

Research on the Application of Lexical Chunk Usage in College Students' Spoken English Communication

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Abstract: With the continuing development of corpus linguistics, the ability of foreign language learners to use lexical chunks has attracted more attention from the academic circles. Lexical chunk, a language structure with specific discourse functions, possesses both lexical and grammatical features. As a multi-word unit, lexical chunks are examples of integral acquisition and storage in the human brain's memory. It's a language phenomenon that frequently appears in learners' spoken communication but is easily neglected. The ability to use lexical chunks is an important evaluation criterion for pragmatic competence. Lexical chunk usage plays an important role in learners' oral output. This paper aims to explore the application of lexical chunk usage in college students' English oral communication, and how factors such as learners' characteristics of using lexical chunks affect college students' oral output, thus affecting the proficiency, fluency and idiomaticity of communication.

1. Introduction

With the arrival of the era of economic globalization, the 21st century has become an era full of opportunities and challenges. In this globalized situation, communication between countries is becoming increasingly frequent. English, as an international language, has long become an important carrier of international communication in fields such as politics, economy, culture, technology, and so on. As a youthful force driving the development of the times, it is particularly important for college students to improve their English spoken communication skills. However, under the exam-oriented education model in China, college students often become addicted to using excessive assignments tactics and neglect oral trainings. Therefore, in the communication, college students often use Chinglish with many errors in language expression and are unable to express their real thoughts. With the rise of corpus linguistics, the ability to use lexical chunks plays an important role in language learning.

2. The Connotation of Lexical Chunks

2.1 The Concept of Lexical Chunks

For the concept of lexical chunks, scholars at home and abroad have used different terms, commonly including formulaic sequences, chunks, lexical chunks, word clusters, and formulaic languages and so on. ^[1] In these concepts, some emphasize the integrity of chunks, which are stored in memory as a whole and used from memory during oral output. Some emphasize extractability and prefabrication of lexical chunks.

2.2 The Definition of Lexical Chunks

The language phenomenon represented by lexical chunks was first proposed by *Jesoerson*, who used the name formulaic language in 1924. Subsequently, scholars created and used various terminologies based on their research needs. All these names are diverse but inconclusive. Psycholinguistics generally believes that the general definition of the lexical chunk is as a string of words that are memorized and extracted as a whole. This definition is from the perspective of language users, which is to see whether individual language users or learners consider it as a block, and whether it is stored and extracted as a whole. This definition is from the perspective of language users, which is to see whether individual language users or learners consider a string of words as a block, and whether it is stored and extracted as a whole.

The representative figure in foreign research widely cited in recent years is *Alison Wray*, who defines the name of a lexical chunk as a formulaic sequence, which is a sequence composed of continuous or discontinuous words and other elements. These sequences are prefabricated. That is to say, they are stored as a whole in memory and extracted as a whole when in use without the need for temporary grammar generation. Recently, *Wray* also referred to morpheme equivalent unit as the name of the lexical chunk. She redefined that “a lexical chunk is a word or string of words. The string of words can be complete or contain spaces. The word or string of words is treated as a morpheme and its meaning does not depend on the combination of its constituent components.” She proposed 11 criteria for defining a lexical chunk: grammatical irregularity, semantic opacity, specificity of use of register, pragmatic function, personal frequency of use, accompanying linguistic or nonverbal tags, grammatical or lexical tags, *deja vu*, derivability, inappropriateness, and inconsistency with the user's language proficiency. She suggests using one or more of these 11 criteria to distinguish lexical chunks.

From this, it can be seen that lexical chunks refer to multi word combinations that appear frequently which can be stored as a whole and can express relatively complete meanings and functions. However, the naming and definition of it are not absolutely unchanging. And scholars can continuously improve and revise it according to their own research needs.

