

THE USE OF LEXICAL APPROACH IN ENHANCING LEARNERS' ORAL COMMUNICATION PERFORMANCE AT NGUYEN HUE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Although the use of the lexical approach in enhancing English learners' oral communication performance has gained much attention in the TESOL world, it is still a neglected area in Vietnam. The present study is conducted in order to address this issue. On the basis of the theories presented, a teaching experiment was conducted at Nguyen Hue University from September 15 to December 14, 2012. The results show that not only the students' English oral communication performance was improved significantly, but also their attitudes were shown positively. Recommendations are made for teachers of English who are interested in using the approach to enhance learners' oral communication performance.

Introduction

While the lexical approach has been widely used in language training in many countries, it receives little attention in Vietnam. Than (2011) remarks: "Teachers acknowledged the role of lexical phrases in spoken English, but somehow refused to take them to the classrooms."

Likewise, at Nguyen Hue University, one of the training centers of the Vietnamese People's Army, located in Bien Hoa city, Dong Nai province, little emphasis is made on the use of lexical approach. As a result, the students often found themselves at a loss for words in English speaking classes, and they can hardly make any progress in their oral communication performance as it is shown in their academic records. In this context, the researcher used the lexical approach to enhance the students' oral communication

performance at Nguyen Hue University. Specifically, the study is aimed at finding out: (1) the impact of the lexical approach on learner's oral communication performance and (2) learners' attitude towards the application of this approach.

A key aspect of the lexical approach is the concept of lexical chunk and its role in oral communication performance. The term "lexical chunk" is defined by Wray (2000) as "a sequence of words which is stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (p. 465). Within the scope of the study, the term "lexical chunk" is operationally defined as a fixed or semi-fixed lexical phrase with functional meaning(s), which is stored and produced automatically as the whole unit in the

process of language acquisition.

In order to find out the relationship between the use of lexical chunks and learners' communicative performance, the actual use of language in concrete situations (Canale and Swain 1980), we also need to look at the nature of oral communication.

While a variety of definitions of the term "oral communication" have been suggested, this paper will use the definition given by Byrne (1986: 8) who saw it as "a two-way process between speaker and listener (or listeners) and involves the *productive* skill of speaking and *receptive* skill of understanding (or listening with understanding.)

Literature Review

Since the lexical approach places much emphasis on developing learners' proficiency through lexical chunks, this section reviews the literature concerning the usefulness of using lexical chunks in enhancing learners' communicative performance.

In the lexical approach, lexis of different sorts is thought to play a basic part in language teaching and learning. This approach draws a distinction between vocabulary, traditionally seen as a group of individual words with fixed meanings, and lexis which include not only the individual words but also the word combinations that people store in their mental lexicons. According to Lewis (1993: 95), the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or "chunks," is a significant part of language acquisition and these chunks can serve as the raw data by which learners are able to recognize the patterns of language. Nattinger (1980: 341) recommends that instruction should be based on the idea that language production is the right combination of ready-made units appropriate for a particular setting and understanding such units depends upon

realizing the structures to predict in different contexts.

Guiding Principles of Lexical Approach

Lewis (1993, as cited in Halliday, 1978:43) introduces the guiding principles of the lexical approach as follows:

1. The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-words/chunks.
2. Collocation is used as an organizing principle.
3. Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.
4. The Observe-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle replaces the Present-Practice-Produce Paradigm.
5. Most importantly, language consists of grammaticalized lexis—not lexicalized grammar.

Classification of Lexical Chunks

There are five types of lexical chunks: (1) poly-words: fixed short phrases with no variability, (2) 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.), (3) institutionalized expressions: mostly with no variability and stand as separate utterances with pragmatic functions, (4) phrasal constrains: short and relatively fixed lexical phrases with slots that permit some variation, and (5) 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.

Lexical Chunks and L2 Oral Communication Performance

Jiang Yi (2007) believes that the use

of lexical chunks in actual communication can reduce the effect of negative transfer of mother tongue, and can help to narrow the gap between learners and native speakers in the choice of words and discourse output. This view is supported by Jiang Yuhong (2007) who maintains that lexical chunk learning enhances the oral proficiency of English learners not only as viewed from grammatical competence, but also in terms of external communicative performance by developing speed and accuracy in using language.

