

An empirical study of L2 learners' use of lexical chunks and language production

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in language acquisition, especially to college learners. It is really a vital period for students to advance their English proficiency in college. In China, however, vocabulary teaching has been seen as peripheral to language acquisition, both theoretically and practically.

Traditionally, language has been defined as lexical grammar. It has been divided into two categories: vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary is regarded as the stock of fixed non-generative words. However, grammar is considered to be more fundamental and creative, and to consist of elements of the generative system of language. Therefore, many people consider that the focus of language teaching should be concentrated on grammatical competence. Although more and more attention has been paid to vocabulary teaching in English classes in China, most teachers remain accustomed to gluing on the acquisition of grammar. A Chinese educator Linlin Jia (2004:103) claims that EFL (English as a foreign language) learners in China are still far from expectations in their English skills after certain years of studies in traditional way of teaching.

Nowadays, researchers begin to pay more attention to lexis within language teaching. And teaching lexical chunks is becoming an increasingly prevalent methodology in vocabulary teaching. It represents an innovative method and a profound change in the way we see and analyse language. Many researchers have recognized the importance of lexical chunks, like Nattinger and DeCarrico, who put this kind of speech at the very center of language acquisition and regard it as basic to the creative rule-forming process. Lexical chunks are retrieved and processed as whole units, which may not only enhance the accuracy and fluency of the language, but also speed up language processing significantly. Although many linguists propose that lexical chunks can contribute to English proficiency, especially for EFL learners, few empirical researches have been taken to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' competence of lexical chunks and their English proficiency.

Writing serves as an indispensable part of language learning. Among the four basic skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing in English learning process—writing is the hardest for EFL learners to acquire. On the one hand, it involves a large amount of vocabulary; on the other hand, writers need to internalize what they have learnt and at the same time produce language fluently and accurately. It is much more complex and demanding than other language competence. Therefore learners' writing competence can reflect their English proficiency to some extent. This essay attempts to investigate the use of lexical chunks in an empirical way. It tries to probe into the possible relationship between L2 learners' competence of lexical chunks and their language production through analysing results from a multiple-choice chunk test and a writing test.

1.1 Aim

This study seeks to investigate whether second language learners' lexical chunks competence in vocabulary learning has any correlation with their language production. In addition, if the research shows that there does exist some relationship between these two competences, some pedagogical suggestions on using lexical chunks instruction in L2 learners' language acquisition will be brought forward.

1.2 Material

Two tests and an interview are involved in this study. The forms of the tests are multiple-choice chunk test and writing test. And the interview is composed of three questions. The materials of the two tests are carefully chosen from model test of CET-4. The reason for choosing the two tests is that the score of the multiple-choice test can be regarded as testees' using level of lexical chunks, and the score of the writing test can be regarded as the competence of testees' language production. Therefore, the two tests can represent the test takers' use of lexical chunks and their language production.

The participants of this study are forty non-English major sophomore students from a Chinese university. They are all native Chinese speakers, and have a similar background in terms of

learning English. Before this experiment, all of them have learned English for six years in elementary school and high school. The two classes are randomly selected from different departments: one majors in computer information management, and the other major is law. Among them, there are 22 boys and 18 girls, and their age ranges from 20-22. The participants receive no information of being experimented on purpose, so the reliability of the experiment can be mostly guaranteed.

Choosing college students as subjects of this study has several reasons:

- 1) English study is very important to college students, since non-English majors have to take part in a nationwide standard English proficiency test—CET-4 (College English Test-Band Four) at the end of the second year. In addition, college is a critical period for the students to advance their English proficiency. Therefore, if there are some connections between lexical chunks competence and English proficiency, college teachers can add lexical chunks instruction into their teaching strategies, and assist the students in improving their English proficiency.
- 2) An assistant is needed to help me finish the experiment. My friend A is an English teacher in a Chinese university, so it is convenient for me to conduct this study with the help of my friend. In order to ensure the accuracy of the experiment, the detailed information about the experiment was sent to her by means of Email. At the same time, she was asked to inform me of the results of the tests upon completing the experiment.

1.3 Method

- Test 1: Multiple-choice chunk test (See Appendix A)

There are 30 carefully selected items involved in this test. The items are mainly focused on lexical chunks frequently used. The criterion of the scoring is that each option that is correctly chosen will be rewarded one point. The total mark is 30, which will be divided into five ranks: A (30-27), B (26-24), C (23-21), D (20-18), and F (17-0).

The multiple-choice chunk test should be finished within 20 minutes in the classroom. Meanwhile, testees are required to choose the ONE answer that best completes the sentence. Then they mark the corresponding letter on the Answer Sheet with a single line through the centre. Following is an example of the multiple-choice chunk test:

After working all day, he was so tired that he was in no _____ to go to the party with us.

A) taste B) mood C) sense D) emotion

● Test 2: Writing test (See Appendix C)

In the writing test, the students are required to write 100-120 words in the classroom within 30 minutes. They are not permitted to bring any reference books, including dictionaries. As to the scoring of the writing, two experienced teachers are invited to evaluate these writings according to the criteria of CET-4. The grades are based on the content and language, and the total score of the writing test is 100, which is divided into five ranks, A (100-90), B (89-80), C (79-70), D (69-60) and F (59-0). In order to make sure of the reliability of the marks, the final mark of each composition is based on discrepancies in scores awarded by the two scorers. If there are small discrepancies, the two scores can be averaged. If there are large discrepancies, the two scorers have to discuss together, then give a fair and valid score finally. In addition, in order to have a detailed analysis of the results of the tests, the usages of lexical chunks in the compositions are checked.

The topic of the writing test is *Campus Certificate Craze*. Two points are taken into consideration for the reason of choosing of this topic: on the one hand, the topic is chosen from the writing task of model test of CET-4, which is appropriate to the students' English level; on the other hand, this topic has a close relationship with the students' life, thus information and arguments are provided.

After the tests, the results of the two tests will be analysed, and the relationship between L2 learners' using level of lexical chunks and their language production will be investigated.

● Interview (See Appendix D)

Ten testees are involved in the interview. Five of them are testees who get an A or B in the writing test, and the other five are testees who get an F in the writing test. The interview is conducted with the help of MSN—a popular way for people to communicate on the computer. The testees' answers are collected in order to find out their English learning situations and their attitudes towards lexical chunks.

The questions of the interview are listed below:

- 1) What problems do you usually meet in your English writing?
- 2) Do you deliberately memorize lexical phrases like proverbs, sentences patterns and so on in the English learning process?
- 3) Do you think it is necessary to teach knowledge of lexical chunks in class?

2. Previous work

For many years, it has been common for teachers to regard grammar as the vital point in their language classes. The learning of a language means the grasp of all the grammatical rules of the language. However, although the grammatical rules cannot be neglected, the goal of language teaching is not just to teach the abstract rules. What is most important is to make the students use these rules in language comprehension and production. Later, communicative competence has gained considerable interest in language acquisition, which focuses more on rules of appropriate use rather than rules of grammar.

However, Widdowson (1989:131-132) points out that there are shortcomings in this approach as well. He argues that the grammatical approach accounts for one aspect of competence by focusing on achievement of rules of grammar at the expense of using the language appropriately. But the communicative approach, which focuses on using language appropriately can lead to a lack of necessary knowledge and of the ability to compose and decompose sentences with reference to it. Recent studies of language acquisition found a new

way, which can provide some sort of middle ground since it neglects neither, and that is the lexical approach.

Richards and Rodgers state in *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* that “a lexical approach in language teaching holds that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching, but lexis, that is words and word combinations” (Richard & Rodger 2001:132). There are many implications in this statement, for example, the fact that only a small part of spoken sentences are entirely novel creations, and that lexical chunks form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation. It then follows that lexical chunks are quite pervasive in language and that chunks play a central role in language teaching and acquisition.

2.1 The definition of lexical chunks

Many attempts have been made to clarify the concept of lexical chunks, but there is no widely accepted definition of it. Weinert (1995:182) claims that it is difficult to define lexical chunks although researchers have basically the same concept in mind.

Lexical chunks (Lewis 1993) have been explained in many ways: They may be called “prefabricated patterns” (Hakuta 1976), “lexicalized stems” (Pawley & Syder 1983), “speech formulae” (Peters 1983), “lexical phrases” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992), “ready made (complex) units” (Cowie 1992), etc. That there are many terms for this language phenomenon, shows both the significance and the complexity of this linguistic area.

