A Correlation Study on Lexical Chunks and Business Correspondence Writing in EFL in China

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction ..............................................................................................................................1
   1.1 Aim .................................................................................................................................2
   1.2 Material .......................................................................................................................2
       1.2.1 The participants .................................................................................................3
       1.2.2 Texts for analysis .............................................................................................3
   1.3 Method .........................................................................................................................3

2 Theoretical Background .........................................................................................................4
   2.1 The lexical chunks .......................................................................................................5
       2.1.1 Definition of the lexical chunk .........................................................................6
       2.1.2 Categorization of lexical chunks .....................................................................8
       2.1.3 The role of lexical chunks in language production .........................................12
           2.1.3.1 Improving fluency ..................................................................................12
           2.1.3.2 Improving accuracy ...............................................................................13
   2.2 Business correspondence ............................................................................................14
       2.2.1 Connotation of business correspondence .......................................................14
       2.2.2 Characteristics of business correspondence ....................................................15

3 Analysis and Discussion .......................................................................................................17
   3.1 Some technical points in data collection ....................................................................18
   3.2 Quantitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts ...........................................21
       3.2.1 Data presentation ..............................................................................................21
       3.2.2 Scatter/dot Graph analysis ...............................................................................22
       3.2.3 Comparison of three levels of texts .................................................................24
       3.2.4 Discussion on correlation between number of lexical chunks and text quality ....25
       3.2.5 Study of a special case .....................................................................................28
   3.3 Qualitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts ..............................................29
       3.3.1 Comparison based on categories .....................................................................30
3.3.1.1 Sentence builders .................................................................31
3.3.1.2 Polywords ...........................................................................36
3.3.1.3 Institutionalized expressions ..............................................37
3.3.1.4 Collocations and phrasal constraints ..................................38
3.3.2 Comparison based on error analysis ......................................38
  3.3.2.1 Errors inside the lexical chunks ........................................39
  3.3.2.2 Errors around the lexical chunks .......................................41
  3.3.2.3 Errors in register ...............................................................41
3.4 Summary of the lexical chunk analysis from the texts ..............42
3.5 Result of the interview .................................................................43
3.6 Pedagogical implications .............................................................45
3.7 Weakness of the study .................................................................47

4. Conclusion ......................................................................................48

References ..........................................................................................i
Appendices ...........................................................................................iii
  Appendix 1 Writing Test .................................................................iii
  Appendix 2 BEC Preliminary Criteria for Writing Part 2 .................iv
  Appendix 3 A sample letter with underlined lexical chunks and questions for interview ......vi
1 Introduction

With the development of economic globalization, international business has grown considerably in the past two decades. As one of the main means of communication in the international business world, English business correspondence writing plays an indispensable role during the business procedure. The business correspondence initiates and maintains the business relationship between the trade members, and its quality concerns the success or failure of a business deal to a large extent. A well-written business letter will not only accelerate the ongoing deal, but also create a trustful relationship between the partners, which will bring potential benefits in future contacts. On the contrary, if a business letter is inappropriately drafted, it will cause misunderstandings during the transaction, and this may bring successive troubles in the following steps or even result in a total failure of the deal.

China, as one of the important members in the international business world, has paid much attention to professional staff training in the business field since the 1990s. English business correspondence writing is a necessary component in the training course. Writing a good business letter in English requires not only professional knowledge in business but also in English. In fact, business correspondence writing is a branch of practical writing in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which has its unique linguistic features and particular pragmatic context. It demands a methodology different from the one used for EGP (English for General Purposes).

However, most of the business English instructions in China are under the pervasive influence of EGP instructions. The methodology used in teaching business correspondence writing is the conventional pattern which stresses the abstract language competence and pays more attention on grammatical analysis and words learning, but the particular language patterns which have been formed during the long run of business practice are often neglected. One of the problems it brings is that the students have acquired professional knowledge in the business field in their native language and also linguistic knowledge in English for general purpose, but they cannot integrate the knowledge into a satisfactory business letter with a professional tone. In light of this, exploring the factors that can improve the students’ performance in the business correspondence writing is one of the tasks the teachers involved in business writing have to face.
Since the concept ‘lexical chunk’ was put forward about three decades ago, it has aroused the interest of linguists and scholars as well as language teachers due to its pedagogical implications. It is a kind of word-unit that exists on a spectrum between lexical items and grammar rules in the traditional grammar/vocabulary dichotomy. Many SLA researchers have studied the linguistic phenomenon in L1 and L2 acquisition and found that such word-units constitute a large proportion of natural language and play an important role in language acquisition. Especially during the 1990s, a series of publications on the lexical-chunk research and implementation in L2 language teaching were published, which has brought the lexical chunks to the highlight of pedagogy. In view of the function the lexical chunks have in language acquisition and L2 teaching and learning, it is regarded as “an ideal unit for language teaching” by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:32).

This novel and “ideal unit” has also aroused great interest among researchers in China in recent years. Some empirical studies have been carried out with Chinese learners as participants. However, most of the studies focus on the use of the lexical chunks in EGP teaching. The study of lexical chunks in English business writing is still a relatively new field. This essay, therefore, makes an attempt to explore this topic, hoping to provide instructional advice to the teaching of business correspondence writing in EFL.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the present study is to find out whether there is a correlation between the use of lexical chunks and the quality of business correspondence written in EFL. If there is a positive relationship, pedagogical implications will be explored in the hope of improving the students’ writing ability in English business writing by employing the lexical chunks effectively.

1.2 Material

The empirical study was carried out in a secondary vocational school in China. A business writing test was given and 30 scored texts were collected as the primary material from which the data used in the study were derived.
1.2.1 The participants

One class of students in the vocational school is involved in the study. They major in foreign trade business. These students are now in the second semester of grade two. They have learned the course on international trade practice taught in their native language (Chinese) as the professional knowledge and English for general purposes (EGP), i.e. English for daily communication, as the language knowledge. They are learning English business correspondence writing as a compulsory course this semester. They have finished three units concerning general introduction of business correspondence, letters for establishment and development of business relations, and enquiries and offers. The next unit is letters on counter-offer. The reason for carrying out the writing test at this moment lies in two aspects. First, these students have acquired a general knowledge on business correspondence writing and accumulated some technical expressions as well at this stage; they have got prepared to begin to write a counter-offer letter. Second, they have not learned sample counter-offer letters yet, which prevents the students from using uniform expressions in the writing test and thus provides variables for the present study.

There are two teachers involved in the study. Both of them are teaching business correspondence writing in the vocational school in grade two at the present stage. They were invited to score the writing test used for the present study.

1.2.2 Texts for analysis

Fifty scored letters written by the students were sent to me by the teachers, from which 30 texts were randomly chosen to be used for the analysis in the study. Each text had got a holistic score at the top. These 30 texts were assigned numbers from 1 to 30. The numbers instead of the students’ names are used to identify the different texts throughout this study.

1.3 Method

The study consists of five steps:

1) A writing test. The students were asked to write an English business letter according to the
2) Scoring. After the writing test was operated, fifty texts were scored by two experienced teachers according to Business English Cambridge Criteria for Writing Paper (BEC Preliminary). The teachers gave a holistic score to the text respectively and then the two scores were averaged to get the final one. Then thirty texts were randomly picked out and used as the data source for the present study.

3) Data collecting and analyzing. The chunks used in each letter were counted and analyzed with the purpose to find out a possible correlation between the use of lexical chunks and the quality of the letters.

4) A sample counter-offer letter with underlined chunks was provided to the students and an interview was given to the 5 students who got the top scores and 5 students who got the least scores to collect information on their attitude toward the lexical chunks.

5) Pedagogical implication was elicited from the analysis and discussion.

2 Theoretical background

“Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”(Wilkins, 1972:111). The claim made by David Wilkins in his Linguistics in Language Teaching has two implications. On the one hand, vocabulary is a crucial part of language as well as grammar, or even a bit more important than grammar by comparing his deliberately-chosen wordings—little and nothing. In this sense, Wilkins expresses his innovative idea by putting the vocabulary at the center of language teaching in an atmosphere where the influence of grammar-centered pedagogical theories and practice was pervasive. This claim is still frequently cited by linguistic researchers and language teachers to stress the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition.

On the other hand, Wilkins retains the conventional grammar/vocabulary dichotomy. According to his claim, both grammar and vocabulary are important factors required to “convey” information in language. He draws a clear-cut line between grammar and vocabulary and views them as separate systems in language while making the assertion.
The problem then is left to the language teachers: how to keep an ideal balance between the two systems to maximize the function of language teaching. In fact, there exists an intermediate unit between the lexical items and the grammar rules—the lexical chunk, which can be a perfect solution to the above problem.

2.1 The lexical chunks

The lexical chunk is not a newly-born concept in itself, but an inherent part of the English language. As early as 1933, Palmer mentioned the primary idea of this concept by saying “[e]ach collocation …must or should be learnt, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts” (Palmer, 1933:4). He explicitly pointed out the concept of learning collocations as integral and independent units. But due to the fuzziness of the boundary of collocations as integral and independent units, the concept of collocation has long been at the periphery of the language study and categorized as either phrases or syntactic structures.

It was not until the 1970s that such linguistic phenomena came into focus again. Becker (1975) was one of the first to suggest that phrases such as let along, as well as, and so much for, which in many ways defy traditional textbook analysis, are ubiquitous. A systematic treatment of this large class of idiosyncratic phrases is needed. Since then, an increasing amount of research has been done which advocates that between the lexical items and grammar rules “lies a vast number of phrases like a day/month/year ago, the ___er the ___er, etc., which have varying degrees of generality and cannot efficiently be placed with either of these two extremes” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:23). Such phrases and syntactic structures occupy a large proportion of the English language. Estimates vary, but “it is possible that up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression” (Woolard 2009). Considering the large number of lexical chunks in real-life language use, this linguistic phenomenon can no longer be neglected and has aroused great and wide interest of linguists and pedagogical experts so far.
2.1.1 Definition of the lexical chunk

The lexical chunk is a unit between the individual word and syntactic sentence. Many linguists and scholars have made investigations on the topic and different terms are used to refer to this linguistic phenomenon according to their particular research perspective and context. Automatic language, collocations, formulaic sequences, multi-word units, preassembled speech, prefabricated routines and patterns (to name a few) are all terms employed by different researchers to refer to the type or the subtype of the unit. Well above 40 terms have been used in this field (Wray & Perkins 2000). Due to the various ways of understanding the phenomenon by different researchers as well as its fuzzy boundary itself, there is still no widely-agreed definition for the lexical chunk. In order to carry out the study on a scientific basis, some of the definitions given by previous researchers are referred to before coining one as a yardstick used for this paper.

In Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) give the name of lexical phrases to this lexico-grammatical unit. They describe lexical phrases as

‘chunks’ of language of varying length… they are multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time… Each is associated with a particular discourse function, such as expressing time, a month ago, or relationships among ideas, the higher X, the higher Y. (1992:1)

Nattinger and DeCarrico’s description is one of the most detailed definitions of the lexical phrases. In addition to the structural patterns, they put particular emphasis on the functional characteristics of the linguistic units, and explicitly point out that the lexical phrases are integrations of form and function, existing between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, incorporating language knowledge and language performance as well as pragmatic elements. Although they are used as basic units in the same way that individual words are, the lexical phrases, as bigger prefabricated chunks, show great advantage in generative power over words, for they are stored and retrieved as whole units and thus ease the process of stringing discourse pieces word by word.
Michael Lewis (1993), while putting forward the innovational lexical approach, makes a clear statement that vocabulary is more than words; they are “grammaticalised lexis” (1993: vii). He modifies the connotation of lexicon from single words to the collocation of many ritualized bits of language, asserting that lexis is different kinds of multi-word chunks, which are word chunks connected by grammar rules, and, “when combined, produce continuous coherent text” (1997:7). Lewis’s concept of lexicon is the basis for a lexical view of language and the lexical approach to second language teaching.

Rosamund Moon (1998) classifies the unit into the vocabulary domain and calls the unit a multi-word item. She states that “[a] multi-word item is a vocabulary item which consists of a sequence of two or more words. This sequence of words semantically and/or syntactically forms a meaningful and inseparable unit” (1998: 40). Moon’s definition focuses on the form of the lexical chunk, and points out that the form contains its particular meaning as a unit.

The formulaic sequence is the name given by Alison Wray and Michael Perkins. They give the definition to the unit as

…a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words of other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (2000:1)

Wray and Perkins point out two properties of the lexical chunk in this definition: prefabrication and wholeness, which stresses the function of lexical chunks in language use.

Based on the above quotations and discussion, the term lexical chunk is used for the present study. The lexical chunk has the following characteristics:

1. The lexical, part of the term, indicates that they are similar to lexicon in being treated as whole units, yet they are made up of more than one word;
2. They are chunks of various length; some are two-word phrases while some may take the form of a complete sentence;
They are lexico-grammatical units existing between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax. Some are compositional units used as a whole and if separated, they lose their meaning when conveyed by the units, e.g. *by the way*; some can be analyzed by syntactic rules, e.g. *could you lift that for me?* It can be put into the syntactic model *Modal + you +VP (for me)*.

They have pragmatic functions and can be used in a certain context to convey particular information, e.g. *by the way* functions as a topic shifter and *all in all* is a summarizer to conclude a discourse.

In general, the definition given to the lexical chunk in this essay goes as follows: the lexical chunk is a unit of various lengths, fixed or semi-fixed, existing between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax; it has a pragmatic function that conveys meaning and information as a whole in context.

### 2.1.2 Categorization of lexical chunks

Just as different researchers use different terminology and definitions for this linguistic phenomenon, they have their own criteria to classify the lexical chunks for their particular study. However, different from the variety in terminology, most part of the categorization of the lexical chunks given by the previous researchers is somewhat overlapped.

Becker’s (1975) taxonomy of lexical chunks is based on adult native speakers, and is regarded as a detailed categorization containing 6 categories:

1. **Polywords**: multi-word phrases admitting no variability, interchangeable with single words or concepts; their function is the same as single words. *e.g. (the) oldest profession*; *to blow up*; *for good*.
2. **Phrasal constraints**: units consisting of a small number of words, some of which constrain the variability of others; they often specify how a particular expressive function is to be applied to particular semantic material. *e.g. by sheer coincidence*.
3. **Deictic locutions**: phrases with low variability serving as clauses or whole utterances whose purpose is to direct the course of conversation. *e.g. for that matter...*(message: ‘I just thought of a better way of making my point’); *...that’s all* (message: ‘don’t get frustrated’).
Sentence builders: phrases up to sentence length, often containing slots for “parameters” or “arguments”; they provide the skeleton for expression of an entire idea. e.g. (person A) gave (person B) a (long) song and dance about (a topic)

Situational utterances: complete sentences with little variability; they are the appropriate thing to say in certain circumstance. e.g. how can I ever repay you?

Verbatim texts: texts of any length memorized verbatim use as substance for quotation, allusion or variation. e.g. better late than never; How ya gonna keep ’em down on the farm? (adapted from Becker, 1975: 61)

Becker’s categorization is put forward at an early stage of lexical chunk study and it gives a useful reference to later research. Many researchers follow the general frame when giving their categorizations in their particular study context. Among them, the categorizations made by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) in their *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, and by Lewis (1993) in *The Lexical Approach*, are popular ones.

Since the lexical chunks are “intermediaries between the levels of lexis and grammar” (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:37), the two researchers set structural criteria to characterize each category. The criteria are: 1) the length and grammatical status; 2) canonical or non-canonical in shape; that is, whether the connection of the words follow the grammar rules; 3) variable or fixed; and 4) continuous or discontinuous, that is, whether it is an unbroken sequence of words, like by the way or there are lexical fillers between the words, e.g. a ___ ago. In applying these criteria, Nattinger and DeCarrico’s lexical phrases have four categories (1992: 38-44):

1. Polywords: short phrases which function like individual lexical items and allow no variability; they can be both canonical and non-canonical and are continuous; e.g. by the way, by and large, nevertheless.

1. Institutionalized expressions: lexical phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances with no variables; they are proverbs, aphorisms, and formulas for social interaction, and they are mostly canonical and continuous; e.g. a watched pot never boils, nice meeting you, give me a break.

1. Phrasal constraints: short-to-medium-length phrases allowing variation of lexical and phrasal categories; they can be both canonical and non-canonical and are mostly continuous; e.g. a ___ ago, to make a (very) long story (relatively) short, the ___er the ___er.
Sentence builders: lexical chunks that provide the framework for whole sentences, containing slots for parameters or arguments for expression of an entire idea; they can be both canonical and non-canonical and both continuous and discontinuous; e.g. I think (that)X, not only X, but also Y, Modal + you +VP (for me), the ___er X, the ___er Y.

When making the categorizing, Nattinger and DeCarrico emphasize that there is no sharp boundary between these categories. It is better to think of the lexical chunks in terms of a continuum. The examples given in each category are prototypes, but many lexical phrases lie between the prototypes and “do not fit exclusively into either category” (1992:46).

Michael Lewis also puts forward the idea of spectrum with the traditional vocabulary close to the fixed pole and grammar structures close to the free pole, and the lexical items “occur nearer the middle of the spectrum” (Lewis 1997:255). He divides the lexical items into four fundamental types: 1) words and polywords; 2) collocations; 3) fixed expressions; and 4) semi-fixed expressions. When referring to the fixed and semi-fixed expressions, different terms are used in Lewis’s article Pedagogical Implications of the Lexical Approach. He uses institutionalized utterances to refer to fixed expressions and sentence frames and heads to replace semi-fixed expressions (1997:256). Therefore, two terms are used for the third and fourth categories in Lewis’s categorization. His categorization can be concluded as follows:

Words and polywords: words are independent units in traditional meaning, like stop, sure. Polywords are a small extension of words. They are composed of more than one word and have a degree of idiomaticity, like by the way, on the other hand.

Collocations: some pairs or groups of words co-occur with very high frequency. Collocations are in fact a sub-spectrum range from fully fixed like to catch a cold, through relatively fixed, like shake hands, to totally novel, which are used with low frequency in natural language but are accepted in particular context. They are most typically associated with verb-noun and adjective-noun pairs, such as to raise capital, a short-term strategy.

Fixed expressions/ institutionalized utterances: chunks that are called whole units and conventionalized in the language. They may take the form of full sentences with no variation. They are more typical of the spoken than of the written mode and tend to express pragmatic rather than referential meaning, such as social greetings, e.g. Good morning, politeness phrases,
like thank you; phrase book language, like can you tell me the way to...; and idioms, like put the cart before the horse.

Semi-fixed expressions/sentence frames and heads: semi-fixed frames with slots which may be filled in a limited number of ways. It is a large and important category which contains a spectrum, from very short like sequencers such as secondly,...and finally, to very long like the one used as the opening paragraph of an academic paper such as there are broadly speaking two views of ..., from almost fixed like It’s/That’s not my fault, to very free, like It’s surprising that....

Referring to the above three categorization by the previous researchers and the characteristics of the language used in English business correspondence, the categorization used for this study is mainly based on Lewis’s, which is more concerned with the structural aspect of the language. The lexical chunks are classified into five categories in this study. Compared with Lewis’s four categories stated above, the difference lies in the semi-fixed expressions. Considering the wide span over the lexical-syntactical spectrum that the semi-fixed expressions cover, a boundary is set between the phrasal length and sentence length, and the names phrasal constrains and sentence builders are borrowed from Nattinger & DeCarrico’s categorization.

1) polywords: multi-word phrases with no variability, e.g. in reply, due to.
2) collocations: pairs or groups of word co-occur with high frequency, e.g. place an order, take effect, meet the competition, match the market level.
3) phrasal constraints: short-to-medium-length phrases with slot(s) which can be filled in by specific information, permitting variability to some extent, e.g. a (letter, fax, mail, enquiry, offer, L/C, etc) dated ___, quote___ for___, too (adjective, noun phrases) to____.
4) sentence builders: lexical chunks providing the framework for whole sentences, containing slots for parameters or arguments for expression of an entire idea, e.g. thank your for..., we regret to tell you that..., we are looking forward to..., considering...we feel....
5) institutionalized expressions: lexical chunks of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances with no variables.
Although the lexical chunks are classified into different categories, the concept of spectrum should be kept in mind. As Pawley and Syder (1983) assert when analyzing the language categories, “in seeking discrete classes we are in danger of misrepresenting the nature of the native speaker’s knowledge (1983:212)”. It is quite true when dealing with lexical chunks in this study. Some examples collected from the texts are not so prototypical and need to be checked repeatedly according to the categorization, and then to end up in one category.

