

Study of the Influence of the Chunking on Improving Speaking Ability Among Senior High Students

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English speaking skill is one of the most important skills that senior high students need to obtain in learning English. However, there are still many problems existing in students' speaking practice. As a teaching and learning strategy, Chunking is now gradually used in English classroom and has received a positive feedback. Therefore, in this paper, the influence of Chunking on improving English speaking skill among senior high school students will be investigated and analyzed through the methods of questionnaire and the follow-up interview to answer four questions: (1) What effect does Chunking have on the oral fluency of high school students? (2) What effect does Chunking have on the oral accuracy of high school students? (3) What effect does Chunking have on the vocabulary? And (4) Does the English speaking performance relate to genders? After analyzing the results of questionnaire by the SPSS and summing up the interview record, we found that most of them agree the fact that the strategy of Chunking does benefit their oral fluency, oral accuracy, and vocabulary. Also, female students have higher scores than male students.

Keywords: the Chunking memory strategy, high school students, oral English ability, Chunking

Introduction

The ability development of second language teaching is generally divided into several aspects such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, etc. From the perspective of language communication, the cultivation of speaking skill is more important, and a large number of communicative activities are realized through oral expression. Speaking is an important constituent part in English and a direct method to measure the English ability, because it in fact contains lots of knowledges in it, such as vocabulary, abilities to comprehend and express. To evaluate a student's speaking skill, we can test from several parts, that are accent, vocabulary, accuracy, and fluency of his speaking performance.

However, for a long time, English language teaching in China has focused on the accumulation of learners' knowledge and relatively neglected the cultivation of their skill to communicate in English, and various examinations and assessments have focused more on reading and writing skills. In order to solve these problems, a reasonable and effective teaching strategy is needed. The strategy of Chunking, which is centered on developing students' ability to understand and apply chunks, offers a practical way out for both English teachers and students to improve English speaking skill.

Literature Review

Definitions of Chunks and Chunking

More and more researches by linguists have revealed that communication in English is not only achieved through the use of words or fixed phrases, but also through the semi-fixed structures, chunks, which lie between words and fixed phrases. Regarding these semi-fixed chunks, linguists at home and abroad have studied the role of them in language and have given them different names and definitions. For example, the earlier ones are called “the phrasal lexicon” (Becker, 1975), “speech formula” (Peters, 1983), and “lexicalized sentence stems” (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Later on, they put forward “ready-made (complex) units” (Cowie, 1992), “lexical phrases” (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), and “lexical chunks” (Lewis, 1993). Though they have different names, they share the similar or even same meanings. There is no clear definition of a chunk so far, but we may conclude that chunks are a combination of multiple words with semantic and grammatical functions. It can be stored in the brain as a whole and is easy to remember and use.

The strategy of Chunking is the formation of meaningful units from fragmented-building chunks. From the point of view of information processing, Chunking is the organization or recoding of information by human beings. It can be said that Chunking is the key to improving the information processing efficiency.

Researches of Chunking

In the field of second language acquisition research, chunks have been the focus of research. Both psycholinguistics and construction grammars suggest that chunks play an important role in the process of second language production (Duan, 2008). The study of second language chunks from the perspective of applied linguistics presents a prominent feature in the research methodology: It is mainly based on non-empirical research such as the introduction of foreign theories and the summing up of domestic practical experiences, while the methodological awareness and training of qualitative and quantitative research are relatively weak. Lewis firstly put forward the lexical approach, viewing learning vocabulary as the study center, and then Peters (1983) advised the completeness of study, which is to take chunks as a unit learn it in proper circumstance. There is a strong correlation between chunks of speech and learners’ language output ability, which can improve the authenticity and fluency of word choice in speaking and writing. According to Yao (2004), chunks can improve fluency, correctness, and appropriateness of speaking.

Researches of English Speaking

The goal of speaking teaching is to improve students’ speaking skill, which is a comprehensive ability that is expressed in terms of accuracy of voice, correctness of speech, and appropriateness of expression, and which is based on knowledge of the language and relevant culture.

At present, the teaching of speaking has not been given enough attention and has not been formally integrated into the teaching tasks. It can be found that a large number of grammatical rules specific to spoken language have not been summarized and as a result students are often accustomed to using complete sentences and formal sentences in real oral dialogues, but rarely use simple, highly colloquial sentences. The quality of communication is affected by the lack of naturalness and authenticity in the use of the language.

Most of the theoretical and practical studies of Chunking are now mainly concentrated on vocabulary, and some of linguists and scholars investigate the two non-spoken aspects, that are reading and writing skills. For example, Wu and Wang (2002) agreed that chunks are the ideal mode for vocabulary memory. However, there are not enough researches on English speaking, especially on speaking in the stage of senior high school.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of Chunking on improving English speaking skill among senior high school students.

