DTDS

Teaching Lexically

Principles and practice

Hugh Dellar and Andrew Walkley

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES

DELTA PUBLISHING   www.deltapublishing.co.uk

From the authors

Hugh's story

The seeds for this book were planted in the early 1990s. I had qualified as a teacher and was living in Jakarta, Indonesia. When I started trying to teach myself Indonesian, I was unconsciously using a 'grammar + words' approach, memorising single words and studying grammar forms and rules. The results were mixed, to say the least!

It took me a while to realise that a sentence like *anjing itu menggonggong* – 'the dog is barking' – wasn't a good example of how the present continuous was generally used, nor was it representative of what is said about dogs or barking. In short, it was a sentence I'd learned to somehow get to grips with the language, yet which had no real utility. At the same time, what *was* helping me was learning repertoires of relatively fixed questions and answers (often featuring grammatical structures I'd not yet studied, but was able to use within limited contexts), common phrases I heard a lot, and so on. Of course, there was also lots of repetition and practice.

When I read *The Lexical Approach* (1993) by Michael Lewis, I found my language learning experiences had inadvertently brought me to a lexical view of language – and his book provided me with a clearer way of thinking about this. I later came to understand that Lewis was simply one writer working within a long tradition of lexically-oriented thinking.

However, while my initial reading of *The Lexical Approach* energised me, it also confounded me as I felt many of its ideas about putting this way of seeing language to practical use weren't as developed as they might have been. The activities suggested often seemed tokenistic, and didn't amount to a thorough reconstruction of practical pedagogy.

In the years that followed – through my classroom practice, my writing of classroom material, and my conversations with students, colleagues and other EFL professionals – I came to the ideas laid out in this book: our attempt to make lexical teaching more accessible and more widespread!

Hugh

Andrew's story

My route to a lexical way of teaching probably started with my failed attempts to learn French at school. It was only after I started teaching in Spain that I had any real success in speaking a foreign language – a success that stemmed far more from using the language than from studying grammar rules.

I started out with no training, but my main approach was to not do to others what my teachers had done to me! Instead, I mainly chatted to my students and told them some words when they asked about them. We listened to songs and watched videos.

Grammar finally came back into view when I did my CELTA course. I learnt how you could present grammar via dialogues, and how it could be related to real-life communication. I also discovered the *Collins Cobuild English Course* (1988), which based its syllabus around frequent words, and *Conversation Gambits*, from the same year, which contained chunks for conversation.

These experiences primed me to receive *The Lexical Approach* when I read it on my Diploma course. However, I was also taking on other (sometimes contradictory!) ideas – such as teaching skills, and teaching grammar through comparing sentences and discussing differences in meaning.

When I first met Hugh, we were both beginning to wonder about where a lexical approach might go: what would the syllabus be? What should materials and classes be like? We continued to be influenced by other writers, our classroom experience and discussions with colleagues. Getting involved in writing and teacher training brought this into focus, because, when you're paid to share materials and practice, you want to be clear about your own beliefs and principles.

So for me, this book is an outline of where we have both got to so far in determining our beliefs, how these inform our own practice and how we can explore and share that practice. It's *a* lexical approach, rather than *the* lexical approach, *a good way* of teaching, rather than *the only way* of teaching – and we hope it helps you on your own journey.

Andrew

A

Teaching lexically

There have been many thousands of pages written about how people learn languages, yet we would suggest they can all be neatly summarised in a very small number of principles.

Principles of how people learn

Essentially, to learn any given item of language, people need to carry out the following steps:

1 Understand the meaning of the item.
2 Hear/see an example of the item in context.
3 Approximate the sounds of the item.
4 Pay attention to the item and notice its features.
5 Do something with the item – use it in some way.
6 Repeat these steps over time, when encountering the item again in other contexts.

Principles of why people learn

The second area of principle that we think is uncontroversial, but that is worth spelling out, is *why* people want to learn foreign languages. The Council of Europe, which published the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), suggests people learn for the following reasons:

- To deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so.
- To exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language, and to communicate thoughts and feelings to them.
- To achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the ways of life and forms of thought of other peoples, and of their cultural heritage.

