

LANG matters

The lexical approach

raised a lot of debate when Michael Lewis first started writing about it. It seemed a revolutionary new approach to language teaching at the time. Over the years, however, people have come to see that it does not really mean a major change in the way things are done in the classroom, but rather **a change in the way we think about them and a change of focus.**

In this, the first issue of the new school year, we publish articles by Cristina Bareggi, Hugh Cory, David Gibbon and Barbara Bettinelli **looking at ways of incorporating the lexical approach into our teaching and what this means.**

We also publish a response by Nickolas Komninos to Professor Dodd's article about English teaching, in which he wonders whether **it is reasonable to expect schools to be able to get their students up to the B1/B2 level required by universities.**

We would like to know what our readers think, so write and let us know: we want to hear **YOUR** ideas in this important debate.

The final pages in this issue are once again dedicated to Lia Perillo's **reform section**, a regular feature in our publication.

Buon inizio anno!

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Proper words in proper places

Some “modest proposals” for introducing the lexical approach into your English class

by Cristina Bareggi

In recent years a new approach to second language teaching has been developed: the **Lexical Approach**. It has been presented as an alternative to grammar-based approaches, with a new emphasis on lexis. But what does this mean exactly?

The first part of this article aims at presenting the main features of the lexical approach and their implications for ESL teaching. The second part will focus on some possible practical ways of introducing this new approach into real everyday English classes, without necessarily revolutionizing your teaching methods.

What is the lexical approach?

In 1720, Jonathan Swift wrote to a young clergyman: “Proper words in proper places make the true definition of a style”. This is exactly what the lexical approach is all about, devising the best possible description of language, language acquisition processes, and language teaching methods that can allow learners to put “proper words in proper places”. It is important to underline the plural form: not *a proper word*, but *proper words*. We will soon understand why.

The benchmark text for the lexical approach is Michael Lewis’s *The Lexical Approach: the State of ELT and a Way Forward*, published in 1993. Another book by Lewis followed in 1997: *Implementing the Lexical Approach – Putting Theory into Practice*.

Here are, in the author’s words, some of the key principles of both texts.

- Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.
- The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word “chunks”.
- A central element of language teaching is raising students’ awareness of, and developing their ability to “chunk” language successfully.
- Although structural patterns are acknowledged as useful, lexical and metaphorical patterning are accorded appropriate status.
- Collocation is integrated as an organising principle within syllabuses.
- Grammar as structure is subordinate to lexis.
- Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.

(*The Lexical Approach*, 1993)

The first principle may at first sound difficult to understand, but it is the very basis of the lexical approach. What Lewis states is that fluency is not so much a matter of mastering a set of generative grammar rules and a separate list of words. Rather, **fluency depends on having access to a stock of lexical items, or chunks**. In other words, Lewis denies the assumption that once you have mastered sentence frames, you can subsequently insert new words into the “gaps”, thus expanding your vocabulary. In this way, you can perhaps produce *possible* grammatically correct sentences, which, however, are not necessarily *probable* utterances. What we need to communicate effectively is not the possibility of saying “Colourless green ideas slept furiously”, to quote Chomsky’s famous example. **What we do need is the ability to produce probable, natural – and therefore successful – language. And this ability mainly depends on mastering lexis.**

Lexis is seen by Lewis not as a vocabulary list, but as a set of lexical items, most of which are multi-word chunks. Lexical items have the same generative power as grammar patterns, if not more. They allow the production of natural successful language. This contention is supported by data from statistical analysis of language. Analysing millions of occurrences of a language, one can indeed draw the conclusion that we do speak in pre-patterned chunks. It thus becomes necessary to identify these chunks and learn to use them correctly.

