

DRAFT

From phraseology to pedagogy: Challenges and prospects

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1. Introduction

John Sinclair's model of language is firmly centred on a contextual approach to meaning capable of accounting for "the contextually sensitive relationships that are contracted in actual text" (Sinclair 2004a: 278). This approach stands in sharp contrast to semantic models that view meaning as inherent in words, a view which Sinclair considers incapable of doing justice to the richness of meaning: « The subtlety and flexibility of meaning that is so characteristic of its everyday use is regularized and sanitised to make the words stable nodes in a network that is far removed from their textual origins » (ibid: 278). By contrast, in Sinclair's contextual approach to meaning, « A word may have many potential meanings, but its actual meaning in any authentic written or spoken text is determined by its context: its collocations, structural patterns, and pragmatic functions » (Krishnamurthy 2006).

The two major corollaries of Sinclair's contextual approach – the interdependence of lexis and grammar and the idiom principle – constitute a major challenge for linguistic theory, language description and all language applications, but in no field is the challenge more acute than in foreign language learning and teaching. Both Sinclair's contextual approach and Hoey's (2005) theory of 'lexical priming', which builds upon it, see each word form as having its own phraseology, viz. its preferred collocations, colligations, semantic prosody, syntactic positioning, etc. This fine-grained approach is extremely useful for explaining learners' difficulties, as learners – even advanced ones - are susceptible to getting things wrong at any of these levels. However, it also lays a heavy burden on teachers who usually have limited time to teach a syllabus where vocabulary is measured in breadth as well as (and in some cases, more than) depth of knowledge. The gap between the fine-grained corpus-driven analysis of words (cf. e.g. the analysis of the phrasal verb *set in* in Sinclair 1991: 70-75 or the verb *maintain* in Hunston 2002: 139-140) and the reality of the classroom is dauntingly wide and has so far not been given the attention it deserves. Lewis's (1993, 2000, 2002) Lexical Approach has admittedly opened up exciting new avenues for pedagogical implementation and created an upsurge of interest in lexical approaches to teaching. However, the diverging interpretations of the very concept of lexical approach and the very forceful pronouncements found in the literature are liable to create confusion in the minds of teachers and materials designers and may even end up being less rather than more efficient in learning terms. This chapter is an effort to reconcile Sinclair's contextual approach and the realities of the

teaching/learning environment. In section 2, I start by defining the lexical approach and circumscribing its scope before highlighting what I view as its major strengths and weaknesses (section 3). Section 4 describes three major challenges to the pedagogical implementation of the lexical approach - methodology, terminology and selection – and focuses more particularly on the potential contribution of learner corpora. Section 5 draws together the threads of the discussion and offers pointers for future research.

2. Lexical approach to teaching: definition and scope

Although Lewis's Lexical Approach shares many fundamental principles with communicative approaches to language teaching, it differs from them in several respects. In Lewis's (1993: iv) own words, "[t]he most important difference is the increased understanding of the nature of lexis in naturally occurring language, and its potential contribution to language pedagogy". His approach aims to mark a clear departure from structural grammar-based syllabuses and shift the focus to lexis, a component which, unlike the traditional 'vocabulary', gives pride of place to multi-word prefabricated chunks. Like Sinclair, Lewis defends the decoupling of grammar and lexis, a position which he expresses in what has become one of the most quoted statements in applied lexical studies and which he himself presents as his "refrain", viz. that "language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar" (1993: 89).

The preceding brief outline might give the impression that the Lexical Approach is a well-defined unified approach. Nothing could be further from the truth. A survey of the literature shows that the term covers markedly diverging realities and confirms Harwood's (2002: 139) own conclusion that "'Lexical approach' is a term bandied about by many, but, I suspect, understood by few". This is probably due to the fact that Lewis (2002: 204) does not consider the Lexical Approach as "a new all-embracing method, but a set of principles based on a new understanding of language". His list of 20 key principles (1993: vi-vii) contains some fairly uncontroversial principles which most proponents of lexical approaches are likely to adhere to, but also contains some more radical statements that are implicitly or explicitly rejected by a number of them. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Harwood feels the need to point out that his understanding of the term 'lexical approach' is not exactly the same as Lewis's although he does not explicitly say where the differences lie.

