Teaching Lexically

Principles and practice

Hugh Dellar and Andrew Walkley

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES

DELTA Publishing

DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Series editors Mike Burghall and Lindsay Clandfield

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1. Auflage 1 12 11 10 9 8 | 2029 28 27 26 25

www.deltapublishing.co.uk
www.klett-sprachen.de/delta

ISBN 978-3-12-501361-2

Edited by Mike Burghall
Designed by Christine Cox
Cover photo © Tom Franks/Shutterstock.com
Printed by Digitaldruck Tebben GmbH, Biessenhofen

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would both like to thank everyone at DELTA for believing in this project from the start, and for their hard work and commitment to ensuring it sees the light of day.

Secondly, we would like to thank colleagues past and present from both the teaching and the publishing realms. Without the constant discussions, debates, arguments and interactions over the years, we would not have been able to develop our ideas as fully as we have.

Despite the inevitability of such a list failing to mention all concerned, we feel it only proper to mention in passing Leo Selivan, Ivor Timmis, Nick Barrett, Rebecca Sewell, Luis Pedreira, Margot Van Der Doelen, Karen Spiller, Chris Wenger, Dennis Hogan, Gavin McLean, John McHugh, Bryan Fletcher, Richard Cauldwell, Mark Powell, Chris Gough, Jon Wright, Julian Savage, Andrew Fairhurst, Sally Dalzell, John Smith, Maud Dunkeld and Philip Kerr.

Thirdly, we are both eternally grateful to our wives and children, for indulging us during the long hours of writing that this project required of us.

And finally, we would like to thank Michael Lewis and Jimmie Hill – for lighting the flame for us back in the mid-1990s, and for subsequently encouraging us to kindle it.

From the authors

Hugh's story

The seeds for this book were planted in the early 1990s. I had qualified as a teacher and was living in Jakarta, Indonesia. When I started trying to teach myself Indonesian, I was unconsciously using a 'grammar + words' approach, memorising single words and studying grammar forms and rules. The results were mixed, to say the least!

It took me a while to realise that a sentence like *anjing itu menggonggong* – 'the dog is barking' – wasn't a good example of how the present continuous was generally used, nor was it representative of what is said about dogs or barking. In short, it was a sentence I'd learned to somehow get to grips with the language, yet which had no real utility. At the same time, what was helping me was learning repertoires of relatively fixed questions and answers (often featuring grammatical structures I'd not yet studied, but was able to use within limited contexts), common phrases I heard a lot, and so on. Of course, there was also lots of repetition and practice.

When I read *The Lexical Approach* (1993) by Michael Lewis, I found my language learning experiences had inadvertently brought me to a lexical view of language – and his book provided me with a clearer way of thinking about this. I later came to understand that Lewis was simply one writer working within a long tradition of lexically-oriented thinking.

However, while my initial reading of *The Lexical Approach* energised me, it also confounded me as I felt many of its ideas about putting this way of seeing language to practical use weren't as developed as they might have been. The activities suggested often seemed tokenistic, and didn't amount to a thorough reconstruction of practical pedagogy.

In the years that followed – through my classroom practice, my writing of classroom material, and my conversations with students, colleagues and other EFL professionals – I came to the ideas laid out in this book: our attempt to make lexical teaching more accessible and more widespread!

Andrew's story

My route to a lexical way of teaching probably started with my failed attempts to learn French at school. It was only after I started teaching in Spain that I had any real success in speaking a foreign language – a success that stemmed far more from using the language than from studying grammar rules.

I started out with no training, but my main approach was to not do to others what my teachers had done to me! Instead, I mainly chatted to my students and told them some words when they asked about them. We listened to songs and watched videos.

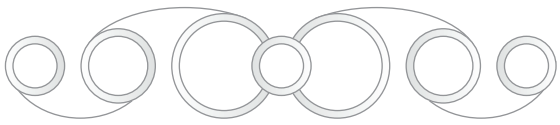
Grammar finally came back into view when I did my CELTA course. I learnt how you could present grammar via dialogues, and how it could be related to real-life communication. I also discovered the *Collins Cobuild English Course* (1988), which based its syllabus around frequent words, and *Conversation Gambits*, from the same year, which contained chunks for conversation.

