A 'Lexical Approach' for Japanese Learners?

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This writing touches on Japanese educational culture and ways language teachers may work effectively with this culture using certain types of lexical exercises in presentation and practice of language. Specifically, after a brief review of the Japanese education system, we introduce one way of giving meaning relationships of single and multiple word lexis a central place in Japanese TEFL classes – Michael Lewis' Lexical Approach and sample applications.

Discussions with college and university teachers in Japan about students often begin with, 'they come in ten to fifteen minutes late and talk about unrelated things when I'm trying to make an important point.' And 'when I talk to them and ask them questions I don't get any response.' Our experience in the Japanese public school system has also shown that due to cultural reasons detailed below, students often appear to have a love–hate relationship with spontaneous conversation practice. Learners seemingly praise the practice. Often however, fear of mistakes, of appearing too eager and of using items not covered in authorized course 'doctrine,' inhibits class members from taking the initiative to speak up in class or even causes them to dread being called upon by the teacher to speak. The difficulty, often near impossibility, of getting learners to take an active part in conversation–based exercises, is one with which most EFL teachers in Japan are familiar.

Some teachers may choose to just 'hammer away' on students forcing them to participate verbally in teacher–student conversations. However, in once–a–week ninety–minute classes with as many as twenty–five students, learner hesitations and attention lapses often create a very watered–down learning experience.

Group conversation activities tend not to fare much better. Japanese who go to foreign countries to experience foreign language immersion in spite of determination to speak as much as possible in class, are often thwarted in their efforts by pressure to socialize with their classmates in the mother tongue. All of these factors often create a combination which leaves students at completion of their course with little to show for their time and little to which they

can return for reference or review. (Wadden, 1992, 27–49)

I. Teaching with Learner Background & Expectations in mind

Much has been written on the socialization of Japanese through a primary and secondary school environment where consensus should precede action. This environment tends to be characterized by education methods which expect most participation to consist of only verbatim answers from materials or notes. The purpose of this article is not to delve deeply into the underlying reasons for the tendency toward suppression of creative participation. Nonetheless, in order to later defend our proposed approach and related methodology, we believe it necessary to touch on the general characteristics of Japanese students. In doing so, we cite heavily Brian McVeigh's lecture as his overall address puts into words what we saw in the more system-trusting (there was a substantial contingent of rebels and passive–resistors) secondary education–tracked children and adults whom we taught in our years as a community English teachers based in a small–town Hokkaido boards of education :

The role of the student is to listen, absorb, and retain information... Japanese students have trouble expressing themselves. This description makes sense in a society where being 'shy' is a strong cultural desirable...Japanese children are socialized to believe in 'an unidentified, seemingly ubiquitous someone,' a sort of social spook...Japanese students do not like to stand out...when called on and asked to take center stage, students will turn to their neighbors and discuss the response before attempting an answer...

They require stage directions. They are simply not used to working independently, and seem to be at a loss when given broadly or loosely defined assignments... their preference (is) for facts...right or wrong, true or false...they expect instructors to provide them with very concrete, specific types of information, not broad concepts that that can be applied to various cases and situations...and progress (they make in climbing the meritocratic academic/social ladder) depends on how they perform on tests...

...all these characteristics seem to encourage a passivity, or in other words, a locus of control that is exterior to the individual student... (McVeigh 1995, p.8–9)

Sit quietly but attentively, and memorize the right facts for the next exam. This will provide you with everything you need . And if you intend to respond verbally in class, make sure you first get a confirmation of the correctness of that response from other class members. Since

it will be all you can do to memorize the material for the upcoming exam, don't apply yourself to anything additional. This seems to be what McVeigh would advise those desiring to get ahead in Japanese society and education system. Naturally, when the studious after years of grueling study of material, test themselves into the middle to upper 'societal life tracks' inherent to entrance in college or University and faced with a future of either 10 to 14 hour workdays or marriage and related housekeeping and childcare, and NO MORE ENTRANCE EXAMS(!) they often seem content with a 2 to 4 year rest (those not so studious in public school, appear to do the same). Moreover, since little in the way of spontaneous production or interactive listening has ever been required of them, all but those who truly identify themselves with English ability end up as false beginners with little ability to process English spontaneously. Finally, it is our opinion that after several years in Japan, the need for individual self-improvement and the connection of 'doing' and 'achieving' to one's identity are not common phenomena. 'Getting in with' a reputable organization or group, being with and participating in after-hours activity with other members and ultimately, the sentiment that develops from this common experience, tend to greatly weaken the binding of one's activity in life with one's identity. In *The Anatomy of Dependence*, a writing which enjoys classic status in Japan, Japanese psychiatrist/author Takeo Doi even goes so far as to claim that Japanese people 'in all membership and relationship are searching for kindness with little calculation of consistency or long term effect take precedence over long-term result.'(Doi 1975, p.57)

