

Does the Type of Task Affect Learning Collocations? Focused vs. Unfocused Tasks

Zahra Montasseri

Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

Email: zmontasseri1992@gmail.com

Zahra Kheradmand

Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

Email: zahra_kheradmand88@yahoo.com

Abstract

The significance of communicative competence, a part of which includes knowledge of collocations in second language has been emphasized in recent approaches of EFL/ESL. Through a quantitative analysis of learners' performance on collocations, the impact of focused and unfocused tasks on development of collocations was examined. To accomplish the purpose of the study, two upper-intermediate Iranian groups studying English in Faragiran Language Institute, Shiraz, Iran, were selected through convenient sampling. One group experienced focused tasks (N=16) and the other one practiced unfocused tasks (N=16). The achievement test of collocations designed by Pishghadam, Khodadady, and Rad (2011) was administered as the pretest at the beginning of the course. Then, both groups received the aforementioned treatments throughout 15 sessions. The same collocation test was once again administered as the posttest of the study at the end of the treatment. A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the mean scores of both groups to find the effect of focused vs. unfocused tasks on the learners' improvement in English collocations. The results indicated that both focused and unfocused tasks had a statistically significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' development of collocations; however, the focused tasks were more effective.

Keywords: Task-based instruction, Focused task, Unfocused task, Collocation

Received July 19, 2016; Accepted December 13, 2016.

© 2016 Khate Sefid Press

Introduction

One of the current trends in language teaching is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is originated from communicative language teaching. The primary focus of TBLT is to involve the learners in the process of accomplishing tasks for the purpose of interaction through negotiation. Instead of offering a predetermined fixed syllabus, learners' needs are analyzed through performing tasks, and then an appropriate syllabus is designed by the teacher. Since tasks are the building blocks of TBLT, their roles have received advocacies from researchers in recent years. The interests in task appeared in 1980's with the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT). Studies show that deliberate teaching of grammar formally does not lead to effective communication outside the classroom. However, engaging learners amid the process of learning grammar through performing tasks will lead to a more promising communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Long (1985) asserts a definition of task as a piece of activity for learners to accomplish freely or for reward. This definition, however, suggests that any type of activity that people do for reward can be considered as task, even if they are not learners or teachers. On the other hand, Skehan (1996) defines task as an activity in classroom which puts focus on meaning, has relationship to the real world, includes some priority for accomplishment, and its outcome is its assessment. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) believe that a task is an activity that requires learners to employ language meaningfully in order to reach a specific goal. Moreover, Lee (2000) asserts that a task is a kind of in-class activity or exercise with a particular objective that requires interaction with peers with a focus on meaning. In another definition he claims that a task is a language learning attempt that requires attention, comprehension, manipulation, and performance to produce the target outcome.

According to Ellis (2003), there are some features considered to be the criteria to call an activity a task, the features contains all the definitions presented above.

1. A task is a work plan: A task includes a plan for learner activity.
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.
4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.
5. A task engages cognitive processes.

6. A task has a clearly defined outcome

Ellis (2003) identifies the following critical features of a task (pp. 9-10):

A task is a work plan, encompassing a plan for doing the activity; however, the result may not match the intended plan of the task.

A task involves a primary focus on meaning. However, it just indicates the content, yet the negotiation of meaning is the job of the teacher and the learners.

A task involves real-world processes of language use. However, the process of performing the tasks will reflect those that occur in real-life situations.

A task can involve any of the four language skills, requiring learners to receive or produce. Therefore, tasks may not be different from exercises.

A task engages cognitive processes. These processes do not determine the choice of language. So, the actual choice of words is remained to the learners.

A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome. The outcome of the task reflects when the learners have completed the task.

