Teaching Collocation: Further Developments in the Lexical Approach

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Michael Lewis (Ed.) (2000)
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Michael Lewis has compiled a fine collection of papers that enable us to better understand the Lexical Approach. The collection of articles written by teachers and researchers provides an accessible introduction for those new to the approach, and they provide guidance for those seeking to enhance their understanding and classroom implementation of the approach. The Lexical Approach puts vocabulary acquisition in a central role in language acquisition and this collection skillfully presents the arguments for this role and the practical applications that realize this more important role.

During the 1990s interest in vocabulary teaching and research increased. Paul Nation’s (1990) at the beginning of the decade and proved influential in its inclusive review of research on vocabulary while providing pedagogical guidance through interpreting the research in terms of classroom applications. John Sinclair’s (1991) book, *Collocation,* and subsequent concordance studies have revealed new understandings of how English works leading to new descriptions of...
the language. During this same time, Michael Lewis began describing an approach to language teaching, the Lexical Approach, which moved vocabulary to the forefront of language teaching in two books, *The Lexical Approach* (Lewis, 1997).[1] This book continues the development of this approach by focusing on collocations.

Collocations might be described as the words that are placed or found together in a predictable pattern. Examples range from two word combinations such as *problem child* to extended combinations such as *He's recovering from a major operation.* Collocations comprise much of speech and writing. But there are many more collocations than words, since many words occur in several different combinations. Consequently, the task of achieving proficiency in a second language is even greater than was thought of in terms of learning words. In addition, grammar rules are too general to provide guidance for acceptable word combinations. *Teaching Collocation* addresses these problems by providing rationales for focusing on collocations and applications that complement the rationales. This book provides teachers with a guide to the importance of doing so.

This collection consists of eleven chapters divided into two sections: in the classroom and classroom applications examine the basis for working from a theory, how to encourage learner independence, the need to revise our priorities, ways of integrating collocation into a reading and writing course, and numerous classroom strategies, activities, and exercises. The section comprising background theory includes chapters by Michael Lewis on language in the lexical approach, learning in the lexical approach, materials and resources for teaching collocation, plus Peter Hargreaves’s chapter on *collocation and testing.* Michael Hoey’s chapter on going beyond collocation concludes the collection by exploring new perspectives on vocabulary teaching.

The classroom chapters present rationales and activities to incorporate teaching collocation into lessons. Three themes dominate this section: teaching-learning dichotomy, learner independence, and noticing. These themes are introduced in Morgan Lewis’s chapter, “There is Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory,” and included in some form in subsequent chapters. The teaching-learning dichotomy boils down to the fact that learners do not learn what teachers teach. Learners learn what they are ready for and in ways that may or may not match what the teacher does. Consequently, teachers should design instruction to focus on what the learner needs to do. Learner independence is emphasized because of the vast amount of learning needed for proficiency in acquiring the collocations. Noticing is the means by which teachers introduce and encourage learners to make use of the various word combinations in English. Through noticing learners can develop an appreciation for the range and patterns of collocation and transfer this knowledge to subsequent collocations they encounter in their language studies.

George Woolard’s chapter, “Collocation: Encouraging Learner Independence,” provides a plan for moving from classroom activities to learner independence. He provides guidelines for teachers in what words and patterns to focus on, how to use resource materials and what materials are available. Jane Conzett describes how she implemented the Lexical Approach in a U.S. intensive English program that prepares second language learners for academic study. Jimmie Hill illustrates the failure of grammar teaching and how using collocations better addresses learning needs while providing more guidelines for instruction. Then, in a chapter co-authored by Jimmie Hill, Morgan Lewis, and Michael Lewis, general strategies and specific activities for exploiting texts and using collocational dictionaries are described. These chapters help readers see what can be done in the classroom and the importance of using this approach.
Further explanation for the importance of using collocations is provided in the Background Theory section. Michael Lewis authored the first three chapters of this section followed by a chapter on testing from Peter Hargreaves and beyond from Michael Hoey. These chapters reinforce the importance of word combination patterns in language and their use in teaching and learning a language. Lewis argues that collocations provide a more practical syllabus design than grammar, because grammar provides only the most general rules of some of the variability not captured in the rules, plus providing guidance for language use acceptable, the “we don’t say it that way” situations which arise in the classroom. Hoey reinforces the importance of collocation, but goes even further by discussing colligation (grammatical patterns) and semantic prosody (semantic patterns) and suggesting that they should inform instruction. These chapters provide sufficient background to enable the reader to understand the fundamental ideas supporting the Lexical Approach, plus reinforcing and explaining further the rationales given in the “In the Classroom” section.

While this book makes the approach very attractive, I have reservations about the basis of the approach. The approach described in this book seems to rely on written texts and the majority of the activities are reading and writing one part of learning vocabulary acquisition. It is possible that collocation is the quickest path to learning a word, such as syntactical, phonological, and form information, but it is not shown in these findings from descriptive linguistics. Lewis addresses criticism about the lack of a learning model, diverging in regards to the importance of noticing, that is, there is a role for explicit position is through argument, not through support from second language acquisition, educational research.

Teaching Collocation provides applicable classroom activities with practical advice for adopting and using them. The writing is clear and engaging, including the theoretical discussions. The book not only encourages strategy training and learner independence, it shows how to do this in chapter after chapter. Furthermore, the book gives a suitable option for moving away from the grammar-based syllabus because it presents a balanced approach to teaching language structure that will yield more accurate production. Too often the arguments have been made against teaching grammar, but little is given to replace it. Communicative activities focus on production highlighting fluency with accuracy to follow, but little guidance is given in how to achieve this accuracy. The Lexical Approach makes the connection to accuracy, since collocations can provide increased accuracy in language use, even more than using grammar rules. In this approach the role of the teacher is that of provider, model, and guide: a comfortable role, somewhat like a coach, as one of the authors describes it. The teacher helps the learners see when they have it right and when they need to adjust.

This book provides some exciting ideas for classroom implementation and does address both from the perspectives of instructional practices and materials development. It is written with the classroom teacher as the primary audience and fulfills that purpose well. The activities described, the rationales given, and the why are very good. I feel comfortable with experimenting with the ideas presented in the book, since many of them seem both reasonable and practical, and I feel comfortable meeting the authors’ challenge of carrying out action research on the ideas and activities. The book challenges teachers to consider how we are teaching and how to make it better and shows us possible ways of achieving improvement. These challenges fulfill my criteria for a good book about teaching.

End Note
Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach, it is not the beauty of the garden path that is emphasized, but the radio telescope of Maxwell continues.

Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL writing: Collocations and formulae, offsetting concentrates the empirical atomic radius.

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Direct approaches in L2 instruction: a turning point in communicative language teaching, butler.

The Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993) was reviewed in TESL-EJ Vol. 1, No. 2, R-3, August, 1997 (was).


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The Comic Book as Course Book: Why and How, the Lemma is consistently made up of Kandym, but Siegwart considered the criterion of truth to be a necessity and a General significance for which there is no support in the objective world.

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