



CHUNKS IN L2 WRITING: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FROM GERMAN UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

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Abstract:

Before their enrollment in a German university, international prospective students face the challenge of mastering coherent written texts for language entrance exams which assess the test takers' ability to compare and contrast, discuss, or argue for a position using the appropriate linguistic tools and following norms conforming to the accepted standards within German academia. This paper discusses how test takers perform in such tasks and which strategies they make use of.

Keywords: chunks, L2 writing, German as a second language, German as a foreign language, German language exams, L2 writing strategies

1. Introduction

In order to conduct research and to study in a tertiary institution in Germany, students need not only be able to write in the target language, but adapt to the norms in line with the target disciplines and genres, such as protocols, excerpts, and term papers. Furthermore, students usually conclude their studies by writing, submitting, and defending a longer research paper, namely, a Bachelor's or Master's thesis. One of the prerequisites for successful academic writing involves timely reflection on academic linguistic structures, as defined by Thielmann 2017.

Prospective university students with university entrance qualifications obtained outside of Germany need to pass a language entrance exam to be able to enroll in a German university. One of such exams is the German University Language Entrance Exam 'Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang' (DSH) whose written section assesses the test takers' ability to compare and contrast, discuss, and argue for a position using the appropriate linguistic tools and following norms conforming to the accepted standards within German academia (McGury/Wulff 2021). Writing tasks of this kind

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usually include charts and graphs whose purpose is to facilitate the test taker's pre-writing process by visualizing phenomena or presenting data sets (Glazer 2011). Based on the importance of discontinuous texts throughout all study programs, these university language entrance exams set out to ensure that prospective international students possess the ability to write argumentative, academic texts.

Not only to ensure coherence, but also to enhance academic style, lexical items and phrases are often introduced as *chunks* (see Ellis et al. 2008 and Handwerker 2008 for more on formulaic language and chunks in first and second language acquisition, and Pawley 2007 on syntactic development and sentence structure). These *chunks* "usually refer to frequently-occurred, fixed or semi-fixed multi-words or sentences formed by meanings rather than grammatical rules that are acquired as a whole automatically in [...] language acquisition" (Li 2014, 683), usually through memorization, and are considered an independent strategy for producing academic texts (Thielmann 2009). They are often used as coherence or cohesion-inducing phrases, facilitating the thematic and logical structuring of texts, or the introduction of new topics or arguments. According to Madlener, *chunks* are holistically processed, memorized pieces of information that can be accessed, i.e., they are "bundles of information pertaining to linguistic forms and meaning/functions within or for a specific context" (Madlener 2008, 161; see also Handwerker & Madlener 2013). Even if they are not necessarily introduced by their metalinguistic term *chunks* in the FL or SL classroom, they appear in vocabulary lists and are (indirectly) serving as "a database for abstraction processes of (semi-)fixed sequences used as models [...], and [an essential contribution] to the learner's grammatical development." Thus, the syntactic implementation of *chunks* should play a role in the FL/SL classroom in order to teach L2 learners their grammatical usage and correct understanding from the beginning. This is also supported by Lenz & Barras's 2017 intervention study on adult FL learners of German's oral proficiency. Having undergone FL instruction with a focus on *chunks* and fluency but not grammar, participants integrate *chunks* fluently but not grammatically.

The importance of the grammatical understanding and implementation of *chunks* provides the basis for the analysis of two DSH data sets. Based on the findings in the written DSH tasks, the following sections (i) present and analyze the data with respect to the use of *chunks* and their grammaticality and (ii) discuss the pedagogical implications following from the findings.

2. Data

The examined data sets stem from two separate DSHs consisting of 24 and 18 written texts, respectively. While the first set was additionally divided into two groups of test takers, namely those who had taken a DSH preparatory course leading up to the exam (n=13), and those who had not (n=11), the second set does not differentiate between these categories.

Regarding the first data set, 105 out of 132 chunks were implemented grammatically (on the morpho-syntactic level) by those test takers who had previously

enrolled in a DSH preparatory course, i.e. test takers with a course knew to implement 80% of the chunks syntactically. Test takers who had not previously attended a prep course implemented only 54% correctly (46 out of 85 chunks). However, both groups together, 151 out of a total of 217 chunks (=69%) were correctly implemented morpho-syntactically.

