

A study on the fresher's chunk competence and vocabulary size

Yang Shiyan

Foreign languages college,
Civil Aviation Flight University of China,
Guanghan, 618300, China
Email: 550546861@qq.com

Abstract

The present survey is conducted to examine the fresher's chunk competence and vocabulary size. Furthermore, the writer tries to explore the correlation between chunk competence and language proficiency. As analyzed in the study, language learners' chunk competence is correlated to their language proficiency. However, the testees don't lay emphasis on the chunk learning in the process of acquiring vocabulary, which give some hints to vocabulary teaching in China.

Key words: chunk competence, vocabulary size, correlation, vocabulary teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Based on American linguistic theories which had been dominant throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, vocabulary has been neglected for decades with the grammar being the center of language teaching and learning. According to American structural linguists, the grammar should be the starting point of language learning, so emphasis in the past decades was put on grammatical and phonological structure. Although Chomsky who advocates generative linguistics brings about revolutionary changes in linguistic theory, the idea that the role of vocabulary is secondary to grammar is not thrown away. However, in recent years, more and more linguists, scholars, researchers and learners begin to pay more attention to vocabulary. Two quotations may well illustrate that important role of vocabulary has been fully recognized. "Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." (Wilkins, 1972:111). "The more one considers the matter, the more reasonable it seems to suppose that lexis is where we need to start from, the syntax needs to be put to the service of words and not the other way round" (Lewis, 1993:115).

The importance of vocabulary can also be seen from many research findings. For instance, Zimmermann (1997: 8) claims: “Native speakers can better understand ungrammatical utterances with accurate vocabulary than those with accurate grammar and inaccurate vocabulary.” Gass and Selinker (2001) point out that most errors are made up of lexical errors, which can be seen as the most serious and disruptive obstacles to communication by both learners and native speakers. Vocabulary knowledge has been found to have a close correlation with different language skills and comprehensive language proficiency.

Finally, language teachers and language learners all realize that learning a second language involves the learning of a great number of words. A number of researches concerning vocabulary teaching and learning have been conducted, among which researchers focus on different perspectives such as vocabulary size, the growth of lexicons, vocabulary learning strategies, Gui Sichun (1985) and Xi Zhongen (1998) investigate and analyze English major’s vocabulary size and point out that language competence is closely related to vocabulary size the learners obtain. More empirical studies have been carried out to explore the correlation between vocabulary size and language proficiency. Many scholars tend to identify the number of words average native speakers know or non-native speakers need to know (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996). Vocabulary learning strategies are also the hot topic among the various studies. (wang 1998; wu and wang1998). From these researches mentioned above, it is unfair to say that vocabulary hasn’t received adequate attention in recent years. In fact, researches on vocabulary dramatically increased no matter in terms of quantity or quality in the last few decades. The importance of vocabulary has been fully recognized.

Nevertheless vocabulary teaching and learning are still problem-haunted. As for English learners in college, they usually center on the breadth of vocabulary, that is, they are engaged in enlarging their vocabulary size, mainly focusing on remembering the meaning of single words. It is not surprising to see many graduates recite a vocabulary book day after day, especially when CET-4 or CET-6 is approaching. As for English teachers in college, vocabulary instruction is usually haphazard, with the instruction time devoted to presenting, explaining, and defining terms. Thus, another aspect of vocabulary learning---the depth of vocabulary remains neglected. What’s more, as an integral part of the depth of vocabulary knowledge, lexical chunks receive little attention, especially among English learners in China.

1.2. A brief introduction to lexical chunks

Though neglected in the past, lexical chunks, as one indicator of vocabulary depth, gain more and more attention in the research fields of linguistics and applied linguistics in recent decades. Many researchers (Hakuta, 1974; Wong-Fillmore, 1976; Peters, 1983; Willis, 1990; Lewis, 1993; Wray, 1999; Nattinger and Decarrico, 2000) find out that ready-made chunks are of vital importance in language learning and can promote language learners’ idiomaticity and fluency in second language acquisition. Among these researches, Michael Lewis’s *The Lexical Approach* in 1993 is one of the most influential works, which advocates that language is grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar. With the development of corpus linguistics, Yang finds that most natural utterances are completed by semi-fixed “chunks” (yangyuchen, 1999). Besides, studies on lexical chunks start to accumulate in large numbers in China; some investigating Chinese learners’ knowledge of lexical chunks (huangqiang, 2002; pujianzhong, 2003), some emphasizing the important role of lexical chunks in second language acquisition (changchenguang, 2004; pujianzhong and weinaixing, 2000), some exploring the correlation between lexical

chunks and language proficiency. However, compared with a lot of theoretical studies, empirical studies are in small numbers.

