Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Misan
College of Education
Department of English

An Investigation into the Lexical Approach

Presented by

Khadim Ashoor Abdulhussie

Falah hassan askar

Supervised by

Asst.Prof. Ahmed Mohamed Karam

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بِسْـــــمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيـمِ

(وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا)

صدق الله العلي العظيم

Dedication

To:

My Mother

&

To My Biggest Supporter

To My Father

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Abstract

This paper explores the Lexical Approach to language teaching, highlighting its emphasis on the use of multi-word units or "chunks" in both language acquisition and communication. The Lexical Approach proposes a shift away from traditional grammar-focused instruction, suggesting that fluency in language is achieved not only through understanding syntactic structures but also through the ability to use memorized, pre-formed expressions. The theory of language within the Lexical Approach emphasizes that much of natural speech consists of recurring lexical chunks, which learners must recognize and acquire to improve their fluency and communicative competence. In examining the theory of learning associated with this approach, this paper outlines how exposure, noticing, and rehearsal of lexical chunks contribute to long-term retention and fluency. Furthermore, the paper discusses practical teaching activities, including awareness activities, chunking exercises, and memory-enhancing strategies, all aimed at improving learners' ability to use lexical chunks in real-world contexts. The study concludes with a call for further integration of the Lexical Approach into language teaching practices, particularly in helping learners develop the skills necessary for fluent, contextually appropriate language use.

Introduction

The pursuit of the ideal strategy or technique in language instruction is never-ending. Any methodologist's ultimate objective is to discover such a method, but since every language learning situation is distinct, this goal is difficult to achieve. Numerous factors, ranging from the physical surroundings to the learner(s), instructor, and resources to the chosen strategy and method used, collide and impact the learning process. There are a plethora of communicative-based ways to teaching languages as a result of the change from the traditional method of teaching grammatical structure to one that emphasizes communication. Recent studies have shown the effectiveness of the lexical method in teaching languages (Ilyas, 2021).

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in the lexical approach to teaching second languages as an alternative to grammar-based methods. The focus of the lexical approach is on helping students become proficient in lexis, or word and word combinations. It centers on the notion that a key component of mastering a language is being able to understand and generate lexical phrases as unreconstructed wholes, or "chunks," and that these clunks serve as the raw material through which learners interpret linguistic patterns that are commonly referred to as grammar. Instead of teaching traditionally constructed phrases, the emphasis is on relatively stable statements that are common in spoken English, including "I'm sorry," "I didn't mean to make you jump," and "That will never happen to me." Lexical phrases in particular were thought to be an effective tool for language learners, aiding in the creation, understanding, and critical analytical thought required to understand the structures and meanings of the target language. Although lexical fields provide a representation of a language's knowledge, vocabulary is much more than just lists of words, nouns, and verbs (Hameed, 2008).

The lexical approach may be summed up as follows: language consists of specific multi-word prepared pieces in addition to conventional grammatical rules. When employing the lexical method, teachers will focus students' attention on these chunks rather than analyzing the target language in the classroom (Hameed, 2008).

Chapter One

1.1 The Lexical Approach

The lexical approach, introduced by Michael Lewis in 1993, asserts that lexis forms the foundation of language rather than grammar. Traditionally, language teaching has operated under the assumption that grammar is the primary basis of language and that mastering grammatical structures is essential for effective communication. However, Lewis (1993) challenges this perspective by emphasizing that "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar". He argues that any meaning-centered syllabus should prioritize lexis as a central organizing principle. According to Lewis' theory, lexical chunks represent the fundamental components of language acquisition and communicative competence. The development of language skills is dependent on vocabulary expansion, proficiency in collocations, and the mastery of essential vocabulary and language structures. Lexical chunks are considered the smallest functional units of verbal communication and serve as effective tools for language learning (Lewis, 1993).

In the context of the lexical approach, different types of lexical chunks are regarded as essential elements in both native and second-language acquisition. Nattinger (1980) highlights that language production primarily involves assembling pre-established linguistic units that are appropriate for specific communicative contexts. Lewis (1997) further classifies lexical items into various categories, including:

- **Polywords**, such as a couple of, at times, and in turn;
- **Collocations**, or word partnerships, such as strongly recommended and meet the minimum standards;

- **Institutionalized utterances**, including common phrases like I'll get it, We'll see, That'll do, and conditional expressions such as If I were you... or Would you like a cup of coffee?;
- **Sentence frames and heads**, such as It is not as…as you think and It's said/reported/suggested that..., as well as broader **text frames**, including structures like The aim of the thesis is to explore... and On one hand..., on the other (Tang, 2012).

