

**Research Article**

## **THE EFFECT OF PARAGRAPH WRITING ON LEARNING PROVERBS OF IRANIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Human beings, coming from various cultures, use their own proverbs to express experiences, to give moral lessons, etc. These proverbs could share the same semantic features but different in their syntactic structures or they could be even different in semantic and syntactic features. The present study's aim is to investigate the effect of paragraph writing on learning proverbs of Iranian Intermediate students. To do this aim the researcher considered three general phases, namely before the instruction phase, during the instruction phase, and after the instruction phase. In the first phase, after laying the ground for the study, participants in both experimental and control groups were pretested on the researcher-made proverb measure and in different sections. In the second phase, proverb instruction for both groups was carried out. And the final stage dealt with post-testing participants on the same measures that were used in the first phase. A one way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the possible effects of using paragraph writing tasks on Iranian EFL learners' proverb learning. On the one hand, the descriptive statistics were used here for sorting, displaying and describing the data.

**Keywords:** *Syntactic Structures, Proverbs, Iranian Intermediate Students, ANCOVA*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Of the various verbal folklore genres (i.e., fairy tales, legends, jokes, and riddles), proverbs are the most concise but not necessarily the simplest form. Proverbs reflect various aspects of human life, which could be expressed vividly in human communication. People often encounter proverbs in everyday life in oral communication and in diverse written works. These lexical units connect individuals with their ancestors and transmit their values and knowledge. They contribute certain stability and a sense of identity as every individual is provided with something that they can hold on to or rely upon, but at the same time they retain unique character to a particular nation in regard to the whole world. Accordingly, proverbs as the items of folklore deserve a respectful study. Bearing all this in mind, it is evident that an easily memorable form and everyday speech help to establish proverbial tradition, which is handed down from generation to generation. Simple constructions and ordinary vocabulary make proverbs more acceptable to the general public and allow them to be applied in whatever circumstances. According to Speech Act Theory (SAT), which was developed by the philosophers John Austin and John Searle; "language is used to perform actions" (Schiffrin, 1994). This view proposes that by uttering words, a person performs actions. By using words in their right contexts, a person can assert, request, promise, thank, or declare ...etc. (Schiffrin, 1994). The fact that proverbs are used by our contemporaries proves that they still play a significant role in modern age societies; they are independent of time and are strongly rooted in the minds of people. Although, they appeared at a certain time and place, proverbs became traditional folk expressions due to their long-term frequent usage. They maintain their currency, because these expressions reflect what is considered to be a general truth.

### **Review of the Literature**

Use of proverbs as part of formulaic language, can enable fluent and natural language production (Yorio, 1980) and therefore, teaching proverbs can help to produce language more fluently and naturally which can in turn increase motivation (Porto, 1998). In her work Profantová (1998) stated that "<...> the national proverbs were from the very beginning considered as a manifestation of folk philosophy, expressing the idea in a brief, terse form in a witty and poetically apt way". Accordingly, Malinauskienė

### **Research Article**

(2004) believed that proverbs transmit cultural idiosyncrasy, national world outlook, wisdom, experience and mentality of people and, as such, they contain didactic and certain behavioral patterns. Therefore, these expressions of human mind can be considered as not only a written monument of a nation, but they also carry practical value, which will be analyzed further in the present research. Vulič and Zergollern-Miletič (1998) have drawn attention to the fact that each nation or country has its own proverbs, the occurrence of which has resulted from the lifestyle and customs of people, who have had strong bonds with the natural world, their religion and traditions at all times.

Being the case, it is obvious that direct wordings of proverbs and their deep structures are different, and reference to Malinauskienė (2004) reveals that due to the misunderstanding of the context of a proverb and its use in inappropriate way the proverb might have no desired effect on the recipient. The proverbs with figurative meanings are used to designate situations in a metaphorical way without actually naming the idea. Melerovič (1998) indicates that the implied sense of the proverbs is created by invoking figures of speech. Such stylistic devices, which contribute to the rhetorical efficiency of proverbs, are metaphor, personification, hyperbole, paradox, metonymy, simile, allegory, litotes, irony (Mieder, 2004; Malinauskienė, 2004). Certain poetic traits, such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance and ellipsis, also add peculiar rhetoric force to proverbs (Mieder, 1996 and 2004).

