

# The Case for Lexicogrammar Mindset

## Introduction

Traditional views of language teaching systems (grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse) shape the way lessons unfold, even the trajectory of long-term language learning. And especially beliefs about language learning itself. Grammar has a certain mystique that engenders fear and respect. Lexis, then, tends to take a back seat to grammar and is seen as a separate and distinct system. To illustrate this position, take a cursory look at coursebooks in our field. What are the basic building blocks of popular coursebooks? Grammar+words+skills. In short, grammar teaching is a controversial issue.

But what if there was another way to conceptualize language learning and teaching, where grammar and lexis were viewed as mutually interdependent? That would be lexicogrammar. Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia (2016; 1) support this idea, stating, “Not only is it the case that vocabulary and grammar are intertwined; it is also true that language is less governed by rules and more made up by patterns.”

## Support for Lexicogrammar

Practicing teachers may have observed that the acquisition of structures is not additive, despite the arrangement of grammatical items sequenced in coursebooks. Learners do not build up knowledge of grammatical constructions one after another in sequence. Research in language acquisition (Lightbrown, P. & Spada, N.; 153-199) indicates that focus-on-form(s) alone is insufficient for language development. There must also be meaningful, salient text to co-occur with or tasks to engage.

Secondly, it is worth asking the question, *What does it mean to know a word?* More specifically, what does knowing a word entail? At the most elemental level, knowing a word means knowing its meaning and form. Unsurprisingly, meaning is precisely what most learners are exposed to throughout their school years: simple word lists. Nation, P. & Waring, R. (1997) recommend that learners know about 3,000-word families to facilitate comprehension. Given our learners’ time constraints, wordlists and flashcards efficiently build a basic, receptive vocabulary knowledge in a short time. However, it is worth pointing out that knowing a word is far more complicated than brief exposure to meaning (and form). Common collocations, aural and oral forms, register, derivations, grammatical behavior, and connotations (Thornbury, 2002) all contribute to aspects of knowing a word.

Finally, word frequency is dependent on context or genre. Context and genre imply use, in addition to meaning and form. Corpus linguistics surveys show that word patterns prevail and that words do not appear in isolation. They occur in predictable patterns and as multi-word chunks, including idioms, fixed expressions, sentence stems, etc. Many of these are not amenable to traditional grammar teaching, particularly in individual lessons.

## Is Lexicogrammar Viable?

Traditional grammar teaching methods continue to have a stranglehold on teachers, curriculum developers, and even learners. The notion of presenting and acquiring grammatical competency the old-fashioned way is indeed comforting and strategic. Is implementing a lexicogrammatical approach viable in your context? What can instructors do to foster a lexicogrammatical mindset?

The first step in developing as a teacher is to investigate ways to enhance grammar teaching and integrate it with vocabulary study. Our mission is to help students. We can do so by changing how we present content to our students and reframing tasks and activities to be lexicogrammatical-oriented.

Beginner-level learners cannot engage in lexicogrammatical activities on their own. That is not to say that low-level learners would not benefit from a lexicogrammatical emphasis. This group of learners would benefit from the teacher's language and pedagogical expertise. Teachers should enliven bland coursebook material with informed examples and personalized and relevant content. Teachers should aim to do this without burdening learners with information overload. Some of the most frequently used words in English do not appear in coursebooks until much higher levels, but restricting some grammatical forms is a disservice to students.

### **Classroom Practice**

Let's look at different ways to introduce a lexicogrammatical mindset and expand upon materials and activities.

### **Lexicogrammatical Information**

Learners are often provided only isolated words to memorize and translate into L1. However, it would be more helpful to give supporting context to identify a word's grammatical properties. For example, nouns need to be introduced with a/an/some so that learners know if they are countable or uncountable. Objects or prepositions should accompany the context for transitive and intransitive verbs. This way, learners are more conscious of grammaticalized lexis.

**Collocations:** Some words statistically associate with each other. Many verbs collocate with nouns. For example, make, do, play, pay, save, break, have, take, and go. A wide range of activities can be used to learn and recycle common collocations, ranging from simple to creative and complex. Many online corpus tools are available online for teachers or learners to check for examples.

**Phrases and chunks:** Use authentic materials if possible, and model for learners a whole text or piece of writing in the genre of your choice. However, textbook materials and literature are also suitable. Circle or highlight groups of words so that learners can see how individual words can be grouped to form meaningful units. Afterward, learners can begin to find phrases and chunks on their own.

**Lexical sets:** One notable deficiency that many students have is the ability to produce language, spoken or written, with specificity. Circumlocution, the ability to explain a concept with other words or ideas that are hard to define or when a word is unknown, is one strategy or skill for

developing ideas more thoroughly. For teachers, asking concept-checking questions (CCQs) is a profitable way to elicit topic-related lexis and build background knowledge around a subject.

### **Pattern Repetition**

Instructors also need to make a note of specific difficulties students have—for example, V+to-infinitive; V+preposition+ing; V+to-infinitive or ing. More practice with these forms facilitates the learning process.

### **Predicting, Recycling, Revising**

At some point after a lesson, it is imperative to repeat or consolidate previous learning. One effective activity is to read aloud a text (or play a recording) and stop at points where students supply the following phrase or missing words, including grammaticalized lexis.

### **Story Reconstruction**

Instructors can write down a number of key chunks and phrases from a text that students have studied previously. Students working alone or in groups reconstruct the text, writing or talking about the main points in sequential order. Story retelling based on movie trailers or one or two-minute scenes from movies is also motivating for students.

### **Related Derivations**

Frequent errors that learners tend to make are with confusing derivatives. Sometimes they change meaning entirely, despite having the same root. Other times, the meaning remains the same but the part of speech changes; for example, (impression, impressed, impressive, impressively).

### **Conclusion**

It is impossible to distill the grammar versus lexis debate down to a few paragraphs or pages. There is much left out of the argument. Nevertheless, in this very brief space, I hope that I have made a strong case for integrating grammar and lexis at the same time. In order to demonstrate proficiency, write or speak cogently, or just obtain a higher Toieic score, learners' language must be used accurately and appropriately. Lexicogrammar is one way to improve our learners' English proficiency by focusing on form, meaning, and use.

Grammar versus lexis. Where do you stand?

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