Functions of Lexical Chunks

Recent research has drawn our attention to the following areas in which lexical chunks can help in improving learner's communicative competence: language fluency, accuracy, creativeness, and cohesion.

- 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).

Putting lexical chunks in sequences, speakers are able to make long and continuous utterances. Since the use of lexical chunks lightens the load of language processing, speakers find it possible to use L2 properly and fluently without undue hesitation.

In view of accuracy, Pawley and Syder (1983:193) use the term "native-like selection" to refer to the ability to select accurate and idiomatic words and convey their ideas as native speakers do. Learners

are able to express themselves using prefabricated expressions that are not only grammatically correct but also native-like.

With reference to creative language production, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:24), following Hakuta (1974), points out that lexical chunks are seen as "segments of sentences which operate in conjunction with a moveable component, such as the insertion of a noun phrase or a verb phrase." Moreover, "these chunks are not isolated or incidental to the creative rule-forming process, but, in fact, played a role in its development." In the same vein, Pawley and Syder (1983:97) assert that "lexical chunks serve as building blocks of language production and provide existing models for novelty and creation."

In guiding language production, lexical chunks can serve as "the primary markers which signal the direction of discourse, whether spoken or written." (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: 60). To be more specific, lexical chunks can guide the overall language production whether the information to follow is in contrast to, in addition to, or an example of the preceding information.

In terms of cohesion, when the discourse requires an evaluator, for example, learners may use such devices as "*as far as I know/ can tell*" or "*there's no doubt that*" to make their statement more cohesive.

Apart from the above mentioned functions, lexical chunks can help increase learners' motivation:

- 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... (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:114).

It can be inferred that learners can make utterances easily in particular situations since the chunks are “stored and retrieved as whole chunks” and this easiness encourages them to speak English as much as they can.

Principles of Lexical Chunks Instruction to L2 Teaching

Lewis (1997:92-94) suggests some principles on the classroom instruction of lexis as follows:

1) Topic: This principle requires that teachers must be always aware of the various sorts of lexical chunks which may be organized within a topic framework.

2) Collocation: Noticing collocations is a central pedagogical activity.

3) Notion: This term is used to mean a synoptic description of an event, which has psychological unity.

4) Metaphor: It is one of the most creative ways of identifying lexical chunks in lexis.

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.

Related Studies

Previous studies related to the current issue can be grouped into three categories according to the methods used to measure learner’s L2 improvement: (1) conducting pre-test and post-test, (2) using word frequency for data analysis and (3) employing interviews and other methods.

In the first category, the study conducted by Ranjbar, Pazhakh and Gorjian (2012) on the impacts of lexical

phrases on fluency in paragraph writing production of Iranian EFL learners, reveals that lexical phrases teaching methodology ensure effectiveness and influence in developing paragraph writing fluency of Iranian language learners.

In the second category, Frank, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006), in an attempt to explore the impacts of formulaic sequences on L2 learners’ speaking proficiency, report that the experimental group is more proficient in English speaking than the control group and the former’s repertoire of lexical phrases is considerably expanded.

In the third category, studying the effective way for improving the English language proficiency of the college students in China, Runjiang Xu, Zan Mao and Yan Liu (2012) conclude that lexical phrases facilitate the students in word choice ability and contribute to building up accuracy and fluency.

In the present study, within the particular context of a military university with its own distinctive features of physical environment, teaching staff, and learners, the researcher combined both qualitative and quantitative methods and tried to maintain a non-bias stance by using classroom observation of the teaching experiment and audio recording of the participants’ verbal interaction.

Methodology

Participants

45 military M.A. students studying English as a foreign language at Nguyen Hue University were selected based on nonrandom purpose sampling. These subjects, aged from under 26 to over 40, were divided into two classes, namely 3A or experimental group with 22 participants and 3B or control group with 23 participants.

Instrument

The triangulation method was used to collect data including pre-test and post-test, audio recording, questionnaire and observation.

