A Lexical Approach to the Teaching of College English Writing

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to explore the problems existing in the teaching of college English writing and to put forward the lexical approach as a new teaching method to solve the problems. By analyzing the students’ English writings, the research finds out that there exist many serious problems in their writing, such as Chinese English phenomenon, poor performance in naturalness and fluency of English expression and in overall text arrangement. By investigating the teaching of college English writing in Shangluo University, we also find that the students’ poor writing ability is largely due to the teachers’ traditional teaching method and concept. It is suggested that the lexical approach should be used in the teaching in order to cultivate the students’ chunk competence and awareness and improve their English expression and logicality of discourse organization.

1. Introduction

As an organic part of higher education in China, the importance of college English teaching cannot be ignored. The reform of college English teaching has been carried out for nearly ten years. All colleges have conducted new attempts and explorations in many aspects, such as teaching resources, modes, means, and methods and so on. Generally, the English teaching level has been greatly improved. Nevertheless, the situation in most local colleges is different, and its English teaching level is relatively low. My college is taken as an example. Since the college is located in a remote northwestern mountain city, its teaching resources and students are not as good as the colleges in big cities. The reform of college English Teaching in the college has achieved certain results, but there still exist a lot of problems. Teachers are expected make reasonable use of teaching resources, explore new teaching mode and improve teaching methods. According to an investigation of the situation of English band 4 and 6 in recent years, students’ grades have been improved but they still do poorly in the parts of listening and writing. Especially for English writing, most of the students show very low writing competence. Besides the serious problem of Chinese English phenomenon, the students have poor performance in idiomaticity and fluency of English expression, and their ability of overall text arrangement needs to be enhanced. It can be safely concluded that the students’ writing ability and comprehensive use of English are poor. In this regard, there is an urgent need to improve the students’ writing ability, which is a key point of college English teaching reform. Quite a few scholars at home and abroad have done research on college English writing teaching, and they have put forward some effective teaching methods, such as process method, task method, result method, function method, and so on. Taking lexical chunk theory as a basis, the paper discusses a new teaching method of English writing.

2. Theoretical Background

Based on lexical chunks theory, the lexical approach is raised as a new method of foreign language teaching and learning. It is of great help for language learners to improve their expression. The application of the lexical approach to language teaching can greatly raise the teaching effects.

2.1 Lexical chunks theory.

With the development of phraseology and corpus linguistics, lexical chunk theory has become one of the hottest topics in linguistics and teaching methodology. It has its origin in the term of “chunk” in cognitive psychology, which, as a unit of memory, is a processing of information in human brain. Therefore, chunk is beneficial to the cognition and learning of language. Since the 1970s, linguists have paid much attention to the concept of lexical chunk. Based on different focuses, they have used...
their own different terms for this linguistic phenomenon, such as lexical phrases (Becker 1975), speech formula (Peters, 1983), lexicalized sentence stem (Pawley & Syder, 1983), ready-made complex units (Cowie, 1992), multi-word lexical phenomena (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), lexical chunks (Lewis, 1993), formulaic sequence (Wray, 2002) and so on. Nowadays, lexical chunks become the most common term.

Becker was among the earlier linguists who did research on lexical chunks. In 1975, he attended an international conference and published a paper “The Phrasal Lexicon”. In this paper, he put forward the concept of lexical phrases. He thought that the smallest unit of communication is chunks instead of words. “Wherein utterances are formed combinatorically from units the size of words or smaller. This paper will focus on the contrary aspect of language, wherein utterances are formed by repetition, modification, and concatenation of previously-known phrases consisting of more than one word.” [1] Bollinger (1975) pointed out that words are stored in the form of phrases instead of “individual morphemes”. Pawley and Syder (1983) considered chunks as lexicalized sentence stems which contribute to the natural expression of language. They stated that “a sentence stem is a unit of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed.” [2] Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) regarded chunks as a kind of multi-word lexical phenomena. He pointed out that chunks are between words and sentences and are a combination of meaning, form and function. Lewis (1993) had a more specific definition, “A lexical item (or lexical unit, lexical entry) is a single word or chain of words that forms the basic elements of a language. Lexical items composed more than one word is also sometimes called lexical chunks, gambits, lexical phrases, lexical stems or speech formulae.” [3] Based on this, lexical chunks can be defined as a special linguistic phenomenon, which is a multi-word unit with the combination of structure, function and meaning. Stored in memory in the form of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated modules, lexical chunks can be drawn directly in the process of using language, without grammar generation. Thus, lexical chunks are of great help for the fluency and native-likeness of language expression.

