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SOMMAIRE

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Léa Marie Laurance	N'GORAN-POAME
Ndioro	SOW

The Lexical Approach to language teaching: Evolution or revolution?

Dahigo Guézé Habraham Aimé[1]

Résumé

L'approche lexicale, bien que se réclamant aussi de l'approche communicative remet en question toutes les théories et philosophies qui fondent celle-ci. L'on se demande alors si celle-ci propose un changement radical de méthodologie dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères. Si la réponse s'avère positive, quelle est cette méthode? Dans la négative, quelles sont les améliorations apportées par cette approche dans les théories déjà existantes. La présente étude tente d'apporte des réponses à ces interrogations à travers une approche contrastive d'analyse des théories qui fondent l'enseignement communicatif.

Mots Clés : Approche Lexicale, Approche Communicatif, Grammaire Universelle, behaviorisme.

Abstract

Since the early 90s, there is the emergence of the Lexical Approach putting into question the founding principles of the communicative approaches though claiming to be one of them. In addition, its implementation through the creation of syllabuses and classroom techniques has not yet been successful (Lewis 1993). That situation cannot, but raise the curiosity of the practicing English language teacher we are. In fact, if the latter claims to be communicative, does it propose a total change of teaching methodology? If yes, what is that teaching method? If not, which improvements does it bring to the existing approaches? The present study is an attempt to answer these questions through a contrastive analysis of the assumptions and principles underlying the communicative approach and the lexical approach.

Key Words: Lexical Approach; Communicative Approach; Communicative skills; Universal Grammar; Behaviourism

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[1] Université de Bouaké, Côte-d'Ivoire

Dahigo Guézé Habraham Aimé: The Lexical Approach to language teaching: Evolution or revolution?

Introduction

Since the advent of audio-lingualism, progress in language teaching has originated from advancements in linguistic descriptions and learning theories. That close relationship between language pedagogy, linguistics and the educational sciences is described by many researchers such as Howatt (1984), Stern (1983), and McDonough (2004) to mention only those.

The works of the above mentioned applied linguists show that since the intrusion of structuralism as a theoretical basis for language teaching towards the end of the 50s, and, the early 60s with the Reform movement, English language teaching has gone from the structural approach to the communicative approach grounded in discourse analysis and the communicative theories initiated by Canale and Swain(1980).On the basis of the communicative theories and principles, such approaches as the Notional approach, the Notional-Functional approach, the Natural approach ,etc, have developed, giving the impression that the knowledge of the nature of the English language and the process of its learning were now mastered.

Then, in the 90s, the Lexical Approach emerged claiming to be communicative, but questioning the old theories and principles. In addition, attempts to implement the approach through the development of syllabuses have proved unsuccessful (Lewis, 1993).That situation leads to two major questions. Firstly, is the approach clear enough for the practioners in the classrooms to implement it? That question which would call for another type of research can be rephrased the following way: how far does the lexical approach challenge the methodological principles of users of the communicative approach? Secondly, does it constitute an evolution or a revolution in English language teaching methodology?

The objective of this paper is to show that the lexical approach represents the corollary of the shift in linguistic research in language teaching. The study also purports to describe the nature of the changes brought in language teaching by proponents of the lexical approach through a contrastive analysis of the approaches.

The present study revolves around two major aspects. The first aspect entitled, communicative approach and lexical approach: diverging views about the nature and learning of a language, tries to compare the theoretical foundations of the two approaches to pinpoint

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the similarities and differences. The second part, called pedagogic implications, looks at the concept of method in the two approaches.

I. Communicative Approaches and Lexical Approach: diverging views about the nature and learning of language.

Implying a level of approach consisting of a view on the nature of language and its learning, E.L.T is focused on the method including the objectives of the teaching, the syllabus and a teaching technique (McDonough, 2004, p157).The objective of this chapter is to look at the assumptions in the different approaches to pinpoint the similarities if any and the differences. That will allow us to see if the L.A model is a complete change of philosophy in language teaching or just some adjustments. An approach being consistent with a method which itself is consistent with a teaching technique, comparing the approaches will help understand classroom practice within each model of language development. This part starts with a look at the nature of language in the two kinds of approaches and ends with a comparison of the views on language learning.

I.1. The nature of language according to tenets of the communicative and lexical approaches: some contrasting views.

This part of the work purports to discuss the views of the approaches on the nature of language. The analysis starts with the language description that influenced each approach to come up with the convergences and divergences. The second aspect of the analysis consists in looking at the assumptions.