According to Abrahams (1982), proverbs criticize moral problems either by directing future actions or by altering a point of view towards something that has already happened. Usually they are didactic or evaluative and act as warnings, judgements, encouragements, morals, some advice (Basaj, 1998; Blatná, 1998; Norrick, 1985; Sauka, 2007). This notion means that proverbs teach lessons or provide certain instructions on what should be done and what should not and, of course, as they are produced by someone, they also gain the status of arguments. Moreover, according to Norrick (1985), these expressions of folk wisdom can be used in delicate circumstances when a person does not want to reveal his true feelings.

According to Hakamies (1998), proverbs function as responses to circumstances which require certain remarks, but, at the same time, their application is limited to a particular set of situations based on similar evaluations. Similarly, Grigas (1976, translated by Valiulytė) believed that “The use of most proverbs is determined by rather consistent and determined circumstances”. In other words, every proverb is bound to a particular category of situations and the trespass of these boundaries would mean that these traditional expressions are misused, i.e. applied to situations in which they are normally inappropriate. Different proverbs are employed to comment on work, emotions or relationships between parents and children, a husband and a wife. Nevertheless, Sauka (2007) points out that the user is provided with a possibility to justify any act or to support one’s truth, attitude and belief due to the abundance and variety of proverbial wisdom. In this way, proverbs manifest their conversational nature. They carry the speaker’s message to the recipient, who receives and interprets it according to one’s knowledge of the proverb.

Čermák (1998) distinguished prototypical and non-prototypical use of proverbs in corpus: proverbs used prototypically occur in the beginning or in the ending of a text summarizing a situation or providing a moral, while non-prototypical application of proverbs is considered to be their use in titles, advertisements and written quizzes. Blatná (1998) points out that newspapers, television and radio programmes usually have a tendency to employ only a part of the proverb in the title with a belief that the hearer will recognize it or the full utterance may also be provided further in the text of an article. Furthermore, the practical value of proverbs can be evident from slogans, caricatures, comic books, greeting cards and they also are often used in songs, from traditional folksongs to modern rock (Mieder, 1996). A more serious aspect of proverb usage in practice is depicted by Honeck (1997) who believed that proverbial units can be applied in order to examine an individual’s intelligence and in psychotherapeutics. Harmer (2004) additionally highlighted the fact that the most visible differences are at the level of correctness, well-formedness, lexical density and the use of paralinguistic features 3. The author explains that in speech people tend not to judge the other person according to his or her use of language. On the other hand in written discourse mistakes and ill-formed grammatical structures are more hardly judged. Typical example of difference in well-formedness is the use of condensed questions 4 which are

### **Research Article**

commonly used in speech but are widely obnoxious in the written discourse. There is also a significant variation in the use of content words 5 and grammatical words 6.

Harmer declared that the frequency of use of content words exceeds the use of grammatical words in written discourse and the presence of content words is much higher than in the speech (Harmer, 2004). Harmer (2004) also agreed with Raimes that even though in written discourse it is not possible to use paralinguistic features, there is a chance to use other devices to stress or highlight some parts of writing. Questions, exclamation marks can be used or the change of the order of clauses can change the meaning.

### **Significance and Purpose of the Study**

To the best knowledge of the researcher, there are few studies about proverb teaching in EFL classrooms and there are almost no empirical studies related to proverb teaching in Iran, particularly, in teacher education. Proverbs in language teaching are not given the place they deserve in the literature. Regarding this, Vanyushkina-Holt (2005) puts forward that proverbs are underestimated in the field of second language acquisition when compared to studies related to proverbs in the field of linguistics. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to filling the gap in the literature regarding the study of proverbs in foreign language education.

The study can also stimulate further research in the field and thus, further contribute to filling the gap. It is also expected to bridge the gap between linguistic research on proverbs (phraseology) and English Language Teaching and English teacher education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When students travel, they do not carry grammar books; they carry dictionaries (Krashen in Lewis, 1993). Many scholars assure that proverb is a key to language learning. There is a strong relationship between knowledge of proverbs and the ability of students to construct meaning. Although people frequently call upon such expressions in order to express themselves more effectively and clearly, they aren't amply rewarded in foreign language teaching classrooms.

On the other hand, it should be accepted that teaching and learning such expressions for both foreign language learners and teachers is deemed to be not the easiest part of vocabulary instruction but rather a stumbling block (Laufer, 1997). According to Kellerman (1978) non literal expressions (idioms and proverbs) are difficult to understand and learn even when the two languages are similar in the use and meaning.