2.1.3 The role of lexical chunks in language production

Compared with language comprehension, language production is rather a complex process during which various factors should be taken into consideration, such as lexical selecting, grammar rules and pragmatic functions. In this part, the role that the lexical chunk plays in production will be discussed from two perspectives: fluency and accuracy.

2.1.3.1 Improving fluency

Fluency, according to Quintero et al, is the ability to produce language rapidly, coherently, appropriately, creatively as well as automatically (1998:13). It not only concerns the speed of the language production but also the logical organization of the production.

In the research made by Pawley and Syder (1983), a phenomenon is noticed that native speakers show a high degree of fluency when describing familiar activities and experiences in familiar phrases. They seem to have the ability to produce long strings of speech by “expanding on or combining ready-made construction” with little “encoding work” (1983:208). Enlightened by the findings, Pawley and Syder propose that one way to achieve native-like fluency for the second or foreign language learners is to assemble ready-made lexical chunks into fluent production.

Pawley and Syder are not the only advocators of the idea that lexical chunks improve fluency. Nattinger, DeCarrico and Lewis all agree on this point. In a similar way, Nattinger and DeCarrico repeated the idea by saying that “[i]t is our ability to use lexical phrases… that helps us speak with
fluency” (1992:32). In addition to that, they hold that the lexical chunks seem to be an ideal unit for language teaching.

Lewis, too, has the similar statement that “fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items, which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity” (1997: 109).

All the above claims fit neatly with the results of computational and language acquisition researches as well as the psychological theories on memory. Since the lexical chunks can be stored and retrieved from the memory as a whole, the use of lexical chunks simplifies the processing procedure for the language users. They do not have to do the basic job of selecting single words from their mental lexicon and stringing them together by applying some syntactic rule. They can concentrate their effort on constructing larger units of discourse and pragmatic elements in the discourse.

While the lexical chunks do improve the language fluency, fluency is more concerned with being fluent in a time frame, not necessarily with grammatical accuracy. In the next section, the accuracy will be considered.

2.1.3.2 Improving accuracy

Accuracy is another yardstick to evaluate the quality of language production. Together with native-like fluency, Pawley and Syder (1983) also put forward the idea of native-like selection. It is the ability to select the accurate words and expressions that the native speakers do. In their research, Pawley and Syder found that the native speakers use grammatically correct or idiomatic expressions to convey their meanings. For L2 learners, such native-like selection can be achieved by using lexical chunks.

The lexical chunks are ready-made units that can be retrieved and used as a whole. They have contained grammatical rules in themselves already, and can be used without paying much attention to grammar rules within the string of words in the chunk. When making a request, one would
retrieve the lexical chunk would you do...? without analyzing it into Modal + you +VP? It is grammatically correct. Like the function that lexical chunks have in achieving fluency, the prefabricated chunks release the pressure of selecting the proper words and applying grammatical rules simultaneously. The language users can concentrate their effort on other factors, such as the meaning of the discourse, the context and register. By producing the lexical chunks as ready-made correct units, errors are reduced and native-like selection is attained; at the same time, accuracy is achieved as well.

2.2 Business correspondence

In the business world, communication is an essential and necessary part to keep the community running well, and business correspondence plays an indispensible role during the interaction between business parties. It transmits information and maintains social relationship in the business community.

2.2.1 Connotation of business correspondence

The term business correspondence is quite a wide umbrella that covers every corner of the business domain. Resumes for job application, office memorandums, business reports, letters of invitation, and letters between trade parties during the process of business transactions all belong to business correspondence. In addition to the various types in terms of function, there are different media to convey business information. Conventional letters, telegrams, telex and paper files are the traditionally used modes, while e-mails and faxes are the hi-tech members that are more commonly seen in the modern business world.

Since business correspondence is such a broad concept, it is inconceivable to survey even part of the types in one article. Therefore, one thing that has to be explicitly pointed out is that the connotation of business correspondence is narrowed down in the present study. It only refers to business letters, in written form, between entities and organizations during the process of international trade transactions. To make things clear, during the discussion of this essay, business correspondence is used to refer to business letters covering various topics written to complete a
deal, including letters of enquiry, letters of making an offer, letters of negotiating payment and shipment or letters to make a complaint, etc. Sometimes business letters will be used, which concerns specific letter texts.

2.2.2 Characteristics of business correspondence

As one of the most practical writings in the professional world, business correspondence has formed its own characteristics, which are different from either personal letters or academic writings.

1 Semi-formal in style

Geffner (2004) reminds the business-letter writers of the importance to remember the basic difference between personal correspondence and business correspondence. He argues that business correspondence is not private, and that the tone of voice should be appropriate to the business relationship between the writers and the recipients (2004:166). In difference to daily conversations and personal letters, business correspondence is a communication on enterprise level, which calls for a professional attitude from writers to recipients. Besides, some of the letters during the business transaction are kept and filed to serve as memos for successive actions or evidence in case of dispute between two parties. In this case, a relative formal style in business letters is always required according to traditional convention, with much jargon and complicated structures as the distinctive characteristics.

On the other hand, experts and teachers in business writing in L1 or L2 nowadays advocate a shift from formal to less formal in style. Geffner (2004:157) also points out that “a sure sign of an inexperienced writer…is the obvious attempt to sound too ‘business-like’”, and a natural and regular way to say things within the limits of standard English is preferable. A courteous and friendly style in a business letter based on mutual understanding is a tactful strategy to avoid stiffness and establish a relation of trust between the partners, which will bring potential benefit in the future. In this sense, business correspondence writing is different from formal academic writing or legislative writing in terms of style. It is semi-formal in style.
Three C’s Principles in language use

With the semi-formal style as a premise, language used in business correspondence writing has particular linguistic features. On the one hand, casual and conversational expressions are not appropriate for such written texts between two business entities, while on the other hand, academic and redundant language should also be avoided. The language used for writing business letters can be described by a 3C’s Principles (Gan 2008), which is popular among business English teachers in China. The 3 C’s are:

1) Clarity: the language should be clear, so that the recipients will understand the message immediately, easily and correctly. There should be no ambiguous language that causes confusion.

2) Conciseness: simple and easy language should be used for writing business letters. Difficult words, especially old-fashioned jargons should be strictly avoided, as one cannot expect the reader to consult reference books to get the meaning every time he reads the letter.

3) Courtesy: courtesy wins the heart of the reader. In business letters, courtesy can be shown by using the expressions like please, thank you, etc.

Relative fixedness

In the development of international trade over the past decades, business correspondence has formed a relative fixed model in practical operation in terms of layout and language use. Generally speaking, text-books on business correspondence writing in China introduce this characteristic as a basic knowledge at the very beginning before the students begin to learn the business letter writing under various topics (Wei, 2006:2-4; Yan & Huang, 2006:7-9).

Usually, seven essential elements are involved in a formal business letter, including letterhead, date, inside address, salutation, body of a letter, complimentary close and signature. Some other elements may appear in the letter, such as reference number, attention line and IEC block (initials, enclosures and carbon copies).
Even in drafting the letter body, there is an outline to follow. A typical business letter usually has three or four paragraphs, with particular information to convey. Take a firm offer letter for an example. The opening paragraph should express thanks for the inquiry; in the following paragraph, a detailed description of the goods, the terms and conditions should be given; in the third paragraph, the validity of the offer should be clearly stated; then, in the closing paragraph, hopes for an order is expressed (Wei 2006:50). The relative fixedness of a business letter saves much energy for the drafter and at the same time ensures that the necessary information is included in the letter.

The language used in business correspondence is somewhat fixed, too. In addition to the jargon and technical terminology, there are conventionally accepted expressions used for some types of letters or for particular functions. The expressions like *make an offer, subject to our final confirmation* can often be found in letters making an offer; *to our regret, we feel regretful that*...are common preludes to convey negative news.

Business correspondence in itself is a broad concept including various types of texts, like letters for job application or letters for sales promoting. Each type of texts has particular layout and language patterns. Therefore, a systematic study of the linguistic characteristics in business correspondence is little up to the present. The following discussion is an attempt to inspect the business correspondence texts from a linguistic perspective.

3 Analysis and discussion

Having discussed the knowledge of the lexical chunks and business correspondence, attention is shifted from theoretical reviews to empirical study in this part. Data collected from the texts written by students will be analyzed and discussed, and pedagogical implications will be drawn from the results of the analysis and discussion.

There are seven sections included in this part. The first section explains some technical points during the procedure of data collection. The second section gives a quantitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts, trying to find out whether there is a correlation between the quantity of
lexical chunks and the quality of the business letters indicated by the scores. In the third section, a qualitative analysis of the lexical chunks is made to inspect the correlation; it is based on the category analysis and the error analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts. In the next section, a summary is made based on the quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the thirty texts. Then, the results collected by the interviews with the 5 high-score students and the 5 low-score students will be discussed in the fifth section. The results from the quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, together with the information collected from the interviews are used to draw pedagogical implications for teaching business correspondence writing, which are presented in the sixth section. In the last section, the weakness of the study is briefly mentioned.

3.1 Some technical points in data collection

The data used in this study consists of three types: the score of each text, the number of lexical chunks used in each text, and the specific lexical chunks as examples. The scores are given by two business English teachers in the vocational school involved; the numbers of the lexical chunks and examples of the lexical chunks are retrieved by the researcher from the thirty texts written by the students.

There are five technical points which need to be mentioned before the data are used in the analysis.

1) Scoring

Scores of a writing test cannot be regarded as a direct equivalent of the writing ability of the test takers. They must be inspected together with the scoring criteria. Different criteria stress different profiles of the language ability, and may lead to different results. The 30 texts used in this study are scored according to the Cambridge Criteria for Writing Paper of Business English Certificates (BEC Preliminary) (See Appendix 2). It has 6 bands with Band 5 as the top band and 0 the bottom. Each band has 2 levels in mark. In Band 5, one gets 9 to 10 in mark, and in Band 0, one gets 0 in mark. Each text is endowed with the mark from five aspects, namely, content, accuracy in language, structure/ vocabulary, organization and register.
The reason for taking the BEC Criterion is: 1) the teachers have been trained in scoring BEC Preliminary writing, and have experience in scoring business texts, which increases the reliability of the scores; 2) the students are in the same level as the BEC test takers; they have acquired knowledge both in business domain and in English, but they are at the preliminary stage of writing business texts; 3) the most important reason for taking BEC Criteria for the present study is that it “tests English language in a business context, not business knowledge” (2002:1). Inspecting the five aspects to endow scores, one can find that the criterion is for a language test rather than a test for business knowledge. It stresses the language use in business contexts and the competence of using language fluently and accurately in business writing.

