



Journal of Teaching Language Skills (JTLS)
38(3), Fall 2019, pp. 39-80- ISSN: 2008-8191
DOI: 10.22099/jtls.2020.36041.2773

Appropriation Based -Syllabus and Advanced EFL
Learners' Speaking Skill:
The Case of Chunks-on-Card Activities

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Abstract

The impetus for conducting the present study came from Thornbury's (2005) approach to teach speaking in which he claimed that awareness-raising techniques, along with appropriation strategies, facilitate the process of teaching and learning speaking. Therefore, the present study attempted to explore the impact of the appropriation-based syllabus to teach speaking by using chunks-on-card activity. Accordingly, 60 female and male Iranian advanced EFL learners were selected from a private language institute and were assigned to four groups. The four groups were male experimental and control groups as well as female experimental and control groups. To examine the effect of the treatment, the participants were pre- and post-tested on speaking skill. They took part in 14 treatment sessions in which the experimental group practiced the chunks-on-card method through drilling while the control group practiced the conventional approach. The results of one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among the posttest scores of the four groups. According to the findings, the mean score for male learners in the experimental group differed significantly from female and male learners in the control groups. Similarly, the mean score of female learners in the

Received: 17/01/2020

Accepted: 20/06/2020

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experimental group differed significantly from female and male learners in the control groups. The results of paired-samples t-test for each group also indicated that the appropriation-based teaching of lexical chunks had significant impacts on both genders' speaking skills.

Keywords: Lexical chunks, Appropriation, Speaking skill, EFL learners, Collocation

As the most challenging of the four language skills (Nunan, 2003; Zhang, 2009), speaking is claimed to be an interactive process of meaning-making (Brown, 2007) in which several various processing mechanisms are involved in putting the words to speak fluently and accurately (Pawlak, 2011). Highlighting the significance of speaking ability, Namaziandost, Abdy Saray, and Rahimi Esfahani (2018) designated that for the majority of individuals, the ability to speak in a language is equivalent to knowing that language. Given the influential role of speaking in learning other skills, instruction on how to develop speaking skills is assumed to be a crucial part of any classroom. The development of speaking skills would facilitate the process of teaching other skills since it offers support and a basis for learning as the key communicative medium of the classroom. Moreover, teaching speaking is an essential component of syllabus content and learning outcomes (Goh & Burns, 2012). According to McCroskey (1992), several factors such as lack of or less exposure to language use, poorly developed listening skill, improper teaching methods, and poorly developed repertoire of vocabulary might lead to students' unsatisfactory performance in speaking ability. Acknowledging the significance of learning vocabulary in speaking, Carter & McCarthy (2014) reiterated that communication would happen with little knowledge of grammar, whereas without vocabulary knowledge, nothing can be expressed. Over the past four decades, the center of attention in vocabulary teaching has changed to lexical chunks (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008) as the studies

demonstrated that the acquisition and exploitation of these expressions are both beneficial and challenging among EFL learners (Cortes, 2004). Richards (2009) suggested that many factors are contributing to the spontaneity of speech and pointed out that one significant factor is the number of multi-word chunks the learners exploit along with the conversational routines or fixed expressions. In this line, Widdowson (1991) emphasized the role of chunks in improving communicative competence by proposing that knowing pre-assembled and prefabricated structures and chunks rather than the mere knowledge of rules improve learners' communicative competence effectively. According to this view, rules are used for regulative purposes rather than generative ones.

Although speaking seems to be an effortless task, it is indeed a cognitively demanding process containing the numerous multifaceted processes working interactively (Goh & Burns, 2012). The theory of communicative competence encouraged proposals for the development of communicative syllabuses, and more recently for task-based and text-based syllabuses and methodologies (Thornbury, 2011). It is claimed that these types of syllabuses should inform approaches to teaching and learning speaking that range from direct to indirect ones (Thornbury & Slade, 2006; Brown, 2007; Richards, 2009). Additionally, it has been reiterated that if the teaching instruction focuses on appropriate activities, speaking can elevate learners' motivational levels and change the language classroom to an enjoyable place to be (Nunan, 1999; Celce-Murcia, 2001). Besides the emphasis on adopting appropriate tasks for teaching, a plethora of studies conducted on the lexical chunks have highlighted the pivotal role they play as production strategy for language learners (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers & Demecheleer, 2006; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Underwood, Schmitt, & Galpin, 2004; Wood, 2006; Wray, 2005; Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008). Along with the pervasiveness of

lexical chunks in language, their role as the building blocks of coherent discourse, genre, and discipline (Hyland, 2008; Jalali, Eslami Rasekh & Tavangar Rizi, 2008); as well as their influential impacts on production and comprehension (Biber, 2006) have attracted the interest of researchers. Reviewing the literature would indicate that the majority of the studies focused on awareness-raising strategies, while the appropriation of such knowledge has been neglected. On the other hand, the majority of studies conducted in the field of chunks have focused on native speakers (McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Boers et al., 2006; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). Unfortunately, not much is known about the employment of chunks by second or foreign language speakers (Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, Tahriri, & Dobahri Bandari, 2015).

The objective of this study was twofold. First, the impact of teaching chunks on learners' speaking ability was investigated. In other words, the study elucidated whether the appropriation-based syllabus in which learners are guided to practice control over their learning through drilling is beneficial to learning chunks. Second, the study determined whether learners' gender has a discriminating role in the development of their speaking ability in general and learning lexical chunks in particular. To comply with the objective of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there a difference in participants' English speaking skill posttest means after being treated with chunk-on-card activities?
2. Do the chunk-on-card activities have any effect on Iranian male EFL learners' English speaking skills?
3. Do chunk-on-card activities have any effect on Iranian female EFL learners' English speaking skills?

