

## Book Review

**Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory Into Practice.** Michael Lewis. (1997). Hove England: Language Teaching Publications. 296 pp.

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Vocabulary learning will not take care of itself is the underlying message of *Implementing The Lexical Approach: Putting Theory Into Practice* by Michael Lewis. However, vocabulary or lexis (chunks of coherent language) is not the only concern of this book which also questions current approaches to teaching methodology and classroom practice. This does not mean *Implementing The Lexical Approach* is about rejecting previous or current approaches or methods: it actually builds on established insights e.g., the Natural Approach, Total Physical Response and the need for consciousness-raising and noticing in language learning.

Making an important distinction often forgotten by other authors, Lewis says 'describing a language and teaching it are two very different things' (p.44). This book is about developing a principled approach not only to teaching and learning lexis but also to English language teaching in general, to the position of grammar and to classroom procedures and activities. Focusing especially on the problem of vocabulary learning, Lewis outlines the problem within the EFL context:

A mature adult L1 lexicon is simply too large to have been acquired by formal vocabulary teaching. In both L1 and L2 a mature lexicon is acquired in very similar ways -- firstly by large quantities of listening which is largely comprehensible, and later by similar quantities of comprehensible reading.  
(p. 86)

However, exposure is not enough to develop lexis; learners still need to be taught. What and how do they need to be taught? This book gives some possible answers.

*Implementing the Lexical Approach* sees the key to learners' developing a wide and relevant lexicon as focusing learning and language use on multi-word items (including collocations, fixed expressions and semi-fixed expressions). Further key areas Lewis identifies include: contractions, polywords (a word-like item often composed of several words e.g. "by the way", "on the other hand"), information content level of individual words, common words and de-lexicalised words (words such as "thing", "point" and "have" which convey little meaning when used out of context)

On one level, *Implementing The Lexical Approach* can be seen as the 'practical' extension of Lewis' early book, *The Lexical Approach* (1993 Language Teaching Publications). However, it is not necessary to have read the first book unless, of course, you want to be challenged over basic teaching concepts and long-held attitudes towards teaching and learning.

Noticing language and the importance of consciousness-raising (p. 44) are the central foci of *Implementing The Lexical Approach*. Language is not the product of the application of rules: Most language is acquired lexically (p. 75). Language needs to be broken down so that it is available for re-assembly in potentially new combinations. This means turning input into intake.

Effective teaching must be about helping learners with the transition from input to intake: 'The natural and most efficient way of storing a large part of your mental lexicon is in multi-word chunks' (p. 78). This means learning whole expressions rather than just individual words and, when recording a lexical pattern, trying to find other related instances. However, language teaching should not be about possibility but rather probability. The focus on multi-word chunks involves accurate noticing (p. 85) which 'means teachers need a set of organizing principles so that they can encourage learners to record selected language in carefully designed lexical Notebooks after studying a text... (p. 85).

Far from abandoning grammar, the Lexical Approach tries to promote communication through probable English rather than possible English as found in standard grammar books. Lewis sees grammar as helping language users 'to use novel language' while 'lexis helps us handle highly probable events fluently and effortlessly by providing us with prefabricated ways of dealing with them' (p. 41). To put them in context, Lewis argues:

There is an important category of semi-fixed items, frames with slots, which fits somewhere between traditional fixed words and generative grammar. This category may be central to understanding how language is acquired and stored in the mental lexicon. (p. 43)

Lewis questions many traditional stances to the teaching of lexis and offers the following positions:

- 1) 'To speak English well you do need a large lexicon.' (p. 20)
- 2) 'You cannot learn to speak English well from exclusively written input materials, nor to write well from spoken materials. The languages of speech and writing are simply too different from each other for this to be possible' (p. 21).

Going beyond just the teaching of lexis towards teaching in general, Lewis also says:

- 1) The learner needs to be repositioned as the central focus in the teaching process and, therefore, techniques such as Present-Practise-Produce (P-P-P) or a blanket rejection of translation activities (p. 64) need to be reconsidered.
- 2) He questions current approaches to such aspects as reported speech which, he says, is 'very rare and of little use to learners' (p. 181) and offers a different approach.
- 3) He argues that typical question-and-answer approaches to language use may be superficial and teachers need to go much further with language to reflect real-life interaction. (p. 183).
- 4) Lewis rejects the carefully staged mastering of one concept before moving on. He sees language developing as an 'organic whole', especially through listening and speaking activities at all levels. Language learners should consume large quantities of materials through extensive reading and listening with an emphasis on variety rather than depth (p. 207).

One of the strong areas of this book is that it does not stay at the theory level. There is a variety of classroom activities (cooperative, interactive undertakings) and exercises (solitary linguistic-based endeavors). Language content receives a complete chapter which focuses on how to systematically build up a learner's lexicon and 'to avoid simply adding an unhelpfully large repertoire of uncollocated nouns' (p. 177). Lewis emphasizes that teaching needs to focus on probable sentences rather than possible sentences and that in teaching there has to be a

clear distinction between teacher/textbook models of language and teachers' expectations of the target language to be produced by students (p. 185).

One interesting section is a question Lewis sets himself to answer: 'Is EFL in any fundamental way different from "English"?' (p. 186). He comes up with four insights:

- 1) L2 is more likely to be used with strangers than friends which implies that a strong teaching emphasis on practising intimate language may not particularly useful.
- 2) L2 use often means that L2 users may not have shared cultural background knowledge which means that students need the linguistic skills to find common ground.
- 3) L2 students may need help on using suitable language for suitable circumstances. Therefore, emphasis must be on probable conventional use.
- 4) Given that most learners will remain at intermediate level (p. 187), teachers need to focus on effective, even if defective, communication.

For teacher training, the lexical approach says that teachers need to focus on what students can do (rather than on what they cannot do correctly) e.g. by concentrating on communicative performance rather than giving undue emphasis to language mistakes. Teachers may need to change their stance to vocabulary teaching and focus on what they have come across as individual language users rather than set themselves up as authorities on language usage and dictate what is correct English (p.194). Furthermore, teachers need to think about students' memory load: if seven-year-old children learn 4/5,000 words a year, is, say, ten words per class enough?

In conclusion, 'The Lexical Approach claims that, far from language being the product of the application of rules, most language is acquired lexically, then 'broken down...after which it becomes available for re-assembly in potentially new combinations' (p. 211).

Relating grammar to lexis, Lewis, referring to Mark Powell, argues that 'Grammar tends to become lexis as the event becomes more probable' (p. 41) and 'the content and role of grammar teaching is modified in the Lexical Approach but it remains an important element of a balanced course' (p. 75). Lewis argues that '...the best form of input is spoken language, based on situations in which language is highly conventional and the language correspondingly highly lexicalised' (p. 212). Perhaps one of the key messages to reflect on from this book, whether you agree or disagree with *Implementing The Lexical Approach*, or its position on teaching, selection of content, and methodology, is:

As Henry Widdowson has observed, if you claim your teaching is eclectic, and you cannot state the principles of your eclecticism, you are not eclectic, merely confused. (p.108)

*Implementing The Lexical Approach* is a book to make you think about your current teaching practice and the underlying principles behind your teaching.