Among the principles on which there is no general consensus are Lewis's pronouncements on grammar. In his 1993 book, he is extremely critical of grammar, proposing "a greatly diminished role for what is usually understood by 'grammar teaching'" (p. 149), underlining "the dubious value of grammar explanations" and advising teachers to treat them "with some scepticism" (p. 184). In a later publication, however, he expresses a more qualified view, saying: "The Lexical Approach suggests the content and role of grammar in language courses needs to be radically revised but the Approach in no way denies the value of grammar, nor its unique role in language" (2002: 41). The revision of the grammar syllabus involves introducing as lexical phrases a large number of phenomena that used to be treated as part of sentence grammar: "The Lexical Approach implies a decreased role for sentence grammar, at least until post-intermediate

levels. In contrast, it involves an increased role for word grammar (collocation and cognates) and text grammar (supra-sentential features)” (Lewis 1993: 3). Although Lewis (ibid: 146) cites phenomena like the passive or reported speech as items that “could unquestionably be deleted”, he does not give a precise list of the candidates for shifting and the contours of the reduced sentence grammar component remain very hazy. In spite of that, the principle has been taken over by several proponents of the lexical approach. Porto (1998), for example, lists the following phenomena as candidates for shift from grammar to lexis: first, second, and third conditionals; the passive; reported speech; the –*ing* form; the past participle; and *will*, *would*, and *going to*; irregular past tense forms; and the concept of time which “may be most efficiently presented as lexis rather than tense”. No arguments are given that justify the selection of these phenomena and it is interesting to note that other authors make quite different selections. Lowe (2003), for example, suggests keeping core tenses in his slimmed-down core grammar component.

Other ELT specialists, however, have a much more moderate stance on the grammar/lexis issue. Woolard (2000: 45), for example, does not advocate a major shift from sentence grammar to word grammar but presents the two as complementary: “A word grammar approach complements the traditional approach to grammar by directing the students’ attention to the syntactic constraints on the use of lexis. (...) Both approaches, then, are essential components of grammatical competence”. Similarly, Harwood (2002: 148) warns against “an iconoclastic call to abandon all grammar activities” and simply calls “for the teaching of lexis to come higher up the agenda”.

There is clearly much to be gained from a more lexical approach to grammar. To take but one example, the strict separation of grammar and lexis has resulted in a highly limited presentation of modality, with a near-exclusive focus on modal auxiliaries at the expense of equally, if not more, common lexical expressions of modality such as *it is possible that*, *there’s a chance that*, *it may be necessary*. However, shifts from grammar to lexis cannot be made simply as a matter of principle. Like Lowe (2003), I believe that there is still a place for sentence grammar, a grammar core, which provides a useful organizing principle for learners.

Although there are several versions of the lexical approach, Lewis’s model is undoubtedly the one that has been most extensively described. As it is also the most influential, it is this model that we will take as reference point to describe the pros and cons of a lexical approach to teaching.

3. Lexical approach: pros and cons

In this section I list what I view as the major strengths and weaknesses of the lexical approach. By offering a non-partisan view of this approach, I hope to contribute constructively to the debate surrounding it and help counter-balance the somewhat over-optimistic and at times downright dogmatic statements found in the literature.

3.1. Pros

3.1.1. Wide phraseological approach

The major advantage of the lexical approach is its close fit with contextual models of language (Sinclair's model, construction grammar, pattern grammar) that integrate the intertwining of lexis and grammar and give phraseology a more central role in language than was previously the case. The days when phraseology was viewed as a peripheral component of language are dead and gone. Corpus-based studies have uncovered a "huge area of syntagmatic prospection" (Sinclair 2004), which contains a much wider range of units than the highly fixed non-compositional units – idioms, proverbs, phrasal verbs – that used to constitute the main focus of attention. This wide view of phraseology includes "a large stock of recurrent word-combinations that are seldom completely fixed but can be described as 'preferred' ways of saying things – more or less conventionalized building blocks that are used as convenient routines in language production" (Altenberg 1998: 121-122). The relevance of this wide view of phraseology for teaching is demonstrated by Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992), who describe the essential functions of conventionalized lexical phrases in discourse, both spoken and written, and suggest ways of incorporating them into teaching.

3.1.2. Fluency

Incorporating a wide view of phraseology into teaching comes down to giving fluency a higher priority in teaching. As pointed out by Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992: 32), "[i]t is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us speak with fluency". According to Porto (1998), mastery of lexical phrases is likely to boost motivation as it allows learners to express themselves in the absence of rich linguistic resources: « Lexical phrases prove highly motivating by developing fluency at very early stages and thus promote a sense of achievement ». Although the impact of lexical phrases on fluency is mostly related to speech, several authors also highlight their role in promoting fluency in writing (Howarth 1999, Gilquin et al 2007, Coxhead 2008). This said, the incorporation of lexical phrases into teaching will only be fully justified once we have a better grasp of their role in foreign/second language acquisition and production. Several recent psycholinguistic studies have begun to lift the veil on this complex issue (Schmitt 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt 2008, Conklin & Schmitt 2008) and shown its relevance for teaching (Ellis et al forthcoming).

