

THE LEXICAL APPROACH IN EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Introduction

In the last decade the questions probing the nature of lexis, its acquisition, teaching and evaluation, have come into the focus of many applied linguists' research. Lexical knowledge has started to be (re)considered as central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Authors who advocate the lexical approach in foreign language teaching and learning argue that:

Vocabulary and lexical units are at the core of learning and communication. No amount of grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge can be employed in communication or discourse without the mediation of vocabulary. Indeed, vocabulary and lexical expressions can sustain a great deal of rudimentary communication without much support from other aspects of the language system (Schmitt 2000:xi).

Similarly, they argue that “[w]ithout grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins in Lewis 1997:16).

This new attitude towards the role of vocabulary in language (first, second or foreign) has been prompted by the findings in corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics and applied linguistics that are daily changing our understanding of the function of vocabulary in discourse. Moreover, they have also changed our understanding of the very nature of lexis. It has been realised that much of everyday spoken communication relies on units larger than single words – on so-called **multi-word units**.

This new understanding of the nature and significance of lexical knowledge in language has to play a more central role in the knowledge base of foreign language teachers.

New approaches to lexis

Research findings coming from the field of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis highlight the diversity and frequency of lexical elements above the word level and their cohesive role in spoken discourse. They also highlight that polarisation between lexis and grammar is sometimes unnecessary. In his discussion of the principles that

function in discourse, Sinclair (1991) points out the distinction between the open-choice principle and the idiom-principle. According to the first, more traditional view of language, words combine freely, abiding to grammatical rules only. According to the second, more modern view of language, language is also governed by lexical rules, i.e. principles that limit the choice of words in a discourse. Some of the principles merely reflect knowledge of the world: because some phenomena co-occur in nature, the words expressing these concepts will co-occur in language. However, some principles are of a purely linguistic nature, that is, completely arbitrary (for example, there is no reason for not saying **to put something on fire*, but fluent speakers of English know that the appropriate phrase is *to set something on fire*).

It is easy to notice that new approaches to the nature of lexis bring about new views on the nature of grammar, traditionally the focus of linguistic analysis. At first sight, it may seem that grammar has lost its importance ('Language consists of grammaticalised lexis not lexical grammar'; Lewis 1993:vi), but this is not the case. Moreover, it can even be said that, within the lexical approach, the knowledge of grammar becomes even more important because it is considered to be the source of variation in language. While lexical knowledge enables us to communicate easily and freely, grammatical knowledge instills the speaker's personality and creativeness into the fixed lexical patterns.

Authors like Lewis (1993; 1997; 2000), Schmitt (2000), Sinclair (1991), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), to name just a few, all point out that a great amount of language used consists of multi-word chunks. However, each author classifies and defines these units in a somewhat different way. It seems that the most problematic are those multi-word units that were first recognised as such – collocations, idioms and phrasal verbs. Accepting that language consists of even larger lexical chunks meant including traditional multi-word units into a new system of representation.

One of the classifications of the lexical elements in language that does not include the modern concept of multi-word units may be presented as follows:

A) **one-word units** – words and compounds (e.g., car; blackmail)

B) **collocations**.

According to this view, collocations can have a different degree of fixedness. For example, according to Cowie and Howarth (1995), idioms are the most fixed collocations because they do not allow for any type of variability within their structure. Moreover, the meaning of a particular idiom is noncompositional, which means that it can't be guessed from the meanings of its constituent parts (e.g., *kick the bucket* meaning 'to die'). The second class of collocations consists of those expressions that are also fixed, but their meaning is more transparent because each word in the expression adds something to the meaning of the unit as a whole (e.g., *to smell a rat*). The third type

of collocations would be those with a transparent meaning and allowing for a limited amount of variability (e.g., *have/feel/experience a need*; *as dark/black as night/coal/ink*).

Most authors would agree that there are two basic types of collocation: grammatical or syntactic and semantic or lexical. The most frequent examples of the first type are phrasal verbs (*look after, pick up*) while the second type usually consists of a combination of words of equal 'status' (noun and verb – *ball bounces*; verb and noun – *cause trouble*; adjective and noun – *artificial intelligence*). Some authors suggest a third type of collocation that is neither purely grammatical nor purely semantic. Examples are the following: *at one o'clock* but *on Sunday* or *in January*.