One underlying assumption that the CEFR makes is that students will be taking classes, as part of their efforts to learn languages. It is perhaps worth questioning why this might be. After all, many people learn languages without ever participating in formal study. It seems to us that one of the fundamental reasons students take classes is that this allows them to set aside some time for study. A lot of people have neither the time nor the discipline to study on their own. While it is clearly true that the best language learners do a lot outside of class, we believe that teachers should recognise that, for what is probably the majority of learners, class time is basically all they may have spare for language study.

Collocation exercises

Developing both words and collocations

Principle

Many vocabulary materials and coursebooks now have exercises focusing on paired collocations. Some are similar to single-word exercises, and simply have single collocations instead of single words. This is still an improvement, as more words get recycled and because opposites and synonyms work better at the level of collocation. Other exercises have the students match words to one or more collocates, so you get answers like this:

watch TV / turn the ~ on / turn the ~ off
a tall man /a ~ building/ He's over six feet ~
have an argument / cause an ~ / settle the ~

With exercises that result in single paired collocations, we can assume the students understand the basic meaning if they have the correct answer, and we can check by asking for further collocates:

● When doing this, you can ask about *either* word in the collocation. It depends what you think might be new or what is more relevant.
● As such, we could ask:
  What other things can you watch?
  What other things can you do to a TV?
  and / or draw on the board something like:

watch	TV	or	watch	TV
?				?
?				?

Where there are multiple collocates, you may have to check the students understand ones you think are new. So, above, we might ask: *Do you know what **settle an argument** means?* or *What happens when you **settle an argument**?* followed by an explanation, if necessary.

As we saw in Part A, different collocations of the same word can have quite different opposites, synonyms and co-text. It is therefore often better to ask concept checking questions and give examples based on the collocation rather than the single word:

*What's the opposite of **heavy rain**?*
*What's the verb form of **heavy rain**?*
*What might you do if **it's raining heavily**?*
*What might happen if **it's rained very heavily**?*

Practising the principle

● Look at the collocation exercise below. It's aimed at Intermediate/B1 students.

1 *the light*	**a** *the TV on*
2 *the phone*	**b** *crashes*
3 *the screen*	**c** *a button*
4 *the computer*	**d** *rings*
5 *press*	**e** *freezes*
6 *switch*	**f** *flashes*
7 *plug*	**g** *the machine in*
8 *dial*	**h** *the number*

● What other collocates can you think of for each word?
● Write a checking question for each collocation (like those on this page, and on pages 00–00).
● Choose the three items you would spend most time on.
● Write sentences or exchanges (see pages 00–00) for those collocations.

Applying the principle

● Find the next exercise in your coursebook that is based on collocation – or find a collocation exercise from elsewhere. Do one of the following:
  ○ As you go through each answer in class, ask for other collocates of one word in the collocation.
  ○ Then write the students' ideas on the board in the style you saw depicted in *Principle*.
● Alternatively, before class, write two checking questions for each answer in the exercise:
  ○ As you go through each answer in class, ask one of these questions.
  ○ Write up some language you think is useful, or that will help the students during the practice phase.
  ○ Give the other questions, either on a handout or written on the board, as a revision exercise in a future lesson.

When? Why? Who to?

Teaching the probable, not just the possible

Principle

As we saw in Part A, most coursebooks are still based on a 'grammar + words' view of language. When it comes to giving examples of how structures work, we believe this can cause problems because:

- the examples won't necessarily reflect the way the structures are actually used.
- little or no attention is paid to the language or patterns often used around the structure in question.
- the focus is generally on sentence-level communication, while real communication occurs mostly at discourse level.

Lexical teachers would hopefully:

- ensure that examples of particular structures can be used in everyday life.
- provide examples that reflect the way the words contained in them generally colligate or pattern.
- recognise that grammar structures are often restricted by lexis or by meaning.
- think about usage beyond sentence level.
- be aware of connected patterns and co-text.

