

A Study of the Application of Lexical Chunks Approach to College English Listening Teaching

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Listening is an important input way of language learning, and is closely related to language learning. Now, listening is still a weakness for English learners in colleges. In recent years, many experts and scholars have explored the application of lexical chunks in teaching, trying to solve the problem of students' vocabulary acquisition. However, there are relatively few researches between lexical chunks and listening achievement. Based on the lexical chunks theory, the research finds that lexical chunks teaching can relieve students' anxiety in English listening, improve their English listening scores, and stimulate students' chunk consciousness.

Keywords: listening, lexical chunks, anxiety

Introduction

As an important input way of language, listening, to some extent, decides one's English level. As an important input way of language, listening, to some extent, decides one's English level. While listening comprehension is closely related to memory. Feng Yana (2013) pointed out that taking chunk as a basic unit can increase the volume of short-term memory and accelerate the process of listening comprehension. Besides, according to Lewis (1993), during the receptive and productive language processing, chunks can greatly improve the efficiency of language processing of learners. At present, there are many chunk studies, like corpus-based lexical chunk studies (Hu Yuanjiang et al.), cognition-based lexical chunk studies (Duan Shiping et al.), and SLA-based lexical chunk studies (Wang Juan et al.). Hu Yuanjiang (2015) investigated the structural features of spoken chunks of senior English majors based on the spoken corpus of native speakers and learners. Duan Shiping (2019), through the analysis and interpretation of relevant linguistic research, found that chunks have stepped out of the marginalization of the language system and risen to the core position. Wang Juan and Yang Yue (2014) found that multi-modal chunk-highlighting teaching of college English can promote learners' listening comprehension, and help to solve the vocabulary barrier in language learning, so as to guide college students to learn vocabulary effectively.

However, the research only concerning the effect of lexical chunks approach on college students' listening performance is relatively scant. Therefore, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Can lexical chunks approach relieve their anxiety to English listening?
2. What is the influence of lexical teaching on college students' English listening achievement?

Theoretical Basis

Anderson (1995, p. 379) divided the process of listening comprehension into three stages: “perception, analysis, and application”. The research has found that information in the perceptual storage stage remains very brief, and it only enters short-term memory when it receives attention. The information undergoes encoding before it is transferred to the long-term memory stage. Zeng Qingmin (2012, pp. 135-139) suggested that when learners possess certain phonologically stored language chunks, they can more readily retrieve these chunks from their minds during the process of listening comprehension. Proficient mastery of these chunks assists learners in surmounting challenges related to unfamiliar pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and expression in English natural speech patterns, thereby diminishing cognitive load in processing information and heightening efficiency in listening comprehension. To put it differently, chunks contribute to an enhanced speed of understanding in listening, alleviating the strain on short-term memory, enlarging its capacity, and aiding listeners in capturing the core points of listening materials. Experiments in cognitive psychology have also shown that information organized in chunks remains in memory for a longer duration compared to information that is dispersed and isolated.

The theory of chunking first appeared in American psychologist Miller, G. A.’s (1956) comments on “short-term memory”. He argued that chunking was the process in which the brain formed isolated words into larger units of meaning. Becker (1975) first put forward lexical phrases, namely, lexical pluralistic words of fixed or semi-fixed structure existing in traditional grammar and vocabulary. The concept of lexical chunk was finally put forward by Lewis (1993). Lewis (1997) proposed the “chunk-based approach”, arguing that chunk-based learning is the main unit of language learning, and chunk-based learning should be emphasized in second language learning.

In terms of classification of lexical chunks, different scholars have different views. Becher (1975), Lewis, (1997), and Nattinger and DeCarrico (2000) all gave the classification. However, the experiment adopts Nattinger and DeCarrico’s classification of lexical chunks. They classified the lexical chunk into four types: “poly words, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints, and sentence builders”. “Poly words” refer to fixed phrases composed of more than one word, such as “on the one hand”. “Phrase constraints” is what users can make partial replacements as needed. “Sentence builders” mean vocabulary combinations that provide a framework or quotation for the entire sentence.

Method

In this research, two classes from the university in Suzhou are randomly selected as experimental participants. The one is control class (CC) and the other is experiment class (EC). There are 59 students in each class. The experiment lasts for three months. The CC accepted traditional listening training while the EC accepted lexical chunks instruction in listening class.

Two questionnaires were given to students at the beginning and at the end of the experiment to observe whether lexical chunks approach can relieve their anxiety to English listening.

Two tests were conducted to observe the changes of students’ listening level before and after the experiment. Both tests are chosen from IELTS listening tests. In order to ensure the authenticity and validity of the experiment, pre-tests are conducted to prove that there is no obvious difference between CC and EC about their English listening competence. The data of both questionnaires and tests are collected and analyzed by XLSX.

