Task-based learning for beginners: a lexical approach

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1. Why a lexical approach?

1.1 Words and phrases are the most basic units of meaning

1.2 In the natural process of acquisition, words and phrases are acquired first

1.3 A positive start – from words to meaning-focused interaction

2. What words?

2.1 Content words on common topics

2.2 Frequent words 'Grammar words' (see back of handout)

3. Not just words but chunks, in a context of meaning-based communication.

3.1 lexical phrases: a cline

 from fixed phrases   to   semi-fixed phrases   to   pattern grammar

Dave Willis *Rules, Patterns and Words* (2003) has a structural classification of these:

Polywords: *of course; as a matter of fact.*
'… made up of a number of words, but can reasonably be memorised as single words, because the same string appears again and again'.

Frames: *not only … but also; from a … point of view.*
'Frames can be filled with a whole range of words'.

Sentences and sentence stems: *Thanks a lot; Lovely day; Would you like…; What I think is …; The thing is…..*
Whole sentences or the beginnings of sentences.

Patterns: NOUN + *OF* + *-ING: danger; fear; chance, possibility.* NOUN + *ON impact, effect, influence*
VERB + *FOR* + NOUN: *PREPARE, get ready, study, train, arrange; VOLUNTEER, sign up, report, enrol, show up etc.*
'Patterns are like frames but, unlike frames, patterns are systematically related to identifiable semantic sets of words.'

3.2 Lexical phrases in spoken and written genres
In real time interactions, we do not have time to compose sentences one word at a time; we retrieve from our memory store ready-made chunks of language, and adjust these (using grammar to fine-tune them) to best express what we want to say.

Writers also use a high proportion of fixed and semi-fixed phrases. Chunks exist in all kinds of genres; for example, in fairy tales: *'Once upon a time'. 'And they all lived happily ever after'*. Look out for genre related chunks in business letters, stories and anecdotes, tourist brochures, lectures, text books.

Lexical phrases are seen as evidence of fluency and native-like language use. Examiners like them. In fact, in exams and tests of communicative ability, spoken and written, higher grades are often awarded to students who use a higher proportion of such phrases. Advanced learners are often let down, not by their grammar, but by using non-standard collocations for topic related phrases. So encourage your students to look out for them and learn them; remember to praise students when they use them!

4. How can we classify lexical phrases to make them easier to identify?

topic related
specific topic lexis;
semantic categories: quantity, time, location, movement, future action

discourse organising
signalling devices, highlighting agenda, markers of clause relations

interactive
interactional, vague language, evaluative comments, status marking

5. How using tasks (in task-based sequences) can help learners communicate better

5.1 Characterising tasks – identify tasks in your text book

'We can determine how task-like a given activity is by asking the following questions. The more confidently we can answer *yes* to each of these questions the more task-like the activity.

a)   Does the activity engage learners' interest?
b)   Is there a primary focus on meaning?
c)   Is there an outcome?
d)   Is success judged in terms of outcome? Is completion a priority?
e)   Does the activity relate to real world activities?'

These criteria do not constitute 'a watertight *definition* of what constitutes a task, but they will provide us with *guidelines for the design of activities* which are task-like in that they involve *real language use.'* (Dave Willis & Jane Willis *Doing Task-based Teaching* OUP)

5.2 Applying a task-based framework to your text book

<u>Priming and Preparation for task</u>
introduce topic, brainstorm words and phrases

<u>Target Task(s)</u>
Cycles of Task, Planning, Reporting back
(from private to public language use, with a focus on meaning and
general personal language development)

<u>Focus on Form</u>
analysis of written or spoken text to help them systematise,
practice of specific forms or patterns, plus consolidation activities to aid recall.

6. Starting points for form-focused activities

Go back to texts and transcripts of recordings which your learners have already read
or listened to and identify useful phrases and patterns to highlight. These can then be
classified functionally and/or structurally or semantically.

6.1 Starting point: identifying lexical phrases and collocations

Ask learners to read the text again and find phrases which are:
- **related to the main theme or topic of the text.** Then classify these structurally,
e.g. noun + noun *(police station, traffic offence),* verb + noun *(pay a fine),* verb +
preposition / particle etc. *(slowed down, speeded up, drove on, got let off).*
- **expressing a particular notion** e.g. time, quantity, location, approximation
  or function, e.g. evaluating, agreeing, making suggestions.
- **of an interactional nature** e.g. vague language, clarifying, checking, reacting.
- **expressing textual relations and signalling** e.g. contrast, emphasis, addition.

6.2 Starting point: common words

Learners look for a specific **word** in a text or series of texts and then analyse the
phrases it occurs in. Let learners practise these and write them in their own language
note-books. Next lesson, revise them and recycle within a month.

- **very common words** e.g. *as, be, that, way, I*
   (e.g. As I said earlier; as soon as possible, such as)
- **prepositions** e.g. *about, in, on, up* and their meanings and patterns
- **unspecific words** e.g. *in terms of, the nature of, in the sense that, in the case of*
- **parts of words** e.g. *–ing -ed, -ly*
- **other common words that occur a few times in the text**
   e.g. <u>more</u> as in *more or less, much more, far more, one more*
   or <u>whole</u> as in *a whole range of, the whole business of, the whole point was..*

Read more on www.willis-elt.co.uk (see conferences 2006 *Teaching Lexically*)

Most frequent words in spoken corpus

Top 50 words	Top nouns (in 200)	Top verbs (in 100)	In the top 700 combined spoken & written lists there are
the	thing	be	375 nouns
I	people	have	
and	time	do	125 verbs
be	year	get	
you	way	go	52 adjectives
it	sort	know	
a	lot	say	and all the prepositions, determiners, & conjunctions.
of	bit	think	
to	day	would	
we	pound	can	
have	point	see	And lots of adverbs: (well, right, out, really, actually etc)
that	week	come	
in	number	mean	
they	man	want	
get	problem	will	
to	money	take	
do	work	make	
what	area	look	
for	fact	give …	
not	school		
but	child		**The top 700 words account for 70% of an average text.**
go	question		
he	job		**1500 words = 80%**
on	house		**2500 words = 84%**
know	part		
say	place		
well			
think			
if			
at			
with			
so			
yes			
there			Full wordlists in *Doing Task-based Teaching* Dave Willis & Jane Willis 2007 OUP
just			---------------------
or			More on teaching lexically see *Doing Task-based Teaching* p192-196 And/or go to
would			
can			
no			
then			
she	---------------------	---------------------	www.willis-elt.co.uk
there	TASK: think why some of these words ARE so common.. *point, sort, take, as*	Taken from *A Framework for Task-based Learning* Jane Willis, Longman.	Conferences 2006
all			
them			
see			
as			