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# The Application of Lexical Chunks in English Writing Teaching in Chinese Senior High School

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**Abstract:** Among the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is a complex output skill, which can demonstrate the comprehensive linguistic competence of language learners. For second language learners, the main problem in writing is how to use native language and accurate expressions in order to reduce the influence of their mother tongue on their English expressions so as to make their compositions more coherent and authentic. Probably the application of lexical chunks to the teaching of English writing could solve these problems in some way. In language acquisition, a large number of lexical chunks exist in natural language, they have both grammatical features and pragmatic functions, they can speed up language processing and have great significance for the accuracy and fluency of language input and output, and thus they are considered as the ideal unit for language teaching. By means of literature review, this paper firstly summarizes the definition and classification of lexical chunks by different scholars, and then reviews the current research status of the application of lexical chunks theory in English teaching. It is found that numerous studies showed that the application of lexical chunks in writing improved high school students' interest in English writing and their independent writing ability. Students' writing accuracy and appropriateness, coherence and fluency are all improved. Finally, this paper discusses the advantages and functions of lexical chunks in English writing, and gives some suggestions on the application of lexical chunks in English writing teaching in Chinese senior high school.

**Keywords:** Chinese Senior High School; English Writing Teaching; Lexical Chunks; Lexical Approach; Writing Competence.

## 1. Introduction

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills, including speaking, writing, listening and reading, which leads to effective communication. One crucial factor in this process is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language. As a result, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research and how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently and how it can best be taught are contentious issues in applied linguistics (Lewis, 1997). Among the varieties of techniques to teach and present vocabulary, research shows that teaching words in chunks can largely enhance the range of the words one can apply in the process of meaning negotiation.

Lexical approach to language teaching places more emphasis on presenting the words in language chunks not in isolation. Lewis insists that the lexical approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching, as "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis, 1997). Chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and according to him, occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency. It is suggested that native speakers' fluency is related to the fact that their vocabulary is not stored only as individual words, but also as parts of phrases and larger chunks, which can be retrieved from memory as a whole and reducing processing difficulties. On the other hand, learners who only learn individual words will need a lot more time and effort to express themselves.

Traditional English language teaching in China approaches vocabulary and grammar separately and pays little attention to lexical items, which leads to the fact that "new word acquisition is not based on lexical grammar, so meaning is separated from colligation and collocation" (Li, 2018). As a result, learners' active vocabulary is often composed of a limited number of lexical chunks, as learners have not even been "trained to notice" these lexico-grammatical units. In other words, they have not developed an authentic awareness of lexical chunks. Therefore, despite years of hard work in English classes, their lack of vocabulary knowledge is often cited as one of the obstacles they struggle to overcome.

Nowadays, there are some problems in high school students' English writing, such as inaccurate vocabulary selection and collocation, improper connection between sentences and paragraphs, slow language organization, and lack of writing confidence. Moreover, in the context of the further deepening of the college entrance examination reform, the written expression part puts forward higher requirements for high school students' writing level. Lexical chunks are in line with students' cognitive and learning habits, and it may be beneficial to adopt lexical chunks to English writing teaching. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the promotion of language output by applying lexical chunks to English writing teaching in senior high school.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition and Classification of Lexical Chunks

Lexical Approach, proposed by Michael Lewis (1993), has been paid more and more attention to by linguists and English teachers in recent years. The basic principle of it is "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar" (Lewis,1993). Research of corpus analysis and computational linguistics show that there are a large number of lexical

chunks in language. These chunks are frequently occurred, fixed or semi-fixed multi-words or sentences that can be stored and retrieved as a whole.

