Teaching Chunks of Language

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Suppose you've brought a length of rope with you to class, or are ready to mime using one. Suppose that you ask your students what people use ropes for. They might mention things like anchor ropes, tying things together, catching cows, hanging murderers, and stretching between posts to make a kind of fence. Now ask if anyone can say, or mime, how experienced rope users store their ropes when the day is done – i.e., they wind them up into coils. Write *wind up your rope* on the board and quickly sketch a coil of rope (but you needn't also teach the word *coil*). Next write these three sentences on the board:

1. *After five years of being engaged, they finally <u>tied the knot</u>.*
2. *All business taken care of? Yes? Shall we <u>wind up the meeting</u> then?*
3. *He's going to <u>wind up</u> in jail for sure.*

Ask about the meaning of each of the underlined phrases, or 'chunks of language' (respectively, 'got married', 'finish the meeting in good order', 'finish up') and see if anyone can say what connection each expression has with using a rope and/or with one of the other expressions. ([1] To explain *tie the knot*, draw or mime a couple encircled by a rope, the ends of which have been tied together; [2] A meeting, like a rope, can be long. 'Winding up' a meeting means finishing it in an orderly fashion just like winding up a rope is an orderly way of ending a session of use. [3] Like a rope, a life can be long with twists and turns, and when it has been 'wound up', we see that a life-phase has ended.)

Further below, we will say how this brief 'rope activity' exemplifies an important but widely neglected way of addressing a major problem with the Lexical Approach so far – namely, its *serious* neglect of the vital issue of memory. Before that, recall that the Lexical Approach is all about teaching 'chunks of language' (= 'multi-word vocabulary', 'lexical phrases', etc.). You will be familiar with the claim (evidently true!) that foreign language learners need to know masses of L_2 chunks such as *Could I...*, *as soon as*, *tie the knot* and many more in order to be fluent. For one thing, mastery of chunks helps students produce idiomatic language that comes across as natural to native speakers.

Students with good chunk-knowledge of English will produce idiomatic word strings like *make an effort*, *stark naked*, and *let's have a drink* rather than, say, 'do an effort', 'stark nude', and 'let's drink a glass'. For another thing, mastery of chunks facilitates fluency, both in language production and reception. Firstly, mastery of chunks enables you to retrieve chunks from memory as 'pre-fabricated' word strings which you can insert pretty much without further ado in the stretch of discourse you are producing. Secondly, it enables you instantly to recognize and understand chunks in whatever discourse you are confronted with. Thus, students with good chunk-knowledge of English will effortlessly anticipate the missing words in the following phrases, for instance:

- "As a matter of ___, the woman who was burnt at the ___ wasn't a witch at ___"
- "When he saw his daughter was unharmed, he breathed a sigh of ___"
- "Got to get ___ now. I've got a train to ___"

Half a century ago J. Firth famously stated that "You shall know a word by the company it keeps". Eventual recognition of the truth of this statement has led to the publication of better and better collocation dictionaries and the creation of hugely useful on-line, corpus-based collocation samplers which can be used to learn about 'strong collocates'. (Strong collocates of a given word are words that very often co-occur with this word in a kind of chunk known as a 'frequent collocation'– e.g., *commit* is a strong collocate of *crime*). To give another example, the following words were thrown up by the free collocation sampler on the Collins Cobuild website when we typed in a certain preposition as query word: *years, all, control, take, victory, again, weekend, handed, head, shoulder, win, world, place, and, here, days, dispute, controversy, row, time, presided, concern, came, counter, turned, bent* and *run*. Can you guess what preposition we were interested in? If so, your chunk knowledge for this preposition is at least fairly good. (The answer is at the very end of this article.)

In short, there can be no dispute over the importance of chunks in language and language learning. However, there is reason for concern about the *feasibility* of chunk-oriented language pedagogy. After all, the number of chunks that are current in English is *vast* – greater, in fact, than the number of current single words. (This stands to reason since many common words occur in many chunks, with each chunk having its own particular

meaning/function – e.g., *a power play, a power house, a power broker, manpower, girl power…*). So, even more than is the case with single-word vocabulary, teachers need to teach some chunks but ignore others.

