A Study Based on Lexical Chunks Present among College Students

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Abstract

College English writing is one of the four basic skills in English learning, which can objectively reflect students' language ability. Whereas, English writing is considered to be the most difficult part to improve. As we can see, in the essays of the Chinese college students, there often appears Chinglish, correct in grammar but unauthentic in expression. In order to better the situation, the author has introduced the new idea of lexical chunks into the teaching of college English writing. Under this guideline, students should firstly understand the lexical chunks theory, ranging from the definition to the various classifications of lexical chunks. Afterwards, students should learn to recognize and even learn some important chunks by heart. The third step should lie in their daily practice of consciously using chunks they learned in their writings, followed by the final step of appropriate usage of chunks unconsciously. Students are expected to improve their writing ability in the process of identifying and using lexical chunks.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Current Situation of College English Writing in China College English writing has long been in an embarrassing position in college English learning. Though it is not difficult for the Chinese teachers to understand what the students mean in their essays, it is rather confusing for the foreign teachers to fully know their meaning for the same essay. Chinglish in writing, the Chinese usage of English which is not common for native English speakers, has long been a problem and has become the bottleneck. In the author's two classes, it was found that the most obvious problem lies in the vagueness of expressions and the emergence of many Chinglish expressions. Both teachers and students have poured a lot of time and energy to deal with this situation. It is not uncommon to see many students have bought all kinds of vocabulary books to enlarge their vocabulary, and some even try to recite the words in dictionary. Unfortunately, their effort has got little paid off and their English compositions are still far from perfect. Moreover, many chinses scholars also realized this phenomenon and published the relevant articles to analyze it from different angles. Qin (2017) studied the Chinglish phenomenon in Chinses-English translation, Shuai (2019) explored the reasons for Chinglish in writing from a psycholinguistics view.

1.2 The Introduction of Lexical Chunks After a 3-year study and analysis, it seems to the author that the students often search single English equivalents of Chinese words, from either the books they newly learned or their minds, and then combine them mechanically piece by piece to construct a so-called English sentence. That is where the lexical chunk theory comes to the mind. As the same time, the author realizes some Chinese scholars have already realized the important role that the lexical chunks play in English learning and thus made some relevant research. For instance, Cao & Zhang (2016) made an experimental study on improving students' translation competence based on lexical chunk. Zhou (2018) studied the impact of chunk teaching in college English to negative transfer of native language. Fei (2018) explored the impact of chunk teaching to college English writing. However, few scholars have made an elaborate analysis on how to apply chunk theory into the real classroom teaching activities. Therefore, based on Lewis's lexical approach, the author tries to teach English writing in college with the application of lexical chunks in order to find a practical way to improve English writing. elt.ccsenet.org English Language Teaching Vol. 12, No. 9; 2019 2

2. Definition and Classification of Lexical Chunks

2.1 Definition of Lexical Chunks The word "chunk" is often used as an umbrella term to refer to the multi-word combinations or units that are helpful in language acquisition, processing and use. The study of chunks can be traced back to 150 years ago when scholars began to realize the importance of multi-word combinations in child's language acquisition. However, no coherent term and definition have yet emerged. Different scholars use different and overlapping terms. Krashen (1978) uses semi-fixed patterns, Pawley and Syder (1983) prefers lexicalized sentence stems, Lewis (1993) applies lexical chunks, Wray(1999) puts it formulaic sequences, Moon (2002) uses multi-word items. Zhang (2018) steps a little further and uses multimodal lexical chunks. Although labeled differently, they mostly refer to the same phenomenon in language, that is, a sequence, continuous or discontinuous of words or other kinds of meaning elements which are stored and retrieved as a whole from memory. In this essay, the author opts for the term "lexical chunks".

2.2 Classification of Lexical Chunks As noted earlier, there are many terms for chunks. So accordingly, different categories of chunks have been identified. And the most accepted and comprehensive ones are from Nattinger and DeCarrico, and Lewis. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) put forward four large categories of lexical phrases based on four criteria: length and grammatical status; canonical or non-canonical shape; variability or fixedness; whether it is a continuous, unbroken string of words or discontinuous, allowing lexical insertions.

1) Poly-words are phrases that act as single words with no variability or lexical insertions, Examples include on the contrary, in a nutshell.

2) Institutionalized expressions refer to sentence-length, invariable, and mostly continuous expressions like, how do you do, nice to meet you, long time no see

3) Phrasal constraints allow variations of lexical and phrase categories, and are mostly continuous. Phrases like a day ago, long time ago, see you later, see you next time all fall into this category.

4) Sentence builders are those lexical phrases that allow the construction of full sentences with lots of variation and insertions, such as, I think that…, my point is that … Michael Lewis also proposes four kinds of lexical chunks in his two works, the Lexical Approach (1993), Implementing the Lexical Approach (1997).

As we can see, the above two categories have many overlapping parts though they may use different terms to mean it. Another thing the author should point out is about the first category by Lewis.

3. Lexical Chunks Teaching

3.1 Lewis' Teaching Approach In Lewis' two books, Lexical Approach, and Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice, he enthusiastically talks about how to apply lexical chunks to language teaching shown as follows.

1) Teachers should not analyze the target language at the very beginning, but will be more inclined to draw students' attention to these chunks.

2) In the process of language teaching, the importance of noticing and listening as well as the practice of repeating tasks are essentially emphasized. elt.ccsenet.org English Language Teaching Vol. 12, No. 9; 2019

3) Translation and the speaking of the first language by teachers and students should not be totally avoided.

4) The traditional Present-Practice-Produce paradigm should be replaced by Observe-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle.

5) The main purpose of teaching activities introduced by teachers is receptive, awareness-raising of lexical chunks, rather than formal teaching in a high-anxiety learning atmosphere.

3.2 Teaching Steps According to Lewis' Lexical Approach, the identification of lexical chunks should be placed in the first place. The second step goes to the organization or practice of chunks, followed by the final step of appropriate usage of chunks. Recognition of chunks, especially for the beginners, is not an easy job. Therefore, some guidance is strongly recommended. Guided discovery by the teacher together with contextual guesswork by the students should be interchangeably adopted, which involves asking questions or offering examples that lead students to identify or guess the formation and meaning of chunks.

Teachers can also use some techniques to facilitate their teaching process. In this way, students get involved in a process of semantic processing After the successful identification of chunks, organization and practice will come in handy. In the early stages, teachers can organize some separate activities based on the three kinds respectively: collocations, institutionalized utterances and sentence frame and heads. In this process, teachers play the main role and should be prepared to give some prompt guide if necessary. After a certain period of time, students can make some practice by combining the four kinds together until they can write an essay skillfully. Still, the relevant teaching activities should be undertaken in a light atmosphere rather than a high-anxiety learning atmosphere.

4. Summary

The introduction and adoption of the lexical chunks is supposed to be a new angle in teaching college English writing, and we sincerely hope that it will offer a solution to the bottleneck problem existing in current English writing and provides an effective complement to the existing grammar vocabulary dichotomy.

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