2.2 The lexical approach

Since the discussion of the concept of chunks, the close relationship between lexical chunks and language teaching and learning has been observed. In the 1990s, based on his study on lexical chunks theory, Michael Lewis raised the lexical approach, which provided a new method for language learners and teachers. He published two books The Lexical Approach (1993) and Implementing the Lexical Approach (1997), in which he gave a detailed account of his lexical approach. His research is of great significance to the development of linguistics and teaching methodology. At the beginning of this century, Chinese scholars began to do research on the lexical chunks theory. They not only introduced in great detail the theory to the Chinese academic circle, but also advanced their own opinions. Many of them studied the application of the theory to English teaching and learning, such as Pu Jianzhong, Ma Guanghui, Ding Yanren, etc.

According to Lewis, language constitutes “grammaticalized lexis” rather than “lexicalized grammar”, and the basis of language should be lexis rather than grammar. He pointed out the difference between vocabulary and lexis. The former is a totality of individual words, while the latter includes both individual words and lexical chunks stored in the memory. In the process of language acquisition, learners should pay more attention to meaningful chunks instead of individual words. For a very long period, the importance of grammar is over stressed by linguists and language teachers. In their views, language is composed of grammatical structures, and language input and output should be based on a detailed analysis of grammar. However, the lexical approach attaches great importance to lexis, which helps to produce coherent and natural text. Lexis is classified by Lewis into five groups: words, poly-words, collocations, institutionalized utterances, and sentence frames and heads. Lewis particularly laid stress on the later three groups. Taking collocations as an example, he defined it as “the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency and is not determined by logic or frequency, but is arbitrary, decided only by linguistic convention.” [4]
Generally, the lexical approach put much emphasis on the importance of “prefabricated language” and “meaningful chunks”. In the preface to Implementing the Lexical Approach (1997), Lewis stated that “The Lexical Approach can be summarized in a few words: language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks. Teacher using the Lexical Approach will, instead of, analyzing language whenever possible, is more inclined to direct learners’ attention to chunks which are as large as possible.”

3. **Lexical Approach Applied in the Teaching of College English Writing**

The lexical approach is highly applicable in second language acquisition. In recent years, many scholars have done research on its application to English teaching and learning. As for the teaching of college English writing, some researchers point out that the lexical approach helps to cultivate a strong sense of the English language, strengthen the fluency and native-likeness of English learners’ expression and thus improve their writing competence. As Pawley & Syder (1983) put it, two difficult problems for second language learners are “nativelike selection” and “nativelike fluency”. It is encouraging that the lexical approach is a good way of solving these problems. As for students in local colleges in China, their overall English level is relatively low, particularly in the aspects of listening, speaking and writing. The reason for that lies mainly in the examination-oriented teaching mode and the grammar-based teaching method in high school. Since college students are raised higher requirements for English learning, college English teachers should change the teaching idea, adopt flexible teaching methods and cultivate the students’ correct learning habit. The lexical approach is of great help to improve such situation.

