The Application of the Lexical Chunks to English Reading Teaching in Junior High Schools

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Abstract: Reading is an effective way to acquire knowledge and information. Vocabulary is the basis of reading comprehension. It's time-consuming and inefficient to recite a lot of words and grammar rules. Therefore, scholars have begun to explore the use of lexical chunks. As a combination of grammar, semantic and context, lexical chunks can help reduce students' burden of memory, and understand the structure and the theme of a text, which can be regarded as a good way to learn. According to the analysis of the experiment being carried out, it can be concluded that lexical chunks can help improve students' English reading ability, and the application of the lexical chunks to reading teaching can help students have a more positive attitude towards reading comprehension.

Keywords: Junior high school; English reading teaching; Lexical chunks;

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a variety of social factors are increasing the demand for English teaching. For junior high school students, reading is particularly important, because there is a considerable proportion of reading in various English tests at home and abroad, and this period is critical for them to establish a foundation of their English learning. Lexical chunks can be innovated under relatively fixed conditions, which can be regarded as a good way for learning. As the existing theoretical researches, mostly focus on oral English and writing. And the subjects among some of the empirical researches are mostly college students, some are senior high school students, but few are junior high school students. It is hope that

through this study, it can help teachers to understand the current status of the application of the lexical chunks to the teaching of reading, providing some reference for teachers to use lexical chunks in reading teaching, so as to improve the reading level of students and magnify the effects of teachers' reading teaching. What's more, teachers can adapt lexical chunks theory to make a more comprehensive design of English reading materials, guide students to use proper reading strategies, and provide some feasible methods to improve their reading ability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "lexical chunks" has been proposed by foreign scholars in 1960s, while the study of lexical chunks in China is relatively late.

(1). Definitions of lexical chunks

Researchers at home and abroad are not completely consistent with the definition of lexical chunks, and different scholars use different terms.

Nattinger & De Carrico (1992) defined the lexical phrases which are commonly used in language as lexical chunks. They argued that lexical chunks are located between traditional grammar and vocabulary, with two or more than two words and with different lengths. And lexical chunks have stable collocation and specific pragmatic functions.

Michael Lewis (1993) defined that lexical items are socially sanctioned independent units. These may be individual words, full sentence-institutionalized utterance that conveys fixed social pragmatic meaning within a given community. When people use a language, they do not normally build a new statement based on the rules of grammar and the words they need, but use some prefabricated chunks of words. In comparison, his definition of lexical chunks is broader and more comprehensive.

Xu Jiajin and Xu Zongrui (2007) believed that Lexical chunks have a relatively high frequency in the corpus, can express a relatively complete meaning of more than two words of continuous word combinations, such as I think, if I were.

From the above definitions of lexical chunks of various scholars, it can be seen that lexical chunks include words, phrases, idioms, sentences and so on. Their structural form and meaning are relatively stable, and easy to be remembered. As being stored in the brain as a whole, lexical chunks can be extracted and used as a whole.

(2). Classifications of lexical chunks

Because of different definitions of lexical chunks, researchers have classified the lexical chunks from

different perspectives.

Lewis (1997) divided lexical chunks into four categories, too: (a) Words and poly-words;(b) Collocations;(c) Institutionalized utterances;(d) Sentence frames and heads.

According to the classification of Nattinger & Decarrico, Zhang Jianqin (2004) divided the words into five categories in terms of their functions: (a)topic-related phrases; (b) general topic-related phrases; (c) discourse devices; (d) interactive devices; (e) General phrases.

Among different classifications, the one made by Michael Lewis is more user-friendly, so that learners in the learning process can understand how to integrate memory, storage and retrieval, and it has a greater significance on teaching.

(3). Functions of lexical chunks

The functions of lexical chunks also have been studied by many scholars. The study of Nattinger & De Carrico (1992) found that the function of lexical chunks is as educational as the classification of lexical chunks. They divided them into three categories: (a) Social Function, which refers to the description of social relations made by the initiator of social interaction, composing categories of conversational maintenance and categories of functional meaning; (b) Necessary topics, which are used for daily conversation when speakers ask or answer questions; (c) Discourse devices, which mainly refer to lexical chunks that are related to the meaning and structure of the discourse.

To sum up, it can be seen that from all the above classifications of the functions of lexical chunks have a significant effect on the local structure of the text, the macro organization of discourse, the subjective level of attitude, and evaluation of the interlocutors.

3. THEPROBLEMSWITH VOCABULARY TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ENGLISH READING

In this chapter, the problems with vocabulary in English reading teaching and learning process will be discussed, so as to have a clear understanding about its current situation.

