

Lexical Approach and Its Application in College English Classes

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Abstract—As a composite of language form and function, lexical chunks indicate the positive interaction of semantics, syntax and pragmatics to promote further development of language utterances. The theory of lexical chunks is popular for college English teachers to adopt in their classes. Based on theories of lexical chunks and lexical approach, this paper aims to discover the effective way for the College English classes in China so as to improve students' language proficiency.

Index Terms—lexical chunks, lexical approach, college English classes

I. INTRODUCTION

College English teachers in China pay much attention to apply effective teaching approach in their classes in order to perfect their teaching and better students' language acquisition. As for the teaching approach, many have been developed, such as multiple intelligences teaching approach, comprehensive teaching approach, tentative approach, discipline-based English teaching approach, genre-based teaching approach, lexical approach, among which the lexical approach has aroused much attention to improve language learning. Teachers in China have become more aware of lexical chunks in their English teaching for the past decades. Thus, researches on ready-made chunks of language start to prevail, which consider the chunks as important as productive rules. This study tries to explore the appropriate lexical approach applied in college English classroom to see if it is influential to improve the English learning ability of students. Besides, students are expected to raise consciousness of lexical chunks and master some learning strategies.

II. THEORY OF LEXICAL CHUNKS AND LEXICAL APPROACH

A. *Lexical Chunks*

Since Chomskyan theory presents that native speaker's utterances are limited with creation and prefabricated items play a crucial part in their output, for several decades, many linguists, scholars, and teachers have carried out a number of studies (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Kjellmer, 1987; Erman & Warren, 2000) on lexis. The notion of lexis can be traced back to Lyons (1968) who mentions unanalyzed whole acquisition and usage applied in special situations. Bolinger (1975) names them as memorized chunks, stereotypes, pre-assembled chunks, prefabricated chunks and so on, while Becker (1975) regards it as a particular multi-word phenomenon. Besides, terms such as sentence stem (Pawley & Syder 1983), prefabs or lexical phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), lexical bundles (Biber et al. 1999), and formulaic sequences (Schmitt & Carter, 2004) are given afterwards to show the awareness of each one. Over 57 terms related to the feature of lexis are found in linguists' research among which collocation, lexical chunks, formulaic sequence, multiword units/strings, phraseology, prefabs, and units of meaning are the most frequently mentioned (Wray, 2002). It can be inferred that lexis has received its recognition and became increasingly crucial in language acquisition. On the other hand, varieties of terms are used to describe the concept based on various aspects.

To further identify lexical chunks, researchers have made a variety of classifications. I would like to adopt the division from Lewis since I recognize the division fits the characteristics mentioned above. Lewis (1997) lists the following taxonomy of lexical chunks:

- a. Words and polywords: words are seen as one single or independent unit (e.g. desk, look), while polywords refer to phrases of idiomaticity as an extension of this division (e.g. by the way, on the other hand)
- b. Collocate ones, or word partnerships refer to pairs or groups of words co-occur with very high frequency. (e.g. verb-noun phrase "put forward a suggestion"; adjective-noun phrase "a heavy smoke")
- c. Institutionalized utterances are those chunks used as wholes with pragmatic function (e.g. I'll get it, If I were you)
- d. Sentence frames and heads are seen mostly in written context to show its formality and complex. (e.g. The fact

was . . . firstly,...and finally)

Thus, I prefer to define the lexical chunks as word blocks of multi-word combinations which are fixed or semi-fixed in prefabricated modular form in the vocabulary memory of language users and are frequently used in the actual speech act. It can generate specific language in semantics, pragmatics, language cognition and discourse structure, etc.

Teachers in China have become more aware of lexical chunks in their English teaching for the past decades. Most natural utterances are completed by the semi-fixed “chunks” existing between words and fixed phrases (Yang, 1999). There are also relative researches from Ding Yanren & Qi Yan (2005), Pu Jianzhong (2003), etc. These studies mainly include summarizing the general theory of lexical chunks, exploring the relationship between lexical chunks and English spoken, written, or reading proficiency, discussing the correlation between lexical chunks and grammar. However, there are few specific clarifications of the teaching chunks and the acquisition of types of lexical chunks applied in college English classroom taking advantage of topics from the units of New Horizon College English textbook.

