

9月6日(日) 13:10-14:10 VOC 8 D50

Field: Vocabulary, Writing

## Reflection on the zone of proximal development for the advanced learners of English from the perspective of acquisition and use of "lexical chunks" in writing class

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### 1. Background and purpose of the study

How is the English class at the university level designed for those students who could pass the entrance examinations for "topnotch universities" as they are called and can get a TOEFL ITP score ranging from 520 to 550? Mizuno(2005) designed a class named "Writing for the TOEFL Test" for such students to improve their scores on the writing section of the TOEFL test. It points out that they lack conventional modes of expression which Lewis (1993) called "lexical chunks": functional expressions which structure the organization of an essay logically and collocations which are closely related with the topic of the essay.

In order to have a good command of English, we need to have two kinds of language knowledge (Skehan 1998): one is exemplar-based knowledge (lexical chunks) and the other is rule-based knowledge (grammar). The advanced students have enough explicit knowledge about rule to analyze and extract the meaning from linguistic forms but they have not sufficiently stocked lexical chunks as exemplar-based knowledge for output. It is essential for them to internalize lexical chunks through using them as a means of communication while using the rule-based knowledge as procedural knowledge.

With this awareness in mind, "Writing for the TOEFL test" was designed to raise their consciousness of lexical chunks to meet the needs of the students and based on the idea of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978): The database of lexical chunks named "Essential Expressions for Writing an Essay in English: EEW" was created. The two websites "Interactive Writing Community: IWC" and "Writing for the TOEFL Test" were created, so the students are facilitated to communicate their ideas with others on the Internet using many lexical chunks meaningfully. Owing to the consciousness-raising in such a learning environment, they could make use of lexical chunks effectively and efficiently. They could successfully improve their scores from 3.5 to 5 out of 6 on average within one semester.

However, the practical study did not reflect on the following aspects: (1) what lexical chunks they found missing and noticed as a hole in the process of writing. (2) how they could fill in the holes utilizing the database to try to get across their ideas in English. This study explores these questions through analyzing the 70 essays in response to the following question and posted on the website: *Some people say that foreign language education should be a required part of every school curriculum. Others believe that it should not be a required subject but an elective one. Which opinion do you agree with? Give reasons to support your answer.*

## 2. Procedure of the class

(1) Students wrote an essay for 30 minutes. After the test, they were told that they would answer the same question next week.

(2) They prepared the outline for the essay question. In the process of making an outline, they brainstormed writing down in Japanese whatever keywords or phrases that came into their mind on a piece of paper. They chose Japanese lexical chunks from the list which were important to discuss the question but difficult to express in English. They consulted a collocation Japanese-English dictionary named “Eijiro on the web” and EEW to find English lexical chunks which corresponds to the Japanese ones. This list is essential for them to join the next class.

(3) In the next class, they wrote an essay for 30 minutes based on the outline they had prepared. They also used tools such as the list of J-E lexical chunks, EEW, and “Eijiro.” After the test, the essays were printed out, and the lexical chunks taken from the tools and used in the essays were underlined by them. The essay and the list of J-E lexical chunks were turned in by the set to the teacher.

## 3. Method

From the underlined parts in the essays we could see what lexical chunks they borrowed. We could also take a cue from the list of J-E lexical chunks about what lexical chunks they wanted to make use of. Those English lexical chunks were or seemed difficult for them to come up with from the scratch using the rule-based knowledge by themselves. All the lexical chunks are analyzed to discover the general characteristics which made them list and borrow from the EEW and Eijiro.

## 4. Results and Implications

It was found that the 120 English lexical chunks have the following overall characteristics: (1) Many English lexical chunks are “nominal” constructions that contrast sharply with “verbal” constructions corresponding to the Japanese ones (2) The words which consist of the lexical chunks are mostly “basic words”. The results of the analysis and the implications of (1) and (2) will be discussed in detail.