These experiences primed me to receive *The Lexical Approach* when I read it on my Diploma course. However, I was also taking on other (sometimes contradictory!) ideas – such as teaching skills, and teaching grammar through comparing sentences and discussing differences in meaning.

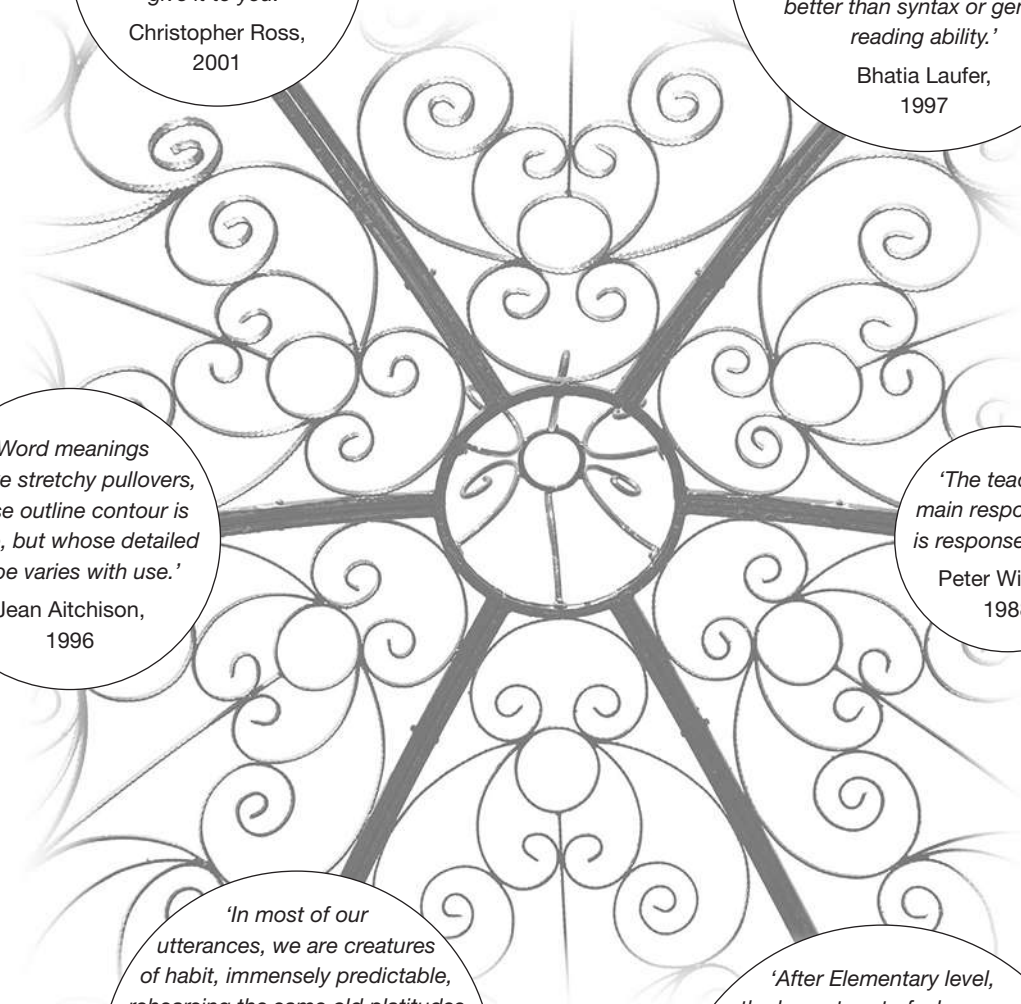
When I first met Hugh, we were both beginning to wonder about where a lexical approach might go: what would the syllabus be? What should materials and classes be like? We continued to be influenced by other writers, our classroom experience and discussions with colleagues. Getting involved in writing and teacher training brought this into focus, because, when you're paid to share materials and practice, you want to be clear about your own beliefs and principles.

So for me, this book is an outline of where we have both got to so far in determining our beliefs, how these inform our own practice and how we can explore and share that practice. It's *a* lexical approach, rather than *the* lexical approach, *a good way* of teaching, rather than *the only way* of teaching – and we hope it helps you on your own journey.

