

The Lexical Approach In the EFL Classroom: A General Overview

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the theoretical research related to the Lexical Approach which came about in reaction to former teaching approaches by providing a major rethink to the role of lexis in the EFL classroom. It addresses four main points: the theoretical background of this approach highlighting its rise into prominence and the main tenets it is founded upon as stated by its founder Michael Lewis (1993), also the different categories into which lexical chunks fall as they are the building blocks of this approach. In addition, it provides a general and brief outline about the Lexical syllabus and its classification. Finally, it brings to the fore the pedagogical importance of the Lexical Approach and its relevance to language teaching and learning whilst scrutinizing its limitations.

Key Words: Lexical Approach, lexis, chunks, collocations, fluency.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est l'approche lexicale qui est apparue en réaction aux anciennes approches pédagogiques en proposant une refonte majeure du rôle du lexique dans la classe de l'EFL. Il explore le contexte théorique de cette approche en soulignant sa montée en puissance et les principaux concepts sur lesquels elle repose, comme l'a déclaré son fondateur Michael Lewis (1993). Il fournit également un aperçu des différentes catégories dans lesquelles les collocations sont divisées. En plus, il présente le programme lexical de façon très brève et générale. Enfin, il met en évidence l'importance pédagogique de LA et sa pertinence pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues tout en examinant ses limites.

Mot clés : Approche Lexicale, lexicale, champs lexical, collocations, fluidité.

Introduction

Ever since the teaching community has gained interest into foreign language instruction, there has always been an undue focus on grammar. Most linguists pertained that language proficiency was based on a good mastery of grammatical structures excluding vocabulary and belittling its importance. In fact, Richard-Amato (2003) indicated that the classical Grammar-and-Translation Approach, also referred to as the Structural Approach, was the most predominant in the twentieth

century. Foreign language learning consisted at automatizing language structures through understanding, translating and deconstructing syntactical structures so as to produce grammatically possible utterances. In sum, its curriculum revolved exclusively around grammar. With the advent of the communicative approach, language was viewed differently. It was no longer considered as a means of understanding works of art and literature, but rather as a means to transmit and receive meaning i.e. to communicate. Thus, by contrast to the GTM, the communicative approach stresses fluency over accuracy. However, most of its syllabi were communicative in name only as the main objective of the instructional units was to practice grammatical sequences. And so, despite the fact that "*there have been changing trends – from grammar translation to direct method to the communicative approach – none of these has emphasized the importance of the learner's lexical competence over structural grammatical competence.*" Carter and McCarthy (1988:111)

Fortunately enough, the 1990s have witnessed new developments in linguistics resulting in a total redefinition of language thanks to the findings of a collection of corpus-based studies, but also to the adoption of a new teaching approach where vocabulary was no longer peripheral to grammar. According to Stubbs (2001), Corpus Linguistics contributed to the creation of databases that comprised vast corpora of authentic language providing concordance information including word frequency and usage. Corpus-based studies also revealed that lexical chunks were a substantial part of nativized speech implying that the mental lexicon did not only consist of individual words, but also of thousands of formulaic expressions ready for retrieval whenever the need arises. This argument can be furthered by Skehan's (1992) claim that language is memory-based and idiomatic. He reckons that first language acquisition goes through three different stages: lexicalization, syntacticalization, and relexicalization. The first of these processes namely lexicalization is the process by which language is acquired as undivided chunks that are gradually deconstructed into their lexical segments during the syntacticalization process becoming syntactic. Finally, the gradual development of the language system becomes bound to the relexicalization process where language learners learn how to cope with time-consuming syntactic patterns during real-time language processing.

