

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Chunk it up in the ESL classroom!

by Touria Jouilla (ECM)

A few months ago, upon overhearing one of my pre-intermediate students speaking to the school receptionist, it occurred to me that what my student needed the most was to learn useful formulaic language he could apply in everyday situations. The receptionist had trouble understanding what the student was enquiring about,

since his sentence was an ensemble of isolated fragments – words that were not connected in a way that clearly conveyed the message; “Please Joanne need my paper”. I assumed the student in question wanted to enquire “Can I see Joanne about my certificate?”. This led me to reassess the approaches I had been addressing when following a set curriculum, subsequently leading me to the decision that my class needed more focus on two areas: using formulaic language and functional English. If my students had more opportunities to practise larger fragments of phrases in familiar contexts, this may well address their learning needs and help them to be understood when dealing with native speakers outside the classroom.

Wray (2000) defines lexical chunks as prefabricated utterances which are stored whole and reused without the speaker’s need to analyse them in relation to grammar. For the purpose of this paper, we will refer to them as lexical phrases. Lexical phrases can be placed in various categories: polywords (e.g. pass the buck); institutionalised phrases (e.g. making suggestions: why don’t we...); heads and frames (e.g. lastly, what I mean is...); and collocations (e.g. feel free, big decision, a large amount...) (Lewis, 1993, 92-95). My focus here is on institutionalised phrases associated with asking for and giving information, as discussing the nature and definitions of lexical phrases is beyond the scope of this article.

The acquisition of lexical phrases and multi-word formulaic speech production highlights the positive effects of the automatization of formulaic sequences (Wood, 2010, p 5). In other words, like lexical items, formulaic sequences can be stored whole and later retrieved from the learner’s long-term memory. Frequent use of these sequences can have a positive impact on fluency in L2. For instance, one of my B1 students, who is currently working with native speakers, may have improved her speaking skills by using expressions and phrases she has been exposed to on a daily basis, such as “see you later”, “can you tell me...?”, “thanks a million” (typically used by Dublin / Irish native speakers). When the student first arrived in Dublin, she began studying English at Beginner level and used the translation method, employing the same sentence structure in L1 and communicating directly from an online translator. As soon as she began working in a hotel with native speakers, her discourse level improved, as she began to use more formulaic units without consciously trying to study them. This tells us that students’ knowledge of chunks of language enables them to formulate sequences and strings of utterances used in real, functional language.

The teacher’s role

According to Dasen (1994), Piaget’s concept of cognitive development is a developmental process which moves from using prior schema to accommodation and then to equilibration. In other words, students add newly learnt knowledge to their schema and gradually assimilate information. Accommodation occurs when an individual’s prior schema is altered to process newly learnt content, and then this knowledge is ready to be expanded, integrating new ideas and gradually assimilating them. Until this new information is internalised, these students will continue to use the word need without a preposition. Equilibration presents a balance between assimilation and accommodation. When disequilibrium occurs, it is up to the student and the teacher to address this by taking gradual steps, introducing new material and allowing the learner to question, process and absorb new concepts (Dasen, 1994). This connection can be made when observing how learners in my class process new language. For this particular class, it was then anticipated that the variables connected to lexical phrases might be far too many to process and practise in a short time. Therefore, if students are exposed to



Breaking it up into chunks.

Pic by Evan-Amos (Wikimeida)

functional language covering varied scenarios over longer periods, this might enable them to accommodate lexical phrases in spoken language. For this to take shape, students can be given the opportunity to process, synthesise and internalise new knowledge, moving from presenting, drilling and practising language points to understanding.

This is not to say that all learners process information in the same way. Allocating time to observe students' performance and how they interact with new language can reveal aspects of cognitive development unknown to the teacher. In addition, getting to know learners through tutorials, ongoing communication and a thorough class profile may allow teachers to evaluate their affective needs and address these accordingly.

