

## A LEXICAL APPROACH TO THE OCCUPATIONAL ENGLISH TEST FOR VETERINARY SCIENCE AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING ACCURACY AND FLUENCY IN ENGLISH

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### Abstract

Attaining native-like accuracy and fluency is the aim of every student that has embarked on the study of a foreign language. In order to achieve this aim, students are encouraged to perceive and analyse the way English is used in various contexts, especially in those that are of interest to them in the light of their future careers. The lexical approach facilitates the mediation of language by means of a purposeful focus on chunks of language, since words do not occur in isolation but in meaningful combinations that are formulaic (e.g. collocations, idioms, discourse markers, phrasal verbs) and reveal the speakers' level of proficiency. Linguists are in favour of teaching chunks as they facilitate the acquisition of fluency, confer idiomaticity and provide the basis for subsequent language acquisitions. The present study focuses on the extent to which the Occupational English Test (OET) for Veterinary Science practice tests can be used in order to expose students to various instances in which chunks of language occur in professional contexts. The practice tests that assess the receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) language skills rely on a consistent use of chunks in various healthcare professional settings and can be used to consolidate learners' linguistic knowledge and accurate communication skills. Learners can be trained to notice the various linguistic contexts in which chunks occur, to accurately infer their meaning and the typical structure they are based on, and to confidently build on this acquired knowledge. Careful consideration is given to specific collocations and formulaic phrases used in the OET listening and reading materials which can be further transferred to other communicative instances and activated in the area of productive skills.

**Key words:** lexical approach, veterinary science practice tests, chunks, accuracy, fluency

Native-like accuracy in the use of English for a specific field is the aim of every student. This aim can only be achieved by constant and consistent exposure to linguistic contexts that mediate such knowledge. The lexical approach facilitates the mediation of language by means of a purposeful focus on chunks of language, since words do not occur in isolation but in meaningful combinations that are formulaic (e.g. collocations, idioms, discourse markers, phrasal verbs) and reveal the speakers' level of proficiency. Linguists encourage the teaching of chunks as these facilitate the acquisition of fluency, confer idiomaticity and provide the basis for subsequent language acquisitions (Thornbury S., 2019). Michael Lewis supports this by stating that "language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text" (Lewis M., 1997). The researchers also noted that the more confidently chunks were used, the more they contributed to the perception of fluency (Boers F. & Lindstromberg S., 2009). In the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) mastering chunks is a prerequisite

in communicating appropriately and successfully the intended message.

Pawley A. and Syder F. (1983) allude to a native-like ability of speakers to distinguish between unmarked or natural and highly marked or unnatural usages, while Alison Wray (2000) makes a distinction between chunks that are speaker-oriented, *i.e.* that enable fluent production, and those that are hearer-oriented, *i.e.* that achieve social and interactional purposes, such as polite formulae (e.g. *I wonder if you'd mind...?*) or expressions that assert group identity (e.g. 'teen talk': *can't even; yeah right*). Therefore, the target will be to accustom students to a natural use of language and to use specialized vocabulary confidently.

Errors in using chunks appropriately frequently occur due to the mother tongue influence. Some common examples among the Romanian students are the use of the verb 'depend' with the preposition 'of' instead of 'on', or of the verb to 'touch' - instead of 'accomplish' or 'achieve' - with the noun 'purpose'.

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Chunks can be classified by function, form, level of formality, clarity of meaning, frequency of occurrence, etc., ensuring thus the meaningful and contextualized activation of linguistic and grammatical knowledge of learners. The present study focuses on the extent to which the Occupational English Test (OET) for Veterinary Science practice tests can be used in order to expose students to various instances in which chunks of language occur in professional contexts. The practice tests that assess the receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) language skills rely on a consistent use of chunks in various healthcare professional settings and can be used to consolidate learners' linguistic knowledge and accurate communication skills in the intended health context.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

In order to identify types of chunks in materials pertaining to the field of veterinary medicine, a closer look at the classification of linguistic chunks has been taken. A 'chunk' is an all-purpose word that embraces any formulaic sequence, lexical/phrasal expression or multi-word item (Thornbury S., 2019)

By 'chunks', Michael Lewis meant everything from: collocations (*wrong way, give way, the way forward*); fixed expressions (*by the way, in the way*); formulaic utterances (*I'm on my way; no way!*); sentence starters (*I like the way...*); verb patterns (*to make/fight/elbow one's way...*); idioms and catchphrases (*the third way; way to go!*) (Lewis, 1997).