(1). The problems in teaching process

The present situation of English vocabulary teaching in junior high schools is in line with the requirements of the new curriculum standards, both teachers and the students have generally recognized the importance of vocabulary teaching. However, there are still three major problems in teaching process.

The first problem is about rigid and inflexible teaching methods. Most of the teachers still maintain the old-fashioned teaching methods, without trying harder to set a specific context of the use of vocabulary, so as to cause students being inactive and have no interest to learn words.

The second problem is about backward teaching

environment. Nowadays, there are many advanced teaching techniques and methods, but for the vocabulary teaching in junior high school English reading class, the auxiliary function of advanced teaching methods is not so great.

(2). The problems in learning process

Ensuring a context for learning English has been advocated. However, there are still some problems need to be worked out.

The first problem is that most students are lacking of learning awareness and motivation. On the one hand, with the traditional vocabulary learning methods, students are used to study and memorize vocabulary mechanically and passively. On the other hand, students rely too much on teachers and teaching materials, there is no initiative to expand the awareness of vocabulary knowledge.

The second problem is that it is easy to forget owning to the physiological characteristics. And for the non-mother tongue language, teachers need to give correct guidance and initiative to strengthen students' self-learning awareness.

The third problem is about lacking of interest. Students need to learn a large amount of knowledge in a limited time, under the pressure of examination, many students lose their interest in learning English and even give up it.

4. THE APPLICATION OF THE LEXICAL CHUNKS IN ENGLISH READING TEACHING

The author made a study in Dongshan Junior High School in Meizhou during her 3 months internship. The students from Class 7, Grade 8 were chosen as subjects. There were 56 students. The teaching material was Go for it, published by the People's Education Press. The author applied the lexical chunks in English reading teaching, which lasted for three months. And two questionnaires were given to the students before and after the experiment and analyzed carefully.

(1) Questionnaires

In this research, two questionnaires were applied. Both of the two questionnaires were adopted from the paper of Shen Xiufang, a master graduated in 2014.The pre-questionnaire was conducted at the beginning of the experiment, and the post-questionnaire was conducted at the end of the experiment. The collected data was carefully sorted and classified, and the percentage of each content was calculated by Excel program to ensure the accuracy and validity.

(a) The pre-questionnaire

The pre-questionnaire includes fifteen questions.

The first part is made up of questions 1-3, and it discusses the subjects' attitude towards reading. The result is as following:
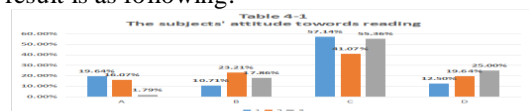
According to table 4-1, most students (57. 14%) do read English articles because of the pressure of English examination rather than interest (19.64%) or learning about western culture (10.71%). Under the pressure of the examination, most of the students (41.07%) neither like nor dislike reading, and even some students (12.50%) feel helpless in reading. In return, 55.36% of them pay no special attention to their reading results. So it's very necessary to help students change this terrible situation in reading.

The second part includes four questions 4-7, and it concerns about the subjects' reading habits. The result is as following:

Table 4-2
The subjects' reading habits
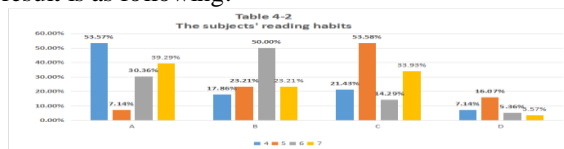
According to table 4-2, as for question 4, most students (53.57%) incline to read the whole article word by word and sentence by sentence, which is time-consuming and inefficient. When asking how do they deal with new words coming cross in reading, most students (53.58%) choose to skip the words and go on with reading the following part. In question 6, most students know that it's better to do reading exercises by getting the main idea first or going through the questions first. Meanwhile, it has shown that many students spend time on the articles they have read, 39.29% of them would like to look up the new words or some phrases, but few can pick out some key words that can really help facilitate their understanding. To sum up, students pay more attention to the understanding of words and sentences, while ignore trying to get the main idea and outline the structure of the reading passages.

The third part consists of three questions 8-10, and it considers the subjects' difficulties in reading. The result is as following:

Table 4-3
The subjects' difficulties in reading
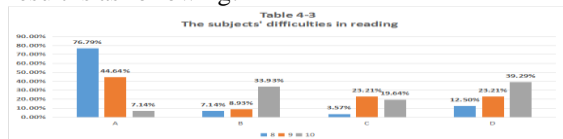
According to table 4-3, from the answers of questions 8 and 9, it is obvious that the main difficulties students encounter in reading lie in vocabulary-related problems, including the lack of vocabulary (76.79%) and confusion of similar morphology (44.64%). When asking what kind of question is the most difficult in reading comprehension, 39.29% students think questions considering the meanings of words and sentences are the most difficult. Meanwhile, a certain number of students (33.93%) think questions concerning the details are also difficult.

