

Lexical Approach: Revisiting English Language teaching by Putting Theories into Practice

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We could not talk about vocabulary teaching nowadays without mentioning Michael Lewis (1993), whose controversial, thought-provoking ideas have been shaking the ELT world since the publication of his book “The Lexical Approach”. The lexical approach is a method of teaching foreign languages. The basic concept on which this approach rests is the idea that an important part of learning a language consists of being able to understand and produce lexical phrases as chunks. Students are thought to be able to perceive patterns of language (grammar) as well as have meaningful set uses of words at their disposal when they are taught in this way. The most important highlight is the importance of vocabulary as being basic to communication. Lewis himself insists that his lexical approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching. The Chunks that he refers include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, which according to him, occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production and act as the key to fluency.

The principles of the Lexical Approach have been around since Michael Lewis published 'The Lexical Approach' 20 years ago. It seems, however, that many teachers and researchers do not have a clear idea of what the Lexical Approach actually looks like in practice. In creating the pedagogical materials for Français interactif, the developers decided to move away from the traditional grammatical syllabus and adopt features of the Lexical Approach instead.

Theory of language

According to Avram Noam Chomsky a known American linguist, philosopher and cognitive scientist, a native speaker’s output consisting of a number of “creative” utterances is at best a half-truth. In fact pre synthesized items represent a significant portion of a native speaker’s spoken and written output. Native speakers have a vast stock of these lexical prefabricated items or chunks and are vital for fluent production. Fluency does not depend so much on having a vast set of grammar rules and a separate stock of words as on having rapid access to a stock of lexical chunks. It would seem, that speakers need both a pre synthesized, automated element as well as a creative, generative one. Since long it has been analyzed that the language consists of grammatical structures and a set of usually single vocabulary items. Grammar has been given priority over vocabulary. The latter has been seen as secondary in importance, merely serving to illustrate the meaning and scope of the grammar. However in the lexical Approach this dichotomy is considered as unrealistic and based on false assumptions about language. Language is basically its lexicon. The key principle of a lexical approach makes a distinction between vocabulary—traditionally understood as a stock of individual words with fixed meanings—and lexis, which includes not only the single words but also the word combinations that we store in our mental lexicons. It advocates argue that language consists of meaningful chunks that, when combined, produce continuous coherent text, and only a minority of spoken sentences are entirely novel creations” In other words, lexis is central in creating meaning, grammar plays a secondary role in managing meaning. When this principle is accepted, the logical implication for teachers is that we should spend more time helping learners develop their stock of phrases, and less time on grammatical structures.

How can we use Lexis in the classroom

Central to the lexical approach is the focus on teaching **real** English and a shift away from usual practice. In fact, the approach contends that the language course books teach is “not what people really say.” That is why it is urgent to avoid distorting the language with course book writer intuition and access the authentic language via corpora (a large amount of written and sometimes spoken material collected to show the state of a language). It can instantly provide us with the relative frequencies, collocations, and prevalent grammatical patterns of the lexis in question across a range of genres. In addition, light is shed on lexical variation. This leads to the collection of thousands of vocabulary items that cannot be taught in the traditional PPP (Present-Practice-Produce) framework. So how does the Lexical Approach deal with the teaching part? Even if the approach doesn’t present a clear theory of learning there are some hints about how the teaching looks like within the approach.

- Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language. Emphasis is on successful communication not grammatical mastery.
- Language is not learnt by learning individual sounds and structures and then combining them, but by an increasing ability to break down wholes into parts. We can also use whole phrases without understanding their constituent parts.
- Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.
- Grammar is acquired by a process of observation, hypothesis and experiment. That is, the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle replaces the Present-Practise-Produce Paradigm.
- Grammar exploration instead of grammar explanation.
- Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language.
- First and second language comparisons and translation—carried out chunk-for-chunk, rather than word-for-word—aimed at raising language awareness.
- Repetition and recycling of activities.
- Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context.
- The language activities consistent with a lexical approach must be directed toward naturally occurring language and toward raising learners' awareness of the lexical nature of language.
- Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.

Language Teaching and Learning with the use of Lexis

Here we would like to mention that in lexical approach, the lexis in its various types is speculated to play a cardinal role in language teaching and learning. Nattinger (1980, p. 341) suggests that teaching should be based on the idea that language production is the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation. The realization of the above mentioned units or chunks is dependent on knowing where to put what in different situations. Instruction, therefore, should revolve on these patterns and the ways they can be put together, even ways they differ and the situations in which they occur.

Activities used to develop learners' knowledge of lexical chains include the following:

- Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language.
- First and second language comparisons and translation—carried out chunk-for-chunk, rather than word-for-word—aimed at raising language awareness.
- Repetition and recycling of activities, such as summarizing a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep words and expressions that have been learned active.
- Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context.
- Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.
- Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.

Hence Lexical Approach can be summarized in the following words: “language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi - word prefabricated chunks.”

It has been argued that lexical chunks also play a part in vocabulary and grammar acquisition. Once a chunk is known, it can be analyzed and segmented into its constituent words. This can occur when some variability is noticed in a lexical chunk. For example, after having heard the phrase, How are you today? several times, it may be acquired as a chunk with the meaning of ‘a greeting’. However the learner may later notice the phrases, How are you this evening? or How are you this fine morning? At that point, the learner may realize that the underlying structure is actually How are you _____?, where the slot can be filled with a time reference. The learner is then aware that what fits in the slot is a separate unit from the rest of the phrase, which opens the door to learning that lexical unit. Eventually, the entire lexical chunk may be analyzed into separate words, although it may continue to be stored as a whole because of its utility. Because this segmentation also involves syntax, it has been suggested that it can lead to grammatical acquisition as well.

Conclusion

Very basically, a lexical approach to teaching means the primary focus is on helping students acquire vocabulary. The most important learning strategy we can give students is just to train them to NOTICE lexical chunks during their exposure to language. First we have to raise their awareness of the fact that language consists of lexical structures, then we need to define the main types of lexical structures (collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions) and finally we need to develop some activities that help them notice the lexical chunks in spoken and written texts.

Most significant is the underlying claim that language production is not a syntactic rule-governed process but is instead the retrieval of larger phrasal units from memory.

Nevertheless, implementing a lexical approach in the classroom does not lead to radical methodological changes. Rather, it involves a change in the teacher's mindset. Most important, the language activities consistent with a lexical approach must be directed toward naturally occurring language and toward raising learners' awareness of the lexical nature of language.

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