Implications for ESL teaching

It is obvious that this shift of perspective has

consequences on language teaching. If lexis plays a major role in determining fluency, then lexis should be given increased attention. In fact, **one of the key principles of the lexical approach is that language teaching should raise students' awareness of language "chunking" and develop their ability to do it successfully.**

Such a demand, however, should not upset teachers. As Lewis says: "The change is a matter of emphasis not revolution" (*ibid.*, 1993), and "Implementing the Lexical Approach in your classes does not mean a radical upheaval... On the contrary, if introduced with thought and sensitivity, its introduction will be almost invisible". (*Implementing the Lexical Approach*, 1997)

Lewis does not reject the communicative approach. **Communicating meaning is still of paramount importance, only the main carrier of meaning is lexis rather than grammar.**

So, how can teachers be more sensitive to the lexical approach with just small methodological changes? For example, getting into the habit of recording adjective + noun, instead of noun alone, highlighting certain expressions as having a special evocative and generative status, exploring the environment in which words occur and emphasising the pronunciation of lexical chunks instead of individual words.

Lewis also suggests expanding activities based on L1/L2 comparison and translation, and resorting to the dictionary as a resource for active learning.

This last point is perhaps where Lewis distances himself most from the communicative approach. The role of L1 should be reconsidered, he claims. Learners inevitably tend to compare L1 and L2 and to translate from one language into the other. If this is a natural tendency, then why not try to exploit rather than suffocate it? For example, when helping learners recognize and use language chunks successfully, comparison with learners' L1 can be fruitful. Making learners aware of lexical items as whole units in their own mother tongue can help them chunk their second language too. **It is not a matter of word-for-word but of chunk-for-chunk comparison.** So, next time your students ask "How do you say X in English?", don't answer directly – even if it is an apparently "easy" word – but take the question as an opportunity to analyse the Italian word in all its meanings, collocations, fixed expressions, etc. Then compare all that to its corresponding English meanings, collocations, fixed expressions, etc. A good bilingual dictionary can be of help. What you will almost certainly discover is that **there is seldom a word-for-word correspondence.** You can hardly ever say: Italian word X = English word Y. **Correspondence depends on how you chunk language, not on single words.**

Introducing the lexical approach into your class: playing with words

We have seen that "turning lexical" does not necessarily imply a revolution in the class. There can be gradual introductions.

Here, for example, **we propose a few activities on lexis, some in the form of games.** We "wordaholics" are in fact convinced that playing with words is a very good way of enhancing language awareness. The activities have various levels of difficulty. You can choose the most suitable for your students (and you are invited to invent your own activities, of course). They can easily be incorporated into much of the work that can be done in the class, such as pre-reading or text-based tasks. Otherwise, they can also be used as spare-minute activities.

◆ The Collocation Domino

This game is suitable for B2 learners. It is based on "chains" of collocations: each word of the chain collocates with two other words (e.g. *public + interest* and *public + announcement*).

Here we have chosen an **Adjective + Noun chain (Chain A)**, and a **Verb + Object chain (Chain B)**, but any type of collocation (Verb + Adverb or Subject + Verb) can do.

Write each word of **Chain A** and **Chain B** on a small card. Divide your students into two groups, A and B, and place each group around a desk. Put the card with the first word of Chain A (*interest*) on group A's desk and the first word of Chain B (*to open*) on group B's desk. Give each group all the other cards of their chain. Tell them to place their cards next to one another like dominos. They have to form correct collocations. You can place the first domino yourself as an example. Let your students use a dictionary for help. At the end of the game, they should obtain a closed chain where the first word collocates with the last one. The first group to complete their chain wins.

Chain A: *interest – public – announcement – formal – language – foreign – affairs – home – match – tight – rope – long – hair – red – cheek – chubby – child – growing – (interest)*

Chain B: *to open – eyes – to lower – curtain – to draw – picture – to take – bus – to catch – flu – to prevent – fire – to set – film – to direct – traffic – to block – road – (to open)*

◆ The Three-piece Suite

This game is suitable for B1 learners. Each three-piece suite is composed of a noun and two adjectives. The two adjectives are opposite in meaning, and both of them make correct collocations with the noun. So, for each suite you can obtain two opposite lexical items (e.g. *close relative/distant relative*).