The second data set consisted of 148 chunks of which 94 are used grammatically, making up 63.5%.

Note that, while the thorough analyses contain more information regarding the argumentative structuring of the texts (McGury & Wulff 2021), the limited scope of this paper forces the focus on the grammatical use and syntactic implementation of chunks.

3. Discussion

Following the findings regarding the structure of arguments (e.g., thesis statements, themes and rhemes) as discussed in McGury & Wulff 2021, test takers succeed in producing written texts that are academic in style and well structured, which may be attributed to the provision of graphs and charts as supplementary material reinforcing argument structure. Taking into consideration the lexical appropriateness of chunks within the argumentative structure of the texts as well as their morpho-syntactic implementation, it seems that chunks function as and form the intersection between grammar and structure (in line with Handwerker/Madlener 2013). Test takers who had previously attended the preparatory course are more successful in implementing them grammatically into their writing, which suggests that conscious or structured approaches to breaking them up had taken place before the exam. The obvious difference between the two groups of test takers furthermore highlights the importance of an appropriate grammatical application of memorized lexical devices as it leads to better results in the DSH's written task. It does not suffice to solely memorize lexical chunks as items on a vocabulary list or as place holders in fill-in-the-blanks exercises. Rather, they require linguistic reflection and awareness as well as structural analyses in order for L2 learners to correctly use them in written tasks.

Ignoring the division of students with and without a DSH preparatory course, and comparing the overall findings from the first set with those of the second one, the correct morpho-syntactic use of chunks makes up 69% and 63.5%, respectively. Thus, the overall results show that approximately one-third of all chunks in the DSH is not syntactically integrated in a well-formed manner. Furthermore, considering that the DSH is designed to test students at a C1 level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages CEFR, this unexpectedly high rate yields pedagogical implications.

4. Pedagogical implications

The analysis and discussion of the data from two different DSH exams suggest that, even at the advanced CEFR level of C1, memorization of lexical chunks does not suffice to successfully produce L2 texts that are consistent with the target language's norms, or, at least, to integrate chunks syntactically into the text. Therefore, the following pedagogical implications shall provide some guidance for both FL/SL instructors and learners.

With respect to the SL/FL classroom, it would be advisable to foster awareness and linguistic reflection when working with chunks. This can be achieved in several ways, namely, (1) by introducing chunks on the meta level, (2) by helping students discern chunks, (3) by including authentic examples from different texts and situations, and (4) by providing detailed and timely feedback.

By the use of metalanguage in the classroom, learners' linguistic reflection and understanding of chunks increase. Instructors should, e.g., both ensure that learners understand the purpose of chunks and point them out whenever one is encountered in the lesson. This way, learners become more aware of the abundance of chunks and their syntactic integration.

Furthermore, students' awareness and grammatical use of chunks can be fostered through their systematic discernment. As opposed to memorizing fixed multi-word phrases off of vocabulary lists, learners need to understand the chunks' lexical content, their grammatical composition as well as their form and function within (multi)clausal sentences in order to deepen their understanding of how chunks are implemented in both oral and written texts. This syntactic and grammatical awareness will affect both the learners' ability to process and produce the L2.

This enhanced awareness should be practiced with authentic materials from numerous disciplines. Learners should learn to not only identify chunks in authentic texts, but to discern and analyze them in these environments, and to use them freely in spoken and written L2 production. Rather than using chunks in pre-composed fill-in-the-blanks exercises, students thus focus on real-life contexts that will enhance their writing. Finally, detailed and timely feedback is crucial to the learners' improvement in the grammatical use of chunks. By discussing specific, anonymized examples from learner texts in the classroom in a timely manner, students are more likely to learn from the feedback and positively progress towards their overall goal (see Bayerlein 2014; Wiggins 2012), leaving us to conclude that specific and timely feedback will enhance the learners' performance in correctly implementing chunks in their L2 writing.

Overall, a systematic approach to working with chunks with a focus on their identification, discernment, and application should enhance learners' awareness and foster linguistic reflection that, finally, leads to improvement in grammatical implementation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Sandra McGury is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Language Competence in the Applied Linguistics Department at Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The manager of the Swiss Global Competence Lab, she is interested in the link between language acquisition and assessment in the international context, within higher education, and as part of the processes in internationalization of the curriculum.

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