Affective needs and the syllabus

“The point of such activities is to encourage learners to assess their own use of chunks after being introduced to them, and to compare initial tasks to subsequent ones. ”

As teachers, our roles extend beyond addressing cognitive development. Students are far more likely to advance their learning skills if we attempt to determine areas of positive development, taking into account students' interests and motivation (Shawer, 2006b). In reviewing students' profiles, and through observations of their level of interaction with L2, it became evident that my students' main desire was to acquire useful, functional knowledge in L2 but, most importantly, to acquire skills such as memorisation, conversation skills and organising ideas when producing the target language in spoken and written form. The main motivating factor for this particular group was to recycle language in real situations, which prompted me to adapt the syllabus in hope of accommodating these needs. In a curricula-based research study by Woods (1991), teachers who adapted curricula to address cognitive and affective learning needs saw higher achievement records in pupils in all core skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) compared to those who simply delivered curriculum content. It was also noted that these teachers greatly motivated classroom participation (Woods, 1991). Indeed, teachers who develop, adapt and question textbook materials can help students focus on what is important in reaching their learning goals. Certainly, having ready-made materials from textbooks minimises preparation time for teachers, but taking the time to adapt these for a particular class means teachers are able to assess students' learning needs, leaving out irrelevant sections or altering exercises to focus on what students need most. One of the outcomes emerging from the needs analysis I had conducted for my class was their request for functional language and video / audio materials. In their individual tutorials, students expressed their desire to learn functions such as asking for information, apologizing, etc. They felt that accessible audio and video materials would assist them in practising situational language.

Lexical phrases in context

One way to assess students' use of language in the ESL classroom is through a series of role-play tasks. In the case of introducing lexical phrases, students can practise the target language before and after being introduced to a series of set phrases in a relevant context. For instance, if the task is for learners to practise making a doctor's appointment, student A can make the call while student B books the appointment and asks student A to provide some personal details (such as DOB, address, etc.). The teacher could observe to what extent lexical phrases are incorporated in natural conversation before tweaking utterances, gradually weaving set phrases into the role-play.

The point of such activities is to encourage learners to assess their own use of chunks after being introduced to them, and to compare initial tasks to subsequent ones. Having tested this in several lessons, I was able to assess students' production of functional language before and after being exposed to chunks of language within a set functional scenario, in this case making requests, asking for information and giving personal details over the telephone. In addition, I provided self-study materials in the form of videos, featuring content such as 'making a doctor's appointment' or 'going to the bank' (see www.eslchinwag.com/functions). These were taught as part of the syllabus and could be accessed by all students at any time.

Issues with recycling

The first noticeable issue with the use of these chunks was that students needed more guidance when they stumbled upon colligations. When reproducing their own conversations with lexical phrases, some couldn't construct complete

sentences because their knowledge of verb tenses, prepositions and the like was premature. For instance, 'How do you spell that?' and 'I need to' posed problems in the output stages. Some students had not been fully introduced to different verb forms, and some were unable to form questions using auxiliary verbs such as do, nor did they understand that a whole chunk operated as a single unit to serve a fixed function. Indeed, the variables linked to chunks of language were endless, and I could not address these without ongoing adaptations to the class syllabus and numerous lessons incorporating functions and formulaic sequences, gradually exposing learners to more variables and contexts using the same phrases.

In addition, I could foresee a potential difficulty with formulaic language when a student decided to use a lexical phrase he had learnt in a previous lesson: "I need to don't come to class tomorrow. They fit me in immigration for my visa tomorrow". The student used the phrases in the right context (stating a necessary, intended action and using fit me in when referring to an appointment) but was unaware of the grammatical form attached to the phrases in this instance. This may mean that some students retrieve expressions or utterances during speech without adjusting the words that fit around them. Similarly, other students can also use whole units that don't apply to a certain statement. For example, when a student says "I think so I will go shopping today", we can assume they want to say "I am thinking about going shopping". They may be using the chunk 'I think so' because they are accustomed to hearing it from native speakers, and because it's a frequently used phrase.

Although my students will eventually store lexical phrases in their long-term memory for spontaneous use, they may develop other difficulties using them in appropriate contexts. Recently, a student told me "I miss my friend because long time no see". In this case, we can assume that the student stored the expression as a chunk and is unaware of alternative ways to express the same idea using the appropriate verb pattern or sentence structure. Then, we can deduce that students can store lexical phrases but need further guidance to reconstruct fragments of these chunks in various contexts.

I intend to continue teaching lexical phrases and functions but, in the process, I plan to introduce learners to the grammatical and lexical company these phrases keep as well as appropriate contexts in which to use them.

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