

The positive effects of using the lexical approach for kids at learning English

Javier Ricardo Revelo A.

Third grade (1,2 y 3) of The institución educativa municipal ciudad de

Pasto sede Lorenzo

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ABSTRACT

The lexical approach identifies lexis as the basis of language and focuses on the principle that language consists of grammaticalised lexis. In second language acquisition, over the past few years, this approach has generated great interest as an alternative to traditional grammar-based teaching methods. From a psycholinguistic point of view, the lexical approach consists of the capacity of understanding and producing lexical phrases as non-analysed entities (chunks). The main objective to prove is to show the positive results of using the lexical approach for kids in a public school of Pasto, Colombia. Observations in behavior and exam results were taken as the main tool to see if the goal was accomplished. Fortunately, the goal was reached and leave important to consider.

Introduction

It is very well known the fact that Colombia is not the best country at learning English. Teachers and students face this reality but a change is needed. There is an old saying which says: if you want different results, do not do the same. It is mind blowing to know that many

teachers, mainly the old ones, are still teaching with no methodology at all and with a basis of grammar and reading comprehension. Even when the Colombian curriculum for English is designed to be more focused on communication, numerous teachers do not pay attention to it.

When it comes to teaching English in a setting where the language is a foreign language and not a second language to very young learners, work is even more difficult and challenging for teachers. Those young students, are what they are: ¡kids!. They are crazy, loud, friendly and egocentric at the same time, playful, curious, energetic, imaginative, and happy (most of them). Besides, at least in public schools, the vast majority of students do not have a minor idea of what it takes to learn another language neither a basic knowledge of it. Their parents do not expose them to other language since a very young age and even worse they do not encourage them to learn it. However, since we are dealing with kids, there is an environment of curiosity around the subject English in the class but that is not enough for learn it. An experienced

teacher knows well that their attention and their willingness to stay quiet in a chair with 40 other students it is just a few minutes. All time left, should be used carefully. Therefore, a very savvy teacher, and also experienced if possible, is needed to take that kind of situation and make learning to take place. Without doubt, important knowledge on how to teach (methodology) is needed. This would probably make learners not only learn the subject but also motivate students to study and enjoy the long and difficult process to learn a second language. This is where activities that be fun for them are important. "Research about young learning and development show that when kids are provided appropriately at their game, gaming do not take away learning rather it enhances to take place." (Bodrova y leong, 2003, p50)

A lot has been said about teaching English as a foreign language to kids, methods to use, materials to take into account, importance to an early approach to the second language, roles of teacher and students, principles, and more. Fortunately, a well skilled and knowledgeable instructor knows that every kid, every class room, and even more in Colombia, is different. What has been working on some areas of the world, possibly would not work in other. Even more interesting, what works in a place of a city with certain characteristics, would not work in other place in the same city. It is possible to say that Colombian young learners of English have these main needs: enjoy the process, be encouraged to study it and be continuously learning the language.

The main objective to prove is to show the positive results of using the lexical

approach for kids in a public school of Pasto, Colombia. Research has been showed that this method/approach works quite well with young learners because the philosophy of learning, teaching and language fits the needs of them. Moreover, without knowing it, many home based teachers of young grades in Colombia, work with a syllabus that focuses on learning and practicing vocabulary and expressions that can be taken as "chunks" which is the basis of the lexical approach. In addition, the lexical approach has clear activities to work on and leaves place to create and adapt many more which is great to have in this kind of situation.

The information showed could really serve to future teacher-assistants since it gives results of what works in the actual context. Besides, it sums the information to the already existent literacy about the efficacy of the approach with kids.

Material and methods

It is important to say that unfortunately, the author was not able to be with the three third courses of CCP School at Lorenzo during the five months expected because two reasons. First, at the beginning of the practicum the author was placed in a seventh grade where the old based teacher was not able to deal with a new teacher who wanted to take into account all the theory inside teaching English in the XXI century. This created a raw situation for both teachers and students. In consequence, the author had to ask for a change, giving up one month and half of hard work. Nevertheless and even knowing that the old based teacher would not leave space for new and real methodologies, practices and activities of the lexical approach were used and will serve to this article. Second, due to the bad

working and salary conditions for teachers in Colombia, a strike started in the middle of May. As a result, classes were not finished and very sadly, results of this research cannot be fully exposed and believed because of time constraints created by this strike that affects all the education system in the country.