B. *Lexical Approach*

In order to cultivate L2 learners to become more fluent and communicative in applying foreign language, language teaching approaches have been developed further to reach the teaching target

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) support the progression of language acquisition from routine to pattern to creative use. Many linguists, such as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Lewis (1993) have attempted to apply formulaic sequences in language teaching, among which “Lexical Approach” coined by Michael Lewis can be the most meaningful alternative to concentrate on lexical activities in order to improve learners’ language proficiency. Strong and convincing cases are given in the book of the Lexical Approach in 1993 by Michael Lewis, covering the primacy of meaning in language teaching. The approach has aroused attention and welcomed by teachers who applaud lexico-semantic knowledge and apply lexical teaching strategies over grammatical drilling at class. Lewis insists that this approach is not a shift from grammar teaching to vocabulary part, that is “language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks” (1997)

The lexical approach for L2 teaching focuses on the layer of lexis. It differentiates from traditional vocabulary teaching, that is, vocabulary is taught as individual words resulting in a gap between words and fixed meanings. It as well differentiates from traditional classroom which has largely been one of subservience to grammar (Sinclair & Renouf, 1988). Therefore, Lewis claims that his lexical is not simply a substitute teaching for the previous one, as language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks (Lewis, 1997). Lewis thinks the perception of language is holistic and organic not atomistic. Instructions on chunks in this approach are given to arouse learners’ consciousness, help them identify and organize the chunks so as to reduce the efforts of processing individual words and increase the accuracy and native type of language. Learners’ cognition and ability are taken into consideration for language teaching.

Many studies are carried out in order to put the theory into practice. Some of them aim to investigate the lexical idea of learners in English learning in China so as to find accessible methods to improve English teaching. Meanwhile, corpora are built to help the lexical study. Pu Jianzhong (2003) makes a distinction on words usage between Chinese learners and native speakers. By examining several common verbs in non-English major’ writing in Chinese Learner English Corpus, mainly in terms of colligation and collocation, he found that the learners’ uses of those verbs are significantly deviant from those of the native speakers’ both in quality and in quantity. The lexicon used by Chinese learners is actually less appeared in native speakers’ utterances. Pu demands that teachers should apply lexical approach in English classroom. Wang Lifei (2006) has studied the use of chunks in Chinese learners’ English argumentative writing based on SW ECCL corpus to discover the chunks proficiency of English Learners in China. They point out that Chinese learners used fewer types of chunks and overused three-word chunks. The chunks used by Chinese learners can be classified into 10 categories. Chinese learners differ in the use of passive and active sentence builders from the native speakers. Besides, studies applied chunks in improving speaking, listening, reading and writing skills have been reported to discuss the teachability of lexical chunks such as Wen Qiufang, Ding Yanren & Wang Wenyu (2003), Ding Yanren & Qi Yan (2005), Ma Guanghui (2009).

The above studies, either abroad or at home, introduce the basic knowledge of lexical chunks and lexical approach or practice them in sentential or textual level, which have made achievements on Chinese language learners. However, the classroom performance of lexical approach is paid little attention. The present study hopes to practice lexical approach in College English class with the selection of units from textbook in order to help students transform the unfittable concept of College English learning and improve their English skills.

III. APPLICATION OF LEXICAL APPROACH IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

A. *Current Situations in College English Classes*

For a long time, most College English classes have been arranged for two main steps. At the beginning of one unit, teachers would like to present a list of new words followed by analysis and illustration so as to make students familiar with the new words and further make a good use of them. The next step for the class is to explain the long or sophisticated sentences in texts in order to make students understand the main idea from writers. However, the result

seems discouraging. In fact, out of class students can be found anytime and anywhere taking a vocabulary booklet with them, especially in face of the coming of all sorts of tests. It is a good phenomenon for both teachers and students to be conscious of the crucial role of vocabulary since words can be named as the foundation of a language, but problems still exist for the improper way of vocabulary acquisition.

Students' chunk competence remains in a low level. Some of them are aware of the existence of chunks but lacking in appropriate learning strategies. Students are eager to enlarge their vocabulary but neglect the comprehensive mastery of it (Wei, 2003). So there is an urgent demand to practice chunk theories into college English classroom.

B. Lexical Teaching Practice in College English Classes

According to the theory of lexical approach, I have made corresponding teaching design in order to help students identify, organize and use lexical chunks appropriately and accurately. It is crucial to instruct clearly in front of the students the definitions, characteristics and learning strategies of lexical chunks mentioned above before the application of lexical approach in English classes. The specific teaching steps are still developed based on the textbook of New Horizon College English. The teaching of lexical chunks lasts for fourteen weeks nearly one semester. Eight units are covered during this semester and one unit cost two weeks to instruct. Lexical approach is implemented through the whole unit and activities are developed to raise the consciousness of students and make them more familiar with those chunks. One unit here is designed as an example. There are three stages, that is, lead-in stage, text-analysis stage and conclusion stage to present the teaching details of lexical approach.

a. Lead-in stage

This stage can be considered as the first or introductory part of a new unit learning. In this stage, activities like video play, pictures appreciation, warm-up questions can be adopted to motivate students to give their speech practice as many as possible.