2.3 The Type of Lexical Chunks

The classification of lexical chunk types by different researchers has also shown diversity (*Beker*, 1975; *Nattinger&DeCarrico*, 1992; *Moon*, 1997; *Lewis*, 1997; *Howarth*, 1998, etc.). It is widely accepted that *Nattinger&DeCarrico* (1992) categorizes L2 prefabricated lexical chunks into four categories structurally: multi word (by the way, etc.), idiomatic (I will get it, etc.), phrase structure (a few days ago, etc.), and sentence framework (I believe, etc.). Next, *Lewis's* (1997) classification of types suggests that multi word prefabricated chunks include the following four categories: aggregate words (They are usually fixed phrases composed of 2-3 words. They are immutable, indivisible and similar to micro idioms, such as all in all); collocations (It refers to word

combinations that occur frequently in natural languages, such as watch TV); fixed expression or idiomatic discourse (Such chunks are relatively rare. They have fixed forms and pragmatic functions, and are mostly used in oral communication, such as If I were you, I am very happy, etc.); sentence structure (They are usually noncontinuous structural phrases, such as Firstly... Secondly... Finally, etc.). Overall, lexical chunks can be divided into four categories: aggregated words, idiomatic words, collocations, and sentence frames.

3. The Influence factors of Lexical Chunk Usage on English Spoken Communication

Lexical chunk usage is an important indicator for measuring learners' pragmatic competence and language proficiency. [2] Lewis (2000) believes that chunk learning can help learners express language more proficiently and fluently. Related studies have shown that learners' ability to use lexical chunks shows positive correlation with their language skills and comprehensive linguistic competences. [6] Lexical chunk organization has a predictive effect on English speaking performance. In terms of lexical chunk usage amounts, students with higher proficiency use more lexical chunks. [4]

Research has found a high or moderate correlation between lexical chunk usage and oral proficiency. [7] Mao Chengyi (2008) also pointed out that the frequency of lexical chunk use by Chinese English learners in Spoken English communication shows moderately positive correlation with their fluency in oral production. And using lexical chunks can help improve learners' fluency. [8]

From this, it can be seen that there is a positive correlation between learners' lexical chunk usage and their English speaking proficiency. Therefore, both teachers and learners should attach great importance to the use of lexical chunks.

3.1 The Influence of Language Itself on Spoken English Communication

Mao Chengyi (2008) found that the higher a learner's oral proficiency, the more lexical chunks and types they use. The number of lexical chunks used by Chinese English learners in oral communication is not large, and their types are relatively single. In English speeches, the types of lexical chunks used by successful Chinese college students are phrase structure, sentence framework, idiom, and multi word. [8] The most commonly used lexical chunk types include phrase structures and sentence frameworks. The least used are idioms and multi words. In terms of the richness of lexical chunks, the phrase structure is the highest, while the richness of idioms and sentence frameworks is relatively low. [1]

The reason for this is that sentence construction frameworks and phrase structures have the characteristic of openness. Learners only need to master 2-3 frames to form a new sentence during the language generation process by filling in words or phrases that match the specific context. However, idioms and multi words have the characteristic of being closed with fixed structures. And all the memorization, extraction, and processing require precision. Therefore, learners master idioms and multi words relatively less. [9]

3.2 The influence of Learner Factors on Spoken English Communication

Spoken language is the key link in language communication. And fluency in spoken language is one of the goals pursued in second language learning and foreign language teaching. [3] As a means of language output, spoken language plays a decisive role in expressing ideas, conveying information, and communicating with each other. Foreign language learners pursue fluency in their spoken language. According to Webster's New Third International Dictionary, fluency is defined as

smoothly, calm, and rapid. This is a general understanding of common sense. In English learning, fluency usually refers to the ability of learners to express them freely and effortlessly. People usually classify fluency into general fluency and narrow fluency, possessing practical application ability, independent operation ability, innovation ability, multi-directional thinking ability, and self-sustainable development ability. However, the factors that affect foreign language learners' oral fluency vary, mainly manifested in:

First and foremost, the transfer of mother tongue has a negative impact. Lado proposed in 1957 that learners would transfer the language form, meaning, and distribution of their mother tongue, along with their mother tongue culture, into the second language system in second language acquisition. When there are differences in the structural characteristics between the target language and the learner's mother tongue, negative transfer of language occurs, which is mother tongue interference and makes learning difficult. In fact, there are many factors that lead to negative transfer of the mother tongue, such as cultural factors. The translation of "*huijinrutu*" in Chinese into English is "spend money like water", rather than "spend money like earth". This is because Britain is an island country with abundant water resources, while China lives and thrives on the Asian continent with land everywhere.

