

A Study on the Use of Chunks by Chinese EFL Learners

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Chunks, as fixed or semi-fixed structures, are the unity of grammar, semantics, and context which play an important role in the process of language comprehension and generation. This paper gives a brief introduction to the definition and classification of chunks, and makes an in-depth analysis of the use of chunks in 95 Chinese EFL learners' compositions on the basis of the classification of chunks by Nattinger and DeCarrico. For the incorrect chunks in the compositions, this paper makes qualitative analysis and classifies them into redundancy, avoidance, tense, mixing, and chunks creation. According to the analysis, four suggestions on chunks teaching are put forward in order to explore effective measures to promote chunks teaching and help language learners improve their practical application ability of English.

Keywords: chunks, error analysis, chunks teaching

Introduction

With the globalization of economy and education, English, as a common communication tool in the international arena, becomes more and more important. English learning has also become a major problem for Chinese students. For most Chinese EFL learners who have studied English for six or seven years, there are still some difficulties in writing a coherent and smooth article in English or communicating in fluent and authentic English. Although many teachers have been carrying out various teaching reforms and adopting different methods to improve students' comprehensive ability of English use, the effect is not satisfactory. In recent years, some linguists have shown great interest in chunks, since they found language is not only realized by individual word or fixed phrases, but 90% of natural discourse is constructed by the semi-fixed chunks. Chunks, as fixed or semi-fixed language structures, are grammaticalized and stored in language users' memory in the pattern of chunk structures, which are ideal units in the output of language and could facilitate information retrieval. Many studies have proved that in the process of teaching, strengthening the input of chunks is closely related to the quality of language output, such as improving the accuracy and fluency of language, enhancing the logical structure of articles, overcoming interlanguage, and so on. This paper discusses the use of chunks by Chinese EFL learners on the basis of analyzing their 95 compositions.

Definition and Classification of Chunks

As early as the 1970s, Becker put forward the concept of "prefabricated chunks", which refers to a special multi-word lexical phenomenon in English. Then different experts named the language phenomenon from

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different perspectives, such as Nattinger and DeCarrico called it “lexical phrases”; Lewis used “lexical items” and Wray called it “formulaic language”. Though the labels are different, they just refer to the same phenomena in language, i.e., “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous of words or other meaning element, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole, from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (Wray, 1999, p. 214). The paper tends to use the simple word “chunk”.

It is difficult to classify chunks for their various names and definitions. The most widely accepted classification is made by Nattinger and DeCarrico. On the basis of structural criteria, chunks can be divided into polywords, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints, and sentence builders. From function’s point of view, Nattinger and DeCarrico classify chunks into social interactions, necessary topics, and discourse devices. Since chunks of social interaction and necessary topics often appear in spoken language, this paper mainly discusses the use of chunks by Chinese EFL learners from the perspective of structural classification.

Research Purpose, Subjects, and Method

The main purpose of this research is to invest the current use of chunks by Chinese EFL learners. In order to finish this task, 95 students’ compositions on the topic “How long should the National Holidays be?” are collected. The subjects are all students of a university from China. The title of this composition is from the prediction writing for CET-4 test of New Oriental School in June, 2009. The reason for choosing this topic is that it is closely related with students, and familiar with students, which can avoid students having nothing to write about.

After collecting students’ compositions, the author makes a statistical analysis of the use of chunks. Firstly, the chunks are picked out and classified according to Nattinger and DeCarrico’s criteria. Then, the incorrect chunks are marked. Finally, these errors are qualitatively analyzed. According to the statistical data, the incorrect chunks are classified into several types and the reasons for the errors are also discussed.

Research Results and Discussion

According to the statistics, there are 1,061 chunks in total in 95 compositions. The statistical results are in the following table.

Table 1

Statistical Results of the Use of Chunks by Chinese EFL Learners

	Frequency	Type	Recurrence rate	Error	Error rate
Polywords	440	113	3.9	57	13%
Institutionalized expressions	7	2	3.5	2	28.6%
Phrasal constraints	275	54	5.1	41	14.9%
Sentence builders	339	30	11.3	65	19.2%
Total	1,061	199	18.8	165	15.6%

From the above table, it can be obviously seen that students’ storage of chunks and their abilities of applying chunks in their writings are in urgent need to be improved. Chunks, which occupy 90% of the natural language, only occur 1,061 times in 95 students’ writings. In the aspect of frequency, the use of polywords chunks and

sentence builder chunks are the majority, but it is still far away from the ideal numbers. As to the types, polywords chunks exceed others by a great deal, and phrasal constraint chunks are in the next place. The sentence builder chunks, which should make the greatest contribution to the rich expressions of the content of writings, appear with fewer types, so its recurrence rate is relatively high. When it comes to error and error rate, the first one is institutionalized expression chunks, and sentence builder chunks rank the second. Institutionalized expressions, “which shoulder the responsibility of making expressions more idiosyncratic and also finding to be an efficient and pleasing way of getting an idea cross” (Nattinger & DeCarrio, 1992, p. 40), only occur two types with the frequency of seven times and the highest error rate of 28.6%.