The lexical approach is grounded in the belief that fluency is achieved through the acquisition of a broad repertoire of fixed and semi-fixed phrases, commonly referred to as chunks. These chunks, particularly collocations, play a crucial role as they serve as the fundamental data through which grammatical structures are encoded (Lewis, 1993). Scrivener (2011) highlights that the lexical approach encourages extensive exposure to language and the use of authentic materials, as opposed to rigidly adhering to the traditional Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) methodology. Historically, grammar was regarded as the most valuable component of language instruction, while lexis was often neglected. Furthermore, communicative competence was widely believed to stem from mastering the grammatical system of a language. However, with Lewis' publications (1993, 1997, 2000), a new understanding of language emerged, reinforcing the idea that language is defined by "grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar" (Lewis, 1993, p. 36).

Therefore, fluency in language use depends on the effective application of linguistic building blocks, with collocations being a core element of the lexical approach. Lewis (1993) illustrates the importance of collocations in meaning construction by pointing out that the verb bark cannot be fully understood without associating it with the noun dog. Since lexis conveys meaning more effectively than grammar, collocations possess a generative capacity for

meaning, making their habitual co-occurrence a pivotal aspect of classroom instruction (Debabi & Guerroudj, 2018).

Morgan Lewis is convinced that language should be kept in the form in which it was found, without any analysis (Lewis, 2000). Finally, Lewis and Hill express an appeal for the teachers – they strongly believe that „teachers who themselves learned foreign languages in a very strongly structuralist tradition must avoid confusing their students by using structuralist explanations for functional materials“ (Lewis & Hill, 1992).

Hence it also corresponds with the fact, which was a few years later presented by Lewis, that the key principle which encourages the fluency is primarily a quick access to a vast stock of so called „chunks“ (1998, p. 15). Willis, like Hill (Lewis, 2000, p. 47), calls these prefabricated chunks which create a part of the native speaker's repertoire waiting for being used (1990, p. 73). And this is actually the basis of the Lexical Approach for which the lexis is the crucial part carrying the meaning. Whereas grammar merely provides a system for the creation of utterances (Lewis, 1998).

However, Lewis, and Sinclair agrees with this statement (2000, p. 147), immediately completes that vocabulary and grammar should not be entirely separated since it seems to be unnatural (2000, p. 137). As Wilkins summarises, „information on the possible content of utterances will be of greater practical value than grammatical information and will be more complete than situational information“. This theory is very similar to so called „analytic strategy“ by Wilkins (1976) who also emphasises phrases presented as a whole. The storybooks seem to be a very convenient tool for such an approach, for they provide readers/learners with many chunks used in a real context. However, the important thing is that it is not enough to present such a book, but even the accompanying activities should avoid any structural analysis. To follow

principles of the Lexical Approach, these should only encourage chunk learning.

The Lexical Approach never was an approach: it offered little guidance as to how to specify syllabus objectives, and even its methodology was not much more than an eclectic mix of procedures aimed mainly at raising learners' awareness about the ubiquity of 'chunks' (Bolcková, 2016). Richards and Rodgers (2001) agree with this statement and add that the Lexical Approach „is still an idea in search of an approach and a methodology".

1.2 Lexical Items

Michael Lewis challenges the traditional linguistic perception that language consists of grammar and vocabulary. Instead, he asserts that "the Lexical Approach consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text" (Lewis, 1998, p. 7). He identifies four types of these chunks: words, collocations, fixed expressions, and semi-fixed expressions. Furthermore, Lewis and Hill emphasize a significant advantage of learning such phrases—early-stage fluency enhancement. They argue that teachers should encourage students to acquire these chunks to facilitate communication skills development (Lewis & Hill, 1992, p. 98).