Research Design

Research Methods and Data Collection

In this passage, the methods of questionnaire and follow-up interview are used to investigate the relationship between Chunking and English speaking skill among senior high school students. After collecting the data, SPSS Version 25 will be used to analyze them. This paper is mainly to solve these four following questions:

1. What effect does Chunking have on the oral fluency of high school students?
2. What effect does Chunking have on the oral accuracy of high school students?
3. What effect does Chunking have on the vocabulary?
4. Does the English speaking performance relate to genders?

The questionnaire is conducted in an online website called Wenjuanxing, and then senior high school students in a same English class are asked to complete. After collecting all the results, we use SPSS Version 25 to analyze them.

Research Subjects

The research objects of this paper are Grade 12 students in a senior high school who took part in CELST on March this year. CELST (Computer-based English Listening and Speaking Test) is a module of National Matriculation English Test (Guangdong Version), consisting of three parts. Part A is Reading Aloud. In this part, students are required to watch a video clip and read after the speaker in the video. Part B is Role Play. In this part, students are required to act as a role and complete three communicative tasks: listen to a speaker; ask the speaker three questions; and then answer five questions from the computer acting as another role. Part C is Retelling. In this part, students are required to listen to a monologue, and then retell what they have heard in their own words. As a provincial listening and speaking test, the CELST can reflect the students' speaking ability to a certain extent. This full score of this test is 20.

According to their scores, we will divide the students into three groups. Students who got 15 or above 15 scores belong to high-grade group, students who got 9 to 14 score belong to middle-grade group, and students who received 8 or below 8 scores belong to low-grade group.

Data Analysis

The investigation altogether provides questionnaire 40, the actual recovery of 33 copies, of which 30 valid questionnaires, for an effective questionnaire returns-ratio is 75%.

After analyzing, we find that students who have higher scores in CELST have higher tendency to learn and practice chunks in daily life even though they do not realize whether they are using Chunking to learn. What's more, they who belong to high- and middle-grade group are more willing to use chunks in daily oral communication and the test.

From Figure 1, we can know that 80% of them agree that Chunking plays an important role in English speaking. In addition, 76.67% of senior high school students agree that it can improve their oral fluency and oral accuracy by using the strategy of Chunking, and 80% of them agree that Chunking can enrich their vocabulary.

As can be seen from Figure 2 above, five out of 13 male students belong to the low-grade, and eight of them belong to high- and middle-grade group, while only one female student belongs to low-grade group and other 16

female students belong to high- and middle-grade group. Therefore, we can see from the results that female students have a better performance in speaking whereas male students have a relatively lower scores than female students.

14. you think that chunks play an important role in improving your English speaking skills.	1(3.33%)	1(3.33%)	4(13.33%)	10(33.33%)	14(46.67%)
15. you think that using the Chunking Memory Strategy improves fluency in spoken English.	1(3.33%)	2(6.67%)	4(13.33%)	9(30%)	14(46.67%)
16. you think that using the Chunking Memory Strategy can improve the accuracy of spoken English.	1(3.33%)	1(3.33%)	5(16.67%)	12(40%)	11(36.67%)
17. you think the use of Chunking Memory Strategy can enrich vocabulary.	1(3.33%)	1(3.33%)	4(13.33%)	11(36.67%)	13(43.33%)

Figure 1. Results of understanding.

X\Y	15~20	9~14	< 9	
Male	3(23.08%)	5(38.46%)	5(38.46%)	13
Female	12(70.59%)	4(23.53%)	1(5.88%)	17

Figure 2. Genders and grades of students.

X\Y	15~20	9~14	< 9	
History	11(73.33%)	3(20%)	1(6.67%)	15
Physics	4(26.67%)	6(40%)	5(33.33%)	15

Figure 3. Subjects and grades of students.

Seeing the statistics from Figure 3, we can know that there are 14 students who learn history belonging to high- and middle-grade group and only one student is in the low-grade group, while 10 out of the 15 students who learn physics are in the high- and middle-grade group and the rest five students belong to low-grade group. Hence we can draw a conclusion that students who learn history can receive higher scores and have better performance than students who learn physics.

Discussion

As we can draw a conclusion from the results of questionnaire and follow-up interview, this paper found that most of the students who get high scores use the Chunking memory strategy consciously or unconsciously. During the interview, they agree that they prefer using chunks which are more convenient to keep in mind to memorize the individual English words. It will be easier to use and output fluent and complete sentence when students are speaking English. This discussion is similar and even same to the definition and concept of Chunking memory strategy. For students who get middle or low scores, some of them are used to remembering the English vocabulary in separate, which makes them spend more time to operate and form the sentence. As for non-technical factors, though others have the consciousness to utilize chunks and Chunking memory strategy, the anxiety and nerve while they speak English makes them behave badly and terribly. This mental problem cannot be solved with chunks and needs other solutions to deal with.