3.1.3. Accuracy

Recognition of the difficulty in mastering the contextually appropriate use of words goes back a long way. One of the eight assumptions of lexical competence in Richards' seminal 1976 article deals explicitly with this type of knowledge: « Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words we also « know » the sort of words most likely to be found associated with the word » (p. 79). Collocation is explicitly mentioned, with examples of adjectives commonly used with nouns like *fruit (ripe, green, sweet, bitter)* or *meat (tender, tough)*. Hoey (2005: 8) explains this type of knowledge in terms of the process of lexical

priming: “We can only account for collocation if we assume that every word is mentally **primed** for collocational use. As a word is acquired through encounters with it in speech and writing, it becomes cumulatively loaded with the contexts and co-texts in which it is encountered, and our knowledge of it includes the fact that it co-occurs with certain other words in certain kinds of context”. This process occurs naturally and gradually for native speakers but the situation is quite different for non-native speakers who lack the necessary exposure for words to be successfully primed. The difficulties encountered by learners were highlighted by proponents of both Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis and numerous examples given of both interlingual and intralingual errors as well as mixtures of the two, a phenomenon that Dechert & Lennon (1989) refer to as ‘blends’. Far from being a difficulty limited to lower level learners, collocations have been proved to be a major difficulty at advanced levels (Nesselhauf 2005). One of the advantages of the lexical approach is that by attaching more importance to word selection, it is likely to improve this aspect of learners’ lexical accuracy more than previous non-lexical approaches (cf. Conzett 2000).

3.1.4. Ease of learning

In Sinclair’s (2004a: 274) view, one of the positive outcomes of the contextual approach to meaning is that it is likely to facilitate language learning: “If a more accurate description eliminates most of the apparent ambiguities, the language should be easier to learn because the relationship between form and meaning will be more transparent”. This idea is taken up by many proponents of the lexical approach. Porto (1998), for example, states that “[f]requency of occurrence and context association make lexical phrases highly memorable for learners and easy to pick up”. Lewis (2000: 133) goes further and claims that memorability is enhanced by the length of the phrase: “The larger the chunks are which learners originally acquire, the easier the task of re-producing natural language later”. The main argument behind this assertion is that it is easier to deconstruct a chunk than to construct it: “We have already seen that learners acquire most efficiently by learning wholes which they later break into parts, for later novel re-assembly, rather than by learning parts and then facing a completely new task, building those parts into wholes” (Lewis 2002: 190). On this basis, he gives the following advice to teachers: “don’t break language down too far in the false hope of simplifying; your efforts, even if successful in the short term, are almost certainly counterproductive in terms of long-term acquisition” (Lewis 2000: 133). Strong assertions on the ease of learning afforded by the lexical approach abound in the literature and many – though by far not all – sound intuitively right. However, it is important to note that at this stage they are more like professions of faith as validation studies are very rare. Studies like those of Tremblay et al (2008) and Ellis et al (forthcoming) that demonstrate the effect of frequency of word sequences on ease of acquisition and production are still quite rare. At this stage, therefore, ease of learning cannot entirely be taken for granted.

