Like most language teachers, I don’t take much convincing that students need to learn chunks of language and have tried various ways of teaching them over the years. However, I doubt that my students are likely to learn collocations from boring exercises like word maps and gapfills. And then there’s the problem that a text which might have two or three grammar points worth picking up on probably has many more unconnected chunks of useful language. I therefore approach any book on collocations with a fair amount of scepticism. Imagine my surprise and delight, then, when I read the Introduction to Teaching Chunks of Language and found that it contained a great summary of most of my doubts.

The ideas on how to get round the weaknesses of previously available techniques and materials are divided into three chapters: initial steps towards memorization (Chapter 2 Basic Chunks Teaching Activities); selecting particular chunks to learn and applying memorization techniques to them (Chapter 3 Teaching Sets of Chunks); and reviewing to make sure those things stick (Chapter 4 Reviewing and Quizzing). Chapter 1 is an Introduction (How to Use this Book), and the book ends with 60 pages of photocopiable materials, keys, a Glossary (of terms like ‘word string’ and ‘entrenchment’), a Bibliography, and a Teacher’s Quick-Reference Guide (to help choose activities by level and time available). There are also additional worksheets at www.helblinglanguages.com/teachingchunks

This 174 page book of practical suggestions and photocopiable materials offers more teaching ideas for chunks than I’ve seen in one place before, but the ultimate test for this book is whether it manages to follow up its criticisms with real solutions. The main solutions suggested by the authors in the Introduction are all connected to choosing chunks that are “linguistically motivated”. By “linguistic motivation” they mean that “their wording is partly explainable in terms of identifiable influences” (p. 12), giving the three “particularly important” examples of being “explainable in terms of their original literal meaning and usage” (e.g. the sailing roots of show someone the ropes), words of a similar register going together (e.g. the Latinate words remain and custody in remain in custody), and repetition of sounds, as in rhyming and alliteration. To put it in much more common language, their idea seems to be to put much more emphasis on teachability than in other books I have seen on collocations, making it more of a priority than frequency or being able to put the language into thematic sets – something they state as potentially confusing as it is helpful.

Chapter 2 kicks off the practical teaching suggestions with 14 activities on Basic Chunk Teaching Activities – Initial Steps Towards Memorisation, almost all of which have accompanying photocopiable materials at the back of the book, ranging from just two lines for 2.2 (Priming with Chinese Whispers – using chunks from a song they are going to hear) to three and half pages for 2.11 (Teach your phrase – telling stories containing the target chunks to each other). The Introduction emphasises

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that 'noticing' is the most important first step, and also mentions "what memory researchers call 'rehearsal'" (p. 19), which is holding chunks in your short term memory while you prepare to use them. This is most obviously used in 2.4 (What are those initials for?) and 2.5 (Remember my change). The other activities include some variations on some long-neglected favourites (2.1 Reading out loud with pauses, 2.3 Memorising short dialogues, 2.6 A kind of one man running dictation, 2.8 A variation on dictogloss, and 2.9 Putting target chunks into questions that they ask each other).

Chapter 3 has more emphasis on communication than Chapter 2, but also aims to make students “engage in the kinds of rich mental processing that are especially likely to result in the formation of robust memories”. In this case there are 36 pages of photocopiable materials for the 17 ideas. As with the other chapters, I don’t think I would use many of the actual materials here again, except with higher level classes than the suggested range, but they do illustrate the activities very well and are well worth the space given to them. The first few ideas and worksheets get students thinking about their bodies, with language for smelling (3.1), sounds (3.2) and movement (3.3). The movement one then moves into figurative expressions (my head is spinning, etc.), and the next few do the same with weather (a frosty reception, etc.), devices (memory like a sieve), cards (cabinet reshuffle), seafaring, horse riding, body idioms, and boxing.

Some ideas were unfamiliar to me. For example, chunks that have their form because of their sound (colour coordinated rather than colour matched). However, I can’t really imagine using those worksheets with lower than post-upper-intermediate level students, rather than pre-intermediate + as suggested by the book. In fact, I wonder how much importance we should give to chunks at lower levels when most of students can progress without them. A lot depends on how much students read and listen to English outside class, and how much of a text is by native speakers and so likely to include these kinds of chunks.

Chapter 4 has 12 ideas on “reviewing and quizzing” which try to repeat and extend the memorization techniques in other parts of the book, but also aim to promote “effortful recall” (p. 83), use of guesswork, and a range of skills. Five of the ideas have a page or two of accompanying worksheets. The ideas include fairly obvious but perhaps underutilized ideas like testing each other in groups (4.1 Memory slips with hints, and 4.5 What comes next?), brainstorming onto sheets of paper that are passed around the room and added to (4.3 Circulating review sheets), and storytelling (4.4 Using chunks in mini-stories). Review Posters (4.6) is a variation on a fairly well-known vocabulary learning technique. There is also an activity where students guess from context if a phrase is being used with its literal or figurative meaning, one that I thought I was the first to use when I tried it with business idioms about six months ago! Playing the well-known guessing game 20 Questions with chunks of language (4.7 Guess my chunk) is a bit more fun than the other ideas, but I’m not really convinced that talking about how many words and if it has alliteration will actually help recall the language in real time.

Although I generally agree with the idea of paying more attention to teachability, this book does seem to introduce idioms that I wouldn’t expect even advanced students to be able to produce. There is also no distinction made between chunks which students need for production at one level and those that they might only need to understand at another level.

My main worry is that few of the activities were actually fun, which is a very important part of teachability for me. Having said that, motivated students were happy to do most of the activities I tried, even though they preferred it when I managed to introduce a game element. It was certainly a stimulating book that has made me rethink my teaching. I also expect it to be a book that I think of, and pick up, again and again for years to come.

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