It is Becker that first proposed the concept of lexical chunks. He thinks that the lexical chunks can be stored in the brain as a whole, just like prefabricated blocks which can be retrieved for learners as a whole or after slight change. Due to the difference of research perspectives, the researchers give different names according to their own research. The linguist Becker (1975) regards them as "prefabricated language"; Pawley & Syder (1983) points out that they were "lexicalized sentence stems"; Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) adopt the term "1exical phrases"; Lewis (1993) calls them "lexical chunks". Cowie (2016) distinguishes between set of phrases and set of sentences, which are obviously both chunks of languages, and to describe the usefulness of these, Nation (2017) uses the term "collocation" to describe them both. Nation (2017) describes such "language units" as multi-word units. Nation further identifies other units used to describe more or less the same concept, including pre-formulated language, formulas and lexical phrases. In the past few decades, the studies on lexical chunks have never stopped. Many applied linguists spare no efforts to define them, but it is a pity that there has been no universally accepted definition of lexical chunks so far.

The term lexical chunks proposed by Lewis is adopted in this paper. Wray (2002) defines lexical chunks as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, 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". Originating in the field of psychology, chunking is considered the all-important principle of human cognition, implying the ability to build up structures recursively, thus leading to a hierarchical organization of memory. Some applied linguists argue that this concept can be applied to language acquisition and, rather than taking the traditional view that language is composed of grammar and vocabulary, it consists of lexical chunks, which are the essential mediator between conceptualization and grammatical and phonological encoding (Lewis, 1993, 1997; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).

There are many classifications of lexical chunks, among which the most popular ones are the following two. According to Lewis, lexical chunks fall into four types: 1) Polywords, such as by the way, in a nutshell, to sum up; 2) Collocations, such as meet one's needs, striking increase; 3) Institutional expressions, such as how do you do, nice meeting you; and 4) Sentence frames and heads, such as A new study suggests that… (Lewis, 1997). Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) divided lexical chunks into 1) Polywords, such as in any way, as a matter of fact; 2) Institutionalized expressions, such as "As the old saying goes," "Every coin has its two sides"; 3) Phrasal constraints, such as to one's surprise/delight/regret, as far as I am concerned; 4) Sentence builders, such as not only…but also. Since these chunks serve the basic units of human memory, they play an essential role in the learning process. An average native speaker knows hundreds of thousands of chunks, thus achieving a taken-for-granted degree of real-time fluency (Pawley & Syder, 1983).

## 2.2. Previous Study on Lexical Chunks

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of lexical chunks in foreign language acquisition. Research has found a strong relationship between lexical chunks and second language skills. Ding and Qi (2005), for example, have found that the ability of second language learners to use formulaic language is a better predictor of oral and written English performance than grammatical accuracy. In other words, good language learners are good users of formulaic sequences. Boers (2006) has suggested that it is helpful for language learners to establish a set of formulaic sequences to improve their oral proficiency, while Mohammadi and Enayati (2018) have found that the input of lexical chunks helps to avoid errors caused by vocabulary selection and cultural differences, thus improving the accuracy of spoken English. Kazemi et al. (2014) have demonstrated that lexical chunks help students to improve their writing ability and argue that all writing courses should pay attention to the teaching of lexical chunks. Research by Li (2018) has revealed that the number of lexical chunks that a learner possesses is closely related to listening performance, suggesting that lexical chunks can improve the efficiency with which a learner processes language information. Pu Jianzhong (2003) also indicates that the main reason that blocks learners' improvement is the lack of using of lexical chunks. Therefore, he encourages teachers to consider teaching lexical chunks as the key point in vocabulary teaching. Liu and He (2013) state that lexical chunks have advantages of relatively stable structures and significant meanings which could help create an environment to aid learners realize the connection of vocabulary and context. What's more, the application of lexical chunks theory could also help learners boost their pragmatic awareness and raise their ability in choosing and applying words. Finally, learners' language output ability will be enhanced.

Although a number of empirical studies demonstrate the impact of chunk input on EFL learning, there has been limited research into how to reliably and effectively teach lexical chunks.

