

The lexical approach: A systematic way of building oral fluency

Lori Parish

Tokai University, Shonan
Campus

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The lexical approach was introduced in the early 1990s as an expedient way to expand L2 learners' comprehension and production of the target language, yet it never gained currency among TESOL practitioners. It was pushed to the side in favor of content-based, task-based, and integrated skills L2 instruction. This paper argues that much can be gained from using a modified lexical approach. By salvaging components of the original approach and by using best practices in the field of TESOL as a guide, the resultant streamlined version is flexible enough to be used in most speaking courses where the focus is on building oral fluency. The paper begins by defining key concepts related to the lexical approach and oral fluency and then describes the necessary criteria to implement oral fluency-building tasks. The paper next describes a modified version of a lexical approach in which language functions and their corresponding phrases are systematically introduced and then recycled throughout a course.

Lexical (語彙的) アプローチは1990年代初期に第2言語学習者の語彙習得に役立つ方法として紹介されたが、その手法はTESOL関係者の間に普及することはなかった。内容ベース、タスクベース、そしてまた総合型の第2言語教育が関心を集める一方で、語彙的アプローチは片隅に追いやられていた。著者はここで改良された語彙的アプローチを用いることで多くのことが可能になることを論じる。TESOL分野における最良の実践方法をガイドとして使うことによって、また、元々の構成要因を見いだすことによって、結果的に出来上がった応用型は、英語の流暢さを高めることに重点を置くほとんどのスピーキングコースで利用可能な柔軟性がある。本論では語彙的アプローチと流暢さの概念を定義することからはじめ、そして流暢さを高めるためのタスクの実践に必要な基準について述べる。著者はさらに機能とそれに応じた言葉のまとまりがシステムティックに紹介され、コース全体を通じてリサイクルされる改良された語彙的アプローチについて言及する。

THERE ARE a number of challenges facing TESOL professionals in Japan: large class sizes, inappropriate textbooks, and obscure or even non-existent curriculum guidelines. In addition, some curricula are content-based, while others are integrated skills-focused, and most only pay lip service to the development of critical thinking skills. The ever-changing methodologies in the profession can also exasperate EFL instructors. With this backdrop, it is easy to lose sight of the fundamentals. Take oral fluency as an example. What are the fundamental building blocks of an effective oral fluency course, be it content-based or integrated skills? What are the elements of an oral fluency syllabus? How should oral fluency building activities be designed?



This paper argues that the fundamental building blocks of an oral fluency course are language functions and their corresponding lexical phrases. With a modified lexical approach as described herein, students are introduced to meaningful chunks of language in a systematic manner that lays the foundation for them to generate authentic dialog. A by-product of student-generated speech is that, as they process their own ideas and concepts and construct their own line of questioning for their partners, critical thinking skills are honed. Finally, by following best practices in the field of TESOL and designing an oral fluency course based on a modified lexical approach, instructors can create a strong, cohesive syllabus that truly builds oral fluency.

The original lexical approach

In the early 1990's Michael Lewis (1993) advocated substituting traditional grammar and vocabulary-focused lessons with a lexis-based approach. He theorized that language is stored in the lexicon and retrieved in naturally occurring "chunks." These chunks, also called lexical phrases or conversation strategies, refer to standardized, multi-word groupings. Lewis believed that language learners should first be taught to recognize and produce these language chunks. Then, through repetition, learners would eventually be able to produce them with some level of automaticity, thus improving fluency.

Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) point out that approximately half of written and spoken discourse is made up of multi-word groupings such as collocations, idioms, similes, discourse markers, compounds, proverbs, and social-routine expressions. The authors recommend classroom activities in which students learn to identify level-appropriate language chunks from written text, focusing mainly on fixed forms. For example, the authors provide students with a transcript of a BBC radio program and have them try to identify any naturally occurring language

chunks. To make the target phrases more memorable, Boers and Lindstromberg emphasize "elaboration," which is a mental process that goes beyond just noticing. Students are encouraged to consider pronunciation, spelling, word families, and even visual images so as to help entrench the terms in long-term memory.

