

An Effective Way to Memorize New Words— Lexical Chunk*

Xiufang Xia
Qingdao University of Science and Technology, China

Abstract—Vocabulary is the basis of language, but memorizing new words has always been a hard job for all English learners. This paper was written based on the theories on lexical chunk by Lewis and other scholars, and the experiment conducted on my own teaching class. The paper explored the function of lexical chunks, types of lexical chunk, high frequency lexical chunks, the differences between lexical chunks in English and Chinese, and how to implement the method of lexical chunk teaching.

Index Terms—lexical chunk, high frequency lexical chunk, function

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years teaching methodologists have made some proposals for a lexical-phrase oriented pedagogy. The most influential one is Michael Lewis' chunking, which was defined in his book *Lexical Approach*. In this book, he raised teachers' and researchers' awareness of lexical chunk in a broad way.

Efficient communication is never simply a matter of making any grammatically right sentence. Through thousands of years of history, any language has stored quite a bunch of fixed expressions which can express meaning effectively. Communication, to a large extent, depends on having a series of fixed phrases which we can string together rapidly and efficiently.

Greaves and Warren (Greaves and Warren, 2010, P. 221) argue, "One of the central insights to come from corpus linguistics in the last thirty years is the extent to which competent users draw not only on a lexicon of individual words, but also on a range of lexicalized phrasal units which have come to known as "formulaic sequence". This reappraisal of the status of lexis is quite important. In communication, especially in the oral communications, grammar plays only a supportive role. Grammar is not involved in the creation of meaning, but rather concerned with the management of meaning. Wilkins (Wilkins, 1972, P. 11) said, "Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Lewis also argued that grammar is subordinate to lexis in creating meaning, a view captured in the oft-quoted aphorism: "Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar".

Some Chinese researchers also made studies in this field and pointed out the importance of lexical chunk in second language acquisition. Lexical chunks are usually defined as prefabricated multi-word units stored in brain in integral form which can be extracted to use. The application of lexical chunks can effectively prevent the negative transfer of mother in the use of English.

II. FUNCTION OF LEXICAL CHUNK

A. The Importance of Lexical Chunk

It is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantages of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced.

L2 learners try to attain a native-like command of the foreign language, because the chunks can help produce stretches of discourse that sound natural to native speakers. Because their set meanings, chunks can aid fluency in speaking and reading, and improve listening proficiency with the mastering of formula expressions.

There are quite a few terms referring to multi-word items: lexicalized phrasal units, formulaic sequence, collocations and lexical chunks, lexical phrase, or lexical bundle. The different expressions should never be a problem in the research of lexical chunk in English language teaching. As Conzett (Conzett, 2000,P.85) argues, "The single most important thing for teachers, more than worrying whether or not something is a collocation, is to shift their and their students' focus away from individual words to chunks of language".

B. Lexical Chunk and Grammar

Romer (Romer, 2009) speaks of the interdependence of lexis and grammar, which have been traditionally regarded as separate.

* This is the thesis for the project 14XB38: the feasibility analysis of lexical chunk in second language acquisition. The project was launched in 2015 by the humanities department of Qingdao University of science and technology.

Lexical chunk is a frequent meaningful sequence of words that may include both lexical and grammatical words. The definition of lexical chunk effectively subsumes other terms one finds in the literature such as lexical phrase, phrasal expression, formulaic sequence and lexicalized sentence stem.

Language users have a large number of half pre-constructed phrases, which are collocations and chunks in our term. The open choice principle involves direct resource to grammar and word-by-word generation of an utterance or sentence. Fluency is gained by making fewer and larger choices from the lexicon than one would make by following the “slot and filler” approach, which means word for word formation of a sentence.