3.2. Cons

3.2.1. Generative power

Within the lexical approach, “phrases acquired as wholes are the primary resource by which the syntactic system is mastered” (Lewis (1993: 95). This assertion, frequently found in the Lexical Approach literature, is based on L1 acquisition studies which have demonstrated that children first acquire chunks and then progressively analyse the underlying patterns and generalize them into regular syntactic rules (Wray 2002). According to Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992: 27), there is no reason to believe that L2 acquisition works differently: “The research above concerns the language acquisition of children in fairly natural learning situations. Because of infrequent studies of adult learners in similar situations, the amount of prefabricated speech in adult acquisition has never been determined. However, there is no reason to think that adults would go about the task completely differently”. Similarly, Lewis (1993: 25), while recognizing that the question is a contentious one, argues that “it seems more reasonable to assume that the two processes are in some ways similar than to assume that they are totally different”. In fact, there are very good reasons for doubting that L2 acquisition functions in the same way as child acquisition in this respect. One major reason is that L2 learners do not usually get the amount of exposure necessary for the ‘unpacking’ process to take place. In her overview of findings on formulaicity in SLA, Wray (2002: 148) notes that formulaic sequences do not seem to contribute to the mastery of grammatical forms. While lexical phrases are likely to have some generative role in L2 learning, it would be a foolhardy gamble to rely primarily on the generative power of lexical phrases. Pulverness (2007: 182-183) is right to point to the “risk of the so-called ‘phrasebook effect’, whereby lexical items accumulate in an arbitrary way, and learners are saddled with an ever-expanding lexicon without the generative power of a coherent structural syllabus to provide a framework within which to make use of all the lexis they are acquiring”. Lowe (2003) insists on the crucial role played by a process akin to ‘cobbling together’, especially amongst L2 learners: “The less expert we are, the more makeshift is our speech”. The most sensible course, as rightly pointed out by Wray (2002: 148), is to maintain “a balance between formulaicity and creativity”.

3.2.2. Depth vs breadth

One of the distinctive characteristics of the lexical approach is its focus on depth rather than breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Sinclair & Renouf’s (1988: 155) “lexical syllabus”, which was developed alongside the Cobuild dictionary and can be considered as the precursor of the Lexical Approach, “does not encourage the piecemeal acquisition of a large vocabulary, especially initially. Instead, it concentrates on making full use of the words that the learner already has, at any particular stage”. For Woolard (2000: 31), “learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations”. In her highly influential article on lexical teddy-bears, Hasselgren (1994) deplores the way that the most frequent words in the language are learnt early in just one or two primary meanings and subsequently neglected in the foreign language curriculum, leaving learners largely unaware of their numerous (semi-) prefabricated uses. Fleshing out these common words is thus a very welcome development. But how deep can one afford to be in view of the fact that the requirements of teaching programmes are often formulated in terms of breadth rather than depth and in a context where teachers usually have a very limited number of teaching hours at their

disposal? Sinclair (2004a: 282) is well aware of “the risk of a combinatorial explosion, leading to an unmanageable number of lexical items” and Harwood (2002: 142) explicitly warns against “learner overload”, insisting that “implementing a lexical approach requires a delicate balancing act” between exploiting the richness of fine-grained corpus-derived descriptions and keeping the learning load at a manageable level.

4. Implementation of the lexical approach

Successful implementation of the lexical approach requires that progress be made on the following three fronts: (1) clear description of effective classroom methodology; (2) design of a pedagogically-oriented terminology of multi-word units; and (3) consideration of a range of criteria beside frequency when it comes to selecting lexical phrases for teaching. I will tackle each of these challenges in turn and describe the role that learner corpora can play in addressing them.

4.1. Methodology

In his review of Lewis’s *Teaching Collocation* volume, Barfield (2001: 415) concludes that “the picture that Lewis presents is of an exciting pedagogic challenge”. What makes the challenge particularly tough is that Lewis introduces a wide range of activities that can help teachers implement the lexical approach, describes activities that teachers are strongly advised not to use, but “we are never presented with a comprehensive syllabus based around a lexical approach that Lewis *does* approve of” (Harwood 2002: 148). For Rogers (2000) “Lexical phraseology is an approach in search of a methodology”. Teachers are left with many unanswered questions regarding the operationalization of the approach, such as the following ones formulated by Rogers (2000): “Is massive memorization possible or recommended? Is prolonged immersion in an L2 environment the only answer?” More generally, is the change advocated by Lewis a radical or a moderate one? In this connection Lewis’s writings are far from clear. His 1993 book clearly points to the necessity of a radical change: “It is difficult to grasp immediately the **enormity** of the changes implied by the perception of lexis as central to language. It is much more **radical** than any suggestion that there are a few multi-word items which have in the past been overlooked [my emphasis]” (p. 104). His later 2002 statement passes over a lot of the ambiguity on this issue as he claims both that “Implementing the Lexical Approach in your classes does not mean a radical upheaval” and that “Implementation may involve a radical change of mindset, and suggest many changes in classroom procedure” (Lewis 2002: 3). The ambiguity probably comes from the fact that Lewis wants to leave the door open for both a strong and a weak implementation of the lexical approach, though there is little doubt that the strong version has his preference (2002: 12-16).

