

Impacts of Chunks Input on Chinese English Major Students' Oral Production

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Abstract—Chunks have been a hot research in the field of second language acquisition since the 1970s. Aiming to explore the impacts of chunks input on Chinese English major students' oral production, two classes of sophomore English major students were chosen as research subjects who were defined as the control group and the experimental group. Oral tests were taken before and after the research. After using chunks input in English teaching for 12 weeks and comparing the differences between the experimental group and the control group, the impact of lexical chunks on oral production was observed. Based on the analysis of the statistics, it's found that chunks input in teaching plays a significant role in improving Chinese English Major Students' speaking proficiency. The speaking test after the research showed that the fluency and accuracy of students in the experimental group had improved a lot during this period. Though students' speaking ability in the control group did improve, their performance was not as significant as that of experimental students. It's hoped that the result could provide any guidance for English teaching in China.

Index Terms—second language acquisition, oral production, chunks input, lexical chunks teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of lexical chunks was proposed by Becker in the 1970s for the first time. He pointed out that the understanding of the whole language should be based on the understanding of the phrase (Becker, 1975). According to Becker, the memory, storage, output and usage of a language do not only depend on its separate words, but on those idiosyncratic chunks which are the smallest unit of human language communication. With the development of chunk theory, different definitions were raised according to different research scopes and aims. Chunks referred to a single word or an idiom, which could freely combine words by means of language rules, and they were also the fixed phrases that were not bound by the language rules (Lewis, 1993). Lewis (1997) thought that language was not composed of grammar and vocabulary, but was made up of prefabricated chunks. There were a lot of prefabricated chunks in English, which were the clusters of language structures. They were language phenomena which had both lexical and grammatical features. Wray (2002) regarded lexical chunks as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which appears to be prefabricated, stored and retrieved wholly from the memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar". Zimmerman (1997) believed that, throughout history, the functions of the chunks in foreign language teaching were undervalued.

Lewis (1997) considered that an important part of language acquisition was the ability to understand and produce chunks. Language learners could gradually master the whole language system through the learning and usage of the language. Pawley and Syder (1983) also pointed out that in order to speak as fluently as native speakers, foreign language learners should learn more chunks. After the psycho-linguistic research, they found that the language learners' brain could only handle 8-10 words at a time, while native speakers could speak the sentences which included more complex words (Pawley & Syder, 1983). This result suggested that native speakers' brain stored a lot of chunks, which were larger than words. Each chunk was a memory block, which would not increase the burden of memory and could be extracted directly when it was used. Thus, there were advantages of learning chunks in storage and output of languages.

Krashen's second language acquisition theory believed that language acquisition was accomplished through language input, and the ideal input procedure should be interesting and association (Krashen, 1985). Therefore, the main focus of teaching should be placed on how to provide the students with the best method of language input. The traditional teaching method could enhance students' language input, increase their accumulation and consolidation of language knowledge as well as their sense of language. It also developed their habit of thinking in English, which improved their language abilities. According to statistics, 90% of daily communication was realized by those prefabricated chunks which existed as the phrases and fixed implementations (Skehan, 1998). In the process of language acquisition, each learner must go through the process of the use of prefabricated chunks. Thus, the input of chunks played a pivotal role in the process of students' learning and accumulation of the language. By using the prefabricated chunks to improve the efficiency of language input, students may further improve proficiency in comprehensive language.

Domestic research on chunks started at the beginning of this century, including the research and exploration of their functions in second language acquisition and teaching. The content of research has changed step by step from the introduction of theories and experience to the exploration of the combination of theory and teaching practice. Research on chunks can be classified into three categories: The exploration of the theoretical principles, application and learning

model (Chen Xin, 2004; Zhengyou Qi, 2007); The exploration of the relationship between second language input or output and capacity and strategy (Diao Linlin, 2004; Xu Jiajin & Xu Zongrui, 2007); The exploration of use of the lexical chunks in teaching practice, both qualitative and quantitative (Pu Jianzhong, 2003; Chen Yi, 2006; Wang Lifei & Zhang Yan, 2006; Zheng Jing, 2008). In China, school education attaches great importance to learning English. For a long time, there have been two extremes in our English teaching. One of them lays too much emphasis on the structural method, which attaches too much importance to the syntactic rules and ignores the language use in the specific context. It is helpful to the language correctness, but resulting to broken oral production. And the other is communicative approach, which gives weight to the utilization in the context. It's good to the fluency of the oral production but leading to the lack of correctness in communication (Yang Yumin & Wen Qing, 2010).