Write **a list of adjectives** on the left-hand side of the blackboard, and **a list of Adjective + Noun collocations** on the right-hand side, as suggested below. Tell your students they have to match the adjectives on the left to the items on the right to make pairs of items with opposite meaning. The student who finds the most correct three-piece suites wins.

indoor	distant relative
big	open meeting
domestic	near east
close	little brother
home	small town
closed	wild animal
far	international flight
	visiting team
	away match
	outdoor sport

It is important to notice that the adjectives on the left are fewer than the collocations on the right. This is because *big*, *domestic* and *home* have two possible collocations. Focus your students' attention on these adjectives, for they are a good demonstration of how the idea of "opposite" depends on context, so on how we chunk language. For instance, *big* is the opposite of *little* when it collocates with *brother*, but its opposite is *small* when it collocates with *town*. If you then compare these English collocations with their corresponding Italian collocations, you can show how dangerous a word-for-word translation can be. *Home* is translated *in casa* in *home match*, but *locale* in *home team*.

◆ The Animal Hunt

This is an exercise suitable for B2 students. It focuses on fixed idiomatic expressions with animal imagery. You can let your students use a dictionary for help.

Before starting, remind your students what an idiom is. In case you have not explained it yet, this is a good opportunity to introduce the concept. To put it in a nutshell, an idiom is a fixed group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of its components. For example, *to put it in a nutshell* in the above sentence is an idiom.

When your students have completed the exercise, it could be interesting to compare the English idioms with the corresponding Italian expressions. Does Italian use the same animal metaphor, or does it use animal metaphors at all? For example, Italians have elephants instead of bulls in china shops. And *for donkey's years* corresponds to *da un sacco di tempo*, so no animals here.

Complete the underlined idiomatic expressions with the correct animal.

donkey dog mouse horse snail cat bull

Ex.: Stop playing cat and mouse with him!

- In large cities traffic moves at pace.
- He has broken another vase – he is like a in a china shop!
- I've known him for 's years.
- He always treats him like a
- They are brothers, but they fight like and dog.
- I'm so hungry I could eat a!

◆ The Word Container

This exercise is suitable for B1 students. It focuses on a particular semantic field (containers). Students are required to find the most probable collocations.

Write the following words into the correct container.

*juice jam chocolates coke milk matches
beans pickles beer tomatoes honey yoghurt*

A box of

A carton of

A can of

A jar of

KEY TO THE ACTIVITIES

The Three-piece Suite

close/distant relative	domestic/wild animal
closed/open meeting	domestic/international flight
far/near east	home/visiting team
big/little brother	home/away match
big/small town	indoor/outdoor sport

The Animal Hunt

a. snail b. bull c. donkey d. dog e. cat f. horse

The Word Container

A box of: chocolates, matches; A carton of: juice, milk, yoghurt; A can of: coke, beans, beer, tomatoes; A jar of: jam, pickles, honey.

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Lexis, Lies and Videotape

by Hugh Cory

This article aims to present an overview and a brief analysis of some of the different kinds of chunks and to offer a couple of activities to allow the reader to explore these ideas.

I was looking for a snappy title for this article, and “Lexis, Lies and Videotape” came to mind. Titles are often chosen in this way, built around reference to some existing collocation – and variations on the film title *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (a collocation of sorts, almost a fixed phrase by now) have been used so often that they’ve become tiresome. Still, I’m using it anyway, even though the article is just about lexis. I’m sure I’ll be able to find some lies and videotape in due course.

This choice of title is an illustration of a principle behind the way we use language. Any language. This is just as true for Italian as it is for English. It’s not just when we’re looking for a snappy title that we reach for an existing collocation, it’s all the time. In the case of English, and especially informal spoken English, language is sometimes said to be composed of some 60% of ready-made “chunks” of language: collocations, idioms, lexical phrases, etc.