2) Identification of lexical chunks

On the basis of the definition and the categorization of lexical chunks discussed in the section of theoretical background, some criteria must be taken into consideration when identifying lexical chunks in the thirty texts. A lexical chunk is a multi-word unit that can be retrieved as a whole at the time of use. The ‘whole unit’, therefore, is one of the criteria adopted when identifying the chunks. Such multi-word units like *come to terms, too...to..., we regret to say that...* convey the meaning as a whole or realize a certain function are all regarded as lexical chunks.

The second criterion is the degree of frequency of the multi-word units used in business correspondence writing context. Some chunks are not used as whole units in other context, but they frequently appear together in the business field. When putting forward the proposal on prices, the collocation *reduce your prices by/to...* is a high-frequent unit used for counter-offer and thus is regarded as one lexical chunk; while in the sentence *please change your prices if it is possible*, the verb-objective collocation *change your prices* is correct in syntax but not a strong collocation that often appear together; thus *change your prices* is not included as a lexical chunk in this study. Similarly, sentence builders like *we are looking forward to, we feel regretful that* are not regarded as a whole unit when used in daily life, but they are frequently used as pre-fabricated frames in business letters to realize certain function. They are counted in as examples of lexical chunks.
3) Technical terminology
Technical terms used as single words are not included in the lexical chunk discussion. Although many terminologies are multi-word phrases in structure, they refer to a particular concept that equals a single word, like *Free on board (FOB), Letter of Credit (L/C). They are located on the extreme of the vocabulary-grammar spectrum and equal to individual word like *book, or *pen, and are not included when counting lexical chunks in this study. As a contrast, an *illustrated catalogue is regarded as a strong collocation in business context. It belongs to adjective-noun pairs, in which *illustrated is used to describe the property of the catalogue. It allows variations like an *illustrated brochure or the latest catalogue. But such collocations as an *illustrated catalogue are used more frequently than the other variations in business letters, therefore are regarded as strong collocations and included as examples of lexical chunks in this study.

4) The category classification
The lexical chunks are classified mainly on the basis of their structural characteristics. In dealing with the two synonyms, *come to terms and *close a deal, they are classified into polywords and collocation respectively. The three-word chunk *come to terms conveys its meaning as a whole which cannot be achieved by simply assembling its components, and it is more close to *by the way in the spectrum. On the other hand, the three words in *close a deal can be regarded as partners. Nattinger and DeCarrico give an analogy of word partnership and human relationship to illustrate the collocation (1992:27). *Close and a deal meet more frequently in the business English context, but they are just partners not a whole. Therefore *close a deal will be classified into the collocation category.

5) Ways of dealing with errors in scoring and counting
There is a problem concerning the wrongly-used or inappropriately-used lexical chunks in dealing with the data. These errors include spelling mistakes, like *look forward to, *for your consideraration, adding wrong words or omitting necessary words in the chunks, like *come to the term for come to terms, *we afraid that…, and lexical chunks which are correct in themselves but inappropriate in context, or in register, like thanks to in thanks to your letter dated…, which should be thank you for your letter dated…, or I think, which is often used to express personal ideas.
As for these errors, I contacted the two scoring teachers for their opinion. They answered that errors do affect the scores, but it depends on what kind of errors they are. According to the Cambridge Criteria, if they are non-impeding errors, that is, if they can be recognized as the wrong form of the original expressions, they affect only a little when scoring. The above mentioned spelling mistakes and adding/omitting-word errors belong to this kind. On the contrary, when the errors affect the meaning expression for a sentence, like *thanks to for thank you for*, they do affect the scores. Besides, such oral expressions, like *I think*, are not proper in terms of register. They, too, have negative effect in scoring.

When counting the lexical chunks, these wrongly-used or inappropriately-used lexical chunks are all included as valid examples as long as their original forms can be recognized, such as *fall your prices to which should be reduce your prices to, *we afraid that which should be we are afraid that*, and the errors will be specially discussed in the paper. Among the errors, there are some expressions coined by the students on the spot, like *(the price) out of our receive*. They are not lexical chunks themselves but wrong strings of words, and there are no lexical chunks similar in form and in meaning to these expressions. These errors are not included when the chunks are counted.

**3.2 Quantitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts**

In this part, the number of lexical chunks in the texts and the scores are analyzed and discussed to find out whether there is a correlation between the quantity of the lexical chunks and the quality of the texts.

**3.2.1 Data presentation**

In order to find out the correlation between the number of lexical chunks and the text score, the lexical chunks in each text are indentified and counted. The results are shown in Table 1, together with the score for each text.
Table 1. Score and number of lexical chunks in each text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text No.</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of chunks</th>
<th>Text No.</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of chunks</th>
<th>Text No.</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Number of chunks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean score: 6.55  Total quantity of chunks: 215; Average: 7.17

The data in the above table show that the scores of the texts range from 3 to 9, and the mean score is 6.55; the total number of the lexical chunks used in all the 30 texts is 215, that is, 7.17 lexical chunks are used in each text on average. These lexical chunks are various in length. Some are two-word phrases like in reply, hear from, too…to, but most of the lexical chunks contains more than three single words like come to terms, look forward to, reduce your price to/by, we are regretful to say that, we shall appreciate it if.

Although the raw data are presented in detail, the data themselves say little about the relationship between the number of lexical chunks used and the scores of the texts, or the quality of the texts. Therefore, a scatter/dot graph analysis is adopted.

3.2.2 Scatter/dot Graph analysis

A scatter/dot graph is a type of mathematical diagram which can suggest various kinds of correlations between variables. The data are displayed as a collection of dots. The position of certain dot in the graph is decided by the value of variables of the dot on the x-axis and y-axis. If the pattern of dots slopes from lower left to upper right, it suggests a positive correlation between the variables being studied. If the pattern of dots slopes from upper left to lower right, it suggests a negative correlation. If the dots scatter around without any slope tendency, it suggests null, that is, there is no correlation between the variables.
To have a clear knowledge of the relationship between the number of lexical chunks and the score for each text, the data in Table 1 are changed into dots in the rectangular coordinate. They are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure1. Scatter/dot Graph of the lexical chunks and the scores of the 30 texts**

In the graph, the x-axis stands for the score of the text, and the y-axis stands for the number of chunks in the corresponding text. Each dot in the graph represents a text in terms of the score and the number of chunks used in it. There are 30 texts but only 25 dots can be identified in the graph. The reason is that when the texts have the same scores and number of lexical chunks, they have the same position in the graph. In that case, the dots overlap. For instance, Text 1, 21 and 24 all get 7 in score and all contain 8 lexical chunks, so the three dots overlaps.

Observing the dots in the coordinate, some characteristics can be found:

1) The dots scattering within the space over 3 to 6 on the x-axis show a rising tendency from the left bottom angle to the right up angle. The rising tendency of the dots indicates a likelihood of positive correlation between the number of lexical chunks and the score of the text. In other words, the lower scored texts use fewer lexical chunks than in the higher scored texts.

2) The dots lying between 6 to 9 on x-axis show no obvious tendency, but cluster in a group. The cluster of the dots indicates a null correlation between the number of lexical chunks used and the score of the text. To be more specific, a text containing more lexical chunks is not necessarily higher in score than a text containing fewer chunks. There is no such cause-effect
relation between the two variables. This seems to be contrary to the result obtained from the first point.

3) Two dots lying on 4 on x-axis and 8 and 10 respectively on y-axis are discrete from the general rising tendency. The number of lexical chunks contained in the two texts are 8 and 10, above average number 7.17, while they get 4 in score, lower than the mean score 6.55. These two special samples support the result from the second point, that is, there is no necessary relation between the number of lexical chunks and the score of the texts.

The contradictory result reflected from the scatter/dot graph suggests a necessity of analysis in the texts at different levels. Below a certain level, the number of lexical chunks may play an important role in the quality of the texts while above the level, not the number of lexical chunks but other factors are more important. In the following part, a comparison is made between texts of different levels.

### 3.2.3 Comparison of three levels of texts

To check whether texts with low scores do contain fewer lexical chunks than the texts with high scores, the thirty texts are classified into three levels. According to the data in Table 1, the mean score of the thirty texts is 6.55 and 15 texts get the scores between 5.5 and 7.5 (including 5.5 and 7.5), which are around the mean score 6.55. They take up exactly 50% of the total texts, and they are regarded as the intermediate-score texts. There are 8 texts scored above 8 (including 8), and these texts are regarded as high-score texts. Similarly, 7 texts get the score below 6 (including 6), and they are regarded as low-score texts in this study. The total number of the lexical chunks in these texts in each level is added up and then averaged. The result is presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score level</th>
<th>Low-score</th>
<th>Intermediate-score</th>
<th>High-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The average number of lexical chunks in the seven low-score texts is 6.3, fewer than that in intermediate-score texts and high-score texts. The result from Table 2 is in consistent with the result got in the scatter/dot graph analysis: the lower-score texts contain fewer lexical chunks on average than the other texts with higher scores. The average numbers used in intermediate-score texts and that in high-score texts are similar, 7.3 and 7.6 respectively.

3.2.4 Discussion on correlation between number of lexical chunks and text scores

The puzzle whether there is a correlation between the number of lexical chunks and the score can be looked at from two aspects.

According to Hakuta and Wong-Fillmore, “routines and patterns learnt in the language acquisition process evolve directly into creative language”(Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:25). The assertion claims that adequate acquisition and storage of the lexical chunks is the premise of creative production. It is particularly true for business correspondence writing. The language used in business writing is somewhat different from the language in compositions produced by students in EGP writing. It is full of relatively fixed routine patterns of expressions, which are formed in the long run of trade practice. Apart from the technical terminology, a lot of expressions have been condensed in such a way that only the professionals comprehend their connotation and employ them in business practice.

