Nice and chunky

Wayne Trotman rates this text as a useful resource but suggests teachers should select carefully

TEACHING CHUNKS OF LANGUAGE: FROM NOTICING TO REMEMBERING (Helbling Languages)
Seth Lindstromberg and Frank Boers ISBN 978-3-85272-056-2

VERY EARLY in this title the authors explain how thus far in the lexical approach to learning English the student has been ‘like someone expected to row across the ocean in a very leaky boat’ accompanied by a frustrated teacher with no way of helping them. Their intention is therefore ‘to furnish teachers with an adequate means of helping students remember those hundreds or thousands of additional, complex, items of vocabulary’. Clearly they are referring to chunks – sequences of words which native speakers feel are the preferred way of expressing a particular idea or purpose. Teaching Chunks of Language is written for teachers working with teenagers and young adults at pre-intermediate level and beyond. Potential users of this resource book would do well to spend a good deal of time (there’s a chunk for you!) on chapter one, which explains the variety of possible chunks, why knowing lots of chunks is useful, and how we can help students remember them. Also explained is semantic prosody (a close relative of register), an awareness of which can help learners with chunks such as ‘seek solace’ and ‘commit a crime.’

The fourteen activities in chapter two illustrate procedures for helping learners to notice and start to remember chunks. Several involve rehearsal – practising the lines. Each activity is accompanied by a detailed outline of the role of the teacher and any necessary preparation. Photocopiable sheets for most activities, designed to keep students fully occupied, can be found at the end of the book. Examples include the seemingly outdated but still useful tasks of memorising short dialogues and filling in story skeletons. Curious-looking tasks in this section include dealing with ‘chat-up’ lines (those a boy might use when meeting a girl for the first time), such as, ‘Hi, I’m Mr Right. Someone said you were looking for me’ and ‘Can I borrow 20p? I promised my mother I’d phone her when I fell in love’. Another activity might take a bit of explaining to school directors as it deals with situational clichés; page 114 includes the memorable chunk ‘He couldn’t organise a piss-up in a brewery’. Thus far I felt this was probably a fun book to author, and to review, but I’m not sure I would feel completely comfortable teaching such language, especially in some cultures.

Following the focus on noticing in chapter two, the seventeen activities in chapter three are aimed at facilitating chunk learning. A core concept here is linguistic motivation, which concerns various influences on language such as history, genre and repetition. Topics focused on here are chosen to reflect frequency and interest, thus we have tasks that deal with figurative expressions like getting students to ‘dodge an imaginary tomato’. Does it all sound familiar? Yes, you’re right! It’s Simon Says reinvented. Chapter four serves as a review, following another authorial claim, this time that published materials for chunk teaching tend to give insufficient guidance on how to reinforce language previously taught. Requiring teachers to select chunks already covered, various forms of quizzes, posters and review sheets are very much the focus in this chapter. Teaching Chunks of Language is clearly a valuable resource, certainly worthy of a place in any decent staff library. Claims made by the authors are backed up by carefully planned activities based on sound rationale, but teachers might well be advised to select from them with care.

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