Speech and writing flourished with proverbs or idioms are generally considered as flowery language. Accordingly, it is conceivable that lack of knowledge or understanding of proverbs and idioms in a language prevents the learner from understanding the cultural niceties or peculiarities.

Dougall (2004) supports this view with his words that idioms and proverbs can provide a snapshot of other cultures that allows for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture. Without grasping the meaning of these types of sayings we are limited to a unilateral understanding, providing fertile ground toward the development of cultural and linguistic ethnocentrism.

He adds that when we understand the viewpoints of others we can become enriched as individuals and societies.

Since many proverbs are metaphorical and may pose problems for understanding as Gramley and Pätzold say (1992), their meaning cannot be detected from the meaning of their constituent words, or to use Vivanco's words (2008: Internet) "very often the meaning of proverbs cannot be decoded from decomposing each of their constituents. This implies that the meaning may be obscure even for native speakers". This is why students, or people in general, may face difficulties in understanding and using them.

### **Research Question and Null Hypothesis**

The study aims to answer the following major research question:

**Q:** Does paragraph writing affect Iranian intermediate EFL students' proverb learning?

Based on the research question the following hypothesis was raised:

**H0:** Paragraph writing as a writing assignment has no effect on proverb learning of intermediate EFL students.

## **Research Article**

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### **Methodology**

This study used a Quasi-experimental design. A quasi-experimental design is one that looks a bit like an experimental design but lacks the key ingredient- random assignment. With respect to internal validity, they often appear to be inferior to randomized experiments. But there is something compelling about these designs; taken as a group, they are easily more frequently implemented than their randomized cousins.

#### **Participants**

The study was performed in one of the Iranian University. The participants were 60 Iranian pupils (20 males and 40 females), enrolled in two classes of the second grade, and two teachers providing instruction in the classes. For this study, the researcher used a convenience sample that consisted of two classes taking part in the quasi-experimental design.

The teachers have a general teaching education degree at the University, which lasted for 5 years. The teacher of the experimental group has 7 years of teaching experience, whereas the control group teachers experience is 10 years. Both classes were taught in a similar manner as the teachers of the same grade collaborated quite often in terms of materials and methods, but they employed similar types of instruction. The experimental group was taught English proverbs through paragraph writing activities while the control groups participants received proverb instruction through usual techniques such as translation and using visual representation.

#### **Materials**

##### **Proverb Pretest and Posttest**

A 20 item multiple-choice test of English proverbs was developed by the researcher. The proverb items were mainly selected from the new proverb items taught and given exposure during the course to both groups. The validity and reliability of the test was checked. The test was used as the assessment tool in the pretest and the post-test phase of the study. Two internal consistency estimates of reliability which included coefficient alpha and a split half coefficient expressed as Spearman-Brown correlation were computed for the proverb test. For the split half coefficient, the test items were split into two halves based on odd and even numbers to nullify the effects of unwanted factors such as tiredness of the test takers. The value for coefficient alpha was .83 and the value of the split half coefficient was .90, each indicating a very satisfactory reliability. To take validity of the test into consideration, most of the items as well as the distracters were selected from the new proverb items of the book and also a list of new words and proverbs they had been exposed to through the course was compiled by the researcher prior to the instruction and was given to both groups of participants during the instruction. The criterion-related validity of the test revealed .83 of coefficient of determination which was satisfactory.

#### **Procedures**

The present study took place in three general phases, namely before the instruction phase, during the instruction phase, and after the instruction phase. In the first phase, after laying the ground for the study, participants in both experimental and control groups were pretested on the researcher-made proverb measure and in different sections. In the second phase, proverb instruction for both groups was carried out. And the final stage dealt with post-testing participants on the same measures that were used in the first phase. Prior to the initiation of the study, the researcher met the head of the English Department of Islamic Azad University of Tonekabon and explained the specific information about the purpose of the study in order to obtain the required permission. Having gained his permission, the researcher did the preliminary stages of sampling procedures for the study. Then, he obtained the required information on the schedule of different courses. A week later, after the completion of the sampling procedures and identification of the target sample for the survey study, the data collection procedure began. Afterwards, both groups were pre-tested on Proverb Test by the researcher. Each group answered the test in a separate session spending 20 minutes. The experimental and the control groups were instructed by different instructors for two times per week (totally 180 minutes per week) over a 14-week period. The main dissimilarity between two groups lay in the methods of teaching. While the experimental group was

