

From the authors

My adventure with chunks started in the mid-nineties after I heard Michael Lewis give a presentation at IATEFL Poland.

Michael introduced the concept of chunking and, at the same time, admitted that although there was a new linguistic description of the language there did not seem any new methodology springing from this description.

A few years later, together with Paul, we started thinking about writing a resource book, voicing a question that we found crucial and to which we are beginning to find an answer:

Does a new language description have to result in new methodology?

Despite the fact that chunks and corpus analysis have been with us well over two decades, there has been no major breakthrough in teaching. Linguistics provides the data and we teachers recognise the interesting facts that are revealed about language, yet we see hardly any way we can implement these findings.

I am a non-native speaker of English. English is a foreign language to me and I learned it with the help of teachers who believed that if we amassed a lot of new words and mastered the intricacies of English grammar we would speak perfect English.

Subsequent contact with non-native speakers who had *acquired* the language rather than *learned* it taught me something new. I often spoke 'in English' but didn't speak 'English'. I could communicate, but the language I produced was less real and less right.

Later in my adult life I had to learn a lot of chunks or 'routines', and I find I am still learning them. I feel I have wasted a lot of time.

As a teacher, I want to help my students to learn about and use chunks as early as possible. By doing so in a conscious and planned way, I can introduce an element of *acquisition* into the process of *learning* a language. It is what I would call 'conscious acquisition'.

Teaching my students to learn chunks is a way of improving my teaching – and not just part of an academic debate.



I had seen presentations and read about lexical chunking, but what really got me going was noticing the students naturally using chunks in lower-level classes I taught.

In a standard first lesson with my beginners, I presented 'What's your name?' and 'I'm Paul'. Then the students milled around with a piece of paper, using the language to make a list of names. So far so good. But many got bored with the repetition and shortened it to 'You?' or 'And you?'

My students were chunking down – naturally. I thought about getting them to say the full sentence; then I thought about it again and let it go: they were doing what they would do in their mother tongue and what native speakers would do in English.

Why sacrifice this natural spoken English for a bit of grammar practice?

Later, I realised that I instinctively did the same myself. I didn't ask 'Did you have a nice weekend?' I would say 'Nice weekend?' And they would reply in chunks: 'Yeah, grandma's house'. Brief conversations which were low on grammar but dense with chunks – and great confidence builders.

I was struck by a comment of a friend of mine (Simon Marshall) about talking to an advanced non-native speaker of English he met. He said he complemented them, after a few minutes, saying how good their English was but, after a few more minutes, he regretted saying it.

I think Simon meant that they were overusing their knowledge of grammar and words and so the conversation became boring. As David Brazil puts it: making a speech rather than speaking.

So an early exposure to the idea of lexical chunking can have long-term benefits as the student becomes more proficient. And not just speaking, but writing too. I noticed that most of the lexical mistakes of my advanced students were not so much that they use the wrong word than that they use the wrong combinations.

I put this down to the fact that they have learnt single words early in their language learning – rather than chunks.



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