According to McCarthy and McCarten (2019), learners' knowledge of chunks is a central aspect of successful communication which would facilitate the process of interaction. They claimed that teaching syllabuses should focus

on this aspect of language knowledge. Erman and Warren (2000) proposed that lexical chunks constitute fifty percent of a given text, while in oral communication the frequency of using it is much higher. Taking into account the significance of chunks in speaking and the paucity of studies conducted on the role of teaching chunks on learners' speaking ability in the Iranian EFL context, the present study focused on the efficacy of providing learners with a supportive activity that help learners execute their control in developing speaking skill. In this study, attempts are made to boost learners' chunks repertoire by focusing on awareness-raising strategies as well as encouraging learners to practice control over the process of expanding their knowledge of chunks. Moreover, in this study, the emphasis is on the appropriation-phase of teaching speaking to provide evidence that might support the development of a syllabus that helps students to achieve better control over their speaking during the classroom process.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Lexical Chunks: Definition, Significance, and Classification

Scholars have attempted to define lexical chunks from two views, namely psycholinguistics and corpus linguistics. According to the former view, lexical chunks are stored and retrieved as continuous strings of words (Wray, 2000), while in the latter view, they are pertinent to phrases that are exploited with high frequency (Lin, 2010). The fact that language teaching should embrace the learning of chunks has been transferred to the teaching community remarkably by Lewis in his Lexical Approach (1993), which could suitably be called a chunk-noticing approach. Lewis' recommendation for instructors is to ground classroom tasks on extracting lexical patterns from language input, thereby focusing on lexical phrases instead of individual words. In this approach, the conventional difference between grammar and vocabulary is

abandoned and substituted by an integrative view of language in which patterns are integral in language segments. In other words, language is perceived as grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar (Lewis, 1993). Besides, McCarthy and Carter (2002) emphasized the point that a significant number of chunks are as ordinary as or more recurrent than the single word. The reason that chunks are so prevalent is due to the point that they can be processed more rapidly, and the mind can keep these prefabricated chunks in the long term memory to be used later (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008).

Knowledge of chunks is particularly essential for the processing of language under “real-time” conditions, for the reason that they can quickly be retrieved from memory as ready-made word sequences without the necessity for parsing (Skehan, 1998; Kuiper, 1996). According to Conklin and Schmitt (2008), a considerable proportion of resource (long-term memory) is used by the mind to accumulate several ready-made chunks that can be employed in language production. Therefore, it compensates the restricted resource (working memory), which can be encumbered when generating expressions from distinct lexis and syntactical rules.

Highlighting the pragmatic values of lexical chunks, Conklin and Schmidt (2008) reported that they are frequently exploited to achieve repeated communication needs. Pawley and Syder (1983) also reiterated that a small proportion of speech clauses are novel and that prepared chunks in memory support the majority of the speech of daily conversations. Foster, Tonkyn, and Wigglesworth (2000) stated that the one who can focus on more complex micro-units can be a more proficient speaker. In other words, proficient speakers can quickly access multiple chunks during speaking.

Regarding the classification of lexical chunks, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Lewis' (1993) classifications are the most widely accepted ones. The proposed classification of chunks by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992)

embraces four types, including poly-words, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints, and sentence builders. Accordingly, as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) suggested, poly-words refer to prearranged and short lexical phrases that convey special types of functions. They also stated that institutionalized expressions have a comparable length as a sentence with slight changeability and have specific social functions mainly in conversation. Phrasal constraints, as they suggested, are short to medium length phrases associated with various functions, and, sentence builders are those phrases that are open to replacements of their structure to articulate various ideas.

In Lewis' (1993) classification of lexical chunks, some types of chunks overlap with the previous classification proposed by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992). According to Lewis (1993), poly-words, collocations, institutionalized expressions, and sentence frames are the four types of chunks. In defining each type, Lewis (1993, pp. 92-95) stated that:

- (1) Poly-words: are rather fixed combinations of words. The parts of a poly-word cannot be substituted with others without changing the meaning. For example, (on the other hand),
- (2) Collocations: are pairs of words that usually go together. We usually know a word by the word it keeps. For example: (knife and fork, bread and butter),
- (3) Institutionalized expressions: help to manage aspects of oral interaction with certain pragmatic functions. For example: (just a moment please),
- (4) Sentence frames: This sort of chunks is usually used in writing. This is the only difference between sentence frames and institutionalized expressions which are only used in oral interaction. For example: (one of the most important ... is that ...).

As indicated in the two classifications, the nature of these two classifications is the same, though different terminologies are used to refer to the same concept.

Thornbury's Approach towards Teaching Speaking

Thornbury (2005) proposed an approach for teaching speaking, which embraces three stages of awareness-raising, appropriation, and autonomy. He clarified that learners are exposed to new knowledge and get familiar with it during the awareness-raising stage; the newly received knowledge is integrated into the existing repertoire during the appropriation stage, and; the knowledge is used in real-life situations without the help of others in the autonomy stage. As the focus of this study is on the appropriation stage, this section provides a detailed explanation of the concept.

As put forward by Billett (1998), the appropriation of knowledge is used to refer to a process wherein individuals recreate rather than inherit knowledge. The appropriation includes an explanatory assessment and generation of knowledge by people, instead of being an authentic depiction of exterior stimuli (Billett, 1998). Throughout the appropriation stage, as Thornbury (2005) put forward, learners are provided with a supportive framework in which they can practice control over their speaking skills. Practiced control is a stage where learners develop control of ability. In this stage, the learner may make mistakes, but he/she is provided with supports throughout the stage. The primary purpose of practicing control is to boost the appropriation of the target language. According to Thornbury (2005, p. 63), “[...] learning a skill is not simply a behavior (like practice) or a mental process (like restructuring) [...]”.