Experimental Procedures and Main Findings

This research is mainly divided into three stages: pre-experiment stage, experimental stage, and post-experiment stage. In pre-experiment stage, Test 1 and Survey 1 are carried out. The purpose of Test 1 is to get the listening scores of the students in EC and CC, so as to prepare for the comparison in the later stage. The aim of the questionnaire survey is to understand students' anxiety about English listening in EC, and also to make a comparison with another survey conducted at the end of the experiment. The second stage is experimental stage, which would last for three months. During this stage, EC would be taught under the guidance of lexical chunks while CC would be taught with traditional listening instruction. In the end, Survey 2 would be given to EC in post-experiment stage to compare with the data in the Survey 1 so as to justify whether the situation of students' anxiety to English listening would be ameliorated under the guidance of lexical chunks. Moreover, Test 2 will be conducted to both class. The experimental procedures can be well illustrated by the following Table 1.

Table 1

Experimental Procedures

Pre-experiment stage	The experimental class	The control class
	Implementation of Test 1 and Survey 1	Implementation of Test 1
Experimental stage	The experimental class	The control class
	Implementation of lexical chunks approach	Implementation of traditional English listening instructions
Post-experiment stage	The experimental class	The control class
	Implementation of Survey 2 and Test 2	Implementation of Test 2

Pre-experiment Stage

Test 1 is given to both classes, with the time limit of 20 minutes. Students are required to finish the paper independently without any help of learning tools under the supervision of the teacher, which ensures the authenticity and validity of the test. After the papers are handed in, the test scores are collated. After sorting and analysis by excel, the average scores of the two classes are as follows (see Table 2).

Table 2

Average Score of Test 1

Class	EC	CC
Average score	7.12	7.19

Through the observation of the data, we can find that the average listening level of the two classes is not high, with an average score of seven, which also reflects from the side that listening is a weakness for students. However, since the listening level of the two classes is similar, the two classes can be used as experimental objects.

Survey 1 is conducted in EC to know about students' attitude and anxiety towards English listening. Questions 1-3 are about English listening learning attitude. Questions 4-10 are about students' English listening anxiety. Students are required to finish the survey within five minutes. Questionnaires are distributed to 59 students and 59 answer sheets are retrieved, among which six are invalid. In order to ensure the authenticity of the questionnaire survey, these six answer sheets will be deleted. The remaining questionnaires were collected and analyzed by Excel, and the data sorted out are shown in the following Table 3.

Table 3

The Results of Survey 1 in Experiment Class

Choice No.	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
1	16.9	69.5	13.6
2	1.7	64.4	33.9
3	0	32.2	67.8
4	11.9	76.2	11.9
5	20.3	64.4	15.3
6	30.5	62.7	6.8
7	32.2	44.1	23.7
8	25.4	45.8	28.8
9	61.0	35.6	3.4
10	40.7	44.1	15.2

Statistics indicate that most students are not much interested in listening. 83.1% of the students do not like to do English listening; students who may have negative emotions account for 66.1%; and a small number of people sometimes do other things in class. 88.1% of the students may have anxiety when doing listening exercise; 84.7% of the students felt anxious because they could not understand every word; 93.2% of the students felt anxious because they did not adapt to the speed of audio; students who feel nervous when they do not have enough time to think about what they have heard account for 96.6%; 84.8% of the students felt agitated or confused when listening to English and could not remember what they heard. It can be seen that most of the students have anxiety in the listening process, and the reason for their anxiety is that they focus too much on a single word, which will lead to missing the following content when recalling a certain word. In order to eliminate the anxiety of students, it is necessary to ensure that they can understand the content of the text, that is, students should be able to quickly and accurately relate the spoken information to the stored knowledge in the brain. According to Altenberg (1998), 80% of the discourse in human communication is realized by various language chunks. Chunk can save the time of language processing and make the extraction and use of language information accurate, idiomatic, and fluent. Here it can be hypothesized that lexical chunks approach can help students better understand what they heard and thus relieve their anxiety.

The experiment lasts for three months. Each class is given four class hours per week. In the beginning, students will be taught about the theory of the lexical chunks and the classification of the lexical chunks. Then, they will be given some listening contents to recognize the lexical chunks appearing in the passages. After they sort out the chunks they mentioned, the audios are repeatedly played to get familiar with them until bearing them in mind. In addition, after class, students are given some listening materials and audio files as assignments and are required to write down the unfamiliar lexical chunks. Because of the variety of listening topics, this experiment cannot cover all the topics. The test is mainly based on IELTS, so in the process of learning lexical chunks, there are more topics concerning life, work, and study. However, other topics are also involved, just a matter of frequency. Of course, students will not be informed of that, which also ensures the authenticity and validity of the experiment.

