

Harnessing Technology for a Lexical Approach

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ABSTRACT:The Lexical Approach was first introduced over two decades ago but still has relevance for language teaching today. Because it is by no means a new or trendy approach to language teaching, it may seem outdated to some; however, by utilizing technology, the activities that focus on chunks, the foundational focus of the Lexical Approach, the language learning classroom can be reinvigorated.

KEYWORDS : *chunks, language teaching, Lexical Approach, multi-word units, technology*

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the Lexical Approach was first formally introduced by Lewis in 1993, he was not the first to suggest a shift in language teaching toward lexis. Nation (1990) three years prior had published his *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* in which he suggested that different methods for teaching vocabulary should be used for vocabulary depending on his four-type classification system, followed a year later by Sinclair (1991) publishing a book titled *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Thus, Lewis's book on the Lexical Approach in 1993 was actually not far out of line with the focus of some of his cohorts.

In the Lexical Approach, learning a language cannot be deconstructed into vocabulary and grammar; rather, language is made of prefabricated chunks instead of words (Lewis, 1997a). This concept of grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar is a hallmark of the Lexical Approach, along with Lewis's Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment cycle to replace the Present-Practice-Produce standard (1997a). While at first the Lexical Approach may seem like a huge departure from other communicative approaches, using this approach does not have to be a radical change for teachers, and in fact, its principles can easily be integrated into typical lesson plans simply by focusing on chunks rather than single words and by viewing grammar through the lens of those chunks rather than discretely.

II. LEXIS IN THE LEXICAL APPROACH

According to Lewis (1997b), lexis can be broken down into four types: words and polywords, collocations, institutionalized utterances, and sentence frames or heads. Although there may be overlap in some categories, there are some general distinctions. He defines words as independent units, such as *dog* or *wearing*, whereas polywords are combinations of words that are restricted phrases used as idioms, such as *come to think of it*. Collocations are words that frequently occur together, often as a verb-noun pair, as in *lift weights*, or as an adjective-noun pair, as in *fake news*. This category can also include multi-word units, such as *go to the gym* or *make a concerted effort*. Institutionalized utterances are more often present in spoken texts and are usually pragmatic in nature. These are chunks that may be sentences or stand-alone phrases, such as *Whatever you want* or sentence heads, such as *If you ask me*. These chunks can be taught and used without grammatical analysis. His final category of lexis, sentence frames or heads, are most often used in written texts as a way to provide structure, such as *In this paper we review* or *It is not as [...] as you think*.

Lewis (1997b) notes that one problem in typical language learning classes is that teachers and students only focus on new words in a text rather than the "word partnerships" or collocations. For example, students may make a list of new words rather than chunks from a text, which Lewis purports is pedagogically ineffective. In fact, he states that a main tenet of the Lexical Approach is having learners record collocations.

III. CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

Lewis's Lexical Approach has in common with Krashen and Terrell's (1983) contention that understanding messages is necessary for language acquisition, but Lewis (1997b), unlike his predecessors, purports that helping learners acquire language structure can be increased through consciousness raising about how language works, including its chunks. Toward this end, he says that choosing the right input and making

sure students are in a low-anxiety environment are paramount to language acquisition. Lewis adds, however, that it is equally vital for teachers to prepare activities for students to complete outside of class time, such as through reading or watching videos.

Lewis (1997b) further suggests that the activities teachers plan for students should be varied and enjoyable for students, to include activities such as lexical crosswords, collaborative story writing, jigsaw dialogs replete with chunks, and lexical dominoes – using cards on which on one half is a noun and on the other is a verb, wherein game play requires students to match up two halves with a strong word partnership. Another suggestion is using an audio clip that includes several expressions featuring a delexicalized word, such as *make*; learners raise their hands each time they hear an expression with the keyword and/or write the expressions they hear containing the keyword. While these suggestions were made over two decades ago, Lewis’s activities, focusing on chunks, can aptly be modernized using technology.

IV. CHOOSING A TEXT AND IDENTIFYING CHUNKS

To illustrate how to use technology to carry out activities with the Lexical Approach, I first chose an authentic text that would be interesting for students but also serve as the basis for a variety of collocation-based activities. The 264-word article, titled *Woman Creates Purrfect Sign to Warn Neighbors of Thieving Cat*, was published on huffpost.com. The following is a screenshot of the article.



