Teaching Vocabulary Chunk by Chunk

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"Vocabulary has played second fiddle to grammar." “In recent years the teaching of vocabulary has assumed its rightful place as a fundamentally important aspect of language development.” (Nunan, pp. 102-103)

The problem:
Is vocabulary just words? Why teach chunks?
What are vocabulary “chunks”? How can I teach them?
What kind of chunks are there? Are there practice activities?

What are chunks?
“…a unit of memory organisation, formed by bringing together a set of already formed chunks in memory and welding them together into a larger unit. (Newall, 124-125)

Two assumptions about chunking
(1) People chunk at a constant rate: every time they get more experience, they build additional chunks
(2) Performance on the task is faster, the more chunks that have been built that are relevant to the task. (Ellis, p. 126)

How to know if a phrase is a chunk…
-Institutionalization: degree to which a word is conventionalized in the language: does it reoccur as a unit?
-Fixedness: degree to which it is frozen as a sequence of words. Does it inflect in predictable ways? They rocked the boat not they rocked the boats, on the other hand not on another hand or a different hand.
-Non-compositionality: degree to which it cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialized unitary meaning: kicks the bucket, of course. (Moon, pp. 44-45)

Types of Chunks
-Compounds (words)-tape recorder, bookshelf
-Phrasal verbs: come, get, go, put, take + off, in, on, down (polywords)
-Idioms: multi-word items which are not the sum of their parts—spill the beans, kick the bucket, have an ax to grind (Fixed collocations, Institutionalized utterances)
-Fixed phrases: of course, at least, in fact, by far, how do you do, excuse me ( Polywords)
-Prefabs: lexical phrases—the thing/fact/point is, that reminds me, I'm a great believer in (Institutionalized utterances, Sentence Frames) (Moon, pp. 44-45)

Why Teach Chunks
1. Lexical phrases may be treated as wholes.[and] as such, they are stored in the lexicon as unanalyzed chunks like words. Being ready-made, they are easily retrieved.
2. Lexical phrases prove highly motivating by developing fluency at very early stages and thus promote a sense of achievement.
3. Lexical phrases are not dead ends. Some (not all) are analyzable by the rules of grammar. Therefore, they are dual in nature.
4. Lexical phrases may be used to maintain a conversation, change the topic, make a request, greet ...
5. They functional features of lexical phrases offer learners the possibility of expressing the same function in increasingly more difficult ways by expanding an initial formula.
6. Lexical phrases let speakers overcome memory and processing constraints since they are stored as wholes and are readily accessible. If I were you…
7. Easy to acquire:(a) occur very frequently, so recycled.(b) context-bound; have situational meaning. (Porto, pp. 22-23)

Some of Michael Lewis’ key principles
1. Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.
2. The grammar / vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word chunks.
3. A central element of language teaching is raising students’ awareness of, and developing their ability to ‘chunk’ language successfully.
4. Although structural patterns are acknowledged as useful, lexical and metaphorical patterning are accorded appropriate status. (Lewis, 1993, vi-vii)

Using Listening Comprehension
Many texts present chunks in listening practices
Write the chunks on the board. Ss listen and either do a task to recognize them or just discuss what they mean.

Slot-and-Filler
"[The] 'slot and filler' model, envisaging texts as a series of slots which have to be filled from a lexicon which satisfies local constraints. At each slot virtually any word can occur. Since language is believed to operate simultaneously on several levels, there is a very complex pattern of choices in progress at any one moment, but the underlying principle is simple enough.” (Sinclair, p. 109)

. . . communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences. ...[it’s a] matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules … Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative but regulative and subservient. (Widdowson, p. 129)

Slot-and-Filler and Artificial Intelligence
(http://www.cs.rpi.edu/pub/hollingd/ai/lectures/chapter9.pdf--now disappeared.)

- Knowledge is represented by a set of entities, their attributes and relationships between entities.
- Weak Slot & Filler structures are general frameworks that can be used for a variety of domains.
- Strong Slot & Filler structures contain extensions and/or restrictions that are domain-specific.

Strong Slot (my in-progress interpretation)
A slot in which there is only one (or very few) fillers: ___ he study English at 2 o'clock? - ___ you study French?
Calm down...don’t rock the ____. Pass me the salt and ____.

Explain ___ to ___. (pronouns)

Weak Slot (me again…)
A slot with a finite number of fillers.
What do you ....? Have you ever....?
Why don’t we…? One of the major disadvantages is...
The results of the investigation have shown that...

**Conversation:**
A: What are you doing …?
B: ....
A: Why don’t we…?
B: I’m sorry, but ..... 
A: What about going another time?
B: ........ How about…?
A: Great! .............

