

Original Paper

The Role of Lexical Chunks in Writing and Its Implications for College English Teaching

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Abstract

Lexical chunks are considered as composites of form and function and they are the ideal units of language learning and teaching. This study aims to review the role of lexical chunks in writing and discuss its pedagogical implications for college English teaching. Through reviewing the related research on lexical chunks, it is found that most of the research supports that lexical chunks play vital role in improving fluency, accuracy and idiomaticity of English writing. In view of these findings, this study suggests that it is necessary and feasible in Chinese universities to apply the lexical approach to English teaching, divert students' attention to larger segments of texts and cultivate students' awareness of lexical chunks. However, this study is just a bibliographic review of the research on lexical chunks and doesn't conduct any experiment on the application of lexical approach in classroom and its effects on English writing.

Keywords

lexical chunks, lexical approach, English teaching, writing

1. Introduction

From aspects of form and function, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) describe lexical chunks as “a sequence of words that are more frequently used as a whole and their meanings are more idiomatically determined than expressions that are put together on grammar each time” (p. 1). In other words, lexical chunks are conventionalized composites of form and function without necessity to be analyzed into smaller units in the process of receiving and production. They are considered as the ideal units of language learning and teaching. Many researchers have great interest in this language phenomenon and use various terms to describe and discuss them, such as “lexical phrases” (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), “lexical chunks” (Lewis, 1993), “sequence” (Wray, 2002), “formulaic language” (Wood, 2010),

“formulaic sequences” (Ding & Qi, 2005). Lexical chunks are to be used as the operational term in the present study. They might be such short and relatively fixed phrases as *to... extent*, or longer phrases such as *a wonderful example of...*, or clauses such as *In..., I'm reminded of the fact that...*, each with a fixed, basic frame, with slots for various fillers (*to some extent, In welcoming you to this university, I'm reminded of the fact that my father gave me an alarm clock when I graduated from high school*). Moreover, each of these chunks is associated with a particular discourse function, such as recalling an anecdote in the past, *In..., I'm reminded of the fact that...*, or expressing degree, *to some extent* (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).

Many researchers (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Ellis, 1999; Ding & Qi, 2005) have realized that lexical chunks play a central role in L1 and L2 acquisition. Lexical chunks are so pervasive a part of adult language as well as in the language of young children as part of their overall language system in the process of acquiring (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 24). Studies of language acquisition (Ellis, 1999; Wong-Fillmore, 1976; Wang & Huang, 2013) show that language learners have one common pattern in acquiring language: they go through a stage where they use a large number of unsegmented chunks in certain predictable social contexts. That is, the learners use a large amount of prefabricated language under certain situations. For example, English-speakers usually greet their old friends using the greeting sequence “*How are you?*”. They use it as a single, unsegmented unit, *how-are-you?*, just like any single word in their vocabulary, rather than as three individual morphemes.

The prefabricated patterns are very important for learners' language acquisition and development and these prefabricated patterns serve as the basis for creative speech in both L1 and L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1999, p. 169). In the process of acquisition, the learner begins realizing that utterances initially understood and used as wholes are composed of discrete constituents which can be segmented and combined with other constituents in various rule-bound ways. That is, these prefabricated and unanalyzed patterns are memorized by learners not only as formulas but also as raw materials for later segmentation and analysis in the process of developing syntactical rules. From this perspective, lexical chunks rather than grammatical knowledge become the focus of language learning. Wong-Fillmore (1976) believes that the lexical chunks are at the very center of language acquisition and that “the strategy of acquiring formulaic sequence is central to language learning” (p. 640). Widdowson (1989) also believes that in the process of language reception and production the learning of certain formulaic chunks is more vital than that of grammatical rules. Furthermore, lexical chunks could be stored and retrieved as wholes, so they make it possible that learners can produce the expressions that can't be constructed from grammatical knowledge in a predictable situation. Hakuta (1976) claims that “Prefabricated patterns endow learners with the capability of expressing functions that they are not yet capable of constructing based on their linguistic system, and they are simply stored like large lexical items” (p. 333). Therefore, lexical chunks rather than words are now believed to be the smallest unit of memory and production of a language and they play a central part in both L1 and L2 acquisition.