How can a teacher balance cultural sensitivity with reaction to an obvious need to stimulate students to react differently? Perhaps the first step is to understand what tends to be expected of teachers in Japan. According to McVeigh,

1. Information should be made into an inventory, then indexed and catalogued
2. Knowledge that is not neatly packaged (and easily memorized) becomes regarded as unusable and suspect
3. Only testable knowledge is legitimate knowledge
4. Knowledgve should somehow be authorized (come from an approach, dictionary, text, or teacher)(McVeigh 1995, p.8-9)

In our opinion, it is possible to meet many of these expectations while introducing students to material more likely to stimulate production than traditional grammar. An Easily-accessible, 'list of facts' is perhaps a major factor in the success of Japanese students on standardized tests and appears to be the route that many Japanese people feel secure with. But some lists of ma-

terial are more condensed and language-activating than others. This writing introduces the lexi-cal approach as a possible route fulfilling both McVeigh's suggestions to teachers in Japan and many of his course management suggestions:

1. Strict and clear rules, written out and explained to students
2. Goal in English classes should be to 'reactivate' what they already know. Key is to use what students already know.
3. Use texts only minimally
4. Break up cliques
5. Give a lot of homework
6. Eliminate troublemakers
7. Have students write a weekly essay about one page long Have them read it aloud to the other students, and correct only major problems (McVeigh 1995, p.8-9)

In understanding the principles of the Lexical approach, it is first necessary to take a brief look at its precursors in the field of language education and cognitive psychology covered in the next section.

II. Short history of approaches, learning theories leading to the Lexical approach

The primary goals of currently popular communicative methodologies are to provide and de-velop language for real communication which learners then use to carry out tasks meaningful to them. The reader with little background in theories might ask common-sensically, 'hasn't lan-guage study always tended to follow this route?' It has not. For the hundreds of years in which Latin was virtually the only foreign language studied in the West and with up until the 1960's, study of any foreign language was seen as a Character-developing, 'mental exercise' in which the main or even the sole focus was grammatical patterns and vocabulary. Not only was little or no attention given to pronunciation, listening, speaking or language production, even emphasis on text content, had little importance comparison to 'long, elaborate explanations of the intrica-cies of grammar' and drills in conjugation and declension. (Brown, 1994, p.16-17) Surprisingly, the method remains in use worldwide either solely, or in combination with other methods/ap-proaches. By the 1850' s, the snowballing of the concept of practicality in the area of linguis-tics lead to many net theories and approaches.

In 1957, Skinner theorized that language was 'like other behavior, controlled by its conse-

quences...a child says 'want milk' and (a parent gives the child some milk...the operant is reinforced and the child is conditioned.' (Brown, 1994, p.23) Though few were totally sold on this theory, it did spawn a number of foreign language teaching methods.

The 'novel utterances' so obvious in small children acquiring first, languages led cognitivist researchers ('nativists'), particularly Noam Chomsky, to theorize that either a ' language acquisition device' (LAD) exists 'in the brain, and/or a system of 'universal grammar (UG) predisposes small children to acquire ('generate') difficult language in a short period of time. (Chomsky 1965 in Brown 1994, p.25) 'However, the generative rules of nativists were failing to account for the involvement' of functionality of language in language learning. This failure led to yet another school of thought, functionalism.

Functionalist theory and the myriad associated approaches, in very general and simple terms, attempted to deal with the 'very deepest level of language, that level where memory, perception, thought, meaning and emotion are all independently organized in the human mind.' These factors all come into play when a language learner interacts with his/her environment in a way that he/she feels is relevant. Of the approaches stemming from functionalist theory are the various communicative approaches.