III. TYPES OF LEXICAL CHUNKS

A. Different Type of Lexical Chunks

There are many types of lexical chunks in English. They are differentiated into the following types:

1. The different collocations made up of different grammatical combinations

- Adjective + noun collocation, e.g. *partial statement, resentful emotions, social status, occasional interrupt, favorable account, nasty temper, negative influence, humorous comic, persuasive presentation, tragic fate, bleak prospect*. These adjective and nouns patterns are quiet common in every passage in *New Horizon College English*. To instruct students to learn those words in the lexical chunks not only can help students to understand the meanings in contextual situations, but also help them to memorize the more words in a better way. The patterns are stored in mind for future use in oral or written English.

- Noun + noun collocation, e.g. *grammar rule, personnel interview, customer complaint, emergency ambulance, the knots in one's stomach, abdomen pain, drug addict, cherry blossom, coalition government*.

- Verb+ noun collocation, e.g. *save a document; compile a corpus, overturn one's opinion, proclaim independence, await approval, activate the alarm, aisle seat, alleviate pain, articulate thought, commit blackmail*

2. Collocation are not necessarily immediately adjacent, e.g. *drive someone crazy, wrinkle her brow, civilize the barbarian, show compassion for the victims, confer an honorary degree, and conquer the world champion*.

3. Field-specific collocations: They refer to the specific collocation that only appears in certain field.

4. Verb phrases, which are so often used, are usually considered as one word. *Look forward to, make up one's mind, put on, take off, subject to, set out, blast forth, burst into, reach for, and bolt out*.

5. Idioms: *pull one's leg, at the end of one's rope, asleep at the switch, bark is worse than your bite, at the drop of one's hat, nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards, take the preemptive opportunities, be down-to-earth, no discord no concord*.

Speaking of idioms, native speakers of English somehow intuitively know there is a connection between its meaning and the metaphor behind it. Having learners try and figure out their meaning helps them to have a deep and elaborative processing. The autonomous understanding of idioms is very hard, even with the help of contextual clues since many idioms contain content words which are multi-interpretable

B. The Importance of Lexical Chunk Recognition

During L2 class, it is the teacher's duty to draw students' attention to the lexical phrases that happen to occur in the textbook or in the classroom discussion. Students are encourage to record the collocations and other useful phrases they encounter while they are reading. So developing strategies for the recognition and the recording of chunks students encounter not only in, but also out classroom. This belief of incidental chunk uptake rests on analogy with L1 acquisition. Since most vocabulary in the native language is acquired, not taught, the ideal method of acquiring lexical chunk is to be exposed to enough suitable input, instead of formal teaching.

IV. THE DIFFERENCES OF LEXICAL CHUNKS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Generative grammar used configurational and non-configurational languages to make a distinction between languages. Configurational languages, like English, have a fixed word order. The grammatical functions in the fixed expressions can be easily defined, while other languages, such as Japanese, have a freer word order, and grammatical functions are marked by other means. Since a lot of English expressions have the fixed order, it is quite important to teach the students these fixed forms in ESL class. The fixed expressions in oral and written English will make the speaker express more accurately and sometimes more precisely.

It is not easy to transfer the lexical chunks from one language to the other. Usually, a student may produce a given L2 word string without realizing that this is an erroneous word-for-word translation of L1 chunk. The translation either has the wrong meaning or no meaning at all in the L2 language. The ability to distinguish collocations from free word combinations in the L2 is also very essential in order to improve lexical chunk building in the second language acquisition.

To some extent, lexical chunks can serve as access points for raising learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences. Such as the phrases *kick the bucket, face the music*, which the students found hard to understand at first, but which to be the ones effectively learned after some contextual background is exposed to the learners. By calculation, about 15% of

the lexical chunk contain cultural information that need to be taught to the learners, so lexical chunks serve as the bridge to bring historical and cultural tips to the learners.

However, while mastering of lexical chunk is helpful in improve learners' linguistic competence, many studies have shown that it is an area of great difficulty even at an advanced level. To master more lexical chunks in this field, one needs effort and method.