Among all of the definitions, Nattinger & DeCarrico’s and Wray’s definitions of this linguistic phenomenon are the most prestigious. In *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:1) label the lexical chunks as lexical phrases. They describe lexical phrases as ‘chunks’ of language of varying length, and each is associated with a particular discourse function. The two researchers also point out that they are “multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more

idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:1). According to this definition, lexical phrases have not only syntactic structure, but also functional meanings, such as greeting (*how do you do*), expressing summary (*in short* or *above all*), and expressing relationships among ideas or things (*not only_, but also_*), which is the main difference from other conventionalized or frozen forms, such as idioms or clichés.

On the other hand, Wray’s definition of lexical chunks is:

A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning 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. (Wray 2000:465)

This definition expresses the basic characteristic of the lexical chunks, that is, fixed or semi-fixed lexical phrases, which can be stored and retrieved automatically as a whole unit in the process of language acquisition. Learners do not have to analyse and focus on the individual words of the phrases, but should pay more attention to the whole chunks. This can enhance both the fluency and efficiency of the language production.

The connotation of lexical chunks in this essay is based on the combination of the two definitions mentioned above, that is, lexical chunks are fixed or semi-fixed frequently used lexical phrases with functional meanings, which are stored and produced automatically as whole units in the process of language acquisition.

2.2 Classifications of lexical chunks

As mentioned above, there are many definitions of lexical chunks, and the same problem can be seen in the classification of lexical chunks. There is no fixed classification of chunks in the existing linguistic field. Many linguists bring forward their own criteria from different perspectives. Among them, the classifications presented by Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) and Lewis (1993) are recognized as more widely accepted than others.

The classifications given by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:37-44) are primarily based on structural criteria.

Table 1. Nattinger and DeCarrico's classification of lexical chunks

Type of lexical chunks	Examples
<p>Poly words: short, fixed lexical phrases with no variability, and they are associated with a wide variety of functions.</p>	<p>idioms: kick the bucket topic shifter: by the way summarizer: all in all, above all</p>
<p>Institutional expression: lexical phrases of sentence length, and allowing little variability. They provide the framework for particular social conversation.</p>	<p>leaving: I'm afraid I have to be going now accepting suggestions: that's a good idea greeting: how do you do, long time no see inviting: would you like to ...?</p>
<p>Sentence builders: lexical phrases that provide the framework for whole sentences, containing slots for parameters or arguments for the expression of entire ideas, and allowing considerable variation</p>	<p>adding: not only..., but also... comparator: the ...er the ...er suggesting: my point is that... topic marker: let me start by/with...</p>
<p>Phrasal constraints: short to medium length phrases, allowing variation of lexical and phrasal categories, and associated with many functions</p>	<p>timing: a...ago apologizing: sorry about... partings: see you then/see you later relator: __as well as__</p>

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:45) also state that although institutionalized expressions may have sentence length, they share some characteristics with polywords in that both of them are all relatively short and simple. However, compared with these two types of lexical phrases, sentence builders and phrasal constraints are more complicated since both of them contains slots.

On the other hand, Michael Lewis (1993:92-95) classifies the lexical chunks into four different basic types. They are polywords, collocations, institutionalized utterances and sentence frames and heads.

Table 2. Lewis' typology of lexical chunks

Types of lexical chunks	Examples
<p>Polywords: extension of words, which is composed of more than one word. And it is often considered to be the essential vocabulary for learners to acquire.</p>	<p>as soon as, on the one hand, talk about, after all, grow up and so on</p>
<p>Collocation: refers to pairs of words that frequently co-occur with each other. These frequent associations merge into habitual connection and sometimes they are in a fixed order.</p>	<p>fixed order: knife and fork, bread and butter verb+noun: play the basketball, shake hands, catch a cold adjective+noun: bright red, splendid future</p>
<p>Institutionalized utterances: Chunks that are called whole units and conventionalized in the language. They tend to express pragmatic rather than referential meaning. The chunks may be full sentences, usable with no variation but always with instantly identifiable pragmatic meaning.</p>	<p>accepting: I'd be delighted to offering: can I give you a hand supposing: If I were you...</p>
<p>Sentence frames and heads: serve as the framework builder of the whole sentences.</p>	<p>frames and heads: It is suggested that..., The fact is..., My point is that... composition frames: This paper concentrates on..., firstly, secondly..., finally...</p>

Lewis (1993:95) points out that among the four basic types, the first two categories are concerned mainly with referential meaning, and the latter two with pragmatic meaning. The two most important classifications are collocations and institutionalized expressions. The former one is message-orientated, and the latter one is pragmatic in character.

Since the classification of lexical chunks presented by Nattinger & DeCarrico and Michael Lewis have overlapping and complementing parts, the classification criteria of lexical chunks in this research is a combination of the two classifications that are mentioned above, which can be summarized as follows:

- Polywords--fixed short phrases with no variability
- Collocations—pairs or groups of words that frequently co-occur in a natural text (verb plus noun, noun plus adjective, verb plus adverb/adjective, adverb plus adjective, etc.)
- Institutionalized expressions—mostly with no variability and stand as separate utterances with pragmatic functions
- Phrasal constrains—short and relatively fixed lexical phrases with slots that permit some variation
- Sentence heads or frames/sentence builders—lexical chunks providing the framework of the sentences and containing slots for parameters or arguments for the expression of entire ideas.

From the classifications listed above, it can be concluded that there is still no fixed standard for classification of lexical chunks, and researchers set up their own criteria for their own research aims. However, when we use these criteria, we must be aware that all of these lexical chunks range between two extremes from absolutely fixed to highly free. Therefore the categorization is fuzzily edged, and sometimes it is quite difficult to make specific boundaries between these types.

2.3 Functions of lexical chunks

Nyssonen (1999:160) claims that “communicative competence is a highly complex ability. It includes grammatical accuracy, intelligibility and acceptability, contextual appropriateness and fluency”. Previous studies show that lexical chunks are helpful to L2 learning, because chunks contribute to the aspect of language fluency, accuracy, creativeness and cohesion to a large extent. Meanwhile, lexical chunks increase learners’ motivation greatly. Therefore, exploring the functions of lexical chunks is pedagogically useful. On the one hand, it shows the importance of lexical chunks in L2 learners’ written and spoken language; on the other hand, it also shows the orientation of lexical chunks applied in L2 teaching process.

2.3.1 Promoting language fluency

In an early influential paper on lexical chunks, Pawley and Syder (1983:191) refer to “native-like fluency” as the ability “native speakers have to produce long strings of speech which exceed their capacity for encoding and decoding speech. It relates to language production and is the ability to link units of language with facility”. Lewis (1997:15) also points out that “fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items”. It implies that lexical chunks provide an easily retrievable frame for language production, and thus enhance the fluency of the language production.

“Native-like fluency” comes from highlighting the puzzle that native-speakers are able to produce language seemingly beyond their cognitive limitations. Pawley and Syder (1983:192-194) suggest that speakers are not able to compose more than about 8-10 words at a time. But native speakers can fluently say multi-clause utterances. For example, *It seems that it's impossible to predict what will happen next; It is wise to insure your property against storm damage.* Native-speakers can say these sentences without hesitation. The sentences are composed of fixed or semi-fixed phrases like *it seems that...*, *it's impossible...*, *what will happen next*, *it is wise to...*, *insure (your) property* and *storm damage*, which are stored as wholes and are frequently used. As a result, they can be easily called up and used without the need to compose them through word selection and grammatical rules, that is to say, using lexical chunks may simplify the learners' language processing significantly.

Nattinger and DeCarrico explain that:

It is our ability to use lexical phrases, in other words, that helps us speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantage of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and hearers) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it focused narrowly on individual words as they are produced (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992: 32).

Through stringing lexical chunks together, speakers are able to produce stretches of fluent language. Because the use of lexical chunks lessens the load of language processing, it enables speakers to employ regular, patterned segments of discourse without undue hesitation

and disfluency. At the same time, it enables learners to concentrate more on the content of the language. So it can be concluded that lexical chunks can promote language fluency to a large extent.

2.3.2 Enhancing language accuracy

Lewis (1993:87) points out that a large proportion of languages consist of meaningful chunks, which can be found in the utterances of native speakers who employ a large number of pre-assembled chunks to produce fluency and accuracy. Therefore, to master a language, learners must know not only its individual words, but also the ways to piece them together. Pawley and Syder (1983:193) argue that one of the most difficult tasks for even the most proficient non-native speaker is learn to select that subset of utterances that are customarily used by native speakers. And they define the term “native-like selection” as “the ability of the native speaker to convey his meaning by an expression that in not only grammatical but also native-like” (Pawley & Syder 1983:193). Thus to acquire the ability of native-like selection, learners should know how to select accurate and idiomatic words and convey their ideas as native speakers.