Not surprisingly, the typical recommendation in this respect is for teachers to focus on chunks that are highly frequent for the reason that it is these chunks which are most likely to be of use. However, highly frequent chunks happen to be relatively scarce; actually the huge majority of chunks are in the medium-frequency and rare categories. So, in order to proceed with a Lexical Approach at all, we must consider teaching less frequent chunks too – since what's the point of adopting a Lexical Approach in the first place unless your aim is to help your students learn *many* more chunks than they did before? Additionally, it is highly frequent chunks – and only highly frequent chunks – that stand a good chance of being picked up by learners without the teacher's help. What is the sense of restricting your teaching focus to what your students have a good chance of learning on their own? So again, we must consider teaching lots of less frequent chunks.

But of course it is a daunting challenge to try to help students learn *lots* of chunks – in particular:

- Many students find learning, and *remembering*, single-word vocabulary very challenging; yet chunks are even harder to remember.
- Knowledge of chunks results in fluent speech only when the chunks are so well remembered that they pop into mind the instant they are needed. Therefore, classroom work which results only in passive knowledge of chunks will be insufficient.
- Most foreign language courses are non-intensive and so, by definition, they take place outside of any country where the target language predominates in oral communication. The typical result is that a learner's exposure to L_2 chunks in natural and vividly communicative contexts is likely to be minimal both in and out of class.
- Incidental learning of vocabulary through reading and listening generally proceeds very slowly (*extremely* slowly, in the case of chunks); in any case, the

resultant knowledge tends to be passive regardless of whether it has been gained in or out of class.

Before looking at new ways of addressing these problems, let's review some basics about how a person learns and *remembers* a chunk well enough to use it fluently and naturally. For this, three occurrences are always necessary, with a fourth typically being necessary as well:

1. The chunk must be noticed. (Teachers can encourage this in a number of ways: e.g., by highlighting chunks and by targeting them in activities where students get a gapped text and a jumbled list of chunks which go in the gaps.)
2. The chunk must be understood. (There are many well-known ways of bringing this about, but they don't all result in the same *quality* of understanding. For example, doing the brief 'rope' activity above would tend to result in a different quality of understanding than what would result if you just told your class that *tie the knot* means 'get married'..)
3. The chunk's traces in memory must be strengthened. (See further below.)
4. Its memory traces must be maintained over time, or even strengthened further. (That is, for students to remember chunks well, revision and extension exercises are usually essential.)

Re point 1: The Lexical Approach as it has come down to us does address the issue of noticing; in fact, this approach consists almost entirely of traditional noticing exercises along with a few recently devised mainly-for-noticing exercises involving corpus exploration. Such exercises are essential, but by themselves they too rarely lead to strong, durable memory traces. Proponents of the Lexical Approach are likely to argue that in-class noticing activities are meant first and foremost to raise students' awareness of chunks so that students will autonomously become able to pick up many more chunks from the target-language they read and hear out-of-class. However, there are two flaws in this view of things. Firstly, it is hard for a learner to recognize the chunk status of any particular word string unless that learner has already met *and noticed* that same string a couple of times before. But, as we have seen, most chunks are not highly frequent and so,

by they time they have been met a second time, a learner may have forgotten ever meeting them before. Secondly, we know from research in vocabulary learning generally that a word or phrase has to be noticed numerous times within a relatively short span of time in order for uptake in memory to be likely. However, the kinds of chunks that learners beyond lower-intermediate level would find useful additions to their repertoires are highly unlikely to be met sufficiently frequently within the critical time-span for 'incidental acquisition' to take place.

Re point 2: Until recently, virtually all writers on chunk teaching stressed the fact that there is no sense in thinking about why any given chunk is made up of a particular set of words. However, they are wrong. For one thing, many chunks are figurative (e.g., metaphorical and/or metonymic) and are consequently open to the kind of treatment seen in the 'rope activity', the aim of which is to help students understand figurative expressions more deeply by associating them with explanatory mental images. A basic practice here is to focus on a keyword such as *rope* or *ropes*. If, for instance, students consider the use of ropes to encircle a boxing ring, they will be more likely to form an appropriate image for the expression underlined here: *By the end of the debate McCain was <u>on the ropes</u>* (i.e., the image of a losing boxer driven against the ropes by a stronger opponent). This practice can work even if the keyword is archaic or obsolete as in *[be] at the end of your tether*, where a 'tether' is the short rope with which a goat or other grazing animal is bound to a stake. Aside from increasing the memorability of a figurative chunk, recognition of the literal origin from which it is derived can help students appreciate the chunk's evaluative dimension and thus its usage restrictions. For instance, as its origin in boxing suggests, natural use of *be on the ropes* is restricted to situations in which someone is in danger of losing an intense competition; accordingly, it would be odd to say something like, *At the end of my nightmare about falling, I was really on the ropes.* All in all, wording does matter because examination of the words in a chunk can lead to better understanding.

