



## On the Reform of Traditional Chunk Approach: From the Perspective of Language Awareness

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### Abstract

Traditional approach to teaching chunks has been found to have numerous defects insomuch as it ignores cultivating the learners' cross-cultural language awareness. This paper makes an attempt to propose a revised model of chunk approach based on language awareness theory. It is hoped the new mode of chunk approach will enhance the practice of tertiary English teaching in China.

**Key words:** Chunk approach; Language awareness; English teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

The term chunking was coined by psychologist George Miller in his classic view of memory in *the Magical number* (Miller, 1956, pp.vi-vii) and taken as the overarching 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 structures recursively, thus leading to a hierarchical organization of memory. (Newell, 1990, p.7)

Some applied linguists represented by Michael Lewis put forward the concept of “chunk”. They hold that language is not composed of grammar and vocabulary as viewed by traditional linguist school; rather, it is made up of chunks. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992, p.1), chunks are referred to as “form/function composites”, in Leech’s (1983, p.11) words, “particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions”.

Evidence from psychological experiments demonstrates that chunk serves the basic unit of human memory, thus indicating the existence of psychological reality of chunks (Simon, 1974). These arguments, though targeted at information processing in psychology, can be applied to language acquisition in so much as chunking, the bringing together a set of already formed chunks in memory and welding them together into a larger unit, is a basic associative learning process which can occur in all representational systems (Ellis, 2001).

Chunks play a role of easing the pressure of real-time communication and mastering a good number of chunks is also seen as an indispensable way to achieve native-like fluency. According to Pawley and Syder (1983), the average native speaker knows hundreds of thousands of *lexicalized sentence stems* (chunks), and these are then available as a repertoire of elements which may be used in on-going conversation to achieve the degree of real-time fluency which we take for granted, and which would not be attainable otherwise. Research has shown that many proficient learners may produce the target language at a native-like rate, but not necessarily make the choice of language like the native speaker. Speaking natively is speaking idiomatically, using frequent and familiar collocation (Ellis, 2001). One of the ways for learners to achieve acceptability as a native speaker is, according to Skehan (1998, p.39), to

“extend the range of lexical sentence stems (and lexical phrases)”.

In a substantial review of existing empirical studies, Weinert (1995) summarised the role of formulaic language in SLA: First, formulaic language as communicative strategy, allowing learners’ entry into minimal communication as a compensation of a lack of target language rules; Second, formulaic language as production strategy for speeding processing; and third, formulaic language (unanalysed chunks) as a data base for the development of an emerging grammatical competence (see Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998; Myles, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1999 for empirical evidence). In a recent empirical study, Yu (2009) provided evidence produced by a classroom experiment that formulaic language (“grammatical chunk”<sup>1</sup> (Taguchi, 2007) may have the potential for instilling L2 features which are somewhat impervious to explicit instruction due to the learners’ L1 influence or for destabilizing some interlanguage features for which corrective feedback is incapable of effecting positive change (Han & Selinker, 1999; Long & Robinson, 1998). In the following sections, the author will review traditional chunk approach, language awareness theory and put forward a new mode of chunk approach.

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## 1. A REVIEW OF CHUNK APPROACH

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Chunk approach proposed by Lewis (Lewis, 1993, 1997) emphasizes on learners’ identification and mastery of chunks and foreign language teachers’ organization of various teaching activities to enable learners to use chunks appropriately. The innate quality and function of chunks make chunk approach an integrated and comprehensive teaching mode. Learning chunk is not only learning the lexical item itself, but its grammar structure contained and pragmatic function reflected. A number of studies have revealed that teaching chunks can overcome the side-effects produced by traditional grammar-translation method and improve the fluency and accuracy of learners’ language production, therefore offsetting the negative transfer of mother tongue. Therefore, according to Lewis (1997), the basic teaching principles of chunk approach are supposed to include: a) language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar; b) the grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word chunks; c) collocation is integrated as an organizing principle within syllabuses; d) evidence from computational linguistics and discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Different from purely formulaic expressions (e.g. how do you do?), this type of chunks have “slots” which can take different words according to the situation. Take “despite the fact that” for example, “fact” can be replaced by “idea”, “danger” and so on. Other terms for these sequences include “productive speech formula” (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), “slot-and-frame pattern” (Ellis, 2003), “semi-fixed grammatical pattern” (Taguchi, 2007) and “grammatical chunk” (Taguchi, 2008).