In order to achieve accuracy, one must store a large amount of lexical chunks. Pawley and Syder propose that lexical chunks “form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation [...] Coming ready-made, [they] need little encoding work” (Pawley & Syder 1983:13). It means that if learners start from the ready-made chunks that compose a large number of the native speakers’ language, the accuracy of languages can be ensured.

2.3.3 Facilitating creative language production

Nattinger and DeCarrico state that “the balance of routine and creativity in language is an empirical question which has long been neglected, and only recently have researchers begun to explore this issue carefully” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:35). It seems as if more and

more attention has been paid to the use of lexical chunks, not only in the field of lexical memorization and language fluency, but also in the field of creative language production.

Lexical chunks do not always have to be used as invariable wholes, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints and sentence builders are all semi-fixed. They can also be used as ready-made basic forms upon which to build language. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:24) refer to Hakuta (1974) who describes lexical chunks as segments of sentences which operate in conjunction with a moveable component, such as the insertion of a noun phrase or a verb phrase. He also suggests that these chunks are not isolated or incidental to the creative rule-forming process, but, in fact, play a role in its development. Hakuta's (1974) view of the importance of routines and patterns for creative language production is affirmed by Lily Wong-Fillmore. Like Hakuta, Wong-Fillmore (1976) believes that "routines and patterns learnt in the language acquisition process evolve directly into creative language" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:25). From this point of view, it can be concluded that most of the time, lexical chunks are not fixed, but have several flexible components. It seems that lexical chunks are the raw data for later segmentation and analysis in developing the rules of syntax.

Pawley and Syder (1983:97) firmly believe that lexical chunks serve as building blocks of language production and provide existing models for novelty and creation. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:25) also argue that simple phrases that allow a considerable amount of lexical variation, may be the most powerful pattern generators. If the syntactic pattern is simple and it allows flexibility and variations, a steady growth in creative language production will be ensured. In order to illustrate their statement, Nattingerr and DeCarrico provide two examples. One is that children may initially use *want go* as a memorized phrase in certain situations. After they become aware of similar phrases like *want play* and *want eat* in other situations, they may begin to analyze these phrases as a pattern with a moveable component, *want+V*, they may realize that they can substitute V with any movement in different situations (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:25). The other example is that the sentence *I'm not sure but I think* is one of the expanded forms of the lexical phrase *I'm sure*. The basic

form *I'm sure* can be modified to allow various versions, with parentheses indicating optional slots: *I'm (not) (absolutely/pretty) sure/positive/certain (but I think) (that) X* (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:26).

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:49) state that the sentence builder category may consist of only a very limited number of basic lexical phrase frames, but various fillers in the slots may account for several variations of the frames, in other words, produce various creations. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:51-52) use Searle's (1975) examples of requests and offers to demonstrate their point of view. Among the forms that function as requests, Searle lists the following questions:

Could you pass the salt?

Can you pass the salt?

Can you reach the salt?

Are you able to reach the book on the top shelf?

Will you quit making that awful racket?

Seen from the perspective of lexical chunks, however, the two sentences have only one basic form:

Modal + you + VP?

with the variations accounted for by the different fillers used in the modal and verb slots.

Other question forms listed for requests include:

Would you mind not making so much noise?

Would you kindly get off my foot?

Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?

The three sentences mentioned above are also simply variations of the same basic lexical frame. The variations show that the frame is somewhat more flexible and various than we have indicated so far. The basic frame, 'Modal + you + VP?' can be modified to allow for versions like these, with parentheses indicating optional slots:

Modal + you (mind/kindly/be willing to) + VP?

As can be seen, a basic form can have many variations. By way of substituting slots, basic lexical frames are used and initialized by learners. By memorizing lexical phrase frame like ‘Modal + you + VP?’, learners have the possibility of easily using them in production and gradually achieving the ability of making changes to create more complex and creative structures.

Therefore, when learners become more advanced, it is possible for them to generate increasingly more complex and difficult phrases in various situations. With the basic pattern available from a lexical chunk, it would seem relatively easy to substitute flexible elements in different contexts. From this point of view, it can be recognized that lexical chunks play an important role in language creation.

2.3.4 Guiding language production

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:60) propose that lexical phrases are “the primary markers which signal the direction of discourse, whether spoken or written”. It implies that lexical chunks serve as discourse devices, which connect the meaning and structure of the discourse. Meanwhile, lexical chunks are able to play the role of guiding the overall language production. For instance, whether the information to follow is in contrast to, is in addition to, or is an example of preceding information.

Logical connectors:	<i>as a result (of X); nevertheless; because (of) X; in spite of X</i>
Temporal connectors:	<i>the day/week/month/year before/ after ___; and then; after X then/ the next is Y</i>
Spatial connectors:	<i>around here; over there; at the corner</i>
Fluency devices:	<i>you know; it seems (to me) that X; I think that X; by and large; at any rate; if you see what I mean; and so on; so to speak; as a matter fact</i>

Exemplifiers:	<i>in other words; it's like X; for example; to give you an example</i>
Relators:	<i>the (other) thing X is Y; X has (a lot) doesn't have (much) to do with Y; not only X, but also Y</i>
Qualifiers:	<i>it depends on X; the catch is X; it's only in X that Y</i>
Evaluators:	<i>as far as I know/can tell; There's no doubt that X; I'm (not) absolute sure/positive/certain (but)___; at least; at all</i>
Summarizers:	<i>to make a long story short; my point (here) is that X;</i>

(Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:64-65)

Based on these lexical chunks, learners may become capable and successful in language production, such as, when the discourse calls for an evaluator, learners may use *as far as I* or *there's no doubt that* to make their statement more cohesive, in addition, lexical chunks signal the direction of language production, which makes the language more comprehensible. Generally speaking, appropriate chunk using may help to guide the language production and enhance effective understanding.

2.3.5 Increasing learners' motivation

Motivation is one of the most powerful influences on learning a language. Lightbown and Spada (2006:57) refer to Gardner who claims that attitude and motivation are related to success in second language acquisition. Previous research shows that lexical chunks are a good way to ease frustration and motivate learning.

In *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, Nattinger & DeCarrico state:

lexical chunks allow for expressions that learners are yet unable to construct creatively, simply because they are stored and retrieved as whole chunks, a fact which should ease frustration and at the same time promote motivation...(Natting &

DeCarrico 1992:114).

Learners always feel pressure to produce more than they can, and they may become depressed when they are not able to express what they wish or when they are not able to construct creatively (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:114). Lexical chunks would allow the expressions that they are yet unable to construct creatively from rules, simply because these chunks can be retrieved as wholes when the situation calls for them.

Hakuta (1976:333) proposes that lexical chunks enable learners to express functional meanings that they are not yet able to construct from their linguistic system. He further notes that if learners always have to wait until they acquire the con-structural rules for forming an utterance before using it, then they may become frustrated and run into serious motivational difficulties in learning the language, for the functions that can be expressed (especially in the initial stages of learning) are severely limited. Moreover Hakuta (1976:334) observes that the use of lexical chunks provides the L2 learner a head start in terms of acquired structure, given that lexical chunks might help the learner at an early stage of L2 development use and produce a variety of functions. It is important that the learners can express a wide range of functions from the very beginning, because it may enhance the learners' confidence and interest in acquiring the language.

2.4. Lexical chunks and L2 learners' language proficiency

Many researchers have made empirical attempts concerning lexical chunks and L2 learners. Cowie and Howarth (1996a) compare NS (native speaker) and NNS (non-native speaker) writing, though, without controlling the language background of the L2 writers. In order to prove the hypothesis that there might be a measurable overlap in collocational use between less proficient NS and more advanced NNS writers, they concentrate on the collocations displayed in the academic essays of relatively advanced NNS writers and NS undergraduates. Through comparison, they find that the overlap indeed exists, in terms of the proportion of collocations used of a given grammatical pattern (V. + N.). Therefore, they come to the

conclusion that lexical chunks are a significant component of non-native speakers' language proficiency.

However, Granger (1998:151) probes into non-native speakers' academic essays and claims that "learners use fewer lexical chunks than their native-speaker counterparts, and they have less sensitivity to the collocational relationships". It turns out that lower and intermediate learners grasp and use much fewer lexical chunks than native speakers.

From the previous researches, it can be concluded that lexical chunks competence is of great significance to L2 learners' language proficiency. The more advanced the L2 learners are, the more competent they are likely to be in identifying and using lexical chunks and vice versa.