In *Teaching Chunks of Language*, Seth Lindstromberg and Frank Boers distinguish the following types of chunks, classified by:

- **Function:**
  - Conversational fillers: *sort of, you know what I mean*;
  - Exclamations: *Good God!, Trick or treat!*;
  - Pragmatic Notices: *Excuse me, How are you doing?*;
  - Discourse organisers/ markers: *Having said that, The thing is; by the way; on the one hand...on the other hand*; sentence starters: *I was wondering...*
  - Situation evaluators: *Small world! It's a catch 22 situation.*
- **Form:**
  - Sentence heads: *Could you...?, Why not...?*;
  - Phrasal verbs: *break down, wipe out*;
  - Compounds: *credit card, weather forecast*;
  - Strong collocations: *tell a story*;
  - Grammatical frames: *as...as, the -er the -er.*
- **Clarity of meaning:**
  - Clear: *please come in!*;

- Impossible to guess: *hit it off with someone.*
- **Geographical variety**
- **Age of typical users**
- **Level of formality (formal, informal, slang)**
- **More or less idiomatic**
  - Figurative idioms: *make ends meet; a far cry*
  - Similes: *blind as a bat*;
  - Proverbs: *The early bird catches the worm.*
- **Common in everyday language: never mind, as soon as possible;**
- **Less common in everyday language: be as it may;**
- **Typical of specific domains of life: hold someone in custody;**
- **Typical of a particular genre: conduct an experiment**
- **Out of fashion: raining cats and dogs;**
- **Newly coined word sequences: broadband.**

Thornbury S. (2019) in turn identifies the typical grammatical structures at the core of chunks - usually built around nouns and adjectives. Therefore, using this kind of formulaic language greatly facilitates the natural acquisition of grammatical patterns as well.

In order to analyse the extent to which OET tests rely on chunks, careful consideration was given to the listening and the reading materials included in the Veterinary Science – Official OET Practice Book 1 (2018). The chunks were then classified according to the degree of generality and the use in the specific field of medicine. The listening and the reading tests are common to all the 12 health professions whereas the speaking and the writing sub-tests are specific to the veterinary field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the listening tests, which cover texts ranging from consultation extracts to short workplace extracts and presentation extracts, and the reading tests, which consist of extracts from policy documents, hospital guidelines, manuals or emails and memos, the following chunks were identified and classified according to form and degree of idiomaticity (*table 1*).

Regarding the function of chunks, some pragmatic notices have been identified: *I should also let you know that...; So tell me about...;* as well as situation evaluators: *Well that's fair enough.* With respect to form, highly frequent are: sentence heads - *At a first stage..., This brings me to my next point..., this begs the question, That's where the...(begins to come together), To kick off, ..., Another notable finding ..., It's obvious that...;* and compounds: *constraint induced treatment, evidence-based medicine, , tetanus-prone wounds, post-operative wound management, anti-cancer*

*drugs, snake-venom detection kit, patient-practitioner consultation, herd immunity, vaccine-preventable diseases, medication adherence rates, acid-inhibiting drugs, immune-suppressant etc.* The occurring phrasal verbs and collocations have been included in the table.

As can be seen in Table 1, most of the collocations, set phrases, idioms and phrasal verbs

can be used in general, turning these tests into a practical tool for consolidating general knowledge of English as well.

Some steps that can be followed in teaching and learning chunks could consist in:

- **Noticing chunks** in the contexts provided, discovering their meaning and their role in conveying the message.