Moreover, the vocabulary-grammar dichotomy began to be widely debated as many linguists (Nattinger and De Carriico 1992) deduced that individual words had their own rules and that a vast majority had a limited meaning by itself. However, when incorporated

within the context of shorter phrases, their signification became highly varied. In the meantime, many figures from the linguistic circles expressed their opposition to Chomsky's theory which dictates that native speakers rely entirely on their creative ability to produce newer sentences, by putting forward a new theory which advances that *"The building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, function, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching but lexis, that is, word and word combinations"* (Richards and Rodgers 2014:132). Obviously, this was a signal of departure from grammar-oriented approaches to a new teaching approach where word combinations are at the centre of the learning process. According to Lewis (1993: 95) *"an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or chunks and that these chunks become raw data by which the learner begins to perceive patterns, morphology, and those other features of language traditionally thought of as grammar."* Hence, the lexical approach can be regarded as a shift from grammar to vocabulary teaching where formulaic sequences in general are put at the forefront of the EFL classroom as they can cater for fluency acquisition. The principles that provide the foundation for LA will be the centre of our interest in the section that follows.

1. The Main Tenets of the Lexical Approach

Since its emergence, the Lexical Approach has officially evolved as a new teaching approach that opposes grammar-based approaches. Its key principle is that *"language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar"* (Lewis, 1993:34). According to Thornbury (2002:14) *"Lewis challenges the traditional view that language competence consists of having a foundation of grammatical structures into which we slot individual words. Instead, we store a huge assortment of memorized words, phrases and collocations, along with their associated grammar."* Thus, LA is founded upon the view that grammar and lexis are undividable. For Lewis, language consists of chunks of words that have their own grammar, which makes them ready- for use. It is for this reason that he suggests that teachers should concentrate more on getting those lexical phrases into learners' long-term memory rather than drawing a distinction between grammar and vocabulary. He also rejects the superiority of grammar over lexis.

Its second founding principle is that of 'Consciousness Raising' the process by which learners are made aware of how the target language works through noticing and deconstructing the form and function of a lexical item. It is worth noting that the notion of consciousness-raising dates back since the early 1980s. It was coined

by Sharwood Smith (1983) as a way to express his opposition to Krashen's (1982) Acquisition and Learning theory, where the significance of explicit instruction on language learning was trivialized. Though advocating form-focused instruction, Sharwood's theory does not determine what teaching techniques should be adopted to achieve successful noticing. Lewis (1993), however, outscored him in terms of being more specific by attaching more importance to input-centered activities by which students are led to observe the structure of lexical phrases and construct a hypothesis about the rules that govern them. These chunks contribute to noticing linguistic/grammatical patterns which results in the conversion of input into intake. In addition, Lewis advocates that raising learners' awareness of prefabricated patterns is of a paramount importance to language acquisition. He also insists on the idea that learners should be able to chunk language by themselves as "*the central idea to efficient acquisition and effective communication is chunking*" (Lewis 1997:58).

The third tenet emphasizes the centrality of collocations, which are conventional combinations of words. Because they are an integral part of both spoken and written language, Lewis highlights their importance and indispensability to the language learning process. According to the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (2009: V): "*No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocation.*" Hence, building collocational competence can be regarded as a shortcut to a language proficiency that is error-free and almost approximating that of a native speaker. Another important aspect of the lexical approach is the priority it gives to the speaking skill over writing that is regarded as a secondary encodement with a distinguishable grammar that is completely distinct from that of spoken language. By contrast to the structural view in which writing takes priority over speaking, Lewis believes that learners should acquire speaking fluency first before developing their writing skill. It is for this reason that he prioritizes successful communication over the production of accurate language. According to him the learning process should not be impeded by laying too much emphasis on learners' grammatical mistakes as they are bound to happen especially at the early stages of language acquisition.

Unlike traditional approaches which are based on the Present-Practice-Produce paradigm that is usually associated with the grammar translation method, the lexical approach favors the Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment cycle. While the OHE teaching framework falls within the scope of the inductive approach, the PPP is classified among the deductive type Ellis (1992). It involves three main stages where language items are first presented to the learners by providing some contextual clues so that they draw up their underlying rules. This

phase is followed by the practice of the structures in focus through controlled activities. And then comes the production stage within which the newly-presented structures are used by students with an undue focus on meaning rather than form. Role plays and writing tasks are the main activities students engage in to guarantee the integration of those items into their interlanguage.