2.5 Application of lexical chunks instruction to L2 teaching

Among all the teaching approaches that apply lexical chunks to L2 teaching, Lewis' approach is the most famous and influential. Lewis may be called the leading revolutionary against the traditional way of English teaching. He advances that lexical chunks play a central role in language acquisition and teaching, and he has written two books *Lexical Approach* and *Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice*, about how to apply lexical chunks to language teaching. As a novel theory to language teaching, the lexical approach has received increasing attention in recent years, because of its potential contribution to language pedagogy.

Lewis (1993:95) regards lexis as the basis of language rather than grammar or vocabulary. Different from vocabulary which is understood as a stock of individual words with fixed meanings, lexis includes not only the single words but also the frequently used word combinations that we store in our mental lexicon. Native speakers are prone to use much of the same language over and over again rather than starting from scratch each time they speak or write. Therefore proponents of the lexical approach argue that a large proportion of language is composed of meaningful lexical phrases that, when combined, produce coherent and idiomatic texts (Pawley & Syder 1983:208). The fundamental principle of the lexical

approach is “language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar” (Lewis 1993:89). It implies that lexis is the core or heart of language while grammar plays a subservient role. In other words, lexical chunks offer far more language generative power than grammatical structures. The lexical approach concentrates on developing learners’ proficiency through lexical chunks. As a result, teachers should focus on fixed or semi-fixed expressions that occur frequently in the language rather than originally created sentences.

In the lexical approach, Lewis suggests that “pedagogical chunking should be a frequent classroom activity, as students need to develop awareness of language to which they are exposed and gradually develop ways, not of assembling parts into wholes, but of identifying constituent bits within the whole” (Lewis 1993:195). It means that the primary purpose of the teaching activities is to raise learners’ awareness of lexical chunks, rather than teaching in a high-anxiety learning circumstance.

Lewis (1997:60-62) introduces some activities which are used to develop learners' knowledge and awareness of lexical chains:

- 1) Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language.
- 2) First and second language comparisons and translation--carried out chunk-for-chunk, rather than word-for-word--aimed at raising language awareness.
- 3) Repetition and recycling of activities, such as summarizing a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep words and expressions that have been learned active.
- 4) Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context.
- 5) Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.
- 6) Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.
- 7) Working with language corpuses created by the teacher for use in the classroom or accessible on the Internet.

In addition, Lewis (1997:92-94) proposes some principles on the classroom organization of lexis:

- 1) Topic. It means that teachers must remain constantly aware of the different types of lexical chunks, which may be organized within a topic framework. Being associated with a certain context, learners are able to recall these chunks easily in similar situations. For example, when teachers refer to chunks like *bright future*, they should organize the lexical chunks within the topic relating to future, and refer to other chunks like *work hard*, *provide opportunities*, *profound knowledge* and so on.
- 2) Collocation. It forms a central feature of a lexical view of language and noticing collocations is a central pedagogical activity.
- 3) Notion. It is used to mean a synoptic description of an event, which has psychological unity, for instance, particular words or phrases may be used when comparing (like *by contrast*), greeting (like *how do you do/how are you*) or relating (like *on the one hand...*, *on the other hand...*).
- 4) Metaphor. It is one of the most useful ways of identifying lexical chunks in lexis. Such as *raining cats and dogs*, whose meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of individual parts.
- 5) Phonological chunking. That is, teachers had better take advantage of the intonation of formulaic speech for it is easier to remember a tune than a random sequence of notes from psychological view.
- 6) Keywords. This principle emphasizes the great importance of the most common words of the language, for example, *take, do, make, get*, etc.

Generally speaking, implementing the lexical approach by Lewis in the classroom does not lead to radical methodological changes. Rather, it involves a change in the teacher's mindset and brings some useful suggestions on English teaching. The most important point is that the language activities consistent with a lexical approach raise learners' awareness of the lexical nature of the language.

3. Analysis and discussion

This section concentrates on the analysis and discussion of the results of the two tests and testees' answers to the interview. It is divided into five parts: the first part makes a general survey of the tested college English learners' competence of using lexical chunks and their language production. In the second part, through two comparisons, the relationship between lexical chunks and language production will be carefully analysed and discussed. The third part deals with the limitation of the two tests. The fourth part comments on the testees' answers to the interview, and the last part brings forward some pedagogical suggestions on English teaching.

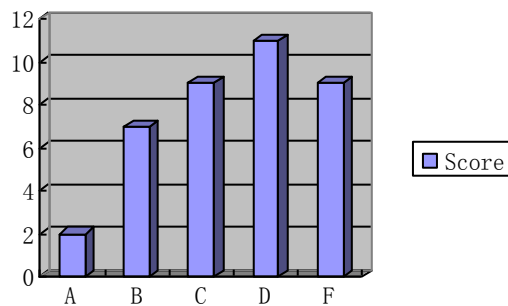
3.1 General view of the two tests

This part will make a general survey of the testees' language proficiency. After the results are handed in, 38 valid test results are chosen from the total of 40. The other 2 test results are excluded because the testees do not follow the requirements of the writing test. Therefore, 38 testees' testing results will be analysed in this part.

3.1.1 Multiple-choice chunk test

The total score of the multiple-choice chunk test is 30. In order to have a detailed and clear analysis of the results of this test, the final scores are divided into five ranks, that is A (30-27), B (26-24), C (23-21), D (20-18) and F (17-0). The results of the test are listed as follows:

Figure 1: Distribution of the multiple-choice chunk test score



In Figure 1, the x-axis indicates testees' scores of the multiple-choice chunk test, and the y-axis indicates the number of testees. As can be seen from this figure, the testees who get A or B only constitute 23.7% of the total number. About 52.6% testees get C or D, and 23.7% testees get F.

The result of the multiple-choice chunk test shows the following problems of college English learners' use of lexical chunks:

- 1) Too many test takers get C, D and F in the multiple-choice test. In other words, many testees' scores converge on the section of low and intermediate level, while fewer score on the section of high score (A or B), which shows the testees' weak ability of using lexical chunks.
- 2) Only on a small part of all the multiple-choice questions does a majority choose the same right answers. It seems that lexical chunks frequently used by native speakers are not easy for the L2 learners to identify and master.
- 3) Some lexical chunks are recognized by most testees. It means that some commonly used lexical chunks have been widely accepted by these college English learners. However, in most cases, testees prefer some grammatically correct, but not appropriate or idiomatic lexical chunks in the test.

For example,

They are twins and look very _____.

- A) same B) alike C) identical D) like

In this case, most students prefer *look very identical* rather than *look very alike*.

He is quite sure that it's _____ impossible for him to fulfill the task within two days.

A) absolutely B) exclusively C) fully D) roughly

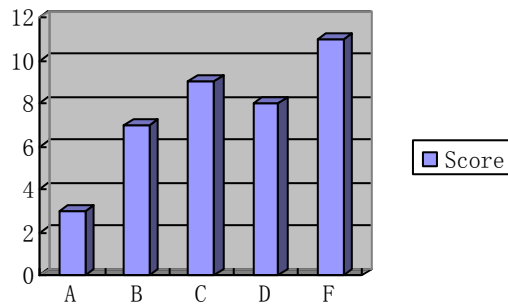
In this case, many testees prefer *it is fully impossible...or it is roughly impossible...* rather than *it is absolutely impossible....*

The result of the multiple-choice chunk test indicates that students' use of lexical chunks is not good enough. More frequently, testees have a preference for normative lexical chunks instead of idiomatic or ungrammatical lexical chunks in the test. For example, most students prefer *look very identical* rather than *look very alike*. It seems that there is slight difference between the meaning of *identical* and *alike*, and both of the phrases are correct in terms of grammar, but *look very alike* sounds more idiomatic and appropriate. And most students prefer *it is fully impossible...or it is roughly impossible ...rather than it is absolutely impossible....* It seems that *fully*, *roughly* and *absolutely* have no big discrepancies in terms of meaning, and all of them are grammatically correct in the phrase *it is __ impossible*. However, *it is fully impossible* and *it is roughly impossible* do not sound native-like. Therefore, it can be concluded that testees construct phrases and sentences mainly through grammatical rules, and most testees do not store enough idiomatic lexical chunks in their mind.

3.1.2 Writing test

The total score of the writing test is 100. In order to have a detailed and clear analysis of the results of the test, the final scores are also divided into five ranks, that is, A (100-90), B (89-80), C (79-70), D (69-60) and F (59-0). The result of the test is listed as follows:

Figure 2: Distribution of the composition test score



In Figure 2, the x-axis indicates testees' scores of the writing test, and the y-axis indicates the number of testees. The Figure indicates that the achievement of the writing test is also far from satisfactory. 44.7% testees get C or D, and 28.9% testees get the mark F, however, only 26.3% testees get A or B.

