A Contrastive Study on the Use of Lexical Chunk Among Chinese Learners of Different Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

This study examines the juniors' and sophomores' writings with the same prompt, attempting to investigate the general pictures of their lexical chunk ("lexical chunk" is abbreviated to LC) use and the main features of using LC categories. The study shows the following results: (a) Juniors generally have higher frequency of using LC, especially in using 4 LC categories: topic-related LC (TRLC), sentence-building LC (SBLC), general LC (GLC) and opinion-presented LC (OPLC), except discourse LC (DLC). (b) In terms of using LC categories, juniors show a better proficiency of SBLC noticeably, which is revealed by their better-structured sentences, rich diversity of SBLC and more native-like sentence logic. (c) Juniors and sophomores show similarity in using TRLC in that their choices of topic-related lexical phrases are both extremely influenced by writing prompt. (d) Juniors employ less DLC than sophomores because juniors attach more importance to the idea, opinion and proof, while sophomores rely more on the signal words of passage due to the purpose of gaining scores and using DLC as facilitators to make the whole passage coherent. (e) Juniors use OPLC more frequently and diversely, while sophomores overuse a certain OPLC.

Key words: Lexical chunk; Lexical chunk category; English major; Writing

INTRODUCTION

The grammar-translation approach, which typically puts stress on rules of grammar instead of language use, dominates the foreign language teaching and learning in China for decades. As the attention to language use increases urgently, the communicative approach comes to be the more popularized methodology. It shifts the focus from structure, rules, analysis to mean and communicative proficiency, because language is not so much rules, structures or text as ways of talking to people. However, due to rely too heavily on communication, the communicative approach gradually uncovers its weakness that promotes fluency over accuracy, with neglecting the foundation of systematic information for producing correct sentences.

Studies argue that the grammar-translation approach concentrates on analysis at the expense of communication, whereas the communicative approach stresses production by overlooking the importance of language discipline. What we need is an approach that provides middle course which can satisfy both communication and language information.

Studies on the process of language learning contribute to solving such a dilemma, especially by investigating the process of children's acquiring mother tongue. It found that children acquire and use formulaic sequences of language in appropriate context prior to the emergence of grammatical system (Cody & Huckin, 2003; Singleton, 1999). Since children get mother tongue through the conventional sequences of words, it is suggested that using ready-made chunks of words can advance the output proficiency of learners who study English as a foreign language.

1. DEFINITIONS OF LEXICAL CHUNKS

1.1 Lewis's Definition in a L2 Acquisition Perspective

Lewis (1993) defines that lexical chunk ('lexical chunk' is abbreviated to LC) is word combinations, which can

be recognized, learnt, decoded and encoded as holistic units. Acquiring language is to acquire sequential patterns, which are formulaic multi-word sequences that operate as single units. It has been argued that LC stands at the boundary between grammar and vocabulary, thus LC plays a part in grammar and vocabulary acquisition due to its characteristics of lexicalized syntax and lexicalized grammar. In fact, a minority of spoken and written sentences is completely novel creation, but multiword units used as chunks or memorized patterns form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard and read in everyday conversation. Therefore LC is the ready-made resource for instant service, and significantly such learning resources require little or no additional processing burdens as well.

1.2 Nattinger and DeCarrico's Definition in a Functional Perspective

Nattinger and DeCarrico (2000) state that lexical phrases with varying length are loaded with communication and discourse functions which refer to the meaning of language in use. The referential meaning of LC, dealing with the linguistic elements, makes LC meaningful, while the functional meaning makes LC useful, in other words it offers more communicative and expressive power than grammatical structures. Furthermore, functional meaning has two sub-categories: transaction-functional meaning, applied mostly in writing for transmitting factual information between writers and readers; and interaction-functional meaning, done in speaking for maintaining social relationship. LC is institutionalized as the most efficient linguistic means to carry out language functions both in writing and speaking.