English is a dependent-marking language. For example, possession is marked on the dependent word "man's, while in Chinese, possession is followed by the character "de". The differences in grammatical level put some difficulties in the study of lexical chunks in a foreign language. Between the two languages, learners and speakers tend to show certain preference to some lexical chunks. For example, Chinese students overuse some common interactive chunks, such as "I think", and they usually overuse the first pronoun "I". Instructors should teacher students to learn more lexical chunks that have the similar meaning with "I think" to replace it.

V. THE HIGH-FREQUENCY LEXICAL CHUNKS

The stocks of chunks of English is enormous. The highly-frequency chunks stand the best chance of being acquired incidentally since they are most likely to be encountered in many contextual situations. Since in the acquisition of vocabulary of a second language, the chunks are much less noticeable than an unknown word. Sometimes the lexical chunks are made of familiar words whose joint meaning is straightforwardly emergent. Students usually do not pause to think if the words in surrounding context are fixed expression unless they have met these lexical chunks many times before. It is the instructors' duty to point out for the students and asked them to memorize the words in their sequential order. So only the very high frequency appear to meet the conditions for incidental uptake through multiple encounters to become probable. For those of the medium-frequency chunks, instructors need to have explicit explanation and target in the classroom. The proficiency of English is strongly associated with a broad knowledge of chunks, not just the highly-frequent ones.

The medium-frequency chunks should be more targeted at the classroom, and there are still thousands of chunks which need explicit explanation. Because explicit explanation provides a shortcut in the learning process, since students have difficulty engaging in the mental elaboration themselves. When explaining these chunks, teachers can make students more easily understand them by elaborating from the two aspect. One is the semantic point of view, which means the meaning of a lexical term should be stressed. The other one is the form of a lexical item.

When learners learn a second language, they adopt a word-by-word process which makes it difficult for them to take in multiword sequences. Native language transfer is the factor that prevents learners to memorize the lexical chunks. Learners tend to adopt word for word translation before they learn the standard way of expressing a certain meaning, and they tend to understand the lexical chunks from their literal meaning, which sometimes may cause misunderstanding since some lexical chunks' meaning cannot be understood literally.

VI. THE EXPERIMENT

I ran two parallel controlled groups in the course of the school year. Both groups are the freshmen in my college, and they are taking English as the obligatory class. One group repeatedly engaged in chunking activities, while the other one was taught in the traditional way without emphasizing the concept of lexical chunk. The experimental group and the control group were exposed to this course during a period of 4 months, with four hours of English study for one week. They were matched in terms of input quantity, topics and communicative strategies. The text book used in the two groups was *New horizon College English* (third edition), with one teacher teaching the two groups. The instruction the experimental groups received differed from that of the control group only was in the way the teacher exploited the reading texts and transcripts of the recording. In the experimental group, the teacher intentionally put more emphasis on the lexical chunks and the syntagmatic behavior of words. During the instruction, the teacher asked the students to underline chunks and collocations. In this way, lexical chunks, rather than single words, are targeted. At the end of each class, students are asked to write at least 5 lexical chunks in their notebooks that were worth remembering. While in the control group, students' attention was drawn to the meaning and form of each singular word. Vocabulary was taught was discussed at a paradigmatic level. For example, words were compared to synonyms, antonyms, etc. At the end of each class, students in the control group were also asked to write at least 5 words that are worth remembering.

Corpus data are quite important during this process of lexical-chunk teaching, since sometimes people use their intuitions to decide what constitutes a chunk. In my study, I rely on expert L2 speakers' counts of what they considered to be chunks. They are the sequence of words which are stored and retrieved as a whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being made up of using language grammar rules.

