

## Lexical Chunks and Teaching of College English Writing

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### Abstract

Poor knowledge of lexical chunks greatly influence students' performance in English writing. The problems include lack of the awareness of lexical chunks and lack of strategies of improving vocabulary from words to chunks. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate students' awareness of lexical chunks and strategies of teaching of English writing from this perspective. Fifty freshmen of non-English majors at a local university were selected randomly as the participants of the study. A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was used to collect information about students' lexical chunk awareness, strategies of memorizing lexical chunks, and the application of lexical chunks to English writing. The survey result showed that students were not sensitive to lexical chunks and failed to frequently identify and apply them in writing. Strategies of teaching were proposed so as to eliminate problems and accelerate learning in college English writing.

### Keywords

Lexical chunks; English writing; College English.

### 1. Introduction

Writing exercises are regarded as an important means of developing language competence for Chinese EFL learners. However, since students have little exposure to native English, they tend to expand the size of lexicon through Chinese meaning of words. A direct consequence of this is that students often fail to extract the proper vocabulary from their word store while writing. Even if they can find the words they need, they can't use them properly in a way that conforms to natural English expression. Language errors concerning word use often occur in students' writing, including inappropriate expressions, monotonous repetition of sentence patterns, weak discourse organization, etc. Students' writing competence is greatly influenced by the size and quality of lexicon. Regarding the problems that hinder learners from reaching the fluency native speakers have, Winddowson (1989) suggested that English should be practised, remembered and used in chunks.

Lexical chunks refer to a series of prefabricated words, coherent or incoherent, which are stored in memory as a whole and extracted directly when used without grammar generation and analysis (Wray, 2002). With the rapid development of corpus linguistics, the role of lexical chunks in language acquisition and application has attracted the attention of teachers and researchers in teaching English as a foreign language. Many linguists have studied the role of lexical chunks in the process of language learning. Michael Lewis (1993) put forward the teaching concept of lexical chunks and further attracted people's attention to the role of lexical chunks. Lian Jie's study (2001) theoretically demonstrated that the use of lexical chunks can help to enhance writing fluency, improve the accuracy of language expression and cultivate the ability of discourse organization. An empirical study on the relationship between lexical chunk competence of Chinese EFL learners and their second language proficiency shows that lexical chunk competence cannot be generated automatically, and it can only be acquired through

systematic training (Zhang, 2007). Based on the analysis of the characteristics of lexical chunks, some researchers have demonstrated that the use of lexical chunks helps to improve the fluency of writing, the accuracy of language expression and the ability of discourse organization (Ding & Qi, 2005; Lian, 2001; Wu & Wang, 2002). In addition, through a large-scale corpus study, a survey of Chinese students' lexical chunk competence is carried out, and the characteristics of lexical chunks used by advanced, intermediate and primary English learners are compared. The researchers found that lexical chunk incompetence is one of the important factors leading to poor English writing (Diao, 2004; Wang & Zhang, 2006).

Lexical chunks have fixed structure and relatively stable meaning. Lexical chunks include collocations but these usually just involve content words, not grammar. With the introduction of the concept of lexical chunks, learners can extract and use these information as a whole while writing. Learners use sentence builder (syntactic structural chunk) to integrate the information they want into sentences and discourse management chunk to compose paragraphs and articles according to different logical relationships, so as to achieve coherence of the text. Taking into account the existing problems of English writing of Chinese college students, investigating application of lexical chunks to teaching of English writing can be a useful measure toward accelerating learning and eliminating problems. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate students' awareness of lexical chunks and strategies of teaching of English writing. Regarding students' awareness of lexical chunks and strategies in memorizing lexical chunks, a survey is carried out to investigate the problems regarding in English writing. Strategies of teaching are proposed so as to eliminate problems and accelerate learning in college English writing.

## 2. Research Questions and Methods

This study is to answer questions as follows. To what extent are college students aware that lexical chunks can be used in English learning? How do they memorize lexical chunks? What are the strategies of teaching of English writing?

