

# Natural language learning



**Fiona Mauchline**

believes that a lexical approach to grammar is only natural.

*'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'*

If expertise in a foreign language is our destination, what better pathfinders could we have along the way than grammar and lexis working together, each offering slightly different perspectives on the landscape and its landmarks – far more supportive than trudging along in single file, one behind the other, to the rhythm of one monotonous drum. Lexis takes the first natural step, grammar instinctively walks close by; this, as the key to deciphering and using the English language 'map' to enjoy the countryside, is only natural and for four very weighty reasons:

- 1 The nature of learning and language acquisition
- 2 The nature of the English language
- 3 The nature of successful and less successful communication in English or Englishes (and by extension, the nature of motivation)
- 4 The nature of teaching, as a reflection of the above three.

## The nature of learning and acquisition

### Play

From the first steps in life, the most effective, and affective, learning involves play. Far from being restricted to the domain of the pre-school or primary classroom, play is also very much part of both adolescent and adult social

interactions: we love experimenting with words and nuances of meaning. It is great fun. It even forms the basis of many of our relationships, whether love, like or hate. When teaching or learning a language, words and phrases lend themselves to mnemonics and games far more willingly than traditional grammar with its rules and analysis: even the present continuous and the present perfect become welcome playmates rather than frosty acquaintances if presented using a lexical, often almost visual, approach.

### A sensible approach

From the earliest language learning period, it would seem that a lexical approach is favoured with the age groups said to be 'pre-abstract-thinking', in the primary or pre-school classroom, where learning is through play, and *he is jumping* is a description or concrete reference, in much the same way as *he is tall* or *it is green and scary*. So, why in our teaching does the lexical approach to grammar get so firmly switched off around the age of 11 or 12? Abstract thinking develops, but it is not exclusive, and should fuse with earlier concrete concepts, working in harmony with them. Furthermore, whilst students do not always expect their L2 lexis to approximate to their L1 store of vocabulary and may happily accept conceptual differences, they appear to have a far lower tolerance when their grammatical notions do not coincide.

### A lexical approach

Krashen's natural order of acquisition hypothesis questions the validity of a grammar syllabus; linguistic forms are said to emerge in much the same order as in L1. So, it would seem logical that we follow this natural process and progression, not isolating aspects of the language for analysis, but rather using an organic approach, a synthesis of the grammatical syllabus with the lexis that is part and parcel of the patterns. A lexical approach to grammar not only facilitates linguistic acquisition, but also builds on previous knowledge by reinforcing it; what's more, it increases the motivation to do so. One of the major benefits is the lack of a need to signpost new input using the same old names: '*Oh no, not the past simple again!*' is a common complaint, which has long echoed around intermediate classrooms, and there is no doubt that



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repeatedly encountering what appears to be the same input is demotivating.

## Order of acquisition

By using a lexical approach, it is easier to build on previous knowledge with fresh input, and without relying on the old labels. Thus, a progression from *will* to *might* for making a comment about this, or asking an opinion on that, is going to be more motivating than looking at *Modal Verbs II* again. It is easier to work lexically, building a path of stepping stones from *-ed* adjectives to *-ed* participles and the passive as an associated group, rather than moving grammatically from the present perfect to the passive, which presupposes what is generally considered a change in levels of complexity, a slippery leap which may end up in a muddy wallow, and assumes that one may be needed before the other, rather than seeing them as part of an organic whole.

## Understanding

Another aspect of the 'nature of learning' which favours a lexical approach to grammar as being intrinsically more natural is that of *understanding*. I would argue that this is perhaps the most significant issue here. To *understand* is to go a long way down the path towards learning; after understanding has been achieved, refinement follows. There are many features of English which, if only focused on as grammar, are not understood until students reach a fairly advanced level, if

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then. They are consequently misused, used in a non-standard way or avoided altogether. In this category we could place prepositions, modal verbs, gerunds and infinitives, the typical bugbears of the grammar syllabus. After all, it is human nature to shun what we do not understand. We may have facts stored away, but, like the unfamiliar gadgets on a bulging Swiss knife, we will never use them productively or creatively if they are not assimilated.

## Different intelligences

Studies in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Multiple Intelligences also suggest that limiting teaching to the grammar syllabus does not attend to the needs of all learners. Kinaesthetic learners, learners with strong verbal-linguistic, visual, musical or interpersonal intelligences, as well as those with strong mathematical-logical or intrapersonal intelligences (as defined by Gardner), might well benefit from a mixed approach: lexis and grammar together. A blend of the two approaches would seem to be a broader, more empathetic and more inclusive way to benefit more learners.

## Different learning styles

Furthermore, we know that there are different types of learner personality or learning style. Field-dependent learners need the contextualisation made possible through a lexical approach to grammar, and it is easier for the risk-taker to express self from an early stage through lexis. Most beginners' courses adopt a 'lexical chunk' approach (*Where are you from? Could we have a menu, please?* etc) in the first few units, before sliding into the grammar syllabus. But why are these two approaches rarely allowed to carry on travelling together, to let communication, 'fluency', develop alongside knowledge of the underlying system, 'accuracy'? Surely it is this hand-in-hand relationship that is only natural?

## The nature of the English language

### Latin

Prevailing English language teaching trends based on the grammar syllabus have been inherited from grammar-translation and the teaching of Latin, which is quite remarkable given the nature of the two languages involved. Latin is such a highly morphological, inflected language that a purely grammatical

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approach is logical as an integral part of the lexis, not just as the underlying system. However, the nature of modern English, in all its forms, is quite unlike Latin. Inflection and syntactical agreement are limited, and even tense use has more to do with personal outlook and aspect than with time.