In addition, the usage type is single and repetitive. On one hand, the type of lexical chunk usage is singular. When expressing personal opinions, learners tend to overuse sentence frameworks such as think/believe that and use less sentence frameworks assume/suppose. ^[9] It can be seen that Chinese learners tend to first use their mother-tongue thinking and then express their corresponding ideas in a foreign language. The first guide word used by Chinese students in the framework language is mainly composed of three conjunctions: "and", "so", and "but", followed by "because" and "then" and "well". It can be said that Chinese learners have poor pragmatic quality in their discourse. On the other hand, some lexical chunks are repeatedly used. Learners repeatedly use sentence frameworks to express personal opinions, typical examples of which are as far as I know et al. ^[10]

Last but not least, the state of mind of the speaker also has much influence. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis points out that the three main factors affecting learners' language input are motivation, confidence, and anxiety. If the learner's motivation is stronger, their self-confidence is stronger. Their anxiety level is lower, and language input ability is stronger. On the contrary, if learners have weaker motivation, lack confidence, or even become overly insecure, and have a high level of anxiety, they will develop a certain level of defensive mentality towards language input, which is not conducive to good learning outcomes. As a form of language expression, the input effect of lexical chunks is closely related to the psychological state of learners. Only when college students have a correct and positive understanding of lexical chunks while maintaining an appropriate level of anxiety in language learning can the quantity and quality of chunk input be guaranteed. In addition, in oral communication, if communicators use grammar instead of lexical chunks to organize their sentences, as second language learners, they will inevitably worry about whether grammar usage is correct and be in an overly monitored state, which can lead to poor language output and even stuttering, leaving others with a feeling of lack of confidence. Therefore, only by confidently applying the accumulated language lexical chunks to the production of spoken language according to different situations can communication be maintained normally.

3.3 The Influence of External Environmental Factors on Spoken English Communication

Broadly speaking, language environment can be divided into natural language environment and classroom language environment. Language acquisition in a natural state is the main source of understanding and generation, mainly obtained through natural communication, and the natural

language environment is the social environment. Based on this situation, the main reason is the lack of a communicative atmosphere. In the current educational environment in China, students have very few opportunities to interact in real-life English communication situations. Their English knowledge acquisition mainly comes from the classroom, but students' time to speak English in the classroom is very limited. And school oral practice often stays in shallow mechanical imitation and practice, which is difficult to fully mobilize students' subjective initiative and enthusiasm, and is also detrimental to stimulating their learning interest.

In addition, there is a lack of relevant research. The survey shows that there is a lot of research on oral expression results, oral teaching, and oral testing in major foreign language journals in China while there is little research on oral expression processes, contextual factors, and so on. At the same time, although teachers and scholars actively learn from advanced teaching methods and concepts and apply them in practice, the proportion of empirical research on oral classrooms is relatively low. Most of them are based on personal teaching experience summary.

From this, it can be seen that the types and strategies used by Chinese college students in English oral lexical chunk usage are singular. There are certain problems in terms of authenticity and appropriateness.