Moreover, to better direct chunks teaching, the errors occurred in students’ writings are categorized and the causes of the error are further analysis. This paper describes the common chunk errors in students’ compositions from the following aspects.

Redundancy

Redundancy means the information that a signal carries in the information system can be gotten from other signals of the same system (He, 2000, p. 30). The problem of redundancy mainly can be differed from the following two aspects.

Redundancy of the chunks with the same or similar meaning. The reasons of this kind of problems’ occurrence always are that the students do not completely understand the meaning of chunks or are affected by the language transfer. For example, in Chinese, people always say “依在我看来, 我觉得...”, while in English it can be expressed as “in my opinion” or “I think”. However, some students do not totally understand the connotation of them, so for the affection of language transfer, they wrote down such sentences “In my opinion, I think a long holiday for about seven days is suitable”.

The recurrence of the same chunk. From the above table, it can be easily observed that the problem of the recurrence of the same chunk is very salient in sentence builder chunks. “Some people think that...” was employed 134 times of all the collected writings, the recurrence rate of it is higher than 39%. If the sentences such as “Some people suggest/consider /argue that...”, which are the same as sentence builder “Some people think that...”, are taken into consideration; the recurrence rate of this sentence type is 69.9%, which leads to the simplicity of sentence type and the monotonous expressions of the writings. This problem may be caused by the directions given by the author; moreover, it is for the reason that students lack the storage of chunks.

Avoidance

Avoidance means that the foreign language learners negatively deal with some difficulties in their learning process and avoid using certain rules or vocabulary in order to achieve language correctness (Ruan, 2000, p. 21). In order to improve the accuracy, most students use similar or the same chunks as their mother tongue to avoid differences, and use simple chunks to avoid complex chunks. As a result, the whole article crowds with a single chunk structure and repeated expressions, lacks diversity, and is poor in coherence. This paper will discuss the problem in detail from the following two aspects.

Prefer simple chunks to complex ones. Due to the influence of mother tongue transfer, the most common sentence patterns in students’ compositions are Subject + Predicate Verb + Object and Subject + Be + Predicative. The structures of inversion, clauses, passive structures, and other difficult structures are rarely used and errors

often occur in those structures.

Use sentences similar to or identical to the mother tongue to avoid differences. There are many differences between Chinese and English in structure. Chinese belongs to left branch language, while English belongs to right branch language. According to Odlin, when two languages present different branch directions, complex sentences' acquisition will be more difficult than when two languages present the same branching directions. For example, the qualifiers are always put before (that also means left) the words it modifies in Chinese, while in English qualifiers are always put after (that also means right) the words it modifies. For the influence of mother language, students seldom use relative clauses to build sentences. According to statistics, only 42 attributive clauses were used in 95 compositions, 11 of which were misused.

Tense

Tense errors are particularly evident in sentence construction, especially in conditional sentences and subjunctive moods. 14 of the 37 conditional sentences used in the total compositions have tense errors, with the error rate as high as 47.8%. Some of them appear in conditional sentences and some in main sentences. The main reason for tense errors is that basic knowledge is not firmly grasped by students. In the test, students, who are asked to write a composition about how long the National Holidays should be, are required to describe others' opinions firstly, and then express their own. Although the views are expressed in the past, they exist objectively and will not change under any circumstances. Therefore, the present tense should be used to describe them instead of the past tense.

Mixing

This problem mainly occurs in the use of polywords chunks, which can be ascribed to some students not clearly distinguishing the usages of some synonymous chunks and the context. This paper elaborates it from the following two aspects.

Mixing of synonymous chunks. Some chunks seem to be synonymous, but their connotations are quite different. The most obvious one is the mixing of "for example" and "such as". Both of them denote example, but the former usually refers using an example to explain or support what you are saying, while the latter can be used to list items of the like, usually at least lists two items. According to statistics, there are 32 "for example" and "such as" in 95 compositions. Except for misuse and misplacement, the number of the mistakes caused by mixing is 11. The error rate reaches up to 63.7%.