## 2.3. Previous Studies of Lexical Chunks in Writing

Ismail (2017) conducted an experimental study on the application of the lexical chunk approach in teaching English writing composition to 48 KPTM diploma students. The results indicated a decline in both grammatical and lexical inaccuracies in their writing after receiving treatment through the use of the Lexical Approach. Moreover, the researchers have observed that the use of collocations in teaching writing produced a positive result in the participants' written compositions and coherent texts. Similarly, Martinez & Schmitt (2012) conducted a study revealed that the integration of collocations in writing tasks contributes to the coherence and interconnection of the text through linking concepts, semantics, and pragmatics, where these elements interact together to produce a coherent text. Yang Yingying (2014) suggests that pre-intermediate and intermediate learners could only use simple chunks to generate short and plain sentences. While advanced learners have the ability to use comparatively complex words to express their ideas. In other words, there is a close relationship between the storage of lexical chunks and a learners' English writing ability.

Another noteworthy finding was that Li (2014) and Li Xia (2010) revealed that learning collocations can reduce the negative transfer of the native language, improving writing in terms of word choice, use of good language, fewer grammatical errors, construction of correct sentences, discourse cohesion, and expression. The attainment of

fluency results in a reduction of language interference. As stated by Lewis (1997), chunks, including collocations, have a significant role in facilitating language production and are key to achieving fluency. Wray (2000) reaffirmed that mastering the use of collocation will lead to more fluidity when it comes to communication, whether written or spoken. Nation and Webb (2011) describe collocations as a source of fluency and accuracy in language production.

In conclusion, the previous research findings demonstrated that through the use of collocations, resulting in a reduction in lexical and grammatical errors, and the language proficiency and accuracy of writing can be improved.

# 3. The Application of Lexical Chunks in English Teaching

This part explores the advantages of lexical chunks in English writing and the suggestions on the application of lexical chunks in English writing.

## 3.1. The Advantages of Lexical Chunks in English Writing

The advantages of teaching lexical chunks have been the subject of many recent studies. For instance, Martinez and Schmitt (2012) noted some key advantages of formulaic sequences (lexical chunks): they compose a large percentage of English discourse, whether written or spoken; and they can facilitate the communication of many expressions; and they enable learners to produce language successfully by providing chunks of expressions. For all the above reasons, researchers are encouraged to pursue their investigation of better ways to integrate more lexical chunks in classroom materials to promote more effective techniques of teaching English as a foreign language.

The significant results of many empirical studies in L1 discourse have encouraged educators to consider lexical chunks as an auspicious tool that might promote better and more effective methods of teaching English as a foreign language. Linguists in the field of language acquisition advocate that teaching lexical chunks to L2 learners might enable them to grasp the new language quickly and lead to more successful language production. Researchers have also proposed that lexical chunks should be considered a valuable tool in teaching academic writing, especially for L2 learners who experience difficulty in expressing themselves in writing. The significance of lexical chunks in validating English written skills can be attributed to the fact that they enable teachers to provide L2 learners with lists of formulas that they can use in their writing, and researchers argue that this practice helps learners develop into proficient writers. Lewis (1997) explained that, through frequent exposure to these lists and some more practice, L2 learners tend to use these expressions in their academic prose.

Using lexical chunks can intrigue students to learn more about the English language, and the knowledge of the formulaic language through collocations and lexical bundles can open the door to a new perspective of language teaching. It can train students to be proactive in their writing instead of simply memorizing lists of vocabulary words without being able to use them accurately in sentences and it also can help students improve their sentence structure and create more fluent and coherent writing. The collocational patterns of learning any language will train the learners to look at any language as a string of words rather than a single stand-alone word that they often fail to incorporate into meaningful sentences. Another benefit, the knowledge of lexical bundles and collocation saves time; due to automated language production, the learners have more time to focus on the content they plan to develop and express. Lexical chunks are in fact described as “the normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourse”. These building blocks, once learners are equipped with, lead to “native-like selection” which reduces the stress and time of processing language each time the learners use it, thus helping earners to achieve fluency in speaking and writing good English.

By mastering the usage and function of lexical chunks, students can organize their compositions faster, build up the framework of their essays quickly, and reduce the pressure of the time limit when writing. Students command a certain number of chunks, which can be quickly extracted and directly used in their writing, so as to improve the degree of automation of language expression and language fluency.