Under the help of multimedia techniques, students can quickly enter the context with visual and audio background. Attention can be aroused for students to think and memorize what they receive from video. For example, when coming to unit two, teachers first shows students a famous speech given by Al Gore, former president of the USA, who depicts the problem of environment and the solution. After the video play, students are asked to recall what words or phrases they have attained from it and teachers guide them to use lexical chunks to talk about the topic and give their own ideas afterward. Meanwhile, the key words in the form of lexical chunks are listed on blackboard by teachers to emphasize.

Pictures like cartoons, photos can be displayed in front of students to encourage them to express as much as possible. After the discussion, the teacher makes a conclusion during which lexical chunks are stressed again and previous mistakes are corrected. For example, the topic of unit two is about environmental problems, photos and cartoons of environmental problems around the world are shown to raise students' attention. During the time of describing pictures, students will be encouraged to use lexical chunks like "it turns out to be", "be aware of", "take measures" etc. Finally, the teacher gives a conclusion to arrange the mentioned chunks into a summary and meanwhile required students to repeat.

Questions relevant to the topic are first given and students are asked to think for a while with good arrangements of words and phrases to present their ideas. The teachers' reference book is so well-organized as to provide such warm-up questions. Free discussions are encouraged so students could have a sense of what lexical chunks are needed. As for some questions with difficulty, cues could be given in form of lexical chunks to students for highlighting.

b. Text-analysis Stage

Reading materials in the text book bring good opportunities for students to get knowledge of and then take advantage of those lexical chunks. When coming to the first time text reading, students first are taught to identify lexical chunks. Polywords and collocations should be trained to identify. Some polywords such as "in essence", "all in all" indicate the conclusion of topic; some such as "at any rate", "so to speak" act as cohesive tool. These are helpful marks for better comprehension. Collocations like "badly/ bitterly/deeply/seriously/severely hurt" shows that other chunks can be mastered if one chunk is mastered. A great number of lexical chunks have one thing in common, that is, they show the regular co-occurrence of words in a specific form and order, so much so that the presence of one sets up an expectancy of the other (Chitra Fernando, 1996). In addition, sentence frames help to make a distinction of writing style. Sentence frames like "The fact/ suggestion was...", "I think/believe/assume..." are used in expressing one's opinion; sentence frames like "After winning his own freedom..." is used in narrative writing. After students become aware of such lexical chunks, they are required to make good use of them. Several strategies can be applied during text-analysis. Paraphrasing is an effective method to encourage students to interpret sentences by other patterns with the same meaning so that they can reorganize sentences structure with the lexical chunks and recall other chunks they have learnt to make a substitution. Translation job is also frequently used in text-analysis, which asks students to divide sentences into several patterns, find the corresponding Chinese patterns and reorganize them to Chinese expressions.

c. Conclusion Stage

After analyzing text in detail, the last stage is to make an end of one unit including activities such as summary, review, writing, exercises finishing. Previously students are taught to meet new lexical chunks and how to deal with them, while during this stage students are supposed to grasp how to make use of them in accuracy and fluency.

At the end of one unit, students are required to give a brief statement of text with efforts to make use of lexical chunks which could be presented by teacher or found from students' retention. Students are first instructed by the skills

of retelling, that is, the topic, keywords and essential elements of articles are well organized to conduct a summary. Students could be put into several teams to make a discussion if the text-retelling was beyond one student. Students could take a note as well to help them remind those chunks. For example, in unit two "Environmental Protection Throughout the World", the thread of this expository writing is so clear that students summarized according to the regional division. The writer in the beginning points out problems on environment and then introduced the specific problems taken place in countries around the world. When student ends up his speech, teacher could proceed relevant questions for further discussion or students are encouraged to make a dialogue as a role-play. For example, in unit two, there come questions like "What measures shall government take to deal with the problem of shrinking land resources? What other environmental problems have you heard? In China, what problems happened? Besides environmental problems, what else do you think is the most emergent problem for us to notice?"

Repetition work are effective for students to master chunks they meet. Teacher can find some relevant scripts or listening materials for students to evaluate their retention quality. Through repetition for times, students tend to raise their consciousness on lexis study and bear the lexical chunks in mind.

Students are asked to write down a paragraph or a short passage to give a comment of one unit. In this way, master of lexical chunks can be examined and students are inspired to have an attempt to utilize new lexical chunks which of course would be checked by teacher. In fact, teacher's evaluation is under constraint due to the factor of time and energy of teacher. Strategy of self-evaluation is provoked and students can make their own judgments on lexical chunks, which help to enhance students' autonomous ability. For example, about unit two, a piece of writing with directions of "how do you view environmental problems" is assigned to students. After the topic study and relevant chunks have been instructed and repeated to them, the writing task is set to test their mastery of chunks.