What's more, Ellis (2003) distinguishes between two types of tasks: focused and unfocused tasks. Unfocused tasks are pre-designed for learners to choose from a range of forms, but do not require learners to use a specific form in mind. Focused tasks, however, are designed with a specific feature for learners to process, for example a particular grammatical structure. So, focused tasks have two goals: to focus on authentic and communicative language, and to engage learners into the process of accomplishing the linguistic feature of the task. Ellis (2003) argues that there are two ways of designing a focused task: one is to assign a particular linguistic feature as the objective of the task, and the other way is to make the language itself the primary goal of the task, like consciousness raising activities which focus on conscious attention to grammar. Hence, focused and unfocused tasks may bring about different results in language learning in general. Since there are few studies on the effects of these two types of the tasks on lexical knowledge, this study aims to shed light on it by filling the void. The current study, therefore, is an attempt to investigate the effects of focused vs. unfocused tasks on Iranian EFL learners' development of collocations.

Literature Review

TBLT has its root in the studies of Prabhu who conducted a piece of research in Bangalore-southern India and employed various types of task as the core unit of language instruction (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). Accordingly, other scholars found promising results revealing the affirmative impact of tasks on learning specific facets of language in classrooms. Long and Crookes (cited in Richard & Rodgers, 2001, p. 229), for example, asserted that “tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation to operate target language samples to learners-input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities- and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty.” Moreover, Widdowson (1998) acclaimed that both form and function are significant in tasks and exercises, however, the identifiable discrepancy between a task and an exercise is the kind of meaning they entail. While a task pertains to the pragmatic meaning in context, an exercise is merely concerned with semantic meaning. In a similar vein, Krashen pointed out that “Tasks, it is said, provide full opportunities for both input and output requirements which are believed to be key processes in language learning” (cited in Richard and Rodgers, 2011, p.228).

Regarding the empirical studies done on focused and unfocused tasks, Rouhi and Samiei (2010) inquired the effects of these two tasks on the accuracy of simple past tense in EFL writing. To accomplish this, 60 Azari learners of English were divided into three groups of focused, unfocused, and control. A test package containing fill-in-the-blank, essay type, error correction, and short-answer tests was given to the participants. The errors regarding past tense were underlined in the packages of the focused group, while all the fallacious items were underlined in the unfocused group and the control group received no feedback at all. The experimental groups were supposed to celebrate and reflect on the feedbacks. The same packages were once again given to the participants after the first and third weeks. The results of Split-plot ANOVAs indicated that accuracy of simple past tense in all the groups had improve from time one to two, but not from time two to time three.

Furthermore, Ahour and Ghorbani (2015) investigated the impacts of the aforementioned types of tasks on 60 homogeneous freshmen university students’ grammatical achievement studying English translation. The participants took a teacher-made production test of grammar at the beginning of the study; then, the treatment lasted for ten sessions. At the end of the study the

same test was once again administered as the post-test. The findings revealed that learners who experienced focused tasks performed statistically significantly on the post-test, meaning that focused tasks were influential on development of grammar.

Likewise, Panah (2015) investigated the effect of unfocused tasks on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. To this aim, 30 intermediate EFL learners were randomly assigned into two groups, one of which received task-based instruction employing unfocused tasks as the primary unit of instruction, while the other group experienced traditional methods of reading comprehension instruction. The results of the comparison of pre and posttests of groups demonstrated that unfocused tasks had dramatic effects on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension development.

As the literature suggests, a number of studies has been carried out on the effects of focused vs unfocused tasks on different components of language such as reading comprehension and grammatical achievement. However, more research needs to be done to investigate the effects of focused and unfocused tasks on other aspects of language such as learning collocations which is the focus of this study. Lewis (1993) claims that collocations may be defined as a set of words that can be found together in a prefabricated speech pattern. These collocations build up a lot of written and spoken language. Achieving language proficiency is not just a matter of learning vocabulary, but acquiring collocational patterns of a language is a major part of comprehension and production of that language. Additionally, grammatical structures cannot provide a good deal of word combinations. Considering the crucial role of tasks in language learning, this study tries to find whether focused and unfocused tasks have any effects on learning English collocations or not. Therefore, two types of tasks are compared in terms of their impact on learning collocations. In order to fulfill the objectives of the study, following research questions are addressed:

Do focused and unfocused task have any impact on Iranian EFL learners' development of collocations?