During a month and half of not being able to work with a real approach/method to teach the language, the author was basically forced to work following old experimental and empiric concepts underlying the ancient roots of teaching of the country. Results were the expected, a few students learnt and many of them forgot what they have learnt in a few weeks. This was realized during exams done by the students. When the language was presented they were asked to memorize it without any kind of practice and contextualization in the middle. The results of exams were not really good for them all and later at other exams were the same topics and themes were asked they performed poorly. Having in mind these results, it was obvious for the author that the “methodology” he was forced to use had to change.

When the change of place was done, after several arguments with the school and university, the place to work was the same CCP school but at Lorenzo neighborhood. The main difference to have in mind is that the author had free options to choose his methodology to work with at this school. This made a real difference in comparison with the other setting because results end up being different. The school asked the author to teach English to three third courses of the institution. They were very different from course to course. This was due to how home run teachers have been

accustoming students to learn and behave. As a funny fact, there were the smart and quiet course, the normal course, and the loud and chaotic course. Nevertheless and surprisingly, results were very good and similar among the three courses because the instruction, materials, method and activities were mostly the same.

At most of the instruction, the assistant brought a personal video beam to the class. This helped considerably to students. Slides, audio and video were used to present, contextualize and provide examples of the language they were about to learn. All the content was designed to be appealing to those kids. Cartoons, tv series, and famous movies content (real language) were used at instruction and workshops. When classes did not make use of this tool, students almost always asked why the assistant was not using the video beam. This showed how much they appreciate instruction with this kind of tool that really gives a boost in teaching English to young kids.

In terms of the methodology itself, the lexical approach can be defined in the next terms made by, masters of language methodology, Richards and Rodgers (2001):

“The lexical approach can be summarized in a few words: language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks. The lexical approach is a way of analyzing and teaching language based on the idea that it is made up of lexical units rather than grammatical structures. The units are words and chunks formed but collocations and fixed phrases”.

The author followed this principle during two months of instruction. In addition, the core activities of the method were used:

awareness activities, memory-enhancing activities, and retelling. It is quite important to follow them because the good placement of theory and practices of the method enhances the expected positive results.

A significant teaching implication was made by Lewis, M. (1993):

“Implementing the Lexical Approach is well written and exciting . . . , but dangerous! It is likely to challenge the way teachers think concerning what is important in foreign language learning and teaching. Lewis has done an excellent job of reminding [-3-] us that only by attending to the genuine needs of students—knowledge, safety, affection, respect, and responsibility—can we obtain the educational goals we have set, making the foreign language classroom into the better and even different organization that it needs to become.”

Every class had a PPP format which is used since the late 90s until today with good results in the English teaching as a foreign language process. The PPP format stands for: Presentation, practice and production. At first in the presentation, a text, audio and visual were presented. The video beam mentioned before was used properly at this point. Students usually had to write the information presented in their books. Then, at practice, the oral approach drill was used. This drill consists of repetition of the “chunks” in an order where the teacher and students are involved in a determined order. Finally, in the production level, the learner had to manage what was taught in daily worksheets. The development of those worksheets is dependent on different cognitive and language skills of the learner to be successfully completed. Several

hours of design were committed to this level due to his relevance for students own production of the language. Once the student finished the worksheet, the assistant-teacher had to make an assessment procedure. At the end, the assistant-teacher completed the worksheets in front of the class asking questions and with the help of students. The worksheets were finally pasted in the book. After two classes doing these processes there was a test of the topic taught. Results were positive. It is significant to say that the four skills of the language (reading, writing, listening, speaking) were practiced.

RESULTS

In general, results were quite similar in the three courses but of course, there are some differences that deserve to be said. First, is important to say that the three home based teachers of each course were teaching English but they do not have any proficiency or good English level neither know anything about teaching it. One of the teachers was even teaching English words with Spanish pronunciation. Therefore, a recap on many words was needed and was done successfully.

This was the main constraint at the begging of the practicum because they were teaching English in a way that was not right. Surprisingly, students learnt very well vocabulary and knew the translation of many words but pronunciation were incorrect and when context were change for the world, they did not know what to do or respond. The three teachers were mainly working on reading and writing skills which is very limiting for students.