Exercises attach to the textbook provide good opportunity to practice the lexical chunks presented in the unit. Each exercise is designed to train in different aspects such as collocations, sentence structures, etc, which are pertinent to the topic. For example, in unit two on environmental protection, exercises IV is designed to train identification of collocation through the way of correction. The exercise lists eight sentences with collocations which students are often used in confusion or error such as "regardless off", "spring out", "aim in". By means of correction, the exercise displays both the frequent mistakes students conduct and the correct forms of lexical chunks so as to leave a deep impression and stimulate their memory. Besides, the exercise provides synonyms of those lexical chunks to make an enlargement for students. In Structure VII, students are required to complete sentences using "remain to". Five sentences are given to show the various uses of "remain to", meanwhile, sentence frames like "it remains for sb. to do...", "sth. remains to be done" are introduced to students to make English sentences more flexible.

Strategies introduced above are the main strategies used in each unit practical teaching. In fact, there may be overlapping or interrelationship among them. It is worth mentioning that not every strategy is essential to each unit teaching. Teacher will alter some of them according to their experiences and students' reaction to the best effect. Helpful methods are welcomed to help students recognize the characteristics of chunks and finally make progress in College English classes.

IV. DISCUSSION

After the teaching practice, I have discovered through both of students' response in classes and talk after classes that they welcome the introduction of lexical chunks and admit the positive effects of lexical chunks in their English learning. Few were aware of learning collocations and expressions and there was no possibility for them to apply systematic lexis learning strategies. However, after practices of chunk identification and usage, students become more confident in English learning. During teaching practice, I have also found several aspects that cannot be neglected and they affect students' learning very much.

A. *Grammaticalised Lexis*

Lewis (1993) points out that Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar; the grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word chunks, which clarifies the top feature of lexical chunks. So the lexical approach asks for our notice of the feature of grammaticalised lexis. In tradition, language is regarded as a system of grammar/vocabulary dichotomy. Grammar in a language represents the generative system while vocabulary stands for the stock of fixed non-generative words. Thus, it is acknowledged that sentence patterns consist of subject, predicate, object and other complements sometimes. To make utterances, tenses, clauses and other generative items are given great awareness. Vocabulary is used to recite as individual word which brings memory work even to overload. The traditionally developed dichotomy between the generalizable quality of grammar and the apparently arbitrary nature of individual vocabulary items does no good to language learners (Lewis, 1993).

B. *Lexis Teaching Principles*

Sample exercises and teaching activities are also given by Lewis (1997). He states 10 principles on class of lexis teaching.

- a. topic. Teachers must bear in mind the lexical items and put them under a topic framework.
- b. situation. Physical situation should be taken into consideration as the most appropriate way to organize lexicon.

- c. collocation. It presents the main feature of lexis in a language.
- d. notion. When under certain event, particular words or phrases are used to describe certain psychological unity.
- e. narration. The pattern of nominalise-narrate-explain processing in one's mind to make a speech should be taken into consideration.
- i. keywords. This will help learners be more familiar with formulaic expressions so as to take less effort to give utterances.

Among these principles, collocation is a factor which is weighed much by Lewis. As the inadequacy of grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is recognized, it is reasonable for collocation to play an important syllabus-generating role (Lewis, 1993). Collocation is defined as the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in actual text with greater than random frequency (Lewis, 1997). Collocations are most discovered in form of verb-noun and adjective-noun, and they can be extended to word groups larger than pairs. Some collocations are fixed, for example, "catch a cold", "a heavy smoke". There are some collocations less fixed or a little flexible such as "badly/deeply/severely hurt".

Noticing collocations is a central pedagogical activity. "Instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways" (Lewis, 1997)

V. CONCLUSION

Learning lexical chunks can be convenient to select proper words according to the context in avoidance of onerous selection. Learners tend to produce language accurately and fluently for focusing on chunks usage instead of grouping single word. Thus, teachers shall undertake the task to introduce theory of lexical chunks to students. Besides, the nature of lexical chunks shall be recognized in order to enhance the self-evaluation for students. Though applying lexical-chunk approach in classroom instruction is a new concept, it is no doubt a new teaching methodology that cannot be neglected. Teachers are expected to employ various strategies to bring more opportunities of chunks acquisition. This teaching attempt results can enlighten us to develop further in lexical chunks study and some helpful teaching strategies are expected to make an improvement on College English teaching and textbook selection. In the future more objective research can be designed to study the lexical approach.

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