Former studies on chunks and Chunking memory strategy mainly focus on the changes and effects before and after using it among students, but in this paper, we want to figure out the influence of Chunking on improving English speaking skill among senior high school students who haven't particularly learnt and controlled this strategy before.

Though this paper tries to analyze the influence of Chunking on improving speaking skill among senior high school students through the questionnaire and interview, and receive surprising outcomes, the inadequate number of this questionnaire exists. Although this experiment finally achieved the expected results, due to my own limited ability and scientific level, the author only made a simple analysis based on the test results. Therefore, the results may not and cannot represent all the senior high school students. What's more, some selections in this questionnaire may be subjective, which leads to incorrectness of the results. Also, the questions in this questionnaire are not comprehensive and may not cover all the important questions. As for interview, six interviewees may not be enough for research. However, we can still get some information from this paper and it has some scientific value.

Conclusions

All in all, as we can draw a conclusion from the analysis above that, first of all, students who belong to high- and middle-grade groups have higher percentage to learn, accumulate, and practice chunks and are more willing to use chunks in reality. Most of them agree that Chunking plays an important part in speaking, especially in vocabulary. Also, chunks can benefit their oral fluency and accuracy. We hope that this paper can provide some useful data and information for others to know and a new perspective to study chunks and Chunking memory strategy.

At present, more and more researchers have recognized the great facilitating effect of chunks on English learning, and believe that the key to successful language learning lies in the mastery of a large number of chunks, and that the strategy of Chunking is likewise of great guidance and facilitation to high school English teaching. In teachers' daily teaching, we should pay attention to exploring the potential of chunks, guiding students to pay attention to chunks, strengthening the input, storage, and output of chunks, and using it as a guide to our daily teaching throughout the various stages of the language teaching process.

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Appendix

Questionnaires

Dear Students,

Hello! Thank you for your participation in this survey. This questionnaire is an anonymous survey designed to find out your opinions about the use of chunks in the process of learning spoken English, and the results of the survey are only used for scientific research purposes, so please feel free to fill in the survey!

Explanation of chunks: Chunks are units of information in short-term memory capacity. It refers to the processing of several individual stimuli into meaningful, larger units of information, i.e. the organization and recoding of stimuli.

Your gender: Male Female

Your high school subject: History Physics

Your score on the CELST is:

A. 15~20 B. 9~14 C. <9

Please make your choice of the following statements according to your current situation:

1 = "Disagree completely", 2 = "Disagree partially", 3 = "Not sure", 4 = "Agree partially", and 5 = "Agree completely"

(i) Understanding of Chunks

1. You have some understanding of chunks and the Chunking Memory Strategy.
2. You think speaking is one of the most difficult aspects of English learning.
3. Chunking is the process of combining a number of separate, fragmented points to form a new and meaningful set.
4. You don't know anything about chunks and the Chunking Memory Strategy.

(ii) Learning Chunks

5. You tend to memorize information in groups (phrases, sentence patterns, etc.) rather than in isolation.
6. You actively mark, record and accumulate chunks in your daily life.
7. You actively review and recite recorded chunks.
8. You actively use chunks to make sentences in your daily practice.

(iii) Application of Chunks

9. You actively and consciously use Chunking Memory Strategy in spoken dialogues.
10. You actively use chunks in spoken dialogues.
11. You can list topic-related chunks according to the topic of a conversation.
12. You can express yourself smoothly and correctly by using chunks in spoken dialogue.
13. You can use chunks to understand and analyze the attitude and intention of the other person in a spoken conversation.
14. You think that chunks play an important role in improving your English speaking skills.
15. You think that using the Chunking Memory Strategy improves fluency in spoken English.
16. You think that using the Chunking Memory Strategy can improve the accuracy of spoken English.
17. You think the use of Chunking Memory Strategy can enrich vocabulary.

(iv) Chunks Teaching

18. You think that schools don't pay enough attention to teaching speaking English.
19. You think teachers can adjust the current methods of teaching speaking (e.g., the Chunking method).
20. English teachers teach chunks in English spoken class.
21. English teachers will teach students how to use Chunking Memory Strategy.

Follow-up Interview

1. Do you prefer to use Chunking Memory Strategy and use this strategy in daily life?
2. If yes, why do you prefer to use Chunking Memory Strategy? If no, why do you not use this strategy?
3. How do you usually memorize English vocabulary?
4. What other factors do you think influence your English speaking performance most?
5. What is the most important aspect in do you think you need to improve?