A modified lexical approach

Where this paper deviates from Lewis, Boers and Lindstromberg, and others who have embraced the lexical approach, is over the belief that L2 learners need to be explicitly taught how to identify language chunks, particularly through reading. Although this would arguably foster learner independence, the process is very time-consuming, as Boers and Lindstromberg readily admit. In addition, if *oral* fluency-building is the objective, it doesn't seem prudent to have students focus on written discourse. Simply put, L2 learners do not build oral fluency with their noses buried in text.

If developing oral fluency is the objective, a more streamlined lexical approach is called for. The essential feature of a modified lexical approach as presented in this paper is that the instructor pre-selects the functions and introduces their corresponding phrases to the students. This bypasses the time consuming aspect of the traditional approach wherein students pour over written text or listen for linkages in spoken discourse. With a modified lexical approach, the ESL instructor does the heavy lifting, so to speak, extracting the lexical phrases directly out of the course textbook and adding any necessary functions and phrases based on course objectives.

Other characteristics of a modified approach are that it:

- introduces one or two functions and related lexical phrases per lesson;
- uses prompts to spark student memory of previously learned functions;



- systematically recycles functions throughout a course;
- uses repetition rather than memorization;
- highlights interactional (rather than transactional) communication;
- ignores minor grammatical mistakes which don't interfere with meaning;
- requires students to generate original dialog;
- helps develop critical thinking skills.

Defining oral fluency

Before outlining a modified lexical approach, a clear definition of oral fluency is in order. On Fillmore's account, a person is considered fluent if he or she can (a) talk at length, at speed and with few pauses; (b) use coherent, semantically dense sentences; (c) have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts; and (d) be creative and imaginative (Fillmore, 1979). McCarthy (2008a) extends Fillmore's widely accepted definition of oral fluency by adding three new descriptors. According to McCarthy, a fluent person must also be able to (a) retrieve prefabricated chunks quickly and automatically, (b) link one speaker's turn to the next, and (c) use an assortment of "smallwords." By "smallwords," McCarthy refers to research that Hasselgreen (2004) conducted with young L2 learners, which suggests that the inclusion of words such as *so*, *really*, and *like* plays an important part in a speaker sounding fluent.

Creating oral fluency building tasks

Given this definition of fluency, the question then becomes one of how to structure fluency building tasks. Nation and Newton (2009) cite five criteria that ESL instructors should follow, and these form the basis for the activities presented here. First of all, oral fluency activities should be easy tasks in that the language

should be simple enough to allow the L2 learner to focus on fluency. The structures should be well within the students' capabilities, and the topics should be based on their actual knowledge and experience. Secondly, the activity should be message-focused. In other words, the speaker should be communicating a real message to an authentic audience. Thirdly, there should be some time pressure replicating real-world constraints. The use of a simple kitchen timer helps achieve this. Next, students need to plan and prepare. Fluency has been shown to improve when students are given some time to plan prior to speaking. Finally, when designing fluency activities, it is important to include repetition. Nation and Newton write

Repetition of an activity is a sure way of developing fluency with particular items and sequences used in the activity. It is necessary to change the audience when designing repetition into meaning-focused speaking activities so that the speaker does not change the spoken message to try to retain the interest of an audience that has already heard the message. The success of repetition involves substantially the same message. (2009, p. 155)

Syllabus planning

A modified lexical approach begins by teaching question formation in the first few weeks of the semester. As many EFL teachers will likely agree, a major impediment to L2 students being able to sustain a conversation is their inability to formulate questions.

At the outset, course objectives are identified and linked to corresponding functions and lexical phrases. For example, most ESL curricula include classroom language, so clarifying phrases are taught at the start of the semester. If the curriculum calls for discussing likes and dislikes, agreeing and disagreeing phrases are useful. Refer to the Appendix for examples of core functions and their related lexical phrases.