Is there any difference between focused and unfocused tasks in improving knowledge of collocations?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 32 female EFL learners studying English at Faragiran Institute, Shiraz. They varied in age from 14 to 17. They studied Interaction 1 Reading (Kirn & Hartmann, 2002) during 16 sessions. The participants were divided into two groups of 16 randomly. In one class (N=16) opinion gap, information gap and real life unfocused tasks were practiced. In the other class (N=16), focused tasks of structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and instructed based production tasks were given to the learners.

Instruments

One of the instruments used in this study was an achievement test of collocations designed by Pishghadam, Khodadady, and Rad (2011) in order to measure the learners' development of collocations. The test consisted of 40 multiple choice items. The reliability of the test was calculated by Cronbach's Alpha and turned out to be .52. The second class of instruments in this study were two types of tasks: unfocused tasks like opinion gap tasks, information gap tasks, and real life tasks; and focused tasks like structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and unstructured based production tasks. In information gap tasks, learners are asked to find missing information necessary to complete a task or solve a problem and are contrasted with opinion gap tasks, in which the information is given and the learners are required to give their own opinions on the information given. In real life tasks, the learners are asked to talk about real life situations and experiences. In structured based production tasks, the researchers or teacher introduce tasks designed to elicit the productive use of specific structures. In instructed based production tasks, the learners should produce or manipulate forms based on specific instructions given by tasks or the teachers. Comprehension tasks are filled with specific structures and learners are asked to process the particular forms in spoken and written texts.

Data Collection Procedure

At the beginning of the study, the achievement test of collocations was administered as the pretest of the study. Then, both groups were taught based on task-based instruction (TBI). In one class focused tasks such as structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and

unstructured based production tasks were practiced in which the learners were asked to practice different structures such as present tense, past tense, present perfect, and modals. For example, for unstructured based production tasks, the learners were asked to read some stories and then summarize the texts using present or past tenses. For structured based production tasks, the learners were given some picture stories and were asked to write about the stories using specific structures each time. For comprehension tasks, they were asked to find instruction on foods, drugs, and other products in which modals were used. The purpose of these tasks were to focus directly on one particular linguistic feature. In the other class, however, unfocused tasks like opinion gap tasks, information gap tasks, and real life tasks were practiced. These tasks do not focus directly on a specific linguistic feature, but deal with the general communicative ability of the learners. The researchers provided the learners with some of these unfocused tasks such as exchanging information about TV programs or train and airplane timetables, finding the differences in different pictures, and finding solutions for some real life problems such as reserving hotel or tables for dinner through practicing role plays. At the end of the course, the same achievement test of collocations was once again administered as the posttest of the study.

Data Analysis

At first, descriptive statistics of the students' scores on the collocation pretest and posttest were obtained. Then the two groups' overall scores on the collocation achievement pretest and posttests were compared using a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to see whether there was any statistically significant difference between the performance of the students in the focused task group and that of the unfocused task group.

Results and Discussion

In this section, research questions are restated separately and findings related to them are discussed. RQ1. Do focused and unfocused task have any impact on Iranian EFL learners' development of collocations?

The descriptive statistics was run in order to report the mean and standard deviation of both groups. As Table 1 illustrates, the mean of pretest for the focused group is 18.75 (N=16,

SD=2.14) and for the posttest it is 31.75. This shows a difference in the performance of the focused group before and after the treatment. The unfocused group, on the other hand, has a mean of 17.69 for the pretest (N=16, SD=2.51) and its mean for the posttest is 28.16 out of 40. As the results show both focused and unfocused tasks were effective in improving the vocabulary knowledge of learners regarding collocations. The results were in line with the studies which showed that either focused or unfocused tasks were effective in improving accuracy of grammatical structures (Rouhi & Samiei, 2010) and reading comprehension (Panah, 2015).

