

Lexical Approach

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Framing the Issue

Promulgated notably by Lewis (1993) and Willis (1990), the lexical approach to second language instruction began in the early 1990s as a reaction to traditional structural syllabuses—which had as their basis grammatical constructions—and other types of syllabus that had come into fashion around that time (e.g., notional-functional syllabuses). One of the fundamental principles distinguishing this approach from more conventional language teaching approaches is that grammar plays a subordinate role to lexis. Language is not analyzed in terms of sentence-level grammatical structures and the vocabulary items that are slotted into them (i.e., lexicalized grammar). Within a lexical approach, language is considered to comprise prefabricated expressions and phrases, usually referred to as *lexical units* or *chunks* (grammaticalized lexis).

Not only did the approach encourage reconsideration of the importance of grammar to the teaching/learning process in favor of lexis, it also served to eliminate randomness from the way lexis had been introduced in traditional language classes. Findings from corpus research have yielded a wealth of data concerning the frequency of vocabulary in text and the frequency of the patterns in which lexis appears. Frequency of usage determines the relative usefulness of these units of language for learners. While traditional approaches tended to present grammar constructions in order of ease of acquisition, lexis tended to be included based strictly on its relevance to the structures into which it was to be slotted. A lexical approach, informed by corpus data, provides language instructors with a principled means of introducing lexis into the syllabus.

Classroom practice based on a lexical approach may be considered to be a type of communicative language teaching (CLT). As in the *natural approach* that had become prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, language learning is said to stem largely from listening and reading input. Communicative competence is the ultimate goal and emphasis is placed on using the language successfully,

rather than accurately. Error is intrinsic to the learning process and sociolinguistic and communicative competence is expected to precede grammatical competence.

The primacy of chunks

In the earliest formulations of the approach, lexical units were said to include individual vocabulary items along with multiword combinations. Gradually, however, the focus of the approach has shifted towards multiword items or *lexical chunks* almost exclusively. These chunks of language are the primary organizing elements of a lexical syllabus. These are lexical structures, rather than grammatical ones and may be canonical (i.e., abide by the rules of grammar) or not (e.g., *be that as it may; by and large*). They also vary in terms of *fixedness*, the degree to which the multiword expression allows substitutions, inflections, and so forth. For example, *on the other hand* is considered to be a fixed expression (since *on the other hands* and *on another hand* are unacceptable), while *make a (very/extremely/rather) long story (very/somewhat) short* is less so. Chunks differ in terms of their *compositionality* as well. This refers to the extent to which the meaning of the expression is revealed through an examination of its individual words. Thus, a compound like *banana yellow* is highly compositional, but many idioms are not (e.g., *bite the big one*; meaning *die*).

There are as many means of categorizing lexical chunks as there are researchers investigating them. Most classifications include the following:

- individual words
- polywords: short, relatively fixed phrases, including
 - compounds (*hot dog, blue-collar*)
 - phrasal verbs (*come across, run out of*)
 - binomials and trinomials (*apples and oranges; this, that, and the other*)
- idioms (*on cloud nine; get someone's goat*)
- similes (*like a fish out of water; as fast as lightning*)
- proverbs (*ignorance is bliss; honesty is the best policy*)
- sentence frames: longer, usually discontinuous phrases used to build larger statements and arguments (*not only X, but also Y; the _____er, the _____er*)
- institutionalized utterances: conventional expressions serving specific functions in social interaction, usually full sentences (*Thank you for having me; Give me a break; There's a call for you.*)
- collocations: prompted by the results of corpus studies, this category includes any pair or group of words that co-occur in higher than chance frequencies (e.g., *negotiate an agreement, a substantial number, splitting headache*); it also includes frequently occurring fixed phrases from written and spoken texts not included above (*by far, for instance, you know*).

Well-selected chunks in the syllabus offer the learner the practical value of being among the most frequent, and hence most useful, elements of the language.