Table 3: Descriptive results of lexical chunks used in writing

Total number of valid samples	38
Word restriction for each composition	100-120
Average number of words	108
Sentence builders	90
Phrasal constraints	52
Polywords	41
Collocations	39
Institutionalized expressions	35
Total number of lexical chunks	257

In Table 3, the number of lexical chunks used in each composition is calculated, which is helpful to investigate testees' awareness of using lexical chunks in their compositions. The number of mistakes in lexical chunks is neglected, and instead more attention is paid to the number of lexical chunks used in the writing test. From Table 3, the numbers of different types of lexical chunks used in writing are obvious and clear. There are altogether 257 lexical chunks in 38 compositions, therefore each piece of writing has less than seven lexical chunks. As can be seen from the table, testees use sentence builders more frequently than other types of lexical chunks in writing. Phrasal constraints take the second place, polywords take the third place, collocations take the fourth place and institutionalized expression is used the least.

Apart from this, some additional problems can be found in the testees' writing test.

- 1) Test takers are prone to repeat some common expressions, like *above all; for example; I suggest that...; I think...; I believe...; There is/are...; There have/has...etc.*
- 2) Some unidiomatic and non-standard phrases are easy to find in writing.

For example,

develop the standard/ enhance the standard (raise the standard)

give an honorary degree (award an honorary degree)

get a good future (have a good future)

in campus (on campus)

search a job (apply for a job; look for a job)

- 3) Test takers are not good at substituting elements in chunks, which is regarded as the basis for creative language production. For example, testees are not good at using semi-fixed phrases like *one the one hand..., on the other hand; There is no denying that ...; It seems to me that...; As far as I am concerned that ...*, and so on.
- 4) Chinglish in writing is one of the most common errors that testees make. Many testees write something that is grammatically correct, but does not conform to the standard and idiomatic English usage.

For example,

There is a saying that defeat is the mother of the success. (There is a saying that failure is the mother of success.)

Learn when you are alive. (It is never too late to learn).

We attain good experience from failure. (We get good experience from failure.)

Opportunity comes to you if you are skilled enough in your field. (Opportunities comes to you if you are qualified enough in your field.).

- 5) Many testees repeat transitional words like *and, but, however and then* in their writing several times, rather than using lexical chunks like *in addition, on the other hand, apart from this* and so on.
- 6) Misused lexical chunks are very common in the compositions.

For example,

Polywords:

in other word (in other words)

in the contrary (on the contrary)

last but not the least (last but not least)

Collocations:

in a large extent (to a large extent)

have/take the decision (make the decision)

pay attention on the classmates (pay attention to the classmates)

search a job (find a job)

Institutional expressions:

A coin has two sides./The coin has two sides./Everything has two sides.(Every coin has two sides.)

Sentence heads or frames/sentence builders:

There is likely to do...(It is likely to do)

It's no denying that...(There is no denying that...)

The pressure on searching a job (The pressure of finding a job)

7) Sometimes testees are not able to express what they want to say clearly.

From *Figure 2*, the result of the writing test indicates that learners have low proficiency in language production. We can see testees are prone to write Chinglish in writing, which may indicate that they often search single English equivalents of Chinese words from their mind and then combine them word by word to construct an English sentence. Therefore, although the phrases and sentences they produce are always correct in grammar, the language sounds awkward and inappropriate. For example, *give an honorary degree* is grammatically correct, but it is not correct in the semantic features of the collocation. It seems that *award an honorary degree* is more appropriate and native-like than *give an honorary degree*. This kind of mistake can be explained by the writers' lack of the necessary knowledge of collocations of the English vocabulary, and that they depend too much on the word collocation of Chinese. In addition, testees often repeat some common expressions. Sometimes, words and phrases are used several times in the same composition. It further demonstrates that testees do not store adequate lexical chunks in their mind.

Wray points out that lexical chunks are “stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (Wray 2000:465). Wray’s definition shows that the characteristic of lexical chunks is phrases which can be stored and retrieved automatically as wholes. Therefore, if learners store a large number of lexical chunks in their mind, they cannot only save much time on selecting words, but the appropriateness of the words can also be ensured. However, if learners only master a small number of lexical chunks, they have to spend much time in analyzing and selecting individual words. Furthermore, sometimes the word they select are not appropriate, thus the phrases and sentences they produce may not sound idiomatic and fluent.

In addition, it is showed that sometimes testees are not able to express themselves clearly, which will not only make the scorers feel confused about the content of the compositions, but the testees themselves may feel depressed. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:114) argue that lexical chunks can ease learners’ frustration and at the same time promote motivation. Because they are prefabricated chunks with certain functional meanings, they allow expressions that learners are not yet able to construct from their linguistic system (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:114). In this way, lexical chunks will not only decrease learners’ pressure to produce what they are not able to express, but also help learners make output fluently and idiomatically in written form beyond the limit of grammar rules.

From *Table 3*, we can see that the average number of lexical chunks used in the writing test is less than seven. This further demonstrates that testees do not store adequate lexical chunks in their mind. Moreover, the distribution of lexical chunks used in the compositions show that testees do not use a wide range of lexical chunks in their compositions because of their insufficient lexical knowledge. Although polywords and institutionalized expressions are associated with a wide variety of functions, such as shifting topics, summarizing, illustrating and so on (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:39), which are quite necessary in writing, they are not so frequently used in the college students’ writing. In addition, phrases like collocations which are fixed and easy to grasp, are also not used frequently in writing. Therefore, it is evident that testees do not master a wide range of lexical chunks, let alone use them skilfully.

Above all, the results of the two tests indicate that testees do not store a large amount of lexical chunks in their mind, which affects their performance in the two tests significantly. Granger (1998:15) points out that “learners use fewer lexical chunks than their native-speaker counterparts”. Furthermore, through comparing the writing between less proficient NS and more advanced NNS, Cowie and Howarth (1996a) claim that there is a measurable overlap in collocational use between less proficient second language learners and native speakers. It shows that lower and intermediate learners grasp and use fewer lexical chunks than native speakers, and advanced learners grasp many lexical chunks in their mind. Therefore, it can be concluded that lexical chunks competence plays an important role in L2 learners’ language proficiency. The fact that testees are not able to master adequate lexical chunks may explain why they do not have high proficiency in English.

3.2 Comparisons between high scorers and low scorers

The significance of lexical chunks in the two tests is discussed in the previous part. In this part, more attention will be paid to the relationship between the competence of lexical chunks and language production. Two comparisons are involved in this part. One is the comparison of the usage of lexical chunks in the writing test between the high scorers and low scorers, which tries to investigate if testees with higher level of language production are better at using lexical chunks; the other comparison is between the scores of the multiple-choice chunk test and the writing test, which tries to investigate if learners who have high level of using lexical chunks are also good at language production.

3.2.1 Comparison of the usage of lexical chunks in the writing test

In this part, testees are divided into two groups. Group 1 consists of 10 students who get mark A or B in the writing test. And Group 2 consists of 10 students who get mark F in the writing test. There are 11 students who get an F in the composition test, and 10 of them are randomly chosen to make a comparison with high scorers.

Table 4. Numbers of lexical chunks used in writing by the two groups

	Group 1	Group 2
Student 1	14	3
Student 2	9	3
Student 3	13	4
Student 4	12	4
Student 5	12	3
Student 6	9	5
Student 7	8	6
Student 8	10	2
Student 9	8	5
Student 10	11	5
Average number of lexical chunks	10.6	4

In *Table 4*, it can easily be seen that the numbers of lexical chunks used by the two groups are strikingly different. Through comparison, we can see that testees in Group 1 use much more lexical chunks in writing than testees in Group 2. The average number of lexical chunks used by Group 1 is 10.6, while the average number of lexical chunks used by Group 2 is only 4. It seems that far more lexical chunks are used in high score writing than in low score writing.

Table 5. Numbers of misused lexical chunks in writing by the two groups

	Group 1	Group 2
Student 1	2	0
Student 2	0	1
Student 3	0	1
Student 4	2	2
Student 5	1	2
Student 6	2	2
Student 7	0	3
Student 8	3	0
Student 9	1	1
Student 10	4	1
Average number of misused lexical chunks	1.5	1.3

Table 6. The ratio of the number of lexical chunks to the number of misused lexical chunks

	Group 1	Group 2
Average number of lexical chunks	10.6	4
Average number of misused lexical chunks	1.5	1.3
The ratio of the number of lexical chunks to the number of misused lexical chunks	7.06	3.08

From *Table 5* and *Table 6*, it is known that more lexical chunks are misused in Group 2 than in Group 1. Because from the ratio of the number of lexical chunks to the number of misused lexical chunks between the two groups, we can see that in Group 1, one misused lexical chunk out of 7.06 lexical chunks is found. In Group 2, one misused lexical chunk out of 3.08 lexical chunks is found. By way of comparison, it can be seen that testees in Group 2 use misused lexical chunks in writing more frequently than testees in Group 1.