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for pretest and posttest collocation test scores

	Collocation test	Group	N	Mean	SD
Descriptive statistics	Pre-test	focused	16	18.75	2.14
		Unfocused	16	17.69	1.70
	Post-test	focused	16	31.75	2.51
		Unfocused	16	28.16	3.84

However, in order to statistically examine the differences in the two groups' performances on collocation tests, a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

RQ2. Is there any difference between focused and unfocused tasks in improving knowledge of collocations?

As the results in Table 2 indicate, there was a significant interaction between time and group (i.e., different treatments) (Wilk's Lambda=.516, $F(1, 30) = 28.15$, Sig=.000, Partial eta squared=.484), meaning that the two groups' development in knowledge of collocation showed much difference and the effect size was large (.484). As for the impact of the two types of treatment, the effect was statistically significant ($F(1, 30) = 30.30$, Sig=.000, Partial eta squared=.503), showing significant difference in the effectiveness of the two types of tasks in improving knowledge of collocation with a great effect size (.503). Moreover, there was a significant main effect for time (Wilk's Lambda=.092, $F(1, 30) = 269.49$, Sig=.000, Partial eta

squared=.908) which shows that both groups greatly improved their knowledge of collocation over time and the effect of time, as indicated by the effect size, was large.

Table 2.

Results of mixed between-within subjects ANOVA for pretest and posttest scores on collocation tests

Mixed-between-within ANOVA							
Multivariate tests (of within subject effect)	Effect	Wilk's		Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
		Lambda	F				
		value					
	Time	.092	296.49	1	30.000	.000	.908
	Time*Group	.516	28.15	1	30.000	.000	.484
Tests of between-subject effect	Group	Type III		Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
		Sum of Squares	Df				
		272.50	1(30)	272.50	30.30	.000	.503

According to the findings of this study, different methods of practicing tasks had positive effects on EFL learners' improvement of collocations. However, in agreement with Ahour and Ghorbani's (2015) study which showed that focused tasks were more effective in improving grammar, in this study, learners who were given focused tasks in their class were more capable of using collocations at the end of the study. This may be due to the fact learners try to pay attention to a particular linguistic feature while doing the tasks, and therefore deliberately learn other linguistic features as well. Yet, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) suggested that focused tasks such as structured based production tasks are effective in automatizing existing knowledge. Therefore, it can be inferred that focused tasks help learners to both pay attention to specific linguistic features and automatize them. Also, in this approach to accomplishing tasks, learners usually make small groups to share their ideas and transact different experiences with other members of the group without feeling anxious or embarrassed of expressing their opinions so

that all the students solve the problems in a safe environment. Moreover, the self-esteem built in learners enhances their satisfaction with the learning experience and promotes positive attitudes toward the whole idea of learning a second language.

Although the learners who were given unfocused tasks showed a significant difference in improvement of collocations, the difference was not too much. This may be due to the fact that the purpose of the unfocused tasks is primarily to develop learners' communicative competence rather than a direct attention of form of the task to learn a particular linguistic feature. Therefore, collocations were not the subject of attention in this model of task performance. Fig. 1 shows the mean difference between the pretests and posttests of both groups.