Contents



Contents



'What is a teacher? A teacher is someone who has what you need and knows how to give it to you.'

Christopher Ross, 2001

'By far the greatest obstacle to good reading is insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon. [In research studies] lexis was found to be the best predictor of success in reading, better than syntax or general reading ability.'

Bhatia Laufer, 1997

'Word meanings are like stretchy pullovers, whose outline contour is visible, but whose detailed shape varies with use.'

Jean Aitchison, 1996

'The teacher's main responsibility is response-ability.'

Peter Wilberg, 1988

'In most of our utterances, we are creatures of habit, immensely predictable, rehearsing the same old platitudes and the same old clichés in almost everything we say. If it were not so, ordinary language would become unworkable. Humankind cannot bear very much creativity.'

Patrick Hanks, 2013

'After Elementary level, the largest part of a language learner's task is to build up an adequate stock of high-priority words and lexicalised phrases, including both knowledge of their forms and an awareness of their more important meanings, the major collocational and syntactic constraints on their use, and so on.'

Michael Swan, 1996

Teaching lexically

There have been many thousands of pages written about how people learn languages, yet we would suggest they can all be neatly summarised in a very small number of principles.

Principles of how people learn

Essentially, to learn any given item of language, people need to carry out the following steps:

1. Understand the meaning of the item.
2. Hear/see an example of the item in context.
3. Approximate the sounds of the item.
4. Pay attention to the item and notice its features.
5. Do something with the item – use it in some way.
6. Repeat these steps over time, when encountering the item again in other contexts.

Principles of why people learn

The second area of principle that we think is uncontroversial, but that is worth spelling out, is why people want to learn foreign languages. The Council of Europe, which published the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), suggests people learn for the following reasons:

- To deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so.
- To exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language, and to communicate thoughts and feelings to them.
- To achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the ways of life and forms of thought of other peoples, and of their cultural heritage.

One underlying assumption that the CEFR makes is that students will be taking classes, as part of their efforts to learn languages. It is perhaps worth questioning why this might be. After all, many people learn languages without ever participating in formal study. It seems to us that one of the fundamental reasons students take classes is that this allows them to set aside some time for study. A lot of people have neither the time nor the discipline to study on their own. While it is clearly true that the best language learners do a lot outside of class, we believe that teachers should recognise that, for what is probably the majority of learners, class time is basically all they may have spare for language study.

Bibliography
We cite other authors and resources throughout the book and the full reference can be found in the bibliography on pages 145-146.

Glossary
A glossary of terms as we are using them can be found on pages 147-150. The first instance of their use in the book is marked with an asterisk *****.

That has implications for the pace of progress and for level, but it also emphasises how vital it is that what happens in class meets the main linguistic wants and needs of learners; chiefly:

- To be able to do things with their language.
- To be able to chat to others.
- To learn to understand other cultures better.

Teaching and learning choices

Most of the principles outlined above are relatively undisputed, but the thousands of pages written about such limited principles are testament to the fact that debates do remain. In particular, there is much disagreement about the following:

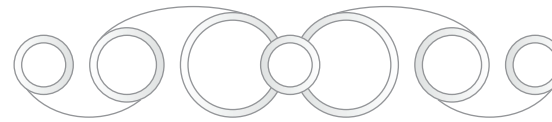
- The very nature of language itself.
- What language to teach.
- Whether you can actually teach and learn languages – or whether they are simply acquired.
- The order in which to teach the language you choose.
- Practical ways in which each principle of how to learn language is realised.
- The relative importance of each principle.

Debates often revolve around the speed of the learning process, and how easily the learner will be able to take in the items of language taught and use them effectively in the world outside the classroom. There is also much discussion about how the process can be made more – or less –motivating for learners.

The choices teachers make with regard to these issues may be informed by research and the consideration of evidence, but it is also fair to say that reliable research and evidence can be hard to come by. As such, teachers will inevitably base some – or all – of their decisions on beliefs, arguments and previous experiences as both teachers and language learners.