With regard to the Observation-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle, Lewis explains that unlike the PPP which is a teacher-centered approach, the OHE is learner-centered. It involves a complete engrossment of the learner in the learning process without much interference or guidance from the teacher. The starting point of this paradigm is the Observe stage along with the Hypothesis and Experiment stages as route points. In the former phase, spoken or written input is provided to the learners so that they can proceed to its chunking by probing into the language data and drawing conclusions about its targeted patterns. Then, learners are expected to construct hypotheses about the rules that govern the already observed language patterns in focus to be later tested in the third and last stage namely the experiment stage where learners get the chance to validate their predictions in communicative language tasks. And so, the OHE paradigm reflects how Lewis views language acquisition, which in his opinion should combine consciousness-raising along with an abundant flow of salient authentic input.

The last tenet is recycling, the process by which the already exposed to language forms are automatized. According to Lewis (1997) learners should be given the opportunity to review and recycle the previously learnt items through reinforcement activities that will eventually lead to enhancing their fluency level. However, he specifies that *"recycling should be done in an interesting and refreshing way, so that learners' interest is still engaged"* (1997:45). In this section, we have outlined most of the key principles of the lexical approach which encourages primary focus to vocabulary in general and lexical chunks in particular that we will deal with in the next section.

2. Lexical Chunks' Divisions

Several scholars placed a limelight on the categorization of lexical chunks. Thus, numerous classifications can be identified. Pawley and Syder (1983) were first to classify lexical chunks into memorized sentences and lexical stems. While the former category is not expandable, the latter can be expanded. For example: 'May I come in?' is an instance of a memorized sentence that is used with no possible expansion whatsoever. The lexicalized item 'Give advice', however, can be easily expanded into a longer sentence by adding other

types of parts of speech. Nattinger & Decarrico suggested four categories for lexical chunks: Polywords, institutionalized phrases, phrasal constraints and sentence builders. The first division includes short phrases that act as one entity. Ex: in conclusion, in a nutshell etc... Institutionalized phrases, on the other hand, are as long as any meaningful sentence and can be used without being combined to other lexical frame works. Ex: How are you doing? (1992:39). The third division, namely Phrasal Constraints, comprises short and medium-length phrases that are linked to different functions. Ex: See you..... (1992:41). Sentence builders, the fourth and last category establish the basic frame work for whole sentences. Ex: My point is that (Ibid).

Likewise, Lewis (1997:8) divides multi-word combinations into four classes: words, polywords, collocations and fixed and semi-fixed expressions. According to him, the first division consisting mainly of words commonly known as vocabulary, should be regarded as lexical items as long as they can stand alone to infer meaning. Polywords for their part are defined as irreversible adverbial phrases of a short-length not exceeding two or three words. Regarding collocations, he identifies them as "common combinations of words" (2000:127) that recurrently co-occur together. Like polywords, collocations cannot be reversed. This means that we are not allowed to use near-synonyms interchangeably. For instance, it would be inadequate to use the verb to do instead of make in combination with the word mistake despite their reciprocity in meaning. It should be noted that there are a variety of ways for describing collocations. 'Fixedness' is the most commonly relied upon criterion for their description. By this, we mean the degree to which the node and collocate are associated with each other. Fixed collocations, for instance, are not based on the structure they take but rather on the particular meaning they convey. Ex: Kick the bucket is an idiom which means to die. Other word combinations, the less fixed ones, are more structural and contribute to the framing of a sentence without carrying some specific meaning by themselves. Let's + verb+ preposition+ noun is an instance of a structural pattern whose base form is not impacted by lexical diversity. Ex: Let's go to the movies/ let's listen to some music etc... It is important for learners to be made aware of the degree of fixedness of collocations in general so that they can distinguish those with a holistic meaning from those which are pattern-bound.

When it comes to fixed and semi-fixed expressions, Lewis (1997) groups all of social greetings, politeness phrases, phrase book language and idioms under the category of fixed expressions. Because they are stored as indivisible units, he posits that they should not be

analyzed internally and should be taught as chunks. Semi-fixed expressions, however, vary between almost fixed and very free. They are divided into five categories, namely: almost fixed expressions, spoken sentences with a simple slot, expressions with a particular slot-filler, sentence heads and finally more extended frames. While the first category allows for a certain degree of lexical variation which remains minimal, the second and third categories are lexically variable at certain positions, as it is the case in: Could you pass.....please? / I haven't seen you + time expressions with for or since. Sentence heads are more subject to the speaker's creativity and can be lengthened in a variety of ways. For instance, what was really interesting/surprising/annoying was...etc. The last category can be found in formal letters or opening paragraphs of academic papers. Ex: There are broadly speaking two views of.....The more traditional, usually associated with...etc (Lewis, 1997:11). In the next section, we will lay emphasis on the lexical syllabus and its classification.