1.3 Scholars' Definition in a Psycholinguistic Perspective

Chunking appears to be a ubiquitous feature of human memory. Richards and Rodgers state the LC is "the sequences of words to which the mind learns as wholes and attaches a single meaning" (2001, p.54). Bollinger argues that formulaic language is "part of the automatic or semi-automatic store" (1975, p.13). Newell claims that "A chunk is a unit of processing organization, formed by bringing together a set of already formed chunks in memory and welding them together into a larger unit at production" (1990, p.7). Lewis (1993) suggests that the mind prefers to use the chunk of prefabricated language because it is easy to start working for its emphasis on meaning and compensating knowledge deficiency while language processing. Those definitions clarify that LC is the efficient psycholinguistic medium by which learners acquire, process and produce language.

Looking back on definitions above, Lewis (1993) investigates LC as indispensable learning resources in first and second language learning, Nattinger and DeCarrico (2000) put emphasis on a functional use schema of LC,

while other scholars study LC from a psycholinguistic perspective in accordance with human statistical processing system. To sum up, a lexical chunk is a string of words that are stored together in the mind as a single item and that one can retrieve and use as a prefabricated unit, either exactly as it stands or with adaptation.

2. RESEARCHES ON LC USE

Many scholars have been done researches on LC use. These researches can be classified into 3 aspects as follows:

(a) Researches shed light on the relation between acquiring language by LC and improvement of language production. Luo, Liang and Lu (2002) indentify the problem existing in the transferring from language input and output, then through conducting an experiment of LC approach, it is proved that LC bridges up the gap between language input and output, meanwhile facilitate clear, relevant and concise language use. Studies (Li, 2004; Yao, 2004; Liu, 2006) reveal that lexical chunk is a large proportion to language output, thus it is an efficient and effective method to improve fluency in oral expression and accuracy in language use.

(b) Researches emphasize how to teach learners using LC by LC approach. Wood (2002) has experiment on constructing the model of reprocessing and catching automatically prefabricated phrases to improve fluent output. For conducting LC approach, Lewis (1993) proposes the Observe-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle while the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected. He states that the PPP paradigm, similar to the rote repetition of a language, is more of a teacher-centered paradigm in which the teacher presents the information to be learnt, makes learners practice and finally makes students produce. On the contrary, the OHE cycle makes learners engross themselves in the activities assigned to them, by probing into the language, making predictions and experimenting language in their own way. Based on the theory and notion of Lewis's OHE lexical approach, Hsu (2002) conducts an experiment on the relativity of lexical approach and language fluency enhancement towards 9 university students in Taiwan. The results turn out that first, there is a significant correlation between foreign language proficiency and the use of LC; second, the competence of using LC is mainly affected by classroom teaching, motivation and learning experiences.

In Nattinger and DeCarrico's (2000) project, they choose three types of writing, formal essay, informal letter and business letter, as teaching samples that most ESL students are familiar with during the college study. Nattinger and DeCarrico show learners some representative lexical phrases for three parts of the three types of writing respectively: opening, body and closing. Their purpose is to train learners' genre-awareness and to

become familiar with the different expressing phrases in different genres. Their teaching experiment of LC does improve the accuracy and fluency in writing, especially for the learner's ability to deal with various genres. But improvements are asked for as well. Learners need to advance the diversity of LC, because it is tiresome to face the same phrases repeatedly. Another problem is that they emphasize too much on the macro-organizer function of LC in writing, but due importance also needs attaching to instruct LC with strong referential meanings which are the language representatives to support the topic in writing.

(c) Researches probe into the use of LC by different learners who are native or non-native like speakers and who are at different English proficiency levels. Li Jie and Norbert Schmitt (2009) did a longitudinal case study on the acquisition of lexical phrases in academic writing, through analyzing the participant's 8 essays and a dissertation over one academic year, it is found that the one gained 166 new phrases, improved the level of LC appropriate usage and achieved confidence in using phrases, generally benefiting academic writing. Yang (2015, 2014) has done 2 researches which present a comprehensive picture of LC use by Chinese learners. The study (Yang, 2015) investigates the main features of LC use from Chinese English majors' and American college students' writings with the same prompt. It reveals that Chinese learners and American college students have a similarity in repeating lexical phrases from the writing prompt and in tending to use shorter lexical patterns. The study (Yang, 2014), by analyzing 128 writing texts on the same topic from English majors of 4 grades, explores English majors' differences in LC use and its relations to write quality. It found that advanced learners are more capable of using more LC, and using LC more variedly, accurately, complicatedly than pre-intermediate and intermediate learners.