Teaching Materials

The book entitled “PET Result Student’s book” by Jenny Quintana (2010) was used as the teaching material for both groups. During a three-month course, all the 14 units of the book were chosen to teach the two groups. The control group received no special treatment – they were taught by following the speaking activities designed in the book. On the contrary, the experimental group was instructed with the lexical approach. The speaking activities for the teaching experiment were modified according to the principles of this approach using the topics available in the above mentioned book.

Teaching Procedures

The experiment lasted from September 15th to December 14th 2012 with 14 speaking sections. The researcher worked as an observer and trained a teacher to teach the experimental group. The instructor is a female who has ten-year experience in teaching English at Nguyen Hue University. The researcher used an observation checklist to observe the teaching procedures. The cycle named Observe-Hypothesis Experiment introduced by Lewis in 1993 was implemented for the experimental group. The students were exposed to the special treatment twice a week for three months. Out of the 208 English periods in total, 50 periods were devoted to teaching speaking.

The control group instructor is also an experienced female teacher who has 15-year experience in teaching. Unlike the experimental group, the control group received no new treatment. The researcher did not have to train the control group

instructor. The control teacher used the speaking activities designed in the book such as describing things and discussion based on topics for the students to practice in pairs and in groups. Instead of using Observe-Hypothesis Experiment cycle, the control group teacher mainly followed the Presentation, Practice and Production paradigm. As with the experimental group, a speaking course lasted for three months during which speaking lessons were given twice a week and each teaching period lasted for 40 minutes.

Analytical Framework

This study employed mixed methods and the types of data used in analytical framework were descriptive statistic data, experimental statistic data and textual data. The framework developed to process the data from the scores of the speaking pre-test and post-test was used for experimental data analysis, whereas the textual data collected from the observations were described in terms of content data analysis. Besides, descriptive data analysis was applied to analyze the information found from the observations and the questionnaire responses as well as from the participants’ use of lexical phrases recorded.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data collected was made in view of the relationship between the use of lexical chunks and oral communication performance.

Results

Participants’ Performance at Pre-test and Post-test

Before the experiment, both groups were required to take the pre-test in order to assess their level of English proficiency. The statistics show that the mean scores of the control group is higher than that of the experimental group with 28.40 (S.D. 7.20)

and 27.91 (S.D. 7.19) correspondingly. Consequently, independent samples t-test was conducted to confirm the significant difference between these two groups. Interestingly, the results show that Sig. value is 0.81 (> 0.05). It means that there is no significant difference between the two groups on the pretest.

At the end of the treatment, the post-test was conducted on both groups. The results reveal that the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group are 28.95 (S.D.= 7.19) and 32.86 (S.D. = 5.37) respectively, and the Sig. value in the t-test is 0.04 (< 0.05). It could be inferred that the implementation of the lexical approach has a positive impact on the students' oral communication performance.

To better confirm the significance of the statistics, the results on the pre-test and post-test of each group were submitted to pair samples t-test. The results of the control group release that scores in post-test are higher than that in pre-test with ($X = 28.81$, S.D. = 7.52) and ($X = 28.40$, S.D. = 7.20) respectively. However, the S.D. of the post-test is still higher than that of the pre-test ranging from 7.20 and 7.52, respectively. More importantly, the value of Sig. (2-tailed) is .071 (i.e. it is larger than 0.05). It indicates that the oral communication performance is not considerably improved for the control group.

The findings, pertaining to the experimental group, show that the mean scores in the post-test ($X = 29.95$, S.D. = 6.72) are higher than that in the pre-test ($X = 27.91$, S.D. = 7.19). Unlike the control group, the S.D. of the post-test is lower than that of the pre-test ranging from 6.72 to 7.19 correspondingly. Inferably, the lexical approach instruction enhances the oral communication performance of the experimental group.

Frequency of Lexical Phrases in Dialogue

The calculation results show that the number of lexical phrases used by the experimental students in the post-test is much bigger than that in the pre-test. Specifically, while the number of lexical phrases used by the first pair of students is 4 in the pre-test and 6 in the post-test, this number varies from 6 in the pre-test to 28 in the post-test for the second pair, 7 to 12 for the third pair, 6 to 31 for the fourth pair, and 8 to 13 for the fifth pair. The increased frequency of lexical phrases enables the participants to perform better in their oral communication.