“The presence of multi-word units in natural data is so common that it has led one linguist, Sinclair (1987), to suggest that what he calls ‘the idiom principle’, the use of ready-made chunks (...) may well be the basic organising principle in language production. In turn, this suggests that the construction of free phrases ‘from scratch’ may form a less important part of oral production than we think...” (McCarthy, Vocabulary, OUP 1990, p.11)

Defining our terms

The terms that describe this phenomenon are many; they are not always very precise, and they often overlap in meaning.

- ◆ **Chunk.** A general term to include all kinds of **strong collocations**, **fixed phrases** and **semi-fixed phrases**.
- ◆ **Lexical item.** This term includes both single words and **multi-word items**. So when our students are learning English vocabulary, they are not just learning “words” – they are also learning multi-word items, i.e. “chunks”.
- ◆ **Multi-word item.** Although this lexical item is written as two or more words, in terms of meaning it is effectively just one “word”. Examples: adverbial phrases such as *on the other hand*; phrasal verbs such as *to get on with*; etc. Sometimes called “polywords”.
- ◆ **Lexical phrase.** A phrase that is sufficiently fixed that you could find it in a good dictionary. This term includes all lexical items, idioms, proverbs, etc.
- ◆ **Collocation.** Words that go together. A **strong collocation** is where the words like each other’s

company so well they are like those married couples where you always find them together. Sometimes there is no clear dividing line between a strong collocation and a **compound** or a **fixed phrase**. For instance, how would you analyse the following sentence?

I was working in a dead-end job for next to nothing, so when I was spotted by a talent scout from a modelling agency it was the chance of a lifetime.

Suggested analysis: all 5 underlined items are **collocations**; all 5 can be called **chunks**; the 3rd and 4th items are best described as **compounds**; the 2nd and the last are **fixed phrases**:

Different types of multi-word lexical items

One analysis (Moon, 1997) divides these items into:

- compounds
- fixed phrases
- phrasal verbs
- other prefabricated chunks of language
- idioms

◆ **Compounds** Whereas many compounds are written as one word (for example *workplace*, and the *videotape* promised in the title), others are hyphenated (*to fast-forward*) and many are written as two words (*cassette player*). In the following sentence, the underlined items illustrate that compounds don’t have to be nouns: can you find the compound adjective, compound adverb and compound verb?

The Prime Minister ruined his navy blue three-piece-suit when he hand-washed it peasant-style instead of taking it to the dry-cleaners.

One interesting thing about compound nouns is the problems they cause for Italian learners. Whereas German learners, for instance, have no problems at all here – they’re already more than at home with the idea you can just force two or three nouns together – for the Italian speaker there’s a subconscious rule that the first noun needs to either take an adjectival form or a genitive structure. As a result, PET candidates say they prefer “fantastic films” (fantasy films), family problems can become “familiar problems”, and the backstreets of Italian cities are sometimes lit with neon signs advertising “sexy shops” (sex shops). *Piazza Castello* and *il mercato dei fiori* will be systematically translated, by students uninitiated in the simplicity of English compound nouns, as *Castle’s Square* and *the flowers’ market*. Is there perhaps a “lexical” grammar rule that we are neglecting to teach here? To form a compound noun, you just stick two nouns together, keeping the first one

singular: *Castle Square, the flower market*. That's the basic rule, though it's not always quite so simple.

◆ **Phrasal verbs** Moon (1997) describes how these range from **transparent** combinations (e.g. *to break off, to write down*), through **completives** "where the particle reinforces the degree of the action denoted by the verb" (e.g. *to stretch out, to eat up*), to **opaque** combinations (e.g. *to butter up, to tick off*).

◆ **Idioms** Chambers Dictionary of Idioms defines idioms as "phrases that are wholly or partly fixed (...) and cannot be understood from the usual meaning of the individual words they contain." Traditionally the term has been applied to bizarre and often low-frequency items such as *to bury the hatchet*, and *that old chestnut* about *raining cats and dogs*. But for teaching purposes such colourful items are probably a bit of a *red herring*. More useful to students, and infinitely more frequent, are less colourful idioms such as *help yourself, you might as well* (do it), and *mind your own business*.