Table 7. Types of lexical chunks used in writing by the two groups

	Group 1	Group 2
Polywords	20	4
Collocations	12	5
Institutionalized expressions	10	4
Phrasal constraints	21	12
Sentence builders	43	15
Total number of lexical chunks	106	40

The number of each category of lexical chunks used by Group 1 and Group 2 are listed in *Table 7*. It is obvious that more lexical chunks of each type are used in high score compositions than in low score compositions. Furthermore, the use of sentence builders, polywords and phrasal constraints by the two groups are significantly different. It implies that more high scorers have recognized the importance of the three types of lexical chunks. However, only a small number of collocations and institutionalized expressions are used in either group, which may imply that the importance of the two categories has not been widely recognized by testees.

From *Table 4* to *Table 7*, the difference of the usage of lexical chunks in writing by Group 1 and Group 2 is obvious:

- 1) Group 1 uses many more lexical chunks in writing than Group 2.
- 2) Group 2 uses misused lexical chunks more frequently in writing than Group 1.
- 3) Group 1 uses more lexical chunks of each type in writing than Group 2.

The results indicate that Group 1 masters many more lexical chunks than Group 2, which shows that the high frequency of the use of lexical chunks contributes to high scores in compositions. The results suggest that there might be a positive correlation between the number of lexical chunks used in writing and the writing grade, that is, learners who are good at using lexical chunks may also be good at writing and vice versa.

3.2.2 Comparison of the scores of the two tests

The scores of the multiple-choice chunks test can be regarded as testees' competence of using lexical chunks, and the score of the writing test can be regarded as testees' competence of language production. Therefore, the relationship between the scores of the two tests shows the possible relationship between L2 learners' competence of using lexical chunks and language production.

Table 8. Comparison of the scores of the two tests

Student No.	Multiple-choice chunk test	Writing test
1	C	C
2	B	B
3	D	D
4	B	C
5	F	F
6	B	C
7	A	A
8	F	F
9	B	A
10	D	D
11	D	D
12	C	C

13	C	C
14	C	D
15	B	B
16	F	F
17	C	C
18	F	F
19	D	D
20	D	B
21	F	F
22	D	F
23	D	B
24	F	F
25	C	B
26	B	C
27	C	C
28	F	F
29	B	B
30	D	D
31	D	D
32	F	D
33	B	B
34	D	F
35	A	A
36	F	F
37	C	C
38	F	F

From *Table 8*, we can see that testees who get an A in the multiple-choice chunk test also get an A in the writing test; 57.1% of the testees who get a B in the writing test also get a B in the multiple-choice chunk test; 66.7% of the testees who get a C in the writing test also get a C in the multiple-choice chunk test; 75% of the testees who get a D in the writing test also get a D in the multiple-choice chunk test; and 87.5% of the testees who get an F in the writing test also get an F in the multiple-choice chunk test.

The data shows that there is no big discrepancy between the scores of testees' multiple-choice chunk test and the writing test. It means that there **is** significant relationship between testees' competence of using lexical chunks and their language production.

3.2.3 Discussion of the relationship between L2 learners' use of lexical chunks and language production

The comparisons indicate that learners with a higher level of language production are better at using lexical chunks, and correspondingly, learners who are able to use lexical chunks have a higher level of language production and vice versa. The conclusion further strengthens the relationship between the two competences, that is, employment of lexical chunks is positively correlated with language production.

Fluency, accuracy, creativeness and cohesion are indispensable parts of language production. Previous studies show that lexical chunks can promote language fluency, enhance language accurateness, facilitate creative language production and guide language production.

1) Lexical chunks and language fluency

Fluency is a clear target of language production. Fluency of writing means that learners are able to write freely and consecutively. Previous studies have proved that lexical chunks can promote language fluency. Lewis points out that "fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items" (Lewis 1997:15). Furthermore, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:32) suggest that "it is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us speak with fluency." Lexical chunks are stored and retrieved as whole units, they can easily be memorized and used without the need to compose them through word selection and grammatical rules (Pawley & Syder 1983:13). Therefore, the character of lexical chunks not only lessens the load of language processing significantly, but also allows learners to produce a patterned and fluent language.

Testees who master a large amount of lexical chunks can retrieve phrases they need in writing as a whole directly, which greatly decreases the load of language selection in a short time. As a result, they are able to spend more time on the content of the language, thus guaranteeing the fluency of writing. In contrast, testees who do not store adequate lexical chunks in their mind have to connect phrases and sentences piece by piece according to the grammatical rules. That means they have to spend much more time in selecting appropriate words. As a result,

the processing speed must be slowed down, and much less time is left to consider the content of the language. All these aspects will affect the fluency and quality of writing.

2) Lexical chunks and accuracy of language

The explicit purpose of accuracy of language is that “students can get the language ‘right’, usually by forming correct sentence” (Lewis 1993:18). Although many learners can express themselves fluently, there always exist some differences between expressions of theirs and native speakers. Previous researches show that using lexical chunks appropriately can make the language more accurate and native-like, because a large proportion of native speakers’ language is composed of meaningful lexical chunks (Pawley & Syder 1983:13). From the writing test, we can see that high scorers employ a large amount of lexical chunks in writing, which can make the language accurate and idiomatic, and therefore, they get high marks in writing. However, many testees do not master a sufficient number of lexical chunks. Although most of the time they are able to write sentences that are grammatically correct, the sentences usually do not sound idiomatic and accurate.

3) Lexical chunks and creative language production

Previous studies have shown that lexical chunks are the raw materials for creative language production (Pawley & Syder 1983:97). Both Hakuta and Wong-Fillmore believe that “routines and patterns learnt in the language acquisition process evolve directly into creative language” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:25). Based on the basic lexical frames, learners can substitute flexible slots in certain contexts. Therefore, if learners master adequate semi-fixed lexical chunks, it is possible for them to produce creative phrases and sentences.

From *Table 7*, we can see that testees with high scores in compositions use much more lexical chunks of each type than low scorers. In addition, among the types of lexical chunks that high scorers use in their compositions, sentence builders take the largest portion, and phrasal constraints take the second place, polywords take the third place, collocations take the fourth place and the institutional expressions take the last place. This means that high scorers use sentence builders and phrasal constraints more frequently than other types of lexical chunks in

writing.

Nattinger and DeCarrico state that “sentence builders are lexical phrases that provide the framework of the sentences, [...] they allow considerable variation of phrasal and clausal elements” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:42). It shows that sentence builders are not fixed, but with several flexible components. We can find various sentence builders in the high scorers’ writing, like *As far as I am concerned that...; it seems to me that...; the more..., the more...; not only..., but also...; There is no denying that...; First of all..., In addition..., Last but not least...* and so on. Like sentence builders, phrasal constraints are also semi-fixed phrases, they “allow variation of lexical and phrasal categories” (Nattingere and DeCarrico 1992:41). However, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:38-39) point out that collocations and institutional expressions only allow little variability, and polywords are fixed phrases with no variability. High scorers use much more semi-fixed chunks like sentence builders and phrasal constraints in writing, thus they are able to produce more complex and creative expressions in their compositions. This kind of creative expressions may give a deep impression to the scorers, thus it is helpful to testees’ good performance in the writing test.

However, testees with low marks in writing use fewer and limited kinds of lexical chunks. Although they can also express their opinions, reading their compositions might be a little boring. Because not so many sentence structures are used and they tend to use some simple expressions like *I think (that)...; there is/are...; I believe (that)...; and; but* and so on. Moreover, some lexical chunks are repeated several times in a single composition. In other words, some lexical chunks are overused by the learners, which makes the writing tedious and less attractive. This shows that using a wide range of lexical chunks is important to the quality of writing.

4) Lexical chunks and cohesion of language

Cohesion is very important to English writing. It means that there is a close relationship between two parts of a sentence or a large piece of writing (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 2003:290), and it makes the language more comprehensible. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:60) propose that lexical chunks are “the primary markers which signal

the direction of discourse.” It indicates that lexical chunks guide the overall language production, such as summarizing (*all in all; above all*), relating (*for that matter; not only..., but also...*), topic shifting (*by the way*) etc. Thus through lexical chunks, on the one hand, the connections between phrases, sentences and paragraphs can be increased; on the other hand, readers can also have a better understanding of the language. Most polywords functions as discourse connectors which are quite necessary to the cohesion of writings. Comparing the testees’ writing, it is obvious that high scorers use many more polywords than low scorers. Therefore, high scorers’ writing might be more cohesive and understandable than low scores’ writing.