3.1 **Cultivating consciousness of lexical chunks**

Studies show that there are many urgent problems in the teaching of college English writing in China, among which old teaching ideas and methods are most prominent. In local colleges, the teaching staff is weak, teaching resources are limited and teaching ideas are old. Most of the college English teachers still adopt very old and conservative teaching methods. Unlike the English majors, non-English majors take the only course of college English, which combine all language skills together. When training the students’ five basic skills, the teacher is free to arrange the time for every part of the course. A great majority of teachers spend most of the time in explaining the intensive text. Their teaching is largely based on grammar analysis. The teaching of writing possesses a very small portion and the students have little time for practice. This traditional grammar-based teaching method is unfavorable to English output. It’s time for the teachers to change their teaching method. Nattinger suggests that “Perhaps we should base our teaching on the assumption that, for a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations.” [5] The lexical approach requires that the teacher should renew their teaching ideas and cultivate the students’ consciousness of lexical chunks. Teaching is based on lexis learning rather than grammar analysis, keeping the balance between input and output of English. The teacher should consciously implant lexical chunks theory in the students, letting them know the definition and function of chunks, and learn its importance to English learning. With a strong self consciousness of lexical chunks, the students will identify, summarize and use lexical chunks in the process of English learning. When learning a new word, the students should be guided to pay more attention to its collocations. Writing ability will be promoted with a large accumulation of institutionalized utterances, and sentence frames and heads.

3.2 **Strengthening learning strategies of lexical chunks**

It is proposed that learning strategies of lexical chunks should be strengthened in both in-class teaching and after-class self-study. Besides pressing the students to increase the stocks of lexical chunks by reading extensively, the teacher should design various types of exercises to practice their using of lexical chunks. Through the understanding and memorizing of lexical chunks, the students’ language competence can be improved. The practice is certainly done according to the teaching
material. Before learning new lessons, the students are required to find out all lexical chunks in the text in the process of previewing lessons. Dictionary and reference books are useful to the self-study of lexical chunks. By analyzing the structure of the text, sentence frames and heads should be paid much attention to. For example, “in the first place”, “in the second place”, “furthermore”, “finally” and such words show the arrangement of the text and the development of the writer’s points. By learning these expressions, the students master some writing skills. When explaining the text, the teacher repeatedly stresses the importance of lexical chunks and asks the students to discuss the lexical chunks in the text. Through explaining the word-formation, word-collocation, fixed expressions, and frequently used sentence frames; the teacher guides the students to grasp proper strategies of learning lexical chunks. The lexical approach can be also applied to the exercises of the text. For example, in the translation part, the students are required to write the sentence structure and then fill in fixed phrases and expressions. After finishing the text, the students need to review the lexical chunks and take an extended learning.

3.3 Promoting the ability of using lexical chunks

According to College English Curriculum Requirements, college students should possess a certain English writing ability. They are required to complete a general writing task, including describing happenings, personal experiences and feelings, doing common practical writings, finishing a 120-word essay on general topics within half an hour. Moreover, they should master some basic writing skills in order that the writings are clear and substantial in content, with proper words and semantic coherence. Therefore, the teaching of college English writing should focus on native-likeness in expression, logic in structure and diversity in forms. Since the writing part in band 4 and 6 is usually composing essays, most of the teachers train the students in a single way. They seldom require the students practice other forms of writing. By reciting some writing models, the students produce a better essay. But their overall writing ability is not promoted. The lexical approach puts much emphasis on an overall output of lexical chunks. A proper use of chunks can promote native-like fluency and native-like selection. [6] In the writing training, the teacher can require the students to use the frequently-used lexical chunks. In this way, accumulation and output can be combined. Specific training for different forms of writing should be done. Besides essays, practical writings should be practiced, such as letters, notices, notes, proposals, etc. A good language context should be created in the writing training. The students are required to combine the textbooks and their own daily life. Different forms of writings are used to express their own ideas. Aside from the writing task in class, they are suggested to take writing practice by making use of internet. For example, diaries, blogs, emails can be written in English.

4. Conclusion

Writing ability is a high-level comprehensive use of language, and it has a truthful reflection of a person’s writing qualities. As a weak point, the importance of writing should be stressed in the college English teaching. The traditional grammar-based teaching method leads to the students’ old writing concepts and poor writing ability. They rely heavily on a large vocabulary, and their writing is another form of translation. With a severe Chinglish problem, their expression is in the absence of fluency and naturalness. With lexical chunks as a basis, the lexical approach gets rid of the weaknesses of the traditional teaching method, which focuses on memorizing words and analyzing grammar. Laying stress on the overall input and output of lexical chunks, the lexical approach is of great help for the English learners to overcome the negative transfer of mother tongue, improve their writing by promoting the naturalness of their expression and their organization ability of text.

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6. References