Participants' Response to the Questionnaires

The data are analyzed by five sub-themes, namely promoting language fluency, enhancing language accuracy, facilitating creative language production, guiding language production and increasing motivation. The results show that the respondents' attitudes towards the lexical approach are highly positive.

Observation Data Analysis

The results obtained from the 24 observations are analyzed step by step in accordance with the three stages of the speaking lesson, namely (1) warm-up, (2) observation-hypothesis and (3) experiment. It is noted that the teacher in charge of the experimental group strictly followed the teaching procedures designed by the researcher. Observation of the participants' performance reveals that the experimental students achieved a significant improvement on fluency, accuracy, creative language production, use of guiding language production devices, and motivation.

In conclusion, the learners' oral communication performance is

significantly improved and they show positive attitudes towards the use of lexical approach.

Discussion

In this section, the findings were discussed in three major parts, namely the participants' performance on the pre-test and post-test, the frequency of lexical phrases in the dialogues, and the results from the observation of the participants' performance together with their attitudes towards the lexical approach.

Participants' Performance on Pre-test and Post-test

The present study showed that the lexical approach instruction could make a significant change in the experiment students. As revealed from the data analysis, the students of the experimental group gain better scores after the intervention. Specifically, they achieve better results for the post-test than that of the pre-test. Additionally, their scores in the post-test are higher than those of their counterparts in the control group. The differences in mean scores via pair-samples t-test and independent samples t-test are proved to be significant.

Frequency of Lexical Phrases Used in Dialogs

Learners' were able to use most of the phrases taught in classroom communication. Furthermore, they seem to have built up a larger repertoire of lexical phrases for active use.

Participants' Performance and Participants' Attitudes

With the help of lexical phrases, learners were able to improve their fluency substantially. The recordings of the post-test show that they quickly respond to the questions asked and make fewer hesitations in expressing themselves.

An examination of the speaking

activities designed on the principles of the lexical approach also indicates that the participants were able to use correct English in a particular role-play situation by using the lexical phrases given and thus, refraining themselves from thinking in Vietnamese.

As far as creative language production is concerned, it seems that with the basic phrases provided, the participants were able to speak English using different patterns. As remarked by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), "simple phrases [...] allow a considerable amount of lexical variation." (p. 25). The observation notes taken by the researcher indicate that the participants could use various forms or phrases to express the same idea.

Given the findings on guiding language production, implication is digested that the activities based upon the lexical approach can ensure effectiveness in oral communication performance. The students' ability to use the appropriate discourse devices is also reflected in their dialogs in the speaking post-test.

On the question of motivation, the findings indicate that when they were provided with useful phrases and expressions, the participants felt more confident and enjoyed speaking English with their partners.

Conclusion and recommendations

Taken together, these results suggest that there is a strong relationship between the use of lexical approach and the improvement of learner's oral communication performance. Learners' attitudes toward this approach are also found positive. Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insight into the effect of the lexical approach which finds its expression in learners' improvement on language fluency and accuracy, creative language production,

and on learners' motivation as well.

The study findings suggest several courses of action for teachers.

First, selection of lexical phrases to be taught should match learners' level of proficiency and the topics to be covered. Off-topic and difficult phrases might prove to be demotivating.

Second, in designing speaking activities, teachers should create or select a great variety of tasks to teach lexical phrases, especially fixed or semi-fixed expressions that occur frequently in real-life language rather than originally created sentences, and encourage learners to use the phrases learned in real-life communication.

Teachers are also expected to offer help and encourage students to work with their partners as much as they can.

Through teacher's constant facilitation and encouragement, learners will be motivated to interact with each other.

Finally, teachers should instruct students on how to use collocation dictionaries and try to use the collocations together with their associated functions in context.

While the present study has its own limitations, it is hoped to provide direction for future research. To start with, further research needs to be carried out in a larger time frame and supposed to select the best representative sample. As the study was conducted in the military environment, it might be interesting if subsequent investigations will be made in other kinds of environment. Finally, further research is expected to investigate other skills and aspects of English to assess the effectiveness of the lexical approach.

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