In this respect, Brown and Palincsar (1989) observed that students whose teachers used Think-aloud strategies in reading comprehension showed an

improved level of performance, although not significantly. For L2 learning and teaching processes, this modeling outlook has encouraged teaching strategies that concentrate mainly on drilling the learners on the correct use of language. Sometimes, such modeling is labeled as explicit teaching (Cazden, 1993), including teacher-led instruction of formal language structures as in the grammar-translation method. It has been suggested that the degree of appropriation relied on the correspondence of a novice learner's prior experiences, values, and goals with those of more skilled or influential members of a culture, such as teachers or university faculty (Cole, 1995; Wertsch, 1991).

In the appropriation stage, the active role of learners is of paramount significance (Leontyev 1981; Wertsch 1991). Learners recreate the knowledge they are internalizing via the process of appropriation, therefore converting both their notion of the knowledge and, in turn, that knowledge as it is interpreted and used by others. Cazden's (1988) viewpoint of performance before competence is valuable to our perception of the concept of appropriation as it stresses the role of active engagement as a means of becoming competent in social practices.

In terms of activities in speaking, Thornbury (2005) distinguished a set of appropriation activities incorporating drilling, practiced control, reading aloud, writing tasks, chants, scaffolding, dialogues, communicative tasks, assisted performance, and task repetition. Thornbury (2005) stated that these activities are incorporated in the role-play, drama, and simulation. Learners can enjoy the exploitation of authentic language use, rehearsing an expanded series of registers, and exercising formal language in the educational context. Furthermore, rehearsing simulation activity may boost particular learners' self-confidence. Uncomfortable learners who feel that they have incomplete comprehension of English speaking will feel calm when participating in

activities and presenting in front of their peers (Harmer, 2015; Thornbury, 2005). In appropriation activities, the focus is on constructing language through collaboration (Thornbury, 2005).

Practical Studies

The significant and facilitative role of chunks in the process of a second and foreign language has attracted scholars' attention. In this respect, the efficacy of using lexical chunks in two Japanese learners' spoken language was investigated in a longitudinal study conducted by Leedham (2006). Each non-native speaker's interactions were recorded and transcribed for five months. The analysis of the transcripts demonstrated an increase in the rate of talk within chunks and a decrease in the use of wrong chunks. Also, learners were provided with the awareness-raising instructions and were required to identify chunks in the transcription. The study highlighted that the rate of chunks employed increased after the instructions.

Likewise, Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, and Demecheleer (2006) studied the impact of raising learners' awareness of formulaic sequences on their oral proficiency. Two groups of EFL upper-intermediate to advance Dutch learners participated in the study. The instruction in the experimental group involved the practice of detecting formulaic sequences as well as practicing collocations and fixed expressions, while in the control group the same procedures with no emphasis on practicing formulaic sequences were followed. The study revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of proficiency and fluency. Besides, there was a correlation between oral proficiency scores and the number of formulaic sequences used by learners in the experimental group.

In a study to discover the relationship between the use of lexical collocation and speaking proficiency, Hsu and Chiu (2008) conducted a study

with Taiwanese learners of English. The study revealed a positive significant relationship between learners' speaking proficiency and knowledge of collocations. On the contrary, the result demonstrated no significant correlation between learners' speaking ability and their exploitation of collocations. Moreover, the analysis of the data indicated no statistically significant correlation between the learners' knowledge and employment of collocations.

Using communicative practice and dialogue memorization strategy, Taguchi and Iwasaki (2008) examined the effect of grammatical chunks instruction on Japanese EFL learners' oral fluency development. Accordingly, the experimental group practiced chunks using conversation activity while the control group did not practice similar instruction. Compared to the control group, the experimental group exploited larger numbers of grammatical chunks and were more fluent at the discourse level.

In another study, Shen (2015) sought to examine the effect of chunks input on Chinese English major learners' oral production. Oral exams were administered before and after the study. Chunk inputs were employed as the treatment in the experimental group. The results of the study demonstrated that chunk input plays a major role in boosting Chinese EFL learners' speaking ability. The speaking posttest revealed a significant improvement in the experimental group's fluency and accuracy. Compared to learners in the experimental group, learners' performance in the control group did not significantly improve.

In an attempt to test the hypothesis that children rely more heavily on chunks in language learning than do adults, McCauley and Christiansen (2017) performed a large-scale study in which computational modeling was used to explore the efficacy of chunk-based knowledge in speaking. They found that chunks play a facilitative role in second language learning;

however, adult learners might use fewer numbers of chunks in their speech than children do in learning a first language. Besides, they found differences in the process by which the two groups learn the chunks.

McGuire and Larson-Hall (2017) conducted a study to examine the effect of explicit teaching of formulaic sequences on ESL learners' fluency. In doing so, two groups of learners were put into an experimental and control group. The task-based approach to speaking and listening were used for presenting authentic English in the control group while the same procedure coupled with chunks noticing techniques were employed in the experimental group. The study revealed that the experimental group performed better than the control group concerning the number of formulaic sequences exploited and level of fluency, highlighting the advantage of explicit teaching of formulaic sequences.

In Iranian EFL contexts also attempts have been made to shed light on the efficacy of explicit instruction of various categories of lexical chunks in developing learners' listening (Khodadady & Shamsaee, 2012; Mohseni, Marzban, & Keshavarzi, 2014), reading (Sadighi & Sahragard, 2013), and writing skills (Araghi, Yousefi Oskuee, & Salehpour, 2014; Ranjbar, Pazhakh, & Gorjian, 2012; Shamsabadi, Ketabi, & Eslami Rasekh, 2017). For example, Sadighi and Sahragard (2013) studied the impact of collocation on EFL learners reading comprehension. To comply with this objective, a low and high lexical collocational density test was administered in the study. It was observed that the use of high lexical collocational density had positive impact on learners' reading ability. The practice of lexical collocation did not have any impact on vocabulary test; however, it had a positive impact on learners' reading skill. Last but not list, learners' proficiency level did not have any impact on their performance on collocation test.