We take the expression *place an order for 1000 DSC-N1 Digital Cameras at USD 230 per set CIF London* for example. It is a technical expression used to place an order, which includes the desire of the buyer to place the order, the type of the goods, the quantity of the goods ordered, the unit price for each set and the trade term in one lexical chunk *place an order for... at...*. A professional business writer will employ it automatically to put all the necessary information in the slots introduced by the two prepositions *for* and *at*. However, for a new-comer to business writing in EFL, if he/she does not know the chunk beforehand, it will cause great trouble to illustrate so much information and put it in a logical sequence. Even when it is done, the expression will not be as concise and conventionally accepted as *place an order for... at...*.  

In EFL teaching and learning, sufficient storage of lexical chunks in one’s mental lexicon helps a fluent and accurate output. Observing the seven low score texts, three of them cannot give sufficient reasons for counter-offer clearly; they just repeat the inability to accept the offer by saying *we are sorry that we cannot accept your offer/price* without any reasons, or coin some pseudo-chunks to express their meaning, like *the price is out of our receive*. Four texts do not put forward the counter-offer proposal in a professional way as *reduce your prices by/to*..., but in some wrongly used expressions like *change your prices*, *make your price cheaper* and *put down your prices to*..., or just fail to put forward the proposal on prices. The attempt to express the idea by coining pseudo-chunks implies that the students who get low scores are lack of sufficient storage or fail to retrieve valid lexical chunks when they were writing the letter. As a contrast, some of the students who get intermediate scores and most of the students who get high scores can state the counter-offer reasons clearly and sufficiently by adopting *cannot match the market level*, or *reduce your price by/to, lower your price by/to*. Insufficient storage of lexical chunks blocks the students from producing the required information efficiently and clearly in business letters, and it decreases the quality of the production, which is reflected in the low scores; while those who get intermediate and high scores, by employing the lexical chunks they have acquired in previous learning, are able to produce the discourse successfully with less effort. It well explains the rising tendency of the dots lying in the space to the left of 6 on x-axis in the scatter/dot graph. In other words, there is a correlation between the number of lexical chunks used in a text and the test score below a certain level.

While sufficient quantity of lexical chunks does help in expressing the ideas one wants to convey, it does not ensure the quality of the production of a business letter. In difference to the compositions in EGP (English for General Purpose), there are particular criteria for evaluating business letters. Under the premise of necessary information conveyed, the 3C’s Principle (clarity, conciseness, courtesy) in language use and a professional style are also yardsticks to evaluate the quality of a business letter. The purpose of a business letter is to get things done through the most economical means. The Harvard business text-book *Business Communication* claims that there are no minimum lengths for good writing; shorter is always better if it communicates the required information (2003:9). In this sense, a long and euphuistical text is a total failure for a business
letter no matter how many lexical chunks are included in it, but a concise and precise one is an ideal example.

In addition to the concise and precise use of language, a business letter for a specific purpose usually has a relatively fixed outline to follow. One of the textbooks on international business correspondence for college students published by Beijing University explicitly lists the points that a counter-offer letter should cover:

1) Thank the supplier for the offer.
2) Express the regret at inability to accept and state reasons.
3) Put forward amendments or new proposals.
4) Suggest that there may be other opportunities to do business together.

(Wei et al 2006:50)

Some variations do exist according to different situations of the real-life business activities, but the general frame should be followed by the students who are at the primary stage of learning business writing in EFL.

The students in the present study in general have the idea of writing business letters in frames after learning the previous units. This can be seen from the uniform structures in most of the texts. To cover the content points required by the writing test—stating the reason and putting forward the price proposal as well as the required opening and closing sentences, there is no need to produce a long and complex discourse or an academic writing. A limited number of lexical chunks are enough for that task. A business letter containing few but useful lexical chunks will be a good writing sample as long as the purpose is achieved, and the language is concise, precise and courteous. In that case, the quantity of the lexical chunks does not account for the quality of the text too much, but other factors do, such as accuracy in language and appropriateness in register. From Table 1, one can easily find that those who use the lexical chunks most in the letter do not necessarily get the highest scores. Text 2, for example, contains 10 lexical chunks, the most of the thirty texts, but it gets one of the lowest scores 4. Test 25, on the contrary, gets the highest score 9 for this test, contains only 6 lexical chunks, even below the average number 7.17. These data,
therefore, indicate that there is no necessary correlation between the number of lexical chunks and the text score.

To put the two aspects together, the primary conclusion is that sufficient quantity of lexical chunks helps the production of business correspondence writing in EFL, but there is no cause-effect correlation between the number of the lexical chunks and the writing performance. The quantity of lexical chunks itself cannot ensure the quality of the business letters.

3.2.5 Study of a special case

In the scatter/dot graph, there are some discrete dots lying far away from the convergent dots. Studying the cases provides more evidence to the primary conclusion mentioned above. The following is Text 2, the dot lying farthest away from the other dots in the rising tendency. The lexical chunks are underlined later by the researcher. The letter gets 4 in score, lower than the mean score 6.55. The number of lexical chunks in it reaches 10, well above the average number 7.17.

Dear Sirs,

Thanks to your letter dated April 17. I’d like to say that your prices are too high and we cannot accept them.

The reasons are: your prices are not catch up with the market; they are too high to accept.

In reply, I think that you must change your prices. If so, we can come to the term.

Thank you again.

One reason that leads to the low score lies in the failure to cover two content points in the counter-offer letter: putting forward the price proposal and urging the action from the recipient. But when the ten lexical chunks are inspected in detail, one can find the use of lexical chunks is another main reason leading to the poor quality of the text: only two of them are accurately used: your letter dated… and too high to; the others are either wrongly or inappropriately used.
The two wrongly used lexical chunks, *thanks to* and *catch up with the market*, are the most serious errors. They mislead the readers of the letter to understand the information from another angle. Usually, after *thanks to (some cause)*, a result is presented; while in the letter, a different opinion follows. According to the context, one can assume that *thank to* here should have been replaced by *thank you for*…. The other mistake *catch up with*, has the same problem. In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, one of the definitions to *catch up with* is “to come from behind and reach someone in front of by going fast” (1995:199). Since the price is behind the market, why are they too high to be accepted? Obviously, the writer of the letter can not find a proper expression to convey his/her information by adopting such chunks like *match the market level or be in line with the current prices*, which may cause confusion in understanding from the readers.

Likewise, *I'd like to say that, I think that, if so and thank you again*, are lexical chunks but inappropriate in terms of register; they are commonly seen in conversational discourses to express personal ideas and feelings, but not proper for the counter-offer letter. The chunk *come to the term* is a wrong form of *come to terms*. And *in reply* is a lexical chunk used before one’s opinion is stated in a business letter. It should be placed before the statement of inability to accept the offer. The use of such lexical chunks does not polish the text; instead, they create more errors and decrease the quality of the text.

The student in the case study employs more lexical chunks than the average number, but the quality of the text is worse than the average, which is reflected in the score. It is often the case that the misuse of the lexical chunks leads to a poorer result than fewer correct ones. The analysis of the special case confirms the primary conclusion again: sufficient lexical chunks help the business correspondence writing, but it does not ensure the quality of the business letters.

3.3 Qualitative analysis of the lexical chunks in the texts

Since the primary result from the quantitative analysis indicates that there is no necessary correlation between the quantity of the lexical chunks and the quality of the texts, attention is shifted from the quantitative analysis to the qualitative analysis in this part, trying to find out the factors which bring the difference in scores. The study on the special case in the previous part
proves the importance of efficient use of the lexical chunks in business correspondence writing in EFL. It is quality rather than quantity that counts.

When the average numbers of lexical chunks are compared in low-score texts, intermediate-score texts and high-score texts, the result shows that the numbers of lexical chunks in intermediate-score and high-score texts are similar (see Table 2); there may be differences in quality. Therefore, the qualitative analysis is based on the comparison between the examples of lexical chunks used in intermediate-score texts and high-score texts.

Eight texts are scored 8 and above, and they are put into a group marked high-score group (H-group). As a comparison, those scored between 5.5 and 7.5 are regarded as intermediate-score texts, for they are around the mean score 6.55. There are fifteen texts falling in this score range. In order to keep a balance with the H-group in text number, eight texts are randomly chosen to form the other group, intermediate-score group (I-group). In other words, there are sixteen texts out of the totally thirty texts included in this part. The qualitative analysis is made in terms of category and error.

### 3.3.1 Comparison based on categories

In the theoretical background, a categorization of the lexical chunks used for business correspondence is set. Referring to the previous categorizations put forward by Becker, Nattinger and DeCarrico, and mainly the categorization by Lewis, the lexical chunks are classified into five categories in the present study, namely, polywords, collocations, phrasal constraints, sentence builders and institutionalized expressions.

Based on the categorization, the lexical chunks used in the texts of the two groups are counted and classified into five categories. The result is presented in Table 3.
Table 3 Numbers of lexical chunks of different categories in I-group and H-group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LC Category</th>
<th>I-group</th>
<th>H-group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>polywords</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collocations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phrasal constraints</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentence builders</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.E.*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.6%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Institutionalized expressions

According to the data in Table 3, the general tendency in the two groups is the same: the proportion of sentence builders ranks first, phrasal constraints come to the second, polywords the third and then follow the collocation, and institutionalized expression in the I-group. Apart from the general tendency, there are three main differences between the two groups: 1) higher proportion of sentence builders in H-group than in I-group; 2) higher proportion of polywords in I-group than in H-group; and 3) one institutionalized expressions in I-group while none in H-group. In the following part, the three categories will be inspected by comparing the examples taken from the texts.

3.3.1.1 Sentence builders

The most salient characteristic is the use of sentence builders when observing the data. They take up a large proportion in both groups. The proportion in H-group is 55%, higher than that in I-group 42.6%.

Sentence builders, according to Nattinger and DeCarrico, are the lexical chunks that “provide the framework for the whole sentence” (1992:42); by filling the slots with words, phrases or clauses, an entire idea can be expressed. Compared with the other categories of lexical chunks (except the institutionalized expressions), the sentence builders are closer to a complete sentence in form. The semi-prefabricated structures save the energy of generating a sentence word by word. What is more
important, the pragmatic element has been contained when the framework is provided. They can be
directly used to realize some function. For instance, when the framework *we regret to say that...* is
used, one can assume that something bad will be said in the following filler, and the frame is used
to express regret. It is particularly essential for a business letter since a business letter is function-
oriented and the purpose of the letter is to get the information transmitted in clear and concise
language.