Making the Case

Much of the theoretical background upon which the lexical approach was based stems from the results of corpus linguistics research. The Collins COBUILD project at the University of Birmingham was particularly influential. Building upon these findings, Sinclair (1991) argued against an *open-choice principle* for an *idiom principle*. The open-choice principle refers to the view that language consists of grammatical structures with slots into which vocabulary items are inserted to make sentences. Thus, to take a structural view of *the doctor crossed the street* is to suggest that the language was produced by way of processes requiring the selection of a subject (*nurse, astronaut, your mother, etc.*), a verb (*is crossing, will cross, ate, etc.*) and an object (*the road, the river, a cheeseburger, etc.*). As this would involve an almost limitless number of choices, Sinclair argued that this view of language did not provide enough constraints on the choices necessary to produce language in real time.

The idiom principle, however, suggests that language users have vast numbers of accessible, prefabricated phrases at their disposal during language production. While it may seem obvious that *hot dog, supreme court, and of course* are probably stored in memory as single, unanalyzable units, more complex and less idiomatic phrases may also be stored similarly. A *_____ of*, for example is a very high-frequency English expression used to quantify (e.g., *a lot of, a few of, a number of*) and to describe units (e.g., *a piece of, a bottle of, a pound of*). While it may not be clear from introspection that language is stored in these types of lexical phrases, the argument for the lexical approach is that their fluency of use—as well as frequency of use, as revealed through corpora—necessitates conceptualizing language in terms of such prefabricated chunks.

Another argument in favor of the idiom principle and a lexical approach to language teaching is seen in the example sentence *If I were you, I'd wait*. When asked to parse this in two, language teachers have traditionally split the expression into clauses (i.e., *If I were you + I'd wait*). Lewis (1997, p. 257) points out that this is simply “incorrect. We recognize that *If I were you* is ALWAYS followed by *I'd*, so the lexical boundary between chunks is after *I'd*.” This kind of reconceptualization—from “slot-and-filler” grammar-vocabulary to chunks of prefabricated language—is central to the lexical approach.

The lexical approach also finds support in arguments from the psycholinguistic literature. As per the open-choice principle, these arguments posit that English speakers would need to select from a near infinite number of single-word items in order to speak fluently. At the same time, speakers must attend to the rules of grammar and topical/situational constraints to produce accurate speech. Further, there is pragmatic need to produce “nativelike” language. Given the array of considerations involved in the production and comprehension of fluent speech, language users’ cognitive resources would quickly become taxed if language were not accessible as prefabricated chunks. These prefabricated expressions facilitate and expedite the language selection process. The number of lexical chunks in English is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands (Pawley &

Syder, 1983). If language were not stored in these chunks, nativelike fluency would be almost unattainable. On the contrary, if language is retrieved from memory as prefabricated chunks, it can be retrieved more efficiently, freeing cognitive resources to devote to larger structures of the discourse and to the social situation.

An argument *against* adopting a lexical approach is that the goal of language learning continues to be *communicative competence*, of which the mastery of lexis and multiword units is, for most learners and instructors, merely a single component. The lexical approach promotes a view of language as the grammaticalization of lexis, and may indeed lead learners to successfully discover chunks of language. However, the approach does not specify how comprehensive language competence may be achieved via these means. Indeed, most attempts to create a strictly lexical language program have thus far proven unsuccessful. Moreover, critics of the lexical approach claim that it is not actually an *approach* to language learning at all. That is, it may not be founded upon a coherent and complete theory of language and the way languages are learned. There is an inherent contradiction in any syllabus that stresses natural input, but at the same time introduces awareness-raising activities as one of its main classroom practices.

Pedagogical Implications

Initially, the implementation of the lexical syllabus in the language classroom was similar in a number of ways to that of the natural approach. Teacher talk was to be a major source of input for learners. The traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) model was rejected for a more learner-centered focus, emphasizing the students' roles in their own discovery of the language. This has been characterized as *Task-Planning-Report* in task-based applications of the approach (e.g., Willis, 1990) and as *Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment* (Lewis, 1993). Teachers' roles too are transformed in a lexical approach. Rather than being vessels of knowledge or drill leaders for the mastery of grammatical structures, instructors are called upon to create an environment that allows students to discover and learn the features of language (i.e., lexical chunks) on their own.

Classroom activities developed within a lexical approach were originally conceived of as being predominantly receptive in nature. Teacher talk and other authentic language would provide input from which learners were to recognize chunks of language to be acquired. Classroom procedure today involves the utilization of both receptive and productive skills. A typical class might consist of all of the following: raising awareness/discovery of lexical chunks, adding knowledge of usage restrictions to vocabulary already known by students, providing practice opportunities for communicative use, and encouraging the

retention of lexical knowledge by way of elaborative tasks, vocabulary notebooks, and other means.