analysis influence syllabus content and sequence; e) the primary of speech over writing is recognized; f) grammar as structure is subordinate to lexis; g) task and process are emphasized; h) the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected in favor of a paradigm on the Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment cycle. The core of chunk approach is learning without analysis, that is, learners are encouraged to perceive the input and store it in the mind lexicon as a whole. As Lewis (1993, pp.vi-vii) points out, “A central element of language teaching is raising students’ awareness of, and developing their ability to ‘chunk’ language successfully”. In addition, task and process, rather than exercise and product, are emphasized. The strong points of implementing chunk approach are summarized by Misili (2008):

It cares about the communication;

It teaches the language patterns as they are used by the native-speakers;

It teaches fixed or set phrases;

It takes it into consideration that language is not learnt but separating sounds but combining sounds and structures;

Learners are encouraged to engage with texts and make discoveries of lexical items in it;

It doesn’t need a fundamental change in the syllabus, but in teacher’s mindset.

It awakens the language awareness.

Native-like fluency and accuracy are cared.

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## 2. TRADITIONAL MODE OF CHUNK

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### 2.1 Approach

The most widely used mode of chunk approach in China is indicated in the following route:

Teachers identify chunks and present—students comprehend chunks in terms of both form and function—students recite and memorize chunks—students utilize chunks in language output

This mode of teaching chunks can, to some extent, help the learners avoid grammatical mistakes of certain lexicalized structures, therefore improving fluency and accuracy of learners’ output. However, based on the author’s teaching practice of traditional chunk approach, learners are found inadequate in terms of sensitivity of pragmatic function of chunks in various contexts and genres. In other words, learners have difficulty in distinguishing chunks used in written language and those used in spoken language. Moreover, learners are void of sensitivity of those chunks which, though grammatically correct, do not conform to the idiomaticity of native use.

### 2.2 Language Awareness Theory

Applied linguists have conducted numerous researches on the role of awareness in language learning. Brewer

(1974) claims that awareness is indispensable in language learning and plays a significant part in the process of acquiring a language. Schmidt (1990) points out that understanding is the premise of learning a second language and the analysis of language form facilitates the mastery of language. The concept of “language awareness” was derived from language awareness movement promoted by language education circle in the UK in 1980s. Many a language educator responded this movement actively, hoping to improve the quality of language learning in this country through enhancing learners’ language awareness, including Carl James & Peter Garret (1991), Christopher Brumfit (1991), Guy Merchant (1991), Gillian Donmall (1991), Norman Fairclough (1992), Leo van Lier (1995), David Little (1991), Schmidt (1990) and Mike Scott (1991). “Language awareness” refers to the ability of reinforced sensitivity and automaticity of language form and function (Carter, 2003, pp.1-3). The purpose of developing language awareness is to encourage learners to be aware of language use and pay special attention to distinctions of language in various contexts. Some researchers (e.g., Yang, 2008) believe that language awareness is an abstract and sophisticated psychological process during which concrete and tangible knowledge about language is internalized into language output. There are two aspects of language awareness: One is the awareness of language structure, and the other is the awareness of language use. To be more specific, the former refers to the awareness of comprehension and use of grammar and the latter the awareness of use of language in practical communication. Hence, it is of great significance to raise the learners’ awareness of language structure and use in order to better the quality of their language output.

Early studies on language awareness in China are mainly application of language awareness theory to teach English grammar. Pang (1996) discusses how to develop students’ language awareness through grammar instruction. Peng (1999) expounds the reinterpretation of grammar teaching from the perspective of redefining language awareness. The paper concludes that grammar teaching should encourage students to discover the operating rules of language and have full understanding of these rules through deliberate thought. There are also qualitative studies on language teachers and learners’ language awareness. Cui and Wang (2002), taking the advantage of questionnaire and aptitude test of language awareness, investigate the current situation of language awareness of 60 college students, trying to understand the relationship between activities of developing language awareness and communicative competency. It is found in the study that communicative ability can be enhanced by the use of activities training students’ language awareness. Shi (2006) proposes a number of practical ways of

cultivating students’ language awareness and emphasizes the significance of language awareness in foreign language teaching.