All the students in both groups obviously realize the advantage of the sentence builders in business
writing, which is reflected by the high proportion of this category in both groups. While the total
numbers of the lexical chunks in the two groups are similar, 60 and 61, the texts in H-group
contain more sentence builders. The direct reward it brings is the fluency and accuracy in language
use in the H-group. It can be seen from the comparison of the examples expressing the same idea
in the two groups.

The following two pairs of examples are chosen from H-group and I-group respectively in
expressing the same ideas. Sentence (a) and (a’) are picked out from H-group; (b) and (b’) are from
I-group.

(a) *We regret to say that your prices are too high.*
(b) *We feel sorry, your prices are too high.*

(a’) *If you could reduce your prices by 3%, we might accept your offer.*
(b’) *Please reduce your price to $ 50 per item. That price will be accepted by us.*

Sentence (a) expresses the feeling of regret and states the reason of inability to accept the offer by
employing a sentence builder *we regret to say that*... Filling in the slot with a clause *your prices
are too high* in the framework, the two functions are realized through one sentence. In sentence (b),
the two functions are conveyed by two separate sentences with an abrupt shift in pronouns *we* and
*your*, which breaks the fluency between the two parts. Besides, sentence (b) is not accurate in
syntax. The two parts should be either separated by a full stop or connected by a conjunction. It is a
common mistake in the texts in I-group when two related ideas need to be expressed while the
students fail to adopt an efficient device to connect them. In a similar way, sentence (a’) puts forward a proposal on price by adopting the sentence builder *If you could..., we might...* This sentence builder not only combines the two parts *reduce your prices by 3%* and *accept your offer* into one syntactic sentence by using *if-clause*, but also creates a tone of courtesy in a counter-offer letter, which is a little offensive when refusing the offer and putting forward one’s own price proposal. Sentence (b’) puts the idea into two separate parts. It is correct but not as good as sentence (a’) in terms of integrity and fluency.

The frequent use of sentence builders in H-group brings a whole impression of fluency in language use. At the same time, by using the semi-prefabricated structures which are correct in syntax, the chance of errors is reduced during the process of stringing the fragments together. This, to some extent, may account for the high scores in this group compared with those in I-group.

Apart from the difference in quantity of sentence builders in the two groups, differences exist in the quality, too. By locating the sentence builders in their particular places, some typical examples used in these texts are presented in Table 4 for comparison.

**Table 4 Examples of sentence builders in I-group and H-group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>I-group</th>
<th>H-group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>thank you for...</td>
<td>(we) thank you for...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thanks for...</td>
<td>we are pleased to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter body</td>
<td>Expressing regret</td>
<td>we are sorry that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we regret to say that...</td>
<td>we regret to say that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we think (that)...</td>
<td>we feel regretful that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I\'m afraid that...</td>
<td>It is impossible for...to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I\’d like to say that...</td>
<td>we feel sorry that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal</td>
<td>we\’d like you to...</td>
<td>if you could... we might...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>could/would you...</td>
<td>considering... we suggest that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we could/would you...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>we are looking forward to...</td>
<td>we are looking forward to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we await...</td>
<td>we look forward to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we are waiting for...</td>
<td>we would/shall appreciate it if...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing the examples taken from the two groups, one can find that the sentence builders used in H-group are better in quality than the I-group in terms of function and register.
Function
The task of the writing test is to write a counter-offer letter. As has been mentioned in the previous part, there are mainly four functions needed to be reached: expressing gratitude to the supplier, expressing regret of inability of acceptance and state the reason, putting forward proposals and urging actions from the recipient. All the functions can be achieved by the sentence builders if selected properly.

The examples listed in the opening part and closing part in Table 4 are all well-functioning sentence builders for a business letter except *thanks for* in I-group. (It is a colloquial expression and never appears in the formal written discourse. It will be discussed later.) In fact, they are routine expressions which can be easily acquired after an initial touch of business correspondence. The difference lies in those used to express regret and to put forward proposal on prices.

To achieve the function of expressing regret, seven out of the eight high-scorers employ the sentence builders containing the word *regret/regretful/sorry* to emphasize the connotation, while in the I-group, only four sentence builder containing *sorry/regret*, and others, like *we think, I’m afraid that*, are often used to express one’s opinions, failing to convey the feeling of regret.

Similarly, to achieve the function of putting forward proposal on prices, the sentence builders in H-group *if you could... we might... and considering... we suggest that...are more exactly selected than we’d like you to...and could you...*. The former are making the proposal in a courteous tone while the latter are more like a request rather than a proposal.

In this sense, the sentence builders in H-group are better in quality than those in the I-group. Although they are similar in meaning, they are different in degree of function achieving.

Register
The other difference between the sentence builders used in the two groups exists in register. This factor may directly result in the difference in scores. Different from a personal letter, the counter-offer letter is part of the business transactions between two firms, especially during an international transaction. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) briefly mention this point when discussing the lexical
chunks used in different written discourses. They hold that the lexical chunks used in business letters are more formal, and they more explicitly signal their function than the ones in personal letters (1992:168). Business letters in international trade concerns economic interests of both parties and will be a basis on which the contract is signed. In such a letter, a relatively formal style is required.

There is an obvious difference in style when the sentence builders are compared in the two groups. Those in I-group tend to use simple and oral sentence builders while the high-scorers tend to use formal and written ones. The examples in I-group I’m afraid that and I’d like to say that are more often used in daily conversation to express personal ideas rather than in a business letter. Geffner has warned business letter writers of this point in her How to Write Better Business Letters that “use ‘I’ when you are referring to yourself; use ‘we’ when you are referring to the company” (2000:5). A counter-offer between two parties is a decision made on behalf of the business entities rather than a personal decision, and the pronoun I in the two examples decreases the quality when they are used for a counter-offer letter. Other two examples thanks for and could you... have the same problems.

As a contrast, the sentence builders used in H-group are more formal in register. The sentence builders, like if you could..., we might..., we shall appreciate it if..., are often adopted in formal discourses. By using an indirect and courteous style of linguistic pattern, they show concern on the recipient’s reaction on receiving relatively negative information. In this sense, they are proper in register for such a business letter and regarded high in quality in business writing context. This point has been confirmed by the two scoring teachers in this study who scored the texts. During the procedure of my data collection, they were asked for their attitude toward mistakes. They admitted that such inappropriately-used lexical chunks, like thanks for, do affect their scores because they are not proper in register while relative formal style like considering... we suggest that...gain points.

The category of sentence builders takes up a large proportion in the lexical chunks used in all the texts and the efficient and proper use of this category does, to a large extent, affect the quality of the text, which is reflected in scores.
3.3.1.2 Polywords

The proportion of polywords used in the two groups is quite different, too. Opposite to the use of sentence builders, the texts in I-group contain more polywords than in H-group. Examples of the polywords in the two groups are listed in Table 5. The numbers inside the parenthesis indicate the times they are used.

Table 5 Example of polyword in I-group and H-group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I-group</th>
<th>H-group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in reply (4)</td>
<td>in reply (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject to (2)</td>
<td>for your consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come to terms (4)</td>
<td>as long as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least</td>
<td>come to terms (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in fact</td>
<td>hear from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are fourteen polywords collected from I-group texts. They can be divided into two types according to their function in a sentence. Five of them function as cohesive devices, *in reply* and *in fact*, which connect two parts of discourse together and create a sense of fluency. They are usually separately used at the beginning of a sentence, independent from the sentence structure by adding a comma behind them. The four *in reply* all appear at the beginning of the second paragraph to elicit the expression of inability to accept the offer, e.g., *In reply, we think that your prices are too high to ...*. After thanking the supplier for the offer, the use of *in reply* provides a sense of cohesion between the paragraphs.

The polywords *come to terms* and *hear from* are verb phrases which are necessary components of a sentence structure. They can not be used independently but have to be assembled into the sentence structure by syntactic rules. The other three types *subject to*, *as long as* and *at least* are qualifiers to modify certain part in the sentence. They are components of sentences and have to be assembled into the sentence structure by syntactic rules, too.

According to Nattinger and DeCarrico, polywords are invariable “short phrases which function very much like individual lexical items”(1992:38). In other words, the students in I-group still need to experience the process of assembling the word-level chunks into a complete sentence by
syntactic rules. Compared with sentence builders, this category of lexical chunks is closer to the single word on the spectrum, and more energy is needed to process them into a complete sentence to achieve the function. During this process, the chance of error increases, like the example hear from in *we are looking forward to hearing from your letter soon*, which should be followed by somebody instead. And the number of errors will surely decrease the quality of the whole writing. In this sense, using polywords helps produce the necessary ideas on the one hand, and needs more energy to be assembled into a sentence than the sentence builders on the other hand.

As a comparison, there are only six polywords in the H-group, four of which are cohesive devices. It indicates the students’ attention to the cohesion of the texts. Although there are fewer polywords found in their texts, this does not mean they produce texts in worse quality. In fact, the students in this group have applied more sentence builders to construct their writing to achieve the same goal and these sentence builders are appropriately used and function well. In this sense, the category of polywords does not have the same role as the sentence builders do in improving the quality of the letters.

### 3.3.1.3 Institutionalized expressions

There is only one appearance of this category in the two groups, but it still needs to be mentioned. One of the texts in I-group uses thank you again in the closing instead of a sentence builders to urge the action of the recipient, like we are looking forward to…. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), institutionalized expressions are mostly proverbs, aphorisms and formulas used for quotation, allusion or direct use in daily conversations (1992:39). In this case, they are seldom used in a business letter where conciseness is one of principles. By using thank you again as a closing, the writer may want to express courtesy to the recipient, but he/she made two mistakes at the same time. First, he/she fail to cover the function of urging the recipient’s actions required by a counter-offer letter and second, he/she breaks the law of register. These two mistakes will surely affect the quality of the letter.
3.3.1.4 Collocations and phrasal constraints

There is no obvious difference being found in these two categories when the data are collected. Most of the students in both groups use your letter/fax/offer dated/of ...and too high to...as the phrasal constrains. Similarly, in each group, place an order, match the market level are the typical examples of collocation. For that reason, the study on the use of collocations and phrasal constraints has to be put aside and needs to be studied in future research.