## Colour

English is rich in collocations, idioms and contrastive and comparative word items (that is to say, the type of lexis that constitutes a large part of the index of most grammar books: *as* versus *like*; *at*, *on* and *in*, etc). In fact, these are perhaps the linguistic features that make up the core of the language. The phrasal combinations and the collocations have their grammatical base, but come alive through their colour and the patterns they generate, as well as through the cultural associations they conjure up. Idioms derive from tradition, from pop culture, from the Bible, from Shakespeare, as well as from semiotics like cadences, reduplication and alliteration with all their musicality – the pheromones of lexical attraction. We create images; others build on them; we communicate idiomatically: we fill the language with colour. *Absolutely fabulous, much ado about nothing, the prodigal son, the bee's knees, lock, stock and barrel* – they all tell a story.

## Choices

This 'lexicity' is also true of modal verbs and prepositions, for example. Consider *might* and *may* for possibility; the choice of which to use may (or might) in point of fact be more to do with sound and 'harmony' than with degrees of certainty, and yet we often put them into more of a functional framework than a subjective communication framework. Modal verbs are as much lexis as they are



grammar. Many prepositions may be viewed in the same way: we often call them 'function words' but are they? We are instantly struck if the 'wrong' preposition is used because it is so fused with its surrounding phrase that it is an integral part of the meaning (*on the beach, to the beach*): a lexical hinge.

The very nature of English makes a lexical approach the natural way to approach its grammar.

## The nature of communication

### Pronunciation

According to studies into the use of English as a lingua franca, breakdown in communication occurs approximately eight times more frequently due to vocabulary than to grammar. The same studies show that the main culprit is pronunciation, accounting for almost 70 per cent of communication problems, and is this any wonder? Where does pronunciation fit into the grammar syllabus? And yet pronunciation is such an integral part of lexis.

### Communication

Whilst these studies look at communication between non-native speakers of English, the same is also true if we consider communication between non-native and native English speakers, or even between L1 speakers. A native speaker visiting another part of the L1 world will often struggle with local regional lexis (and pronunciation), but variations in the underlying grammar rarely cause obstacles to comprehension. The grammars of American English and British English are not identical, nor are the grammars of, say, Scottish English and English English, but many differences may even go unnoticed. Is the Irish use of *to be + after + -ing* confusing for speakers of other Englishes because of the unfamiliar use of the present continuous (grammar) or the unfamiliar use of *after* as a lexical item? Perhaps they go hand in hand ...

And as for communication between native and non-native speakers, how frequently does communication break down due to grammar as opposed to lexis or pronunciation? If we take a one-sided approach and limit our teaching to the grammar syllabus, how much light will we shed on the fairly frequent use of, for example, *tend to* (introduced in more recent coursebooks at intermediate

level), *intend to* (also at intermediate level, if at all), or 'deviant' modals such as *If he will phone late at night, what can he expect?* or *I should say/think so?* A grammatical knowledge will only go half way. Lexis and grammar are intertwined, with the lexis facilitating fluency by 'naming' the ideas.

### Student expectations

If communication is more dependent on lexis than on grammar, as it would seem, then feelings of security and confidence, and of being able to 'connect' with people, will be developed sooner in a learner through lexis. A lower-level learner can attempt to express self, rather than having to cope with the anxiety of 'getting it right'.

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We mustn't forget, however, that many learners will be from linguistic backgrounds with a strong grammar base, and their expectations in terms of 'how to study a language' need to be considered. Many learners, particularly adults, equate learning grammar with learning a language; many view their course as a series of grammar points to be covered and revised for an exam; others may see grammar as a type of familiar safety blanket. There are also those students who actually enjoy grammatical analysis and extrapolation. We need to cater for both styles and preferences, and look at the keyword lexis in a grammatical framework ... naturally.

## The nature of teaching

The nature of teaching should reflect all of the above considerations:

- If learning theories say 'concrete' first, 'abstract' later, provide contextualisation as well as the abstract, engage the learner, motivate the learner, and provide meaningful

input, then let communication and self-expression precede, or at the very least sit alongside, overt grammar rules.

- If language acquisition is a social response, let understanding and communication take place.
- If English is predominantly lexical in nature, let modals and prepositions be recognised as meaning units and lexis; let collocations and concordances do the initial structural legwork.
- If it is a living language, not just a school subject or body of facts, we should be prepared to broaden horizons and make mindsets flexible.


But ...

If getting the right tense aids communication, then abandoning grammar altogether is throwing the baby, and perhaps even the bath, out with the water. Learners do finally acquire the underlying system; L1 children move on from *I putted, I dranked*, L2 learners make their mistakes and correct them as rules are assimilated subconsciously; some formal grammar teaching may speed this up, strengthening the cognitive processes and aiding assimilation.

If communication favours lexis over grammar at an earlier stage of language learning, why put the cart before the horse? If motivation favours security and a sense of integration that communication may afford, let's make it two horses, lexis and grammar pulling together.

If fun, repartee, empathy, rapport, sharing, stories, colour and getting carried away on the moment beat potentially arid grammar explanations, if teaching is facilitating learning, if the shortcut is also the pretty route, all well and good.



After all, it's only natural, isn't it? 



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