However, the benefits of lexical approach in learning a second language are obvious. Because of the intensive language training the students received during the 16 weeks, the experimental group made significant progress in remembering the lexical chunks, and they exhibit high ability in identifying the real meanings in the listening and can express their ideas more precisely in their writing. While their abilities in oral English are not statistically different. That is to say, the usage of lexical chunks in oral English is the requirement harder to obtain. Another explanation is that they although they were exposed to the lexical chunks, they have no enough time to master them sufficiently for a

challenging real-time speaking task. So students' ability of using lexical chunks in oral communication or in the process of retelling a story is comparatively low. Lexical chunks can hardly occur to students' mind especially when they are making an impromptu speech, unless they are quite familiar with them besides, the native language has a strong negative transfer in the using of these chunks, for chunks in both languages are not equivalent both in form and in meaning. So even students try to use the lexical chunks, they have the risk of using them in a wrong way. That's also the reason why the lexical chunks should be paid more attention in the process of teaching. Teachers should not only tell students the meaning of the lexical chunks, but also there is the necessity to show them the usage of the lexical chunks in contextual situations.

In each unit I asked each student to write down at least 20 lexical chunks, and then I gave them the ones that I need them to memorize. Along with the lexical chunks, there is at least one example sentence to show how the lexical chunk is used. The next week, I have a quiz about the chunks that they remembered. I got a very interesting find from the result of this kind of tests. Students were more likely to remember the patterned phrases, so the lexical chunks that have phonological rhyme should be pointed for the students.

There is phonological effect in memorizing the lexical chunk. Such as alliteration, which means word-initial consonant repetition is especially common, such as *beat around the bush, cool as a cucumber*. Rhyme, which means word-end sound repetition consists of the other part that have phonological pattern, such as *drank as a skunk*. The study of the experiment shows that lexical chunks with the phonological repetition can be remembered easily and the students are more likely to apply them both in oral and written English.

Other studies about lexical chunk teaching also showed that the patterned ones are easier to memorize. According to the study made by Lindstromberg and Boers (Lindstromberg and Boers, 2008) experiment with the participation of a different cohort of highly proficient students. The students were asked to memorize the lexical chunks with phonological repetition or phonological rhyme and the others without these fixed patterns. The results strongly suggest that the answer is affirmative: students were statistically more likely to remember the patterned ones than the un-patterned ones.

But there is one point that needs to be cleared out. From the quantitative analysis, the experimental students' production of chunks is higher in listening and writing, but no more in speaking. We'll also consider the qualitative difference with the control group. The result shows these characteristics.

First, with more lexical chunks in mind, students can understand dialogues in listening comprehension more easily, since sometimes the most important meaning is carried by the lexical chunk. The understanding of the lexical chunks is the key point and that's usually why the examiner gives the question.

For example: *Man: You have to face the music since you have no other choice.*

Woman: I think so!

Question: what is the woman's feeling?

We have to know the meaning of the lexical chunk "face the music", which is the key factor in understanding the conversation. Since it has nothing to do with music, lots of students will make mistake if they understand the meaning literally. Here "face the music" means one has to face something unpleasant reality.

Second: about the effect lexical chunks to oral English. There is still some difficulties for the students to apply the lexical chunks in oral English, due to the fact that they have little time to let these chunks to recur in their mind or the fact that they are not so familiar with them. Anyway, lexical chunks could be used as an important indicator of different oral English Proficiency levels of second language. The more knowledge of lexical chunks one possesses, the better proficiency he'll have in actual performance of oral proficiency. Furthermore, the mastering and usage of lexical chunks can reduce negative transfer of the mother tongue to a large degree since the lexical chunks can express the meaning more precisely. In real communication between a second language learner and a native speaker, the use of lexical chunk can narrow the cultural gap and get favorable result in communication or negotiation.

Then about the effect of lexical chunk to writing: Students trained in pedagogical chunking are more likely to use them in a writing task and the meanings conveyed by the lexical chunks tend to be more precise. After the four-months of lexical training, drawing students' attention to chunks appears important to make students memorize more words and enables them to make correct use of these lexical chunks in context level. More lexical chunks enable students to express the meaning more accurately and they can have more replacements rather than use the same expression to express a certain meaning

VII. TEACHING METHOD

A. Context Clues Helps Lexical Chunk Learning

Noticing alone was not sufficient for the experimental students to add more lexical chunks. In order to master these chunks and carry out the speaking tasks with the chunks, teachers need to match the lexical chunks from L2 with the exact meanings in L1, and more importantly, putting them into contextual situation is one effective way for the students to learn how to use them in real language situations.