Inspired by the researches abroad, researchers and linguists in China have developed interest in lexical chunks and conducted relevant studies from different perspectives in the last 20 years. Many studies have shown that lexical chunks can improve learners' speaking (Yuan & Guo, 2010), writing (Ding & Qi, 2005) and interpreting proficiency (Wang & Huang, 2013). Nearly all of the above studies are associated with the effects the use of lexical chunks has on English speaking proficiency, but few studies are concerned with the role of lexical chunks in writing proficiency. In addition, as one of the four basic skills of language acquisition, writing remains a hot topic among scholars and researchers in language learning and teaching and a hard nut to crack for language learners, particularly for English as L2* learners. So this study aims to review the research on the role of lexical chunks in English writing and put forward its implications for English teaching in Chinese universities.

2. The Role of Lexical Chunks in Writing

Since many studies have shown that lexical chunks play a vital part in language reception and production, they can be believed to be ideal units for Chinese college students to improve their English writing proficiency. Many researchers (Ding & Qi, 2005; Xu & Huang, 2011) in China have shown that lexical chunks have certain advantages in writing.

2.1 Promoting the Fluency of Writing

Pawley and Syder (1983) believe that there are two problems puzzling ESL learners: One is how to acquire the ability of native-like fluency, the other being native-like selection. They argue that the fluency and idiomaticity of language “rests to a considerable extent on knowledge about a body of institutionalized or lexicalized sentence stems” (p. 191), including many semi-lexicalized sequences. According to McCarthy (1998), the concept of fluency would become impossible if there are no ready-made lexical chunks in the process of language output (p. 121). Therefore, if there is a small number of lexical chunks in store, people would create some phrases based on the syntactic rules they have mastered in this process. In such case, the speed of transformation will be definitely slowed down, and the language expression would be obstructed, which would affect the fluency of language use in writing. On the contrary, a large number of lexical chunks in store facilitate the fluency, because these chunks could be retrieved more efficiently and used directly without the need to think out word for word in the process of writing. In short, lexical chunks play a part in helping students achieve the fluency in writing.

2.2 Enhancing the Accuracy of Writing

Pawley and Syder (1983) define the native-like selection as the ability of native speakers to transform their minds with standard and native-like expressions (p. 191). Native speakers employ “native selection” and use lexical chunks appropriately in different styles of writings. However, the expressions L2 learners constructed usually sound different from those of native speakers, even some are awkward and strange for native speakers to comprehend. The reason is that in the process of learning, especially at the early stages of learning, the knowledge of grammatical rules and individual words are central in

L2 acquisition. Therefore, L2 learners rely on these grammatical rules to construct sentences in spoken and written discourses. This kind of learning strategy would result in the neglect of lexical chunks and this is also quite different from that of native speakers. However, lexical chunks could affect the degree of native-selection and guarantee accuracy and idiomaticity of language use in written discourse, because lexical chunks are stored and retrieved as a whole in the long-term memory with the feature of accessibility. Take expressing the agreement with others as an example, native speakers probably use *see eye to eye*, while it is probable for L2 learners to use *have the same opinion as someone*. Therefore, lexical chunks could make expressions in writing more idiomatic and accurate.

2.3 Improving Students' Discourse-organizing Ability

Besides the lexical chunks could contribute to the fluency and accuracy of writing, they are also beneficial to the enhancement of students' discourse-organizing ability. It is a fact that Chinese speakers and English speakers have quite different modes of thinking and manifest different styles when expressing their thoughts in writing. For example, English speakers tend to come straight to the point and state the most important information at the beginning of writing, while it is completely reverse for Chinese speakers. Therefore, in order to write a well-organized English composition, Chinese students could learn and memorize lexical chunks which signal the overall direction of discourse. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) view these chunks as macro-organizers, indicating the organization of information at high level, such as introducing topics, shifting in topics, marking relationships between topics, statement, exemplification, qualifications, evaluations, and asides (p.90). They further distinguish macro-organizers as co-ordinate, or global macro-organizers and subordinate, or local macro-organizers (p.95). Global macro-organizers function in introducing a topic at the beginning of a discourse, shifting to a new topic, and summarizing a topic. For example: *what I sincerely wanted to share was X* (topic marker); *on the contrary* (topic shifter); *in a word* (summarizer). Local macro-organizers are the markers of sequencing or value of high-level information at certain points within the overall framework which is set by the global macro-organizers. They are markers which signal exemplification, relations between topics, sub-topics, or other subordinate material, evaluative comments, qualification of previous material, and asides. For example: *in other words* (exemplifier); *however* (relator); *as far as I know, I'm absolutely certain that X* (evaluators). These macro-organizers range from polywords like *however, by the way*, to phrasal constraints such as *to make a long story short, as far as I know*; and sentence builders like *what I mainly wanted to talk about was X, I'm absolutely certain that X*. In a word, lexical chunks can signal the overall direction of a specific discourse and Chinese students could apply them in their writings to incorporate the meaning into the structure of discourse. In this sense, lexical chunks could improve students' discourse-organizing ability.