One of the first steps towards teaching grammar from a more lexical perspective is to be critical of the examples given, and to try and improve them. It is useful to consider how many of the example sentences provided are likely to be *used*. To do this, we can ask:

- When would we say these sentences?
- Why – and who to?

If we are unable to easily answer one or more of these questions, we may well need to provide different examples. Once we have *better* examples, we can:

- add them as alternatives when checking answers.
- focus more on the sentences in exercises that *didn't* need to be improved on, and less on those that *did*.

Practising the principle

- Below is a table of the kind often found in the back of coursebooks. It shows examples of many of the structures most commonly taught at lower levels. It includes active and passive sentences, as well as negatives and questions. Decide:
  - which sentences – if any – seem *probable* to you.
  - who you would say them to. When? Why?
- Add to, or change in some way, the sentences that didn't seem probable to you. Ensure your new examples still illustrate the same grammatical structures, but are more likely to actually be used in day-to-day speech.

He *drives* cars.	He *drove* cars.
Cars *are driven*.	Cars *were driven*.
He *is driving* cars.	He *was driving* cars.
Cars *are being driven*.	Cars *were being driven*.
He *has driven* cars.	He *had driven* cars.
Cars *have been driven*.	Cars *had been driven*.
He *has been driving* cars.	Cars *had been being driven*.
I/You/We/They	*drive*.
I/You/We/They	*don't drive*.
Do I/you/we/they	*drive?*
He/She /It	*drives*.
He/She/It	*doesn't drive*.
Does he/she/it	*drive?*

Applying the principle

- Look at the grammar tables and examples in the reference section of the last coursebook you used.
- Think about how many of the examples are re-useable:
  - How many of them do you think your students might actually want to say, or might hear said by others?
  - Can you think of a context for them?
  - Who would *you* say them to? Why? When?
  - Can you think of any better examples?

Beyond correction

Putting emergent language to use

Principle

If you intervene in a student's communication and provide the language they need, you are addressing several of the steps involved in learning mentioned in Part A. It can be assumed that the learner you help:

- understands the meaning of the language, because they generated that meaning.
- hears or sees 'correct' language when you give it.
- will probably use it as they continue speaking. (If, of course, they don't just say '*Yeah – that!*'.)
- will pronounce it accurately enough if they do use it.

However, when we highlight that language for *other* students during feedback, only the first two steps may take place, and none of the students will have repeated.

If we think about this 'emergent' language in the same way as the prepared language we teach through materials, we should want to do the same things that we do with vocabulary and grammar exercises. We have already suggested using gap-fills and error correction with sentences on the board, but you could also:

- give additional examples.
- draw attention to chunks or patterns.
- ask questions about vocabulary/grammar (see pages 00–00).
- elicit additional comments or responses (pages 00–00).

You also want the students to (re-)use the language. If you know it will re-appear in a text or language exercise in your book, you might leave it till then. Otherwise, you could:

- get the students to repeat the task they just did with a new partner or in a shorter time.
- set a new task.

Expanding on the language and inventing a task may be too difficult to do on the spot. However, you can plan to do it at the start of your *next* lesson. If a similar language point comes up with a different set of students after this, you may also be prepared to deal with it on the spot then.

Practising the principle

- Look at the language below that was corrected during feedback on the language in the previous task (page 00). Decide:
  - what questions you might ask about vocabulary here.
  - if there are any patterns you would highlight with additional examples.
  - if there are any responses/additional comments you could elicit.
- Think of ways that the students could practise some of this language (see pages 00–00 and Chapter Two).

Sorry I'm late. There was a problem on the underground…

… The train was stuck in the tunnel for 30 minutes. It was really crowded and I could hardly breathe. I thought I was going to die. (This came from further discussion with a student – and reformulation.)

A: *I usually cycle to work.*

B: *I think you are You must be very fit.*

(montar)
put together IKEA furniture

I did volunteer work once.
quit prison be released from prison
They were going to become fire fighters.
They were going to be sent to fight forest fires.

*Have you been to America?*
No. I've never really wanted to.
Have you been anywhere outside America?

