

NEW TRENDS IN ELT

The Lexical Approach Syllabus

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The lexical syllabus is based on corpus linguistics, and is a collection of English texts from a wide variety of sources which are stored electronically. These can be sorted in various ways, and this has led to new ways of looking at language. Most especially, it has led to thinking about how we understand and use spoken language as compared to written language. It leads us away from the study of language as an abstract subject to a world where people are using the language for face-to-face communication. Today,



even written communication such as e-mail functions more like spoken language in that it is more like a conversation that exists in real time than an exchange of letters. Indeed, e-mail has sounded the death of the traditional (formal) written business letter.

If we consider the lexical approach (which gives us the idea of separating the spoken language from the written language), we have to define what we mean by the term. The lexical approach is not just about words, but the suggestion, backed by research in corpus linguistics, that word relationships have a central importance to language learning - more than we have hitherto given them.

In the lexical approach, vocabulary is not something that is tacked onto the grammar structure. The relationship between words comes first, and from looking at this relationship, comes grammar. The lexical approach also gives us a more accurate picture

of what spoken language is really like, and it seems to have the following characteristics:

- It takes place in a shared context and it is based on (shared) assumptions about the context.
- Spoken language avoids elaboration or specification of meaning. There is a low lexical density and a very low mean phrase length. Meaning is carried largely through intonation. In other words, it is *how* something is said that is important rather than *what* is said.
- Conversation is interactive. Learners learn by interacting in a social context. According to Vygotsky, "*The mind is not just a box inside of the head. The mind exists as a social space for thinking and interacting.*" If we fail to teach our students how to react spontaneously and appropriately with words and expressions that help them to do so (e.g. *wow, super, really?, what for?, My God!, fine, lovely, I guess, anyway* etc), then they will be impoverished listeners and reactors.
- Conversation is expressive of personal politeness, emotion, and attitude. These are words which exist to establish a relationship between speaker and listener in a conversation. It is the relationship which exists that allows us to say or not to say things such as *thank you, please, sorry, would you...?, could you...?, Let's..., honey, darling, hey you guys, oh, ah, whoops, yippee, you silly cow, what a rip off, the bastard.*
- Conversation takes place in real time. This means that there are hesitations, pauses, repeats, retrace and repair sequences, and incompletions. Since there is no planning time for real-time conversation, language tends to seem disjointed, as in this example: '*Do you know erm... you know where the erm... go over erm... where the fire station is not the one that's white*'
- Conversation has a restricted and repetitive repertoire. Grammar exists, but it is minimal. For example, '*Can I have a...? and Do you know what?*'

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- Conversation employs a vernacular range of expression. For example, 'Well us lot must walk five miles everyday' and 'I bet they're wearing them boots'.

These characteristics are not reflected accurately when we look at traditional grammar books. But are they reflected accurately when we consider discourse in the language classroom? An important question language teachers need to ask themselves is to what extent they really use spoken (authentic) language in the classroom and to for what purpose. Here is a list that one group of teachers came up with:

- giving instructions
- thinking out loud
- communicating with each other over a task
- gossip
- non-heard talk

Another point to take into account is how we *chunk* language. By chunking I mean the relationship between words, and we can chunk language in different ways:

- Words
- Word partners and collocations
- Fixed expressions
- Unfixed expressions

Real language exists naturally in chunks as the following examples show:

- *I can't get over it.*
- *I don't suppose...*
- *You ought to have been there.*
- *I'm sure I told you...*

There are countless thousands of such examples, and it is through teaching these chunks that students acquire a **real** feeling for the language.

At the same time, looking at language through the eyes of corpora gives us insights into the function of certain words like '*just*'. Look at these examples and consider what function '*just*' serves in each of these sentences:

- *I've just received a letter.*
- *Can I just ask you a question?*
- *Could you just listen for a moment?*
- *Just look at this.*
- *We're not just concerned with the grammar.*
- *It's just exactly like I thought it would be.*

The answer is that it serves to make these statements less blunt - it softens the meaning and keeps the

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message from sounding too imposing.

We have also learned a great deal about the frequency with which we use certain words. For example, verbs like *make*, *do*, *have*, *get*, occur with a very high frequency because they are verbs that work in partnership with many other words.

Corpora linguistics also gives us insight into the different ways of saying something. For example, the word '*no*': oh dear me, oh dear, I am sorry, so it's no go?, you see, the thing is.., we're in a negative situation, no can do, no way, out of the question, fat chance, sorry love, love to but, sorry, can't help, I'm afraid and we can go on.

So the next question to answer is how can we, as teachers, apply the lexical approach in the classroom? I would suggest three approaches:

- Create an atmosphere 'm the classroom where talking is important.

2 Give free talking time like pair-share where students are given a topic to talk about for 2 minutes. This could even be a way to revise or talk through something done in class.

3 Give students time to 'mess around' or 'play' with the language. CELTA has a model for this called '*test-teach-test*'. Here, students are given an activity to do, the teacher monitors the students and observes how well it goes, she does some fine-tuning and then gives another activity for learners to experiment with. This leads to understanding.

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