

## *Original Paper*

# Prefabricated Chunks and Second Language Output

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### **Abstract**

*Based on the theory of prefabricated language chunks, this article will mainly discuss the role of prefabricated language chunks in improving the quality of second language output. The explicit input of English chunks requires certain teaching strategies, so the teaching of prefabricated chunks should first distinguish the corresponding chunk features, combine instructive input with autonomous input, and design reasonable chunk output training, which promotes the prefabricated language chunks transformed into internal knowledge from input, thereby improving the level of second language output.*

### **Keywords**

*Prefabricated language chunks, Second language acquisition, Teaching strategies*

## **1. The Background of the Study**

Linguists believe that the output of the second language can more objectively reflect the language ability of second language learners, and the form of the second language output is generally expressed in the oral and written forms of the second language. Most English teachers find that when students use English to speak and write for second language output, the effect is generally unsatisfactory. The students' second language output problems are reflected in two aspects: one is the vocabulary problem, the choice of words is plain, the sentence structure is single, the words are not expressive, and the expression is unclear. Second, there are more grammatical errors. And whether in terms of vocabulary selection or grammar usage, most Chinese second language learners behave stiff, unnatural, and unnatural. This is because students have memorized a large number of words, but when outputting the second language, they have no choice due to the limited ability for word collocation and a large vocabulary size, they can only combine vocabulary for the moment. And in order to reduce errors, they prefer to choose simple and elementary vocabulary. Based on their current existing English knowledge, students tend to analogize, over-generalize or negatively transfer their mother tongue. As time passes,

fossilization errors will easily occur. Even if the teachers keep reminding and correcting their mistakes, students' fossilization problems have not been significantly improved. Therefore, it is necessary to solve the vocabulary and grammar problems from the source--the second language input, so as to effectively reduce the errors in the output and improve the learner's ability to use the second language. There are a large number of prefabricated language chunks in English, which integrate grammar, semantics, and context into one unity, and their structures are relatively fixed. Using these prefabricated language chunks as the basic unit for English teaching can provide students with the authentic English input. By consolidating through practice, it's possible to improve the learner's second language output effect, and enhance their pragmatic ability.

## **2. Definition and Classifications of Prefabricated Language Chunks and the Lexical Approach**

### *2.1 The Definition of Prefabricated Chunks*

There is currently no unified terminology and definition for the concept of prefabricated chunks. Becker, who first proposed the concept of prefabricated chunks, called it formulaic frames with analyzed slots. He believes that the memorization, storage, output, and use of language are not based on a single word. The smallest unit of communication is those fixed or semi-fixed chunk structure. He refers to lexical chunks as prefabricated language, pointing out that the input and output of a language are not in units of single words, but in the form of fixed or semi-fixed patterned language chunks. This kind of fixed or semi-fixed block structure is called prefabricated chunks. Pawley and Syder (n.d.) call it lexicalized sentence stems. They believe that the basic language units in English are made up of words with high frequency and varying degrees of lexicalization. Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) call it lexical phrases, which is a kind of language "chunks" composed of two or more words falling somewhere between traditional grammar and vocabulary concepts. Chinese linguists Wang and Zhang (n.d.) believe that "prefabricated chunks are a language structure with both vocabulary and grammatical features, usually composed of multiple words, and have specific discourse functions". What was commonly used is Wray's definition of lexical chunks: "a series of prefabricated coherent or incoherent words or other meaning units, which are stored in memory as a whole, without grammatical generation and analysis, and can be directly extracted and used as a whole". Lewis once pointed out that there were thousands of word chunks stored in the brains of people who use their native language. They naturally know which words can co-occur and match, and which words do not meet the collocation conditions. Therefore, the reason why they can use their native language fluently and accurately is mainly because native speakers first search for memory blocks from the brain storage and combine them together. These memory blocks are actually prefabricated language chunks. Prefabricated chunks, also known as formulaic sequences, lexical chunks, lexical bundles, multi-word units, etc. Different researchers use different terms to describe this concept.

In summary, prefabricated language chunks are those semantic units composed of two or more single words while formally fixed or semi-fixed, which have a high rate of recurrence in the text. These

chunks have a certain discourse function and exist like these independent sentences as a whole, they include idioms, fixed phrases, fixed sentence patterns, and fixed word strings that appear frequently in the text.