In my view, the most exciting methodological contribution of the lexical approach, in both its weak and strong versions, is its promotion of language awareness activities. Lewis’s publications contain a wealth of innovative types of exercises which aim to make learners aware of the existence of chunks, viz apply to lexical phrases the

type of discovery learning advocated by Johns (1986) and many others after him. Numerous studies have reported success in implementing these methods in a variety of teaching contexts and have further extended the battery of exercise types (cf. e.g. Woolard 2000, Conzett 2000, Kavaliauskienė & Janulevičienė 2001, Hamilton 2001, Deveci 2004). However, here too one might speak of a strong and a weak version. For Lewis, these methods are meant to replace the previous teacher-led methodology: “The Lexical Approach totally rejects the Present-Practise-Produce paradigm advocated within the behaviourist learning model; it is replaced by the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cyclical paradigm” (Lewis 1993: 6). For many, however, these techniques are a complement to the battery of existing techniques. Divergences are particularly strong as regards grammar. While Lewis considers grammar to be primarily receptive (ibid: 149) and is extremely critical of full-frontal grammar teaching, Willis (2003: 42) considers that there is a place for explicit grammar instruction: “different aspects of the grammar demand different learning processes and different instructional strategies. The grammar of structure, for example, is very much rule governed and instruction can provide a lot of support for system building ».

4.2. Terminology

Although phraseology has always been “a field bedevilled by the proliferation of terms and by conflicting uses of the same term” (Cowie 1998: 210), the widening of the field spurred by Sinclair’s corpus-driven approach has further compounded the situation: “The recent interest in lexis in language teaching has exposed an embarrassingly broad range of categories which, while incontrovertibly linguistic entities, have no names” (Sinclair 2004a : 273). Although Sinclair is of the opinion that “We need a new way of talking about lexical choices, rather than a terminology” (ibid: 285), many foreign language learning specialists have felt the need for “a workable framework for classifying them” (Meehan 2004). Not all ELT specialists agree though. Some argue that there is no need to break down the all-embracing notion of ‘lexical phrase’ as defined, for example, by Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992: 1): “multi-word lexical phenomena....which are conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than the language that is put together each time”. Kavaliauskienė & Janulevičienė (2001), for example, explicitly state that « It is unimportant if students do not know which category a lexical item belongs to ». Many, however, explicitly or implicitly recognize the need for a terminology but in the absence of an established typology are reduced to inventing their own and the categories used are often more confusing than helpful. This inconsistency is also found in dictionaries. Gabrielatos (2005a) notes that the lexical phrase *in the vicinity* is presented as an idiom, an expression and a collocation in different dictionaries.

Due to the long-time dominance of grammar in language teaching, the metalanguage used in textbooks is largely grammatical. Most learners are exposed at one time or other in their curriculum to terms referring to word categories (noun, adverb, preposition, adverb) and subcategories (countable vs uncountable noun), tenses (present perfect, simple past), voice (active vs passive voice), and a great many others. For lexis, the repertoire is much more limited and, unlike that used for grammar, differs widely from one textbook to another (cf. Gouverneur 2008). Now that lexis has come to occupy

a more dominant position in teaching, it would be very helpful to both teachers and learners to have access to a sound pedagogically-oriented terminology of multi-word units. I fully agree with Lewis (2000: 129) that we need to “think about the kind of terminology which will be helpful for learners. Introducing unnecessary jargon into the classroom is intimidating and unhelpful to learners, but the careful introduction and regular use of a few well-chosen terms can be helpful and save a lot of time over the length of a course for both teacher and learner”. The successive typologies he put forward in his three major publications (1993, 2000, 2002) bear testimony to the difficulty of the task and the establishment of a helpful pedagogical terminology of multi-word units remains one of the major desiderata for the future. To be maximally effective this terminology should cover the full spectrum of multi-word units, from the most fixed to the loosest ones, and follow a number of principles, among which the following four strike me as especially important:

- (a) Whatever the terminology used, list the criteria that have been used to identify/select the multi-word units;
- (b) Distinguish clearly between linguistic and distributional categories;
- (c) Avoid using the same terms to refer to quite different types of unit;
- (d) Choose the level of granularity that best fits the teaching objectives.

Principle (b) aims to avoid typologies that mix up terms and criteria pertaining to the traditional approach to phraseology, viz. linguistic criteria of semantic non-compositionality, syntactic fixedness and lexical restriction, with the terminology used in the Sinclair-inspired distributional approach to refer to quantitatively-defined units, i.e. units identified on the basis of measures of recurrence and co-occurrence (for more details, see Granger & Paquot 2008).