Considering the fact that the breadth of vocabulary knowledge has an equal importance as its depth does, this thesis sets out to investigate the freshers' chunk competence and at the same time explores the correlation between chunk competence and language proficiency. What's more, the author also attempts to examine whether the chunk learning is granted importance among the freshers in the process of vocabulary learning through the investigation of the relationship between vocabulary size and chunk competence.

2. Design of the research

2.1 Purpose and Significance

The present study is conducted to investigate the fresher's chunk competence and explore the correlation between chunk competence and language proficiency. At the same time, the author also tries to probe into the relationship between vocabulary size and chunk competence so as to find out whether the freshers attach importance to chunk learning or not.

The research is believed to help reveal the freshers' chunk competence. As we know, for language learners, what matters most is not the ability to have a good command of grammar, but the ability to use English idiomatically and fluently. There is growing evidence that lexical chunks, as an important component of vocabulary knowledge, are the key to idiomaticity and fluency (Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992). In the light of these, the author intends to carry out the study with such purpose.

2.2 Theoretical foundation

Researches on lexical chunks by many linguists and scholars provide theoretical foundation for this study.

In recent years, lexical chunks have aroused much attention at home and abroad. As early as 1983, Pawley and Syder addressed the issue of ESL students' quest for native-like selection and fluency, arguing that fluent and idiomatic control of the language "rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of sentence stems which are institutionalized or lexicalized" (1983). Studies in the field of psycholinguistics find that language is processed and acquired in chunks or groups of words, rather than on a word-by-word basis. Hill (1999) explains that most learners with "good vocabularies" have problems with fluency because their "collocational competence" (one part of lexical chunks) are limited, and that we should aim at increasing their collocational competence with the vocabulary they have already know. Some linguists and researchers advocate that chunks should be highlighted in language teaching and learning (Willis, 1990; Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992; Lewis, 1993).

The related theories prove the position which serves as the theoretical standpoint of the present study: Lexical chunks are of vital importance to language proficiency, which greatly contribute to idiomaticity and fluency. Learners with "good vocabularies" don't necessarily be equipped with good chunk competence.

2.3 Research questions

The objective of the study is to investigate the fresher's chunk competence and their vocabulary size. Moreover, the author attempts to know whether chunk learning is granted importance in the process of

vocabulary learning among them by the examination of the relationship between vocabulary size and chunk competence. Specifically speaking, the author intends to find answers for the following questions:

Question 1: What is the fresher's chunk competence like?

Question 2: Does the chunk competence have any correlation with their language proficiency?

Question 3: Do the fresher attach importance to chunk learning in the process of vocabulary learning?

Although some obvious answers can be made based on the people's experience and relevant knowledge, the author attempts to answer these questions with authentic data by means of investigation, which seems to be more convincing.

2.4 Subjects

The subjects in our survey are made up of the fresher from CAFUC, altogether 137 students in three classes. Among them, 42 are female and 95 are male. All the subjects are native speakers of Chinese. Before entering college, they have learned English for at least six years in junior and senior middle school.

2.5 Instruments

2.5.1 Test on vocabulary size

The vocabulary size test is selected from The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Nation 1990: 269-271). Five parts constitute the original measure: the 2000-word level, the 3,000-word level, the 5,000-word level, the university word level and the 10,000-word level. Six groups comprising six words and three definitions are included in each level. The testees need to choose three definitions to match three of the six words provided by writing the numbers of the words before the corresponding definitions. For example:

business
clock _____6___ part of a house
horse _____3___ animal with four legs
pencil ____4____ something used for writing
shoe
wall

A number of L2 researchers have actually adopted this test for their own researches (e.g. Fan Lin and Wang Qinghua 2002: 209-212). In this study, the items of the university word level have been used to test the freshers' vocabulary size.