The method seemed to be very good for the students. They were active, sometimes

too much, and willing to participate in the different activities. As it was mentioned before as a funny fact of the three courses, reflects the results. The savvy course was the one who performed better due to the quiet and hard working way they are used to study and learn. The course in the middle was not left behind and it is even possible to say that they performed in the same way and had similar grades. The main difference relies in the fact that the “savvy course” had more than half of the course in 4.0 or above. The “normal course” had many students in 4.0 or above grades but definitely they were not half of the class. In the other hand, the course labeled as the “loud course” for an obvious reason, performed very well but not as the other two. It is important to consider that this last course only had 15 students and the other two had close to 30 students. Classroom management were a major factor in this course since the based teacher was not able in this aspect and treat students in an inappropriate way. Most of the students were in the 3.6 to 4.5 scale at most of the time. It is important to say that there were 5 students that even though they were loud, impatient and sometimes rude, they had the best grades which were above 4.5. As mentioned before, the results are similar but not the same which is completely expected and normal having in mind the nature of teaching in such a context. The scale to grade students was from 1.0 to 5.0.

One situation that all of the courses had was the presence of kids with special abilities. In the course that performed the best, there were two kids with mental problems. They both were not able to neither read nor write. This made instruction way more difficult.

Fortunately, the home based teacher of the course was most of the time with those two kids during instruction and activity time. They both had oral exams instead of the written regular ones. The content and the exams sheets were the same for all the students. One of those two kids was not able to pass the first period of the course due to their poor performance. The other kid performance was enough to pass the first period with a 3.3 grade.

The “loud course” had one student who also had disabilities at reading and writing. Thanks to the help of the based teacher it was possible to evaluate his progress. He really needs a specialized teacher on this kind of kids because he was not able to neither behave nor learn. It is significant to say that this kid was good at memorizing vocabulary and giving its meaning but that was enough to pass the first period.

Discussion

The lexical approach in research has been said to be well suited for low-average students but not especially for real beginners of the language. Stengers et al. (2010:101) “given its reliance on incidental acquisition thorough independent reading and listening, we take it that the lexical approach is intended for learners above lower-intermediate level”. In contrast to what is said, results shown in this case that the method works pretty well. There are major constraints and differences among courses and students that do not make results the same. Instead, they are similar.

In an objective perspective, more could have been done in that short time of instruction. More technology, parents involvement, better classroom state and maintenance, and of course better prior

knowledge and instruction could have given better results.

It was a real shame to have changed of location after one month and half of instruction to the seven graders. They were starting to learn and reach a very good English level for their age and context with the use of the lexical approach. A major difference was that students were able to remember what was taught two or three weeks before easily with the method and activities.

For both seven graders and the three third courses of CCP School the fact of using worksheets at almost every class is significantly beneficial since they make them produce the language. Materials design is not an easy task. There are master courses completely devoted to that side of the language learning. What has been taught in the university really made a difference in this aspect because the assistants in general are capable of generate their own material and also adapt already made material and activities to the needs of students of our context.

It is vital to say that at none of the both courses, seventh and third, cooperative work was allowed. It was a shame because it is widely known that group work and study promotes learning and even more important for the case foreign language learning. The four skills of language, listening, speaking, reading and writing can be improved by peers' creation, correction, or by means of suggestions. At this point, students were not into learning or helping their partners. Rather, they were given an opportunity to play or gossip in the class.

Conclusion

The objective was clearly reached since students really learnt. They are able to

pronounce words in the right way. When teacher explains a concept of a word or sentence in isolation or in a drill, they are capable of understand what is he saying. They can write words and small sentences of simple dialogues with proper spelling. They are able to recognize and read words and small "chunks" of dialogues.

This was made thanks to the right application of the lexical approach which is not an easy task to perform. The philosophy for Teaching, learning and language has to have logic and congruent with what is said and done.

Thanks to the University for proving the necessary company and help to all the assistants during this time. In addition, in particular, thanks for understanding my personal case. The situation with the old teacher of the seventh grade was more than tough. At CCP school they were always attentive and comprehensive with the situation. Both main coordinator and psychologist (in charge of assistants) provided a hand a gave a good resolution to any problem.

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