## Research Article

trained through paragraph writing as a contextualized method for improving proverb, the control group was taught through the usual ways of vocabulary instruction within these contexts such as translation and demonstration. To counter any potential threats to the internal validity of the research and to neutralize the likely material and test effect, the researcher asked the teachers to use the same reading materials, the same activities, the same length of teaching time, the same classroom environment, and the same examination. However, the experimental and the control groups were taught through different teaching methods. In the final phase, both the experimental and control groups were post-tested on the same measure which were used in the pre-test, namely English Proverb Test. To see if any change has occurred for both groups between their pretest and posttest separately, a one-way ANCOVA was calculated.

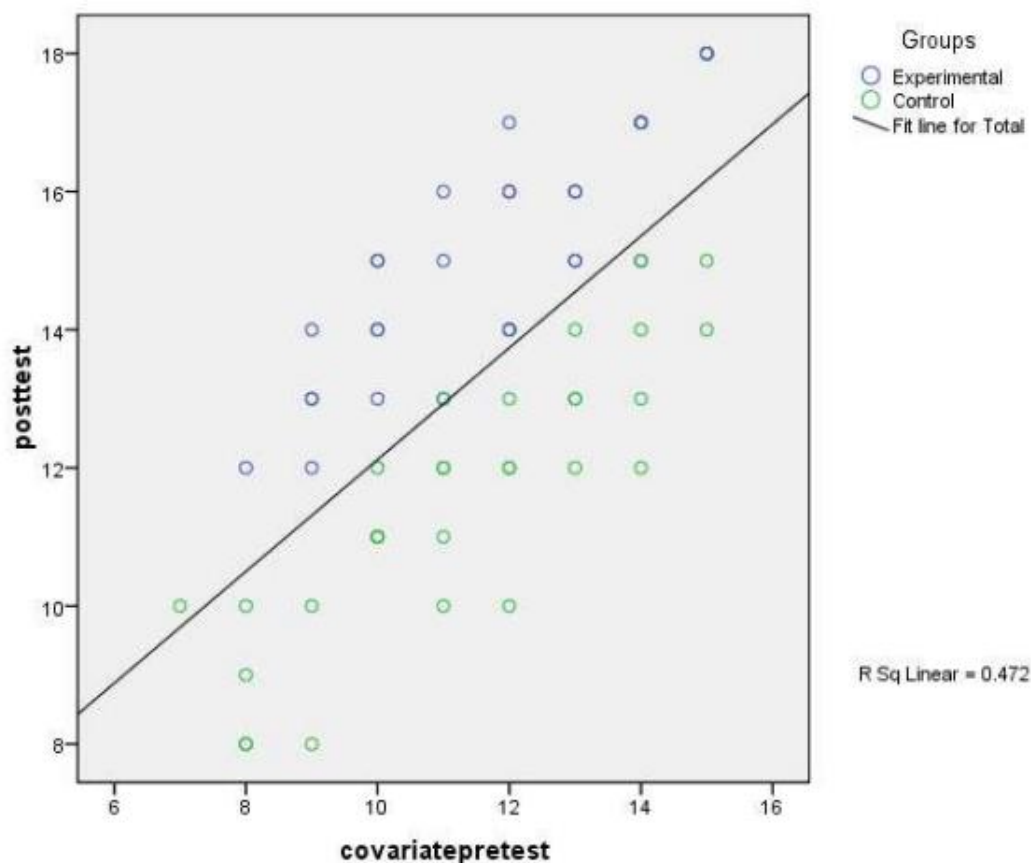
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Data Analysis and Results

To examine whether significant differences existed between the two groups of participants prior and after the instruction, descriptive statistical procedures, and ANCOVA were applied to ascertain the extent to which paragraph writing influenced the learners' proverb learning and knowledge.

ANCOVA assumes that the relationship between the dependent variable and each of your covariates is linear (straight-line).

*Some Basic Assumptions of ANCOVA*



**Figure 4.1: Linearity for each Group**

Figure 4.1 shows the linearity for each group. It is easily noticed that the relationship between the dependent variable and covariate is linear for both groups. Therefore, the assumption of linearity was not violated, and, as far as this assumption is concerned, conducting ANCOVA is not problematic.