Figure 1. Woman Creates Purrfect Sign to Warn Neighbors of Thieving Cat

In this article, numerous chunks can be found. If students are accustomed to the Lexical Approach, they may, of course, find the chunks themselves and log them in a lexical notebook (Lewis, 1997a); however, if students are new to the approach, they will need more guidance in the task of finding chunks. Assuming the students are inexperienced with the Lexical Approach, the teacher will need to create activities to draw students’ attention to the chunks and help them understand their meaning and usage. Additionally, incorporating practice activities using the chunks can help students better learn and use them. To do this, the teacher first needs to identify a number of chunks from the text. Using the list, a number of activities similar to those suggested by Lewis (1997b) can be created using a variety of technologies. A categorized list of the identified chunks from the selected text is shown in Table 1, from which activities will be created and illustrated in the following section.

Collocations		Institutionalized Utterance	Sentence Frame
reach far beyond	make s.o. (a minor celebrity)	as a way to	according to
put up a sign	retrieve one’s belongings		
next to (the sign)	a little bit		
take pictures	school bus		
pair of gloves	go viral		

a number of reasons	acting on instinct
care for	safe place
share tales	engage in
Twitter users	ill-gotten goods
bring home	compare sth. to
as a compliment	inanimate object
(sign) intended to	social media

Table 1. Lexical chunks by type from the selected news article

V. TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENT LEXICAL APPROACH

1. Edu Games

Edu Games (www.edu-games.org) is a website that provides downloadable worksheets for a variety of subjects, but it also has game creation tools by which a teacher can enter content and create printable games. One such game is Bingo. On the Edu Games website, the template I used was for compound words; however, this can work quite nicely for two-word chunks. Each student is given a bingo board with one word in each space, and these words are the second words of two-word chunks. Game play proceeds as follows. The teacher calls out the first word of a two-word chunk, and students who have the second word to that chunk mark the space. For example, if the teacher calls out, “Safe,” then students who have *place* on their Bingo cards can mark it off. Below are example Bingo boards using the chunks from the aforementioned list (Fig. 2) along with the answer sheet (Fig. 3) which the teacher uses for calling out words.



Figure 2. Bingo cards

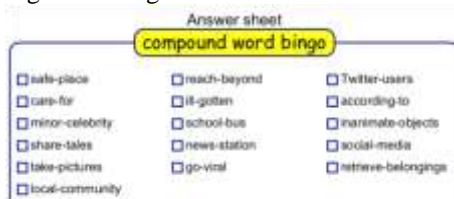


Figure 3. Answer sheet for Bingo cards

On this same website, there is a crossword puzzle maker. First, the user enters each answer for the crossword, and the website auto-generates a definition or clue. However, the user can override the auto-generated outputs, and for a Lexical Approach, enter a sentence with a chunk from the text, where the answers are all parts of chunks. An example can be seen as below in Fig. 4, followed by the answer sheet in Fig. 5.