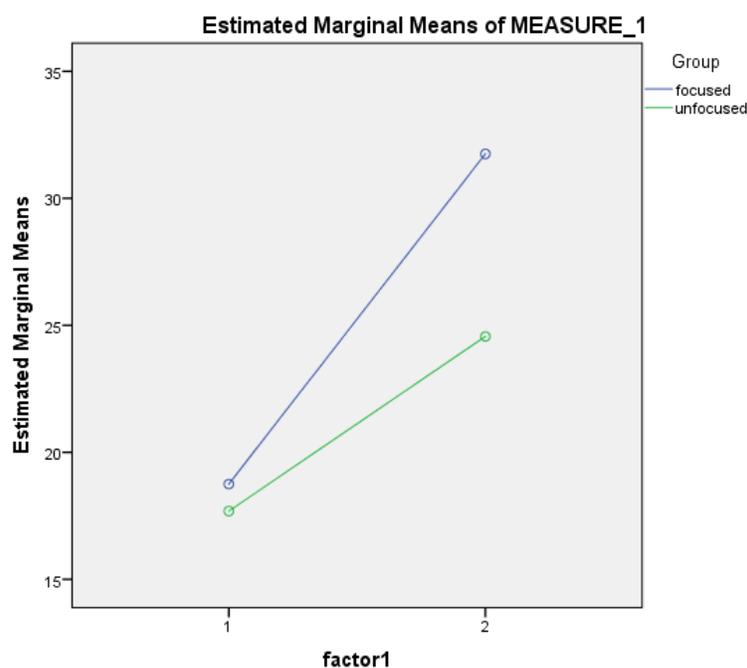


Figure 1. Comparison of pretest (1) and posttest (2) scores on collocation test of the focused and unfocused groups

As it is shown in the figure above, both types of tasks improved the learners' knowledge of collocation; however the students in the focused group showed a rather better performance than their counterparts in the unfocused group over time. Learners who were given unfocused tasks also showed a small change in their improvement of collocations. This might be due to the

fact that unfocused tasks are designed for communicative purpose and one way or another, they have an impact on the overall performance of the group. But, in comparison to focused tasks, they do not urge the students to pay attention to structures and forms, particularly collocation which is the focus of this study. Unfocused tasks also may be beneficial in other aspects of linguistic development like speaking skill or pronunciation of the words. However, regarding the development of collocations, focused asks are probably more effective.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, in line with results from other studies, different models of tasks have various impact on development of language skills and components. From what is presented above, it could be concluded that different types of tasks can have positive effects on the knowledge of collocation. Both focused and focused tasks showed to have a positive impact on the Iranian EFL learners' development of collocations; however, the focused tasks were more effective. The results of this study can be used by EFL teachers to find out the effectiveness of different kinds of tasks, so that they make better decisions about the activities given to the learners in and out of class. Moreover, the findings of the study may help curriculum designers create and design tasks which best serve learners' needs and wants. Learners also, may distinguish between impacts of tasks and use them for their own purposes. At the end, it is noteworthy that the results of this study may not be suitable for all contexts, and it may have contrary results in other situations because there were some shortcomings in the present study. Due to practical issues, both groups received treatment and the study lacked a control group. Yet, the small sample should be taken into account because there were only 16 participants in each group. Another shortcoming deals with the structures which were used for practicing focused tasks; it is possible that changing the types of structure sand forms affects the results. Therefore, the researcher recommend that further research needs to be done to compensate for the above shortcomings so that generalizability of the findings can be confirmed. Future studies may, among others, take the following suggestions into account: including larger samples as well as control groups in different contexts, using other examples of focused and unfocused tasks, and including different structures and forms in focused tasks. Also, a point should be taken into

account regarding the fact that not all the exercises of the classroom should be allocated to focused tasks because unfocused tasks are more useful in some situations especially when the general communicative performance of the learners are of importance.

References

- Ahour, T., & Shemshadsara, Z. G. (2015). The impact of focused and unfocused tasks on university students' grammatical achievement. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(1), 124-133.
- Bygate, M., Skehan, P., & Swain, M. (2001). *Researching pedagogic tasks, second language learning, teaching and testing*. Harlow: Longman.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fallahi, S., Malayeri, F., & Bayat, A. (2015). The effect of information-gap vs. opinion-gap tasks on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 2(3), 170-181.
- Kirn, E., Hartmann, P. (2002). *Interactions 1: reading*. McGraw-Hill.
- Lee, J. F. (2000). *Tasks and communicating in language classrooms*. McGraw-Hill.
- Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications
- Long, M. (1985). *A role for instruction in second language acquisition: Tasks based Language*. Oxford Multilingual Matters.
- Loschky, L., & Bley-Vroman, R. (1993). Grammar and Task-Based Methodology. In G. Crookes & S. Gass (Eds.), *Tasks and Language Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice, Vol 1*. (pp. 123-167). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matter.
- Panah, M.L. (2015). The effects of unfocused tasks on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. Paper presented at the 13th International TELLSI Conference, Iran: Lorestan University.
- Pishghadam, R., Khodadady, E., & Rad, N. D. (2011). The Effect of Form versus Meaning-Focused Tasks on the Development of Collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. *English Language Teaching*, 4(2), 180-189.
- Richards, S., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rouhi, A., & Samiei, M. (2010). The effects of focused and unfocused indirect feedback on accuracy in EFL writing. *The Social Sciences*, 5(6), 481-485.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language processing*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H. (1998). Skills, abilities, and contexts of reality. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 111-129.