In sum, studies claim both the crucial role of LC in language acquisition/use and the value of furthering research on LC in more aspects. Thus, this paper attempts to study on the main features of LC use in sophomores' and juniors' writings of Chinese English major.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research project was exploratory-interpretive in nature. The data we discuss here come from a contrastive study into the use of LC between sophomores' and juniors' writings of Chinese English majors with the same writing prompt. This article will focus on the following research questions:

- What are the main features of using LC in sophomores' and juniors' writings with the same prompt respectively?
- What are the similarities or differences between using LC categories in sophomores' and juniors' writings with the same prompt?

3.1 Participants

Participants were 100 sophomores and 100 juniors who major in English education in China West Normal University (CWNU). All junior participants have passed TEM4 (Test for English Majors Band 4, which is the most widely accepted and authoritative test for English majors in China). While sophomore participants were preparing to pass TEM 4 in four months. They were required to write a composition by the title, *Should College Students Hire Cleaners*, which is tested in the year 2010 TEM4. They were supposed to finish writing in 35 minutes as the test directs. The writing prompt follows as:

It is recently reported in a newspaper that six students who shared a dorm at a local university hired a cleaner to do laundry and cleaning once a week. And each of them paid her 60 yuan a month. This has led to a heated debate as to whether college students should hire cleaners. Write a composition of about 200 words on the following topic: "Should College Students Hire Cleaners".

3.2 Identifying LC in Participants' Writing

By uniting Michael Lewis's (1993), Ketko's (2000), Nattinger and DeCarrico's (2000) classification, there are five categories to identify LC.

(a) Collocation, groups of continuous words that co-occur high-frequently in the text-type of the data (e.g., community service, pretty girl, flock of sheep).

(b) Poly-words, a small extension of words (e.g., by the way, at any rate, all in all). It is continuous with no variability within the unbroken sequence of words thus it serves as individual lexical item.

(c) Phrasal constraint, short-to-medium-length chunks, being composed of syntactic/semantic feature and permitting lexical and phrasal variation (e.g., a ___ ago, as I was ___, as far as I ___).

(d) Institutionalized utterance, habitual or conventional discourse as proverb, aphorism, formula for social interaction (e.g., How are you? Easy come, easy go. I'll get it.).

(e) Sentence builder, typically in written frame, which provides the framework for the whole sentence. It consists of three sub-types: sentence head (e.g., I think that X. If I were you X.), sentence frame (e.g., not only X but also Y, That is not as X as you think), text frame (e.g., firstly X, secondly Y, and finally Z).

For this study on LC use in writings, the category of LC is reclassified by consulting the classification above and LC functions in writing. This research put down another five categories of LC as follows:

(a) Topic-related LC (TRLC), phrases assist in starting and discussing the topic (e.g., do clean, clean the room, hire a cleaner).

(b) Opinion-presented LC (OPLC), phrases are applied to state one's opinion (e.g., I hold the view that, in my opinion, I strongly suggest that).

(c) Discourse LC (DLC), phrases function as passage connector or sentences connector for improving the discourse coherence (e.g., first and foremost…what's more…, on the one hand…on the other hand…, on the contrary…, to sum up…).

(d) Sentence-building LC (SBLC), phrases provide structure of the sentence (e.g., not only…but also…, there is no doubt that…, it is essential for…to…).

(e) General LC (GLC), lexical phrases, except the four types mentioned above, including collocation, poly-word, institutionalized utterance (e.g., at the same time, be able to, count on, live a comfortable life).

