

## Teaching of Lexical Chunks in English Listening Class for College Students

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**Abstract.** Listening is one of the most important language skills, and recently it has received more and more attention. However, of all the basic language skills, college students still find that listening skill is the most difficult to acquire. And this obstacle greatly affects students' interest and success of English learning. Therefore a great many teachers and researchers have put forward various methods to improve learners' listening comprehension, but chunking method is rarely applied in the teaching of listening comprehension. In view of this situation, the present paper poses the research question—whether chunking approach can improve college English learners' listening comprehension and tries to answer the question with a teaching experiment. It turns out that chunking approach is beneficial to improving students' listening comprehension.

### Introduction

**The definition of lexical chunks.** Different linguists and researchers use different terms and have different definitions for lexical chunks according to their different research aims and scopes (Jiang 2012). Wray (2002) proposes that lexical chunks will be a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other language elements, which is, or appear to be, prefabricated. Chunks are stored and retrieved as a whole from memory at the time we use them, rather than being subject to generative or analysis by the language grammar.

Pawley and Syder (1983) define lexical chunks as “sentence stems” which are “institutionalized” or “lexicalized” and regard them as the key to idiomatic control of the language. Owing to them, a lexicalized sentence stem is “a unit of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed”. Being different from the traditional term “idiom”, the lexicalized units are regular form-meaning pairings and their stock accounts to hundreds of thousands for native speakers. Besides giving such a concept, Pawley and Syder also claim that generative grammar is only part of what a person must know in order to be competent to use any language, but far from the whole. Instead, native speakers do not exercise the creative syntactic rules, as a result of which, an utterance will be native-like just when it is composed of a lexicalized sentence stem plus permissible expansions or substitutions.

From the psycholinguistic point of view, Newell (1990) argues that chunking is the main principle of human cognition. “A chunk is a unit of memory organization, formed by bringing together a set of already formed chunks in memory and welding them together into a larger unit. Chunking implies the ability to build up such structures recursively, thus leading to a hierarchical

organization of memory. Chunking appears to be a ubiquitous feature of human memory. Conceivably, it could form the basis for an equally ubiquitous law of practice” (1990).

**The background of the study.** Listening is an important language skill and in its most common sense is an acoustic or auditory processing of speech. The role of listening is a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning (Krashen 1981). Listening is also an essential component of human beings’ communicative competence. Among the four skills in communication: reading, listening, writing, speaking, listening is involved in communication to a larger extent as some scientific evidence showed by Cooper (1988) that listeners spend at least 42% of time listening, 32% of time speaking, 15% of time reading and about 11% of time writing in daily communication.

The contemporary society exhibits a shift away from printed medium and towards audio-visual one and people need to develop a high level of proficiency in listening. However, of all the basic language skills, college students often find that listening skill is the most difficult to acquire. In the field of English language teaching in China, teaching of listening comprehension is relatively weak in spite of the fact that students have paid more attention to listening.

Meanwhile, in recent years lexical chunks have become a hot subject in the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition. People become aware that lexical chunks have great advantage in language learning. Now researchers have put chunking theory into the teaching of vocabulary, writing, speaking. But comparatively speaking, the application of lexical chunks into the teaching of listening comprehension is much weaker. So how to apply lexical chunks into the teaching of listening to facilitate the teaching is a worthwhile study. It is expected that the present study can shed some light on the improvement of teaching of college English listening.

### **Teaching of lexical chunks in the English listening Class**

In order to answer the research question, an experiment was carried out. The subjects, the instruments, the procedure, and the data collection and analysis will be presented in turn in the following.

**Research Questions of the present study.** Based on the theories and research results generated before, the present study puts forward the following research questions: whether teaching of lexical chunks in the English listening class will help to improve college students’ listening ability, and whether the chunking approach is effective in listening comprehension?

**Subjects.** In the experiment, the subjects were 83 second-year non-English majors from Yulin University of Shaanxi Province. They were from two classes, one consisting of 41 students and the other 42 students. They were second year students. In the study, class one was the experiment group and class two was the control group.

### **Instruments.**

Two listening comprehension tests were used in the study. Listening comprehension test one was the pretest and was used to judge and compare the listening ability of the two groups. Listening comprehension two was the posttest, and was used to test the listening comprehension scores. These two listening comprehension tests were two paper-and-pencil tasks requiring the participants to listen to the tests and respond by marking an answer sheet. The two tests used two CET-4 test papers as the instruments.

**Procedure.** The experiment is mainly composed of three parts: a pretest, teaching treatment, a posttest, before and after the experiment.