Table 1

**Chunks occurring in the OET Veterinary Practice listening and reading practice tests**

|                        | <b>COLLOCATIONS</b>   | <b>SET PHRASES</b>   | <b>IDIOMS</b>  | <b>PHRASAL VERBS</b>  |
|------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| <b>General use</b>     | to keep active<br>to go smoothly<br>to get (a bit) anxious<br>to come to a decision<br>to be in (overall) charge<br>to make savings<br>to depend on / (to be) dependent on<br>to pay close attention to<br>to aim for<br>to rely on<br>to be embarrassed about<br>to be good/ useless at (noun/ verb-ing)<br>to agree on (something)<br>to undertake physical activity<br>to take action<br>to cope with<br>to be keen on<br>to be right in assuming that<br>to be pleased with (a result)<br>to get in touch<br>to be entitled to<br>to be involved in<br>to comply with<br>to be satisfied with<br>to attend to someone's needs<br>to hold a different view<br>to hit goals<br>increase in the risk of<br>low-level guidance (narrow)<br>focus on<br>statistics on<br>progress in (something)<br>slim evidence<br>a clear need for (noun/ verb-ing)<br>on arrival<br>on investigation | to the extent that<br>it's on the tip of my tongue<br>some kind of<br>hold up with (the paperwork)<br>to feel thrown in at the deep end<br>to be due to<br>from early on<br>to give someone their due<br>to keep your/an eye on something/<br>someone<br>make much/a big difference to | out of the blue<br>(to influence someone) for the better<br>in your own words<br>(to have something) into the bargain<br>to be in good shape<br>it goes without saying<br>as a matter of course<br>in light of something<br>to be a far cry from something | to get over<br>to set up<br>to set off (a pain)<br>to flare up (pain)<br>to fill someone in (on something)<br>to work out<br>to pull out of (an event)<br>to step up (gradually)<br>to look out for<br>to look into something<br>to stand back (from)<br>to harp on (about something)<br>to get (something) through<br>to point (something/ someone) out (to someone)<br>to pick up on (something)<br>to turn out<br>to factor in something<br>to fit in with something<br>to take something out of someone<br>to take something in<br>to notch up<br>to come round |
| <b>Specialized use</b> | to suffer from bouts of (sciatica)<br>dizzy spells<br>risk of miscarriage<br>to refer someone to/ to be referred to<br>to sign up with a practice<br>to join a practice<br>to get (tender) bumps<br>pain radiates out from (bumps)<br>to have severe pain<br>to clear the pain<br>to undergo an operation/ a therapy<br>to be in agony<br>to be admitted to inpatient therapy/ for (a health issue)<br>to specialize in (injuries)<br>to report on<br>to be on (medication)   | to fit the symptoms  |  | to come out/ break out in hives<br>to give up the therapy<br>to wear off (about the effect of morphine)   |

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>to be diagnosed with<br/>to do (some blood) tests<br/>to have one's (varicose) veins done<br/>to bruise at (the slightest thing)<br/>to be in pain<br/>to uptake and release drugs<br/>to allow symptoms to settle<br/>to show a (statistically significant) benefit for something<br/>to do an evaluation<br/>to be short of breath<br/>to develop an eczema<br/>to start someone on a low/ high dose of<br/>to have access to care/ hospices<br/>signs (may) clear<br/>(warning) signs subside</p> |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|

For the listening practice, for example, students may be given the lines from an audio material from which particular words from collocations or idioms have been removed. A pre-listening task may consist in recycling knowledge or challenging students' ability to guess the words missing from those contexts. The students will then listen to the material with the purpose of identifying the word/ words missing and then analyse the way in which these chunks fit the global meaning of the discourse. A possible follow-up activity may require students to consult a collocation dictionary and select other words that may collocate with a particular word and offer possible variants to the initial discourse or transfer the knowledge to examples from their personal context and experience.

- **Selecting the chunks that are worth committing to memory** - these can be taken from the listening and reading materials based on their degree of transferability into the area of speaking or writing in the field of veterinary medicine.

- **Consolidating knowledge** by actively using the acquired knowledge in the speaking sub-test where students have to assume the roles of vets or clients and discuss about the health issues of pets/ animals. The writing sub-test also challenges students to an active use of formulaic language that pertains to the field of writing letters of referral, transfer, advice etc. Thus, using expressions like: *Investigations reveal; The ultrasound/ laboratory results revealed; The results of the tests performed confirm that* - at the beginning of a letter will indicate good mastery of language and pattern. In addition, discourse markers along the letter, such as: **sentence starters** - *Given the absence of / Given the presence of; I suspect ... caused by; Should the diagnosis of ... be confirmed, the ... would likely pursue an ... examination;* or **closing**

**formulae** - *Should you require any further ..., please do not hesitate to...; The owner would appreciate your expertise in discussing the prognosis...; A second opinion would be appreciated,* can demonstrate a confident mastery of specialised vocabulary.

### CONCLUSIONS

The OET Veterinary Science practice tests are an invaluable source that can be successfully used to acquaint veterinary students with vocabulary in specific contexts. They can help them consolidate linguistic knowledge that confers naturalness to their communication through the use of chunks that are either specialized or pertain to general use. Moreover, the chunks of language identified in the reading and listening materials can be transferred to the speaking and writing tasks and turned into effective discourse.

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