4.3. Selection

4.3.1. Criteria

“Pedagogically the main problem with phrases is that there are so many of them”. This statement by Willis (2003: 166) points to one of the biggest challenges of the lexical approach, i.e. the selection of lexical phrases. The criterion that occupies a clearly dominant position in the lexical approach is corpus-based frequency. Corpora make it possible to identify “the common uses of the common words” that a lexical syllabus should focus on (Sinclair & Renouf 1988: 154). There is no denying that frequency is a crucial criterion. Far too much teaching time is wasted on words and phrases that are not even worth bringing to learners’ attention for receptive purposes, let alone for productive purposes. There is much to gain from teaching high-frequency words such as the high frequency verbs *see* or *give* (ibid: 151-153) in all their richness rather than focusing exclusively on their primary meanings. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is no such thing as generic frequency. Hugon (2008) reminds us that frequency ranking varies in function of the overall composition of the corpus from which it is derived.

Proponents of the lexical approach make no claim that “frequency of occurrence is the only relevant factor” (Sinclair & Renouf 1988: 148). Sinclair (2004a: 275) mentions “different criteria such as complexity and familiarity” but clearly presents them

as secondary to frequency, i.e. as a way of arranging “initial frequency-based listings” (ibid). The interplay between frequency and the many other factors that should be heeded in vocabulary selection is hardly ever tackled. As represented in Figure 1, frequency needs to be counter-balanced by at least three other factors: learner variables, learnability and teachability.

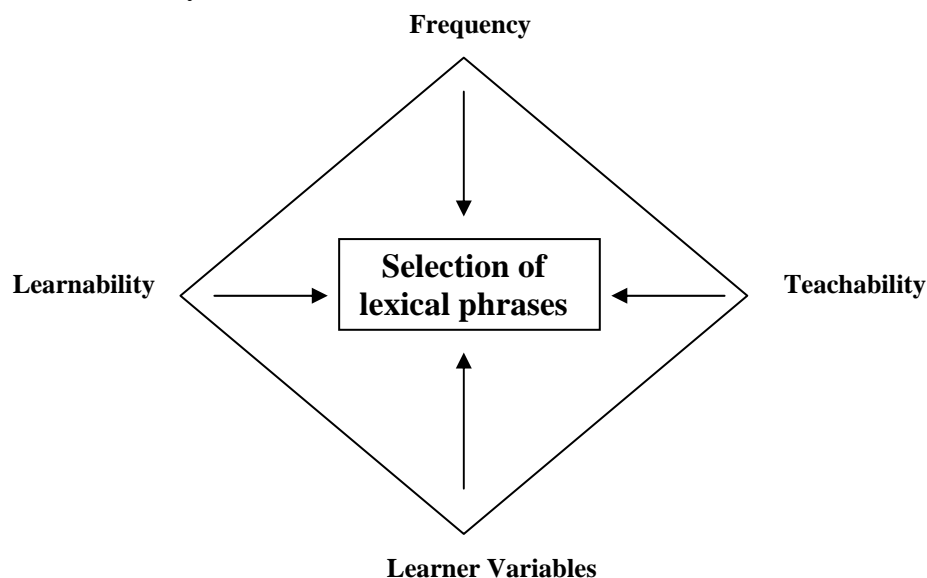


Figure 1: Criteria for the selection of lexical phrases

Second language acquisition research has uncovered a wide range of variables that prove to have a strong influence on language learning. Among these are age, social distance, aptitude, motivation, learning style (analytic vs holistic), L1 and the linguistic distance between L1 and L2, proficiency level, amount of L2 exposure and learning needs, in particular learners’ targeted accuracy level. These variables are largely disregarded in studies of the learner phrasicon: “research has tended to assume that the ‘learner’ label overrides all others, so that individuals who would easily be acknowledged as different in aspects of their L1 behaviour and, indeed, different in all other respects in their L2 learning, suddenly become a homogeneous group when it comes to formulaicity” (Wray (2002: 144). To be maximally effective, the lexical approach needs to be fine-tuned in function of these variables.

The issue of learnability should also be brought into the equation. Myles (2002) concludes her survey of SLA research by pointing out that “There is still a huge gap – not surprisingly, given the limits of our knowledge – between the complementary agendas of understanding the psycholinguistic processes involved in the construction of L2 linguistic systems, and understanding what makes for effective classroom teaching” (Myles 2002). This is particularly true of phraseology, probably due to the fact that research on the processing and storage of multiword units by L2 learners is in its early stages. The issue of memorization is particularly crucial. Although several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of memorization (Wray & Fitzpatrick 2008: 124-125),

more research is needed to establish “the part memory plays in second-language learning, and whether (and under what conditions) memorised language becomes analysed language” (Thornbury 1998: 13).

