Segmentation of Chunks in Developing a Mental Lexico-Syntactic System: A Case Study Based on A Young Second Language Learner

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There is growing evidence in the field of psycholinguistics that children are sensitive to the properties of multi-word combinations of building blocks, which include multi-word chunks. These chunks, when used in early production allow them to discover grammatical relations and co-occurrence patterns that exist between words. This case study was designed to investigate how a young second language learner, aged 3 years, in his early stages of language learning, acquires the basic elements of language. The researcher was a participant-observer who lived with a young learner who just began to learn English as a second language while simultaneously acquiring his first language. The learner was provided with second language input only by the researcher while the child communicated with others in his first language. The utterances produced by the learner were recorded and the database consists of transcribed interaction recorded over six months. According to the collected data, there is an indication of analysis starting with formulaic chunks and of extension beyond the mere segmentation stage. It was evident that the learner began to segment the chunks and replace them with other parts of analyzed chunks. The results revealed a number of regular developmental patterns and the overall analysis suggests a developmental pattern of lexico-syntactic elements to convey basic meanings. Initially, one lexical element is used to convey a complete meaning and then a larger chunk which conveys the same meaning is analyzed and segmented to convey other meanings. (eg; *'water'* conveying the meaning "*I want some water*' and gradually '*want water*' as one chunk conveying this meaning and then segmenting elements of this larger chunk to produce the utterance '*want a*pple' to convey another meaning). The study confirms the use of larger chunks to discover the units of language and the regularities governing their combination. Further studies can be designed to investigate how this chunks segmentation affects the learning of grammar.

Key words: Lexico-Syntactic System, Second Language Input, Segmentation of Chunks, Young Second Language Learner