So, there comes a problem. Is the input of chunks beneficial to the learners' output of oral English? If so, chunks will have an important impact on language learners, which will also help learners with language learning. Therefore, the exploration and research of the relationship between the input of chunks and oral production can be very necessary.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Questions*

The purpose of the study is to find out the functions of chunks input on English major students' oral production, so the whole experiment is designed to collect more information and gain a deep insight into it. Therefore, the research questions are proposed. Are there any differences in oral production between two groups of subjects?

B. *Subjects*

60 English major students from Nantong University were invited to participate in the experiment. Those subjects have been studying English for 8 or 12 years, and most of them had passion for English, sharing similar English background. These subjects were divided into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. The way of chunks input was employed in teaching in the experimental class, while in the control class, the traditional way of teaching was used.

C. *Procedure*

For the teaching in the experimental class, the emphasis was laid on the cognition and drill of chunks. Through the input and output in the teaching and learning activities, subjects were taught to identify, study and use chunks. Thus, subjects would be able to master and use chunks effectively and skillfully, and their ability to use English would also be improved. The process was divided into four steps.

Firstly, subjects were trained to be aware of chunks. This required experimental group students to preview and get some information about the articles. While getting the information about the articles, they should mark the chunks. First, of course, students should figure out the chunks, the type of chunks and so on. On this basis, students were required to use their own English knowledge to identify chunks in the context. This was a proactive process to construct knowledge through language attention, analysis and memorization. It not only trained the students' ability to identify the chunks, but also enhanced the students' awareness of chunks.

Secondly, subjects were required to practice with chunks. First, the researcher asked questions and then required students to find the chunks in the textbooks. As for the key chunks, students were required to make sentences or translate them over and over again.

Thirdly, subjects were expected to accumulate chunks. When doing exercises, students were required to detect chunks by themselves, which could cultivate their awareness of chunks. When coping with the doubts in these exercises, the researcher raised questions for subjects and then did further explanations. As for some useful and authentic expressions in the text, the researcher gave the Chinese equivalents, and then urged subjects to make some marks on them. Lexical chunks teaching required students to accumulate the chunks in the texts and exercises. At the end of each unit, students were required to check these chunks by dictation.

Fourthly, chunks were applied to real contexts. Students were required to use the expressions learned from the textbooks to complete the output tasks. During the output, lexical chunks teaching focused on putting new knowledge into existing knowledge structures, expecting that students' systematization, their memory storage would be increased. After that, students would have accumulated a large amount of chunks. In order to prompt students to use and master the new chunks, the researcher required experimental group students to discuss in small groups. The oral compositions and group discussions not only stimulated the students' interest and enthusiasm of their study, but also made them use these chunks creatively. Gradually, they could use chunks appropriately and learned to put chunks in different contexts accurately.

For the teaching in the control group, traditional method was used, which mainly went through the following steps. Before the class, the researcher required students to preview the text. In class, students were taught the key words and phrases. After the class, they were asked to complete the exercises and the teacher explained the difficult parts of the text. Finally, students were required to dictate words and phrases in the words list.

This experiment lasted about 12 weeks, comparisons were made between the experimental group students' oral production grades and the control group students' grades.

D. Data Collection

Data collection mainly aimed at the results of pre-test and post-test for students' oral proficiency in the two groups at the end of the experiment. In the process of detecting the use of chunks in oral production, it was necessary to make it clear that only the correctly used lexical chunks were counted. Moreover, the accuracy and fluency of the oral production were also measured. 60 students' scores were collected at the end of experimental teaching.