Finally, there is the issue of teachability. Lowe (2003) wonders what implications “the massively increased lexical load” has for teaching methodology: “If there is all this extra stuff to learn as fixed expression, are we implying that repetition and role-learning may regain a place in the pantheon of teachers’ tools?” One key to the problem, suggested by Lowe himself, resides in making a sharp difference between teaching for productive vs receptive purposes. Another important factor to consider is the type of multiword unit. Grant & Bauer (2004) highlight the differences between figurative and non-figurative phrases and demonstrate that the two categories call for different teaching methods. While figurative idioms like *he’s a small fish in a big pond* can be unpicked by drawing learners’ attention to the underlying metaphor, different methods need to be used for non-figurative idioms like *red herring* or *he’s not swinging the lead* (cf. Grant & Bauer 2004) and other categories not mentioned by the authors, notably collocations and lexical bundles. More generally, in the absence of a well-defined methodological framework which does justice to both the creative and holistic aspects of language, it is probably wise to integrate the lexical approach progressively via “mini-action programmes” (Lewis (2000: 153), i.e. local experiments integrated into the teachers’ preferred and/or imposed teaching curriculum. In this connection, a resource that may contribute to a smooth and efficient integration of the lexical approach is Willis’s (2003: 163) ‘pedagogic corpus’, i.e. a corpus made up of the texts used in the classroom to support teaching. The main advantage of this type of corpus is that the lexical phrases selected for teaching are extracted from texts that learners have already processed for meaning, which ensures better contextualization, increased relevance and hence higher motivation for learning them.

4.3.2. The role of learner corpora

According to Barfield (2001: 415) one of the weaknesses of Lewis’s (2000) book on teaching collocation is that “the voices of typical language learners are largely omitted”. He argues convincingly that “it is perhaps only by including more detail about actual stages of learner collocational development that deeper questions of how collocations are learnt and mis-learnt may be better answered in the future”. In order to decide what to include in a lexical syllabus, it is essential to have a precise picture of learner difficulties. In this respect, learner corpora are a particularly useful resource as they give access to the full range of lexical items – both single words and multiwords - produced by learners in relatively uncontrolled circumstances (typically, argumentative essays for writing and informal interviews for speech). Learner corpora are an excellent basis for identifying among the myriad of phrases that can be taught those that present the greatest challenge to learners. They have the advantage of displaying a higher degree of representativeness than experimental data sets, which tend to be restricted to a very limited number of learners. In addition, the electronic format of the data allows for automated methods of analysis that were hitherto impossible to apply. Using the appropriate computer tools, it is possible to identify multiword units in corpora, count and sort them in various ways,

analyze them and compare the results with those obtained from corpora representing other learner groups and/or expert speakers or writers. Several recent learner-corpus-based studies have shed new light on different categories of multiword units: idiomatic expressions (Wiktorsson 2003), collocations (Nesselhauf 2005), phrasal verbs (Waibel 2007), lexical bundles (Milton 1999, Hyland 2008). Most studies deal with learners' use of multiword units in writing. De Cock (2000, 2004 & 2007) is one of the few scholars to have investigated learner speech.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a highly conventionalized variety of language that has proved to be very difficult to master by EFL/ESL students. EAP-specific phraseology is characterized by word combinations such as *the aim of this study*, *the extent to which*, *it has been suggested*, *it is likely that* that are essentially semantically and syntactically compositional. EAP would therefore be a good field within which to demonstrate the usefulness of the Sinclairian contextual approach to meaning and the benefits that can be gained from the conjoined use of native and learner corpus data. In the following lines I give a brief outline of some of the results of a large-scale investigation of EAP vocabulary based on the systematic comparison of EAP words in the *International Corpus of Learner English* (Granger et al 2002) and a comparable corpus of native academic writing.