3. Implications for ELT

From the above review, it can be learned that lexical chunks are the units of forms and functions and they can be stored and retrieved as a whole. In a result, they can ease the burden of memory and provide the shortcut for language processing in certain contexts. So they have the advantages in improving fluency, accuracy and idiomaticity in L2 learners' writing. Consequently, this can shed some lights on how to teach English in Chinese universities where English is learned as L2

3.1 Adopting the Lexical Approach in L2 Classroom

Writing is one of the four basic skills of language. So the teachers and students in China have dedicated much time to improving students' writing proficiency. However, the result seems to be far from satisfactory. Statistics in College English Test of Band Four and Six (the two tests are currently the most popular and valid ones to assess Chinese college students' English proficiency) show that college students' writing proficiency stagnates and remains at the same level while their overall performance manifests a tendency of improvement (Qi, 2005, p. 64). The most prominent problem is that although students have mastered a large number of English words, phrases and all types of grammars, and they are familiar with the topic of a composition, they are still unable to express their ideas clearly and accurately in English. Moreover, it is a fact that in the process of writing they tend to have some thoughts at first in Chinese in their mind and then try to find corresponding English words for Chinese words one by one, and finally they arrange them together word for word on the basis of grammar to construct English sentences. This is so time-consuming that they have no enough time to direct their attention to the fluency and coherence of the whole composition, resulting in a composition devoid of fluency, accuracy and idiomaticity.

Reasons behind these problems in college English writing can be partly attributed to the language teaching methods adopted for English teaching. Li (2005) states that "among the traditional language teaching methods, the structural approach and the communicative approach hold a dominant position" (p. 62). However, just as the structural approach relies greatly on the knowledge of grammatical rules, leading to the neglect of the consideration of appropriateness, so the communicative approach focuses on the appropriate use of language in certain contexts, neglecting the learning of given grammatical knowledge and the development of ability to apply these grammatical knowledge to compose and decompose sentences. This is affirmed by a conclusion to the two approaches that "the structural approach pays attention to one aspect of competence by focusing on analysis but does so at the expense of access, whereas the communicative approach concentrates on access but neglecting analysis" (Widdowson, 1989, p. 132).

The lexical approach could provide a middle ground for the two approaches. It was first proposed by Lewis and his associates in 1993 and based on the idea that lexical chunks are central to language learning and teaching. Lexical chunks are the units of forms and functions and they can be stored and retrieved as a whole. They are the result of gradual consolidation of vocabulary in language use rather than the product of grammatical analysis. Just as Michael Lewis (2000), in his book *Collocation*, states

that high-frequency collocations occur more frequently in the language, so these collocations is the basis for accurate, natural and fluent English expression, so L2 teachers and learners had better realize the important role of lexical chunks in language teaching and learning and weaken the position of traditional teaching methods dominantly adopted in Chinese classroom.

3.2 Diverting Learners' Attention to Larger Segments of Text

These days, the majority of researchers are likely to view written texts as the result of co-operative process, which emphasizes the communicative function of linguistic elements. But these process-centered approaches neglect the vitality of interaction between writer and reader in discourse comprehension. On the other hand, product-centered approaches regard written texts as structural products divorced from context and they are mainly interested in the instruction of formal surface elements or their discourse structures. In fact, it needs to teach both the communicative function of linguistic elements and their structures. Therefore, the lexical approach can be a feasible way to train English learners' writing from these two aspects and lexical chunks as composites of function/form are ideal units for this approach.

Moreover, both writers and readers are energetically involved in the process of creating and interpreting written texts and a text should be viewed as a whole unit of discourse rather than a composite of separate pieces at the sentence level. There is no doubt that the surface, cohesive elements of a text are important markers of meaning, but if they are considered not in relation to more global markers of organization in the discourse, they will result in inefficient production and interpretation of text. L2 readers often process in a bottom-up manner, that is, they build comprehension through analysis and synthesis of the surface structure. In such case, the chunking strategy that they use automatically in the native language may be rendered inoperable in an L2 context. When chunking is impeded, less information can be stored at one time in short-term memory. A reduction in storage capacity means that less linguistic data can be analyzed simultaneously, which results in inefficient use of redundancy and contextual cues.

