

The Challenge of Chunks

Chunks of language can operate as 'islands of reliability' for us when communicating. If we island-hop, from chunk to chunk we reduce our brain's processing load and increase fluency in speaking, listening, reading and writing. As teachers, we're generally good at dealing with two word collocations but what about whole phrases? Following are some ideas that have worked for my learners:

A) NOTICING:

1 Find phrases learners can 'borrow' to raise their game in any particular task or interaction. As contexts for this, you could talk to the class yourself, have a conversation with a learner or with a visitor to the class, use recordings or videos. Learners can pick out phrases they notice and you can explore these together. Learners could do this aurally or work from an audioscript. Alternatively you could pick out phrases or use ones that have been identified in a coursebook. Also you could invite learners to bring phrases they've heard or read to class and develop a class phrase board/book/padlet.

e.g. Advanced (C2) learners picked out these phrases from a video in which interviewees were asked if they felt different when speaking L1 and English. The bracketed items indicate where as a class we explored possible endings:

- I would say (yes/no/that...)
- I tend to (be more emotional when...) whereas I'm often a bit/lot more (formal when...)
- It's hard to (disentangle X from Y / differentiate between X and Y)

2 Help learners pay attention to accuracy in phrases, e.g. by using any text reconstruction, dictogloss or dictation type (e.g. a whistle dictation)

e.g. Elementary (A1) ESOL learners are given a text reconstruction full of useful 'chunks' which include:

Doctor: *How / help?*
You: *I / problem / foot. It... / I don't know / word / English.*
D: *me / look.* Etc.

B) USING:

1 Let learners rehearse to help 'fix' the phrase in the short-term memory: try some alternatives to traditional drilling:

- Silent drilling – learners mentally repeat the phrase over and over to themselves
- Mumble drilling – learners say it under their breath as often as they want
- Teacher as audio – learners individually ask the teacher to say the phrase as often as they want to hear it and then repeat it as often as they need/want.

- Race the teacher – practise alone or in pairs and then try and say the phrase faster than the teacher.

It's important to establish the main stresses in the phrase and, where helpful, to indicate where and how words might join up to help learners 'see' and hear the shape of the phrase.

e.g. function: how to avoid answering a question (like a professional politician):
Advanced

- *What we have to take into account is that there can be many reasons...*
- *This figure has been taken out of context...*

Here you might get learners to notice the linking between 'into' and 'account', 'out of' and the weakening of 'to' 'can' and 'has'

2 Situate the phrases in recognisable contexts: e.g. dialogues with lower level learners, particularly in common situations, can be very useful in helping them gain a repertoire of ready-made chunks of language. Pre-intermediate (A2) level:

A: Arggh. Oh no.
B: *What's the matter?*
A: Oh. The cash machine *'s not working. Do you know if there's* another machine somewhere? *I really need to* get some money.
B: Hmm... *I'm not sure. There might be one* in the shopping centre.
A: Thanks.

There are many things you can do with a dialogue, including having words 'disappear' or blanking out one part. The following 'Look Down, Look Up' idea uses drama techniques and a 'whole person' approach, linking a physical action with a chunk/line and thus making phrases easier to memorise. As long as any fixed phrases are accurate, it doesn't matter what other language is used in the dialogue. The procedure:

- 1 Read the dialogue aloud
- 2 Read it again and for each sentence make an exaggerated gesture
- 3 Look down at the dialogue, look up, make the gesture and say the line(s).
- 4 Cover the dialogue and say the lines with the gestures.

3 Make the phrases relevant and give deliberative practice: As teachers we can encourage learners at any level to make the phrases relevant to themselves and try using them, by:

- allowing students to select which phrases they feel will be useful/want to learn e.g. 'choose a minimum of three phrases...'
- giving preparation/rehearsal time e.g. learners write their own 'useful' sentences using the phrases; teacher helps students pronounce these confidently before they do a speaking task
- providing opportunities for task repetition; research shows that when people have the chance to repeat a task, they get better at it

- getting learners to practise outside the classroom: use in real situations or record on whatsapp or a similar platform/app.

C) REMEMBERING

In order to retain a phrase a learner need to revisit it a number of times:

1 Help students to record chunks of language in a way that will be useable in future; e.g. for an exam writing class if the word 'solution' comes up in class, explore and record it on the board:

<i>A short-term</i>	<i>solution</i>	<i>to the problem would/</i>
<i>A long-term</i>		<i>could/might be to</i>
<i>A partial</i>		
<i>One possible</i>		

Instead of recording a phrase in a very grammatical way with the infinitive form, try to think of how it's actually used, in what tense, or with what modal or what other language, so that it turns into a ready made accessible 'chunk' for learners to access. Eg. (from 'Teaching Collocations') instead of :

<i>To rule out the possibility of...</i>
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Record:

<i>We can't rule out the possibility of + -ing</i>
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And get the learners to give some examples of how the chunk could finish, in ways that are relevant to their own context.

How could you record the following?

- views (n) elementary (A1)
- increase (n) intermediate (B1) business students
- appreciate (v) upper intermediate (B2)

Some possibilities:

<i>1 There are fantastic views of the town</i> <i>There are great views from the top.</i>
<i>2 There's been a huge increase in visitors.</i> <i>We've seen a significant increase in costs.</i> <i>We're predicting a small increase in sales.</i>
<i>3 I appreciate it when people help me with my English</i> <i>We really appreciate the effort you've gone to.</i> <i>I appreciate that it could be quite difficult.</i>

2 Recycle: The human brain needs to encounter new items several times if it is to fix and be able to retrieve them. So it's important to recycle phrases.

You could use any of the ideas under noticing or using for refreshing learners' memories. Some other ideas:

a) A parallel role play which invites the use of the same set of chunks.

'Correct the teacher' T: reads out the phrase, learners in pairs correct it. Examples are taken from the examples earlier.

- Wrong words:
What we need to bake into a cake is that there can be many raisins, in that...
- Missing words:
I've got a problem my foot.
- Added words:
I'm tend to be more emotional in my language.
- Wrong order:
Context...out...figure...taken...this...of...been...has

b) Replace the first letters of words with the full phrase:

A: Arggh. Oh no.

B: *W th m?*

A: Oh. The *c m n w*. D y k i *th* another machine somewhere? *l r n t* get some money.

B: Hmmm... *l n s*. *Th m b o* in the shopping centre.

A: Thanks.

References

The term 'islands of reliability' comes from an article by Scott Thornbury about the knowledge and skills needed for students to speak: **Awareness, appropriation and autonomy**: <http://www.scottthornbury.com/articles.html>

Other practical ideas came from:

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