In addition, the use of lexical chunks helps learners to use effective cohesive means to improve the coherence and logic of the essay. A good article should not only have rich content and correct and authentic expressions, but also have certain textual cohesion means to organically link these contents, so as to make the writing coherent and logical. English is rich in lexical chunks with connecting and transitional functions. Through the use of these chunks, students can strengthen the relationship between sentences and paragraphs, making the meaning of the text coherent and tightly connected, and also reflect students’ rigorous logic.

Moreover, the use of lexical chunks can help learners to use grammar and vocabulary correctly and improve the accuracy of written language. Word chunks, with their relatively fixed grammatical structure restrictions, stable collocational meanings and specific pragmatic contexts, are an important way for learners to internalize and establish grammatical rules, and can effectively promote the development of vocabulary knowledge in depth and breadth. Lexical chunks can be easily stored and extracted. Meanwhile, they are the combination of syntax, semantics and context. If students master a quantity of lexical chunks, it is much easier for them to express their ideas freely and fluently than accumulating lots of words. Because lexical chunks are stored and extracted as a whole, students will make fewer mistakes when applying them in writing, which can greatly improve the accuracy.

Finally, the use of lexical chunks can help to overcome the negative transfer of mother tongue in writing and enhance the authenticity of writing. Due to the huge differences in expression modes between Chinese and English, mother tongue has a considerable interference in second language writing, and learners’ language mistakes in second language writing are mainly caused by the dominance of mother tongue thinking in foreign language. However, the introduction of lexical chunks into writing teaching can effectively improve this problem. As long as learners learn to use chunks to learn, they can store a large amount of English language knowledge in the form of chunks in their brain. In the writing process, they do not need to generate sentences temporarily according to grammatical rules, but only need to call on the chunks stored in their brains and recombine or partially replace them, which effectively avoids common grammatical errors such as incorrect tenses, inappropriate collocations, inconsistencies in the subject and predicate, and confusing syntax and the intermediary language mistakes caused by the negative transfer of the mother tongue, and then produce high-level

compositions. The composition of lexical chunks accords with the language habits of native speakers and is a conventional collocation method. Therefore, lexical chunks learning can help learners get used to the thinking mode and expression habits of English better, and in writing, they can overcome the negative influence of the mediating language and the stereotyped thinking of the mother tongue to a great extent, and write authentic articles.

### 3.2. Suggestions on the Application of Lexical Chunks in English Writing

Lexical chunks, according to Schmitt (2020), is an advanced vocabulary knowledge that is difficult to know how to teach to learners. In light of this, two basic challenges teachers of language have to address are the vast number of lexical chunks existing in the language, and the fact that there is no best way to teach lexical chunks. So, after realizing that language is full of collocations, a basic question is, what collocations should language teachers focus on and teach? By way of answering this obvious question, scholars such as Nation (2017) and Moon (2021) are of the opinion that language teachers should base their instruction in the language class on selection. Selection of instruction should include "frequency", "congruence" and "restriction", Schmitt (2020) emphasizes the importance of congruence by suggesting the necessity of addressing only the collocations with no direct translation equivalents.

Studies by Wray (2000) and Nasselhauf (2020) contend that one factor to be considered in this aspect is that native speakers tend to internalize chunks of language without even being aware of it due to the fact that they (native speakers) have frequent exposure to the words that do collocate with other words. Whereas, on the contrary, Lewis (2019) argues that L2 learners, even at advanced levels, have a lot of difficulty using and monitoring collocations easily, which is largely due to insufficient exposure to the target language. This implies that L2 learners should be aided with "conscious-raising" as well as "frequent exposure" to the rubrics of the target language.

Therefore, to incorporate lexical chunks into the English teaching method, the instructors should follow McCarthy and O'Dell's (2008) model of teaching collocations. The proposed model presents a three-phase approach to collocation teaching. The first phase is a searching process in which the instructors provide some guidance to students on how to search for and identify collocations in some texts. As Lewis (1997) suggested, the instructors should raise the students' awareness about the importance of lexical chunks in foreign language learning, highlight the importance of collocations in preventing linguistic errors, and provide relevant examples of their usage in language to avoid such errors. In the second phase, which is the recording process phase, where instructors provided students with guidance on how to incorporate the previously identified collocations from the phase one into various sentence structures. In the third and final phase, the instructors should focus on practical aspects of writing skills, such as forming paragraphs and essay writing, where the students should be encouraged to write an essay based on the number of collocations provided to them in phases one and two. This will assist the participants in achieving fluency.