A.The language descriptions

According to Stern[1], theorists of the communicative approach brought into language teaching "insights which they have derived from speech act theory, discourse analysis and the ethnography of communication" .Discussing the Lexical Approach, Lewis asserts that it is based on developments in lexicography and corpus linguistics. From these two theoretical backgrounds, the two types of approaches have diverging views on the nature of language. In fact, the Lexical Approach rejects the view that the nature of language is grammar to

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[1] H.H, STERN. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, O.U.P, 1983, p258.

assert that it is lexis. While tenets of the communicative approach like Littlewood[1] say that it "pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view", proponents of the lexical approach assert that "language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalized grammar" (Lewis,1993).Here, we see that the nature of language according to the first group is grammar structures and language functions when the second one views the grammar rules as subordinate to lexis. That position becomes even clearer when Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) assert that "language consists of multi-word chunks". That is, a phrase or groups of words which cannot be learnt as a unit.

In the end, it is important to say that the Lexical approach acknowledges the usefulness of structural patterns, but lexical and metaphorical patternings are accorded appropriate status because grammar is believed to be subordinate to lexis. In addition, grammar is seen as a receptive skill.

That diverging view on the nature of language surely has implications for learning within each approach.

B.The learning theories

The central hypothesis in the lexical approach is that, "language occurs in only one way: by understanding what we hear or read in mother language", Lewis (1996, p22).In other words, learning is process oriented. In fact, the belief within the lexical approach is that, "it is cognitive involvement struggling, trying, hypothesing, revising, and other activities of this kind which are the basis of learning", Lewis (1996, p18).

Tenets of the lexical approach agree with Widdowson (1979, p12) a theorist of the communicative approach when he asserts that, "knowing a language is not only a matter of knowing how to form correct sentences, but how to use these sentences in acts of communication". But what diverges the Lexical Approach from the Communicative Approach is the following assumptions of the proponents of the Lexical Approach. First, they assert that "it is possible to learn a language simply by listening to it spoken", Lewis (1996, p17).Second, it is believed that "language is retained in

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[1] William, LITTLEWOOD, *Communicative Language Teaching*, C.U.P, 1982, P2.

chuncks", Nattinger and De Carrico (1992, p32).Third, the assumption is that, "fluency is based on those lexical phrases", Lewis (1996, p19).

On the whole, proponents of the Lexical Approach do not see any real difference between L1 learning and L2 learning whereas those of the communicative approach do. An eloquent example is provided by Hoff[1] who puts that, "grammar is a receptive skill which can be fuelled by the need to communicate". He contradicts, here, the view of Littlewood who views grammar as a productive skill.

All these contradictory views on the nature of language and how it is learned have implications for applied linguistics, mainly English Language Teaching (E.L.T).

II.The pedagogic implications

Convergent on the objectives in so far as they all have communication as the ultimate goal, the Lexical Approach differs from them on the following aspects: the role of the teacher, the organization of the syllabus, the focus of the teaching, and the attitude to error.

2.1.The role of the teacher

Contrary to the other communicative approaches in which the teacher is the "purveyor and orchestrator of the knowledge" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), the role of the teacher in the L. A model of language development is one of a guide. His/her role is not to provide the learner with what should be known, but draw the latter's attention on it. Lewis (1993) talks about "bringing about awareness" on the part of the learner. As such, more and careful teacher talk is valued in the Lexical Approach while less teacher talk is prescribed in the other communicative approaches.

Last but not the least is the role assigned to the teacher when communication breakdown occurs in learner production. While the other approaches suggest an intervention of the teacher by indicating the learner the mistake, its nature and correct it, the Lexical Approach proposes a particular task of the teacher who is asked to play on the learner's accurate observation and noticing. In the end, the teacher should make sure that learners keep a well organized notebook

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[1] E.HOFF, *Language Development*, Wadsworth, 2001, p332.

according to the Lexical Approach, when such an initiative from the teacher is not advised in the other communicative approaches.

On the whole, the role of the teacher within the Lexical Approach is to encourage learner autonomy. As such the role of the teacher is one of a facilitator, editor, consultant and advisor rather than an instructor as indicated in the other approaches.

All these differences can also be seen through the principles of syllabus content organization.

2.2. The organization of the syllabus

Though we acknowledge from our readings that there is no single definition of the term syllabus, history shows that it represents a programme highly linked to the view of its initiator of the nature of language and how students learn it.

In fact, when the other communicative approaches do not reject the Chomskian view of language, the Lexical Approach rejects that view and proposes a purely lexical perspective of learning. So in the place of grammar structures, the L.A proposes the grammar of the word known as collocation.