B. Phonological Clues Help Lexical Chunk Learning

Since the phonological impact is very important, phonological repetition, especially alliteration, is pervasive not only in idioms but in all categories of chunks, for example compound *beer belly*, verb + noun collocation, *wage war*, proverbs and sayings *curiosity killed the cat*. In the classroom teaching, teachers let the students know the presence of alliteration or rhyme through their task instruction, since, most of the time, students have little inclination to notice phonological motivation on their own. Teacher's role is quite important in leading the learners to notice them and memorize them. This was confirmed by another experiment reported in Lindstromberg and Boers (Lindstromberg and Boers, 2008). In the experiment, teacher briefly alerted students in an experimental group to alliteration in the chunks they encountered in reading and listening texts during a 36-hour course, while he didn't intentionally do so when teaching the control group. The test result showed that the experimental group was much better than the control group. This suggests that the experimental students did indeed benefit from the occasional awareness-raising by the teacher. Drawing students' attention to the phonological repetition in a given chunk and perhaps suggesting that its lexical makeup might not be completely accidental is a way of engaging students in structural elaboration. This intervention is brief but nonetheless brings a measurable learning benefit.

Explicit targeting is an effective shortcut for the students to pay enough attention to the lexical chunk, and then the teacher can engage students in all kinds of mental elaboration, which they are unlikely to do on their own. Instructors can direct the students from the aspect of semantic meaning and form. By semantic point of view, it means students get a clear understanding of the meaning of the chunk. By form point of view, it means an easier way to understand and remember the lexical chunks through structural or phonological analysis.

C. Semantic Effect of the Lexical Chunks

In fact, some of the lexical chunks are teachable because their meaning and form is motivated in one way or another and the teacher can point out this motivation in order to engage students in elaboration, which is known to enhance retention. Sometimes, by revealing the imagery behind figurative chunks, semantics elaboration can be stimulated. Words tend to build partnerships with collocates with which they have semantic features in common. For example, for the word *commit* is often followed by the words which have strong meanings, such as murder, crime, manslaughter.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Targeting the lexical chunks in the classroom is the first step in helping the students understand and memorize them. To help students attain the fluency and accuracy of using these chunks, instructors need to provide ample opportunities for the students to reencounter them in different context situations. That is to say, appreciation of a chunk's rhyme and form is one thing, processing them in mind and make right application of these lexical chunks is another.

The linguistic motivation is a good way to elaborate works with very good efficiency. These methods can accelerate learning, but these methods alone cannot be sufficient by themselves to help students to learn a lot. The fluency of retrieval that is displayed by native speakers cannot easily be achieved. The understanding and memory of the chunks are the first steps of learning process, and then re-encounter and rehearsal are still considered to be the effective way to memorize them and use them in the right contextual situations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Conzett, J. (2000). Integrating collocation into a reading and writing course. In: Lewis, M (ed) *Teaching collocation: further developments in the lexical approach*. Hove: Language Teaching Publication
- [2] Greaves, C. and Warren, M. (2010). What Can a Corpus Tell us about Multi-Word Units? In O'Keeffe, A. and McCarthy, M. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 212-216.
- [3] Lewis, Michael. (1993). *The lexical approach. The State of ELT and a Way Forward* Hove: LTP
- [4] Lindstromberg, Seth, and Frank Boers. (2008). *Teaching Chunks of Language: From Nothing to Remembering* Rum/Innsbruck: Helbling Languages.
- [5] Romer, U. (2009). *Corpus linguistics perspective. Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [6] Wilkins, D. (1972). *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press

Xiufang Xia was born in Gaomi, Shandong province, China in 1975. She graduated from Ocean University of China in 2002. She is interested in functional linguistics, translation theories and second language acquisition.

She is currently teaching college English in Qingdao University of Science and Technology.