Applying the principle

- In your next lesson, record all the language that you put on the board during feedback. Take a photo of your boardwork if you can.
- Prepare the sentences that you wrote on the board as a handout or on an IWB. You might want to gap different parts.
- Prepare ways in which you will expand on the language and practise it – as outlined in *Practising the principle*.

C
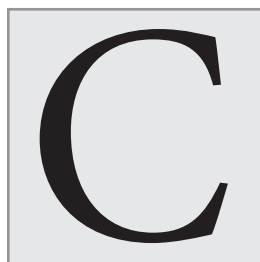
Teaching lexically has so far approached lessons largely from the point of view of a general English course where classroom materials are used. Teachers in different contexts may sometimes wonder whether this is relevant to their situation.

The short answer to this is that lexical teaching is fundamentally about a way of thinking about language, so the kinds of things you do in the classroom – and the techniques suggested in Part B – should predominantly stay the same; what changes is the *language* that different types of students will need.

Developing lexical teachers

However, there are certain areas, such as low-level classes, exam classes and EAP, where a 'grammar + words + skills' view has come to have a particularly strong hold. In Part C, we address some of the specific concerns about a lexical approach in these kinds of classes.

When it comes to one-to-one classes and young learners, many teachers (consciously or not) already teach quite lexically. We look at why this may be the case, and suggest some adaptations to the methodology we have so far put forward.

The rest of the sections in Part C address how lexical teaching may be encouraged through teacher training and through development in schools. Obviously, we hope that this book will play a part in this and form the basis for formal training sessions, but the emphasis here is on heightening awareness of the structures and conversations that may implicitly reinforce the 'grammar + words + skills' view of ELT. We suggest *different* conversations and approaches to lesson observation and training that may be more supportive of lexical teachers.

From lexical teachers to lexical writers

Central to this is, on the one hand, adopting a lexical view of published materials that may encourage a greater demand for these, but perhaps, more importantly, we suggest that teachers should start to write more material themselves. We believe there is a very positive symbiotic relationship between teaching and writing, when materials are written by teachers themselves.

We hope that you will enjoy the writing process and that you will learn as much from it as we have over the years – and we look forward to perhaps seeing the fruits of some of your labour in the future.

DTDS

Multi-award-winning series

Teaching Lexically

Principles and practice

Teaching Lexically shows what a lexical view of language looks like, and explores how it differs from a more traditional 'grammar + words' view. It then considers what implications such a view might have for classroom practice. At the heart of *Teaching Lexically* are three main ideas:

- Grammar and vocabulary are both taught better in combination.
- Context is absolutely central.
- Classrooms need to be input-rich; and input needs to be useful.

Teaching Lexically contains three distinctive parts which focus in turn on theory, practice and development.

Part A provides a detailed exploration of the core ideas behind lexical teaching. The authors begin with the principles that explain how and why people learn, before presenting two competing views of language – 'grammar + words' (and skills) and a lexical view. They close with an in-depth exploration of how language looks when seen from a lexical perspective.

Part B contains a bank of activities that puts into practice the particular principles related to such areas of teaching as vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, and so on. These activities are designed to be applied to any classroom material, and to help teachers build up their own repertoire of lexically-rooted techniques.

Part C addresses some of the issues and implications involved in where and how lexical teaching may be applied. It also considers how teacher training and development can become more lexically-oriented, finally suggesting ways to develop as a lexical materials writer.

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES is a pioneering award-winning series of books for English Language Teachers with professional development in mind, blending theory, practice and development.

Hugh Dellar and **Andrew Walkley** are classroom EFL teachers with over fifty years' experience between them. They are also teacher trainers and coursebook writers, and have delivered conference talks, training sessions and teacher development workshops all over the world.

They have co-authored two series of five-level General English coursebooks – *Outcomes* and *Innovations* – published by National Geographic Learning. In 2016, they co-founded London Language Lab, a lexically-oriented school in central London, and run the *www.lexicallab.com* site.

Hugh and Andrew both live in north London with their families.

Series editors Mike Burghall and Lindsay Clandfield

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES

DELTA PUBLISHING   www.deltapublishing.co.uk