### 2.2 *The Classifications of Prefabricated Chunks*

According to the semantic connections and syntactic functions within the vocabulary, Lewis divides lexical chunks into four categories: (1) Polywords. Words of this kind are fixed phrases, such as “all in all, ahead of time, in spite of, etc.”. Such fixed phrases are the above-mentioned multi-word combinations. (2) Collocations, which is a habitual expression peculiar to language, a common feature of all languages, and refers to a relationship between words and words that are gradually formed during long-term use. This relationship is a structure of words that can mutually predict the possible appearance of their “partners”. These kind of words are like “take part in, strongly believe, etc.”. (3) Institutionalized utterances. Such as “it’s very kind of you, I’m afraid, there is no doubt...”. It refers to a fixed or semi-fixed vocabulary combination with a fixed pragmatic function; it is a fixed expression of a language in the course of long-term use. It is characterized by complete sentences that conform to grammatical rules and have clear pragmatic meaning. (4) Sentence frames and heads. Such as “to start with, I believe, firstly, secondly, finally, first of all, furthermore, last but not the least, on the one hand...on the other hand, etc.”. The sentence framework provides a basic structure for the complete expression of a certain meaning or point of view. It is an open structured phrase with spaces, often in the form of fixed or semi-fixed chunks. As a means of text organization, this kind of sentence frame space can be filled by different words or phrases to form sentences with different meanings or viewpoints, and derive different meaning changes. The above different terms collectively reflect the integrality in the form and the convention of semantics. They combine the advantages of grammar, semantics and context while own a relatively fixed grammatical structure restriction, stable collocation meaning and the environment of specific language use.

Based on language’s structure and function, Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) divides prefabricated language chunks into four categories: (1) Polywords or multi-word items: that is, fixed phrases with idioms, such as “on one’s own”, “to begin with”, etc. (2) Institutionalized expressions such as “no problem”, “lend a hand” and so on. The main feature of this kind of language chunks is a combination of words that are fixed or semi-fixed in form and have pragmatic functions. (3) Phrasal constraints such as “as long as time permits, to one’s disappointment / joy, etc.”. In English, framed phrases formed by certain fixed structures can be replaced as needed under certain language environment. Such lexical chunks are called phrasal constraints. (4) Sentence-builders and quotations: Such word blocks refer to vocabulary phrases and quotations that frame the entire sentence, such as “enjoy your..., have a ..., etc.”.

Prefabricated language chunks are dynamic, expandable, autonomous and integral. Language chunks change with the subject’s knowledge, experience, cognitive structure, and memory materials. Objective materials can be processed according to the experience and knowledge of different subjects and then

the amount of information in the chunks expands. The chunks are relatively independent but the internal elements are closely integrated, so they always appear as an element in use. If we can grasp the internal connection between each block and expand the amount of information, we can lighten the burden of short-term memory and expand the capacity of short-term memory. In traditional vocabulary teaching, many learners equate language input with vocabulary input, thinking that learning English is to memorize vocabulary. Although a lot of time and energy are invested, the effect of English output expression is not satisfactory.

### *2.3 The Lexical Approach*

The lexical approach advocated by Lewis (1993) takes lexical chunks as the basic unit of language teaching. He believes that language is not composed of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but composed of multi-word prefabricated chunks. Many scholars have studied prefabricated language chunks from a cognitive perspective and found that language is stored in the brain in the form of chunks, which is the whole memory. When needs to be extracted, this kind of “whole memory” is output without the temporary construction by learners, which reduces the information processing time and improves the efficiency of information processing. The learner is able to output fluent second language, which reduces many petrochemical errors caused by grammatical reorganization, mother tongue interference, cultural differences and other factors. Prefabricated language chunks teaching is conducive to improve the efficiency of information processing and the comprehensive application ability for second language learners. It can generate a sense of achievement and strong learning motivation, and play a positive role in promoting second language acquisition.