Choices are also likely to be at least partially the product of the attitudes and beliefs of the time and place that teachers are living in, and, as such, may also perhaps be a reaction to what has come before. For example, one might see the current argument against fun activities and games – and the move towards more correction and intervention (as exemplified in the recent emergence of the Demand High concept) – as being a reaction to the free-spending, debt-creating economy of the 1990s and 2000s! The move in language teaching towards such practices could be seen as a reflection of the contemporary discourse that claims that what people want now is something more controlled and austere.

To recognise and acknowledge this is simply to state that, as teachers, trainers and materials writers ourselves, we are no different when it comes to our principles and our choice of exercises that we feel best realise the principles described earlier. As such, in the pages of Part A that follow, we would like to explore our beliefs and principles in more depth, so that you can see how they fit with the exercises and practices that will follow in Part B of *Teaching Lexically*.



One view of language

Grammar plus words plus skills

Traditionally, the most dominant view in English Language Teaching is probably that grammar + words = productive language.

In other words, there has long been a belief that language can be reduced to a list of grammar structures that you can drop single words into. You may perhaps have seen this described as something along the lines of 'grammar providing the order into which you slot words'.

This is a view of language that we disagree with.

There are a number of implications that follow from this more traditional view of language – some of which may sometimes be explicitly voiced by teachers, and some which may not. Firstly, grammar is seen as being the most important area of language. If words are there to slot into the spaces which grammar presents, then it is grammar which must come first, and it is grammar which will help students do all the things that they want to do. It also follows that the examples used to illustrate grammar rules are relatively unimportant.

Seen from this perspective, these examples don't necessarily have to represent what is actually said because understanding the rule will enable students to create all the sentences they could ever possibly want – in accordance with the rule. It therefore doesn't matter if an example used to illustrate a rule could not easily (or ever) be used in daily life.

Similarly, if words are to fit in the slots provided by grammar, it follows that learning lists of single words is all that is required, and that any word can effectively be used if it fits a particular slot. Seen from this point of view, *Dracula didn't/doesn't/couldn't/mustn't/won't live in Brazil/Spain/the UK* are all equally possible and grammatically correct, as are *I'm studying English*, *I'm not studying English* and *Am I studying English?*

Naturalness, or the probable usage of vocabulary, is basically regarded as an irrelevance; students just need to grasp core meanings. At the same time, synonyms***** – words that have very similar meanings – such as *murder* and *assassinate* – are seen as being more or less interchangeable and, if on occasion they are not, then this is a choice based purely on subtle shades of difference in meaning rather than anything else.

In addition to this, an associated belief has developed: that grammar is acquired in a particular order – the so-called 'building blocks' approach that sees students start by attempting to master what are seen as more basic structures, before moving on to more advanced ones. When following this approach, students do not get to see, let alone use, a structure before they have been formally taught it. For this reason, beginner- and elementary-level coursebooks do not generally have any past or future forms in the first half of the book, and may exclude other common tenses and grammatical structures altogether.

The section on teaching young learners on page 138 stresses further the importance of exposure at lower levels.

Finally, over the last thirty years, another layer has been added to this view of learning. This looks to address skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing. If content is essentially catered for by the presentation of grammar rules plus words, then where there is a deficit in fluency or writing or reading, the claim is that this may be connected to a lack of appropriate skills.

These skills are seen as existing independently of language, and a lack of them is thought to result in such problems as not being sufficiently confident, not planning, not making

use of clues such as pictures to deduce meaning, not thinking about the context of a conversation, and so on.

As a result, many courses will claim to teach these skills, and you will typically find coursebooks with sections on grammar, sections on vocabulary, and then sections labelled as speaking, listening, writing or reading. The prevailing formula might then read: 'grammar + words + skills = productive language'.

A lexical view of language

From words with words to grammar

In some sectors, the 'grammar + words + skills = productive language' view is presented as the only option, but in fact there are countries and institutions which organise their language syllabuses differently, and there is also an alternative view of how language itself works that is supported by research, observation of language and logical arguments.

This alternative view is one we both share.

If we return to the principle that learners want to be able to do things with their language and to communicate, then communication almost always depends more on vocabulary than on grammar, even if we assume the 'grammar + words' model. For example, take the sentence 'I've been wanting to see that film for ages'. Saying *want see film* is more likely to achieve the intended communicative message in a conversation than only using what can be regarded as the grammar and function words: 'I've been *-ing* to that for'.

