

A Review of Research on Chinese English Lexical Chunk Teaching

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[**Abstract**] This paper analyzes the current state of lexical chunk teaching research in China based on over 600 papers collected from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database from 2004 to 2024. The analysis covers four aspects: definitions of lexical chunks under different considerations, annual publication volume, different educational stages, and English writing. The paper argues that lexical chunk teaching methods are primarily focused on theoretical research in primary and secondary school English education, lacking in-depth empirical research. Additionally, the research lacks emphasis on cultivating students' practical pragmatic abilities.

[**Key words**] lexical chunk; teaching method; writing; pragmatic ability

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1 Introduction

Becker first introduced the concept of lexical chunks in 1976. He believed that lexical chunks are units of language stored in the brain in a holistic form and can be used by learners as prefabricated chunks either in their entirety or with minor modifications. Since the introduction of lexical chunk teaching methods in Chinese English language teaching, they have gradually become a hot topic for domestic scholars in second language acquisition, leading to numerous research outputs and abundant findings. These studies have been explored from various perspectives, including listening (Li Ou & Sun Ruohong, 2009; Wang Li, 2015; Qu Ping, 2016; Cheng Liping, 2017), reading (Luo Yanxiu, 2008; Xia Cunguo, 2013; Zhao Yuhang, 2015; Zhao Zeyan, 2018; Meng Yu, 2020; Xiao Yang, 2023), writing (Wang Mei, 2007; Ou Minhong, 2009; Zhang Yanle, 2010; Xie Guiling & Suo Mingru, 2012; Liu Tingting, 2022), and speaking (Hu Xiaoying, 2009; Xie Li & Zhao Ming, 2010; Lu Xiangpeng, 2011; Qi Yan, Jiang Yumei & Zhu Xueyuan, 2015; Qi Yan & Xu Cuiqin, 2015).

However, a review of relevant papers published in Chinese domestic journals shows that they are primarily focused on theoretical research in primary and secondary schools, lacking in-depth empirical research. Furthermore, there is insufficient emphasis on cultivating pragmatic abilities. Therefore, this paper summarizes research on English lexical chunk teaching methods conducted by Chinese scholars from 2004 to 2024 and predicts future trends.

2 Lexical chunk teaching based on different definitions

Chinese scholars have put forward various definitions of lexical chunks. After summarizing and analyzing, these definitions can be categorized into four characteristics based on different focuses: (1) psychological characteristics; (2) structural form characteristics; (3) practical functional characteristics; (4) meaning characteristics.

Regarding definitions focused on psychological characteristics, Duan Shiping (2007) believes that lexical chunks are multi-word units stored in the brain in a holistic form and can be used as prefabricated chunks. The psychological reality of word combinations refers to whether they are stored and retrieved as wholes. Psychological

reality is a key indicator of whether a word combination is a lexical chunk. Under the focus on structural form, Ma Guanghui (2009) defines collocations as a co-occurrence relationship between words that is necessary and inevitable. Based on this relationship, lexical chunks can be defined as extended collocations, which are word combinations that appear in corpora. They can be two-word combinations, three-word combinations, four-word combinations, or combinations of four words or more. Moreover, Ma Guanghui (2011) further suggests that lexical chunks are a combination of form, meaning, and function, emphasizing that they are composed of multiple words and can be used independently to form sentences or discourse, representing the smallest combination of form and meaning that achieves certain grammatical, textual, or pragmatic functions. This definition clarifies that lexical chunks are linguistic units located between vocabulary and sentences. Lexical chunks can be used independently like words but must be expressed continuously to convey complete semantic meaning or possess clear functions. In other words, lexical chunks do not include non-continuous language segments, those lacking both lexical and grammatical characteristics, or those with unclear semantics and functions.

In conclusion, despite differences in the focus and characteristics of lexical chunk definitions, they are not mutually exclusive and independent. We can still derive some common features from the above explanations. Structurally, lexical chunks exhibit wholeness; while composed of multiple words, their internal elements maintain stability and cannot be arbitrarily changed or replaced. Psychologically, lexical chunks are prefabricated chunks that occur frequently in real-life communication and creation, possessing psychological reality. Semantically, lexical chunks have fixed and clear meanings, allowing for their independent use in expression. Functionally, lexical chunks play crucial roles in pragmatic use, communication, and discourse organization.

3 Research development of lexical chunk teaching methods

After the exploratory stage, the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition has been initially demonstrated. Furthermore, the “National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Outline (2010—2020)” emphasizes the importance and popularization of English education. Subsequently, the implementation of the new round of English curriculum standards in 2011 highlighted the practicality and applicability of English teaching, encouraging students’ participation and interaction, and emphasizing the improvement of English education quality and efficiency. Both prior accumulation and policy guidance have provided opportunities for the further development of English lexical chunk teaching methods. From 2010 to 2017, research related to lexical chunk teaching methods emerged rapidly, with a total publication volume reaching staggering 354. The publication volume in 2010 doubled compared to the previous year, reaching 24, and ultimately peaked at 63 papers in 2017.

