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Teaching vocabulary through the Lexical Approach: strategies for first- and second-year undergraduate students

The development of lexical competence is widely recognized as one of the fundamental components of language acquisition. Consequently, expanding students' vocabulary remains a primary objective in foreign language pedagogy. Mastering linguistic units involves not only memorization of grammatical structures but also a deep understanding of their semantic and functional properties, as well as their practical use in communication. Given the contemporary status of English as a global lingua franca, enriching the learners' lexical repertoire has assumed paramount importance in modern language pedagogy. Developing proficiency in collocations is crucial for students aiming at advanced language mastery, as these structures simultaneously improve both grammatical precision and conversational fluency. Within this framework, classroom tasks should no longer be confined to passive, isolated word memorization, but rather act as dynamic tools that help undergraduate students notice and internalize formulaic structures.

This article examines the methods of vocabulary acquisition in English language classes at the lower levels of higher education (first- and second-year undergraduate students), as well as contemporary pedagogical approaches and effective teaching methods. Within the scope of this study, particular emphasis is placed on the pivotal role of the Lexical Approach in vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: vocabulary repertoire, lexical competence, communicative method, contextual learning, the Lexical Approach, vocabulary acquisition, lexical chunks, collocation.

Introduction

The mastery of a foreign language is inextricably linked to the continuous expansion and refinement of learners' vocabulary. In modern higher education, preparing first- and second-year undergraduate students requires a pedagogical shift from traditional mechanical instruction toward more integrative methods. As English solidifies its role as a global language, contextual word combinations have become the cornerstone of modern language pedagogy. This article investigates how the principles of the Lexical Approach can be systematically implemented to transition early-stage university students from passive language recognizers to fluent, active communicators.

Theoretical Foundations of Vocabulary Acquisition

Insights from contemporary research in linguistics and pedagogy indicate that vocabulary acquisition yields significantly better outcomes when driven by semantic mapping and contextual interpretation, rather than mechanical rote learning. A comparison of traditional and modern methods of vocabulary acquisition reveals that, for many years, English language teaching based on the **Grammar-Translation Method** presented words primarily in the form of lists and taught them through direct translation into the learners' native language. Although this method may offer short-term retention, it inherently fails to facilitate the consolidation of linguistic data into the learners' long-term memory.

Emerging in the latter half of the 20th century and now serving as the core of modern educational frameworks, the Communicative Approach fundamentally reshaped the traditional paradigms of foreign language teaching. In their seminal work, "Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching", renowned methodologists Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers emphasize that the primary principle of the Communicative Approach is to teach language not as a collection of static grammatical rules, but rather as a dynamic and functional means of human interaction. The authors maintain that language acquisition is significantly

accelerated when classroom activities mimic authentic communication [1; 91], further suggesting that internalizing linguistic structures relies heavily on how personally relevant and meaningful the content is to the student [1; 90]. Within this approach, lexical material must not be introduced through artificial constructs; instead, it ought to be contextualized within real-life communicative situations (social contexts) and directly linked to speech activities.

Methods and Materials

These functional principles introduced by the Communicative Approach marked the beginning of a new stage in foreign language teaching methodology and directly stimulated the emergence of the Lexical Approach. The Lexical Approach is a modern methodological orientation that highlights the central role of vocabulary in foreign language teaching. Systematically developed in the 1990s by the British linguist Michael Lewis, this approach places vocabulary at the core of communicative competence. Grounded in the communicative philosophy of “authenticity and contextual learning”, the Lexical Approach rejects the notion that language is merely an accumulation of isolated, abstract words. Instead, it views language as a synthesis of multi-word lexical units, specifically collocations, fixed expressions, and semi-fixed expressions. Consequently, it advocates teaching vocabulary within meaningful contexts and as ready-made lexical chunks rather than as isolated lexical items. This methodological principle enables learners to communicate more fluently, naturally, and effectively in real-life communicative situations.

Theoretical and Practical Foundations of the Lexical Approach

According to Michael Lewis, the foundation of language is not grammatical structures but rather “lexical units” — namely, word combinations, fixed phrases, and ready-made speech patterns. Under this paradigm, his groundbreaking maxim asserts: “Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar” [2; 89]. This means that in the natural speech process, people do not recall grammatical rules every time and connect words to each other with chain-like links; on the contrary, the brain processes ready-made lexical patterns stored as a whole in memory beforehand and immediately transfers them to speech. This idea is widely explained in his famous book “The Lexical Approach” [2; 8].

The theoretical foundations of the Lexical Approach are based on computer analyses in corpus linguistics and research on memory in psycholinguistics. Corpus linguistics demonstrates that in natural speech, words are not used randomly, but in the form of certain combinations known as lexical units. As M. Lewis argues, fluency is based on acquiring a large store of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated items that can support linguistic novelty and creativity [3; 15]. Other contemporary methodologists, including Michael Swan, have extensively examined lexical combinations occurring in natural discourse and classified them according to their structural and semantic characteristics. In this article, we will focus on three of the most significant categories:

Collocations

Fixed expressions

Semi-fixed expressions

Each of these categories deserves separate consideration. In combinations like collocations, which are called *conventional word combinations* in some books, words form a typical compatibility with each other and combine naturally in a certain context. For example: *make a decision, strong tea, heavy rain*.

Michael Swan gives the explanation of collocations in an easier way as follows: “We can talk about *a burning desire* or *a blazing row*, but we don’t say *a blazing desire* or *a burning row*. Somebody can be *a heavy smoker* or *a devoted friend*, but not *a devoted smoker* or *a heavy friend*. Expressions like these are also idiomatic, in a sense. They are easy to understand, but not so easy for a learner to produce correctly” [4; 243].