After having a close look at the categories of lexical chunks used in the texts, one can conclude that the efficient use of different categories of lexical chunks affects the quality of the business writing to a large extent. Different categories play different roles. Among the five categories, sentence builders are the mostly used lexical chunks. The quantity and quality of sentence builders directly affects the quality of a business letter. Polywords are basic elements for constructing a business letter. The polywords used as cohesive device bring a sense of cohesion for the texts. But to assemble the polywords into a complete sentence, processing is needed, during which errors may occur. The number of errors affects the quality of a business letter. As for the institutionalized expressions, generally speaking, there is no need to include this category in a business letter for the sake of conciseness and register appropriateness.

3.3.2 Comparison based on error analysis

Accuracy is one of the measures to evaluate the quality of second language writing. When the second language learners produce fewer errors in their writing, they are more proficient (Quintero 1998:4). Quintero’s assertion is also fit for the requirement of business correspondence writing. An error-free business letter not only shows respect to the recipient but also reflects the writer’s professional manner and reputation. The errors in a text will surely affect the quality of the business letters.

During the primary stage of business correspondence writing in EFL learning, errors can not be avoided. Exploring the source of the errors gives directions in the future teaching practice.
Therefore in this part, errors concerning the lexical chunks will be discussed with the purpose of giving pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning business correspondence writing.

Error detecting is done in and around the 121 lexical chunks collected from the sixteen texts in two groups. 34 errors are found; 26 from I-group and 8 from H-group. They are classified into three types: errors inside the chunks, around the chunks and errors in register. 12 spelling mistakes, such as *look forward to, *we regret to say that... are tentatively excluded. The result is presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Errors concerning the lexical chunks in I-groups and H-group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors inside</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC I-group</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>fall your price to, for your consider we afraid, come to the terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H-group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>we are regret to say, we await for quote sb of sth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors around</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC I-group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>look forward to do, hear from sth (price) too expensive to accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H-group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>look forward to do, (price) too high to be accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>register</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-group</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>I'd like to say, I think that Will you please, thank you again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H-group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>in my opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three types of errors indicate three different degrees of lexical-chunk acquisition. When the errors occur inside the chunks, that is, the chunks are wrong in form, it means they are not acquired by the students yet. When the errors occur around the chunks, the students have at least learned the chunks in correct form but they have problem in putting them into practical use. The errors in register concern the appropriate use of the lexical chunks. In the following section, the three types of errors will be analyzed in detail.

3.3.2.1 Errors inside the lexical chunks

This type of mistakes appears frequently in both groups. They cover four categories except the institutionalized expressions. The students intended to use them as lexical chunks but turn out to be wrong in form. They may have a vague impression of a certain lexical chunk and create a similar
form which is not acceptable by English native speakers, like *come to the terms, which should be come to terms, or *quote sb of sth, which should be quote sb for sth. Some errors are caused by wrongly mixing two pieces together, like await for, which is a mixture of await and wait for, and some are wrongly collocated by meaning and without considering the syntactic rules, like fall your prices to, and still some errors result from the influence of their mother tongue, Chinese, like we afraid that…. Since the lexical chunk is defined as ‘a unit’ in the theoretical background and any change in the form will lose its meaning when conveyed by the unit as a whole, such errors imply that the students have not acquired the chunk as a whole but a string of individual words. In other words, the students have not acquired the chunks yet.

When the examples in the table are compared, one may find differences between the two groups. The students in I-group tend to coin phrase-level lexical chunks but with basic grammar mistakes, like *fall your price to, *for your consider. The phrasal-level lexical chunks are components of sentence structures and the wrongly-connected words block the readers from comprehending the meaning of the sentences at the first sight. Such errors are regarded as impeding errors according to the Cambridge Criteria. In order to express some idea, the students fail to retrieve a ready-made chunk, therefore have to search the words and assemble them together according to the vague impression of certain lexical chunk they have met before, but it turns out to be wrong. It reflects the insufficient storage of lexical chunks in their mental lexicon.

As a comparison, four out of the five errors in H-group come from sentence builders, like *we are regret to say, *we await for. They are used in their proper places. That is to say, the students in H-group have acquired more chunks and are able to employ the lexical chunks to express their ideas properly. Although they are not accurate in form, these errors in H-group are closer to the correct form. The meaning of the lexical chunk is conveyed and the function of expressing regret or urging the further reaction is realized. They are non-impeding errors and have relative less negative impact on the scoring.

This point that the insufficient storage of lexical chunks affects the quality of writing echoes one of the results got from the quantitative analysis. When the lack of necessary lexical chunks blocks the
lower-score students to express their ideas properly, it also prevents the intermediate-score students, and high-score students as well, to produce a high-quality business letter.

3.3.2.2 Errors around the lexical chunks

This type of mistakes does not exist in the lexical chunks themselves, but in the pieces outside the lexical chunks and is caused by the using of the lexical chunk. Take *we look forward to do for instance. The underlined do is a mistake outside the look forward to, that is, the lexical chunk itself is correct, but after it doing instead of do should follow. Therefore the wrong follower do is caused by using the look forward to. It is a mistake around the lexical chunk.

From the data collected from the texts, this type of errors is not as common as the errors inside the lexical chunks, and is found mainly in two places in both groups: look forward to, and too...to... This is better than the situation for the errors inside the lexical chunks since the students have at least acquired the chunks in form. The problem is that they cannot put them into practical use, or use them properly. When too...to is used in the structure your prices are too ... to..., the students made a good choice to express their opinion on the prices; but when the fillers are given, errors occur. These errors result from the fact that the students have learned the lexical chunks literally, but not their use. Similarly to the errors inside the lexical chunks, students in the I-group make more mistakes in this type of errors, which affect the quality of their letters.

3.3.2.3 Errors in register

This type of errors is not wrong, but inappropriate in terms of register. Counter-offer letters are written for negotiating the prices between business parties. As long as the prices are accepted, the letters will be filed as the primary documents for signing a business contract. For that reason, the language used in counter-offer letters has to be prudent and relatively formal in register. Such lexical chunks as I think, I'd like to say are generally used to express personal ideas in daily speech. It is not proper to use them in putting forward a proposal on prices.
There are seven errors in register found in I-group, including an institutionalized expression thank you again is found for the closing sentence. This type of errors reflects the students’ ignorance in register when they are selecting these expressions. It seriously affects the quality of their letters since register is one of the five yardsticks to assign scores in the Cambridge Criteria. There is only one error in register in H-group texts. Only one error in register indicates that the students in this group have realized that informal language in daily conversation is not proper for business writing and consciously avoid using it. The score lost in register in H-group is less than in I-group. This is one of the main contributions to the high scores in this group.

One thing is obvious when looking at the three types of errors: there are more errors found in the I-group than in the H-group in each of the types. In other words, the high-score students use accurate and proper lexical chunks while the intermediate-score students make more mistakes when using the lexical chunks. The number of errors results in the difference in quality of the texts, which is directly reflected by the scores. The quality of the lexical chunks used in the texts is an essential factor that ensures the quality of the business letters.

### 3.4 Summary of the lexical chunk analysis from the texts

From the thirty texts of the writing test, the lexical chunks are focused on and analyzed. Quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis are adopted, trying to find out the correlation between the use of lexical chunks and the quality of the texts.

The result of the quantitative analysis shows that a sufficient amount of lexical chunks in business domain is necessary to express the ideas one wants to convey in the letter, but the quantity itself does not ensure the quality of the letter. A study of the special case indicates that it is quality rather than the quantity of the lexical chunk that accounts for the quality of a business letter.

On the basis of the result, a qualitative analysis is used by checking five categories of the lexical chunks and three types of errors in the texts. The result shows that the high-score students exceed the intermediate-score students both in quantity and quality in using sentence builders. The category of sentence builders affects the quality of the letters to a large extent. As a comparison,
the category of polywords, as a whole, does not have such great influence in the letter quality. The polywords used as cohesive device add a sense of cohesion to the texts, and the high-score students tend to use those polywords acting as cohesive device according to the examples collected.

The result from the error analysis shows that accurate and proper use of lexical chunks in business writing is an essential factor of the letter quality. The accuracy in form, the correctness in use and the appropriateness in register are three factors that can reduce the chance of error and improve the quality of the letter.

Hence, the conclusion from the analysis of the data from the thirty texts can be briefly stated as follows: sufficient use of lexical chunks helps in business correspondence writing, while it is quality of the lexical chunks rather than quantity that accounts for the quality of the letters. The category of sentence builders plays an important role in the quality of the letters; accuracy and proper use of the chunks reduces the chance of error, therefore, is another essential factor to ensure the quality of business correspondence.

3.5 Result of the interview

A sample counter-offer letter with underlined lexical chunks is assigned to the 5 students who get the highest scores and the 5 students who get the lowest scores, together with three questions for interview (see appendix 3). The three questions are designed to know the students’ understanding of the lexical chunks and their opinion on the learning of lexical chunks in business correspondence writing. The three questions are:

1) Have you ever noticed such lexical chunks in your previous learning in this course (English business correspondence writing)?
2) What kind of lexical chunks do you think is most useful if you were asked to write a counter-offer letter again? Choose 5 from the given letter.
3) Your opinion on learning such lexical chunks in the course. State your reason(s) and problems if any.
For the first question, all the ten students answered yes, but they admitted that they had never expected there to be so many chunks included in the letter. All the five students who got low scores expressed their astonishment when they knew sentence structures like we regret to say, or if you were prepared to..., we might... belong to lexical chunks. In their previous learning, they paid attention only to the set phrases like an illustrated catalogue, or come to terms. Their astonishment indicates that they focused more on phrasal chunks in their previous learning and never included the sentence builders as whole units. Three students who get high scores are more open when looking at the lexical chunks. They said they would pay attention to the sentence structures used in the opening and closing sentences if the structures are new to them, and they would try to use we are pleased to... to replace the commonly-used thank you for... Their answers show a primary attempt to use sentence builders as a kind of chunks in their writing. On the whole, the ten students’ concept of lexical chunks remains on phrasal level.

For the second question, the answers from high-score students and low-score students are quite different. Four of the high-score students choose more than three sentence builders and fewer phrasal-level chunks such as be out of line with while three low-score students choose more than three phrasal-level chunks as the most useful chunks. The three low-score students hold that the phrasal-level chunks are basic units to express their ideas clearly and correctly. As a contrast, four high-score students express that the phrasal-level chunks are basic and important bricks to construct a sentence, but the sentence frameworks are more important because they can help to complete a grammatically correct sentence with less effort. The different opinions indicates that the high-score students care more on sentence level when writing a letter, while the low-score students remain on a phrasal level.