Despite increased interest in the role lexical chunks play in language and language learning, premade materials and textbooks designed specifically to implement a lexical syllabus remain limited. An important aspect of the teacher's role in the classroom, then, is to provide vocabulary learning materials that demonstrate the use of lexical units in context. Teachers subscribing to a lexical approach may find themselves presiding over corpus and concordance software to allow learners to discover lexical patterns in class. As explained above, however, the number of lexical phrases in English far exceeds the classroom hours required to either teach them explicitly or to have learners discover them naturally. Thus, introducing strategies to aid in the autonomous discovery of chunks is also a key feature of a lexical methodology. Success within a lexical curriculum may best be measured in terms of the student's ability to learn how to chunk authentic language, and to acquire the strategies necessary to continue to do so with authentic language beyond the classroom.

Readily available concordance software now affords teachers and students the opportunity to discover lexical chunks through hands-on corpus research. Teachers may ask learners to build their own corpora and then, with the aid of concordancing software, have them examine specific words and the chunks in which they reside in their natural contexts. Where technology is limited, learners may do the same with preprinted concordance lines or more simplified materials. A simple corpus activity of this sort involves distinguishing between words with similar meanings by allowing learners to discover differences in their use. While examining the verbs *focus* and *concentrate*, for example, learners may find that both words collocate directly with *on*, but only *focus* can be used in conjunction with *attention* (*focus your attention on*, not *concentrate your attention on*). Differences noted between the usage restrictions of *powerful* (*engine*, not *tea*) and *strong* (*tea*, not *engine*) provide another popular example among linguists and learners.

Similarly, words that learners have difficulty defining on their own may be easier to understand in context. As an example, groups of learners can be presented with concordance data for the word *system*. Have the students cut the concordance lines into individual strips and ask them to group the lines of text according to the types of system they think are represented on each. Depending on the specific data received, learners may discover that *system* is used to describe large organizations bound by a specific plan or set of rules (*financial system*, *legal system*), sets of electronic devices (*computer system*, *surveillance system*), mechanical devices (*heating system*, *plumbing system*), networks for transportation or communication (*rail system*, *cable system*), internal organs (*digestive system*, *respiratory system*), or the government and its institutions (*the system*). Students can later compare their groupings with the entry for *system* in a corpus-informed dictionary to see how closely they've matched the most common usages.

The activities below are based on those introduced by Lewis (1997, p. 261) as means of raising awareness of lexis and their collocates.

Activity 1

Which of the following nouns do NOT fit with the words in capital letters?
Choose only one word for each.

- 1) HIGH opinion spirits house time priority price
- 2) MAIN street speed course thing character
- 3) NEW idea experience food potatoes job
- 4) LIGHT green lunch rain living entertainment

Activity 2

Choose the words that fit best with the verbs below.

	deal	mistake	risk	shower
	meeting	presentation	drink	lunch
MAKE	_____	_____	_____	_____
DO	_____	_____	_____	_____
HAVE	_____	_____	_____	_____
TAKE	_____	_____	_____	_____

In both of these activities, learners are made aware of collocations in which common (hence, useful) lexis occurs. These examples also serve to illustrate the difference between words that collocate strongly (i.e., words that are likely to be found together; e.g., *make a deal* or *have lunch*), those that collocate weakly (*do a deal*, *do lunch*), and those that are merely possible, but unlikely, combinations. Such activities can be used to reinforce both authentic language arising naturally in the classroom milieu, and that which appears in texts prepared specifically for didactic purposes. Drawing attention to similarities and differences between collocations in a learner's first language and that of the target language may also aid in raising awareness of certain usage restrictions. As a final step, it is necessary for the student to consolidate the lexical knowledge in memory. Activities designed to help learners to remember chunks need not be specifically developed for a lexical syllabus or even for language learning more generally. Any activity that increases the likelihood that the material will be remembered may be useful. Such activities may involve structural or semantic elaboration (i.e., deep cognitive processing) or mnemonic techniques.

SEE ALSO: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Functional-Notional Approach; Natural Approach; Structural Approach; Teaching Lexical Chunks

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Suggested Readings

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