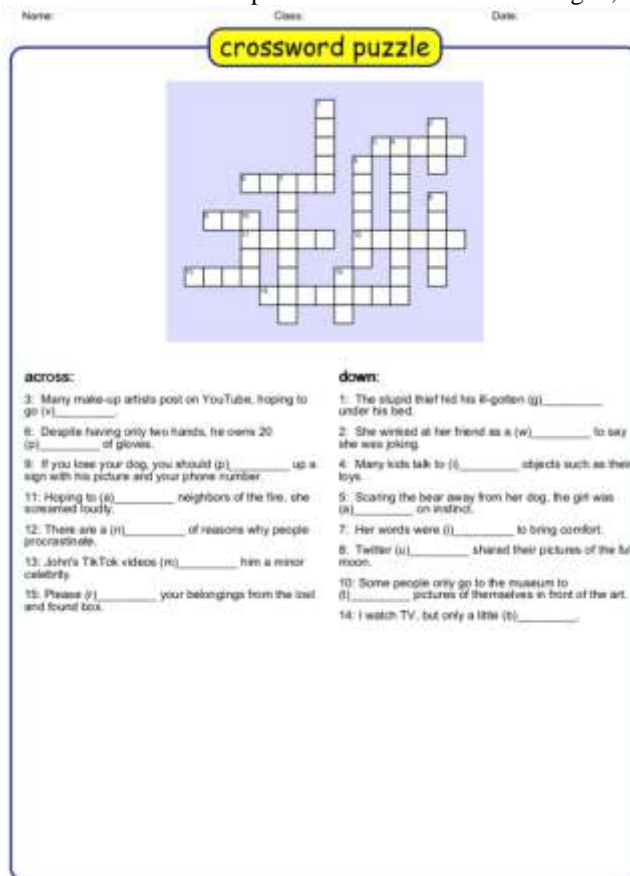


Figure 4. Crossword puzzle from edu-games.org

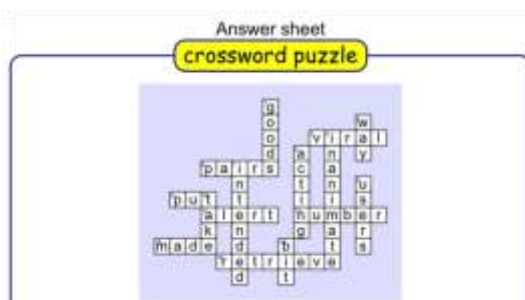


Figure 5. Answer sheet

2. WordWall.net

Another very useful website with tools that can be manipulated for activities with the Lexical Approach is WordWall.net. In contrast to the available tools on Edu Games, however, this website allows for the creation of games that can be played online with a clean interface. One possible activity on this website, for example, is a matching game called Matching Pairs. To utilize it for the Lexical Approach, the teacher simply inputs two-word lexical chunks, as shown below in Fig. 6. Then in game play, two rectangles must be selected, each revealing a word (see Fig. 7). If the two revealed words create a lexical chunk (e.g., a match), a point is given and those two rectangles disappear from the game. If there is a mismatch between the two chosen words or phrases, then an "X" appears over the two rectangles before they are virtually turned back over (see Fig. 8). In contrast, if the two selected phrases are a match, such as *station* and *local news* to form the chunk *local news station*, then the match is indicated by check marks on the screen (see Fig. 9), and those rectangles will disappear from the grid. This game is essentially an online version of the traditional game Memory but can work effectively as an engaging activity to review lexical chunks.

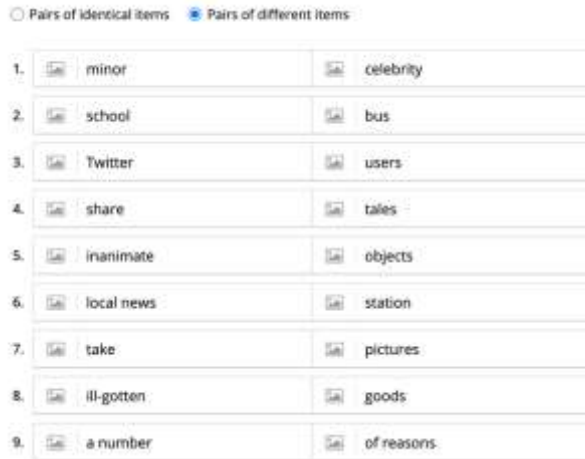


Figure 6. Input screen for lexical chunks



Figure 7. Match game screen with one word selected

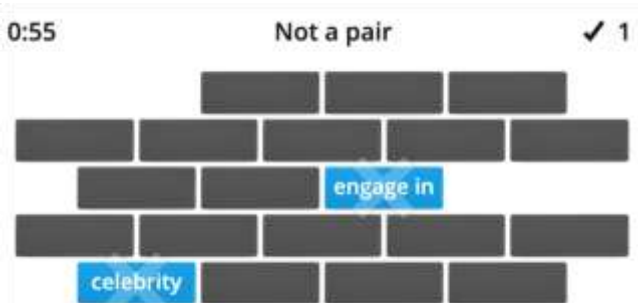


Figure 8. Incorrect pair of words selected

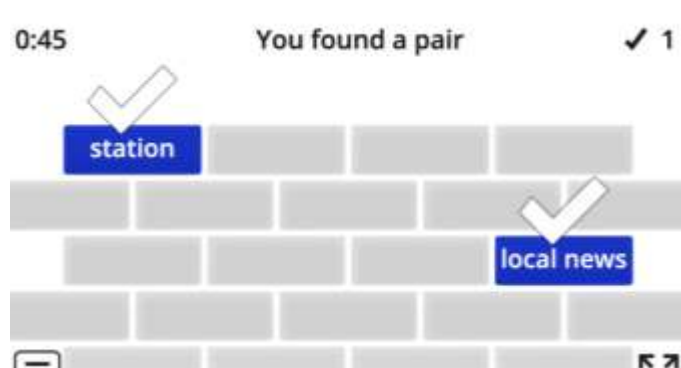


Figure 9. On-screen alert for a correct pairing

Another game from this website that lends itself well to the Lexical Approach is Find the Match. For this game, as in the previous, the teacher inputs lexical chunks. Then in game play, one word is shown in large black text on the main part of the screen, under which are possible words in colored boxes, one of which will combine with the black word to create a lexical chunk (see Fig. 10). The player clicks on one of the colored boxes, and then on the screen it is indicated whether or not the pairing is correct. If it is correct, then that colored box is eliminated from the choices and “Correct!” appears on the screen (see Fig. 11), after which a new word appears on the screen.