Regarding the use of such expressions, Michael Swan writes: “One can think of many adjectives that might be used with *smoker* to say that somebody smokes a lot — for example *big, strong, hard, fierce, mad, devoted*. It just happens that English speakers have chosen to use *heavy*, and one has to know this in order to express the idea correctly. A learner who uses the wrong words for an idea like this may be understood, but he or she will not sound natural” [4; 244].

Fixed expressions are structures that exist in the language as ready-made templates, whose composition is completely unchangeable. They function as holistic units and often carry a figurative or idiomatic meaning. Examples include *by the way, as a matter of fact, in other words, at the end of the day*.

Semi-fixed expressions are functional formulas that have a certain structural framework (skeleton), but allow different words to be added inside them according to the context. Examples include *Could you please + verb...?*, *It is important to + verb...*, *The point is that + clause*.

Results and Discussion

According to the requirements of the Lexical Approach, the teaching of collocations, fixed expressions, and semi-fixed expressions in lower-level university English classes can be effectively implemented through practical classroom activities designed to develop learners' awareness and productive use of lexical chunks. As Lewis profoundly states, "teaching helps, precisely when it encourages the transition from input to intake" [3; 52]. Within this framework, classroom tasks are not merely passive exposures to language, but active tools that help students notice and internalize formulaic structures. As Boers et al. point out, "when the collocation consists of words that the learner is already familiar with (e.g. have + dream), a learner is not very likely to attend to the word combination as such" [5; 55]. This perspective directly resonates with Penny Ur's approach to vocabulary pedagogy. She notes that "the collocations typical of particular items are another factor that makes a particular combination sound 'right' or 'wrong' in a given context. So, this is another piece of information about a new item which it may be worth teaching" [6; 61].

According to Nesselhauf, proficiency in collocations has great significance for students at an advanced language level, as these structures simultaneously improve both grammatical precision and conversational fluency [7].

Consequently, higher education curricula must prioritize these multi-word lexical patterns over isolated lexical items to foster natural-sounding discourse. The following types of exercises may be used for this purpose [8]:

1. Collocation Grid (Collocation Matrix): This activity aims to develop students' awareness of conventional word combinations. Learners are provided with a matrix containing a number of verbs and nouns and are asked to identify the combinations that form natural collocations. For example, students may be required to distinguish between the verbs make and do in combinations such as make a decision, do homework, make a mistake, do a favour, and make progress. Through repeated exposure to such patterns, learners begin to perceive lexical units as complete chunks rather than as isolated words, thereby improving both fluency and lexical accuracy.

2. Chunk Hunting (Lexical Chunk Identification): In this activity, students are presented with a reading text or an audio recording and asked to identify lexical chunks rather than individual words. Their task is to underline or highlight fixed and semi-fixed expressions consisting of three or more words, such as bear in mind, pay attention to, on the other hand, or as a result of. This exercise encourages learners to recognize formulaic language in authentic discourse and helps them develop greater sensitivity to naturally occurring lexical patterns.

3. Sentence Frames (Sentence Patterns): Sentence frames are particularly effective for practicing semi-fixed expressions. Students are provided with a lexical framework and are required to complete it according to a given topic, context, or academic discipline. For example, the frame "If I am not mistaken, the main cause of the problem is..." may be completed in different ways depending on the subject under discussion. Similarly, patterns such as "It is widely believed that..." or "One of the main advantages of... is..." can be adapted to a variety of communicative situations.

This activity promotes productive language use while reinforcing the acquisition of frequently occurring lexical structures [9].

The implementation of such activities in lower-level university English courses enables learners to internalize lexical chunks more effectively and use them automatically in communicative situations. As a result, students gradually develop greater fluency, accuracy, and confidence in both spoken and written communication [10].

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that vocabulary acquisition in English language classes requires a comprehensive and systematic approach. Although traditional methods provide a certain foundation for lexical development, contemporary communicative and lexical approaches yield significantly more effective outcomes. Contextualized learning, spaced repetition strategies, digital technologies, and active communicative activities collectively facilitate the consolidation of lexical units into learners' long-term memory.

Implementing Michael Lewis's concept of "lexical units" at the early stages of undergraduate education enables students to acquire the language system more naturally, without excessive dependence on rigid tradi-

tional grammar rules. Storing language in the brain as formulaic speech patterns (lexical chunks) rather than through mechanical, isolated memorization significantly enhances students' communicative competence. Thus, deploying the Lexical Approach in English classes renders vocabulary learning more systematic, practical, and efficient and represents one of the key directions in modern language teaching.

Conclusions

Lexical competence constitutes a fundamental component of communicative competence. When language learners do not possess a sufficient vocabulary, they inevitably experience difficulties in expressing their thoughts accurately and fluently. Therefore, the systematic and purposeful instruction of vocabulary remains indispensable, placing the instructor in a vital guiding role throughout the selection, presentation, and consolidation phases of vocabulary teaching. To achieve optimal outcomes, lexical items should be chosen in strict accordance with students' age and language proficiency, while concurrently enhancing their intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, the teacher's strategic choice of appropriate strategies and the contextual presentation of vocabulary serve as decisive factors in shaping students' academic language skills.

Building upon these foundational insights, this research underscores that, within the specific context of higher education, vocabulary should no longer be regarded as a supplementary component of English language instruction. Instead, it must be recognized as a core structural component of the entire language learning process.

In conclusion, this article substantiates the necessity of deploying an integrative, systematic, and pedagogically sound instructional model as the primary vehicle to achieve successful vocabulary acquisition among undergraduate learners.

CRedit Author Statement

Author Babayeva V.A.: Conceptualization, methodology, writing — original draft.

Author Aliyeva A.A.: Data curation, formal analysis, writing — review and editing.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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