The Naturalist Approach (Krashen) to which Michael Lewis rcpcafedly refers on which the Lexical approach is heavily based, stems from the Cognitivist theory (Chomsky) touched on above. One of the theories related to this approach states that the 'Language Acquisition Device (LAD)' in the brain takes over when students are 'immersed' in (exposed to and engaged with) language, allowing learners to 'acquire' it. 'The chief aim of the Natural Approach is to focus on the meaning of genuine communications (rather than on the form...) and to bring anxiety down to a minimum.' Oller 1991, p.267)

In close relation to this, the Natural Approach supports low–anxiety learning in the form of a 'silent period' the delaying of oral production until the learner him/herself responds willingly to abundant opportunity. (Lewis 1993, p.28) Lewis 'wholly supports' this view and Krashen's unrelated position that if immediate feedback on oral production work suggests failure, the effect, on the student's attitude is likely to be profoundly negative. (Lewis 1993, p.28)' Lexical exercises are intended to at least partially replace forced speaking inherent to more popular 'communicative' approaches. Lewis refers to Krashen extensively in his defense of the lexical approach. 'Importance of comprehensible input.' Is a phrase that is almost synonymous with the Natural approach. This term is generally understood as the importance of all the language to which the learner has not been exposed to previously, but is nonetheless in the grasp of understanding. Lewis feels this input is 'material which relates to what we already know, but in

some way modifies it or extends it.' (Lewis 1993, p.100)

Existence of a silent period, does not in any way mean that, work in reading and writing should be excluded. Terrell Quotes Bollinger (1970) on the importance of Lexicon:

'the lexicon is central... grammar is not something into which words are plugged, but is rather a mechanism by which words are served...The quantity of information in the Lexicon far outweighs that in any other part of the language, and if there is anything to the notion of redundancy it should be easier to reconstruct a message containing just the words than one containing just the syntactic relations.'(Oller 1991, p.275)

Until students are ready to participate orally, they must, develop a lexical foundation ever further extending through reading real samples of lexis in use and manipulation of lexis in various written practices in order to 'modify' and 'build upon' what they already know. If you look at the adapted exercises psovsded in this writing, all strive fit to this description with regard to Japanese tertiary students.

Lewis expresses an important point in, perhaps even a reservation to connection with Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis, which states that the language students use differs 'in many cases radically from what they have been taught': 'Whatever the truth or otherwise behind the Natural Order Hypothesis, it is at least plausible that students work simultaneously on a much wider range of language, of which they have varying degrees of mastery, than traditional syllabus construction and classroom procedure would lead us to believe.' (Lewis 1993, p.26).

The next section, covers specific types of Lexis, how to derive lexical exercises from commercial ESL/EFL textbooks and some examples of such derivations.

II. Classification of Lexis & Adaptation of exercises
to textbooks for Japanese learners

While Lewis does however, encourage the teaching of individual vocabulary in the beginning, 'that does not mean that it cannot be exploited and recorded in principled ways...helping students to see what language properly belongs with other language items.' (Lewis 1993, p.116–118) Lexical chunks in the approach are categorized as words both 'of a very general nature with low meaning – content through to those words with a very specific technical meaning: 'multi–word items such as collocations (regular co – occurrences of words with others) and institutionalized expressions ('fixed combinations of words'); and finally, 'polywords' such as 'of course', 'all at once', ' by the way', 'the day after tomorrow', etc. Thus, Lewis consoles, 'We

fortunately, are not looking for rigidly defined categories, only useful ways of grouping...almost all grammatical (and lexical) categorization has fuzzy edges.' (Lewis 1993, p.93) The categories are, as follows:

Words–Equal treatment of 'high–frequency, zero to low information content words (with, of) with 'low–frequency high–information content (book, advert, oscillate)' Multi –word items (involves 'marginal' cases and overlapping categories)

Polywords – Usually only two or three words long, of any word class. 'The meaning of the whole group may range from immediately apparent or totally different from the component words.' For example:

> put off
>
> look up
>
> look up to
>
> by the way
>
> the day after tomorrow
>
> in his element

Collocations – infinitely numerous, institutionalized or entirely novel pairs of words of any variety, which are 'neither pragmatically tied, nor pragmatically identifiable:'

> rancid butter   prices fell   incomes rose
>
> unemployment stabilized

Institutionalized expressions – 'allow the user to manage aspects of the interaction.' These may be broken down into three broad subcategories:

1. Short, hardly grammaticalized utterances:

> Not yet. Certainly Not. Just a moment, please.

