



THE IMPACT OF THE LEXICAL APPROACH ON VOCABULARY RETENTION IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This article examines the effectiveness of the Lexical Approach in promoting long-term vocabulary retention among learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). Based on the idea that language is acquired in chunks rather than single words, the Lexical Approach has gained popularity as a method to improve communicative fluency and vocabulary depth. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of the approach, outlines practical classroom applications, evaluates research findings, and highlights challenges in its implementation. It concludes that while not having any limitations, the Lexical Approach significantly enhances vocabulary retention when properly integrated into classroom instruction.

Keywords

Lexical Approach, vocabulary retention, lexical chunks, collocations, ESL, language teaching methodology.

Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in language acquisition. ESL learners often face difficulties not because of grammar but due to a lack of usable, contextually appropriate vocabulary. Traditional methods that rely on rote learning cannot help learners to improve their language for real communication. The Lexical Approach, popularized by Michael Lewis (1993), argues that the building blocks of language are not grammar structures, but “lexical chunks”—pre-fabricated sequences of words commonly found in spoken and written discourse.



This article explores how the Lexical Approach contributes to vocabulary retention by emphasizing real language use, authentic materials, and frequent exposure to lexical bundles. Theoretical underpinnings, classroom strategies, benefits, challenges, and research findings that related to the approach will be examined.

Theoretical Background

The Lexical Approach is founded on the idea that language is made up of chunks—collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms, and other fixed or semi-fixed expressions. Lewis (1993) argued that these multi-word units are more central to fluency than grammar. Language users do not produce sentences word by word but retrieve ready-made chunks from memory.

This theory aligns with usage-based models of language learning, which claim that exposure to authentic input and pattern recognition are crucial. Cognitive linguists such as Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) and Wray (2002) support the notion that formulaic sequences aid fluency, processing speed, and comprehension.

Implementation in the Classroom

1. Teaching Collocations

Teachers present common word pairings like “heavy rain,” “strong argument,” or “make a decision.” Activities include gap-fills, collocation matching, or error correction tasks.

2. Chunk-Based Learning

Instead of teaching single vocabulary items, teachers focus on expressions like “to be honest,” “on the other hand,” or “as far as I know.” These are practiced in dialogues and role plays.

3. Using Corpora and Concordance Tools



Teachers use tools like the British National Corpus (BNC) to show students how certain lexical items appear in real-life contexts. This helps learners see frequency and usage patterns.

4. Recycling Lexical Items

Vocabulary is repeated across multiple lessons. For example, phrases introduced in listening activities are later reused in speaking or writing exercises.

5. Authentic Texts

Using authentic materials—newspaper articles, videos, podcasts—students notice and extract useful lexical phrases, promoting contextual understanding and long-term retention.

Impact on Vocabulary Retention

Multiple studies support the claim that the Lexical Approach enhances vocabulary acquisition and retention. Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, and Demecheleer (2006) demonstrated that learners exposed to formulaic sequences significantly improved in oral proficiency and vocabulary use. Similarly, Nation (2001) emphasized that repeated exposure to lexical chunks in meaningful contexts leads to better recall and fluency.

In practice, ESL teachers observe that students taught with lexical chunks are better able to participate in natural conversation. They use idiomatic language more confidently and recognize vocabulary more readily in reading and listening tasks.

Challenges and Limitations:

Despite its benefits, the Lexical Approach faces several hurdles:

Material Development: Many coursebooks still emphasize grammar. Teachers often need to adapt or create their own materials.



Assessment: Standard vocabulary tests may not reflect knowledge of chunks. Teachers must develop alternative assessments like portfolios or performance-based tasks.

Student Resistance: Learners accustomed to word lists and grammar drills may initially find chunk-based learning unfamiliar or confusing.

Teacher Training: Not all educators are equipped with the knowledge or tools to implement the approach effectively.

Conclusion

The Lexical Approach marks a significant shift in language teaching—from isolated vocabulary and grammar drills to meaningful, chunk-based instruction. It reflects how language is actually used and acquired. Research and classroom evidence show that it can greatly improve vocabulary retention, fluency, and communicative competence.

While it presents challenges in terms of resources and training, its benefits make it a powerful tool in the modern ESL classroom. Teachers who integrate lexical chunks thoughtfully and consistently can help learners build a stronger, more usable vocabulary base that supports both accuracy and fluency.

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