From this point of view, we should see words as more valuable. This does not entirely exclude the 'grammar + words' model, but it does undermine it. Would the message be less clear if the order of those words were changed? Not dramatically:

film want see *see want film*
see film want *want film see*

For an exercise on the limits of grammar – see page 61.

Actually, the division between vocabulary and grammar is rarely clear-cut; instead, it is rather fuzzy. Grammar is restricted by the words we use, and vice versa. In daily life, there are not infinite variations of each and every structure, and we don't accept synonyms in all cases. For example, we may say *I've been wanting to see that for ages*, but not *I've been fancying seeing that for ages*. Similarly, we may say *it's a high/tall building*, but not a *high man* or a *tall temperature*.

Furthermore, we often make use of phrases, or chunks***** of language, which appear to be stored and recalled as wholes, rather than constructed from an underlying knowledge of grammar + single words. To put it another way, we consistently choose one particular way of saying something grammatical, rather than any of the many other possibilities.

In their seminal 1983 article – 'Two puzzles for linguistic theory: native-like selection and native-like fluency' – Pawley and Syder cite the way we tell the time as an example of this. All of the following are grammatically possible, yet most are not chosen by fluent speakers:

It's six less twenty. *It's two thirds past five.*
It's forty past five. *It exceeds five by forty.*
It's a third to six. *It's ten after half five.*

Most competent users of English – including you, almost certainly – tend to opt for either *It's twenty to six* or *It's five forty*. There are thousands of similar instances, and it was these

ideas, among others, that led Michael Lewis to declare in *The Lexical Approach* (1993) that language was 'grammaticalised lexis*' rather than 'lexicalised grammar'. As a result, he rejected the idea that we should continue with a syllabus based on neatly ordered grammar structures and, instead, advocated syllabuses, materials and teaching centred around collocation* and chunks alongside large amounts of input from texts.

From this input, a grasp of grammar 'rules' and correct usage would emerge, especially if the input were mediated by the guidance of teachers helping students to notice forms and meanings.

More recently, Michael Hoey has given theoretical support for this approach. In his book *Lexical Priming* (2005), he shows how words which are apparently synonymous – such as *result* and *consequence* – typically function in quite different ways. Statistically, one is more common than the other in most situations, and often these differences are very marked.

For more on some of the problems caused by focusing on synonyms – and how to tackle them – see page 54.

The way synonyms are used differs not only in terms of the other words immediately around them that they collocate with, but also in terms of the words that co-occur in the wider surrounding text. Near-synonyms may also occur in different parts of sentences or in different genres*, or may be followed by different grammatical patterns.

Hoey argues that these statistical differences must come about because, when we first encounter these words (he calls such encounters 'primings*'), our brains somehow subconsciously record some or all of this kind of information about the way the words are used. Our next encounter may reaffirm – or possibly contradict – this initial priming, as will the next encounter, and the one after that – and so on.

If this was not the case, then *result* and *consequence* would be equally prevalent in all cases, or one would be used more consistently in all contexts. Hoey suggests that many of what we might think of as being our grammatical choices are actually determined by the words themselves and by our experience of how they are used – and the patterns that attach themselves to the words – rather than by any underlying knowledge of grammar rules and an ability to then slot in words.

Hoey has also cited evidence from psycholinguistic studies to support his claims about such processes, and to help explain why language use works in this way. One experiment he mentions shows how words are recognised quicker when they are related in use than when they are not. So, for example, once a test subject has been given the word *cow*, the words *milk* or *field* might then be recognised more quickly than, say, the word *airport*.

In another experiment, unrelated pairs of words such as *scarlet onion* were taught. After a day during which the test subjects were exposed to a lot more language, participants were then tested on recognition of words based on prompt words. When the prompt word was *onion* – the word *scarlet* was recalled more quickly than other words.

These experiments suggest, firstly, that we do indeed remember words in pairings and in groups, and that doing so allows for quicker and more accurate processing of the language we hear and want to produce. Quicker, that is, than constantly constructing new and creative sentences.

If you accept this, then it's not too great a leap to believe that spoken fluency, the speed at which we read and the ease and accuracy with which we listen may all develop as a result of language users being more familiar with groupings of words. This certainly seems to be a more likely source of development than relying on constructing sentences from the bottom up, using grammar and words.