Jalali and Zarei (2016) carried out a qualitative analysis to identify how lexical bundles are employed by Iranian EFL post-graduate students in the discipline of applied linguistics. The study indicated that postgraduate

students used target lexical bundles like the published writers did. No difference was observed among the writers with respect to the exploitation of lexical bundles.

Regarding the effectiveness of lexical chunks instruction in speaking ability, Sadeghi and Panahifar (2013) investigated the inappropriate use of collocation by Iranian EFL learners in oral production. The analysis found that verb-preposition and preposition-based collocations were the two most problematic types of collocation. In addition, negative transfer of L1 was the most influential factor contributing to the inappropriate use of collocations.

Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, Tahriri, and Dobahri Bandari (2015) studied Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In doing so, the learners in experimental and control groups were interviewed as a pretest, received treatment sessions, and interviewed as a posttest. Both groups practice the same content and skill, with the exception that the experimental group rehearsed how to use chunks. The study indicated that the experimental group significantly improved speaking fluency and that there was a direct relationship between the frequency of the chunks employed and the listeners' opinion of the learners' speaking fluency.

In a study conducted by Attar and Allami (2013), the efficacy of collocations instruction on Iranian learners' speaking ability was probed. To this end, forty intermediate EFL learners were assigned to control and experimental groups. After completing the pretest and interview on collocation, the participant in the experimental group practiced the book *Collocation in Use*. Both groups, then, attended the posttest and interview sessions on collocation. The study demonstrated that learners' speaking ability in the experimental group improved significantly. In addition, learners' in the experimental group used more collocations in the interview sessions.

Shooshtari and Karami (2013) carried out a study to determine whether the instruction of lexical collocation has a significant impact on the speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. They found that teaching lexical collocation had a positive impact on learners' speaking ability and an average impact on their exploitation of collocations. Accordingly, they concluded that training on the exploitation of collocation can be beneficial in developing EFL learners' language skills, particularly their oral proficiency.

Given the fact that lexical chunks are one of the great concerns of teachers and learners over decades, Zaferanieh and Behrooznia (2011) attempted to address this problem in the Iranian EFL context. In their study, they focused on the impact of implicit/explicit instruction of collocations through web-based and traditional approaches. For that purpose, the participants in one group practiced collocation through the integration of concordancing and traditional approach and the other group practiced just the traditional approach. According to the results, concordancing had a significant impact on learners' knowledge of collocation and they outperformed their counterparts in the group practicing the traditional approach. In addition, it was revealed that explicit instruction was more conducive to boosting learners' knowledge of collocation than the implicit approach.

In a study conducted by Zarei and Tavakoli (2012), the impacts of two modes of input presentation on comprehension and production of lexical bundles were investigated. Four treatment groups were selected for practicing one of the treatment conditions; i.e., the collaborative-massed; collaborative-distributed; non-collaborative-massed; and non-collaborative-massed. Recognition and production test was used in the four groups. The results of the study revealed a non-significant difference among the modes of presentation and method. In addition, no significant difference was observed between massed and distributed modes of presentation. Furthermore, the

difference between collaborative and non-collaborative modes of teaching was not significant.

Similarly, Bakhshizadeh, Rahimi Domakani, and Rajaei (2015) sought to study the efficacy of explicit teaching of lexical chunks on developing oral proficiency of young Iranian learners. For that purpose, two groups of low intermediate learners formed the experimental and control group. They were interviewed before commencing the treatment sessions. Then, the control group practiced its regular instruction focusing on analytic grammar rules and discrete vocabulary, while the experimental group received explicit instruction on chunks through readings. At the end of the treatment sessions, the two groups were interviewed again. The results showed the significant oral proficiency improvement of the experimental group in comparison to the control group, pointing to the effectiveness of formulaic sequences instruction. Asaei and Rezvani (2015) also tried to look at the efficacy of implicit/explicit teaching of collocations on EFL learners' exploitation of collocations. To do so, they selected forty-five learners from two intact classes and randomly assigned the two classes to experimental and control groups. The study showed that the group which received explicit instruction performed better than the group which received implicit instruction.

Babaei, Taleb Najafabadi, and Fotovatian, (2015) studied processing of lexical bundles by Iranian EFL learners. More specifically, they attempted to discover whether Iranian learners store and process the lexical bundles as a whole and whether this process is influenced by the functional discourse type. To that end, the participants were selected and assigned to three groups randomly. Using a DMDX software, three customized readings were implemented in the study. The constituents containing discourse organizers and referential bundles formed the stimuli while non-lexical bundles formed the control. The stimuli were introduced in the three experimental groups in

three ways; word-by-word, portion-by-portion, and sentence-by-sentence. The results demonstrated that the participants read referential bundle faster than discourse organizers and that there was no significant difference between non-lexical bundles and lexical bundles in the three groups, highlighting that lexical bundles were not stored and processed as a whole.

In a similar line, Zarei and Tondaki (2015) attempted to study the impact of explicit and implicit instructional techniques on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' production and comprehension of collocations. The participants in the study were randomly assigned to two groups and that explicit and implicit instructions were given for each group. The study unravels that the difference between the two groups was not significant. In other words, the two groups did not differ in terms of comprehension and production of lexical collocations.

Mohammadi and Enayati (2018) also explored the impacts of lexical sequences teaching on intermediate learners' speaking ability. Accordingly, the two groups were interviewed first and then took part in the treatment sessions in which the experimental group received instruction on lexical chunks, and the control group rehearsed the conventional approach. After the treatment sessions, both groups participated in the interview session. The findings demonstrated that the experimental group's speaking fluency was significantly enhanced after receiving treatment. Furthermore, learners in the experimental group demonstrated encouraging attitudes toward the explicit teaching of lexical chunks.