Appendix

A Teacher-Made Collocation Test

Choose the best answer.

- 1) He serious heart attack, so he should not eat fat and greasy food.
a) catches b) has c) gets d) takes
- 2) A: I am not really in the mood for the party. I catch cold.
B: Take this pill; it may have GOOD effect your health.
a) on b) at c) within d) out
- 3) Most of the students the Internet courses this year in our university.
a) connect b) take c) get d) give
- 4) As she works hard these days, she tired and want to sleep. .
a) has b) gets c) remains d) takes
- 5) There was a(n) wind blowing.
a) quick b) heavy c) serious d) strong
- 6) People try to cut lots of trees in the jungles and build houses in the big cities.
a)out b) down c) off d) from
- 7) She suddenly stopped at the intersection anda right turn.
a) had b) got c) passed d) made
- 8) We are looking for somebody with a clearof direction.
a) taste b) feature c) point d) sense
- 9) It was clear from Luke's language that he was nervous and angry. His face turned red.
a) second b) verbal c) first d) body
- 10) You should stop at the intersection, when the traffic is red.
a) lamp b) light c) flash d) bulb
- 11) Only 25% of students who English test, passed the exam.
a) got b) used c) took d) made
- 12) They hadto accept the lawthe public pressure.
a) in addition to b) in response to c) in order to d) because
- 13) The informationavailable to anyone who wishes to see it.
a) feels b) gets c) is d)looks

- 29) Most office worker prefersfood to a sit-down meal in a restaurant.
a) natural b) quick c) healthy d) snack
- 30) A: You become very fat, so you should go a diet.
B: Sure, The doctor asked me to eat small amount of food during a day.
a) on b) for c) in d) into
- 31) I forgot to return library books on time, so I musta fine for it.
a) make b) have c) spend d) pay
- 32) The driver a ticket for going through a red light.
a) gives b) gets c) buys d) makes
- 33) When you want to go on a trip, take this map. So, you will notlost.
a) have b) get c) become d) take
- 34) David was very fat, but he isweight now. He looks very handsome.
a) Putting b) losing c) holding d) missing
- 35) Mina is still in contact with Sarah. They are old high school friends.
a) near b) close c) nice d) nearby
- 36) Can youme a direction for getting to John's house?
a) give b) take c) state d) tell
- 37) You look very dangerous, try to stayI do not want to see you again.
a) around b) on c) in d) away
- 38) Could you fill the glasswater? I am thirsty.
a) in b) of c) with d) out
- 39) The life situation can vary completelycountrycountry.
a) between-with b) among-to c) from-to d) between-to
- 40) Mr. Smith was forced to high fee for his lawyer's work. It was so expensive.
a) pay b) give c) take d) spend

Authors

Zahra Montasseri is a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL at Shiraz University, Shiraz. She holds a bachelor's degree of English Literature and MA of English language teaching from Shiraz University. Her areas of interest are discourse analysis, CDA, skills, extensive reading, and applied linguistics.

Zahra Kheradmand Saadi got her BA in English Language and Literature and MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran. She is presently a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Shiraz University. Her areas of interest include L2 literacy, assessment of EFL learners' L2 writing ability, sociocultural theory, and language assessment.