In order to answer these questions, a questionnaire to assess the students' awareness and strategies of memorizing lexical chunks was developed. The questionnaire includes three types of questions relating to the degree of lexical chunks awareness, lexical chunks memorizing strategies, and attitude to peer review and teachers' comment. Specifically, regarding lexical chunks, the respondents were asked about the frequency they consciously pay attention to the chunks and draw them out when reading English articles, to use them when writing in English, and to remember English words as chunks. Students' attitude to peer review and teachers' comment concerning the use of lexical chunk in writing is also asked to assess their strategies of improving writing. One open-ended question was asked at the end of the questionnaire to know about the plans students made to improve writing skills regarding the use of lexical chunks.

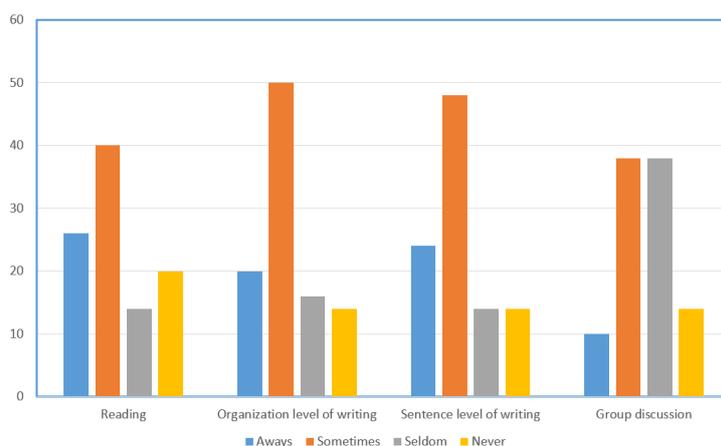
The respondents were a convenient sample of 50 freshmen of non-English majors. Most of them have never heard of the term of lexical chunks before the study begins. With explanation of the basic definition, most of the students show their understanding of lexical chunks to some degree. Data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed by introducing individual answers to the 19 questions into an Excel file.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Questions one to four checked for the learners' lexical awareness and whether they are aware of lexical chunks in different scenarios of learning (see Fig. 1). The answers show that the respondents do not pay much attention to lexical chunks in both input and output process. Fewer than one fourth of the students admit that they consciously use the lexical chunks in

writing. Most students are not sensitive to lexical chunks and fail to frequently recognize and apply them in writing.

Answers regarding students' strategies of memorizing lexical chunks show that students tend to memorize lexical chunks when they can recognize words are connected as a chunk (40% of the respondents said they often do so). But when taking a close look into the survey, that most respondents (86% of the total) choose "phrases" as the most commonly used lexical chunks, while only sixteen percent choose "discourse management chunks" and thirty six percent choose "sentence builders", indicates that failure of identifying lexical chunks is a major obstacle for students to improve vocabularies. Lack of strategies of memorizing lexical chunks then results in learners' poor performance in the process of input and output.



**Figure 1.** Percentages of answers to questions 1 to 4 concerning the lexical chunk awareness. Q1: "Are you aware of the chunks and draw them out while reading?" Q2: "Are you aware of the chunks concerning the organization level of writing?" Q3: "Are you aware of the chunks concerning the sentence level of writing?" Q4: "Are you aware of the chunks while doing group discussion in class?"

The negative influence of native language on English writing (42% of the respondents recognize that they often use Chinese to come up with the story first and then translate it into English), results in a large number of expressions which are not natural in English. Students are more inclined to get comment from teachers than peer reviews. Nearly half (48%) of the students attach great importance to teachers' feedback and think that is beneficial to their knowledge of lexical chunks. Only eighteen percent respondents thought that peer review could have help on their knowledge of lexical chunks. Most respondents (64%) said that the way of commenting on poor use of sentence builders and discourse management chunks was beneficial for them.

