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Lexical Approach Activities

A Revolutionary Way of Teaching

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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

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Introduction

Very basically, a lexical approach to teaching means the primary focus is on helping students acquire vocabulary. This movement away from a grammar-based syllabus largely began in 1993 with the publication of “The Lexical Approach” by Michael Lewis. It was called an approach to differentiate it from a method. In English language teaching, methods are systems for structuring lessons while approaches are less concerned with how the lesson is structured and more concerned with the general focus of instruction. Teachers should be aware of this as there is some reluctance to adopt a more lexical approach because of the fear that it may mean revamping the way one teaches. In reality, teachers can use any methodology with a lexical approach from grammar translation to task-based learning. What changes is just the linguistic focus of the lesson.

While one might think the paradigm shift was away from teaching grammar structures towards teaching individual words, the linguistic focus of the lexical approach is really in between grammar and what we traditionally think of as vocabulary. What it focuses on are structures made up of words, meaning that the actual paradigm shift was away from individual words to clusters of words, or lexical chunks as they are commonly referred to. This new idea about the structural nature of the language does not exclude grammatical structures but instead recognizes that the language has far more structures than those that occur in the grammatical syllabus. Consider the statement below.

The Lexical Approach is based on the idea that language is made up of other structural elements besides what we traditionally think of as grammar.

In that statement, there are two distinct structures:

“X is based on the idea/belief/premise that + clause”
“X is made up of Y”.

Both of these structures occur fairly frequently in the language with different variables. Yet neither one would be found in a grammar book. In his book, Michael Lewis suggested that teachers need to help students become aware of the lexical structures that commonly occur in the language. The idea is that if students become aware of some of the many lexical structures, they will have a lot more information about how to combine individual words to build coherent structures like phrases, expressions and whole sentences, which should ultimately emulate those used by native speakers. Many teachers have noticed that it is not use of grammar which separates higher level students from native speakers – often the student’s grammar will be better than a native speaker’s – but the way words are combined into lexical chunks.

Slot-filler Search



Speaking
Vocabulary



Listening
Grammar



Reading
Pronunciation



Writing
Warmer/Icebreaker

This is similar to the previous activity in that students have to provide slot-fillers for semi-fixed expressions taken from texts. However, this activity gives them expressions that are variations of those in the text and they have to search the text to find the original expression. This task gives them practice with reading skills as they will need to skim and/or scan the text to find the original expression. In addition, the activity demonstrates how semi-fixed expressions can be varied and, since the variations can be provided by the teacher, it's ideal for lower level students who may not be entirely sure how to recognize and manipulate semi-fixed expressions.

To set the activity up, use a text that students have been working with, a reading or listening tapescript, and pull out a few important semi-fixed expressions, e.g., 5 – 10.. Then write variations of them by changing the slot-fillers. Before starting the activity, write the semi-fixed expressions on the board. To make it easier for students to do, write them in the same order they appear in the text. To make it more challenging, mix them up. Then divide the students into two to five pairs or groups. Give each group a different coloured board marker. Tell students to look back through the text and find the original expressions. When they do, one person from each pair/group comes to the board and writes one of the original slot-filler above the changed one in one of the expressions. Then that student returns to their team and gives the marker to another member, who can come up and change another slot-filler. For semi-fixed expressions with more than one slot-filler, you can allow them to change both at once but it makes it more challenging, more collaborative and more active if they can only change one as their teammate can then get the marker from them and change the other one. When all the expressions have been changed, count up how many contributions have been made in each colour to determine the winning team.

Here are some sample changed semi-fixed expressions taken from the first paragraph of this text. They are in the same order that they appear in the text.

Schools have to provide lunches for students
Children have to search the room to find the hidden presents
The incident demonstrates how teenagers can be cruel
Public transportation is ideal for people who live in the suburbs

After students have found the original slot-fillers, spend some time talking about the construction of each semi-fixed expressions and, if you'd like, get students to write some other variations of them, either in class or for homework.

Suggestions for Teaching Lexically

Because the lexicon is far too vast to “teach”, the Lexical Approach puts the emphasis on getting students to notice lexical chunks during their exposure to English. This is called “noticing” or “consciousness raising” and is considered the key for language acquisition. The teacher’s role is to help the students develop their “noticing” skill, or in other words, to turn **input** (language exposure) into **intake** (language acquisition). Hopefully, the development of the students noticing ability will go beyond the classroom and occur whenever they encounter the language.

- Don’t teach vocabulary out of context. Try to avoid teaching isolated words. Either collocate them (e.g., bank account, savings account, etc.) or include the word in a realistic structure (I’d like to open an account).
- With semi-fixed expressions, give other examples of similar words/chunks that are also used in that structure. Generally, don’t give more than five examples and try to relate the words in terms of function and/or meaning.
- Don’t spend too much time on fixed expressions, particularly idiomatic ones, as they are normally not used that frequently (When is the last time you heard someone say “He’s always blowing his own trumpet”?) and they do little to develop strategies for processing other structures (He’s always blowing his own nose???)”).
- Get some collocation dictionaries and encourage students to use them when using classroom material (i.e. “Go through the reading and find the collocations that go with the following words...” “Now use the collocation dictionaries and find other similar collocations for those words.”). Also, they can use the collocation dictionary to embellish their writing. (Instead of “We went on a trip to Niagara and stayed in a hotel”, “We went on an **overnight** trip to Niagara and stayed in a **first-class** hotel.”)
- Develop or adapt exercises to get students to notice collocations and other lexical chunks in their course material. After doing reading or listening comprehension have students go over the text/tapescript and pick out certain topic-related or function-based lexical chunks.
- Use Teacher Talking Time to give students practice in noticing lexical items in your speech.
- Use a task-based approach. Tell students before they read or listen to a text that they will have to do a task relating to the text and have them listen or read for topic or function-related lexical chunks they think they can use for the task (e.g., “Read this description of a holiday and look for expressions to talk about YOUR last holiday”). Then compile what the students have extracted on the board, expand semi-fixed expressions, clarify form, meaning and pronunciation, where appropriate. Then have them use the language in a task relating to the text (e.g., students then talk about their last vacation). Telling them before they deal with the text that they will have to use the lexis they find, is a good way of encouraging noticing and acquisition. In addition,