### Research Article

The next assumption is called the Homogeneity of regression slopes. That is, the relationship between the dependent variable and the covariate is the same for each group. It is checked to show that there is no interaction between the covariate and the treatment.

**Table 4.1. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the Homogeneity of Regression Slopes**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	323.769 <sup>a</sup>	3	107.923	108.768	.000
Intercept	47.638	1	47.638	48.011	.000
Groups	5.220	1	5.220	5.260	.030
covariate	141.425	1	141.425	142.533	.000
<b>Groups * Covariate</b>	.012	1	.012	.012	<b>.904</b>
Error	55.565	56	.992		
Total	11046.000	60			
Corrected Total	379.333	59			

a. R Squared = .818 (Adjusted R Squared = .835)

In the Table 4.1, the only value that needs to be checked is the significance level of the interaction term (shown above as **Groups \* covariate**). The Sig. value is greater than .05 indicating that the assumption of the Homogeneity of Regression Slopes has not been violated. Therefore, the Analysis of Variance can be properly conducted to explore the differences between our treatment groups.

#### Descriptive Analysis of the Data

The results of the groups' descriptive statistics are summarized and tabulated in tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4. Table 4.2 presents the result of the descriptive statistics of the control group on both pretest and posttest measures.

**Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics of the control group**

	N	Minimu m	Maximu m	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Pretest</b>	30	5	14	<b>11.15</b>	1.17
<b>Posttest</b>	30	6	16	<b>12.14</b>	1.05
<b>Valid N</b>	30				

According to the above table, it is revealed that the pretest mean value of the control group for proverb knowledge was 11.15 with the standard deviation of 1.17. With regard to its performance on the posttest, the control group showed some degree of improvement on proverb knowledge measure [Mean= 12.14, SD= 1.05].

## Research Article

**Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics of the Experimental Group**

	N	Minimu m	Maximu m	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>pretest</b>	30	8	15	12	2.03
<b>posttest</b>	30	12	18	14.21	1.18
Valid N	30				

Table 4.3 indicates the result of the descriptive statistics of the experimental group on the proverb knowledge measures before and after the treatment. Prior to the instruction, the experimental group had a mean value of 12 with the standard deviation of 2.03. However, it is revealed that its performance on the proverb knowledge measure improved after the treatment. It can be inferred that the instruction through paragraph writing tasks was effective in enhancing learners' proverb learning [Mean= 14.21, SD= 1.18].

**Table 4.4. Descriptive Statistics of both groups on the posttest**

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Experimenta l</b>	14.21	1.18	30
<b>Control</b>	12.14	1.05	30

Table 4.4 illustrates the descriptive analysis of the experimental and control groups for the posttest scores of proverb knowledge tests. Findings revealed that the mean value of the experimental group on the posttest measures of the proverbs is 14 with a standard deviation of 1.18. However, the mean value of the control group of the study in the posttest is lower than that of the experimental group (Mean= 12.14., SD= 1.05 30 1.05). Thus, it can be claimed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the posttest of proverb knowledge test despite the initial difference in their pre-test mean values. Yet, in order to investigate whether the difference between groups is significant, the results of ANOVA should be presented and discussed. What follows in the next section is a discussion of the inferential statistics of the research.

## Discussion

It is an initial attempt to explore an area which has not previously been tackled by researchers in this EFL context. The study offers a quantitative analysis of the results of the study. This analysis revealed that instruction through paragraph writing tasks are highly useful in improving Iranian EFL learners' proverb learning.

Proverbs constitute a significant part of cultural life of people. Although these expressions represent folk wisdom, their appearance is not a finite process as they are often used in everyday life and new coinages are being introduced in to the English language. Proverbs perform many functions. They can be used as warnings, encouragements, judgments, morals, advice. They might also be used by people to support ones truth, attitude or belief. Very often proverbs are encountered in press, television and radio programmes, literature, education, songs, political speeches, legal documents, slogans, caricatures, comic books and greeting cards. Proverbs have two levels of comprehension, namely, the literal and figurative ones. Some of the proverbs have both of these levels of understanding, while other proverbs cannot be used with literal meanings as they are meaningless or absurd. This study is by no means conclusive. Further

### Research Article

developments and additions can be made. More investigation can lead to acquiring more data to be scrutinized. Different methodology might also prove useful in improving EFL learners' proverb and vocabulary knowledge. This study could also inspire future research in the area of vocabulary instructions.

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