◆ **Fixed phrases** A general term covering a broad range of multi-word items, including items such as *of course* and *at least*, greetings (*How do you do*), proverbs and sayings (*out of sight out of mind*, once allegedly translated as "il pazzo invisibile").

There are also **semi-fixed phrases**, where one item can be substituted with others: *as far as* (I am / the Americans are / the rest of the world is) *concerned*, etc...

◆ **Other prefabricated chunks of language**

- *the thing/fact/point is, that reminds me, I'm a great believer in, to cut a long story short*
- *As I was saying earlier, ... / To digress for a moment, ... / Which brings me to my next point, ...*
- *Further to my letter of ... / I look forward to hearing from you*
- *That's all very well, but ... / I see what you mean, but ...*

Activities

• **Task 1.** Each of the items in **bold** in the text below is part of a larger lexical item – a fixed phrase, an idiom, a multi-word item, or a strong collocation. For each item, underline the rest of the "chunk". The first three items have been done as an example.

Anyone who claims they never lie is definitely lying. We all lie sometimes, whether it's a a little white lie so as not to hurt the feelings of a friend, or a tall tale to keep a guilty **secret** under **wraps**. Sometimes you need to lie just to **get on** with people. It happens more **often** than you think. In **fact**, a recent **study** found that we are economical with the **truth** in as **many** as one in four of our conversations. But how do we know when someone is lying to us? "Even an expert liar has his **achilles heel**," says Dr David Lieberman, "and with the right information you can spot

when you're being taken for a **ride**." So if you want to know whether your boyfriend's **cheating** on you, your boss is getting away with **murder**, or the shop **assistant** is having a **laugh** at your **expense**, read on...

slightly adapted from Isabel Burton: "How to Spot a Liar – Anywhere" in Cosmopolitan magazine

• **Task 2.** Match the items in column 1 with the "colloquial responses" in column 2 (after B.J. Thomas).

Set 1

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| A. Oh my God! We're all going to die! | 1. The more the merrier. |
| B. A seat belt <u>and</u> a safety helmet, in a FIAT 500? | 2. Famous last words! |
| C. Mine is richer than yours. | 3. Don't ask! |
| D. How was the match? Did you win? | 4. So what? |
| E. Can my sister come too? | 5. Pull yourself together! |
| F. It's simple, you just need to ask him. | 6. Go for it! |
| G. Do you think I should ask him? | 7. Easier said than done. |
| H. This is quite safe, you know. | 8. Better safe than sorry |

Set 2

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| I. Do you fancy running a marathon next week? | 9. You're telling me! |
| J. I'm not coming with you. | 10. You must be joking. |
| K. I can't come, I've got to plan my lessons. | 11. So far, so good. |
| L. How are you getting on? | 12. I'm none the wiser. |
| M. I was knocked out in the first round. | 13. How should I know? |
| N. That exam was quite difficult. | 14. Suit yourself. |
| O. ...and that is Chaos Theory in a nutshell. | 15. You can't win them all. |
| P. Who's the president of Turkey? | 16. Get a life! |

Task 1 - Answer key

a guilty secret / to keep a secret; to keep... under wraps; to get on with; more often than you think; in fact; a recent study; "(to be) economical with the truth" is a popular recent euphemism for lying; as many as; Achilles heel; (being) taken for a ride; cheating on; getting away with murder; shop assistant; having a laugh; at your expense; read on.

Task 2 - Suggested answers

Set 1: A5, B8, C4, D3, E1, F7, G6, H2.

Set 2: I10, J14, K16, L11, M15, N9, O12, P13.