2.5.2 Test on chunk competence

The chunk competence test is made up of two parts: 20 items of multiple choice which intend to test subjects' receptive knowledge of chunks and 10 items of translation to test their productive competence of chunks. Considering the limitation of time and resources, most of the testing items are chosen from Diao Lingling (2004), which is proved to be valid.

2.5.3 Scores of the college entrance examination

The third instrument is their English achievements in the college entrance examination, which is used as a measurement of the subjects' language proficiency. In China, it is regarded as a nation-wide and

comprehensive proficiency test with high reliability and validity. The scores used in the present study are obtained from the students.

2.6 Research procedures

The two tests, one vocabulary size test, the other chunk competence test, were handed out to three classes in the afternoon of December 15th, 2015. Before carrying out the chunk competence test, we explained the evaluation rule to the testees clearly. The tests lasted 60 minutes. Altogether 137 students took part in the survey and we collected 134 valid testing papers. 3 were excluded because the testees forgot to write down their names on testing papers, unable to find their English achievement in the college entrance examination.

2.7 Data analysis

All the data we collected are put into the computer for statistical analysis. SPSS20.0 (Statistics Package for the Social Science) is the tool to deal with all the statistics which involves several statistical procedures.

In the first place, descriptive statistics for chunk competence, college entrance examination and vocabulary size including mean, minimum, maximum and standard deviation are computed to prepare for the further analysis. Secondly, before calculating the correlation between chunk competence and language proficiency, and between vocabulary size and chunk competence, we conduct Tests of Normality to judge whether their respective scores are normally distributed, which decides the choice of calculating measures. Thirdly, two One-Sample T Tests are used to check the chunk competence and vocabulary size by means of which the author tries to have an overall understanding of the freshers' chunk ability and vocabulary ability. Fourthly, two correlational analyses can help reveal the relationship between chunk competence and language proficiency and vocabulary size.

3. Results and analysis

3.1 Descriptive data

In order to answer the three questions, we will first describe the data we get from the chunk competence test, vocabulary size test and college entrance examination. We collect 134 valid samples from the testees in the CAFUC. With the help of SPSS, we get the general descriptive statistical results.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistical results

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
College entrance examination	134	30.00	136.00	104.03	19.19
Chunk competence	134	20.00	74.00	54.93	9.09
Vocabulary size	134	32.00	94.00	68.35	11.84

The Table1 shows that the range is wide indicating that extreme case possibly exists in samples. In addition, the mean in chunk competence is pretty low. In order to have an overall idea of the testees' chunk competence, we set up the passing score as 60% of the total, the student won't pass unless he achieves 60 points for score of chunk competence. However, most of the students' performance is far from satisfactory. With the help of SPSS, we conduct One-Sample T Test to better explain this point.

Table 2 One-Sample T Test for chunk competence

Test Value= 60					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Chunk competence	134	54.93	9.09	6.454	P<0.01

The Table2 shows clearly a significant difference between the practical scores and theoretically assumed ones and indicates the practical scores are lower than the expected ones. That is to say, the testees' chunk competence as a whole is inadequate. This coincides with the proposition put forward by Pawley and Syder (1983) that "the formulaic sequences used by native speakers are not easy for learners to identify and master".

3.2 Correlation between chunk competence and college entrance examination

3.2.1 Correlation between chunk competence and college entrance examination

The second important issue we intend to examine in this study is the possible correlation between chunk competence and language proficiency. Since it is difficult for us to design a valid and reliable test paper to evaluate the testees' language proficiency, we choose CEE (College entrance examination) as an indicator of language proficiency. The reason for such choice is that CEE is a nationwide and authoritative examination with a high reliability and validity.

Table 3 The correlation between chunk competence and CEE

(Correlations)

		CEE	Chunk competence
CEE	Pearson Correlation	1	.572**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.011
	N	134	134
Chunk competence	Pearson Correlation	.572**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.
	N	134	134

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Table 3 proves that there exists a correlation between the two sets of scores. From the Table, we see the Pearson correlation coefficient p is .572, suggesting that the correlation between scores of chunk competence and CEE is moderately related. That is to say, students who have a good command of lexical chunks can achieve higher marks in CEE and achieve higher language proficiency.