Words

Words represent the most widely recognized and substantial category within lexis, appearing even in the most basic dictionaries. Words that can function independently, such as *STOP* or *Please*, are considered lexical items. According to Lewis (1998, p. 21), acquiring as many words as possible is essential for language learners; without an extensive vocabulary, proficiency in a language is unattainable. Willis (1990) supports this view, asserting that "a focus on words... seems to offer learners the potential to create structures for themselves." He also notes that word forms are easily identifiable and

retrievable, unlike grammatical structures. Many educators favor teaching individual words over structures, as they perceive grammatical instruction—particularly at early learning stages—as more challenging. However, Lewis argues that when structures are effectively explained in terms of usage and context, young learners often find them easier to grasp than isolated words with no immediate meaning.

Lewis and Hill (1992, p. 101) suggest that when teaching vocabulary, words should not be presented in isolation but rather in relation to other words within thematic "areas" such as synonyms, antonyms, complements, converses, and hyponyms. Additionally, words can be categorized into various subgroups, including contractions (e.g., *don't*), polywords (e.g., *by the way*), common words (e.g., *way*), and de-lexicalized words (e.g., *thing*). Despite being the most familiar and frequently used category, Lewis (1998, p. 8) argues that originality in language primarily comes from the other three lexical categories.

Collocations

Lewis defines collocations as "the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency" (Lewis, 1998, p. 8). However, he cautions that not all frequently co-occurring words necessarily form collocations. Instead, the significance of a collocation lies in the closeness and quality of the word relationship rather than in frequency alone (Lewis, 1998, p. 27). He classifies collocations along a continuum from fully fixed to relatively fixed to entirely novel combinations (Lewis, 1998, p. 8).

Collocations focus on word pairings rather than abstract ideas, and learners should be exposed to collocations that naturally occur in language rather than artificially constructed ones. For instance, the sentence *I have just had a coffee* is far more common than *I have just drunk coffee* (Lewis, 1998, pp. 25-26).

Another defining characteristic of collocations is their arbitrariness, meaning that predicting the same collocational behavior of words in different contexts is impossible. This unpredictability reinforces the lexical approach's principle that words are stored and processed as prefabricated chunks rather than through grammatical generalizations (Lewis, 1998, p. 26).

Morgan Lewis also advocates strongly for the teaching of collocations. He argues that repeated exposure to specific collocations accelerates acquisition, whereas neglecting them may significantly delay comprehension (Lewis, 2000, p. 16). He highlights two major advantages of collocations: first, "the more collocations learners have at their disposal, the less they need to grammaticalize" (Lewis, 2000, p. 24); second, collocations provide greater communicative power than isolated words. To enhance learning, teachers should prioritize useful, naturally occurring collocations without excessive grammatical analysis (Lewis, 2000, pp. 12-14). Exposure to collocations through reading, particularly in books that students enjoy, can further reinforce their learning.

Expressions

Expressions can be categorized into fully fixed expressions and semi-fixed expressions, though both share similar characteristics. These expressions typically range from two to seven words in length, with some words acting as interchangeable slots. However, according to the lexical approach, these slots should be filled with commonly used and meaningful variations rather than unlikely combinations that might confuse learners. When teaching expressions, instructors should avoid any analytical breakdown of their structure. Instead, presenting expressions within appropriate contexts is sufficient, and providing an equivalent in the learner's native language may further aid comprehension (Lewis, 1998, pp. 33-40).

1.3 Principles of the Lexical Approach

As far as the principles of the Lexical Approach are concerned, those are mostly inspired and based on the principles typical of the Communicative Approach. The crucial principles according to Michael Lewis (1993) are the following:

- Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar (Bolcková, 2016).

- The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word „chunks".

- A central element of language teaching is raising students' awareness of, and developing their ability to „chunk" language successfully.

- Although structural patterns are acknowledged as useful, lexical and metaphorical pattering are accorded appropriate status.

- Collocation is integrated as an organising principle within syllabuses.

- Evidence from computational linguistics and discourse analysis influence syllabus content and sequence.

- Language is recognised as a personal resource, not an abstract idealisation.

- Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.

- The central metaphor of language is holistic – an organism; not atomistic – a machine.

- The primacy of speech over writing is recognised; writing is acknowledged as a secondary encodement, with a radically different grammar from that of the spoken language.

- It is the co-textual rather than situational elements of context which are of primary importance for language teaching.

- Grammar as structure is subordinate to lexis.

- Grammatical error is recognised as intrinsic to the learning process.

- Grammar as a receptive skill, involving the perception of similarity and difference, is prioritised (Bolcková, 2016).