Shadowing, hesitating devices and fillers are taught as strategies in a similar manner as lexical phrases are: input, drill, practice and recycle. Fast, or reduced forms should be drilled along with slow forms. For more examples of functions and their lexical phrases, refer to *Conversation Strategies* by Kehe and Kehe (2004).

Once course goals have been identified, a syllabus can be designed wherein one or two functions are planned for each individual lesson. It is best to limit the number of corresponding lexical phrases to two or three per function, per lesson.

With a modified lexical approach, the lesson plan follows a typical structure: (a) warm up, (b) input, (c) guided practice, (d) extended practice, and (e) assessment. After introducing a function and its lexical phrases, it is important to continue to recycle them throughout the course. Once a function has been taught, though, instructors should only provide prompts—not the actual lexical phrases—in any subsequent lesson. For instance, if hesitating phrases have already been taught (for example, “let me see” or “let me think”) the instructor would merely provide the prompt “hesitate” as a reminder. Likewise, if opinion phrases have already been covered (such as “if you ask me,” “it seems to me,” or “I believe”) the teacher would simply call for “opinion phrase” as appropriate.

It should be noted that grammar instruction is not ignored in this approach to fluency-building. Mini-grammar lessons can be conducted as needed before fluency activities. In fact, a compelling feature of a lexical approach is that it does not teach grammar separately, or even base fluency activities on a grammar syllabus. Rather, grammar is introduced to support fluency, not the other way around. For example, if the topic is future vacation plans, teachers can review the present continuous, or *be going to*, with students. Affirmative and negative forms, question forms, as well as short and long answers should also be covered. Low-level students in particular need such support

and can often be found taking copious notes. Another way that grammar needs are addressed is by the instructor listening for common errors while monitoring student dialogs. These errors can then be written on the board and corrected as a class in the last few minutes of a lesson.

Timed conversations

The use of timed conversations in the modified lexical approach is based on Kenny and Woo (2000), who use functional language and the element of time to build oral fluency. Kenny and Woo assign roles to pair groupings. Partner A is referred to as the conversation leader. As the leader, Partner A is responsible for beginning every timed conversation with a greeting and ending it with a leave-taking phrase. Partner B is otherwise equally responsible for helping to maintain the conversation. At the start of a course, the instructor keeps the timed conversations to one or two minutes, then slowly adds minutes as the course progresses. The modified lexical approach as described herein works well with this technique. However, whereas Kenny and Woo have students stay stationary and look to the left, right, front or back for a speaking partner, this paper recommends the seating arrangement described in Figure 1 below.

Regarding time, as many EFL instructors have come to learn, the use of a timer in the EFL classroom proves invaluable. Timed activities give structure to a lesson. While an English-only atmosphere is a worthy goal in the classroom, it is unrealistic to expect basic, low-intermediate, or even intermediate-level students to adhere to an English-only policy throughout an entire class. By timing activities and insisting that students speak only English while the timer is on, the instructor has a controlled atmosphere where only English is spoken. If the instructor increases the time incrementally, as Kenny and Woo recommend, students gradually learn to sustain lengthier conversations. Allowing students to negotiate how many minutes



they have to speak further empowers them. In addition, students can track their own progress as the minutes of sustained conversations grow.

Seating arrangements for fluency building activities

Keeping in mind Nation and Newton's (2009) criteria for designing fluency building activities, wherein both productive and receptive skills are used under real-life time pressure, this paper suggests the following seating arrangement. Prior word chunks and strategies related to the lesson's objectives should be drilled and reviewed in guided practice. In addition, students should be given at least five minutes to plan what they want to say.

After warm-up, input and guided practice, the class is ready for extended practice. Students speak on a given topic for a designated time, for example three minutes. When the time runs out, students change partners by rotating seats. Roles are switched (A to B/B to A) after each turn. In this manner, students take turns leading the conversation and have plenty of opportunities to repeat the same meaning-focused message to a variety of partners. The element of time not only helps structure the activity but also replicates real-world time constraints.