Hassani and Jamali (2014) also sought to unravel the efficacy of teaching lexical clusters on Iranian EFL learners' speaking accuracy. Accordingly, they selected 41 male and female intermediate learners and randomly assigned to two groups of experimental and control. Instruction of lexical cluster was given in the experimental group while the traditional approached was

followed in the control group. The analysis of the results from the pretest and posttest indicated the significant impact of teaching clusters on learners' speaking accuracy. The results also revealed that gender was not a significant variable.

Some studies attempted to investigate the impact of learners' gender on their speaking ability. For example, using a descriptive quantitative approach, Erdiana, Bahri, and Akhmal (2019) attempted to test the hypothesis that female learners are better speakers than male learners. The first-grade high school students in the study were tested in terms of speaking skill components (i.e., pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension). The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis highlighting that female learners outperformed male learners in all the five components of speaking skill.

The possible effect of teaching collocation on male and female EFL learners' level of vocabulary knowledge was the focus of the study conducted by Behforouz (2017). Accordingly, 22 male and 23 female learners received instruction on collocations which included sharing collocations with partners, collocation with adjectives, as well as the proper use of prepositions. The study indicated that both genders benefited from collocation instruction and their level of vocabulary knowledge improved accordingly. However, the study illustrated that female learners outperformed male learners on the posttest. Hence, Behforouz concluded that integrating collocations with available teaching materials and raising learners' awareness of collocation would significantly increase learners' vocabulary knowledge.

In an effort to investigate the differences between male and female learners with respect to their speaking ability, Rahayu (2016) employed a qualitative and comparative approach to data collection. The study included observation and recorded spoken tests. Learners were tested on four indicators including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. The study

showed that female learners performed better than male learners in all four indicators.

Also, Sundari and Dasmo (2014) carried out a study to determine speaking ability differences in terms of learners' gender. Using a self-efficacy questionnaire, they study 27 female and 23 male college students. They found that both male and female learners' self-efficacy level was moderate. In addition, they observed that gender was a significant factor in distinguishing learners in terms of their speaking ability.

In a study conducted by Ismiati (2013), the effect of gender on learners speaking ability was investigated. In doing so, she interviewed male and female first-grade learners and found that female learners outperformed male learners in aspects of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. In other words, the study revealed that gender was a determinant factor in distinguishing proficient speakers and non-proficient speakers.

Method

The Design of the Study

In this study, a quasi-experimental design was followed. As Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker (2013) pointed out, the quasi-experimental design is one the most widely employed design in which intact classes are assigned to experimental and control groups randomly. In this study, the participants were advanced EFL learners recruited from four classes in a Language Institute who had already been assigned to the classes based on their performances using the placement test they took before attending the course. due to certain pedagogical regulations of the participants rearranging the class condition was not possible; therefore, intact classes were selected. However, their proficiency level was assessed using a quick placement test. All the groups took part in speaking pretest and posttest.

Participants

Four classes with the total number of seventy learners were selected from Rasta Language Institute in Tonekabon, Mazandaran province, Iran. For this study, the participants in two of the classes were female learners and the other two classes were comprised of male learners. Of the initial seventy, sixty participants were at an advanced level based on their scores on the quick placement test. An equal number of participants were at each group with the ages ranged from 20 to 27. Then, the classes comprised of female learners were randomly assigned to one experimental and one control group, with the same procedure followed for the two classes comprised of male learners. Therefore, there were male and female experimental groups, and male and female control groups.

Instruments

Two instruments, including a Quick Placement Test (QPT) and speaking test, were used in the study. The QPT was used to select a homogenous sample, and the speaking tests were used to identify the impact of the treatment. Each of the two instruments is discussed in the following sections.

Quick placement test (UCLES, 2001). The paper and pen version of QPT was employed to determine the proficiency level of the participants. The test comprises of 60 items in a multiple-choice format that measures learners' vocabulary and grammar knowledge. As put forward in the manual for interpreting an individual's score on the test, those who scored between 48 to 60 were selected as advanced learners.

Speaking test. A speaking test was administered prior to and after the treatment sessions. The test followed the IELTS speaking test procedure, and the IELTS scoring rubric was utilized for scoring participants' speaking ability. Each speaking test took about 10 to 15 minutes. In the first part of the

test, the learners were asked some general questions about themselves and a number of familiar topics, including questions about family, home, and hobbies. In the second part, a topic was assigned to the learner, and they were supposed to talk about it. In the third part, learners were asked further questions about the topic they talked about in part two. The topic selected for part two was selected from the coursebook used in the classroom.

The reliability of the test was estimated via inter-rater method in a pilot study with 20 learners. The raters were three experts as PhD level in TOEFL from Tonekabon Islamic Azad University as they were qualified as assessors through their years of teaching experience. Regarding the validity of the test, it was valid in content since it was extracted from IELTS (2018) and was suitable for the target participants of the study.

Procedure

This study was carried out in an institute in Mazandaran province. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher sent a request letter to the institute principal seeking his approval for conducting the study in the institute. When the approval was granted, the experiment began. To obtain a homogenous sample, QPT was administered among 70 participants. The 60-item QPT assessed learners' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar through multiple-choice items. Learners were required to answer to the test in 30 minutes. Based on the rubric proposed for the interpretation of scores, 60 learners from four intact classes were selected. Then the intact classes were assigned to two experimental and two control groups randomly.

Before commencing the treatment sessions, the learners in control and experimental groups participated in a speaking test that followed the IELTS speaking test format. The speaking test took about 15 minutes, and the participants were supposed to talk about a general topic and a particular topic

assigned by the examiner. To assess the speaking ability of the participant, the IELTS scoring rubric was followed.