Apparently, college freshmen have poor knowledge of lexical chunks due to the lack of awareness and the lack of the ability to identify lexical chunks. On the one hand, they fail to develop appropriate strategies in memorizing lexical trunks. On the other hand, the poor understanding and mastery of lexical chunks cause the poor performance in college English writing. Therefore, teaching strategies should be developed to help improve students' awareness, recognition ability and application ability of lexical chunks.

#### 4. Teaching Strategies

Based on the problems found in the survey, teaching strategies aim at improving students' awareness of lexical chunks, ability of identifying them, and application lexical chunks to writing.

### A. Improving awareness of lexical chunks

Introduction of the basic theory and knowledge of lexical chunks to the students is essential. Based on Lewis' typology, lexical items include words, poly-words, collocations, institutionalized utterances, and sentence frames and heads (Lewis, 1997).

Reading exercises are designed to practice identifying lexical chunks. Texts are not analyzed for the purpose of understanding at the beginning, but for the purpose of drawing students' attention to lexical chunks. Students are guided to underline and classify lexical chunks based on the way of combination and the discourse and pragmatic function.

Creating individual glossary notebook is essential for learners to raise awareness of lexical chunks. Students are asked to collect and integrate lexical chunks and sentences and get comment from teachers.

Peer learning groups is effective to encourage learners to engage in the learning process. Discussing in groups, students understand and determine meaning and type of lexical chunks more effectively.

### B. Identifying lexical chunks

The practice designed to identify and extract lexical chunks includes blank filling, substitution drill with synonym chunks, paraphrasing and summarizing, translation practice, etc. These practices help students to memorize lexical chunks and to prepare for language output.

For example, students are asked to summarize a text by using the chunks related to the theme of the text and the structure. Firstly, they identify the chunks in the text: watch for; a major concern; warning signs; besides the efforts to; it is best to; it is advisable to; make a great difference; in addition to; for example; a major emphasis for.

Secondly, by using the chunks, they can summarize the text like this:

The prediction of earthquake is a major concern for people all over the world. For example, the Chinese have traditionally watched animals and plants for warning signs of earthquake. To prevent the great destruction of property, the architects design columns and horizontal beams of equal strength. Besides the efforts to improve building structures, people also should prepare for the possibility of a great earthquake. It is advisable to check and reinforce their homes regularly. In addition to preparing the houses, it is best to store enough supplies of water and food for the family. All these precautions can make a great difference in saving lives and prevent the loss of homes. Education concerning how to survive an earthquake should be a major emphasis for all government programs and earthquake-related research projects.

Finally, students are asked questions "how many types of lexical chunks are there?" and "what are they?" These questions enhance students' understanding of lexical chunks. Furthermore, students are encouraged to build their own bank of lexical chunks with more reading practices like this.

### C. Writing practice with lexical chunks

Imitation writing is recommended since it is a good way for students to learn from a good sample. The use of imitation does not merely means students copy or use the same language of others. It is a process to practice sensitivity to language. Imitation involved the composition of related subjects with related structures. For example, when students read a text with the theme of how to prepare for earthquakes, related topic writing exercises can be designed around disaster preparedness, such as "how to prepare for typhoons" or "how to prepare for thunderstorms". The related structure composition can be designed according to the problem-solving article, for example, "how to deal with cheating", or "how to create a green campus". Because the design of writing training is similar to the text in structure or theme, it increases the repetition of the learned lexical chunks, and students can turn them into their own bank of lexical chunks.

## 5. Conclusion

More emphasis should be put to the application of lexical chunks to teaching of college English writing. The use of lexical chunks plays an important role in improving students' writing competence. Teachers should inform students that lexical chunks can greatly enhance and guarantee the accuracy and fluency in writing. In fact, the introduction of lexical chunks can be extended to the whole process of college English teaching. Teaching strategies should be developed to ensure that students consciously pay attention to lexical chunks and memorize lexical chunks in listening and reading, and use them in speaking and writing so as to express English coherently and naturally.

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