During the flourishing stage, lexical chunk teaching methods demonstrated a comprehensive, multi-layered, and large-scale characteristic in terms of overall publication volume, targeting different educational levels and aspects. These studies specifically addressed higher education (Zhang Ruiguang, 2010; Lu Yan, 2011; Wang Yansu, 2012; Sun Qiong, 2013; Huang Shu, 2013; Sun Jing & Cui Xinyan, 2014; Wu Dan, 2016), secondary education (Chen Xuemin, 2010; Yu Li, 2011; Jiang Yingchao, 2012; Yang Chaoying, 2012; Sui Xin, 2013; Zhang Pingsheng, 2013; Chen Yiru, 2015; Hao Xiuyin, 2016; Yang Jingjing, 2016; Jiang Xintai, 2017; Wang Qian, 2017), English majors (Wang Wanrong, 2012), non-English majors (Lu Xiangpeng, 2010; Wang Mengying, 2015), and other niche English fields like tourism English (Wang Xueqin, 2010), nautical English (Jiang Ling, 2010), and medical English (Wang Shijie, Wu Yongsheng, Zhao Yuhua & Zhang Wenyi, 2012).

These findings demonstrate the rapid emergence of lexical chunk teaching methods as a focus in education. Numerous theoretical and practical studies further validate the significant benefits of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition: (1) they improve the accuracy and fluency of students’ English language expression, overcoming the influence of first language transfer; (2) they contribute to enhancing students’ fluency

and coherence, boosting learners' confidence; (3) they break through language output bottlenecks, overcoming language output fossilization.

The publication volume of lexical chunk teaching methods peaked in 2017 and subsequently exhibited a downward trend, experiencing slight fluctuations from 2019 to 2022. Ultimately, only 8 related papers were published by June 2024, with a total publication volume of 265 papers, indicating a gradual decline in overall publication volume. This suggests that in recent years, the popularity of lexical chunk teaching methods in English research has gradually declined under the combined impact of flipped classrooms, task-based teaching methods, and online learning. The emphasis of lexical chunk teaching methods research has shifted towards empirical research, leading to a decrease in theoretical publications. Most empirical research requires a longer time to complete, extending the overall writing process. Additionally, the research has encountered bottlenecks, making it difficult to develop innovative aspects, leading to a decline in research output efficiency.

4 Lexical chunk teaching methods at different educational stages

Educational stages are formed based on an individual's age, physical and mental development, and learning requirements. These stages are interconnected. Research on English lexical chunk teaching methods has gradually shifted from higher education to secondary education. However, the publication volume for primary education remains the lowest and has not shown any significant changes. From a temporal perspective, 2012 can be considered a dividing point. From 2007 to 2012, research on lexical chunk teaching methods in second language acquisition and related issues primarily focused on higher education, while also considering secondary and primary education. From this point onwards until June 2024, the research focus shifted to secondary education, with a primary emphasis on high school research. The gap in publication volume between junior and senior high school research has gradually narrowed, indicating a growing focus on primary education, which requires further attention.

From 2007 to 2012, research focused on exploring the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition to better apply them in secondary and primary education, thereby improving the overall level of Chinese English education. Additionally, higher education institutions have served as primary experimental areas due to their students' superior overall English proficiency, comprehension, and execution abilities. The purpose of these studies is to test the feasibility and effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods (Zhao Yushan, Jin Pengsun & Jia Aijing, 2004; Sun Xiaohong & Wang Linlin, 2009). The findings revealed that lexical chunks are an integrated unit of vocabulary, grammar, and context, exhibiting fixed and semi-fixed characteristics. Using lexical chunks as a tool to learn English allows students to independently discover and summarize rules, fostering independent learning skills. Lexical chunk teaching methods view the process of second language acquisition as a cognitive process that follows the "observation-hypothesis-verification" approach. Acquiring language based on lexical chunks aligns with the cognitive patterns of learning because individuals comprehend everything from simple to complex, from imitation to creation, and from extensive absorption to eventual output. This approach holds universal significance. Furthermore, the initial stage of lexical chunk teaching requires internalizing a large amount of language data, followed by mastering the application process, and finally reaching the creative stage. Chinese students are accustomed to rote memorization, signifying a perfect match between lexical chunk teaching and Chinese students' learning characteristics. Therefore, lexical chunk teaching methods possess three factors of feasibility: (1) they embody the principle of learning by doing; (2) they align with the basic cognitive patterns, exhibiting universality; (3) they align with the learning characteristics of Chinese students.