On the basis of the previous theories and the empirical study in this essay, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between L2 learners’ use of lexical chunks and their language production.

3.3 Limitation of the tests

From *Table 8*, we can find that some testees who get high marks in the multiple-choice chunk test do not get high marks in the writing test. There might be some reasons for the discrepancy.

- 1) The multiple-choice technique is not a perfect indicator of learners’ competence of using lexical chunks, because it usually tests a student’s receptive skill rather than productive skills (Hughes 1989:76). For example, the person who can identify the correct answer in the item of the test may not produce the correct form in the writing test. And the probability of guessing the correct answer in the multiple-choice chunk test is one in four, or a quarter.
- 2) The testees are only allowed to write 100-120 words in the writing test. The limited number of words may provide them with fewer opportunities to use lexical chunks in writing. Thus this may have some side effect on the quality of their writing.
- 3) Taking the two tests together might have influenced the testees. That is, if they take the multiple choice test first, they might have been reminded of some useful lexical chunks in

the chunk test, and used them in writing. Therefore, the testing sequence may have some influence on their writing performance.

- 4) It is not convincing enough to judge testees' lexical chunks competence and language production just by means of one test. At least, no far-reaching conclusions should be drawn on the basis of the results.

By analysing the tests results, although there are some limitations of the two tests, the tests are able to reflect L2 learners' lexical chunks using level and their language production to a large extent.

3.4 Interview

Ten students are involved in the interview. Five of them are chosen from Group 1 who get an A or B in the writing test. The other five are chosen from Group 2 who get an F in the writing test. Therefore, the ten testees are the representatives of the high scorers and the low scorers. They are asked the same three questions (see Appendix D).

For the first question, testees in Group 1 reply that the main problem they usually meet is lack of vocabulary. Testees in Group 2 complain that they have many problems in their writing process:

- 1) They often translate from Chinese into English word by word. They claim that it is hard for them to match single English equivalents of Chinese words from their memory.
- 2) They often waste much time on selecting proper words.
- 3) They often express the wrong meaning because of the misuse of some words.
- 4) They find it is hard for them to express themselves although they are rich in ideas and thoughts.

As can be seen neither of the groups have a large vocabulary. And the answers of Group 2 show that word-selection is the most serious problem testees meet in their compositions.

When they are asked the second question, testees in Group 1 state that they often learnt the lexical phrases by heart after class by themselves, because they thought this kind of

knowledge is very helpful for improving their speaking and writing. The student who received the highest mark in the writing test says that, “Sometimes the phrases and sentences come to my mouth automatically, for the main structures of the sentences have been printed in my mind”. On the contrary, testees in Group 2 appear a little passive about lexical phrases. They admit that only when teachers ask them to learn certain types of lexical chunks do they begin to recite them. In addition, they mention that if lexical chunks are not emphasized by teachers, they prefer to ignore the chunks. They also think such kind of knowledge is helpful, but to them, grammar is more important than lexical chunks because teachers always spend much time on grammatical points in class. One student complains, “I have devoted much time to grammar, but I don’t know why my writing is not always good”. From the second questions, we can see that the two groups have different views of the importance of lexical chunks. Group 1 affirms the significance of the lexical chunks in their language production, whereas Group 2 doubts the importance of lexical chunks. They affirm that grammar is most important in English learning.

All the interviewees are interested in the third question. Testees in Group 1 reply that they have mastered a large number of lexical chunks, but they find it hard to remember all of them. If teachers introduce some related knowledge about lexical chunks and focus more on this kind of knowledge in English classes, it will be easier for them to master the chunks. And testees in Group 2 suggest that if it is proved that lexical chunks have many advantages in improving their language proficiency, teachers should use this innovative approach in class. It seems that testees in both groups have a positive attitude towards lexical chunks instruction in the classroom.

From the interview, it seems that teachers do not pay much attention to teaching lexical chunks in English classes. Due to the neglect of lexis, teachers simply focus more on grammatical rules and rely on semantic matching between Chinese and English as the major means of English instruction. High scorers have recognized the importance of lexical chunks, therefore, they have learnt the chunks by themselves. But they find it is difficult to remember these chunks by themselves. And low scorers are not aware of the importance of lexical

chunks. They spend much time on grammar rules and individual words, however, they find their English proficiency has not been improved.

From the previous discussion, it turns out that there is a positive relationship between L2 learners' competence of using lexical chunks and their language production. If learners can master sufficient lexical chunks and use them appropriately, they may achieve language fluency, accuracy, cohesion and creativeness, thus performing well in language production. Furthermore, if learners are able to use lexical chunks appropriately, their motivation can be increased, which is helpful to their language proficiency. Therefore, the introduction of lexical chunks into English classes and a revolutionary change in the concept of vocabulary teaching may offer many advantages for English acquisition.

3.5 Pedagogical suggestions

English learners at college are generally considered to be advanced English learners, however, testees' productive knowledge of language has proved to be very weak. There are, of course, some reasons contributing to this phenomenon, but students' ineffective vocabulary learning strategy one good better explanation. Because in most cases, learners find that they have to spend much time on analyzing and selecting individual words when they are writing. At the same time, it is found that lexical errors are very common in writing, particularly when word selection and word collocation are concerned. Therefore, vocabulary in college English teaching calls for more research. It turns out that L2 learners' lexical chunks competence have a positive relationship with their language production. Thus college English instruction should not only teach individual words and grammatical rules, but more attention should be given to lexical chunks.

There are some pedagogical suggestions that need to be taken into account when applying lexical chunks instruction. The list below is based on the work of Lewis (1993).

1) Changing learners' concept of language acquisition

Traditional instruction of teaching single words and grammar rules does not improve learners'

language proficiency significantly. Influenced by this traditional instruction, most Chinese college learners regard grammar and individual words as the key to English proficiency. Lewis (1993:89) proposes that lexis is the core of language while grammar plays a subservient role. It implies that lexical chunks should play a more important role in language proficiency than grammatical structure. Seeing more and more frustrated learners spend much time in learning grammatical points and individual words by rote, while achieving little, the first step is to change their traditional concept of English learning thoroughly.

2) Developing learners' awareness of lexical chunks

Lewis suggests that “students need to develop awareness of language to which they are exposed and gradually develop ways, not of assembling parts into wholes, but of identifying constituent bits within the whole” (Lewis 1993:195). Therefore, teachers should not only introduce the importance of lexical chunks to learners, but also establish the concept of lexical chunks in learners' minds, thus giving them opportunities to identify, organize and record lexical chunks. Pedagogical chunking should be a frequent classroom activity, which may help learners develop the skill of identifying different lexical chunks. For example, spotting all the lexical chunks in a given article, translating chunk-by-chunk, highlighting lexical chunks in doing exercises and so on, may help learners develop their awareness of lexical chunks.

3) Teaching basic lexical chunks first

Basic lexical chunks should be taught first to facilitate the acquisition of native-like proficiency. Initial instruction should focus on relatively fixed expressions that occur frequently, rather than originally created sentences. Because lexical chunks enjoy different degrees of variability and flexibility, teachers may begin by introducing a few basic fixed and semi-fixed patterns, and then teach increasingly variable chunks.

4) Teaching lexical chunks within a topic framework

Lewis (1997:92) proposes that teachers must remain constantly aware of the different types of lexical chunks, which may be organized within a topic framework. It indicates that it is

important to help learners to master lexical chunks which cover a particular topic or situation together. Words may be more effectively learnt if they are presented systematically in rich contexts rather than randomly. This kind of strategy may help learners memorize lexical chunks, and when they encounter similar topics again, it is much easier for them to recall many relevant lexical chunks quickly.

5) Using corpora in class

With the wide expansion of Internet technology, it is not difficult to use corpora in English classroom. With the help of corpora, on the one hand, it may help teachers to choose appropriate corpora for students of different levels, needs and interests; on the other hand, it may encourage learners to discover the usage of lexical chunks by themselves.

6) Doing chunk-related exercises and games

Lewis (1993:195) suggests that “pedagogical chunking should be a frequent classroom activity.” By doing exercises and games, learners can get more information about lexical chunks in a relaxed atmosphere. Some frequently used lexical chunks should be repeated and revised in the exercises and games, which will help learners to internalize them and use them skillfully. When learners are engaged in interesting and meaningful use of languages, it is possible for them to master lexical chunks more quickly.