3. The Lexical Syllabus

In comparison with the product/structural and process/notional oriented approaches in which grammatical structures and language functions are at the core of the syllabus, the lexical type prioritizes vocabulary as clearly stated by Lewis (1997:15) "*The Lexical Approach places communication of meaning at the heart of language and language learning. This leads to emphasis on the main carrier of meaning, vocabulary. The concept of a large vocabulary is extended from words to lexis, but the essential idea is that fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items, which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity.*" It is worth noting that the development of the very first lexical syllabus was stimulated by Sinclair's analysis of language components.

With the help of Antoinette Renouf, Sinclair devised a lexical syllabus that was founded upon the data collected from the computational analysis of English, which was initially used as the data base for producing dictionaries. Both researchers maintained that it was high time for the language teaching/learning community to benefit from the advances of computational analysis. The vision they had was that "*for any learner of English, the main focus of study should be on: "a) the commonest word forms in the language; b) their central patterns of usage; c) the combinations which they typically form*" (quoted from: Carter and McCarthy 1988:148). This deviation from the traditional view, where grammar is placed in the limelight, can be justified by the fact that "*if the analysis of the words and phrases has been done correctly, then all the relevant grammar, etc. should appear in a proper*

proportion. Verb tenses, for example, which are often the main organizing feature of a course, are combinations of some of the commonest words in the language" (Ibid:155). However, Sinclair and Renouf oppose the idea of piling words without taking into consideration the criterion of selectivity.

With this premise in mind, Sinclair and Renouf devised a lexical syllabus based upon three different aspects: word forms which "can be subsumed under their base form or full form in a teaching list...etc", also lexical collocations and some lower frequency and utility words (Ibid:150). As it was targeted toward the beginner level, Sinclair and Renouf attempted to balance "natural usage and utility and highlight the common uses of the common words" (Ibid:154). The total number of words used in the lexical syllabus was about 700, almost a quarter of it was classified within the category of utility words, which were incorporated due to the fact that "... English makes excessive use of its most frequent words, and so they are well worth learning" (Ibid:155). Their syllabus could be described as "an independent syllabus, unrelated by any principles to any methodology." In other words, it is a comprehensive syllabus that could be distinguished by its specification of "*the exact nature of the content, the sequence of events and the pattern of coverage*" (Sinclair and Renouf 1987: 145). Thus, the lexical syllabus could be regarded as a huge step towards innovation in the field of syllabus design, as it allowed for a change in terms of content by focusing on vocabulary, but also language use as it covers the most useful expressions in the language.

4. Classification of the Lexical Syllabus

As its content is restricted by the underlying outcomes of instruction, the lexical syllabus falls within the category of the product-oriented syllabi. It is also analytic due to the fact that "*learners are presented with chunks of language which may include structures of varying degrees of difficulty. The starting point is not the grammatical system of the language, but the communicative purposes for which language is used*" (Carter and McCarthy, 1988:28). Interestingly, this implies that both of the lexical and notional syllabuses have something in common as the two of them are analytic in nature and aim at achieving communicative goals by equipping learners with the commonest and most useful language patterns. The structural syllabus, on the other hand, has nothing in common with the lexical syllabus. It mainly provides learners with a list of grammatical items organized from the easiest to the most difficult and presented in an isolated fashion so as to be synthesized later. That is why it has been classified under the banner of the synthetic type.

It should not go unnoticed that despite being classified within the same category, both of the lexical and notional syllabi including the structural synthetic type, diverge in terms of theory of language and language learning. The Lexical syllabus for instance has derived substantial benefit from computational analysis, which provided a proper understanding and a clearer description of language in terms of use and how it works. This understanding could never have been reached without the analysis of the open-choice and the idiom principles. By contrast to the open-choice principle which advances the idea that each slot in a sentence can be filled in with multiple choices, the idiom principle encourages the use of multi-word composites “prefabs”. Bolinger was first to oppose the exclusive reliance on the open-choice principle. For him “*Speakers do at least as much remembering as they do putting together*” (1976: 2).