Schmitt (2000: 99-102) combined different authors' approaches and classified the lexical elements in the following way:

A) **one-word units** – words in the traditional sense

B) **collocations** – Schmitt stresses the tendency of the words to co-occur, but he also stresses a degree of freedom that these combinations have

C) **multi-word units** – primarily characterised by their institutionalised nature.

This means that native speakers of a particular language recognise them as units that regularly occur in language, in the same form and with the same meaning.

Schmitt classifies them as the following:

- compound words (*sky-scraper, haircut*)
- phrasal verbs (*break up, let down*)
- fixed phrases (*back and forth, to and fro*)
- idioms (*bite the dust, have a chip on one's shoulder*)
- proverbs (*out of sight, out of mind*)
- lexical phrases/lexical chunks (*to make a long story short*)

Lewis' (1997:7-12) classification could be summarised as following:

A) **one-word units:**

- simple words
- words that are at the border-line between one-word and multi-word units, absolutely fixed, they can be written as one word (*nevertheless*) or more words (*by the way*)

B) **multi-word units:**

- collocations (grammatical – *relevant to, take over*; semantic – *drug addict, make a mistake*)
- fixed expressions (social greetings – *Happy New Year; It's a lovely morning, isn't it?*; politeness phrases – *No, thank you, I'm fine. I'll have to be going*; 'phrase book' language – *Can you tell me the way to... please?*; idioms – *You're making a mountain out of a molehill*)

- semi-fixed expressions (according to Lewis this is the most frequent and the most complex group that includes expressions that are almost completely fixed – *It's ...*, *There's ...*, but also expressions that would typically occur in specific types of discourse, for example, in academic articles – *There are, broadly speaking, two views of... The more traditional ...*).

A more detailed analysis of the above-presented classifications and, in particular, their application to the analysis of spoken or written discourse shows some overlapping and inconsistency, but what these authors agree upon is the following: multi-word units, whatever their classification, are the key elements in the everyday speech of native speakers. Their centrality comes from the fact that memorised multi-word units allow for quick and easy language processing¹, both at the level of language comprehension and at the level of language production.

In terms of the acquisition and learning of a foreign language, Read (2001:2) claims that multi-word units play an important role not only in the learners' language production during the early phases of mastering a foreign language, but also in the development of fluency similar to that of native speakers during the later phases of foreign language acquisition or learning. In addition, Schmitt (2000:142) argues that the acquisition of multi-word units helps the acquisition of grammar, and Lewis (1997:58) argues the same about the acquisition of intonation and pronunciation. Furthermore, the fact that most multi-word units are based on prototypical words (i.e., words frequent in discourse and therefore presented early to foreign language learners) makes us think of introducing multi-word units into the process of foreign language teaching in a more systematic way.

Multi-word units and foreign language teaching

There are several possible problems related to the attempt of a systematic introduction of multi-word units into foreign language teaching programmes. It seems that multi-word units are a universal language feature, but it also seems that not all types of multi-word units are equally frequent in all languages and they do not segment the semantic and syntactic continuum in the same way in all languages.

Learners of English as a foreign language find English idioms and phrasal verbs the most difficult multi-word type because of the usual noncompositionality of their meaning. On the other hand, if meaning is transparent and therefore comprehension is

¹ Psycholinguistic research has shown that larger lexical units are memorised in the same way as single lexical elements. This implies that native speakers spend the same amount of time and energy while understanding or producing a multi-word unit as while understanding or producing a single word.

made easier, the arbitrariness of lexico-grammatical combinations that make up a particular multi-word unit (for example, *red wine* and not **black wine* as in Croatian, *back and forth* and not **forth and back*) causes great difficulty in language production. If we add to this the lack of information about the real frequency of particular multi-word units in discourse (a problem that might be solved by corpus linguistics in the near future), we can really question what the best sequence of teaching these units might be.