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In a word

Some thoughts on learning, teaching and testing lexis

by David Gibbon

A question often asked to young would-be English teachers is what “knowing a word” means. As much as anything, this serves to alert them to the myriad traps that lie in wait for learners attempting to use even simple words in a foreign language. Nothing could be simpler than the name of a colour, could it? Green is green, after all. Grass is green, traffic lights turn green. Unfortunately so do people. But when they turn green, are they supporting an ecology party, feeling sick, peering at the neighbour’s new car through their curtains, or suffering the pangs of sexual jealousy, the notorious “green-eyed monster”? The answer is, of course, any of these, depending on the context. What this probably goes to show is that even with a basic lexical item, woe betide the student who tried to lock it up in a box labelled “I’ve learned that”.

Another variable learners may be tempted to underestimate is word order. If you said to students that the order of the words “She had long, straight, blonde hair and big, blue eyes” is critical, would they attach much importance to it and remember it, or just the picture of Claudia Schiffer it accompanies in the textbook? Probably the latter, unless you asked Italian learners, for instance, what the phrase “Aveva blu occhi grandi” sounds like in Italian, and how they would react to a foreigner saying that to them. This is often quite an eye-opener.

Among the many technical terms used to describe the lexical properties of words, synonymy and collocation seem perhaps more accessible and useful than, say, connotation or polysemy. Learners’ bilingual dictionaries often try to help by providing two or three synonyms for whatever the word is that the learner is looking up. But synonyms are real traps. The unwary male student attempting to make a good impression on an English girl by assuring her that she looked really

skinny in her new top would soon find out the connotational differences between that and *slim*. At a different level, translators grappling with intractable lexical items often refer to a thesaurus to get some idea of the range of synonyms available. Nowadays, this is made faster and easier by the availability of these tools on line. www.thesaurus.com gives you the answers from simply typing in the item you want synonyms for. In practice, odd things can happen, though. When I was recently doing a translation for an Italian multinational who wanted to emphasise their “apparato industriale solido” it was obvious that *apparatus* would not do the job in English. Typing it in produced some inadvertently hilarious results, including: *accoutrement, black box, contraption, device, dingbat, dohickey, dojiggy, doodad, fandangle, gaff, gear, gimcrack, gimmick, gizmo, grabber, idiot box, implement, jigger, paraphernalia, stuff, sucker, tackle, thingamajig, thingamajigger, whatchamacallit, whatsis, whosis, widget*. So, “solid industrial fandangle”? No, none of these had quite the combination of gravity and technical competence I was looking for so I had, reluctantly, to go for a “solid industrial machine”. But when a native speaker looks up a word in a thesaurus, s/he is thrown back on collocational knowledge – the items that co-occur frequently. At the most basic level, learning that *ascoltare* means *listen* is a useless piece of knowledge, which will result in that teeth-grindingly common “I like listen music in my free time”. *Ascoltare* means *listen to* and learning *listen* without *to* is like buying a bicycle with one wheel. Collocation, of course, is often felt by teachers to come into play at higher levels and be more concerned with things like adjective-noun combinations or verb-noun “chunks”. A typical exercise for testing such things comes from the British Chamber of Commerce for Italy Entry Level examination (B1).

Match each verb in column A with a phrase in column B that it is commonly used with, by drawing a line. Use each verb once only.

The example “introduce → me to your charming wife” has been done for you.

A	B
show	for this lunch with my credit card
introduce	you around our new premises
pay	you home for dinner
invite	you a coffee before the meeting
offer	me to your charming wife

The expression “chunks” used above is borrowed, of course, from the *Lexical Approach*, Michael Lewis’ influential work, in which he postulates that much language consists of multi-word chunks, so that native speakers are not so much applying collocational rules as using ready-made building blocks, which in most cases other native speakers are able to recognise and reconstruct without even really needing to hear how the speaker actually finishes the chunk.

This implies that a central element of teaching should be raising our learners’ awareness of the presence of chunks and hence their ability to use these building blocks themselves.