3.3 Data Collection

There were 20 sample writings randomly chosen from 100 sophomore participants' writings and another are 20 sample writings randomly chosen from 100 junior participants' writings respectively. Due to the small sample research, all LCs from sample writings were identified and classified by hand. In order to ensure all the possible LCs in sample writings could be recognized, two Chinese teachers who were teaching English majors in CWNU joined in judging LC. The first teacher has been teaching sophomores integrated English course and writing course for 10 years. The second teacher, with English teaching experience of 15 years, was teaching juniors advanced English course and American literature course. Two teachers had made agreement on the definition, categories and identification of LC initially,

then the first teacher judged LC from sample writings first time while the second teacher confirmed, revised and supplemented LC second time. Finally two teachers reached consensus on identifying and classifying all LCs from sample writings. Two dictionaries, Collins COBUILD English Dictionary (New Edition) (2012) and Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (7th edition) (2004), aid to recognize and classify LCs.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 General Pictures of Using LC by Juniors and Sophomores

Table 1 describes that juniors generally used 74 more LCs in writing than sophomores. This result echoes the research (Dong & Ke, 2011) in which it proves that junior year reaches the most fruitful level of using LC among all the four grades of university. What's more junior learners get stronger consciousness of acquiring and producing LC. Since this TEM4 writing required words number was about 200, by counting the words number of each sample from the 40 writings, the smallest number was 192, the biggest one was 216 and the average number was 202, meanwhile these sample writings had a quite small number range of total words. Therefore, the frequency rate of LC is not counted though it is usually studied in previous researches.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of LC and LC Category Between Juniors and Sophomores

Group LC	The total number of LC	The number of DLC	The number of TRLC	The number of SBLC	The number of GLC	The number of OPLC
Juniors	758	86	80	212	326	58
Sophomores	684	96	70	164	314	44

By comparing the use of LC categories, juniors used more LCs than sophomores in terms of four LC categories: TRLC, SBLC, GLC and OPLC. This result, following the findings done by Dong, Ke (2011) and Zhang (2004), which finds that the more advanced learners, the higher frequency and the more diversity of LC have been used. Studying intensively, the biggest gap of using LC category was SBLC. Juniors wrote down 48 more SBLCs than sophomores. For example, Zhang (2010) conducted a corpus-based LC research in which it found that SBLC has the largest absolute advantage in the corpus of English native speakers' writing and speaking. It is clear that juniors have a better mastery of lexicalized syntax, which attributes to the complexity of sentence and discourse. The better proficiency of using SBLC by juniors helped them to achieve more impressive and better-structured sentences.

However, the smallest gap of using LC category is TRLC, since there were only 10 more TRCLs used by

juniors. Zhang (2004) interprets that foreign language learners, especially the beginning and middle level learners, prefer to use TRLC as the top LC category in writing, because they are strongly influenced by the LC used in prompt. Additionally, Yang (2015) discovers that not only Chinese learners but American college students similarly use repetitively the lexical phrases from the writing prompt. Apparently, this is called LC plateauing, which means LC acquisition encounters the tough phase to make progress. However, considering the underlying reasons, learners are short of effective language input, out of preparation for the proof or ideas to support topic, and unaware of critical thinking.

DLC, the only LC category, do juniors use less than sophomores. Yang (2014) states that beginning learners would like to repeat the DLC, especially in the writing test, for it is the scaffolds for helping them structure the all passage. This can explain why sophomores apply more LCs than juniors who prefer the quality of

content, opinion and proof to the signal words of passage coherence. What's more, sophomores who are under preparation for TEM4 attach more importance to the structure and coherence of writing for conforming to the test requirements.