Therefore, teachers need to provide strategies to assist both reading and writing students in synthesizing meaning in larger segments of text. These strategies must be based on elements that provide both cohesion and coherence in the discourse, and must divert students' attention, whether on the local or global level, from individual lexical items to larger lexical form/function composites. From a sentence-based perspective, lexical chunks of sentence level are stressed in the lexical approach and students have to follow three procedures in performing a topical structural analysis: firstly identify sentence topics, then determine sentence progression, and finally chart the progress of sentence topics (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 161). In other words, the more students become aware of the characteristic progression of topics in well-written essays, the better they will be able to interpret intersentential relationship and incorporate them into their own writings. Lexical chunks in sentence level can be signaling cues of the cohesive linear relationships among sentences, that is, whether the relation of a sentence to the preceding one and the following one is a cohesive pattern of co-ordination

or subordination. If students are able to identify sentence level cohesion and signaling cues, they will apply the same principles across sentence boundaries and begin to focus on the global cues lending coherence to discourse. Therefore, teachers should expose students to the materials containing the most frequently used lexical chunks as much as possible and employ exercises to isolate these lexical chunks.

From a process-centered discourse perspective, Carrell (1987) believes that teaching L2 learners about the top-level rhetorical structure of texts and teaching them how to signal a text's organizational plan through linguistic devices will make their writing more effective and their reading more efficient (p. 55). This suggests that teachers could train students to identify and use top-level organizational structures along with appropriate signaling devices. Furthermore, it could increase students' awareness of information flow by mapping and hierarchical outlining of high-level discourse movement in terms of interlacing lexical chunks. Each top-level structure would display a characteristic network of lexical chunk discourse devices, combining particular patterns of macro- and micro-organizers and they should be taught in ways that foster their paired nature.

3.3 Cultivating Learners' Awareness of Lexical Chunks

A large amount of research has found that the lexical approach is conducive to improving L2 learners' writing proficiency. However, it is firstly of great necessity for teachers to guide learners to develop and strengthen their awareness of lexical chunks. Students need have a certain concept of lexical chunks and understand the role each type of lexical chunks play in language acquisition and performance. In terms of word structure, Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) categorize lexical chunks into four types: polywords, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints and sentence builders. Polywords are short continuous chunks functioning much like individual lexical items and allow no variability and associated with such a wide variety of functions as relating one topic to another, summarizing, shifting topics. Institutionalized expressions are conventional lexical chunks in sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances. They include proverbs, formulas for social interaction, aphorisms, and others that are efficiently memorized as units by a speaker. For example: *a watched pot never boils* (advice), *nice to meet you* (greeting), *give me a break* (objection), *once upon a time...and they lived happily ever after* (narrative framer). Phrasal constraints are chunks in short- to medium-length. They are mostly continuous, allowing variation and can be both canonical and non-canonical, performing a wide variety of functions. For example: *in short/sum/summary* (summarizer), *yours sincerely/truly* (closing), *as far as I know/I can tell* (qualifier). Sentence builders are lexical chunks which provide the framework for whole sentences, having slots filled with considerable variation of phrasal and clausal elements and expressing a central idea about some subjects or topics. They can be canonical and non-canonical, continuous and discontinuous. For example: *hardly...when...* (relators), *my point of view is that...*(summarizer), *let me start by/with...*(topic marker), *it seems (to me) (that)...*(assertion).

In addition, it is of great importance for teachers to assist students in discerning lexical chunks and designed diversified learning activities for them to use lexical chunks. In China, the learning materials for college learners are nearly confined to English textbooks. In these books, the passage reading section is the top priority and the important carrier of vocabulary of each unit. However, the current English textbooks do not clearly explain anything concerning lexical chunks but list words one by one with corresponding meaning in glossary, so teachers cannot just rely on the textbooks and syllabus but they ought to take initiatives to integrate lexical chunks into all aspects of English teaching and help students to discern them in each passage. At the same time, teachers should develop diversified classroom activities to provide learners with more opportunities to use lexical chunks, such as brainstorming, converting sentence pattern with lexical chunks, having discussion with classmates, translating Chinese into English. In this way, students tend to acquire more lexical chunks from each other and deeply memorize them.

4. Conclusion

As units of form and function, lexical chunks can be stored and retrieved as wholes and they are central to language acquisition. The present study has reviewed the role of lexical chunks in writing and concluded that lexical chunks can promote L2 learners' fluency and accuracy of writing and enhance their ability to organize the discourse. Based on the role lexical chunks play in writing reviewed in this study, some suggestions were put forward for English teaching in Chinese universities and it can be believed that the lexical approach can improve L2 learners' writing proficiency. But the study does not conduct any experiment on how to apply the lexical approach in classroom and its effects on improving writing proficiency.

*In this study, L2 refers to English which is learned both as second language and foreign language.

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