### **3. Prefabricated Chunk Input and Second Language Output Ability**

The second language output ability is composed of the learner’s language knowledge and language application ability. The output ability of language is related to the accumulation of prefabricated language chunks, whose accumulation and familiarity greatly affect the improvement of learners’ language ability. Research on second language vocabulary acquisition shows that there is a clear correlation between the ability to recognize prefabricated chunks and the second language level. The amount of prefabricated chunks stored in the “mental dictionary” of English learners is directly proportional to their overall level of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills. Generally speaking, the stronger the learner’s ability to recognize prefabricated vocabulary chunks, the faster he will react to vocabulary chunks from the “mental dictionary” in communication. As a result, his reading and listening ability are stronger, while his writing content is richer, and the word and sentence formation is more authentic, the translation level is also superior, the oral expression is more accurate and fluent, reflecting a strong second language output ability. After one stage of language acquisition, the long-term memory ability of language learners will gradually improve, the language knowledge stored in the brain will continue to enrich, and more and more materials are reserved for language output. The prefabricated chunks are memorized as a whole, and language learners can

directly extract and use them as a whole. Therefore, learners can expand the amount of information in the brain's long-term memory by accumulating prefabricated chunks. Enhancing the long-term memory of chunks helps to expand the vocabulary and use vocabulary phrases correctly, and the learner's language knowledge level can also be greatly improved. Language application ability includes language processing ability and language generation ability. Prefabricated language blocks are inherently related to the input and output including listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

The main ways of language input are listening and reading. Listening and reading have similar psychological processes of information processing, and both belong to the category of language understanding. Since the prefabricated chunks are a series of words stored in the brain in an integrated manner, it can help learners to more effectively retrieve the information when performing language output. It can be directly extracted from the overall cognition, and there is no need to carry out the grammatical analysis in the process of understanding. Therefore, learners do not need to recognize word by word in the process of listening and reading, and stay on the understanding of single words, but focus on the overall structure of the discourse, improve the ability and efficiency of information processing, thereby speeding up listening and reading comprehension.

Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) pointed out that people's fluency in using language does not depend on how many generative grammar rules are stored in the brain of language learners, but depends on how many vocabulary phrases are stored, that is, prefabricated chunks. The research of cognitive linguistics also shows that the native language users are able to use their own language fluently, to a large extent it's because they rely on the thousands of prefabricated language chunks mastered. The output of language is both language activity and thinking activity. Many learners have mastered certain grammatical rules and a large number of vocabulary, and can generate grammatically correct sentences according to the rules. However, due to the influence of mother tongue, there is always a certain difference between their output expressions and native language. Problems such as improper choice of words, incorrect collocation, and inconsistency between context and style have become problems that need to be solved urgently in the language expression of learners. Due to the integral storage and extraction of prefabricated language blocks, learners do not need to temporarily combine language expressions but directly use sentences generated according to grammatical rules. In the process of speaking and writing language output, they combine or replace parts of the ready-made language chunks. In this way, learners are accustomed to the way of thinking and habitual expression of the native language from the beginning, which greatly reduces the burden of brain cognition and processing information, and ensures the rapid response of the brain. At the same time, learners can redistribute the freed up cognitive resources to other stages of language output, such as content conception, so as to improve the speed and fluency of language writing.

Researchers have found that native speakers use a large number of pre-made chunks in their daily language output. For native English speakers, a large number of complete phrases, clauses or sentences are stored in their brains. They can quickly search for these phrases or sentences automatically, and

almost don't need to spend energy on word combinations. Therefore, unlike language learners, they can focus on better expressing their opinions and ideas, so their output language is more authentic and pure. In addition, in the daily life of native speakers, there are many concepts and language behaviors that native speakers are familiar with and default, and these are used in the form of chunks in native speakers' daily language communication.

#### **4. The Role of Prefabricated Language Chunks in Promoting Second Language Output**

First, the explicit input of pre-made language chunks can effectively reduce the occurrence of L2 fossilization errors. Second language learners often choose basic vocabulary when expressing in spoken and written language. And even if it is necessary to express specific or complex English vocabulary, the vocabulary is often extracted from the basic level of cognition, and fossilization errors of partial generalization occur. Prefabricated language chunks are ready-made expressions that can be taken and used at any time. Using them as a memory unit, the overall memory is stored and used as a whole when learning a second language, which can greatly reduce the occurrence of fossilization errors. For example, instead of memorizing the word "car" alone, but using its related phrases as the unit of memory, the overall memory of "drive a car", "take a bus" and "ride a bicycle", then when we need to output the corresponding expressions in English, the above language chunks will be presented immediately with the context, so that learners can quickly and accurately extract them without time-consuming re-searching and selecting of verbs to reorganize with the single word "car".