2. Sentence heads or frames – 'most typically the first words of utterances, serving a primarily pragmatic purpose':

That's all very well, but...

I see what you mean, but I wonder if it

wouldn't be better to...

3. Full sentences – the potentially thousands of complete clauses and sentences known
to adult native or advanced speakers (Lewis 1993, p.91–94)

Unfortunately, this is an oversimplification of an approach as potentially complex and detail
–laden as the lexis itself (described as 'boundless chaos') (Lewis 1993, p.89). However, rather
than dwell on the general and abstract, We would like to cover our development of a step–by–
step adaptation of the most salient elements of the Lexical approach:

1. Search the required text for important words and especially related groups of high–
use words (see categorization below). Lewis places highest importance on verbs. If
there is no required textbook, brainstorm with students to come up with items
based on functions, topics or situations from a needs analysis. Finally, select whole
sentence and cohesion/discourse related items.
2. Access several dictionaries from which students may reference the items and find
real examples of the items in use (such as a Collins Cobuild Dictionary or other
corpus or dictionary which includes realistic sample sentences)
3. Research Lexical Approach references/ materials for exercise types and adapt or de-
sign your own (see examples below, resources, end)
4. Have students write down the textbook words that they feel important or words new
to them in their notebooks only in word groups resembling those categorized below
5. Grade students on completion of exercises and regularly remind them Lexis is Le-
wis' categorization of lexical items below

In *Business English*, a course–book based entirely on the tenets of the Lexical Approach,
Wilberg & Lewis implement an excellent variety of lexical exercises all of which force students
to become engaged with the language. I have adapted several of them for use in general Eng-
lish classes:

Figure 1

ACTIVE LISTENING

Different countries have different customs (see page 147) but in many places people who are speaking expect their listener to show interest and involvement. If you listen in complete silence, people may think you are difficult to talk to! Make a list of sounds or expressions which you can use to show you are listening.

Mmm.

I see.
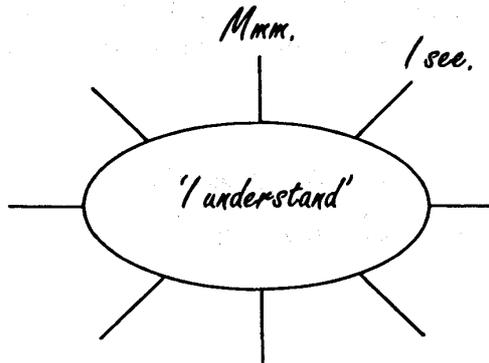
'I understand'

Make a list of expressions you can use to show you do not understand, or need something repeated or explained.

I don't quite follow.

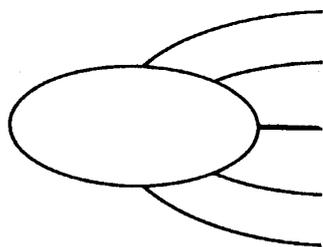*Sorry. What exactly do you mean?*

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis   (1993, p34)

Figure　2

WORD LOBSTER 1

The first words of some sentences are very common and very important in the language needed by business people. Some of the most important are listed for you. There is also space for you to add your own important examples.

It is very difficult to remember language which is just lists of new words. These special shapes, which we call 'word lobsters' will help you to remember more easily. Fill the 'legs' with useful expressions. Add a translation if you think it helps you. From time to time, cover the right hand part of the page and make sure you can recall the important expressions you have listed.

have a short break, shall we?
come back to that point later.

Let's

we meet again on the 17th?
you ring me again early next week?