4. The Role of Lexical Chunk Usage in Promoting Spoken English Communication

For language learners, lexical chunks play an important role in language learning. Integrity, variability, generativity, and dynamism are the essential characteristics of lexical chunks. Lexical chunks can affect the fluency, accuracy, and authenticity of students' oral expression, accelerate the decoding speed of the brain, reduce the decoding burden on the brain, improve the efficiency of language understanding, reduce the pressure of grammar rules on brain calculations in real-time communication, compete for time for grammar analysis and early planning, accelerate decoding speed, promote language fluency. Moreover, it can help overcome the negative transfer effect of mother tongue, cultivate language sense, improve language learners' pragmatic abilities and enhance the authenticity of language expression. It is beneficial to reduce the difficulty of language learning and cultivate learners' confidence and interest. The main functions of lexical chunks in second language acquisition are to reduce cognitive load, cultivate pragmatic ability, and enhance learning interest. The use of lexical chunks in communication can enhance the confidence of communicators, stimulate learning enthusiasm and positiveness. Especially for beginners, the use of lexical chunks greatly alleviates language coding pressure and anxiety during communication, making it easy for learners to gain a sense of achievement and form a virtuous cycle of learning.

5. The Enlightenment of Lexical Chunk Usage on English Oral Teaching

Nattinger&DeCarrico (1992) pointed out that lexical chunk teaching can improve learners' learning efficiency, thus enhancing their language proficiency. Lewis (1993) proposed a "lexical chunk based teaching method" centered around vocabulary, which emphasizes teaching multi word lexical chunks such as collocations, fixed expressions, sentence frames, and quotations. Lexical chunks are mostly language units generated according to certain grammatical rules, which do not require conscious attention to grammatical structure when used. Shortening the time from understanding to producing language information can greatly improve the accuracy and fluency of language use. Lexical chunk teaching has a strong positive effect, such as helping to reduce interlanguage errors, enhancing learners' confidence, improving learners' pragmatic abilities, and promoting vocabulary learning. Therefore, in the process of oral teaching, teachers should not only enhance learners' awareness of language chunks, but also adopt diverse teaching methods to help learners develop the quality of lexical chunk usage to improve the accuracy and fluency of English

oral expression.

Firstly, teachers should make full use of the Chinese student oral corpus to summarize the issues related to language chunks in oral communication, improve learners' awareness of language chunks, and summarize the interactive skills of export language from the corpus for classroom teaching, so that students can identify, learn, and use language chunks.

Secondly, teachers had better adopt diversified strategies for teaching oral chunks. Design block practices with diverse forms, such as sentence making, translation, error correction, filling in the blanks, and give speeches according to the provided block framework, diversifying the input of blocks. Enabling learners to master and proficiently use English lexical blocks through extensive contact and imitation ^[6] can improve learners' fluency and accuracy in oral expression.

At the same time, when writing oral textbooks or teaching resources, exercises should be designed according to the functions of lexical chunks. The pragmatic qualities of discourse, such as interactivity, politeness, and cooperation, cannot be ignored. Foreign language teaching should pay more attention to relevant functions and their lexical means, and pay attention to the diversity and gradient of lexical chunk usage, as well as the combination of different functional lexical chunks, ^[5] such as conversation maintenance lexical chunks, conversation purpose lexical chunks, topic related lexical chunks, communication strategy lexical chunks, and discourse organization lexical chunks. ^[10]

6. Conclusion

Lexical chunk competence is an important factor in the comprehensive ability of English learners. There is a positive correlation between the standard frequency of chunk usage and English oral fluency, which means that the more lexical chunks are used, the higher the standard frequency of chunk usage, and the more fluent the oral expression. In the teaching of college English courses, the proportion of chunk teaching should be increased to enhance the awareness of college students in using lexical chunks, in order to improve their oral fluency in English use.

Despite being influenced by factors such as the language itself, learners, and external environment, the use of lexical chunks still plays a crucial role in college students' English oral communication, and has a great promoting effect on English oral communication. The cultivation of lexical chunk usage ability can help cultivate college students' English language sense, improve the logical expression, increase the fluency of expression, and ensure the authenticity of expression. In the context of internationalization, college students, as important storytellers of Chinese stories and disseminators of Chinese voices, play an important role in the international system. We should shoulder our social mission, attach importance to the importance of language chunks in English oral learning, go abroad, become disseminators and speakers of Chinese culture, tell Chinese stories to foreign countries fluently and authentically in English, spread Chinese ideas, and showcase a comprehensive and three-dimensional image of China to the world.

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