Second language learners also use avoidance and simplification strategies to avoid grammatical errors in expression. Schachter (1974) found that English learners who speak Chinese and Japanese as their mother tongue make relatively few errors in using relative clauses because they avoid using them. In addition, learners also tend to use certain general words instead of specific registers and collocations. Avoidance and simplification are both manifestations of fossilization in vocabulary acquisition. The grammatical structure of prefabricated language chunk is relatively fixed, the collocation meaning is stable, and it has a specific context. When a second language output is needed, learners do not need to process a large number of grammatical rules. This becomes the best choice for learners under the guidance of error avoidance, which is conducive to simple, efficient and correct second language expressions. Language learning out of culture will cause cultural blind spots in language acquisition. The prefabricated language blocks contain language and cultural background knowledge, expressing rich metaphorical meanings and related cultural concepts. Such as "Lucky dog", "Pandora's box (root of disaster)", "Helen of Troy" and so on. Learners are deeply impressed by these prefabricated language chunks. They are easy to remember and understand the social culture of English-speaking countries, which will avoid cultural misunderstandings and facilitate the acceptance and convergence of English culture.

Secondly, pre-made language chunks are also helpful to improve the fluency and authenticity of the second language output. When the learner performs second language output, especially oral expression,

he will brainstorm in his native language to select the content to be expressed, and then retrieve the corresponding second language expression from his own vocabulary. The speed and quality of this conversion process depends on the size and quality of the second language learner's vocabulary. Even if the learner has a large amount of words, he needs to assemble a large number of phrases temporarily according to the grammatical rules. This is not only time-consuming, but also affects the correctness and authenticity of the expression.

Language chunks are routine language building chunks formed in language use, which can be quickly extracted and used as a whole during communication, which can reduce the pressure of language coding in the brain, thus greatly improving language fluency. Learners expand their vocabulary by memorizing a large number of prefabricated language chunks, which can be quickly extracted and used directly during oral expression in the second language. This makes output an automated production process, and ensures the fluency and accuracy of expression. The prefabricated language chunks all have pragmatic functions, those representing the same function are stored in the form of a semantic field. Learners can extract the corresponding language chunks according to the context of expression and the object of communication, which can improve their pragmatic ability and communicative appropriateness. The prefabricated language chunk has its certain degree of generative, so the generated part can be simply replaced without involving complicated rule combinations. Therefore, if you have mastered language chunks, you will master a language block group. When the learner expresses the second language, a large number of language chunk groups will be presented quickly, so as to achieve fluent and correct expression.

In addition to putting the native language fluency as a criterion, another criterion for judging the effect of second language output is the authenticity of the second language expression, that is, the ability to choose words close to the native language. The actual situation is that many learners are able to express fluently in the second language, but there is always a certain difference from that of native speakers. This is the so-called "non-authentic". Because learners often start from vocabulary and grammar in the early stage of second language acquisition, over time, the input becomes the memorization of words, and the output becomes the construction of sentences according to grammatical rules, and thus the second language expression lacks vividness and authenticity. Mc Carthy (1997) pointed out that the languages used by a large number of native speakers are stylized language chunks, which are stored in the brain and can be retrieved and used at any time. Prefabricated language chunks are real language chunks without grammatical reorganization, and a certain amount of prefabricated language chunks contain rich knowledge of English culture. If learners use flexibly when expressing, they can make the expression close to the native language to a large extent, ensuring the authenticity and vividness of the expression.

Thirdly, prefabricated language chunks can even improve the discourse organization of second language learners and help them shape their second language thinking. Many second language learners use Chinese thinking patterns in English writing, resulting in unclear topics, partial explanations, loose

discourse structure, and incoherence. According to the theory of modern English rhetoric, an effective discourse must not only have unity, but also must have coherence. Unity emphasizes the organization of relatively independent segments according to a central meaning, while coherence emphasizes the logical connection between words. These discourse-marked connectives exist in English prefabricated chunks, such as “play an important role in, in addition, for instance, on the contrary, further more, as a result, in conclusion, etc.”. Using these chunks as cohesive means is conducive to writing articles with prominent key points, clear levels, rigorous structure, and coherent discourse, thereby improving the orderliness and logic of second language expression.