Re point 3 (the matter of memory): It is by encouraging students to form more elaborate mental representations of the meaning or other characteristics (e.g., sound structure) of

words and phrases that the chances of their uptake in long-term memory are significantly enhanced. Engaging in mental imagery is one type of mental elaboration and, while it has so far been neglected in the standard Lexical Approach, research has over and over again shown that associating vocabulary with mental images is *powerfully* mnemonic. But there is another aspect of a chunk that can make it easier to remember: it was widely unsuspected until very recently that:

- A large fraction of English chunks show patterns of sound repetition such as alliteration (***m**ake a **m**istake, **d**o **d**amage*), rhyme (*bake a cake, deep sleep*), vowel repetition (*keep x clean, You too!*) and combinations of these kinds of repetition (***m**ake a **m**istake*). There is even statistical evidence that the precise lexical composition of a great many chunks has been influenced by the appeal of such patterns of sound repetition. That is why we say, for instance, ***b**eer **b**elly, **t**ime will **t**ell, **f**eeding **f**renzy* and ***f**ully **f**ledged* rather than, say, 'beer stomach', 'time will show', 'eating frenzy' and 'completely fledged'.

- Chunks which show sound repetition are relatively easy to remember.

Classroom exploitation of these facts has the big advantage that it enables us to go beyond chunks like *be on the ropes* which lend themselves well to mental imagery because they are figurative. This is because sound repetition occurs not only in figurative chunks (***r**un **r**ings a**r**ound s'one*) but also in chunks that are literal (***c**areer **c**ounselling*).

One simple technique for unlocking the mnemonic potential of chunks that show sound repetition is to ask students to form pairs. Give each partner a different list of 8-10 chunks they've met before. Some chunks, whether figurative or literal, should show sound repetition (e.g., alliteration as in *fully functional*) and some should not (*Good timing!*). Partners dictate their lists to each other (so both can experience the sounds in role of speaker and listener). Partners then work together to sort the 16-20 chunks from both lists into sound-pattern families (i.e., chunks that alliterate, ones that show no repetition, etc.). Research indicates that doing even less than this can make 'repetitive' chunks significantly more memorable and so set the stage for better fluency. It is important to note, however, that learners tend not to notice sound patterning on their own

and so *some kind of* teacher intervention is required to unlock the mnemonic potential of repeated sounds.

Engaging with sound repetitions and performing mental imagery (e.g., linking rope expressions to particular functions of a rope) are ways in which students can focus on chunks which deserve a bit of class-time because of their extra memorability *provided* that appropriate facilitation is forthcoming from the teacher. The first book mentioned below under the heading of 'Further reading' is unusual in that it includes exercises of both these types. But two other kinds of activity are also important in chunk teaching, partly because there are many chunks which either show no sound repetition or are not particularly imagistic (also, not all learners are natural imagers). One kind consists of traditional noticing activities (e.g., dictations and dictoglosses) modified so as to include a sharper focus on chunks. Another comprises generative activities for review/revision. No coursebook that we know of comes close to providing these necessities for chunk teaching. The only teacher's resource book that does this, we believe, is the first book that is mentioned under 'Further reading' immediately below.

Further reading
- A collection of ideas for classroom activities and exercises that help students appreciate the importance of chunks, remember them and use them appropriately is presented by S. Lindstromberg and F. Boers in *Teaching Chunks of Language: From Noticing to Remembering* (2008), a teachers' resource book published by Helbling Languages.
- The rationale and the body of research behind the method for teaching chunks that we propose is detailed in *Optimising a Lexical Approach to Instructed Second Language Acquisition* (F. Boers and S. Lindstromberg), forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan.
- A collection of research papers on the merits of helping students appreciate the non-arbitrary nature of many chunks of language can be found in *Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary and Phraseology* (2008), edited by F. Boers and S. Lindstromberg, and published by Mouton de Gruyter.

- *Over* – e.g., *over [the…] years, all over, control over, over again, over [the…] weekend…*

Note

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