After conducting the pretest, the treatment sessions began. The participants in each group of the study took part in 14 sessions (each session was about ninety minutes in length) in which they received relevant instructions. For the purpose of teaching and data collection, one of the two researchers who was an experienced English teacher managed the four classes. The coursebook utilized in the groups was *Four Corners* written by Richards and Bohlke (2012). The book interestingly focuses on four language skills and prepares learners to use English for effective daily communication. The speaking instruction for the control and experimental groups followed the steps introduced in the book. For example, the book provides the learners with a sample conversation between two people talking about a topic. Then, the learners are presented with an activity that gives them the opportunity to practice using the language from the conversation. This similar procedure was followed in both experimental and control groups.

For practicing chunks in the experimental groups, twenty minutes were assigned to teaching collocations. The book *English Collocation in Use* (for advanced level) written by O'Dell and McCarthy (2008) was employed in the experimental groups to teach collocation. According to Thornbury (2005) and Chun-Guang (2014), collocations are classified as prefabricated language chunks, which are made up of groups of words that commonly coappear in a normal text. The book includes 60 units covering various topics by presenting topic-related collocations. In each unit, an easy explanation is given for each collocation on the left-hand page and a range of exercises are presented on the right-hand page. For the purpose of the current study and due to time limitation, only twelve topics were randomly selected and were taught in the experimental group. In each lesson, the learners were supposed to do

the exercises after they studied the explanation and sample examples for each collocation.

In each session, the teacher selected ten collocations and wrote them on the board so that learners could prepare their cards. Drilling as an appropriation activity proposed by Thornbury (2005) was followed in the experimental groups. Thornbury (1999) emphasized that drills might facilitate the atomization of language chunks in the hope that language fluency will be enhanced. Accordingly, learners were asked to use the chunks in a sentence. Then the whole class repeated what they heard. Learners were also encouraged to use the chunk in different sentences. The use of drilling would help learners to focus on accuracy and fluency by intensive practicing of structures. It would also provide learners with immediate feedback on their production, a safe environment for practicing the newly learned structure, and facilitates the process of storing the information. In the control group, the same list of chunks were presented, however, the learners did not practice them in the class.

By the time the treatment sessions ended, the participants were exposed to the posttest of English speaking to determine the effectiveness of the treatments. The format of the speaking posttest was similar to the pretest, and a similar scoring procedure was followed.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of analyzing the collected data, SPSS version 21 was used. Descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. First, the test of normality (Table 1) was performed to choose between parametric and non-parametric tests. According to the result of the normality test, the parametric test was appropriate for the purpose of the study. Accordingly, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the posttest score of the groups to see whether there was a difference in participants' speaking skill posttest means after receiving the treatments. In order to analyze the data for

the second and third questions, paired-samples t-tests were performed. The reason for using this procedure was that the questions sought to determine learners' progress from pretest to posttest.

Results

In order to choose between parametric and non-parametric tests, normality test was run on the pretest/posttest scores. Table 1 presents the results of the normality test.

Table 1.

The Test of Normality for the Speaking Scores of the Four Groups

		Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	Control Group (Male)	.768	15	.059
	Experimental Group (Male)	.790	15	.098
	Control Group (Female)	.856	15	.124
	Experimental Group (Female)	.942	15	.231
Posttest	Control Group (Male)	.712	15	.077
	Experimental Group (Male)	.812	15	.115
	Control Group (Female)	.914	15	.090
	Experimental Group (Female)	.910	15	.179

As the results in Table 1 indicate, the data are normally distributed for the four groups (Sig>.05); therefore, parametric tests were selected to analyze the data. The first research question of the study sought to investigate whether there was a difference among all participant groups of the study in terms of English speaking skill posttest means after being treated with chunk-on-card activities. Accordingly, one-way ANOVA was run to compare the means scores. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the posttest scores of the four groups. As the table shows, male learners in the experimental group have the highest mean score ($M=6.30$, $SD=.52$), and the lowest mean score belongs to male learners in the control group ($M=5.000$, $SD=.626$).

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for Posttest Scores on Speaking Test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental Groups	Male Learners	15	6.3000	.52780
	Female Learners	15	6.2333	.37161
Control Groups	Male Learners	15	5.0000	.62678
	Female Learners	15	5.0333	.54989

Table 3.

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.208	3	56	.890

Table 3 presents the results of Levene's test for homogeneity of variances, the significance value ($p=.890$) is greater than .05, indicating that the variance in scores is the same for each of the four groups. In other words, the homogeneity of variance assumption is not violated. Table 3 presents the results of one-way ANOVA for the posttest scores.

Table 4.

Results of One- Way ANOVA on Posttest Scores of the Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	23.479	3	7.826	28.155	.000
Within Groups	15.567	56	.278		
Total	39.046	59			

Table 4 shows a significant difference at the $p<.05$ level in the speaking posttest scores for the four groups; $F(3,56)=28.155$, $p=.000$. The effect size

was calculated by using eta squared, and it was found to be .60, which is large effect size. The Scheffe test was performed to identify which two groups differed significantly in terms of their mean scores. Table 5 present the results.