### **5. Prefabricated Language Chunk Teaching Strategy**

Biber’s (1999) research shows that the high-frequency chunks used by native speakers in daily conversation and academic writing vary greatly. Prefabricated language chunks have their specific registers, and oral and written language expressions have their own characteristics. They should be distinguished in second language teaching and learning. Oral expression has strong interaction, while written expression has strong formality, professionalism and rigor. A considerable part of the prefabricated language chunks in spoken language are seldom used in written language and have little effect on discourse organization and meaning construction. Therefore, the prefabricated language chunk teaching can distinguish the spoken language chunks that can be adjusted to describe the conversation and make it start, continue and end. Target language chunks such as politeness, inquiry, request, objection and so on can describe conversational functions. Topic-related chunks can connect the structure and meaning of the discourse, making the expression coherent, natural and logical. Communicative strategy chunks can delay, compensate, deal with turn and self-expression modification. Therefore, the second language prefabricated language chunk teaching should distinguish the register characteristics of the language chunk, and design the language chunk teaching activities scientifically and reasonably.

Language acquisition depends on sufficient input, and input is the basis of output. As far as school education is concerned, language input mainly comes from planned and instructive classroom teaching. Direct prefabricated language chunk teaching has a stronger purpose and better effect than indirect language chunk learning. Therefore, students should be instructed to store prefabricated language chunks in reading and consolidate them through practice. Listening and reading are the main forms of language input in second language acquisition. Many listening materials are also good reading materials. Reading and recitation are also used to master the prefabricated language chunks. Classroom teaching should pay attention to the appreciation of prefabricated language chunks. On the basis of understanding the article, students are supposed to learn those fixed expressions, sentence structures and word collocations that make the article beautiful. Guide students to develop the awareness to distinguish prefabricated language chunks, understand the fixed and variable components in the language chunks, learn how to create and use them, and encourage students to read and recite the

concentrated passages of prefabricated language chunks. In this way, when outputting the second language, students will naturally use a large number of chunks that they have memorized. In the consolidation exercises, teachers can use methods such as sentence-making, translation, imitation, and organizational activities to help students deepen the memory of chunks, effectively use pre-made chunks, and form a sense of accomplishment for chunk output.

Swain (1993) pointed out that pure language input is not enough for language acquisition, learners should also have the opportunity to use language, and language output has a positive meaning for language acquisition. Oral and written language expressions are the main ways for second language output. In oral teaching, teachers can create different contexts according to the classification of spoken language chunks, guide students to remember some stylized expressions and formulas, and teach students to use the variable parts of pre-made language chunks to create new sentences and texts, and finally complete the communication task. In the written language expression, teachers can use the explanatory essay to guide the students in imitation, aiming to re-use the pre-made language chunks to achieve the purpose of consolidation. In composition exercises, teachers can introduce common sentence patterns of narratives, explanatory, argument, practical essays, as well as prefabricated language chunks such as related words and transitions to students, so that they can practice and prepare a large amount of materials for writing in different genres. It can also make the second language written language have the clear opinions, fluent and natural expressions, rich forms, and thus the level of writing can be improved. After students accumulate a certain amount of pre-made language chunks, they will use their inner understanding to discover and deconstruct other language chunks, and use this as a meme to copy more language chunks, turning the chunks into an instant “natural language” by this innovative use of language.

## **6. Conclusion**

Swain pointed out that in order for learners to acquire a fluent and accurate target language, they need not only understandable language input, but also understandable language output. The latter has more driving force for the development of language ability than the former. Language input is static. Only by actively using language through dynamic output activities such as oral expression, translation and writing can learners effectively internalize the input language and transform explicit declarative knowledge into implicit procedural knowledge. Therefore, the organic combination of input and output is a necessary condition for language ability development.

In the process of language acquisition, language learners first store the chunks in the brain, and then extract, select and combine the stored chunks according to the specific context in the communication process. The generation of sentences is to extract prefabricated lexical phrases from mental lexicon, instead of grouping words into sentences under the constraint and control of grammatical rules. When the vocabulary is integrated into larger language units such as phrase collocations, and different word chunks are connected together instead of being divided into isolated words or smaller units, a coherent

and meaningful text is formed and the goal of communication is achieved. Through this choice and combination, the expression of language meaning can be enriched. The fluency of language learner's language acquisition depends on how many vocabulary phrases are stored in the brain, that is, prefabricated chunks, rather than how many generative grammar rules are stored in the learner's brain. Second language learners' mastery of prefabricated chunks is directly proportional to the learner's language ability. Therefore, prefabricated language chunks should become the center of language teaching. In vocabulary teaching, teachers should actively cultivate students' awareness of learning chunks, improve students' ability to recognize pre-made chunks, guide and help students store pre-made chunks, so that students can make full use of the advantages of pre-made chunks, and continuously improve the second language ability and level.

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