Subsequently, from 2013 to June 2024, research on the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition gradually shifted towards the field of secondary education, with a primary emphasis on high school empirical research and a secondary emphasis on junior high school research. Nearly all empirical research confirms the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods in secondary education (Yang Chaoying,

2012; Sui Xin, 2013; Zhang Pingsheng, 2013; Chen Yiru, 2015; Hao Xiuyin, 2016; Yang Jingjing, 2016; Jiang Xintai, 2017; Wang Qian, 2017; Xiao Yang, 2023), but some studies also reveal unresolved issues.

While lexical chunk teaching methods can effectively enhance students' mastery of lexical chunks, there are differences between students with varying levels of proficiency. Students with strong learning abilities acquire a larger quantity and greater diversity of lexical chunks, while those with weaker abilities acquire fewer and less diverse chunks. Furthermore, regardless of learning ability, errors in using certain lexical chunks can occur in both groups. This indicates that the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition is limited and cannot completely replace other language knowledge teaching, such as vocabulary and grammar. For students with weaker learning abilities, it is necessary to strengthen the expansion of their common vocabulary and understanding of basic grammar knowledge, which will facilitate memorization, comprehension, internalization, and flexible application of lexical chunks. In second language acquisition, the negative transfer of first language can hinder English acquisition. Therefore, students need to increase the quality and quantity of input lexical chunks. Practicality is the primary criterion for selecting lexical chunks, and the amount of input should be determined based on the learners' actual abilities.

Therefore, based on the above descriptions, we can conclude that domestic research currently favors exploring the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods. To some extent, the research lacks exploration into the unique challenges of lexical chunk teaching methods at different learning stages. Additionally, there is a lack of research on primary education in China. From 2008 to June 2024, only 18 related journal papers have been found in the CNKI database, with no upward trend. Therefore, the feasibility and effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods at the initial stages of English learning, whether they can play the same positive role as in other educational stages, and whether they present unique challenges, need further investigation. Their reliability and validity require further examination. We believe that the research should focus on exploring the unique challenges of lexical chunk teaching methods at different learning stages. It is important to emphasize research on lexical chunk awareness among primary school students, contributing to the development of Chinese English education.

5 Reflections on research on lexical chunk teaching methods

Based on the above summary and analysis, we can observe the development trajectory of lexical chunk teaching methods in China since 2004. In terms of lexical chunks themselves, their definitions vary across different dimensions but are not mutually exclusive. They share commonalities in terms of structural form, function, psychology, and meaning. Regarding the trend in annual publication volume, research on lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition in China started late but gained momentum at exploratory stage. After initial accumulation and policy guidance, the annual publication volume increased significantly after 2010, entering a flourishing stage with a total publication volume of 354. After 2018, the publication volume declined, entering a period of decline. Simultaneously, the annual publication volume of core journals only accounted for 1.5% of the total literature. The total number of papers published between 2004 and June 2024 is 647, of which 47% were created by master students. Research in this field still has a long way to go. In terms of research focus, before 2012, research focused on verifying the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods in higher education. Subsequently, the research focus shifted to secondary education, primarily focusing on empirical research in high schools and secondary research in junior high schools. With the passage of time, the gap in annual publication volume between junior and senior high school research has narrowed. During this period, the effectiveness of lexical chunk teaching methods for second language acquisition has been verified, revealing some issues. However, primary education research has not received adequate attention, with only 18 papers published so far. The reliability and validity of lexical chunk teaching methods at this educational stage remain to be tested. From the perspective of English writing, numerous empirical and theoretical studies have validated their effectiveness in terms

of writing accuracy, fluency, and responsibility, but their impact on logical coherence is not significant.

Currently, English lexical chunk teaching methods in China primarily face the following problems: (1) conduct empirical research on English lexical chunk teaching based on the actual needs of Chinese English teaching to establish a local theoretical framework; (2) the lack of attention to primary education research cannot meet practical needs; (3) input-based teaching is based on test-taking skills rather than the cultivation of practical communicative abilities.

6 Concluding remarks

This paper summarizes and analyzes research on English lexical chunk teaching from four perspectives: lexical chunk definitions, annual publication volume, educational stages, and writing instruction. The research objects are papers published in CNKI from 2004 to June 2024. Although the data is fairly comprehensive, the lack of in-depth analysis of core journals may lead to the omission of new innovative aspects, impacting the depth of research. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the current state of English lexical chunk teaching in China by analyzing existing research. The aim is to provide references for promoting innovation and development in English lexical chunk teaching, advancing the improvement of English teaching, and enhancing the quality of English education. It is hoped that this research can provide references and insights for future studies in the field of English teaching.

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