The fourth part includes four questions 11-14, and gives us a general idea of students' views on present reading teaching. The result is as following:

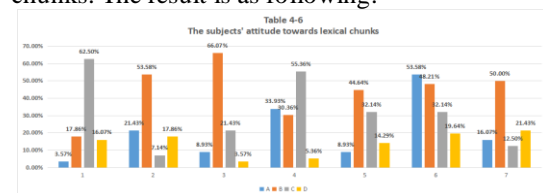Table 4-4
The subjects' views on present reading teaching
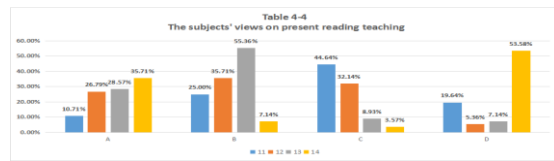
According to table 4-4, there is no optimistic attitude towards present reading teaching, 44.64% students neither like nor dislike it and 19.64% of them think it not helpful. Therefore, 35.71% students believe that it is necessary for teachers to change the present reading teaching approach. What's more, most students (44.64% for necessary and 10.71% for quite necessary) support that instructions on the reading skills or reading comprehension to be given. And it is hope that instruction on how to get the main idea of articles (35.71% in total) and how to make choices when doing reading comprehension exercises correctly and rapidly (53.58% in total) can be given.

The last part is to investigate students' knowledge of lexical chunk. The result is as following:

Table 4-5
The subjects' knowledge of lexical chunks
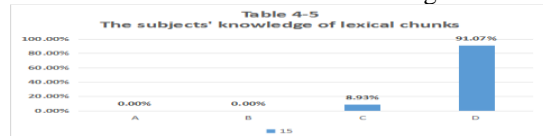
According to table 4-5, it is obvious that students have little idea about lexical chunks, it can be said that lexical chunks is really a new concept for students in junior high schools.

4.1.2 The post-questionnaire

The post-questionnaire includes 15 questions.

The first part includes seven questions 1-7, and concerns about students' attitude towards the lexical chunks. The result is as following:

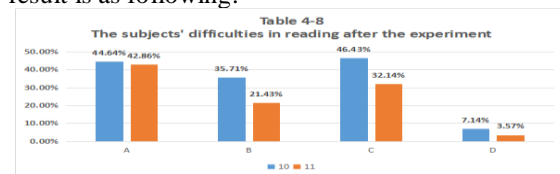
Table 4-6
The subjects' attitude towards lexical chunks

According to table 4-6, it is clear that most students (62.50% in total) have a general knowledge about lexical chunks. Considering the effectiveness of lexical chunks on reading, 53.58% students agree that lexical chunks are useful in facilitating their English reading. And 66.07% students hope that lexical chunks can be continuously applied in English teaching, only 2 students are not willing to learn it. When answering question 4 about the role of lexical chunks in reading comprehension, 55.36% students believe that lexical chunks are helpful to understand the main idea of an article and locate answers. In terms of question 5, 44.64% students display great initiative in memorizing the new lexical chunks they have learned in the class. Regarding the benefits they obtained from lexical chunks, 53.58% students think they have learned a new method and strategy and they also remember more vocabulary.

The second part consists of two questions 8-9, which

concerns students' present reading strategies. The result is as following:

Table 4-7
The subjects' reading strategies after the experiment
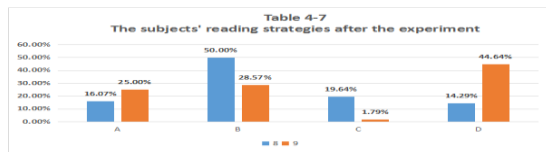
According to table 4-7, after the experiment, half of the students can master the reading strategy that going through the question first to grasp the key chunks, then finishing the reading exercises with understanding of the structure and a general idea of the article, which is quite different from pre-questionnaire (53.57% students do reading exercises by reading every word and sentence). And 44.64% students realize they should do more after knowing the answers, that is trying to figure out key words to the answers, which is also changed a lot from 39.29% of them chose to look up the new words or some phrases in pre-questionnaire.

The third part is composed of two questions 10-11, and presents the students' difficulties in reading. The result is as following:

Table 4-8
The subjects' difficulties in reading after the experiment

According to table 4-8, 46.43% and 35.71% students have difficulty in applying and recognizing the lexical chunks. At the same time 42.86% students think it is difficult to classify the lexical chunks.