- Sub-sentential and supra-sentential grammatical ideas are given greater emphasis, at the expense of earlier concentration on sentence grammar and the verb phrase.

- Task and process, rather than exercise and product, are emphasised.

- Receptive skills, particularly listening, are given enhanced status (Bolcková, 2016).

In addition to the aforementioned guidelines, Lewis (1993) offers an additional set of guidelines that are more practically oriented and specify how to handle vocabulary, grammar, errors, and language abilities in a classroom. It is crucial to place early attention on receptive skills, particularly listening. According to Lewis, the language that is created most frequently does not originate from us at the outset (especially when it comes to young learners); as a result, the learning process is centered on receptive abilities (Bolcková, 2016).

Chapter Two

2.1 Theory of language

The Lexical Approach presents a structural perspective on language, viewing it as a system of interconnected elements used to encode meaning. Traditionally, the components of this system included both lexical items and grammatical structures. The Lexical Approach introduces an additional level of structure, namely multi-word units. While Chomsky's influential theory of language focused on the ability of speakers to create and interpret sentences that are entirely new and have never been heard or produced before, the lexical perspective argues that only a small percentage of spoken sentences are completely novel (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Instead, a large portion of fluent speech in everyday conversation consists of multi-word units, functioning as "chunks" or memorized patterns (O'Keefe et al., 2007). The importance of collocation also plays a significant role in lexically-based language theories. For example, consider the following verb-noun collocations:

- **do**: my hair, the cooking, the laundry, my work
- **make**: my bed, a promise, coffee, a meal

Such multi-word lexical units are believed by some to be crucial for both language learning and communication. The Lexical Approach asserts that these chunks are essential for natural language use. From the perspective of language production, there are clear advantages to constructing utterances from pre-formed chunks rather than from isolated words. The ability to access these chunks is a vital factor contributing to fluent speech (Richards & Rodgers,

2014). O'Keefe et al. (2007: 63) note that an excessive focus in language teaching on isolated words, without context, may leave second-language learners unprepared to process heavily chunked input, such as casual conversations, and may also hinder their ability to produce fluent speech. This, however, does not diminish the importance of grammar in language use or teaching. The key idea is that proficiency in a language requires not just the ability to generate language through syntactic rules (grammatical competence), but also the skill to use lexical chunks in the appropriate contexts. This is particularly important for learners who aim to achieve pragmatic fluency, which involves knowing the right lexical phrase for the right functional situation. Ultimately, effective language learners need mastery in both generating language through grammar and using lexical chunks appropriately.

Drawing on research into first language acquisition, chunks are also considered to play a crucial role in language learning. These chunks make up a significant portion of the input learners use to develop their grammatical competence. As Lewis (1993: iv) put it, language should be viewed as grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar. Chunks are, therefore, not only an important feature of language structure and usage but also a fundamental element in second language acquisition. Nattinger (1980: 341) suggests that we should assume that, for much of the time, language production involves assembling pre-formed units that are suitable for specific situations, and that comprehension relies on recognizing and predicting which of these patterns will appear in those situations. Thus, language teaching should focus on these patterns, understanding how they can be combined, how they vary, and the contexts in which they occur.

2.2 Theory of learning

Lewis (2000: 184) outlined the following learning theory in his original proposal for the Lexical Approach:

1. Encountering new learning items multiple times is necessary, but not sufficient, for learning to take place.
2. Noticing lexical chunks or collocations is essential, but it alone is not enough for “input” to become “intake.”
3. Recognizing similarities, differences, restrictions, and examples plays a significant role in transforming input into intake, although the formal description of rules is unlikely to assist in this process.
4. Acquisition is based not on the application of formal rules but on the accumulation of examples, from which learners develop provisional generalizations. Language production, therefore, results from previously encountered examples rather than from formal rules. No linear syllabus can fully represent the non-linear nature of language acquisition.
5. The learning of chunks is assumed to occur both through incidental learning and direct instruction. Incidental learning depends on the frequency with which chunks are encountered and noticed in natural language use. The methods for direct instruction will be discussed in the following section of the text.

Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) expand on this account of chunk-based learning from a cognitive theory perspective, The aim of learning is that “chunks that are met, noticed, and learned must then be properly ingrained in the learners’ long-term memory” (2009: 10).