It is impossible to deny the fact that the lexical syllabus has contributed tremendously to the evolution of language theory. However, this does not apply to language learning theory. The structural and notional syllabuses, on the other hand, made a dual contribution to both language theory and language learning theory. The structural syllabus, for instance, stifled the idea that language consists of “*a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning.*” (Richards and Rodgers 2014:20). This system of structures is taught and acquired through habit formation, which is reminiscent of the behaviorist theory of learning (stimulus, response, reinforcement). So, we can say that the structural syllabus has a well-defined mode for language acquisition as opposed to the notional syllabus.

Indeed, the notional syllabus has adopted a more integrated and holistic approach where several aspects of language were taken into consideration. Unlike the structural syllabus in which grammatical structures form the central organizing feature, the notional type treats language as a whole and regards it as “*a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning*” (Ibid:20). Obviously, this functional view of language came about as a reaction to the structural view, but also as a result of the communicative revolution which broke out during the 1970’s. Some of the criticisms of the lexical approach along with its strengths will be emphasized in this last section.

5. Pedagogical Importance of the Lexical Approach and its Limitations

Like most teaching approaches, the lexical approach could not be spared from strident criticism. First, it was widely criticized for not

containing a detailed learning theory the reason for which it has been denied the title of approach. According to Thornbury (1998:12), the lexical approach should not be regarded as an approach as it lacks coherence in its learning theory. In addition, he argues that its language theory is not sufficiently detailed to favor the implementation of a syllabus. The second shortcoming has to do with syllabus design under the cloak of the lexical approach. Despite the fact that Lewis has a clear theoretical framework about language and how it operates, he does not provide any specifications about the kind of syllabus to put his approach into practice. Besides, his recommendations for using text and discourse-based language materials are not furthered with the criteria for selecting and organizing those materials. This also applies to the gradation of lexical chunks too. Third, Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) reprove Lewis for allotting too much time to instructing learners how to learn chunks incidentally and autonomously. They argue that such a classroom practice is not only difficult but also time consuming. Instead, they posit the pre-selection of chunks so as to gain more time. They believe that excessive exposure to a particular chunk results in its retention. It is for this reason that rather than relegating the teacher to a secondary role, they give him more responsibility, by contrast to Lewis who approves of student autonomy.

Meanwhile, and in spite of the raft of criticism, Schmitt (2000) could polish the image of the lexical approach, at least in terms of learning theory, by bringing to light the fact that formulaic language is stored and processed holistically, which can grant native-like fluency. Moreover, laying emphasis on computational studies has contributed tremendously to the design of a corpus-based syllabus which fosters the use of authentic materials. Indeed, it is quite the contrary of the non-corpus-based type which makes use of *"a kind of English that does not seem to exist outside the foreign language classroom"* (Mindt, 1996: 232). As put forward by Willis (1990:126) *"Simplification is a natural phenomenon. We simplify our language when we are speaking to children and also when we are speaking to language learners. There is therefore no reason why writers should not simplify their language in this way when they are writing material for an EFL course book."* However, he specifies that the undertaking of such an initiative requires from course designers to check whether *"the language produced in this way is in fact typical of the target language"* (Ibid).

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of Lewis' Lexical Approach while scrutinizing some of its weaknesses. We believe that the Lexical Approach provides considerable insights in terms of vocabulary teaching. Its classroom procedures could be easily implemented in the EFL classroom provided that it is used alongside other methods so as to make up its deficiencies already highlighted by Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) such as promoting learners' autonomy while they are too immature to think for themselves and hence need the instructor's interference. But also input overload which is inevitable if it is not pre-selected by the teacher himself. Despite it all, it has to be stated that there is a much needed emphasis on lexis in the EFL classroom as most corpus studies came up with firm evidence that lexical chunks constitute a major part of everyday language and can enhance learners' fluency level.

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