

USING CHUNKS IN ELT

In recent years, researchers and teachers have begun to stress the lexical connections between words in English, giving particular emphasis to multi-word lexical items. Palmer (1933) first proposed the idea of using lexical chunks as a language learning and teaching unit. English comprises a wide range of lexical chunks that the native speaker processes as prefabricated multi-word units such as collocations, idioms, and other fixed or semi-fixed expressions.

According to McCarthy, languages are full of strong collocational pairs; collocation deserves to be the central aspect of vocabulary teaching. Lewis defines collocation as «the phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur with other words with more than random frequency: the concept is central to the Lexical Approach».

Many researchers have noted that the acquisition of collocations is a key to native-like fluency. Thus, Thornbury states that the ability to deploy a wide range of lexical chunks both accurately and appropriately is probably what most distinguishes advanced learners from intermediate ones. In other words, learners will have a good command of English if they know the principles and applications of lexical chunks.

Seth Lindstromberg and Frank Boersif in their book «Teaching Chunks of Language» point out that if the chunks that a learner knows are well embedded in long-term memory, these chunks may serve the learner as «islands of accuracy» that reduce the overall risk of making mistakes or of producing odd word combinations.

A «chunk of language» is a sequence of words which native speakers feel is the natural and preferred way of expressing a particular idea or purpose. For example, all three of the following can be understood by a native English speaker: *time will show*, *the future will reveal*, *the future will tell*, but the phrase which has become the standard expression of the underlying idea is *time will tell*. So, *time will tell* is a chunk, whereas the other three phrases are not; and if learners use any of them, their English at that point would be odd.

A multi-word chunk cannot be interpreted on a word by word atomical basis, but has a specialized unitary meaning. For example, *to kick the bucket* means *to die*.

Chunks are diverse in type and there exist many classifications. One of them is by function: 1) conversational fillers such as *you know what I mean*; 2) exclamations *Good God!*, 3) pragmatic notices *Excuse me, How are you doing?*; 4) discourse organisers *The thing is, Having said that*.

The BBI Dictionary divides collocations into two main syntactic groups: lexical collocations and grammatical ones.

Lewis suggests the following taxonomies of lexical chunks: 1) words (e.g., *pen*), polywords (e.g., *upside down, by the way*); 2) collocations, or word partnerships (e.g., *absolutely convinced*); 3) institutionalized utterances (e.g., *we'll see; if I were you*); 4) sentence frames and heads (e.g., *that is not as...as you think; The fact/suggestion/problem/danger was ...*).

Chunks may also be classified on the basis of form, e.g. sentence heads such as *Could you ... ?*, *Why not ... ?*; phrasal verbs: *break down, wipe out*; compounds: *credit card, weather forecast*; strong collocations: *tell a story, stark naked*; and grammatical frames: *as ... as ...*, and *the -er the -er*.

One more type is to classify chunks according to the meaning, e.g. ones whose meaning is immediately clear (*please come in!*) to ones whose meaning seems impossible to guess (*hit it off with someone*).

Chunks may be categorised by geographical variety (e.g. international, British or the south east of England), by the age of typical users (e.g. people over 60, teens), by level of formality (formal, informal, slang), and so on.

Teachers can also teach collocations, focusing on the four major types: noun+noun (N+N) collocations, adjective+noun (Adj+N) collocations, verb+noun (V+N) collocations, and verb+adverb (V+Adv) collocations.

Scientists emphasize the necessity of effective strategies for teaching chunks to help students improve their language skills.