Mixing the chunks of different styles. Some students do not clearly know the style that the chunks should be used. Some chunks which should be used in oral English are misused into the written English, which results some compositions being too colloquial and informal. For example, some students used "wanna" to instead "want to" in their writings. Even these chunks, such as "That's all", "That's OK", "It is OK for me", and so on, which should be used in oral English, can be found in the writings.

Chunks Creation

Some students have a small amount of chunks. When they want to express a certain meaning, they struggle to find a suitable chunk to express it. At this time, they will create some chunks according to the chunks they know, which reflects the second language learners' assumption of the target language. If this assumption does not conform to the target language system, there will be mistakes (Lou, 2001, p. 63). It is undeniable that some

chunks, such as phrasal constraints and sentence builders, which have the quality of low stability, weak continuity, and great variability, can be correctly derived based on the known information. However, the chunks of polywords and institutionalized expression with the quality of fixed and high continuity are easily to make mistakes by overgeneralization the rules of target language.

The second language learners are affected by the following five factors in construction the inter lingual: (1) language transfer; (2) overgeneralization of the rules of target language; (3) training transfer; (4) the strategy of acquisition the second language; (5) the communication strategy of the second language (Selinker, 1972, p. 3). According to the analysis result, the paper finds that chunks creation is mainly influenced by language transfer and overgeneralization of the rules of target language.

In Chinese, the word “重” corresponds to the word “heavy” in English, but “heavy” has several meanings, which can be used to express “heavy rain” (大雨), “heavy traffic” (繁忙的交通), etc. However, some students do it literally, and create some chunks, such as “big rain”, “busy traffic”, and so on, which is due to negative transfer of mother tongue. In Corpus of Contemporary American English, those chunks created by students cannot be found. So, they can be taken as wrong ones. And the usage of “spend” can be taken as an example to explain some mistakes caused by students’ overgeneralization of the rules of target language. “Spend” is usually used as “spend some time on something” or “spend some time in doing something”, but some students create the sentence “They need rest when they spend much time *to* work” based on the frequently used chunks of “V + O + to”, which is the result of students’ overgeneralization of the rules of target language.

Suggestions on Chunks Teaching

Based on the above analysis of the problems in the use of chunks, some suggestions on chunks teaching are put forward in order to be able to provide some enlightenment and reference for teachers in the process of teaching chunks.

(1) In the process of teaching, teachers should pay attention to foster students’ awareness of chunks which can help them realize the benefits of using chunks and promote them to actively memorize and use chunks. Students’ awareness of chunks can be fostered by various forms. For example, after learning each text, students can be required to summarize the chunks related to the topics, which can help them quickly extract the chunks when they need in expression. Other forms, such as blank filling, sentence-making, collocations, chunks correcting can also be used.

(2) In order to help students use synonymous chunks appropriately, their differences should be distinguished clearly and emphasized. Synonymous chunks can enrich their expressions, and avoid the monotonous of students’ writings. However, as we all know, it is difficult for second language learner to use them appropriately like native speakers. So, only in this way, the problem can be resolved.

(3) And intensive training should be given to the chunks that students often make mistakes. Mistakes always mean that students do not clearly understand the usages of the chunks. So if the teachers are very sensitive to the chunks students usually making mistakes with and ask students to practice them intensively, the mistakes will occur less and less.

(4) The teachers should ask students to recite some good and useful chunks in a certain context. By recitation, students can remember them clearly and can use them easily. However, recitation does not mean reciting them

individually. It means reciting in a certain context which can help students remember both the chunks themselves and the contexts the chunks use.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of chunks in 95 compositions, this paper finds the chunks used by Chinese EFL learners are not very satisfactory. There are fewer types of chunks in their compositions which results relatively high recurrence rate, and many mistakes are found in the chunks used by students. This paper classifies the mistakes into redundancy, avoidance, tense, mixing, and chunks creation. According to analyzing and summarizing the problems in the use of chunks, four suggestions on chunks teaching are provided, including fostering students' awareness of chunks, distinguishing synonymous chunks, intensively training the chunks students frequently make mistakes with, and reciting some good and useful chunks. The paper hopes to make chunks teaching more targeted, improve the effectiveness of chunks teaching, and help students better use chunks.

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