4.2 The Main Features of Using LC Categories by Juniors and Sophomores

By looking at top 10 frequently used LC, juniors and sophomores both put down 3 TRLCs. Juniors wrote down *do laundry and clean*, *hire (a) cleaner(s)*, *clean dorm/room*, and sophomores had 3 similar TRLCs: *hir(ing)/(ed) (a) cleaner(s)*, *doing some cleaning*, *dong laundry*. All the 6 lexical phrases are strongly influenced by the lexical bundles used in writing prompt. Some are the exact copy of the language from writing prompt, while others maintain the key words with little variety. What's more, one GLC in sophomores' writing-*once a week*-ranking the 7th frequency, is the exact copy of the lexical phrases from writing prompt. The TRLC using from juniors' and sophomores' writings concludes that Chinese learners are short of lexical chunk storage relating to writing topic, and that they are inclined to be constrained into the writing prompt while hardly to work out new ideas.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Top 10 LC Used by Juniors

Rank	LC	Category of LC	Repetition times
1	By oneself	GLC	22
2	Do laundry and clean room	TRLC	18
3	Hire (a) cleaner(s)	TRLC	16
4	It is adj. (for sb.) to do	SBLC	14
5	Clean dorm/room	TRLC	12
6	Whether…or (not)	SBLC	10
7	Take care of	GLC	10
8	If… (there) will/would (be)…	SBLC	8
9	I (firmly) hold the view/belief that…	OPLC	8
10	First of all… Secondly/Next…Finally	DLC	6

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Top 10 LC Used by Sophomores

Rank	LC	Category of LC	Repetition times
1	Hir(ing)/(ed) (a) cleaner(s)	TRLC	34
2	Do(ing) some cleanings	TRLC	18
3	It is adj. (for sb.) to do	SBLC	12
4	What's more	DLC	10
5	Take one's responsibility	GLC	10
6	Doing laundry	TRLC	8
7	Once a week	GLC	8
8	In a nutshell	DLC	8
9	Not only…but also	SBLC	6
10	Solve the problem	GLC	6

There are noticeable discrepancies in using SBLC between juniors and sophomores. In top 10 frequently used LC, juniors had 3 top SBLCs: *It is adj. (for sb.) to do/that X, whether X or (not) Y, If X (there) will/would (be)*. Furthermore, the lexicalized sentence stem, *It is +adj. (for sb.) to do/that X*, is used in other forms of alternation, one is *It is + of +N.* (e.g., *It is of no benefit doing laundry and cleaning dorms. It is of no vital importance for college students to master some life skills so as to be a compound talent.*), another is *It seems + adj.* (e.g., *It seems unwise to believe that cleaning dorm wastes time and effort.*). Meanwhile, juniors add an adverb in front of the adjective with *extremely*, *highly* (e.g., *It is extremely necessary for college students to learn to balance their life and studies.*). Besides, juniors have more variety in using SBLC, though the repetition number is not so much as be counted into top 10, such as *not so much X as, provided that X, unless X would they, we'd better X, no matter how X, there is no benefits / deny/ need/ doubt doing X.*

The top two SBLC in sophomores' writings are *It is +adj. (for sb.) to do/that X, not only X but also Y*. Sophomores generally kept the basic structure *It is +adj. (for sb.) to do/that X*, with little variation and less adverbs before adjective to modify. The majority of sophomores were accustomed to use *not only X but also Y*, which presents the simple logic of sentence structure meanwhile which is similar to Chinese sentence building logic.

Juniors used less DLCs than sophomores for there was only one DLC in top 10 LCs, but used them more concisely and appropriately. Sophomores applied more DCLs with more varieties and there were two DLCs in top 10. In using DLC of coherence, juniors and sophomores popularly wrote down DLC: *First X Second Y Third Z*, to present sub-idea of reasons. Juniors also used *First of all/ Firstly X Secondly/Next Y Finally Z* for the alternation of passage coherence. Sophomores used *First and foremost/ At first X What's more/ In addition Furthermore Y Last but not least* as substitutes for coherence. In using DLC for concluding, juniors and sophomores had much in common by applying the following LC in the last conclusive paragraph. There are five DLCs-*in a word, all in all, to sum up, it can be concluded that X*- used by juniors, while four DLCs-*in a nutshell, all in all, to sum up, in a word*-are used by sophomores. Considering DLC of sentence logic, juniors repeated more frequently than sophomores. It found that juniors put down 7 types: transition, (e.g., *on the contrary*, *rather than*); progressive relation, (e.g., *what's more*, *most importantly*); reinforcement, (e.g., *in this way*, *in fact*, *in other words*, *in addition*); condition, (e.g., *if X there will be Y*, *only if*); comparison, (e.g., not so much X as Y, X as much as Y); cause and effect, (e.g., *in that*, *because of*); concession, (e.g., *no matter how*). Sophomores used 4 types of DLC of sentence logic: progressive relation, (e.g., *what's more*[#]); transition, (e.g., *on the contrary*); reinforcement, (e.g., *in this way*); listing, (e.g., on the one hand X on the other hand Y).