Table 5.
Results of Scheffe Post-hoc Test

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male EG	Male CG	1.30000*	.19252	.000	.7451	1.8549
	Female EG	.06667	.19252	.989	-.4883	.6216
	Female CG	1.26667*	.19252	.000	.7117	1.8216
	Male EG	-1.30000*	.19252	.000	-1.8549	-.7451
	Female EG	-1.23333*	.19252	.000	-1.7883	-.6784
	Female CG	-.03333	.19252	.999	-.5883	.5216
Female EG	Male EG	-.06667	.19252	.989	-.6216	.4883
	Male CG	1.23333*	.19252	.000	.6784	1.7883
	Female CG	1.20000*	.19252	.000	.6451	1.7549
Female CG	Male EG	-1.26667*	.19252	.000	-1.8216	-.7117
	Male CG	.03333	.19252	.999	-.5216	.5883
	Female EG	-1.20000*	.19252	.000	-1.7549	-.6451

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.
CG: control group; EG: experimental group

Table 5 reveals that the mean for the male experimental group ($M= 6.30$, $SD= .527$) is significantly different from mean of the male control group ($M= 5.000$, $SD= .626$) and the female control group ($M= 5.03$, $SD= .549$). Moreover, the mean score of the female experimental group ($M= 6.23$, $SD= .371$) is significantly different from the mean scores of the male control group ($M= 5.000$, $SD= .626$) and female control group ($M= 5.03$, $SD= .549$).

The second research question of the study sought to investigate whether the treatments had significant impacts on male learners' speaking skills. A

paired-samples t-test was performed to analyze the data. Accordingly, pretest/posttest scores of male learners in the experimental and control groups were compared. Table 6 shows the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 6.
Descriptive Statistics for Pre/Posttest Scores of Male Learners

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	Pretest	15	4.4667	.29681	.07664
	Posttest	15	6.3000	.52780	.13628
Control group	Pretest	15	4.7333	.45774	.11819
	Posttest	15	5.0000	.62678	.16183

Table 7.
Paired Samples Test

		M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental group	Pretest-Posttest	-1.833	.556	-12.763	14	.000
Control group	Pretest-Posttest	-.266	.495	-2.086	14	.056

The results of descriptive statistics reveal the mean increase from pretest to posttest for both groups. Table 7 indicates the mean increase in the experimental group from pretest ($M=4.46$, $SD=.296$) to posttest ($M=6.30$, $SD=.527$) is statistically significant; $t(14)=12.763$, $p<.05$. The eta squared statistic also indicates a large effect size ($d=.92$). In the control group, there is a mean increase from pretest ($M=4.73$, $SD=.457$) to posttest ($M=5.000$, $SD=.626$); however, the increase is not statistically significant; $t(14)=2.086$, $p>.05$.

The purpose of the third research question was to examine whether the treatments had significant impacts on female learners' speaking skills. The

same statistical procedure was followed for this question. Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics of the two groups.

Table 8.

Descriptive Statistics for Pre/Posttest Scores of Female Learners

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	Pretest	15	4.5000	.32733	.08452
	Posttest	15	6.2333	.37161	.09595
Control group	Pretest	15	4.8667	.39940	.10313
	Posttest	15	5.0333	.54989	.14198

Table 8 demonstrates the mean of the two groups improved from pretest to posttest. The results of the paired-samples t-test in table 9 unravel whether the mean increases are statistically significant. According to the results, speaking test scores of the experimental group significantly raise from pretest ($M=4.50$, $SD=.327$) to posttest ($M=6.23$, $SD=.371$), $t(14)= 12.665$, $p<.05$. The effect size was calculated using the eta squared, and the result indicated a large effect size ($d=.91$). The control group also shows a mean increase from pretest ($M=4.86$, $SD=.399$) to posttest ($M=5.03$, $SD=.549$); however, the increase is not statistically significant; $t(14)=1.435$, $p>.05$.

Table 9.

Paired Samples Test

		M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental group	Pretest-Posttest	-1.733	.530	-12.665	14	.000
Control group	Pretest-Posttest	-.166	.449	-1.435	14	.173

Discussion

Using an appropriation-based approach proposed by Thornbury (2005), the present study attempted to investigate the impact of practicing chunk-on-cards activity in promoting learning speaking skills. The emphasis in this study, unlike the many studies focusing on awareness-raising, was on helping learners practice control over their speaking skills. Accordingly, four groups of learners (two groups of female and two groups of male learners) were selected and assigned to the experimental and control group in a manner that there were male and female control groups and male and female experimental groups. The study compared learners speaking skills two times during the study; prior to commencing the treatment sessions and after the treatment session ended.

Concerning the first research question of the study, the results indicated significant differences in the posttest scores of the four groups for the experimental groups. Put another way, the posttest scores of male and female learners in experimental groups were different from the control groups. The result of the current study is endorsed by several studies which indicated that explicit instruction of chunks is a more beneficial method to foster learners' proficiency since it facilitates the learning process and it has a continuing effect on memory retention (Attar & Allami, 2013; Hsu & Chiu, 2008; Huang & Normandia, 2007; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Shooshtari & Karimi, 2013; Zaferanieh & Behroozi, 2011). In line with the finding of the study, Lewis (2008) suggested that teaching lexical chunks is a significant factor increasing learners' exposure to the target language, and the lack of exposure to such chunks might bring about deficiency in learners' fluency. In the present study, it was observed that the groups that rehearsed chunk-on-cards outperformed the control groups. The result could be justified by what Chambers (1997) and Wood (2006) claimed. They stated that lexical chunks employed by L2

learners provide them with the opportunity to improve the speech rate by arranging sentences and enhancing the duration of their speech. Moreover, they suggested that learning a great number of chunks and automatic retrieval of such chunks facilitate native-like fluency. The result of the present study is in agreement with the study conducted by Attar and Allami (2013). Despite using a different methodology and assigning a shorter period of time for the treatment sessions, they found teaching lexical collocations as an important means to expand collocation knowledge. They reiterated that teaching lexical chunks would help learners to have more command over their speaking skills and simultaneously understand the ideas within the interactions through the exploitation of collocation knowledge. The outperformance of the experimental groups could be justified by the fact that memorizing lexical chunks reduces the time of retrieving them in the course of communication and enhances the fluency and accuracy of speaking. The result regarding the beneficial effect of teaching chunks on learners' speaking ability is also in line with the study performed by Shooshtari and Karami (2013). They followed the treatment sessions for ten sessions in which they taught the chunks in one session and fill-in-the-blank tests were given in every other session. They concluded that raising learners' awareness on collocating was essential for them to have a good mastery of English. Also, they reiterated that collocation dictionaries are valuable sources for facilitating the progress of collocation competence by presenting a detailed explanation of collocations that seem to be structurally similar. They suggested that practicing collocation can be helpful in improving learners' language skills, particularly, their oral skills. The findings of the current study are also in congruence with the study performed by Zaferanieh and Behrooznia (2011). In spite of the fact that the two studies followed dissimilar methodologies, the findings were in line. Zaferanieh and Behrooznia's (2011) study revealed that focused instruction of

