limitations of the study*

The main limitation of the present study was that the researcher was not able to choose the participants of the study randomly. Moreover, the age range of the participants was between 17-40. Thus, it is not advisable to generalize the findings to other age groups.

There was no control over the number of male and female participants in each of the field-dependent and field-independent groups, thus gender as an intervening variable might influence the results.



### ***Pedagogical Implications***

The results of the current study suggest that formulaic language activities be included in language learning curriculum and teachers be prepared to deliver such activities in language classes. Moreover, teacher trainers and teacher education programs should also include practical module to train language teachers on how to take benefit from formulaic language tasks in language classrooms. Textbook developers should also pay more attention to the incorporation of formulaic language tasks in language learning textbooks. Wood (2002) suggested that repeated exposure to formulaic expressions should be a part of curriculum since it plays a facilitative role in the acquisition of such expressions.

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