

Chunk-based Teaching Reform for EFL Learners' Spoken English Proficiency in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract

Quality of college English teaching will definitely play an important role in the EFL learners' spoken English proficiency. Therefore, college teachers are supposed to put more emphasis on chunk-based teaching method which is effective for the improvement of spoken English proficiency. This paper introduces some definitions related to chunks, presents the functions of English chunks in terms of oral communication competence, and finally put forward relevant practical and effective measures to promote EFL learners' spoken English proficiency in engineering colleges.

Keywords

English chunks; spoken English proficiency; teaching reform.

1. Introduction

Spoken English proficiency is regarded as one of the most important aspects as well as English teaching targets in second language acquisition. As a major part of higher education, college English teaching focuses on the cultivation of EFL learners' practical ability in communication, especially in engineering colleges. In recent years, chunk-based teaching method is employed by some instructors to promote English teaching efficiency in spoken English.

2. Definition and categories of English chunks

Chunk as a definition was firstly coined by Becker in 1970s, and virtually there is no universal definition for it due to different research purposes and different schools. Biber (1999) and some other corpus linguists ever listed high-frequency English chunks based on computational method. However, in nature various definition versions of Chunk share the similarity that English chunks are usually larger in size than English words as collocations integrated grammatically and semantically. They can be input and output in relatively fixed form from human brain.

Generally English chunks fall into four categories (Liang, 2012) according to different structures and functions, namely, multi-word expressions like "first and foremost", "to some extent", proverbs and sayings like "do me a favor", "give me a hand", short constraints like "Just like...", "As I was...", sentence patterns like "they claim that..." etc. In this study we mainly focus on the chunks frequently used in spoken English by native speakers and those frequently employed in English textbooks.

3. Functions of English chunks

English chunks can be employed in college English teaching after comprehensive analysis of students' spoken English proficiency, and afterwards target-based teaching project can be proposed. In general, oral communication competence mainly involves grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and communicative strategy competence (see Figure 1).

3.1 Grammatical competence

Grammatical competence refers to language users' linguistic knowledge, that is, systematic phonetic, grammatical and lexical linguistic rules. The past few decades have witnessed the development and application of communicative method in foreign language teaching and the corresponding reasons lie in the effectiveness of this method in promotion of foreign language acquisition and practical

competence in use. Accumulation of large amount of English chunks in speakers' brain, especially some essential and high-frequency chunks, is bound to promote the fluency and grammatical correctness of English speech.

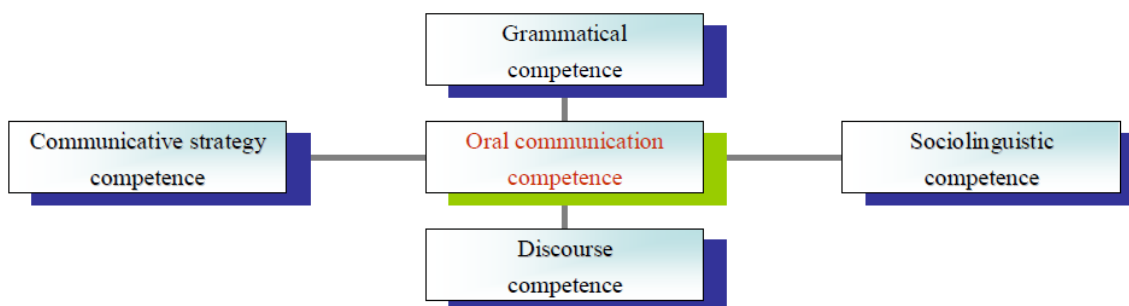


Figure 1. Relevant factors of oral communication competence

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set defa to e:\chunk-searching
creat tabl phrases(phrases c(23),Bfreq n(3),Brate n(4,3),Cfreq n(3),Crate n(4,3))
appen from phrases.txt sdf
sele 133
use phrases
go top
do while not eof()
for i=1 to 133
sele i
use str(i)
a=reccount()
count for ' $cl to b
count for ' $cl to c
count for ' $cl to d
sele 133
repla Cfreq with a
skip
endfor
enddo
sele 133
sum Cfreq to s
go top
do while not eof()
repla Crate with Cfreq/s*100
skip
enddo
sele 133
use Bphrases
sele 134
go top
do while not eof()
sele 135
a=Bfreq
b=Brate
skip
sele 133
repla Bfreq with a
repla Brate with b
skip
enddo
  
```

Program 1. Chunk-searching 1.0

3.2 Sociolinguistic competence

The second function is to improve learners' sociolinguistic competence that refers to understanding ability when speakers use the second language in different social environment and situations. Some researches indicate that English chunk is entity of both language and the corresponding social culture. Therefore, EFL learners should master both English chunks and the corresponding cultural connotation to avoid improper use of chunks in spoken English.

3.3 Discourse competence

The third function is to improve discourse competence which generally refers to speakers' ability to comprehend the relationships between sentences and the semantic functions of sentences in the

discourse. Some Chinese EFL learners always feel confused about how to start, end and transfer topics in communication. In other words, their discourse lacks logical orders and cohesions which can be optimized through the employment of proper English chunks.

3.4 Communicative strategy competence

The fourth function lies in the improvement of communicative strategy competence. It involves the strategies that can be employed by the language users when they come across any gaps or obstacles for communication to fulfill the communicative purposes successfully. Proper use of English chunks can solve the problem mentioned above, since chunks of different categories have different communicative functions. Some Chinese EFL learners are unwilling to communicate with others in spoken English owing to the lack of confidence in idiomatic expressions (Shi, 2015). Employment of English chunks from learners' brain will definitely shorten the time speakers have to use to organize sentences based on their grammatical rules and regulations, hence effective promotion of communicative behaviors by Chinese EFL learners in spoken English.

4. Relevant teaching measures

The collection and resource of high-frequency chunks in spoken English mainly rely on those listed in Biber's study and automatically extracted from a self-built corpus based on the textbooks. The searching engine is a foxpro. program named Chunk-Searching 1.0 compiled by the author (see Program 1).

In addition, the teachers are expected to put more emphasis on the cultivation of EFL learners' chunk employment initiative, and encourage students to use and choose proper English chunks in their spoken English communication practice. Explanation of English chunks and the corresponding application situation set up by the teachers are of great importance. Besides, EFL learners' autonomous learning ability should be developed under the help and guidance of English teachers.

5. Conclusion

Chinese EFL learners' spoken English proficiency is one of important aspects in engineering college English teaching. However, it is also regarded as one of the most challenging targets for English instructors. Since English chunks in prefixed forms stored in EFL learners' brain can help improve the fluency and idiomatic level of spoken English produced by Chinese English learners, teachers are supposed to design their English class activities in consideration of English chunks employment and thus develop students' communicative ability in spoken English.

References

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