Seen like this, problems connected to skills essentially come back to being more about

The sections on teaching EAP (page 139) and exam classes (page 140) emphasise how essential it is for students to broaden their lexicons.

problems with language: students not only don't know enough words, but they also lack experience of how words are used or how they might sound in a group of words.

Some academics, such as Nick Ellis (2013), have suggested that what allows us to acquire new language is our encounters with vocabulary intimately intertwined with grammar. Ellis gives the example of the sentence *He mandubled across the floor*. We can work out what *mandubled* might mean, more or less, because we know many other 'x + verb *across the floor*' patterns (*walk across the floor*, *stroll across the floor*, *go across the floor*, *slither across the floor*, *crawl across the floor*, and so on).

Of all these possible examples, the vast majority of actual uses will consist of a very small number of words, with *go across the floor* and *walk across the floor* being the most probable. Ellis argues that it is repeated hearings of the frequent combinations that establish these base patterns in the mind and that, once we have these patterns, we are then able to understand and to slot in new words.

This shows how patterns can be generative. It also shows how grammar can work, but we need to be very clear that this isn't the kind of grammar which is generally taught in coursebooks. Instead, it is what we could call 'lexico-grammatical' patterns.

Now, for the sake of clarity, let us state that, in keeping with these ideas, we believe that:

- words have more value than grammar.
- language is essentially lexically driven, and words generally come with their own connected grammar.
- our own usage is determined by our experience of how language is used.
- there's a huge number of patterns that can be generative to at least some degree (and this includes the traditional grammar patterns taught in ELT).
- the vast majority of the examples of any one pattern will be made up of a small percentage of all the possible words that could be used with the pattern.
- collocations and patterns will be primed to go with other collocations and patterns in similarly limited ways.

A lexical view of teaching

Towards a practical lexical pedagogy

See page 7 for the list of principles.

Setting out these principles about language is one thing. There still remains the issue of choosing what to teach, the order things might be taught in, and how we can guide students through the six steps necessary for learning that we outlined at the beginning of Part A.

Over the last thirty years, some researchers who have seen flaws in the 'grammar + words + skills' model have argued that what learners learn, and the order they learn it in, can only be determined by the learners themselves. They have also suggested that the conscious teaching/learning of grammar is useless, or at best of only marginal benefit.

Stephen Krashen's and Tracy Terrell's *The Natural Approach* (1982) and other methods based on extensive reading* have emphasised the hearing/seeing stage. According to these perspectives, students do not explicitly learn language; rather, they are thought to acquire the language by seeing or hearing things which are comprehensible, but which contain linguistic features just beyond what they are capable of producing themselves.

The order in which this acquisition occurs is seen as being fairly fixed. From this point of view, instruction – particularly at lower levels – has very little purpose, apart from to provide comprehensible input, though it is claimed that, at later stages, some instruction

about rules may help with noticing and may help learners to monitor what they are saying for errors.

There are other models that also take the idea that language can't be pre-taught as such, but can only be taken on board when students are ready to receive it. These approaches have tended to focus on the stage at which learners use language, when participants are also able to learn through hearing other speakers' language, comprehending it and incorporating it into their own usage.

This idea is at the heart of Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which suggests that new language is learnt through interaction with, and input from, others at the point that communication breaks down. Long and other TBL advocates have increasingly recognised that teachers may have a role to play when it comes to helping students notice forms as they arise during the process of doing tasks*, provided this is not based on a pre-set grammar syllabus of the type usually found in coursebooks.

More recently, so-called Dogme teachers (see *Teaching Unplugged* (2009) in the DELTA Teacher Development series) have advocated a similar process – with a somewhat stronger teacher role that involves identifying and working with what has been dubbed 'emergent language' from student conversations. This may lead to a spontaneous teaching focus on – and practice of – a structure or structures as well as of vocabulary. This approach emphasises conversation over task, but again strongly rejects a pre-set syllabus applied to a whole class, and is (sometimes vehemently) opposed to coursebook use.

For more on ways of working with spontaneous speech – see page 80.