Because of all this, most authors question whether any kind of systematic introduction of multi-word units into foreign language teaching is at all possible or useful. The answers to this question differ. Some authors claim that these units should be left to the process of spontaneous acquisition or autonomous learning. The role of the teacher, if any, would only be to point to the existence and importance of multi-word units in the spontaneous speech of native speakers of English. Other authors offer very detailed suggestions on how to approach multi-word units in English language teaching (e.g., Lewis, 1997) although Lewis himself stresses that his approach has not yet been validated by teaching practice).

It seems that, for the time being, the best approach in the early learning of English as a foreign language would be to expose learners to a rich and intensive language input in communicatively oriented contexts.

Research aims

Since in the Croatian early foreign language learning project (Vilke & Vrhovac 1993; 1995; Vrhovac et al., 1999) the main approach was the communicative approach – exposing children to intensive, contextualised language input – and since children were partly learning and partly acquiring English as a foreign language², our first aim was to see whether these children were using multi-word units in their English language production. Our hypothesis was that most of the children would be using multi-word units. We further wanted to explore what type of units the project children were using and to what extent.

Our second aim was to compare the use of multi-word units in the children's production in English to the use of multi-word units in the children's mother tongue production.

Research methodology

For the purposes of our research we tested 100 11-year-old children from eight different schools in Zagreb. At the time of testing, the children were finishing their fifth

² Because of the context of learning – both formal (school) and informal (TV, internet), and the age of the learners (6-10) when they cannot be exposed to metalinguistic explanations.

year of intensive English language learning. They were given the task to retell a story (a 10-minute version of *The Beauty and the Beast*) that they had just seen on video. The whole class watched the video together twice. Immediately after watching, the children came individually to a separate room where they retold the story to the interviewer, first in English and then in Croatian. The stories were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

The reasons for choosing a story retelling task as the data elicitation instrument were the following:

- retelling a story is a complex linguistic and communicative act that enables us to gather a rich amount of data in a relatively short period of time
- story retelling is a contextualised communicative act which allows for a higher authenticity of the data gathered
- children like listening to and telling stories; we assumed that this would make their production more natural and relaxed during the interview.

Results and discussion

Part one

A detailed analysis of 100 children's retellings in English showed the following:

1. all children, irrespective of the linguistic and communicative quality of their stories, used multi-word units during the story retelling task³
2. as the linguistic and communicative quality of children's retelling increased, the diversity and accuracy of the used multi-word units increased too.

According to the second finding we could group children's stories into three categories.

Category A

Retellings in which only the most frequent multi-word units from the storytelling context were used (for example, *One day... Once upon a time...*). They were produced by children of lower linguistic and narrative competence, that is, children who in their speech often made morphosyntactic errors, and whose stories were rather short (45 words per story on average).

³ We would like to stress that we did not do a statistical analysis of the use of multi-word units in the children's stories for two main reasons. First, vocabulary studies have not yet come up with a reliable solution of how to account for the different lengths of the analysed texts (Vermeer, 2000; Read & Chapelle, 2001). Second, in our study, we even had a more complex problem – the different lengths of children's stories were combined with the different lengths of the used multi-word units (ranging from two words, as in phrasal verbs, to several words, as in lexical phrases). All attempts to express our data in numerical terms proved non-transparent.

Category B

Retellings in which a wider range of multi-word units was used, but these units usually had some kind of collocational error (grammatical or semantic).

Category C

Retellings in which multi-word units were used accurately for most of the time. They were produced by the children with the highest linguistic and narrative competence among the children interviewed, that is, children who rarely made morphosyntactic errors and whose stories were rather long (591 words per story on average).