The fourth parties about students' suggestions on the application of lexical chunks. The result is as following:

Table 4-9
The subjects' suggestion concerning the lexical chunks
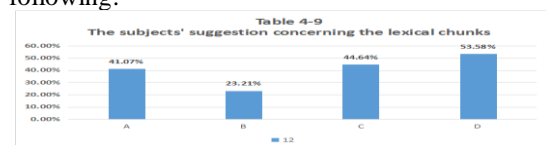
According to table 4-9, it is suggested that teachers should pay more attention on how to apply lexical chunks (44.64% in total) and help students classify them more effectively (41.07% in total). Besides, 53.58% students hope that more practical exercises can be provided.

The last part is made up of three questions and discuss students' attitude towards reading after experiment. The result is as following:

Table 4-10
The subjects' attitude towards reading after the experiment
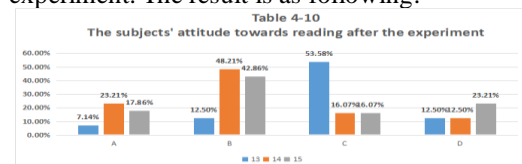
According to table 4-10, it shows that 53.58% students can be more active in taking part in reading activities than before. 48.21% students are more

interested in reading. 42.86% students also become more confident in reading.

All in all, this chapter mainly presents the result of the two questionnaires, it is good to see that students have a positive attitude towards reading and other aspects in some way.

4.2 Interview

In order to testify the effect of the application of the lexical chunks in English reading, 15 students of the class in school activities room were interviewed. Students from different reading level were selected and they can represent the whole class. Each student was interviewed for about five minutes. Then author recorded the main content of the interview.

(1) Before the experiment, students knew little about lexical chunks, but now they are aware of them and gradually working on applying them to their English learning. And many of them would also accumulate them in and out of class.

(2) After this semester's studying, most students become more interested in English reading. Although students have to do a mountain of homework and do rote learning with the hope to get a good score, yet they may still make no progress and even give up reading. So now with the application of the lexical chunks, students are provided a new way to realize English learning, and it can ease their burden to some extent.

(3) It is good to see that more students know about lexical chunks and affirm its application in English reading. By now, they can use lexical chunks to understand the structure and grasp the main idea of an article and locate the answers to the questions. The application of lexical chunks is useful.

5. CONCLUSIONS

(1) Major findings

During the three months' experiment, the subjects were introduced to lexical chunks and trained to apply them to their study. Based on data collected, we can draw the following conclusions:

Firstly, the application of the lexical chunks can help students have a more positive attitude towards reading. And they agree that it is better to memorize useful lexical chunks than single words.

Secondly, the application of the lexical chunks helps improve students' reading ability to some extent. Although there is no specific statistic showing students' improvement in their scores, it is inspired that students hope to learn lexical chunks.

(2) Implications

This experiment is assumed that lexical chunks are effective in helping students at junior middle school to improve their reading ability. And it is also proved that lexical chunks play a positive role in English learning. Here are some implications.

(a) Improving students' awareness of lexical chunks.

In the traditional English reading teaching practice, there is no concept of lexical chunks. Therefore, in

the actual teaching process, teachers should be consciously to penetrate the "lexical chunks" concept to students, so that students can become accustomed to lexical chunks instead of words and phrases. It is not easy to help students construct and gradually strengthen the concept about lexical chunks. Teachers should persevere in gradually guiding the students to form the new thinking of learning, so as to raise students' awareness of the lexical chunks.

(b)Activate the lexical chunks.

According to the characteristics of a text, the teacher should clearly define the vocabulary goal and activate the lexical chunks. After defining goals, teachers can consciously combine them with the main body of the text, and students are expected to extract the relevant words, which can help facilitate the development of later reading teaching.

(c) Designing and providing proper drills

"Lexical chunks" is still a new concept for students to understand. And what should be considered is that the application of lexical chunks is to help reading teaching and learning, not to completely replace current teaching method. Therefore, teachers should pay special attention on designing teaching plans and providing proper drills to help students.

(3) Limitations

As language teaching is regarded as a part of social science, it is inevitable to be affected by some subjective and objective factors when we do empirical studies on reading. Here are some limitations of the study.

The most obvious limitation is the small sample size, only 56 students involved in the experiment, which can not represent all the junior high school students. This study was carried out in Dongshan Junior High School and the students' level is not the same as that of other junior high schools.

The time of the experiment is another limited factors. Due to the restriction of the experiment condition, the experiment only last three months. Besides, there is no test score that can obviously demonstrate the changes of the subjects.

So the results can not be causally generalized or applied from one context to another and the results would be more convincing if subjects included a greater number and more grades, longer period of the experiment and more explicit and convictive statistic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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