collocations had a beneficial impact on teaching and learning collocations and learners who practiced collocation activities outperformed their counterparts who practiced the traditional approach. However, the findings of the current study are in contrast with those of Zarei and Tondaki (2015), who found no difference between modes of practicing chunks on learners' speaking skills. The difference in the findings of these two studies might be due to different proficiency levels of participants as advanced learners took part in the present study, while the participants in Zarei and Tondaki's study were upper-intermediate learners.

For the second and third research questions of the study, it was found that practicing chunks through the appropriation-based syllabus significantly improved learners' speaking skills from pretest to posttest. Both male and female learners in experimental groups outperformed their counterparts in the control groups. The result of the current study is compatible with the findings of the study conducted by Asaei and Rezvani (2015). Despite the dissimilarities that exist between the two studies in terms of the participants' proficiency level (intermediate vs. advanced level) and the language ability that were tested (speaking vs. writing), the results highlighted that explicit teaching of collocation has a significant impact on learners language ability.

In addition, the findings are in line with Wood's (2010) claim that formulaic sequences have great impacts on speech fluency development. Also, the results are confirmed by several studies which reported that lexical chunks and formulaic sequences help L2 learners to enhance their speech speed by building sentences (Ismiati, 2013; Sundari & Dasmu, 2014; Shooshtari, & Karimi, 2013; Hassani & Jamali, 2014; Wood, 2006). They suggested that if learners memorized a great number of chunks and spontaneously retrieve them, they can reach a native-like proficiency and enhance the time-span of the speech between pauses. In addition, the result is confirmed by the study

conducted by Behforouz (2017) who attempted to investigate the impact of teaching collocations on Iranian EFL learners' oral proficiency and found that teaching collocation expanded learners' vocabulary knowledge and oral proficiency in male and female learners. Similar to the finding of the study, Mahdavi Zafarghandi et al. (2015) found that teaching chunks had a significant impact on female learners' speaking ability. In addition, they observed that there was a direct correlation between the number of chunks employed and the listeners' perception of the participants' speaking fluency.

In contrast, the study conducted by Erdiana et al. (2019) revealed that female learners are better than male learners in terms of speaking ability. They reported that female learners outperformed male learners in terms of speaking skill components (i.e., pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension). The current study is not consistent with the study conducted by Rahayu (2016) who employed a qualitative and comparative approach to determine the probable differences that existed between male and female learners in terms of speaking ability. The study discovered that female learners performed better than male learners in four aspects of speaking including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. The possible reason for such difference might be due to the fact that the participants did not follow any types of treatments while in this study male and female learners in the experimental groups received similar treatments and revealed no significant differences.

Conclusion

By following a controlled-practice, awareness-raising procedure, and topic-based presentation of the chunks, the present study sheds light on the significance of chunks in developing learners' speaking ability. Taking into account the results obtained, it is concluded that empowering learners' with

the knowledge and ability to practice control over their learning process is of paramount significance. Providing learners with the chance to practice control over their learning process would raise their awareness of the input. Accordingly, it is suggested that teachers adopt strategies in the classroom that would encourage learners to manage their learning and give them a sense of accountability to monitor their learning process.

In addition, learners were exposed to the input at several stages; i.e., during the presentation of the input by the teacher and the time they practice the chunks individually or in a group. These multiple-focused exposures to the target chunks enhanced learners' knowledge of the input. Accordingly, providing the learners with ample opportunities to practice such knowledge in classrooms would facilitate the process of acquiring such knowledge. In addition, maximum encounters with chunks would guarantee learners' development in speaking skill as it reduces the time of processing the sentences and enhances the speed, accuracy, and fluency of the speaker. Consequently, teachers should organize activities that encourage learners to expand their knowledge of lexical chunks. To do so, teachers could benefit from using explicit and attention directing activities to highlight lexical chunks in the input. Intentional and explicit learning of chunks should be promoted in the classroom to facilitate the learning process.

The topic-based presentation of the input also affected learners' knowledge of chunks and speaking ability. This procedure helped learners better grasp the function, meaning, and appropriate use of such expressions in various contexts. Teachers could benefit from authentic corpora or a creative list of chunks to be employed in the classrooms. However, it is recommended that teachers carefully consider the factors such as range, usefulness, prevalence, and learnability of such chunks to ensure that the learners benefit the learning of such expressions. Subject-related chunks are stored and

retrieved easier than those that are introduced haphazardly. This kind of strategy may facilitate the process of memorization and practicing lexical chunks.

The study provided some valuable insights regarding the impact of teaching chunks on learners' speaking ability; however, it suffered from some limitations. First, in selecting the chunks for the classroom, only collocations were selected. There are other categories of lexical chunks that could affect learners' language skills. Concerning the appropriation approach to teaching speaking, only drilling was used in the study. Other techniques such as writing tasks, reading aloud, assisted performance and scaffolding, communicative tasks, and task repetition proposed by Thornbury (2005) could be employed to enhance learners' speaking skills. Last but not least, the study used a small sample size. A larger sample size would provide more robust results and would improve the generalizability of the findings of the study.

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