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# The Lexical Approach

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## The Lexical Approach

**Michael Lewis (1993)**

**Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications**

**Pp. ix + 200. ISBN 0-906717-0-99-X**

Michael Lewis makes a strong and convincing case in this book for the primacy of meaning. This approach will be welcomed by many teachers who emphasize lexico-semantic knowledge in their teaching of communication over grammatical drilling and the ambiguous notion of correctness. This book offers a lot of knowledge and common sense on language learning and the way language works. It includes terminology, and valuable theoretical and practical ideas all towards building a tight argument. It produces a paradigm to an observe-hypothesize-experiment paradigm, with the lexicon and

The approach itself is formulated in the space of thirteen chapters. The first five cover a detailed analysis of dichotomies and continua (or spectra, as Lewis calls them) used in discourse about language. They address philosophical and psychological problems in language teaching; and some relevant issues. These five introductory chapters will offer most readers a wealth of knowledge about language. They will help you understand the approach put forth by the author, and will probably challenge them to study particular teaching methods used in the classroom.

The remaining eight chapters develop the new approach, which concludes with nine methodological implications. The approach Lewis is urging teachers to use (actually, an approach within that encourages students to develop their vocabularies and teachers to spend more time on lists of words with or without contextual support. When Lewis talks about *lexis*, he refers to polywords (e.g., by the way, catch up with, etc.), fixed and free collocations (the fixed ones are words that are most likely to co-occur in infinitely creative ways), institutionalized expressions (import depends entirely on the features of the speech event in which they occur) in short, formulaic, or frozen, unanalyzable chunks. The idea of a continuum of idiomaticity is introduced from the bucket to the more literally transparent and pragmatically complex funny you should say language, playing a particularly important part in language teaching.

The book's emphasis on the teaching of collocating words, on the linguistic rather than the grammatical learning (rather than just a reference) resource, and the identification of lexical chunks as a focus of our entire attention. It is in keeping with research on first and second language learning by chunks of unanalyzed (and sometimes unanalyzable) chunks of language in appropriate contexts because it also reflects native speakers' reliance on many thousands of ready-made chunks of language. Finally, and most compellingly, it is a way of handling the huge task of a second language learner to learn words and an almost equal number of prefabricated chunks of varying lengths. Such a life is not haphazard, but by incidental learning of vocabulary, although that will obviously happen, it is that vocabulary be exploited and recorded in principled ways (p. 118). To that end, he provides a focus: exercises that identify collocations in specific texts, ways of recording lexical information (e.g., displays), cloze procedures, even lexical phrase drills, and more lexical exercises (some requiring specific instructions). For those who consider that grammar is not paid sufficient attention, Lewis offers a new approach. Succinctly stated, there is a continuum between words and grammar, and the other way around. Grammar rules in the classroom should be, as they are in modern linguistics, and the teacher's attitude should be more accepting of error.

Some readers may find the five introductory chapters too long an introduction into the main text. The reviewer found were the authors' explicit dislike for what he calls the cumulative bibliography of literature; the lack of North American references in what he does cite; and the misspelling

On the copyright page of this book we are told that the author is co-founder of Language Teaching, a teacher training series; there can be no doubt then that the intended audience of *The Lexical Approach* is general and more specifically, given the examples throughout the book, ESL and EFL teachers. The reviewer found rather disconcerting what sounds like signs of distrust, and sometimes even disregard, for current theory and classroom practices. While [-2-] theoretical overstatements are often understandable in light of a more considerate view of the intended audience would have gone a long way. Many more teachers, however, Lewis realizes already know that the key to successful oral or written communication (i.e., the message) is, indeed, a large repertoire of words and lexical formulas used appropriately.

As one who has used a lexical approach almost obsessively for many years, with many of also with an equally obsessive emphasis on reading, the reviewer (and she is by no means formulated and appealing argument for the primacy of meaning in language learning. The convincing. It is true that having a theoretical foundation for what one is doing in the class important to transform that knowledge into activities that are simple, appealing to the stu vocabulary gains become solid acquisition. Some types of vocabulary exercises may be er importantly, the task seems to many simply unmanageable, for the road from the first enc knowledge to active use is long. The learning of vocabulary is slow and incremental. The ti enough for accomplishing the lexical task. Most of the time teachers do not get to see spec that students who have been exposed to the lexical approach will leave the language traini learning and organizing vocabulary, and that the larger the lexical repertoire, the easier it v formal instructional setting. In that sense Michael Lewis book is a way forward for English

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