The selection of EAP words is strongly inspired by Sinclair & Renouf's idea of focusing on "the common uses of the common words". Unlike Coxhead (2000), we have included in our EAP list highly frequent words like the verbs *describe*, *report* and *suggest*, which despite belonging to the top 2,000 words in English (the so-called General Service List), fill important roles in EAP and therefore deserve to be brought to students' attention (for details on the criteria used to establish the list, see Paquot 2007a). Following Willis's (2003: 161) suggestion that "One way of helping learners with phrases – polywords, frames and patterns – is to organise them into meaningful groups", we have grouped the EAP words into twelve rhetorical or organisational functions that are particularly prominent in academic writing, such as contrasting, adding information, etc. A detailed analysis of EAP words in learner and native corpora enabled us to uncover many differences in terms of frequency of use, meaning, lexico-grammatical patterning, collocational preferences and syntactic positioning (for more details, see Paquot 2007b and Gilquin et al 2007). While this comparison brought to light a series of downright errors - formal (*in the contrary*, *let us state an example*, *a conclusion can be drawn up*), semantic (*on the contrary* in the meaning of *on the other hand*), collocational (*we have performed a survey*), it is mainly the instances of over- and underuse that have potential from a teaching perspective. For example, the overuse of the adjective *important* is a prompt for lexical expansion exercises aimed to raise learners' awareness of other adjectives (*major*, *crucial*, *significant*, etc.) that can be used instead and highlight their frequent collocates. On the other hand, instances of significant underuse point to words and phrases that teachers might want to add to the lexical syllabus or that need to be consolidated. This underuse affects many patterns involving verbs typically used in EAP texts, such as *occur*, *note*, *suggest*, *require* or *assume* (Granger & Paquot in press). As learner needs are prime, it is clear that not all sequences that are underused need to be included in the syllabus nor should all words and phrases that are overused be

stigmatized, but it is important for teachers and syllabus designers to have access to this information (for further discussion of this issue, cf. Granger in press).

5. Conclusion

John Sinclair's view of language as being essentially lexical and consisting of phrasal units rather than single words is a major challenge for linguistic theory and an equally great challenge for all language applications, in particular language learning and teaching. From the early Cobuild days, Sinclair was aware that the changes he advocated "were likely to have a profound effect on the teaching and learning of languages, because the new descriptions would represent language in a different way" (Sinclair 2004a: 9). The numerous books and articles inspired by Sinclair's ideas and their pedagogical applications spurred by Lewis's Lexical Approach confirm this prediction, but also demonstrate the difficulty of pedagogical implementation. The literature abounds in extreme statements, with reactions ranging from overoptimistic to overpessimistic. In the absence of hard evidence that radical changes to the syllabus— notably as regards the depletion of sentence grammar – lead to better learning, it is probably wise to adopt a weak version of the lexical approach (Pulverness 2007). Timmis (2008) goes one step further and claims that the lexical approach is dead and that one should rather speak of a 'lexical dimension': "we need to talk about the principled application of a lexical dimension to teaching, a dimension which can be applied, to differing degrees, in any teaching context". In this connection, it is interesting to note that Sinclair himself did not call for a pedagogical revolution: "All the work suggested here can be merged with traditional models of language and language-teaching; the emphasis is different, and gradually we can expect the interests of students to shift into new areas, but there is nothing revolutionary in my proposals as offered here" (Sinclair 2004b: 297).

As an English language teacher of over 30 years standing, I have noted the growing lexicalization of teaching materials and personally experienced the motivational boost it gives to learners. The step from motivation to success is but a small one and this development is thus clearly a very positive one. Clearly however, much research is still needed if we are to assess how far we should go along that route. First, it is essential to provide the teaching community with a clear description of the different categories of multiword units and a pedagogically-oriented terminology to refer to them. Second, more research needs to be carried out into the processing and storage of multiword units and language specialists – in particular materials designers – need to heed the conclusions drawn from psycholinguistic experiments. Finally, as regards integration into teaching practice, I would advocate 'localizing' the lexical approach, i.e. implementing it in small-scale classroom studies and adapting it in function of learner needs and the overall teaching context. At all stages, it is advisable to keep in mind Gabrielatos's (2005b) apt observation that "English language teaching is vulnerable to pendulum swings, and has a propensity for the marketing and uncritical acceptance of 'miracle methods'". With respect to the lexical approach, the pendulum appears to be swinging back to a more balanced position. In a recent article, Cullen (2008) revisits Widdowson's (1990) notion of grammar as a "liberating force" and shows how it can be integrated into ELT practice.

This view of grammar “as a construct for the mediation of meaning” (Widdowson *ibid*: 95) is perfectly compatible with the lexical approach. Cullen’s article and other recent ones like Timmis (2008) are a clear indication that lexis and grammar are slowly beginning to fall into place for the mutual benefit of both teachers and learners.

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