Independent Sample T Test and Paired Sample T Test were used to verify the significant differences of test results, and verify that if the way of chunks input is significant.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Results

1. The Effect of Chunks Input in Groups

When comparing the differences exerted by chunks input in teaching, oral production in and between groups was observed. By employing the Paired Sample T Test, the differences in groups were analyzed. The results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SPEAKING PROFICIENCY IN EXPERIMENTAL CLASS

	Before the experiment (n=30)		After the experiment (n=30)		MD	T(58)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Grades	5.883	0.9440	6.983	0.8952	-1.1000	-9.289*

*P<0.05

Table 1 shows that oral production in experimental class after the experiment was significantly improved compared with the results gained before the experiment ($t(58) = -9.289, p < 0.05$). The comparison presented learners' fluency and accuracy of oral production by using chunks. Inspections of the two group means indicate that the average score of learners' oral production (6.983) after the experiment is higher than that (5.883) before the experiment, and standard deviation (SD) (0.8952) of the former is higher than that of the latter (0.9440). Based on the data, it's found that chunks input plays a significant role in improving learners' oral proficiency.

2. The Effect of Chunks Input between Groups

To further explore the significance of chunks input, the effect between groups was also analyzed. By using the Independent Samples T Test, the differences between groups were measured and displayed as follows.

TABLE 2
COMPARING THE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY BEFORE THE EXPERIMENT

	The experimental group (n=30)		The control group (n=30)		MD	T(58)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Grades	5.883	0.9440	5.917	0.8816	-0.034	-.141*

*P<0.05

Table 2 shows some grades before the experiment without using chunks input in teaching. The mean value of control class is 5.917, which is much the same as experimental class's. Besides, its standard value is 0.8816, a little lower than that 0.9440 of the experimental class. There aren't any obvious differences in speaking proficiency between the experimental class and the control class.

TABLE 3
COMPARING THE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

	The experimental group (n=30)		The control group (n=30)		MD	T(58)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Grades	6.983	0.8952	6.017	0.8251	0.966	4.349*

*P<0.05

Table 3 demonstrates that speaking proficiency of students exposed to chunks input in the experimental was significantly different from that of learners in the control group ($t(58) = 4.349, p < 0.05$). Through observation of two groups of statistics, it is found that the average grade of learners in the experimental group (6.983) is significantly higher than the grades of learners in the control group (6.017). The difference between the means is 0.966 points on a 10-point test. The results suggest that chunks input plays a positive role in enhancing learners' speaking proficiency.

B. Discussions

1. Role of Chunks Input

TABLE 4
COMPARISONS BETWEEN GROUPS

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Before the experiment	The experimental group	30	5.883	0.9440
	The control group	30	5.917	0.8816
After the experiment	The experimental group	30	6.983	0.8952
	The control group	30	6.017	0.8251

Table 4 presents test grades of each group before and after the experiment. It is pretty clear to see the extremely differences in oral proficiency. Through the comparisons between the experimental class's two tests and the results of the two classes, it can be found that the input of chunk language is good to the improvement of spoken English.

It's demonstrated that the average 5.917 in the control class is higher than 5.883 in the experimental class, while the experimental class's standard deviation 0.9440 is lower than the standard deviation 0.8816 in the control class. The results show that the experimental class's grades are lower than the control class's and their distribution were not as even as the control class's.

At the beginning of the experiment, the experimental class students' cognition of chunks was not strong enough. They couldn't make good use of the chunks learned in class and apply them to the communication. However, as the experiment kept going, the oral test results of the experiment show that the experimental class's and the control class's P value in the test is less than the average verbal score 0.01. Besides, there is also a great difference between their average scores. The average of the experimental class is 6.983, which is higher than the average score 6.017 of the control class.

The total points of the oral exam are 10. From Table 4, the average score rates of the experimental class can exceed 69% of the total scores, showing that the input of chunk language indeed improves the students' oral proficiency. The control class students who were taught under the traditional language teaching approach were also improved. But compared with their scores before the oral test, their improvements were lower than the experimental class students'. Under the influence of the lexical chunks teaching, experimental class students enhanced the awareness of chunks and the ability to apply what they had learned to their communication. However, due to the differences of individuals, only some of them could use chunks properly and improve their spoken English quickly and efficiently. And the control class students who under the influence of the traditional teaching method, to some extent, could remember and recite some beautiful sentences of the learning materials. However, when it came to another topic, they could not use the learned sentence structures and pragmatic sentences flexibly. In summary, the input of chunk language has a significant effect on the learners' spoken English. It can raise the students' spoken language significantly. Besides, it is more effective than the traditional language input.