Meanwhile, tenets of the Lexical Approach assert that, "the search for a strictly lexical syllabus is likely to be frustrating for theorist, teacher and student" (Lewis, 1996, p105). An evidence of that frustration is the Cobuild lexical syllabus. Advocates of the Lexical Approach do not propose a syllabus like the other communicative approaches (Notional Approach, Notional/Functional Approach, and the Competency Based Language Teaching etc).They rather propose eleven major ways in which lexis contributes as syllabus component:

1. Certain words deserve lexical rather than grammatical treatment. This type of words include such de-lexicalized words as "have, get, put, take, make do"; function words known as prepositions and modal auxiliaries including "would"
2. An emphasis should be placed on the base form of lexical verbs. In other words, pay increased attention to the highly frequent present simple.
3. Semantically dense items can be de-contextualised.For example, despite the fact that a simple identification of signification cannot be considered as mastery of a word, it is

believed to take an appropriate and valuable basis for increased communicative power.

4. Collocation is thought to assume an important syllabus generating role.
5. Sentences exemplifying pragmatically identifiable institutionalized utterances should be offered to learners for reflexion.
6. Sentence heads are good for syllabus content because unlike functions in communicative approaches, they are generalisable
7. Because it is an important cohesive device in spontaneous conversation, supra-sentential (tags, interested responses) lexical linking in syllabus through lexically based exercises is more natural and more pragmatically effective.
8. Synonyms are believed to constitute key features of fluency, for they represent within the existential paradigm a particular example of supra-sentential linking. In fact, the supra-sentential linking is the ability to use alternative language items as value synonyms, though they have different signification. So synonyms can be of great value in a syllabus.
9. Instead of looking at grammar of the reported speech, proponents of the Lexical Approach would rather that the repertoire of synopsing verbs be considered. Take the following sentences:-don't drink alcohol, the father said. Reported speech: The father *advised* him not to drink alcohol. Here advised is a synopsing word.
10. We should get the learner recognize that a metaphor is part of everyday language.Then, that such metaphorical usage is often patterned in an accessible way.
11. For tenets of the Lexical Approach, two fundamental skills that need be developed in the learner: the student's ability to use the dictionary as a learning resource, rather than reference work, and to help students identify lexical phrases in text ;(Willis, 1990, Lewis, 1993)

In a nutshell, it can be said that a lexical syllabus is a shift from grammar to vocabulary. In this way, collocations become the organizing principle of the syllabus. That principle is completely different from the one guiding the other communicative approaches. Given that a syllabus is consistent with a teaching method, it is clear that the focus of teaching in an L.A lesson will be different.

2.3.A diverging teaching focus

While the Lexical Approach claims a unified teaching of grammar, lexis and pronunciation, the other communicative approaches propose a separate teaching of grammar, lexis and pronunciation. In other words, they propose an analytical approach of the teaching. In addition, the Lexical Approach model suggests no gradation of the language to be taught when the others go for a gradation ranging from the simple to the complex of the language. In addition, when the teacher within the lexical approach seeks to expand learners' mental lexicon, the other approaches suggest that the teacher seek to provide learners with grammar rules and language functions.

In the end, contrary to the other communicative approaches based on the behavioral three Ps (Presentation-Practice-Produce) and geared to a tendency to control learners' intake, the Lexical approach rejects the three Ps and aims at the development of learner's awareness.

From what precedes, it is clear that the attitude in the two kinds of approaches will be different.

2.4.Attitude to error

The Lexical Approach rejects the view of the behaviorists accepted by tenets of the other communicative approaches according to which language is right or wrong. For proponents of the Lexical Approach, language is rather about successful or unsuccessful communication.Therefore, the norm in language teaching is no longer a matter of wrong or right, but what sort of language is produced by the learner or "tendencies" to use the term of Halliday (1989).

So, contrary to the other approaches, the Lexical Approach endorses Krashen's view to regard errors not as something to be corrected, but as "a stimulus to expose students to further natural language around their current level", Willis (1990).

All the above diverging views highlight two major things. First, English language teaching has shifted to a post Chomskian period consisting of focusing the teaching on the target language instead of the ideal innate capacity of the learner. Second, many research works have been directed to second language learning as if the nature of a second language were different from that of the first one. The Lexical approach puts an end to the debate by asserting that L1 and L2 learning constitute the same and unique process.

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Conclusion

Developing communicative skills in the learners is today the endeavor of research in the field of language teaching. The challenge in the undertaking is to know which approach can best help develop those skills, the nature of those skills, and the hierarchy in which they can be developed.

At the end of our analysis, we are in a position to assert one thing: the advent of the Lexical Approach is a revolution in language teaching. In fact, to the above questions it proposes totally different answers than the other approaches. Have we made progress? It is difficult to answer by the affirmative, for only the implementation of the approach can attest of its effectiveness and efficiency.

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