**Pretest.** Listening comprehension test one was the pretest and used to judge and compare the listening ability of the two groups. The pretest paper was randomly selected from CET4 in June, 2001. The listening section consists of 10 short conversations, each followed by one question and three passages followed by three or four questions. Students were given 25 minutes to finish the test. The total score for this section was 20.

**Teaching treatment.** The experiment lasted for one semester, which was about 18 weeks long. In the experiment, the experiment group received additional teaching treatment concerning lexical chunks, which was different from the traditional listening teaching mode. The teaching experiment consists of three steps: pre-listening activities, while-listening activities and post-listening activities.

#### Step 1: Pre-listening activities

At the beginning of each listening class, the teacher spent some time (usu.5 minutes) explaining the knowledge of lexical chunks to students in detail and also the learning strategy based on lexical chunks, for generally speaking, the students were not familiar with the concept. After this, it was also the teacher's task to help students recognize lexical chunks in listening texts and have them sensitive to those chunks first found in class, then in other contexts, thus students' awareness to lexical chunks being improved by and by (Jiang, 2000). Before listening occurred, the teacher listed and explained the important lexical chunks in the listening materials to the students so that they could retrieve the lexical chunks stored in their memories when listening.

#### Step 2: While-listening activities

Then in while-listening processes, the students were required to listen attentively and pay attention to lexical chunks, most of which are key words in listening materials, and also discourse markers (one type of lexical chunks) like "firstly...,secondly..." which could lead them to follow the message naturally. It was important to ask students to use chunk knowledge to make predictions about the listening texts. After listening to the whole passage, the students began to do the exercises. When the students had difficulty in understand certain complicated sentences, the teacher explained some important lexical chunks in these sentences.

#### Step 3: Post-listening activities

Post-listening activities were an important part of the experiment. In the post-listening processes, the students were given a few minutes to have a group discussion on the lexical chunks they had used and make an evaluation of how the lexical chunks in the texts affected their comprehension

and how they could apply this approach more effectively in the future listening activities. When time permitted, the students were asked to practice the lexical chunks orally (making sentences, having a dialogue, etc.). And after class the teacher asked the students to sort out their note, have a review of the lexical chunks learned. In addition, after each class the teacher assigned them to find and accumulate 15 more new lexical chunks in reading or listening and their assignments would be checked in the next class.

**Posttest .** Listening comprehension test two was the posttest. All subjects were asked to listen to this test, and responded by marking an answer sheet. The posttest paper was randomly selected from CET4 in June, 2001, which has the same format as the pretest paper.

The experiment was done from the beginning the semester, lasting about 18 weeks. Relevant data were collected from the pretest and posttest. The scores of the participants in each test were recorded and typed into the computer. SPSS13.0 was used to collect and analyze the data. Two independent-samples t-tests were carried out to answer the research questions. By using SPSS13.0, through independent-samples T-tests, the researcher compared the mean scores and t-values of the experiment group and the control group in the pretest and posttest so as to testify whether lexical chunks can improve the listening comprehension of college students.

**Results and findings**

Table 1 Group Statistics of the Pretest

Group	Number	Mean	P
Experiment Group	41	12.0001	.165
Control Group	42	11.1667	

Table 2 Group Statistics of the Posttest

Group	Number	Mean	P
Experiment Group	41	12.8293	.028
Control Group	42	11.7381	

In the first place, the pretest scores are analyzed to see whether there is significant difference between the experiment group and control group. All the scores of the subjects in both experiment and control groups were counted. As shown in Table1, the results indicated that there was no significant difference between the experiment group and control group in the pretest ( $p=0.165>0.05.$ ), which suggested that the two groups were indeed equivalent in listening comprehension prior to the treatment.

The comparison of the scores of students both in the experimental group and in the control group is shown in Table2. As shown in Table2, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between the experiment group and control group in the posttest ( $p=0.028<0.05.$ ), which suggested that the experiment group had a better performance than control group in listening comprehension after the teaching treatment.

## **Conclusion**

From this study, the conclusion can be drawn that lexical chunks play a significant role in listening comprehension and the memorization of phrases can improve the listening comprehension of English learners. The explanations for this improvement can be summed up as follows: Lexical chunks enhance noticing; Lexical chunks ease the processing load of listeners; Lexical chunks help listeners to focus on relevant information in comprehension processing; Lexical chunks promote listeners' comprehension of discourse. Chunking the single words into the phrases is a useful way to enlarge the capacity of college students' memory, which can save time to make students comprehend more quickly and efficiently. Chunk competence is positively correlated with listening comprehension. Learners with a high chunk competence are likely to acquire a high listening comprehension score. All these conclusions pinpoint the vital importance of lexical chunks in English listening comprehension, which matters much for college students. In order to achieve a high proficiency in listening comprehension, it is desirable that lexical chunks should be given adequate attention and absolute priority in language teaching and learning.

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