In brief, lexical chunks teaching is better than the traditional teaching method, and the input of chunks does help to improve spoken English. However, it is a common phenomenon in China that spoken English is often ignored by the teachers or the students. Even some students' English test grades are very high or nearly full marks, spoken English may be a rather difficult problem for them in daily communication. However, it is the spoken English that is more significant than reading, writing.

2. Problems in Chunks Input

It's apparent that chunks input in teaching could significantly improve learners' speaking proficiency. However, learners under the traditional teaching mode didn't show any significant improvement in speaking proficiency. By observing the process of teaching in the control group, the root of the problem has been explored. Although the problems are complex and diverse, they can be mainly summarized in the following points, namely the simplicity of evaluation criteria, learners' own defects, and the traditional mode of teaching.

Firstly, the problem lies in the simplicity of evaluation criteria. Today, for the English majors, their English assessment criteria are TEM4 and TEM8. Examination pass-rate is the main criteria for each college or university. Therefore, Chinese college students never get rid of the burden of learning English, which makes them committed to the examinations themselves instead of comprehensive ability. Thus, the focus of the study is on the numerous tests and the significance of speaking proficiency is usually ignored, which makes it impossible for both teachers and learners to be aware of the importance of chunks input in improving speaking proficiency. It's believed that chunks input in teaching is undervalued.

Secondly, the problem lies in learners' awareness of chunks. In many colleges' teaching class, the role of lexical chunks is not stressed in a high degree, only few of teachers practice the teaching of using lexical chunks in their teaching class. As is known to all, speaking is a process of information reprocessing and expression. Whether you can use lexical chunks proficiency has a direct effect on oral production in terms of accuracy and fluency, and it also plays as tunnels of learners' language. Learners in the experimental group had a stronger awareness of lexical chunks than students in the control group. It can be concluded that learners in the second group are lack of awareness of chunks.

If students lack awareness of lexical chunks, when they are speaking, they can not use lexical chunks consciously. Therefore, students should make it clear that lexical chunks are the basic unit of language learning and any production is mainly composed of lexical chunks. Students learning to use lexical chunks can effectively eliminate the influence of mother tongue so as to make their expression more exactly.

Thirdly, the problem comes from the traditional way of teaching. Due to the large size of English classes, one to one exchange is only limited to teachers and some students. Most of the students' behaviors are greatly restricted, they can

only be passively input with a limited number of chunks, but can not output actively. The traditional way of teaching makes learners in a passive and mindless state. However, the teaching of lexical chunks is a supplement of the present foreign language teaching methods, which makes the purpose of teaching and study becomes more concentrated (Yuan Wenxiang, 2008). In the teaching class, teachers can arrange a series of activities which are in the form of input, internalization and output. By this way, the ability of using lexical chunks can be strengthened as well as the competence of grammar and pragmatic can be improved. Schmidt thinks that language learning is an accumulation of chunks (Schmidt, 1990). Lexical chunks teaching method not only requires students to accumulate the phrases in the book but also requires them to accumulate lexical chunks in daily practice. On the basis of a large number of real language input, the teacher create the corresponding context, then teachers guide their students to make oral productions by lexical chunks. Therefore, they could complete the default communication tasks and communicative activities (Liu Jiaying, 2006).

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Findings of the Study

Lexical chunks incorporate the advantages of syntax, semantic and context. It has specific expression function and can be used as a whole. Lexical chunks play an important role in oral production. Through studies on how to help learners better improve English speaking proficiency are so many, people should be aware of the importance of chunks input in teaching. The results of the paper show that the chunks can obviously promote the students' language ability and there is a positive correlation between chunks and speaking proficiency of college English learners. All in all, the importance of lexical chunks should be stressed, students need to pay attention to students' language knowledge accumulation and to improve their speaking proficiency. Teaching of lexical chunks will help improve students' English comprehensive application ability. It advocates note memory in learning English and accumulate a large number of lexical chunks, which not only can enhance the students' English learning ability, and can promote the improvement of speaking ability.

B. Limitations of the Study

Through this research, the relevance between lexical chunks and the competence of English speaking has been observed. However, the present research is still elementary and experimental. There exist some limitations. The research involves only 60 students all together, which is quite a small sample and thus the reliability of the funding may be limited. Therefore, in further studies, it is advised that more varied subjects should be used to further test our present findings. In addition, longitudinal studies can be conducted in the future, which will present the development route of learners' English speaking proficiency.

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