Analyzing the opinion-presented LC from sample writings, juniors used as follows: *I (firmly) hold the view/ belief that X* by 8 times, *in my opinion/ from my perspective/ in my eyes/ from my point of view/ as far as I am concerned* by 5 times, and *I think* by 3 times. However, the OPLC from sample writings of sophomores, there was no one counted into the top 10 but interesting, *I think*, was repeated 5 times in 2 samples. *I think*, as an OPLC, is most repetitively used to express opinion by Chinese students, especially in speaking. Undoubtedly, it is also a good LC to make up the writing when students don't have variety in opinion stating or reluctance to work out other words. Typically overusing a certain phrases or a limited number of well-known chunks, it shows that learners lack enough phrasal repertoires to employ in a native-like manner.

Juniors repeat using GLC most frequently as table 2 shows, among which *by oneself* ranks the highest one up to 22 times in 11 samples. Then *take care of* is in the place of seventh by 10 times repetition in 9 samples. Sophomores also had 2 GLCs in the top 10 repetition, *take one's responsibility* in the fifth rank by 10 times repetitions in 6 samples and *solve the problem* in the tenth rank by 6 times repetition in 4 samples.

CONCLUSION

The contrastive study into LC use in juniors' and sophomores' writings of Chinese English majors showed that junior year is the golden grade of acquiring and using LC. This article also claims that juniors generally had the increasing frequency of using LC. In addition, juniors' employment of LC was greatly diverse for juniors had the larger numbers of using 4 LC categories: TRLC, SBLC, GLC and OPLC, except DLC. In terms of using LC categories, juniors showed a better proficiency of SBLC noticeably, which is revealed by their better-structured sentences and rich diversity of SBLC and more native-like sentence logic. Juniors and sophomores showed similarity in using TRLC in that their topic-related lexical phrases were both extremely influenced by writing prompt, which furthermore, constrained Chinese learners' thoughts. That's why an overwhelming majority of these writings put down limited reasons why there is a disagreement on college students' hiring cleaners are to improve the necessary life skills, wasting money and building up responsibility. However, juniors employ less DLC than sophomores because juniors attach more importance to the idea, opinion and proof, while sophomores rely more on the signal words of passage due to the purpose of gaining scores and using DLC as facilitators to make the whole passage coherent. This paper concludes that juniors used OPLC more frequently and diversely. Typically, sophomores put down, *I think*, as the most repetitively used OPLC due to the simplification of LC choice and the shortage of LC storage.

Based on these findings, it is enlightening to find out more appropriate and effective approaches to improve learners' output proficiency and to diminish the gap between language acquisition and language use, learner's English and native-speakers' English. Instead of the present dominate vocabulary teaching method, such as Present-Practice-Produce paradigm, which is vocabulary meaning-driven rote teaching, it would be better choose more flexible approach, such as Observe-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle model to provide foreign language learners with the opportunity of acquiring language by using it.

This study focuses on the main features of LC use by juniors and sophomores of Chinese English majors, meanwhile it echoes previous findings on the employment of LC by Chinese learners, specifically by Chinese English majors. However, it needs larger-scale contrastive studies to verify whether these results conform to juniors and sophomores who are in comprehensive universities, or more English majors at different proficiency levels.

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