

Leo Selivan works for the British Council. He gave a number of workshops at Beit Berl college this year. We are publishing an article which was originally published in the ETAI Forum (with their permission).

Teaching grammar lexically

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Background

This article is going to talk about teaching grammar, but I would like to start by clarifying a terminological confusion regarding the word *lexis*. Nowadays the word "lexis" seems like a fashionable alternative to the word "vocabulary". We don't teach vocabulary anymore – we introduce new lexis. However, few people understand that the two words are not interchangeable. The Lexical Approach, proposed in the 1990s (Lewis, 1993), rejects the grammar / vocabulary dichotomy claiming that language consists of lexical chunks. In this light unlike vocabulary, which has been traditionally seen as 'single' words, lexis is viewed as consisting of lexical items which include collocations (*achieve a goal, silly mistake*), fixed expressions (*by the way, on the other hand*) as well as grammatical chunks, such as '*I don't know*', '*I was born in...*', '*Have you been to...?*'

It is perhaps ironic that the Approach has exercised realm of vocabulary coursebooks now include (particularly of the verb + phrases. However, the most coursebooks has unchanged, i.e. "grammar-practitioners have vocabulary being more they miss the point that Approach language is

lexis, in other words, both grammar and vocabulary are inextricably connected.

- You may have been to Leo's workshop on this topic at the last ETAI in Jerusalem. Look out for him at future ETAI conferences.
- Leo also writes articles on lexis and the relationship between lexis and grammar for the British Council website www.teachingenglish.org.uk

little influence the Lexical on ELT has been in the teaching. Most sections on collocations noun kind) or useful grammar syllabus in remained largely based". While most ELT embraced the idea of important than grammar, within the Lexical viewed as consisting of

Seeing vocabulary and grammar as part of one whole calls for implementation of different teaching techniques. Just like teaching the grammar of the word (*responsible* is followed by *for*, *afraid* is followed by *of*), many grammatical structures could be taught lexically, by drawing students' attention to the surrounding text (co-text) and words which frequently occur in these patterns.

Rules: oversimplifications or useful generalisations?

What comes to mind when you see the following words?

already yet never

That's right. Favourite for some and the most hated by others – the notorious Present Perfect. Likewise *always / usually / sometimes / rarely* would probably conjure up the Present Simple. Most of us actually do draw our students' attention to these time words frequently occurring with one tense / form or another, referring to them as "time indicators". What it means is we do quite often refer to these generalizations in order to streamline the teaching and, hopefully, learning process by offering our students these 'crutches' in the form of adverbials of time.

Are these generalizations helpful or do they oversimplify the grammar to the point of not making any sense? After all, it is obvious the Present Perfect is not the only form where *already* can occur:

*We are **already** doing a lot to combat crime in the city.*
*Ben was **already** 17 when we moved to Birmingham.*

Similarly, time expressions traditionally associated with the Present Simple are used in variety of other forms.

*I've **never** been to Portugal but I've always wanted to.*
***Sometimes** we spent hours going over our homework.*

I believe these helpful oversimplifications are a necessary tool in the EFL classroom.

A lot of supposed “rules” often distort the view of the language

Main criticism levelled by the proponents of the Lexical Approach at the traditional grammar teaching is that most of the supposed rules at best oversimplify the real picture of how a particular structure is used to the point of absurdity, but in most cases are plain wrong (Lewis, 1993)

- “The Present Perfect is used when an event has just happened”.

However, imagine a scene: a flashy car zooms past you and your friend walking down the street. *Wow! Did you see that?!*

- “The Present Perfect Simple is used when an action is complete, while Present Perfect Continuous is used when an action continues up to present”.

However, consider these scenarios. You walk into a smoky room. You can smell cigarettes. *Ugh! Someone has smoked / has been smoking in here.*

A woman reproaches her drunken husband who shows up at the door. (Sorry if this looks like a scene from EastEnders) *You have drunk / have been drinking again.*

It is clear that the Present Perfect Continuous is a better, more natural choice in the above two examples which invalidate the "supposed" rule about complete/incomplete action. However, a lot of learners I have come across have this erroneous perception inculcated by their teachers or grammar books.

It is a fact that the view of the English language that applied linguists hold and that of teachers' classroom practices do not always concur.

Some would argue we cannot entirely do away with these useful oversimplifications and short cuts because they make learning, or rather our teaching, easier to digest. Indeed, what I advocate is actually using more of these "crutches" but using the ones of the lexical variety, i.e. the ones which draw students' attention to the language which frequently occurs with particular grammar items.

Some practical ideas

Present Perfect

Notoriously difficult to teach and master. Too often teachers spend hours of their class time going over the use of the Present Perfect resorting to presentations and lengthy explanations. However, students still fail to produce it in speaking or writing. Wouldn't it be easier to draw students' attention to frequently occurring patterns using Present Perfect and remember them as unanalysed wholes? Memorise, don't analyse! Even students who know the rules well inevitably fail to apply them correctly when they speak.

Pre-Intermediate students usually come across superlatives towards the end of the 6th grade. It is quite possible to introduce a simple pattern using the Present Perfect:

the best I've (ever) + past participle.

Just present it as a useful pattern without delving deep into the use of the Present Perfect. Tell your students that this is the form we normally use with Superlative:

It's the best movie I've ever seen
It's the best book I've ever read

Get your students to make similar sentences using prompts:

cake / present / joke

They will have to come up with appropriate past participles (*have eaten, have received, have heard*)

You can ask your students to elaborate on what they have told you and they would have to use the Simple Past. This way you indirectly expose them to another important aspect of the Present Perfect – its function as a conversation starter.

Most coursebooks are organised topically. When you get to the topic of Travel you can introduce the chunk:

Have you (ever) been to...?

Once again, there is no need to explicitly address the function of the Present Perfect, You can simply tell your students that it is a pattern we use a lot to talk about travel. Later it can be reintroduced when you get to the topic of cinema / books.

Have you seen Armageddon?

Past Perfect

Another form which students find relatively easy to comprehend but rarely produce in their writing or speech. I once tried teaching it together with the verb *expect* and students started producing this form effortlessly.

A very common chunk is

more/-er ... than I had expected

I enjoyed the film more than I had expected.

Other common verbs which fit into this pattern are:

than I had thought
than I had imagined

Third person S

Another challenge for teachers. The problem with the third person –s can be alleviated if some verbs were simply taught as chunks. One such verb is *depend*. *Depends* is much more common than *depend* in the British National Corpus (BNC), particularly in the spoken language where occurrences of *depends* significantly outnumber *depend* (by more than four times). Therefore the verb *depend* should be taught as a chunk (a more familiar word “expression” can be used to label this idea in class instead of “chunk”), ideally accompanied by the nouns it frequently occurs with:

<i>It depends on</i>		<i>the number (of)</i>
		<i>the size (of)</i>
		<i>the type (of)</i>
		<i>the weather</i>

Similarly, *It doesn't matter* is almost four times more common than *it matters* and therefore should be taught as a chunk and not as the infinitive form of the verb *to matter*.

Conclusion

Many learners need explicit rules in order to understand when certain structures are used. However, there is growing evidence that learners have a difficulty transferring formally learnt rules of the language no matter how well they have been learnt. While rule-based grammar teaching, when a particular grammar structure is selected for treatment during the lesson, still has a place in the EFL classroom, many authors on the subject argue that “for some learners what is needed is the learning and recollection of bits of text exemplifying useful “sentence patterns” (Gerngross, Puchta, Thornbury, 2007)

I hope my ideas and suggestions above will help teachers introduce a lexical component into the grammar teaching.

References

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