Experiment Stage

In this stage, the CC adopts traditional listening teaching, that is, the invited teacher will let students do listening exercises, and then help students find the answers in the text and proofread, while the pedagogical activities are carried out according to the designed lexical chunks instruction in the EC. The experiment lasted

for three months, with four class hours a week and a total of 48 class hours. Among them, eight class hours are used to introduce the theory of lexical chunks and the classification of lexical chunks, and then students are taught to distinguish the lexical chunks in eight class hours, which help students cultivate lexical chunks consciousness; the rest 32 periods are used to help students recite the lexical chunks appearing in varieties of topics and to ask them to practice repeatedly. Students are required to categorize the lexical chunks after every exercises. After sorting out lexical chunks, the teacher will play the audio repeatedly because students may pay more attention to the chunks they write down, which may help the students memorize them better. Gradually, these exercises will develop the students' chunk-awareness, and they will understand the text in chunks, rather than focusing on a single word.

Post-experiment Stage

After three months of listening instruction, Test 2 is conducted in both classes, with the time limit of 20 minutes. As same as Test 1, students are required to finish the paper independently without any help of learning tools under the supervision of the teacher, which ensures the authenticity and validity of the test. After the papers are handed in, the test scores are collated. After sorting and analysis by XLSX, the average scores of the two classes are as follows (see Table 4).

Table 4

Average Score of Test 2

Class	EC	CC
Average score	13.98	9.2

The Table 4 shows that the average score of EC is much higher than that of CC. It proves that lexical chunks approach is more effective than traditional listening teaching.

Survey 2 is conducted in EC to understand whether the students' attitudes and anxiety about English listening have been relieved. As same as the Survey 1, Questions 1-3 are about English listening learning attitude. Questions 4-10 are about students' English listening anxiety. Students are required to finish the survey within five minutes. Questionnaires are distributed to 59 students. 59 questionnaires are retrieved and analyzed by Excel. The data sorted out are shown in the following Table 5.

Table 5

The Results of Survey 2 in Experiment Class

Choice No.	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
1	44.1	44.1	11.8
2	5.1	37.3	57.6
3	0	16.9	83.1
4	8.4	45.8	45.8
5	6.8	39.0	54.2
6	16.9	27.1	56.0
7	37.3	45.8	16.9
8	23.7	39.0	37.3
9	23.7	35.6	40.7
10	15.3	33.9	50.8

Statistics indicate that the number of students interested in listening increased from 16.9% to 44.1%. Students who may have negative emotions decreased from 66.1% to 42.4%; now only 54.2% of the students may have anxiety when doing listening exercise, which reduced by 33.9%. 84.7% of the students who feel anxious because of not understanding every word account for 45.8, reduced by 38.9%; 44.0% of the students felt anxious because they did not adapt to the speed of audio; students who feel nervous when they do not have enough time to think about what they have heard account for 59.3%; 49.2% of the students felt agitated or confused when listening to English and could not remember what they heard. In brief, after three months of word block teaching, the students' attitude towards listening has been improved. Besides, students' anxiety has been reduced, though not completely eliminated. It is proved that lexical chunks approach can relieve students' listening anxiety.

Compared with Test 1, the average score of the EC in the second test increased by 6.9 points. Although the average score of the control class also improved, reaching 9.2 points, it was indeed much lower than that of the EC. This is enough to prove that the lexical chunks approach applied in this period is more effective than the traditional listening teaching. Therefore, lexical chunk instruction has positive influence on student's English listening achievement.

Conclusions

The teaching of lexical chunks in college English listening can well cultivate college students' lexical chunks consciousness. Students can also use lexical chunks in writing and other aspects of language output, which can also help students better improve their English competence. The experimental results provide some enlightenment for the teaching of college English listening. Firstly, teachers should strengthen the input and practice of word blocks to better store them in students' long-term memory. Secondly, teachers can design different chunks listening practice and teaching methods, so that students can build up lexical chunk awareness, increase learning interest, and relieve English listening anxiety. In conclusion, teachers should also change their teaching methods according to the students' situation.

However, there are still some limitations which need to be further studied. First of all, the participants in the experiment are limited. Only 118 students can not represent all the English learners in China. In other words, the research is a sample survey. In addition, the classifications of the lexical chunks are still not uniform. The thesis adopts Nattinger and DeCarrico's classification of lexical chunks, which does not mean that others categories are useless, or that this classification is more comprehensive. It is just easier for students to understand. Last but not least, the data collected should be analyzed more systematically and precisely by SPSS. In this article, only average scores are compared. Besides, students have subjective initiative, so the answers to the questionnaire may not be completely true. It is necessary to overcome these limitations to ensure the credibility and completeness of the research. At last, it is hoped that more scientific and professional teaching methods can be applied to English teaching in the future.

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