Figure 10. Game screen for *Find the match*

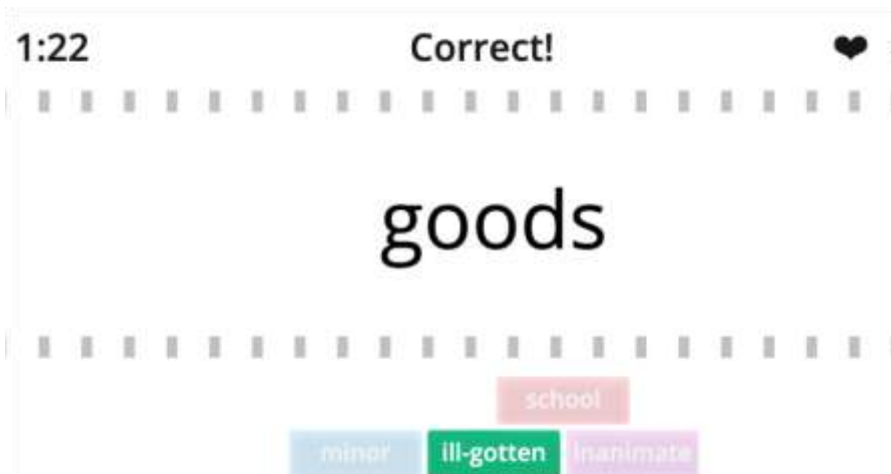


Figure 11. On-screen alert for a correct match

One other useful game for the Lexical Approach on this site is called Unjumble. The teacher first must enter phrases, and unlike in the previously shown games from this site that work with two-word chunks, this game can work for multi-word units. In the example below (see Fig. 12), I entered 10 such lexical chunks, and in game play, each chunk appears on screen but in the wrong word order. The user must drag and drop the words until putting them in the correct order to form the lexical chunk. For example, as seen below in Fig. 13, the user is shown “alert neighbors to intended” and then needs to rearrange the words to “intended to alert neighbors,” one of the chunks from the text. If this is done correctly, on the screen there is an alert along with points given, as seen in Fig. 14.

1. intended to alert neighbors
2. reached far beyond
3. retrieve your belongings
4. put up a sign
5. a little bit
6. a pair of gloves
7. go viral on social media
8. bring home ill-gotten goods
9. a number of reasons
10. acting on instinct

+ Add a phrase

Figure 12. Input screen for lexical chunks



Figure 13. Scrambled phrase not yet solved



Figure 14. Phrase correctly unscrambled

3. Padlet for collaborative writing

Padlet (padlet.com) is an online platform for posting content and can be used for collaborative work. The user simply creates a new “padlet” or virtual bulletin board and shares it with other users who can then write on the bulletin board. One way to use this with the Lexical Approach is to have students write out conversations mimicking text messages, each of which must contain one of the learned lexical chunks. Each student may use their own electronic device and contribute to the padlet either in class or as a homework task to extend learning outside the classroom. An example of this is shown below in Fig. 15.