### 2.3 A Revised Mode of Chunk Approach

So far, there is a dearth of research on the application of language awareness theory to teach chunks in English teaching practice. The author attempts to propose a revised mode of chunk approach based on the theory of language awareness and reinterpretation of principles of chunk approach.

From the author’s point of view, language awareness is able of implicit nature. The process of constructing chunks is closely related to learners’ capability of self-construction. This is obviously the result of internalization of learners’ enhanced awareness of form and structure. During the process, learners transfer the implicit language knowledge to explicit language output by the way of counterbalancing the interference of first language, so as to achieve the purpose of enhancing language awareness as well as the self-learning potential.

The new mode of chunk approach based on language awareness emphasizes the improvement of the following three abilities: a) the ability of identifying the functions of chunks in various language styles, especially the sensitivity of the equivalent chunks used in diverse contexts and genres; b) the ability of critically perceiving and comprehending the habit of language use by native speakers; c) the ability of internalizing, constructing and generating chunks through the process of duplicating chunks and chunk groups. These are the reinterpretation of the implication of chunk approach driven by language awareness theory. Thus, in the remaining part of this paper, the author makes an attempt to devise a new mode of chunk approach in college English teaching. The revised model consisting of three stages is described as follows:

Stage one: Gain knowledge of chunks on purpose.

Students (individually or in groups) are required to look for chunks in a variety of original language sources before class. And in the class, the students, with the teacher’s guidance, classify the chunks accumulated into groups according to different contexts and genres in which chunks are used as well as different functions reflected by chunks. It needs to be pointed out that chunks used in written and spoken languages should be distinguished on purpose. And the students are guided to understand how these chunks are used conforming to native language use custom and the immediate context. After class, students are encouraged to recite and memorize the chunks classified.

Stage two: Study on the chunks with specific purpose.

Students are required to collect chunks with similar pragmatic functions before class. In the class, students work on the generalizability of chunks, summarizing chunk groups sharing the same chunk. Or, alternatively,

students identify the chunk from a range of formulaic sequences. This kind of exercise is practiced repeatedly and regularly. After class, students are required to generate or expand more lexical phrases using chunks summarized in class according to different contexts. Similar to the first stage, recitation and memorization of chunks are mandated.

Stage three: Use chunks purposely.

Students are required, before class, to collect compositions of themselves or their peers under the same topic but with different genres and summarize the chunks. During the class, students discuss the use of chunks in terms of the correctness of grammar, accuracy of diction and fluency of language as well as correspondence to contexts. The discussion takes the norm of either written language or spoken language through the way of self-comments and peer-comments. Next, students, under the teacher's guidance, analyze and summarize the errors committed of both structure and function in the process of chunk use and correct them appropriately. After the class, the practice of self-comments and peer-comments on students' compositions with a focus on chunks is repeated with the teacher's supervision and regular check. Hopefully, students' sensitivity of chunk use is enhanced and their own use of chunks is more-close to native-like normal.

In addition to classroom instruction and practice of chunks, new mode of chunk approach insists that students not only accumulate chunks in and outside classroom but also classify them in terms of their structures and functions.

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## CONCLUSION

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Language awareness is a conscious awareness towards the language *per se* and the role of language played in human communication (James & Carrett, 1991). New mode of chunk approach focuses on reinforcing learners' awareness of chunk use in diverse contexts and genres by way of self-comments and peer-comments as well as pre-class and after-class practice. It is hoped that through enlarging the number of chunk learning, learners can foster their awareness of appropriate use of chunks and their ability of internalizing chunks. It is also hoped that learners' sensitivity of language use can be cultivated through the enhancement of sensitivity of chunks so as to enable the learners to be closer to native-like use of language.

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