

Key concepts in ELT

Lexical chunks

Although vocabulary has conventionally been conceptualized as individual words, it has now become clear that much of lexis consists of sequences of words which operate as single units. Traditional approaches have long dealt with *multi-word units* (MWU), wherein a single meaning is attached to more than one word, for example, *phrasal verbs* ('give up'), *compounds* ('freeze-dry'), and *idioms* ('burn the midnight oil'). But corpus-based research has shown that *collocation* (the tendency for words to occur together in discourse) extends far beyond the level of such MWUs. In fact, it appears quite common for longer sequences of words to pattern together. Some of these recur frequently enough to be treated as units in their own right, e.g. *to make a long story short*. Numerous terms have been coined to refer to this type of sequence, but the most commonly used are *lexical chunks* and *lexical phrases*.

One reason these lexical chunks are so common is that they are typically related to functional language use. For example, the above lexical chunk is often used in summarizing, while *Have you heard the one about ___?* is reserved for beginning a joke or humorous story. Lexical chunks like these are institutionalized as the most efficient and most familiar linguistic means to carry out language functions. As such, they facilitate clear, relevant, and concise language use. Because of their functional usage, knowledge of lexical chunks is essential for pragmatic competence.

There is a good psycholinguistic basis for believing that the mind stores and processes these chunks as individual wholes. The main reason stems from the structure of the mind itself. It can store vast amounts of knowledge in long-term memory, but is only able to process small amounts of it in real-time, such as when one is speaking. In effect, the mind makes use of a relatively abundant resource (long-term memory) to compensate for a relative lack in another (processing capacity) by storing a number of frequently-needed lexical chunks as individual whole units. These can be easily retrieved and used without the need to compose them on-line through word selection and grammatical sequencing. This means there is less demand on cognitive capacity, because the lexical

chunks are 'ready to go', and require little or no additional processing.

Some lexical chunks have 'slots' which can take different words according to the situation, providing a scaffold for quick, but flexible, language use. For example, ' (person) *thinks nothing of* *ing* (verb)' can provide the preformulated platform for many different realizations, such as *Diane thinks nothing of hiking 20 miles*, or *He thinks nothing of teaching six classes a day*. The ability to use preformed lexical chunks allows greater fluency in speech production. The use of lexical chunks can aid the listener as well. Because lexical chunks can be recognized as individual wholes, this spares the listener some of the processing effort required to interpret an utterance word-by-word.

It has been argued that lexical chunks also play a part in vocabulary and grammar acquisition. Once a chunk is known, it can be analysed and segmented into its constituent words. This can occur when some variability is noticed in a lexical chunk. For example, after having heard the phrase *How are you today?* several times, it may be acquired as a chunk with the meaning of 'a greeting'. However, the learner may later notice the phrases *How are you this evening?* or *How are you this fine morning?* At that point, the learner may realize that the underlying structure is actually *How are you _____?*, where the slot can be filled with a time reference. The learner is then aware that what fits in the slot is a separate unit from the rest of the phrase, which opens the door to learning that lexical unit. Eventually, the entire lexical chunk may be analysed into separate words, although it may continue to be stored as a whole because of its utility. Because this segmentation also involves syntax, it has been suggested that it can also lead to grammatical acquisition.

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References

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Norbert Schmitt lectures at the University of Nottingham, and is interested in all aspects of L2 vocabulary studies. He recently published *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* with Cambridge University Press. He also hopes to find time to start playing his bagpipes again.