7) Associating functional effects of lexical chunks

Through associating the functions of lexical chunks, learners may become aware of the importance of lexical chunks, and at the same time, have a deep impression of lexical chunks. Teachers may introduce the functions of lexical chunks in a given article. For example, when introducing the chunks like *as far as I know...*; *There is no doubt that...*, teachers may inform the learners that the functional effect of this kind of lexical chunks is evaluating, which will not only signal the direction of the whole article, but also make the article more comprehensible. Therefore, when learners need evaluators in their discourses, they may employ lexical chunks like *as far as I know...*; *There is no doubt that...* deliberately.

The principle of the lexical chunks instruction is that “language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar” (Lewis 1993:89). It indicates that lexis is the basis of language rather than grammar or vocabulary. Therefore, in general, the most important point is to raise learners’ awareness of the importance of lexical chunks first, and then learn to use them appropriately. It is believed that lexical chunks will be particularly significant to L2 learners’ language acquisition. Its introduction into English instruction is bound to exert far-reaching and positive influence on L2 learners’ English proficiency.

4. Conclusion

This study attempts to find empirical evidence of the relationship between L2 learners’ use of lexical chunks and their language production. Through the multiple-choice chunk test and the writing test, the statistical analysis shows that testees with a higher level of lexical chunks are prone to achieve higher scores in the writing test and vice versa. It turns out that lexical chunks have a positive effect on L2 learners’ language production.

Lexical chunks are fixed or semi-fixed frequently used lexical phrases with functional meanings, which are stored and produced automatically as whole units in the process of language acquisition. Therefore, chunks provide an easily retrievable frame for language production and decrease L2 learners’ pressure to decode individual words. Previous studies show that lexical chunks can promote language fluency, enhance language accuracy, facilitate creative language production and guide language production. Furthermore, lexical chunks can increase L2 learners’ motivation, for chunks would allow learners to produce expressions that they are not yet able to construct from their linguistic system.

Moreover, by means of the two tests, we can see that Chinese English learners’ knowledge of lexical chunks and language production is far from satisfactory. In the multiple-choice chunk test, it is found that testees are prone to prefer some grammatically correct, but not appropriate or idiomatic lexical chunks. In the writing test, it is found that Chinglish and misused phrases are very common in the testees’ compositions. Through analyzing the testees’ answers to the interview, we find that Chinese English teachers still focus more on

grammatical rules and individual words, and pay less or even no attention to the instruction of lexical chunks. It is believed that to a large extent, the low proficiency of language production can be attributed to the lack of adequate input of lexical chunks. Therefore, in order to improve Chinese learners' English proficiency, adopting the effective lexical chunks instruction is quite necessary.

This study not only indicates the importance of lexical chunks to language production, but also brings forward some pedagogical suggestions to English instruction. On the basis of changing Chinese learners' concept of language acquisition, with adequate teaching methods and effective activities, teachers should be able to make a great effort to help learners with their lexical chunks learning.

All in all, lexical chunks seem to play an important role in L2 learners' language acquisition. They serve as the key to the fluency, idiomaticity, creativeness and orientation of language production, which should be given adequate attention and absolute priority in L2 learners' English instruction.

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Primary material:

- Ronggui Mao (2006) *Spark English: Model Test of CET4*. Shandong: Shangdong Science and Technology Press

Appendix A

Test 1. Multiple-choice chunk test (20 minutes)

Direction: There are 30 incomplete sentences in this part. For each sentence there are four choices marked A), B), C) and D). Choose the ONE answer that best completes the sentence. Then mark the corresponding letter on the Answer Sheet with a single line through the centre.

1. American college students are increasingly _____ with credit card debt and the consequences can be rather serious.
A) discharged B) dominated C) boosted D) burdened
2. A study shows that students living in non-smoking dorms are less likely to _____ the habit of smoking.
A) turn up B) pick up C) make up D) draw up
3. Please give my best _____ to your family.
A) notice B) attention C) regards D) cares
4. The medicine the doctor gave me _____ my headache.
A) reduced B) freed C) released D) relieved
5. They are twins and look very _____.
A) same B) alike C) identical D) like
6. You would be _____ a risk to let your child go to school by himself.
A) omitting B) attaching C) affording D) running
7. Many people like white color as it is a _____ of purity.
A) symbol B) sign C) signal D) symptom
8. I would never have _____ a court of law if I hadn't been so desperate.
A) sought for B) accounted for C) turned up D) resorted to
9. During the process great care has to be taken to protect the _____ silk from damage.
A) sensitive B) tender C) delicate D) sensible
10. The British constitution is _____ a large extent a product of the historical events described above.
A) within B) to C) by D) at
11. He is quite sure that it's _____ impossible for him to fulfill the task within two days.
A) absolutely B) exclusively C) fully D) roughly

12. There was such a long line at the exhibition _____ we had to wait for about half an hour.

- A) as B) that C) so D) hence

13. Reading _____ the lines, I would say that the Government are more worried than they will admit.

- A) behind B) between C) along D) among

14. The author of the report is well _____ with the problems in the hospital because he has been working there for many years.

- A) informed B) acquainted C) enlightened D) acknowledged

15. The early pioneers had to _____ many hardships to settle on the new land.

- A) go along with B) go back on C) go through D) go into

16. I didn't know the word. I had to _____ a dictionary.

- A) look out B) make out C) refer to D) go over

17. I'm very sorry to have _____ you with so many questions on such an occasion.

- A) interfered B) offended C) impressed D) bothered

18. Tony is very disappointed _____ the results of the exam.

- A) with B) for C) toward D) on

19. I was _____ the point of telephoning him when his letter arrived.

- A) to B) on C) at D) in

20. You should have been more patient _____ that customer; I'm sure that selling him the watch was a possibility.

- A) of B) with C) for D) at

21. _____ he works hard, I don't mind when he finishes the experiment.

- A) As soon as B) As well as C) So far as D) So long as

22. We love peace, yet we are not the kind of people to yield _____ any military threat.

- A) up B) to C) in D) at

23. Which sport has the most expenses _____ training equipment, players' personal equipment and uniforms?

- A) in place of B) in terms of C) by means of D) by way of

24. _____ their differences. The couple were developing an obvious and genuine affection for each other.

- A) But for B) For all C) Above all D) Except for

25. Every man in this country has the right to live where he wants to, _____ the color of his skin.
A) with the exception of B) in the light of C) by virtue of D) regardless of
26. Because Edgar was convinced of the accuracy of this fact, he _____ his opinion.
A) struck at B) strove for C) stick to D) stood for
27. The director was critical _____ the way we were doing the work.
A) at B) in C) of D) with
28. It British government often says that furnishing children with _____ to the information superhighway is a top priority.
A) procedure B) protection C) allowance D) access
29. This is not an economical way to get more water; _____, it is very expensive.
A) on the other hand B) on the contrary C) in short D) or else
30. I went along thinking of nothing _____, only looking at things around me.
A) in particular B) in harmony C) in doubt D) in brief

Appendix B

Keys to the multiple-choice chunk test:

1. D 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. B 6. D 7. A 8. D 9. C 10. B 11. A 12. B 13. B 14. B 15. C 16. C 17.
D 18. A 19. A 20. B 21. D 22. B 23. B 24. B 25. D 26. D 27. C 28. D 29. B 30. A

Appendix C

Test 2. Writing test

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write a composition entitled *Campus Certificate Craze*. You should write 100-120 words following the outline given below:

- 1) In recent years, certificate craze is very common in the universities
- 2) The reasons for this phenomenon
- 3) What's your opinion?

Appendix D

Questions for the interview:

Question 1: What problems do you usually meet in your English writing?

Question 2: Do you deliberately memorize lexical phrases like proverbs, sentences patterns and so on in the English learning process?

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary to teach knowledge of the lexical chunks in class?

Appendix E

Testees' scores of the multiple-choice chunk test

Student No.	Score
1	C
2	B
3	D
4	B
5	F
6	B
7	A
8	F
9	B
10	D
11	D
12	C
13	C
14	C
15	B
16	F
17	C
18	F
19	D
20	D
21	F
22	D
23	D
24	F
25	C
26	B
27	C
28	F
29	B
30	D
31	D
32	F
33	B
34	F
35	A
36	F
37	C
38	F

Appendix F

Testees' scores of the writing test

Student No.	Score
1	C
2	B
3	C
4	F
5	F
6	C
7	A
8	F
9	A
10	D
11	D
12	C
13	C
14	D
15	B
16	F
17	C
18	F
19	D
20	B
21	F
22	F
23	B
24	F
25	B
26	C
27	C
28	F
29	B
30	D
31	D
32	D
33	B
34	F
35	A
36	F
37	C
38	F