The analysis of errors in children's multi-word units suggested the following classification:

- errors caused by the children's lack of morphosyntactic competence (usually the wrong use of the verb tense – present instead of past tense, wrong formation of the past tense; errors in subject-verb concordance; frequent use of *he* instead of *she*).
- Errors caused by mother tongue interference (for example: **after some two or three days*; **want for the present*; **riding on horse*; **yell on*; **told with a gentle voice*; **on half of way*; **forgot on the time*; **beginning of their together life*).
- 'collocational' errors (these errors actually show the high level of the learner's communicative competence in the foreign language: the learner 'feels' that there is a lexical unit that best expresses what he/she wants to say in English, but he/she can't produce it accurately). For example: **Not die to me!*; **It looked that as there was a spring*; **He didn't want she to...*; **Beast was no more beast*; **threw a spell over him*; **in stand of*; **He translated to the beautiful prince*; **save him for dying..*

The above-listed examples might suggest that the project learners had a kind of linguistic intuition about the existence of multi-word units in spoken discourse. However, the ability to use correctly less frequent and more complex multi-word units develops gradually and is related to higher levels of linguistic and narrative (communicative) competence. We could also suppose that those learners, because of their age and the teaching methods⁴ they were exposed to, were not conscious of the communicative effectiveness of the use of multi-word units in everyday speech. Therefore, the fact that even the weaker learners used multi-word units in their stories might suggest two things:

- multi-word units were highly frequent in the input children were exposed to (within or outside the school context);

⁴ During the early years of English language learning there was no explicit teaching or awareness raising of the presence of multi-word units in spoken discourse.

- the project children were, at least partly, acquiring English as a foreign language and in some aspects of their speech achieved almost native-like competence.

The last observation could be further confirmed by the fact that in the parts of their stories where they used direct speech or introduced more personal elements (e.g., expressed uncertainty), children almost exclusively used multi-word units. We will list a few examples: *I think it was...; I'm not sure; I don't know; I can't remember now; ... something like that; How should I say; Go away!; Leave me alone!; It doesn't matter; I don't want to!; All right!; I'm gonna die.*

Part two

A detailed analysis of 100 children's stories retold in Croatian showed the following:

1. the number of multi-word units in the Croatian story of a particular learner seemed, on average, lower than the number of multi-word units in the English story of the same learner.
2. multi-word units in the Croatian stories also contained errors.

A contrastive analysis of the use of multi-word units in the English and Croatian retellings showed that English and Croatian express their idiomaticity in different ways. This would imply that our young learners need a very rich exposure to English spoken discourse in order to acquire its formulaic nature. However, some of the Croatian multi-word units are parallel to the English constructions – this can be used as a basis for the positive transfer from the mother tongue into the foreign language.

As for the errors in the Croatian version of the children's stories, some of them show that the development of multi-word knowledge is a gradual process, not only in the foreign language but also in the mother tongue. Examples are the following: **vratiti na život; *sve mu je bilo bolje i bolje; *izgrizla u ruku; *molila je da oprosti za svog oca; *napravio ples*, etc. Some collocational errors were even caused by the interference of English (e.g., **bacila je preko toga princa jednu kletvu; *ozdravio u nekoliko minuta*), but they were only present in the retellings of children who had achieved better competence in English. The presence of errors (or mistakes?!) in children's speech production in the mother tongue has to be kept in mind when we evaluate children's speech production in the foreign language.

Conclusion

The above-presented research results strengthened our positive attitude towards a systematic introduction of multi-word units into early English language teaching. Several factors work in favour of the lexical approach.

The most important one is that the lexical approach is not really a new approach in the early foreign language teaching in Croatia. The project's approach to teaching and learning was extremely communicatively oriented. This went along with the notion that words and formulaic phrases are the children's first and main communicative tool, both in first and in foreign language acquisition and production. The project children were exposed to lexical (one-word and multi-word) richness through stories, role-plays, songs, video; however, this approach was not verbalised in terms of the latest terminology of the lexical approach.

Another important fact is that in the project the stress was on foreign language acquisition and, according to current knowledge, it seems that spontaneous acquisition is the 'approach' that works best with the lexical approach.

We should also mention the fact that intensive foreign language teaching starting from the first grade gives teachers enough time to introduce new approaches into their work and observe their effectiveness.

We can conclude that what remains to be done is to make language teachers more aware of the latest research findings that explain the nature and stress the importance and the frequency of multi-word units in everyday speech. This could prompt teachers to introduce even more lexical expressions into their own speech and into communicatively-oriented classroom activities, the effectiveness of which has already been verified.

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