The answers to the third question are similar: the lexical chunks are essential for writing a business letter, for they found the lexical chunks have covered nearly 70% of the given letter. If they are properly linked, a letter can be easily constructed with less effort. When answering the third question, the students raise three problems. First, it is difficult for them to recognize the lexical chunks all by themselves; they still focus on set phrases when reading the letters. They may need help from the teachers to help them to identify the lexical chunks. The second problem is derived from the second question of the interview. The students want to make sure whether some lexical
chunks are more useful in writing a letter. If so, they can pay more attention to them. The third problem is that if there are so many lexical chunks, how can they remember them and use them correctly in their practical writing in the future?

The result of the interview confirms that the difference in the primary knowledge of the lexical chunks and the attempt to use different categories of lexical chunks does lead to the different quality in their writing, which is reflected in the scores. In addition, the interview shows that the students have realized the significance of using lexical chunks in their writing practice. They express their desire to use the lexical chunks to improve their ability in writing business correspondence. It calls for a pedagogical direction, which can help the students to write high-quality business correspondence by using lexical chunks efficiently.

3.6 Pedagogical implications

The result of the study shows that the quality of lexical chunks used in the writing affect the quality of the letters to a large extent. In order to ensure the quality of the lexical chunks, attention should be paid both to the intake and output procedure of the lexical chunk learning.

1) Raising awareness of the lexical chunks

Efficient intake of lexical chunks is the premise of the efficient output. Therefore, raising awareness is the first step that should be done for teaching and learning lexical chunks. The wording “raising awareness of the lexical chunks” used here has three implications: awareness of noticing the lexical chunks, awareness of expanding the connotation of the lexical chunks, and awareness of accuracy and appropriateness.

Schmidt asserts that intake is what learners consciously notice. He said that “what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning”(1995:20). When the students in the interview admit that they had never expected so many lexical chunks in the sample letter, they, in fact, admit having neglected a great number of lexical chunks in their previous learning. This neglect leads to the lack in storage of necessary lexical chunks in their mental lexicon. Three of the low score students use thank you (again) as a closing sentence in the test, which may indicate that they have
never noticed the common sentence builders used for closing sentences in a business letter. Encouraging the students to notice the lexical chunks used in the sample letters is the first step to help them acquire sufficient lexical chunks and get well prepared for the output in the future practicing and writing.

Another implication of raising awareness of lexical chunks is to expand their traditional concept that chunks equal set phrases. The connotation of the lexical chunks should be expanded. They have to be informed that lexical chunks not only include polywords and phrasal constrains (set phrases in students’ words), but include larger chunks like sentence builders. This category, according to the result of the above analysis, plays a more important role in the writing practice. From the data collected in the thirty texts, the proportion of sentence builders is the highest of all the five categories of lexical chunks. Thus, sentence builders, such as *we are pleased to..., we regret to say that..., if you were prepared to... we might..., and we await...* should be introduced to the students’ awareness.

When we talk about the quality of a business letter, errors plays a negative role in it. A letter full of errors will never be regarded high in quality. The awareness of accuracy and appropriateness of lexical chunks used for a business letter should be raised at the early stage before the intake happens. Looking at the errors collected in the study, more than half of the errors are inside the lexical chunks, like *come to the term, *for your consider. Strictly speaking, they are not lexical chunks in real meaning but pseudo lexical chunks. To reduce such pseudo lexical chunks in business letters writing, awareness of accurate intake should not only be raised but reinforced. The errors inappropriate in register should also be avoided at the awareness-raising stage. Such expressions, like *I think, how are you*, will not appear in the sample letters in the course books. The awareness of avoiding using such inappropriate lexical chunks should be raised when the appropriate ones are presented.

2) Activities to ensure the quality of the lexical chunks in practical writing
After storing sufficient and accurate lexical chunks by raising awareness, something still needs to
be done to elicit these lexical chunks efficiently in practical using. During the daily pedagogical instruction, some activities can be done to ensure the quality of the lexical chunks to be used in practical writing.

1 List lexical chunks for each topic of letters
Different from EGP writing, business letters under different topics require different words, expressions and text structures. The lexical chunks used for counter-offer letters differ from those used for shipment. In that case, it is necessary for the students to list the lexical chunks used for each topic of letters and use them in a proper context.

1 Chunk chunks to a larger chunk
It may sound like a tongue twister, but it is a useful activity to reduce the errors around the lexical chunks. We have mentioned such kind of errors as *we look forward to do. If the sentence builder we look forward to is connected with other chunks, like your prompt reply, or hearing from you, the error may be avoided. When this activity is carried out, the students must be informed that these are larger chunks, not fixed expressions. These larger chunks can be separated and re-assembled with other chunks through syntactic rules.

1 Construct the texts by sentence builders
While sentence builders are more energy-saving than the other categories of lexical chunks in constructing a complete sentence, their function has been underestimated. Because of the pragmatic function they contain in the framework, they can be used to construct a whole text. Take the counter-offer letter for example. When the four sentence builders, thank you for..., we regret to say that..., if you could...we might, and we are looking forward to..., are stringed, the framework of the whole letter is there. The rest one has to do is to fill necessary information between the sentence builders. This activity can be used in other topics of letters since, generally speaking, framework in structure is one of the characteristics of business correspondence.

3.7 Weakness of the study

There are two main weaknesses existing in the study. The first is the scores, which are used to
The result of the study shows that sufficient quantity of lexical chunks used in business domain is necessary in writing business letters, but it is the quality of the lexical chunks rather than the quantity that is more important. Among the five categories of the lexical chunks, sentence builders play an important role in affecting the quality of the letter. Besides, the accuracy and appropriateness of the lexical chunks is an essential factor affecting the quality of the letters. Based on the result of the analysis and the interview with the students, pedagogical implications have
been drawn, giving advice on how to improve both the quantity and the quality of the lexical chunks in daily instruction on business letter writing.

Research on the lexical chunks in ESL/ EFL teaching and learning has been done over the past two decades, which has become a heated topic in the pedagogical field, while the study on lexical chunks used in business correspondence writing is quite a new field where little research has been done. This study has made such an attempt in the new field, hoping to improve the students’ performance in their business letter writing. However, due to the limitation of time and sample, the information provided in the present study is only the tip of an ice-berg. Some aspects of lexical-chunk use in the business writing are not clearly presented in the texts collected for the study, such as the use of collocation and phrasal constrains. This information needs to be found in further studies.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1 Writing Test

(The following requirements are given in Chinese in the original version of the test.)

Time limitation: 20 minutes.

Background: You are Yangyang in the Purchase Division of Wongsheng & Co., an import and export company dealing with stationery.
Draft a counter-offer letter to B.P Trade Co. Ltd in USA, asking for lower price. State your reason of inability to accept the price and put forward your terms and conditions. (around 60 words)

Wongsheng & Co.
Rm 509-511 Tongle Bldg
Shennan Rd., Shenzhen (518044), China

B.P Trade Co. Ltd

Dear Sirs:
### Appendix 2  BEC Preliminary Criteria for Writing Part 2

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<th>Band</th>
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| 5    | 9 or 10 | **Full realization of the task set**  
I. All four content* points achieved  
I. Confident and ambitious use of language; errors are minor, due to ambition and non-impeding  
I. Good range of structure and vocabulary  
I. Effectively organized, with appropriate use of simple linking devices  
I. Register and format consistently appropriate  
Very positive effect on the reader |
| 4    | 7 or 8 | **Good realization of the task set**  
I. Three or four content points achieved  
I. Ambitious use of language; some non-impeding errors  
I. More than adequate range of structure and vocabulary  
I. Generally well-organized, with attention paid to cohesion  
I. Register and format on the whole appropriate  
Positive effect on the reader |
| 3    | 5 or 6 | **Reasonable achievement of the task set**  
I. Three content points achieved  
I. A number of errors may be present, but are mostly non-impeding  
I. An adequate range of structure and vocabulary  
I. Organization and cohesion is satisfactory, on the whole  
I. Register and format reasonable, although not entirely successful  
Satisfactory effect on the reader |
| 2    | 3 or 4 | **Inadequate attempt at the task set**  
I. Two or three content points achieved  
I. Numerous errors, which sometimes impede |
In BEC (Preliminary) Writing Test II, four content points are listed for the test taker to cover during the writing. The following is an example taken from a sample paper:

Write a letter to Mrs Bennett:
• acknowledging her letter
• offering her a date and time for an interview
• requesting the names and addresses of two referees
• telling her the best way to reach you by public transport.

Write 60 – 80 words.

http://assets.cambridge.org/97805217/53012/sample/9780521753012ws.pdf
Appendix 3 A sample letter with underlined lexical chunks and questions for interview

| **Alexander Trading Company**  
 253 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017, USA  
Tel No: 1-562-233-6584   Fax No: 1-562-231-4532  
E-mail: alg@www.alexander.com.usa |
|---|
| Wongsheng & Co.  
Rm 509-511 Tongle Bldg  
Shennan Rd., Shenzhen (518044), China  
Date: March 25, 2010 |
| Dear Mr. Jiang,  
We are pleased to receive your offer of March 22, 2010, and an illustrated catalogue. |
| In reply, we regret to say that your prices are out of line with the current market level. Information here shows that the makes offered by you can be obtained from other source at prices much lower than yours. Moreover, the market is declining. |
| In this case, it is impossible for us to persuade our customers to accept your prices even though you can supply full-range famous-brand athletic shoes. If you were prepared to reduce your limit by, say 6%, we might come to terms. |
| It is true that competitive prices will often result in a high market share with great profit in the future. We wish you to consider this factor. |
| We await your prompt reply. |
| Yours sincerely,  
Alexander Trading Company  
Paul Johnson  
Purchase Division |

* The underlined parts are **lexical chunks**.

Questions for interview:

1) Have you ever noticed such lexical chunks in your previous learning in this course (English business correspondence writing)?

2) What kind of lexical chunks do you think is most useful if you were asked to write a counter-offer letter again? Choose 5 from the given letter.

3) Your opinion on learning such lexical chunks in the course. State your reason(s) and problems if any.