2.3 Objectives of Lexical Approach

The primary objective of the Lexical Approach is to enhance learners' awareness and usage of lexical chunks, which are a fundamental aspect of natural language use. A closely related goal is to equip learners with effective strategies for identifying and learning the lexical chunks they encounter in both spoken and written texts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Stengers et al. (2010: 101) elaborate on this point, stating: The guidance provided by Lewis and his colleagues emphasizes the importance of helping students develop strategies for recognizing and recording the chunks they come across, not only within the classroom but also in real-world contexts. What is crucial is that teachers provide students with the necessary search skills to independently discover significant collocations in the language they encounter in classroom materials and, more importantly, in everyday language use outside the classroom.

In other words, proponents of the Lexical Approach hope that students will extend their awareness of the prevalence of lexical chunks to their interactions with second-language samples beyond the classroom. This heightened awareness is expected to accelerate the incidental acquisition and long-term retention of lexical phrases.

However, the Lexical Approach can also be applied to lower-level learners by providing them with pre-selected chunks, rather than relying on independent reading and listening for acquisition.

3.4 Types of Learning and Teaching Activities

Activities associated with the Lexical Approach include awareness activities, training in text chunking, and exercises designed to enhance the retention of lexical chunks. These activities can be integrated into any language course, regardless of whether it is specifically based on the Lexical Approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Awareness Activities

Awareness activities aim to help learners notice lexical chunks. One effective method involves the use of corpora, which provide insights into collocation patterns that may be difficult to explain through direct instruction. For example, the distinction between the vocabulary items “predict” and “forecast” is not

always easy to articulate. However, by examining these words in authentic contexts within a computer corpus, students and teachers can observe their natural usage and collocational tendencies (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

A wide range of corpora is available, and O'Keefe et al. (2007) offer detailed guidance on how teachers can develop and utilize their own corpora. Free online corpus tools allow learners to explore language as it is used in real-life situations. One particularly relevant approach to studying lexical chunks is data-driven learning, which O'Keefe et al. (2007: 24) describe as structured activities in which students engage directly with corpus data. This method adopts an inductive approach, encouraging learners to identify patterns and formulate generalizations about language use. Teachers can facilitate this process by assigning online corpus searches for specific lexical items or by providing handouts that display search results for analysis.

Training in Text Chunking

Chunking exercises are designed to raise awareness of lexical chunks and how they function within texts. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009: 89) describe one such activity, in which students highlight or underline multi-word units (e.g., strong collocations) in an authentic text. These selections can then be compared with those of their peers or verified against a teacher's reference list. Additionally, dictionaries and online resources, such as concordance tools or search engines like Google, can be used to confirm the lexical chunk status of selected word combinations.

Memory-Enhancing Activities

A key strategy for reinforcing lexical chunks in long-term memory is what Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) refer to as elaboration. This concept encompasses various cognitive processes beyond simple noticing, which help learners internalize the meaning and form of words and phrases.

Elaboration strategies may include:

- Considering a word's spelling, pronunciation, grammatical category, and meaning
- Identifying associations with other words
- Forming visual or motoric images related to the term's meaning

The more cognitive dimensions involved, the more likely it is that a lexical chunk will become deeply embedded in long-term memory.

Retelling Activities

After analyzing a text with a focus on its lexical chunks, students engage in retelling exercises, where they summarize or recount the content while deliberately incorporating the same lexical chunks they encountered in the original text. This reinforces their ability to use the chunks naturally in speech or writing (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Conclusion

the Lexical Approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving second language acquisition through the use of lexical chunks. By moving beyond traditional grammar rules, this approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing and mastering multi-word units, which constitute the majority of fluent, everyday language use. As demonstrated, effective language teaching requires more than just grammatical competence; it necessitates the ability to utilize chunks in context to achieve pragmatic fluency. The theory of learning presented by Lewis and others stresses the need for repeated exposure to, noticing, and practice with these lexical chunks to transform input into long-term intake. The suggested teaching activities—ranging from awareness tasks to memory-enhancing techniques—offer practical strategies for facilitating this process. While the Lexical Approach can be applied to learners of all levels, it is especially beneficial for those seeking to improve fluency in real-world communication. In light of the growing recognition of the Lexical Approach's value, future research and teaching methodologies should further explore its potential to enhance language learning and teaching outcomes.

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