3.2.2 Correlation between chunk competence and vocabulary size

To answer the last question, we first attempt to know whether the testees lay emphasis on the vocabulary acquisition. The following T test can better help us understand this. Similarly, we set up a theoretically assumed point and compare it with the practical ones.

Table 4 One-Sample T Test for vocabulary size

T test for vocabulary size (test value=60)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Vocabulary size	134	68.35	11.84	8.167	P<0.01

The T test in Table 4 clearly reflects that the testees' practical points in vocabulary size are higher than the theoretically assumed points, thus indicating that they have paid attention to the vocabulary learning.

With the intention to probe into the relationship between vocabulary size and chunk competence, we conduct another correlation analysis.

Table 5 The correlation between chunk competence and vocabulary size

(Correlations)

		Vocabulary size	Chunk competence
Vocabulary size	Pearson Correlation	1	.310
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.070
	N	134	134
Chunk competence	Pearson Correlation	.310	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.070	.
	N	134	134

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As we can see from the Table 5, the value of correlation coefficient between vocabulary size and chunk competence is .310, indicating that there is no significant correlation among them. In other words, we can not predict one's chunk competence through the examination of vocabulary size. In fact, this result gives us some information and further guarantees our former idea, i.e. students focus on the growth of vocabulary size-the breadth of vocabulary, neglecting the depth of vocabulary, especially the lexical chunks, while they are engaged in vocabulary learning.

4. Findings and implications

4.1 Major findings

In the survey, the author has examined the freshers' chunk competence and their vocabulary size by two tests. The major findings of the survey are listed as follows:

1) The correlation analysis between chunk competence and language proficiency reveals that they are positively related to each other. This can be verified by the tables we list in the former part, one of which shows that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient p is .572, suggesting the positive correlation. From this result, we can believe that students with better chunk competence tend to achieve better L2 proficiency. In other words, chunk competence is quite possibly a factor that causes the variance of L2 proficiency.

2) Most testees have an inadequate knowledge of lexical chunks. The results obtained from the One-Sample T Tests show that the testees' chunk competence are far from satisfactory, indicating that most students don't achieve the passing point we set. Besides, the students' poor performance can reflect that they ignore the acquisition of lexical chunks in their language learning process.

3) The second correlation analysis illuminates that there is no or weak correlation between chunk competence and vocabulary size, which means high scores in vocabulary don't necessarily lead to a good performance in chunk competence test. In fact, this is consistent with the former result drawn from the One-Sample T Tests. That is, the students usually neglect the chunk learning, even when they are engaged in expanding their vocabulary size.

4.2 Implications

Judging from the findings we got from the study, we know EFL/ESL students usually find it difficult to recognize and produce lexical chunks. Besides, they don't pay enough attention to the chunk learning in the process of vocabulary learning. Hence, a re-recognition of the lexical chunk is very important to both theoretical researches and pedagogical practices. In the light of the findings obtained from this investigation, this section attempts to provide some possible implications in terms of theory and practice.

4.2.1 Theoretical implications

The findings obtained from the study give positive evidence to the following views with regard to lexical chunks. Firstly, the correlation analysis indicates that language proficiency consists of the mastery of large amounts of complex lexical chunks, which confirms the idea that native speakers' linguistic competence has a large and significant phraseological component (Howarth, 1998). Secondly, that students with high marks in vocabulary size test still perform badly in chunk competence test reveals that there is an urgent need to attract learners' attention to lexical chunks. It accords with the idea that it is necessary for learners to master lexical chunks (Harmer&Rosier, 1991).

Theoretical implications can be drawn from the above: (1) the importance of chunks should be highlighted in language acquisition, which deviates from the traditional views of language learning in China. For decades, people have long regarded grammar as the most important factor in language acquisition because of people's blind worship of generative grammar's creative power. But the real fact demonstrated in this study is that neglecting chunks is bound to cause non-idiomaticity and inadequate language proficiency. Therefore, chunk competence should be granted the attention that it is due; (2) chunk learning should be

integrated with vocabulary learning. As exemplified by our analysis, learners tend to ignore the acquisition of chunks, even when they are busy enlarging their vocabulary size. Hence, apart from the breadth of vocabulary, the depth of vocabulary should also be the center of language learning.