It is worth noting that we should strengthen the training of lexical chunks learning strategies and cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. There are a large number of lexical chunks in English with different kinds and usages, which pose a considerable challenge not only to language learners but also to language teachers. After all, classroom teaching time is limited, and students are at different levels, so it is impossible for teachers to make every student familiar with all the lexical chunks in the language in class, let alone make students proficient in the usage of each lexical chunks through classroom teaching. Lewis (1993) proposed an observation-hypothesis-verification learning model in his vocabulary teaching method, that is, students should discover and observe the usage of lexical chunks in the process of learning, and summarize the grammatical rules and application rules of lexical chunks in repeated use, so as to eventually internalize their own knowledge. Therefore, teachers should strengthen the training of learners' lexical chunks learning strategies, cultivate their self-learning ability, guide students to establish and strengthen their lexical chunks awareness, apply self-learning strategies to actively discover and accumulate lexical chunks, and actively use lexical chunks, so as to achieve the purpose of expanding lexical chunks size and improving lexical chunks application ability.

In addition, it is necessary to increase and enrich the lexical chunks output training activities, focusing on the development of students' lexical chunks production ability. The improvement of students' writing ability is closely related to their ability to generate lexical chunks, which directly affects the accuracy of the language of the composition and the fluency of the organization. However, at present, Chinese high school students' lexical chunks production ability is very weak. For ordinary students, lexical chunks productive training activities mainly come from the exercises in textbooks and teachers' classroom teaching and homework. Most of the teaching materials focus on vocabulary only on the meaning and form of words, but neglect the cultivation and examination of the knowledge of lexical chunks production, especially the ability of vocabulary collocation has not received due attention. Textbook writers should take into full consideration the factor of lexical chunks and design a variety of exercises that can improve students' lexical chunks production ability. Of course, teachers should also have a certain degree of knowledge of lexical chunks theory, so that they can make up for the shortcomings of the textbook through classroom teaching and after-class homework. In the principle of exercises, attention should be paid to the fact that chunks are not only practiced at the level of words or sentences, but also at the level of parts of discourse.

## 4. Conclusion

The common language units traditionally taught to students are words, phrases, and sentences. For the teaching of grammatical structure, these units are useful because words and phrases are used to build sentences. However, these units may not be the best choice for practical language use, because second language learners usually have little understanding of how words are put together in real use, even though they can construct grammatically correct sentences with a large vocabulary and according to grammatical rules. The lexical approach pays special attention to lexical chunks, including polywords, collocations, institutionalized utterances, and sentence frames and heads. "Instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways" (Lewis, 1997). As the words that co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency, lexical chunks are

not determined by logic. Instead, arbitrary clusters become the prefabricated units of language use.

The application of lexical chunks in senior high school English writing teaching is of great significance. In the process of traditional English writing, students often put together words and sentences, and the expression appears stiff and lacks coherence. However, by emphasizing the application of lexical chunks in writing teaching, students can use fixed expressions more naturally, making the structure of the article more compact and the logic clearer. In terms of cultivating language sense, lexical chunks training not only makes students more sensitive to the subtle differences in expressions, but also helps them more freely choose appropriate vocabulary collocations in writing, improves the accuracy of vocabulary collocations, and avoids the inappropriate use of words in the writing process.

In conclusion, lexical chunks teaching can improve the fluency, coherence and accuracy of students' English writing, enhance their self-confidence in writing, and help students form more natural, authentic and expressive language expression ability. The lexical chunks theory provides a more practical and effective method for teaching English writing in senior high school, which can better cultivate students' comprehensive language application ability. In the future, through continuous promotion and exploration, combined with the advantages of other teaching methods, lexical chunks may inject new vitality and creativity into English writing teaching and open up a new situation in English teaching.

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