Evidence of the existence of these chunks can be found on another fascinating website for English learners, or teachers, for that matter:

<http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>

Here you have access to a corpus of 56 million words to check whether a certain collocation or chunk is really a common part of the language. Say you were tempted in a translation by the phrase “followed the rails” – a literal translation of a phrase meaning *achieve success in a similar way to other companies*. The corpus would reject this as non-occurring, but “path” would give you “follow a well-travelled path” – a much better translation.

As a parting shot, I’d like to look at a feature of English which is quite distinctive, but which is not often dealt with in EFL textbooks. It is our system of verbs referring to the senses.

Some European languages do not have verbs equivalent to *it looks/smells nice* but employ phrase like *it has a pleasant appearance/perfume* so the three-way distinction we can make in English, which I originally came across in Frank Palmer’s “Grammar”, is sometimes new to them. Here is a little exercise to focus their attention on this, which I hope may be useful.

MAKING SENSE

Look at these three sentences:

1. The flat looks horrible now, but wait till I redecorate it.
2. Red is not a good colour to write with, because some people can’t see it.
3. Why are you looking at me in such an angry way?

Which sentence describes:

1. A physical ability.
2. A conscious use of one of your senses.
3. The impression something (or someone) creates.

So, for the sense of sight we have:



1. see
2. look
3. look

Now, fill in the missing verbs for the other senses:



1.
2. taste
3.



1. hear
2.
3.



1.
2.
3. feel



1. smell
2.
3.

MAKING SENSE – keys

Sentences: 1-3; 2-1; 3-2

Verbs for the other senses: 1. taste, 2. taste, 3. taste; 1. hear, 2. listen, 3. sound; 1. feel, 2. feel, 3. feel; 1. smell, 2. smell, 3. smell.

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Teaching ESP: a problem shared

by Barbara Bettinelli

The teaching of English has become increasingly associated with the teaching of other subjects. Observable trends indicate that the speed of information transfer between disciplines is increasing. Traditionally, ESP has not enjoyed the same status as, for example, the teaching of Literature or even General English. However, things have changed and in the past few years we have witnessed a high demand for subject-specific ESP.

What is ESP?

ESP is not a matter of teaching *specialised varieties of English*. The fact that the language is used for a specific purpose does not imply that it is a special form of the language, different in kind from other forms.

ESP is not just a matter of hotel words and a grammar for hotel staff, or science words and grammar for scientists. We need to distinguish, as Chomsky did with regard to grammar, between *performance* and *competence*, that is between what people actually do with the language and the range of knowledge and abilities which enables them to do it.

ESP is not different in kind from any other form of language teaching, in that it should be based in the first instance on principles of effective and efficient learning.

ESP must be seen as an approach not as a product: it is not a particular type of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. It is an approach to language learning which is based on learner need. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: *Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language?* ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning.

What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need. Thus, although it may appear on the surface that ESP is characterised by its content (Science, Commerce, Tourism, etc.) this is in fact only a secondary consequence of being able to readily specify why the learners need English. We can make a basic distinction between *target needs*, what the learners need to do in a target situation, and *learning needs*, what they need to do in order to learn.

Teachers should also take into account the learners' existing knowledge, so they can decide what the learner lacks. The target proficiency, in other words, needs to be matched against the existing proficiency of the learners. Learners use their existing knowledge to make the new information comprehensible. The learners existing knowledge is, therefore, a vital element in the success or failure of learning and the good teacher will consequently try to establish and exploit what learners already know.

A particular problem in ESP is the mismatch between the learners' conceptual and cognitive capacities and their linguistic levels. In mother tongue learning the two develop together but in second language learning they are grossly out of focus: the learners' knowledge of their subject specialism may be of a very high level, while their linguistic knowledge may be very limited.

Teachers should also remember that the learners, too, have a view as to what their needs and wants are, and it is quite possible that their views will conflict with the perceptions of other interested parties, course designers, teachers, etc.