**Classroom Activities**
1. Classifying words and phrases
2. Odd one out (horse / dog / car / cow )
3. Matching phrases to pictures
4. Brainstorming and mind maps

**Additional Activities**
1. Elicit phrases before / after task. Ss can keep notebook
2. Encourage Ss to notice phrases that they find while they read
3. Give more advanced Ss Cloze practices
4. Play games—hangman—with phrases as units

**Bibliography**
Nation, Paul. What are the ten most effective vocabulary teaching activities? http://compasspub.com/userfiles/seminars/200907152130_fl.doc

**Phrasal Verbs**

**Online classroom activities**
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Vocabulary Practices
Ask yourself: How can you use these practices with “chunks”

(1) (From The Recipe Book, Seth Lindstromberg, ed. Longman, 1990.)
1. Write 6 to 12 words from between 2 and 4 small lexical families all jumbled up on the board. Allow no note-taking, yet!

2. Invite Ss to board and have then circle the words they think they know.
3. Taking the circled words one-by-one, point to each one and ask if there are any other circled words that mean roughly the same thing.
4. When a learner gives a correct “relative” draw a lone connecting the two circles. Continue until Ss have run out of ideas. Then do it yourself. You can use different colors connecting different language families.
5. For each mini-group of “synonyms” ask which is more general, least intense. If wrong say everything will be clearer later. Still no note-taking.
6. When you’re elicited all the connections you can get, tell Ss to take a last look because you’re going to test them. Give them about 20 seconds and then erase everything.
7. Ask Ss to tell you one of the vanished words which they knew the meaning of. If someone says terrifying, ask what word went with it.
8. Check again which is the least intense. If no one knows, now is the time to reveal all. Say they can take notes now.
9. Write this on the board:
10. Invite people to come forward and draw stairstep diagrams for the other pairs. For each word, ask for things, experiences or situations that cause someone to feel that way.

(2) (From The Recipe Book, Seth Lindstromberg, ed. Longman, 1990.)
1. Introduce Ss, via the board, to the idea of plotting adjectives along a scale.
2. Add as many adjectives as possible to scale as possible.
3. Brainstorm some emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, disappointment, love, etc.
4. Ss in pairs choose on emotion and brainstorm all the adjectives they can think of to express shades of it.
5. Each pair reads out their collection. Others listen and add any new words they can think of.
6. Then return to pairs. Sort words onto scale. They can use a dictionary.
7. Next have Ss imagine they’re talking to someone who is feeling the emotion they have chosen.
8. Ask them to brainstorm all the phrases the person might use. “love”: I was quite fond of him. I was head over heels in love. Absolutely besotted. We got on quite well.
9. Read sentences to class. Get additions

(3) (Adapted from Lessons from the Learner, Sheelagh Deller, Longman, 1990.)
1. In pairs, write down 6 words in Spanish they would like to know in English.
2. Add as many words to scale as possible.
3. Check with the whole group. Have Ss correct each other and, if necessary, help them.
4. Pairs write a very short story in Spanish using these English words, repeated as often as they like.
5. Each pair reads out their collection. Others listen and add any new words they can think of.
6. Then return to pairs. Sort words onto scale. They can use a dictionary.
7. Next have Ss imagine they’re talking to someone who is feeling the emotion they have chosen.
8. Ask them to brainstorm all the phrases the person might use. “love”: I was quite fond of him. I was head over heels in love. Absolutely besotted. We got on quite well.
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(4) (Adapted from Lessons from the Learner, Sheelagh Deller, Longman, 1990.)
1. Give each student a sheet of paper and a different color pen.
2. Brainstorm areas of vocabulary related to unit being studied: travel, vacations, beach, mountains, cities, etc.
3. Put Ss in groups of four. Each group chooses one of these areas and each S chooses a different subheading for that area. They write this at the top of their paper: Ex. Beach: hotel, sand, restaurants, car rental.
4. Ss write all the words they can think of that are related to their topic. They can use a dictionary or ask T if they need help. Tell them to scatter words over the page rather than put them in a vertical list.
5. Everyone passes their sheet one place round and then words on the sheet they have been given by their neighbor, First they read all the words on it and ask whoever write it about any words they don’t know. Then they can add other words.
6. The process continues until the get their original sheet back.
7. Look at their sheets and ask each other about any words that have been added that they don’t understand.
8. T collects and corrects spelling or word choice.

(5) (Adapted from Vocabulary in Action, Linda Taylor, Prentice Hall, 1992.)
Use this for Ss to predict what language they will be using in the next unit.
1. Tell Ss they are going to work with a specific theme. Look at the beginning of the unit—title and examples at left. Close books. Ask Ss in pairs to predict up to 20 vocabulary items which they think will occur in the text (exclude grammatical words: prepositions, articles, etc.).
2. Join with another group of 2 and write the lists on a sheet of paper.
3. Display lists for the class—put them up on the wall.
4. Open books and see how many occur.

(6) (Adapted from Lessons from the Learner, Sheelagh Deller, Longman, 1990.)
Use this for brainstorming chunks including prepositions
1. Give each group of 4 a piece of paper with a preposition written in the middle. They have to brainstorm words which (a) come before it, (b) come after it or (c) fit around it. (Over: fall over, overtime, I’m not overly fond of him). Ss can use dictionary.
2. Produce sheets like example, check and put on board.