In the recommended seating rotation shown in Figure 1 below, students in B rows always remain seated while students in A rows follow in the direction indicated by the arrows. The student in the far back (right) of the class (larger icon) moves to the front (left) of the class. Students should *move in the same direction with each rotation*.

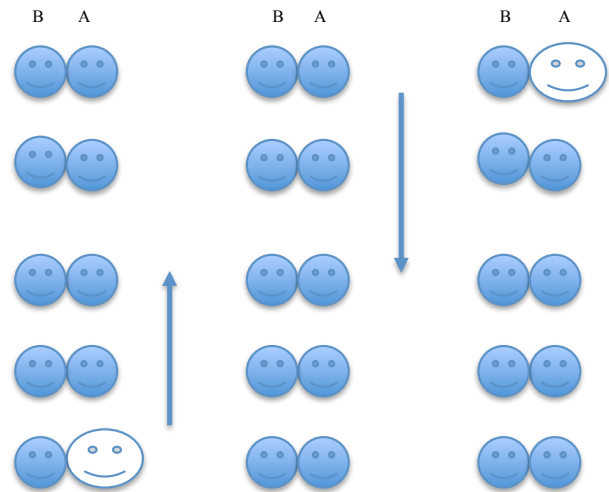


Figure 1. Recommended seating rotation

A name card system

The seating arrangement above works particularly well with a student name card system. On the first day of the course, teachers can have each student make a name card. Before every class, the name cards are shuffled and one is placed on each desk. In this manner, students are assigned random partners. A name card system also provides an efficient way to avoid roll call. About 20 minutes into the class, name cards on empty desks can be collected. With a quick head count, attendance taking is complete. Another benefit of a name card system is its “divide and conquer” strategy. It breaks up the cliques of students who habitually sit in the back of the classroom talking in their native language. Lastly, a name card system facilitates the mixing of

genders. Given a choice, males will sit on one side of the classroom while females sit on the other. Random seating resolves all of these issues. Throughout the semester, and by using the recommended seating rotation for timed conversations, students have many opportunities to speak with each other. Strong bonds form among all of the students and the end result is a very cohesive classroom environment.

Sample lesson: Hesitating

Figure 2 below represents suggested board work for the input and guided practice phases of an oral fluency lesson using a modified lexical approach. The lesson objective is hesitating. Based on Kenny and Woo (2000), the dialog begins with a greeting and ends with a leave-taking. As greetings and leave-taking phrases would have been taught early in the course, only prompts are now provided. The board work serves as a template. In the planning phase, students can work with a partner to think of appropriate questions to ask and individually decide what they want to say on the topic.

A:	Greeting
B:	Response
A:	So, tell...about...
B:	Like, what...want...know...
A:	Like, _____?
B:	Hesitate + Response

A:	Leave-taking
B:	Response

Figure 2. Input and guided practice board work: Hesitating language function

The “smallwords” *so* and *like* are explicitly taught. According to Hasselgreen (2004) “smallwords” are those utterances that add to the flow of a conversation without adding essentially to the message. *So* signals the start of a conversation topic and *like* helps to link speakers’ utterances. Hasselgreen laments the fact that “smallwords” are more often than not neglected in L2 textbook model dialogs. Her research shows that students are perceived as sounding much more fluent with a full repertoire of such words.

The conversation starter *tell me about* and its linked response *what do you want to know*, are lexical phrases that can be used with a wide variety of topics, for example, “tell me about your classes/hobbies/best friend...” The reduced forms *whaddaya* and *wanna* should be drilled as well. After several lessons that recycle learned phrases, students become comfortable using them. As with all functions, McCarthy (2008b) suggests that automaticity is the key to sounding fluent. The phrases should be produced automatically, almost “musically.”