4.2.2 Practical implications

Although theoretical clarification is important, there is an equally pressing need to put the theory into practice. First, language teachers and learners should change mindset in teaching and learning and adopt a brand new perspective towards lexical chunks. Furthermore, as is known to all, vocabulary knowledge involves various aspects such as frequency, pragmatic constraints, syntactic properties and semantic features apart from its pronunciation and spelling (Richards, 1989), so great effort should be made to change teachers and learners' traditional vocabulary acquisition. Previous studies and this research have shown that L2 learners' chunk using is not satisfactory which partly results from their ignorance of it. Therefore, chunk teaching and learning should be granted enough attention. In other words, the inherent connection among words and the important multi-word item like chunks should be introduced to language teaching and learning.

Second, it is suggested that the students' chunk knowledge should be strengthened through instructional practice. To be specific, teachers should spend more time helping learner develop their stocks of lexical chunks, and less time on grammatical structures. More importantly, vocabulary teaching methods and materials must be updated to make lexical chunks available and explicit to language learners. In addition, it is important for teachers to reflect on what kind of classroom activities can really help the student be aware of lexical chunks and promote the intake of them.

Bibliography

- Gass, S. & Selinker, L. 2001. *Second Language Acquisition (2ed.)*. Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Hakuta, K. 1974. Prefabricated patterns and the emergence of structure in second language acquisition. *Language Learning* 34: 287-97.
- Hazenberg, S. & Hulstijn, J. H. 1996. Defining a minimal receptive second-language vocabulary for nonnative university students: an empirical investigation. *Applied Linguistics*, 17 (2), 145-61.
- Harmer, J. and R. Rosier. 1991. *More than words*. London: Longman.
- Hill, J. 1999. Collocational competence. *ETP*, 3 (11), 55-78.
- Howarth, P. 1998. Phraseology and second language proficiency. *Applied Linguistics* 19, 1: 24-44.
- Michael Lewis. 1993. *The Lexical Approach: The state of ELF and the way forward*. Hove: Language Teaching Publication.
- Nation, P. 1990. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House.
- Nattinger & DeCarrico. 1992. *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nattinger, J.R. and J.S. DeCarrico. 2000. *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pawley, A. & Syder, F. 1983. Two puzzles for linguistic theory: nativelylike selection and nativelylike fluency. In J. Richard & R. Schmidt (eds.) *Language and Communication*. London: Longman. 191-225.
- Peters, A. 1983. *The Units of Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Richards, J.L.J. 1989. Lexical knowledge of the teaching of vocabulary, in Richards, J. *The Context of Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willis, J. D. 1990. *The Lexical syllabus*. London: Collis COBUILD..
- Wilkins, D.A. 1972. *Linguistics and Language Teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Wray, A. 1999. Formulaic language in learners and native speakers [J]. *Language Teaching*, (32), 213-231
- Wong-Fillmore, L. 1976. *The Second Time Around: Cognitive and Social Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University.
- Zimmerman, C.B. 1997. Historical trends in second language vocabulary instruction. In J. Coady&H. Thomas (Eds.), *second language vocabulary acquisition* (pp.5-19). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Changchenguang, 2004. The functions of formulaic language. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (2) : 7-10.
- Diaolinlin, 2004. A study of English majors' chunk competence. *Journal of PLA University of foreign languages* (4) : 35-38.
- Guishichun, 1985. A study of Chinese English majors' vocabulary size. *Modern Foreign Languages*. (1)
- Huangqiang, 2002. An Empirical study of collocation Acquisition by Advanced EFL/ESL students. *Journal of PLA University of foreign languages* (4) : 73-76.
- Pujianzhong, 2003. Colligation,collocation and chunk in ESL vocabulary teaching and learning. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (6): 438-445.
- Pujianzhong & Weinaixing, 2000. Vocabulary and grammar. *Journal of PLA University of foreign languages* (2) : 1-5.
- Wangwenyu, 1998. Notion, strategies and vocabulary memorization. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*. (2) .
- Wuxia & Wangqiang, 1998. Non-English majors' vocabulary memory strategies. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (1) .
- Xizhongen, 1998. A study of English majors' vocabulary development. *Foreign Language Education*. (2) .
- Yangyuchen, 1999, Chunks in Lexicon and their implications on English teaching. *Foreign Language World* (3) 24-27.