All these approaches to the practices of teaching can be seen as responses to observations that all teachers must surely have made at one time or another:

- We teach a structure.
- Students practise it, and seem to understand and be able to use it in controlled conditions.
- Then, in freer, more meaning-focused communication, the students revert to making mistakes with the very same structure.

These approaches also have roots in influential research that suggested that foreign language students acquire structures in a similar order to native speakers, and that this order can't be changed – so there is no point teaching grammar if students are not ready for it.

This line of thought was then reinforced by the logical argument that students in any one class will all be at different states of readiness, so teaching the same thing to everyone, without knowing whether they are ready, will not optimise classroom teaching. Finally, there is the belief that we learn best from experience and from our own mistakes.

However, there is also an irony here. These theories have emerged from a questioning of the traditional grammar syllabus, but the validity of the new theories is effectively based on how successfully grammar is learnt! This is then generalised out to all language. It is claimed that lots of reading or listening is the most efficient way to acquire all language, because that's the way grammar seems to be acquired. Here are some similar diktats that seem to have emerged from all of this:

- Don't pre-set any part of the syllabus, because grammar isn't acquired block by block and students are all individuals.
- Don't explain or teach anything, because students can't make active use of explicit grammar teaching.
- Don't use any coursebooks, because grammar can't be cut up into the kind of nuggets that most books offer up and, anyway, coursebooks stop proper interaction.

It is obviously worth asking if this is really true for lexis in the way that it is supposedly true for grammar. We believe words clearly can be learnt consciously – and can be learnt very efficiently. For example, there have been several experiments looking at the use of flashcards to learn words, with one side of the card being in the target language and the other side containing a mother tongue translation. These tests have shown that students using such an approach are able to acquire and retain large amounts of vocabulary, especially when these words are revisited over time.

We would suggest that this is likely to be equally true if those words were collocations or grammaticalised chunks, such as *Have you been here before?*, instead of just single words. Of course, we're not suggesting that if students were to learn such chunks, they would then be able to use the present perfect tense more generally. They may adapt the chunk incorrectly, saying *Have you been here yesterday?* for example, but in the greater scheme of things, we feel this is a relatively minor problem.

The section on teaching low-level learners on page 137 gives further guidance on presenting grammar as chunks.

One major problem with the 'grammar plus words' building block model is that, as students adhering to it set out to learn the language, they are not even permitted to *see* a sentence such as *Have you been here before?* for weeks or even months, as mastery of the basics is demanded first.

However, the answer to the very real problem of learners not being able to take on board structures in one or two lessons should not be to simply wait around for things to somehow come up in class and then be acquired, because here's the thing: most studies suggest that extensive reading (and, we must assume, extensive listening also) is actually a very slow and inefficient way of acquiring new vocabulary, when compared to active study.

And if vocabulary can be efficiently learnt through study, we might then consider why we shouldn't also pre-set a vocabulary syllabus in courses and materials. When students have a particular task to do, or a conversation to take part in, we can predict a good part of what might be said. Thornbury and Meddings say as much in their book *Teaching Unplugged*:

'The activities in Teaching Unplugged aren't designed to generate specific exponents, but you can ask yourself what language areas are likely to be generated. Revise these in advance if it helps you feel more confident – but be prepared for all the other language that will emerge.'

The chapter on speaking – and in particular the focus on cheating (page 76) – explores ways of predicting what students might say.

For them, this predicting of language is a way for teachers to give better post-conversation feedback – and we certainly wouldn't disagree that this is a good thing to do. Note, though, that they refer to language areas, which, while they may not intend it to, suggests 'grammar + words' (in lexical sets). If this is what is implied by the phrase 'language areas', we would obviously see this as unhelpful. Instead:

- We would urge teachers to think of whole phrases, sentences or even 'texts' that students might want to say when attempting a particular task or conversation.
- We would then argue that at least some of those lexical items are learnable, and some of that learning could be done with the assistance of materials before students try to have particular kinds of conversation.

Conversations or tasks then become not only an opportunity for teachers to develop emergent language, but also serve as a rehearsal space for previously studied items.

Finally, we would absolutely agree that, while students are talking, teachers should listen to them and be prepared to help them with the new things they want to say. For us, the study of potentially new items, and the teacher providing help towards better communication, can come before, during and after conversation and, as we shall see, coursebook materials can play a vital role in all of this.