Once the lesson’s core lexical phrases have been drilled, the students have been given time to plan what they want to say, and pairs have completed about five to ten minutes of guided practice, the board work can be altered for extended practice to look something like Figure 3 below. Note that a prompt has replaced the actual phrase.

A:	Leave-taking
B:	Response
A:	Greeting
B:	Response
A:	So, tell... about ...
B:	Like, what want ... know?
A:	Like, _____?
B:	Hesitate + Response

Figure 3. Extended practice board work: Hesitating language function



Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) justify the use of drilling and prompts by recommending two main principles to get students to retrieve and fluently produce chunks of language: (a) repetition of target language out loud, and (b) consistent connections to long-term memory that promotes automaticity. Clearly, the first principle is met by the use of drilling, including the drilling of both slow and reduced forms. Boers and Lindstromberg feel that their second principle can be met by “consolidation practice through the use of prompts that help students to recall and say the whole of a chunk that they have learned” (p. 145). By providing prompts in all subsequent lessons as described in this paper, students are continually encouraged to automatically produce whole learned chunks.

With the altered board work providing only prompts, and students rotating partners with each timed conversation, the extended practice can continue for 15-20 minutes. During extended practice, students should refrain from looking at any notes.

Assessment

There are a variety of ways to assess oral fluency with this method, but the overriding consideration is that the assessment must fit the approach taken. By means of an informal assessment, random pairs can front the class at the end of the lesson and speak for one or two minutes. The rest of the students can be involved by having to listen for information and target phrases. Regarding more formal assessments, the instructor can create a diagnostic rubric in which all of the learned lexical phrases are included. Each time a speaker uses a learned phrase it can be checked on the rubric. This helps create a more reliable and verifiable means of assessing oral fluency. The oral exam basically mimics the format of the timed conversations. Test partners are assigned randomly and are allowed to practice together during the review phase prior to the exam. They are encouraged to use as many learned lexical phrases as possible

during the oral exam. Pair groupings should never be given the conversation topic in advance of an oral exam so as to discourage memorization.

Conclusion

By adhering closely to best practices in the field of TESOL, a modified lexical approach can effectively build oral fluency. By teaching lexical phrases and then systematically reviewing them throughout a course EFL teachers create a cohesive program of instruction. In addition, if instructors follow Nation and Newton's (2009) five criteria when designing fluency tasks, students generate authentic dialog in a supportive atmosphere. As students struggle to verbalize their own opinions and ideas, critical thinking skills are developed. Finally, by configuring student seating so that speakers are able to repeat *the same message* to many different partners, and by using time to structure an English-only atmosphere, the course simulates real-life demands.

There are indeed a great many challenges facing TESOL professionals in Japan. Luckily, there are a few methods and techniques that cut through the complications and get down to the fundamentals. Taking a modified lexical approach to building oral fluency is one such method.

Bio data

Lori Parish earned an MA in TESOL from Eastern Michigan University. She has taught EFL in Japan for about ten years and currently lives in Tokyo.

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Appendix I

Core functions and related lexical phrases

Clarifying:

What does X mean?

How do you say that in English?

Asking for repetition:

Could you say that again?

Excuse me?

Pardon me?

Stating opinions:

If you ask me...

It seems to me...

I believe...

Agreeing:

Me, too

So do I

Neither do I

Me neither

Same here

Disagreeing:

You do? I don't

You don't? I do

Hesitating:

Let me see

Let me think

Asking if they understand:

Do you see?

Do you get it?

Understand?

Got it?

Showing that you understand:

I get it

I understand

Got it

Showing interest:

Oh, yeah?

Really?

Sounds great



Interrupting:

Sorry to interrupt, but...

If I could just interrupt for a moment...

Making suggestions:

Why don't we...

We ought to...

How about if we...

Soliciting opinions:

What do you think?

What are your thoughts?

Asking for help

How do you say...?

What do you call it?

