

Using the Lexical Approach for the Acquisition of ESP Vocabulary

Galina Kavaliauskienė and Violeta Janulevičienė

[ukk \[at\] ltu.lt](mailto:ukk[at]ltu.lt)

Department of Foreign Languages

Lithuanian Law University, Ateities 20, Vilnius 2057, Lithuania

Introduction

No one argues that the scope of specialized vocabulary in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a primary goal. Equally, there is a commonplace assumption that the more words a learner knows, the larger the learner's vocabulary knowledge is. However, there is another dimension to vocabulary knowledge that should be considered - namely, how far a learner knows the combinatory possibilities of a word. For any given word, a native speaker also knows a range of other words, which can occur or collate with it. This is an aspect of vocabulary knowledge that has until recently been largely ignored.

Quite recently computer analysis of the English language has revealed a widespread occurrence of lexical patterns in language use. Some researchers call them 'lexical phrases' or 'lexical items', others prefer the term 'multi-word chunks' or just 'chunks' of language. Whatever the term, they are an important feature both in language use and language acquisition and offer advantages for language teaching, particularly for teaching ESP.

Michael Lewis (1993) challenged the standard view of dividing language teaching into grammar and vocabulary by arguing that language consists of lexical items. He treats them as belonging to four major categories. A relatively small group of lexical items is the words and polywords. They have usually been considered as essential vocabulary for learners to memorise.

A second category is collocations. Collocation is understood as the way in which words typically occur with each other, i.e. combinations of words in natural speech with a certain frequency. Native speakers intuitively 'know' which words frequently combine and which do not. To a native speaker, they just do not sound right. Knowing frequent collocations is essential for accurate, natural English.

There are specific types of collocations in ESP which cause students' errors due to a lack of translational equivalence between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Teachers must help the learner become familiar with ESP collocations, and such familiarity will develop best when the learner is consciously aware of this tendency of words to go together (Lewis, 1993).

In Lewis's approach, a third category is fixed expressions, and a fourth, semi-fixed expressions. Collocations and expressions are thought to be the most important types of lexical phrases. Native speakers retain many prefabricated lexical items in their memory. Language fluency and accuracy is achieved largely by retrieving and combining ready-made chunks of language. 'The ability to chunk language successfully is central to understanding of how language works' (Lewis, 1997).

In recent years, there has been a worldwide increase in demand for ESP, which is essential for professional development. We are involved in teaching ESP at the Law University, Lithuania, constantly trying to enhance the efficiency of learning/teaching process. Lewis's ideas of teaching vocabulary in chunks appealed to us because of its efficacy and have been applied to teaching ESP skills.

Intake of Vocabulary Chunks in ESP

In ESP, students have to learn high-priority lexis, which needs to be selected and included into learning materials and class activities. Obviously, students do not need to distinguish which category lexical phrases belong to. What is important in order to ensure their effective learning is that students turn a high proportion of the input to which they are exposed into intake. The question which arises

to every teacher is how to maximise the probability of learners turning input into intake. In that, we support Lewis's idea of making students aware of the existence of chunks. Most learners equate 'vocabulary' with 'words', and there is a tendency among learners to translate any professional text word-for-word, i.e. they usually try to simplify most lexical phrases to separate words. The role of teachers is to raise students' awareness of the existence of lexical items.

At the beginning of the ESP course, we spent some time on developing learners' strategies for dealing with unknown lexical items. The second step is to help them to identify lexical phrases -- whole expressions with high-priority ESP lexis. This stage is very important for developing the learner's ability to recognize chunks. We suggest using a more discovery-based methodology. We have encouraged students to analyse a number of authentic passages, each of which contained the target lexical item. From these, students are led to discover what different collocations exist for the item.