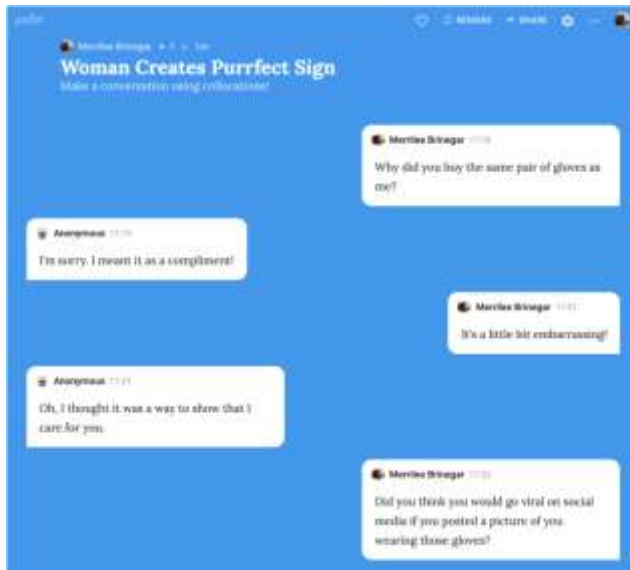


Figure 15. Padlet conversation using chunks

4. Yarn

Yarn (<https://getyarn.io/>) is a website that streamlines searching of video content. The user simply enters a search term, whether a word, a short phrase, or sentence, and then the website displays a variety of video clips from TV shows and movies that include the targetlexis. Thus, the teacher might choose to use this to demonstrate pronunciation of a lexical chunk or to show how it is used in additional contexts. For example, a search of “put up a sign,” one of the chunks from the news article, yields video clips from various shows as seen below in Fig. 16.

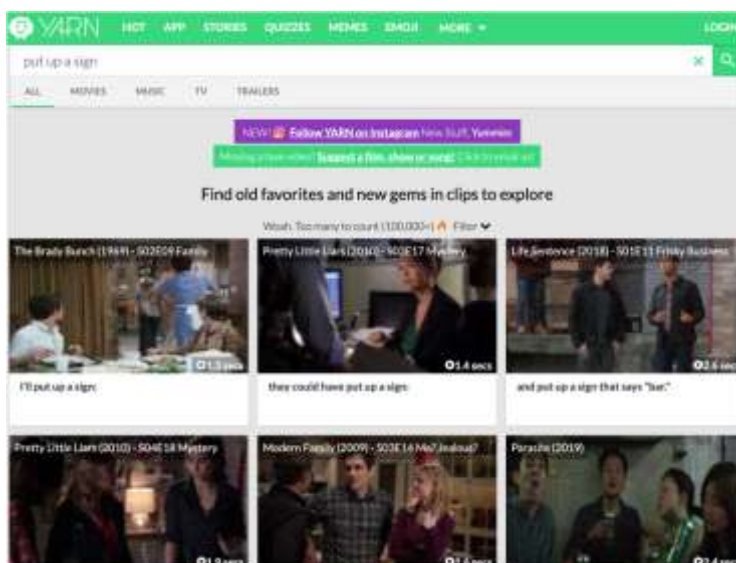


Figure 16. Yarn results for chunk “put up a sign”

Additionally, teachers could assign homework to students using this website to get students to have more exposure to the chosen chunks in additional contexts. For instance, the task could be for students to create funny short stories in which each line of dialog must contain one of the lexical chunks. As an example, I searched for the terms “take a picture” and “act on instinct” to create the two-line dialog in video form that is captured below (see Fig. 17 and 18). These stories can then be shared online via a link or embedded on a website, and for further learning and exposure to the chunks, students could also be required to watch each other’s stories and vote on the funniest or most creative story.



Figure 17. Yarn including chunk “take a picture”

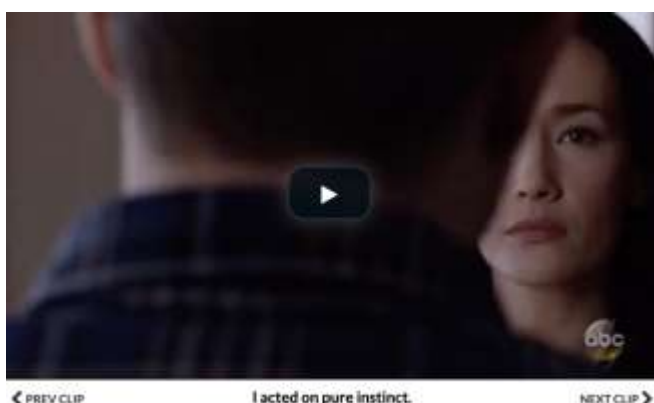


Figure 18. Yarn including chunk “act on instinct”

VI. CONCLUSION

The Lexical Approach was introduced by Lewis and can be used as a stand-alone approach, but aspects of its main tenet – that grammar should not be taught discretely but only addressed in the context of polywords – can be reflected in numerous communicative approaches that focus on using authentic texts. Advanced students can be trained in identifying chunks independently, while the teacher can select and teach specific chunks to lower level students until they are at a level to find them by themselves. As students need multiple exposures to acquire lexis, technology can provide access to expedient methods for implementing a Lexical Approach in engaging ways to seamlessly bring the Lexical Approach into the modern classroom.

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