

Thornbury – the Lexical Approach a Journey Without Maps MET Vol. 7 No.4 1998 – summary
(an example of [ways to work with reading](#) as part of the study guide on the [ITI Delta Module One](#))

Masses of words

You can either learn lots of words and then just hope to glue them together with the right grammar or you can learn lots of grammar and hope to then be able to find / learn the right words to drop into it. He says for a long time the approach usually taken was the latter, but as the communicative approach came more into being vocabulary gained more importance.

Chunks

Alongside that development came linguists noticing chunks in language use. Ann Peters noted how children use things as unanalysed wholes as they were learning and only later started to understand what the units within them were and then Pawley and Syder talked about the deployment of lexical chunks adding to fluency for L1 users generally: that people use only some of a huge range of possible combinations, do so without any conscious thought and notice when others are using nonstandard chunks.

Two systems

So in a sense we are double storing everything. We have the capacity to make phrases and parts of sentences from the ground up, piece by piece, but in fact we do that relatively little. A huge amount of what we say is made up of prefabricated chunks. This didn't immediately start to be reflected in course books as one of the problems is knowing what those chunks are and prioritising, but some ideas of this kind did start to appear (e.g. in the Collins CoBuild Course Books written by the Willis and based on corpus research).

A lexical syllabus

The CoBuild books were built around word lists that looked at frequency of use e.g. the first one was based on the 700 most commonly used words in English. Once they had established what those were they also looked at the context the words were used in / co occurrence etc so they were teaching typical uses. There were tasks and lots of authentic speech. Grammar was only brought in to support where it was needed. In many ways the books were greatly ahead of their time and as a result not a commercial success (both teacher and student expectations being of a much greater reliance on a bedrock of grammar).

A lexical approach

A year or two later Lewis published The Lexical Approach and set out the idea again that words were more fundamental than grammar. He went through the various ways of looking at this and put forward the idea again (but in a more popular accessible form than other things so far) that lexis was more important than grammar in learning a second language. But it isn't really an 'approach' in that he only gives some examples of tasks and lot of those are fairly conventional and text based. He also focused more on fluency than complexity (and for the latter you probably need some grammar).

In search of a theory

Thornbury goes on to point out that an approach should have hypotheses about learning and teaching, where Lewis seems largely to have some useful but simple techniques. Also nobody has shown how things should be formed into a full syllabus / prioritised.

Dangerous liaisons

So while grammar alone cannot an effective speaker make, Thornbury is saying neither does only lexis, yet that seems to be what Lewis is arguing for as he doesn't include anything else in what he presents.

Lively debate

But what it has done is get people to talk about these things and maybe to shift their perspective and include slightly more range (and useful lexical focuses) in their teaching.