Here are some chunks that our students identified in an authentic passage on contract killing:

- was killed by assassins / was seriously wounded by ..., etc.
- died of wounds in hospital, in the car, etc.
- a heap of twisted metal
- is known as the richest man in ...
- to earn a good/bad, etc. reputation
- a contract killing
- claimed the lives of some politicians / pedestrians, etc.
- attracted the hostile attention
- the attackers had escaped before the police arrived
- a write-off car/vehicle
- a criminal was on the run
- a fugitive is at large
- to wreck a career, a life, a car, etc.
- was cornered by the armed police
- to hold a knife to one's chest, head, body, etc.
- a crime has been committed
- shot dead by a partner, a marksman, etc.
- get in touch with the police, relatives, authorities, etc.
- a security force
- to watch out for ...

It is unimportant if students do not know which category a lexical item belongs to. What they do need is to develop an ability to notice chunks of different kinds. So, one of the central activities in ESP teaching is to encourage students to identify language items in authentic materials. Another important point is that language units should be learned in context. Lexical items can be, in theory, learned de-contextualised, but it does not ensure mastery of the item. Contextualised learning is preferable, because learning vocabulary is not a simple memorisation of lexical phrases. They must be integrated into the learner's linguistic resources so that they are spontaneously available when needed. Vocabulary *usage* is not the same as its *knowledge*. And it is a teacher's job to activate these items in a classroom. This means that learners must process this newly acquired vocabulary. Therefore, a logical follow-up is a multi-step procedure: 1) checking comprehension of authentic passages; 2) providing more practice; 3) revision and 4) consolidation.

Our experience has proven that traditional 'fill in the blanks' way is effective for checking comprehension as it encourages learners to consider the context of the sentence to work out a probable missing word. At the same time, students are being exposed to the typical linguistic environment for an item. They perceive other words that can co-occur with the target word and grammatical context in which the item can occur.

Oral practice for processing target vocabulary is advisable. Such activities as 'students' projects' or designing tasks for other groups has proved beneficial.

Revision and consolidation are a required part of the process of vocabulary acquisition. The process of forgetting is very fast. According to research on memorising, a human being forgets 80 per cent of new information in 24 hours. It might sound exaggerated, but there is some truth in it, though these figures are different for different people. But the fact remains that the less a person is interested in something, the faster the process of forgetting is. Thus, revision and consolidation must take place after a lapse of time. A

learner must use all available methods for developing all language skills, some of which are matching pairs, sorting exercises, pictorial schemata, problem solving tasks, values clarification, discussion, role-play, including oral presentations and writing summaries. Promoting autonomous learning, which is often called 'learner independence', we advocate for learners' initiated activities, eg. learners acting as 'teachers' in organising and checking class activities, learners creating their own materials like posters, flashcards, games or role-plays, learners giving a choice of activities for different pairs/groups, etc.

Recently, we applied the lexical approach for teaching reading comprehension and writing summaries. The difficulty that we faced comes from the students' limited general vocabulary. This fact was earlier reported by other ESP practitioners. The estimates (Coady, Huckin, 1997) show that a threshold of general reading comprehension requires 5000 lexical items which cover more than 90 per cent of any text. Consequently, in ESP language high-frequency lexical items should be taught first. They can be classified as a well known KEY WORDS technique because of their role in conveying a message. It is worth noting that the key-word method of teaching vocabulary has also been neglected recently in spite of its obvious advantages for understanding the gist. However, low-frequency lexical items cannot be ignored either, in order to avoid lack of comprehension.

There is another relevant and quite important point to teaching ESP through lexical items is the students' ability to find an equivalent in L1 to match a lexical phrase in L2. As all teachers of English probably realise proficiency in L2 implies the ability to be bilingual -- using appropriately and interchangeably L2 and L1. We dealt with this theme elsewhere (Janulevièienė, Kavaliauskienė, 2000).

Conclusion

ESP lexical phrases may be treated similarly as other chunks -- as ready-made, or prefabricated language units which, once they are learnt, are easily retrievable and accessible. Moreover, they are context-bound and occur quite frequently, which makes them highly memorable for learners. They are invaluable for developing students' competence in language, i.e. knowledge of language and ability to use it.

Learning ESP in multi-word chunks means a change for the better in the L2 vocabulary acquisition. It is not only desirable and beneficial, but also indispensable, because learners become involved in the process of becoming aware of and identifying lexical phrases, processing them orally or in writing, distinguishing between high-frequency and low-frequency lexical items.

References

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