If it is true that the learners' needs and wants should be the starting point of all ESP courses, we have to acknowledge that, at the current time, a truly learner-centred approach does not really exist. Since most learning takes place within institutionalised systems, it is difficult to see how such an approach could be taken, as it more or less rules out pre-determined syllabuses, materials, etc.

In the institutionalised frameworks in which most teaching takes place, we must accept the predetermined syllabus as a fact of life, but we can look at it as a working document that should be used flexibly and appropriately to maximise the products and processes of learning. It should be used in a *dynamic way* so that methodological considerations such as interests, enjoyment and learner involvement, can influence the content of the course.

What is the role of the ESP teacher?

Although the learners and their needs are the starting point in designing an ESP course, the role of the ESP teacher should also be given great attention as there are important practical ways in which the work of the General English teacher and the ESP teacher differ.

The first way in which ESP teaching differs from General English teaching is that the great majority of ESP teachers have not been trained as such.

They need, therefore, to orientate themselves to a new environment for which they have generally been ill-prepared.

ESP teachers may also have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience. Teachers who have been trained for General English or for the teaching of Literature may suddenly find themselves teaching with texts whose content they know little or nothing about and this can result in a feeling of inadequacy. But does the ESP teacher need to understand the subject matter of ESP materials?

Taken in isolation, the answer to this question must be “yes”. But we need to look at this in a broader context. We need to ask ourselves two important questions:

- a) does the content of ESP material need to be highly specialised?
- b) what kind of knowledge is required of the ESP teacher?

Does the content of ESP material need to be highly specialised?

There is little linguistic justification for having highly specialised texts. In fact, experts in the field feel that a successful ESP course does not necessarily imply a strict and blind adherence to the students’ major field of interest in terms of material content. There may well be a heavier load of specialised material, but this need not make it more difficult to understand. In short, the linguistic knowledge needed to comprehend the specialised text is little different from that required to comprehend the general text.

The difference in comprehension lies in the subject knowledge, not the language knowledge.

In fact, some argue that the less specific an ESP course is, the more likely it is to suit the learners’ wants and desires, and therefore the more effective in terms of language proficiency.

This is particularly relevant to the situation of institutionalised ESP courses in Italy, where students still have a limited mastery of General English when they start their ESP classes and need help with standard forms of English to communicate with people on an everyday life basis.

What kind of knowledge is required of the ESP teacher?

ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist subject knowledge. They require three things only:

- a positive attitude towards ESP content;
- a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject areas;
- an awareness of how much they probably already know.

In other words, the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather an interested student of the subject matter. The learners are the experts in the subject specialism while the teacher is the language expert. The learners need their teacher’s help to improve their language skills and the teacher needs the learners’ co-operation when working with specialised texts.

One final point to note is that, as with learners’ needs, teacher knowledge is not a static commodity. Many ESP teachers are surprised to know how much knowledge of the subject matter they pick up by teaching the materials or talking to the students.

If there is to be a meaningful communication in the classroom, it is essential that there is a common fund of knowledge between teacher and learner. This implies inevitably that the ESP teacher must know something about the subject matter of the ESP materials. However, this is not a one-way movement, with the teacher having to learn highly specialised subject matter. Instead it should involve negotiation, where text subject matter takes account of the teacher’s existing knowledge and at the same time efforts are made to help the teacher to acquire some basic knowledge about the subject.

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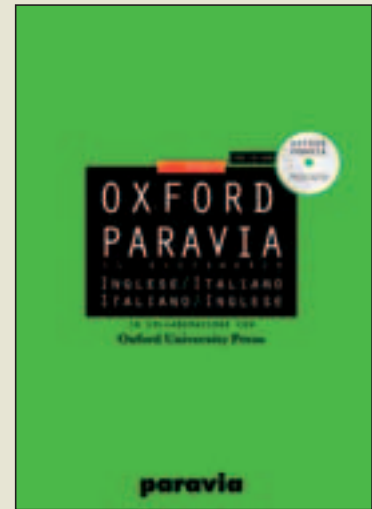
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