May I suggest
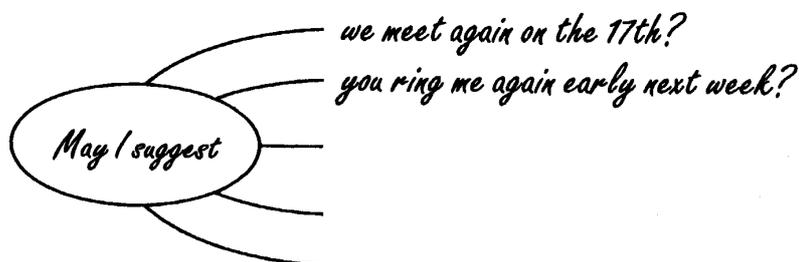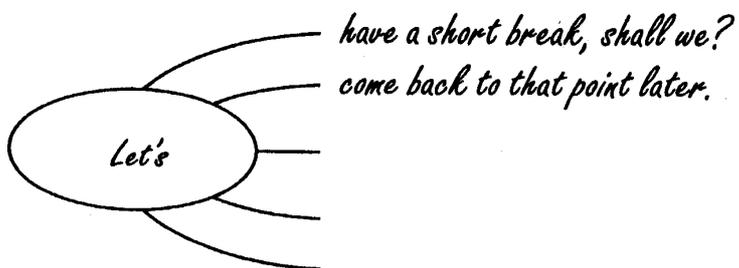
T ry to write natural sentences about your own business. These will be more useful and easier to remember.

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis　(1993, p41)

Figure 3

VERB - NOUN PARTNERSHIPS

Choose your own texts.
List useful partnerships from the texts you choose here.

VERB	NOUN		VERB	NOUN

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis   (1993, p50)

Figure　4

ADJECTIVE - NOUN PARTNERSHIPS

Choose your own texts.
List useful partnerships from the texts you choose here.

ADJECTIVE	NOUN		ADJECTIVE	NOUN

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis　(1993, p51)

Figure 5

NOUN - NOUN PARTNERSHIPS

Choose your own texts.
List useful partnerships from the texts you choose here.

NOUN	NOUN	NOUN	NOUN

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis   (1993, p52)

Figure 6

USEFUL EXPRESSIONS 1

While you are using texts to find and list useful word partnerships, you will certainly find some useful expressions and idioms as well. It is not as easy to list these in a system, but again we suggest you write them so you can cover part of the expression, or write an equivalent in your own language which you can cover later when you want to check what you have learned. Use the following pages to record useful language. Here are a few expressions to suggest the kind of language you and your teacher can look for together.

ENGLISH	YOUR LANGUAGE
worth a look	
across the country	
absolutely free	
hopes and fears	
we are committed to excellence	

Permission to adapt to this writing given by: Wilberg & Lewis　(1993, p53)

III. Conclusion: No approach exclusive of communicative competence and social context

Lastly, we would like to go over a few key principles of the Lexical Approach with regard to the current teaching situation as described in section I:

—Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar

—Grammar as a structure is subordinate to lexis.

English classes in Japan tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary because they are easy to organize and test. However, lexical chunks are not easily categorized because their sizes and compositional structures vary greatly. An important consequence of viewing language from a lexical point of view is that the traditional distinction between 'fixed' vocabulary and 'generative' grammar is recognized as an invalid over-simplification (Lewis 1997, p.11) Can one clearly separate vocabulary and grammar when certain vocabulary are used to signify certain grammar? (e.g., verb tenses are signified by different words – go, went, will go, has gone, etc.; many words have noun, verb, adjective or adverb forms each signified by a different word – weight, weigh, weighty weightily; etc.)

The Lexical Approach suggests the content and role of grammar in language courses needs to be radically revised, but the approach in no way denies the value of grammar, nor its unique role in language (Lewis 1997, p.41)

While lexical chunks may be difficult to categorize they can be easily tested. However, testing lexis requires a teacher to be open to a variety of answers. It is common for Japanese teachers to accept one and only one answer for a given question, even if others are acceptable or proper. If one rejects answers that are acceptable, one teaches the students that memorization of the teacher's answers is important and that learning the language is not. The priority of lexis over grammar may be difficult to understand or accept, but we believe Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin's essay on speech genres and utterance can help.

We speak only in definite speech genres, that is all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical **forms of construction of the whole**. Our repertoire of (oral and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully **in practice**, and it is quite possible for us not to even suspect their existence **in theory**.

We are given these speech genres in almost the same way that we are given our

native language, which we master fluently long before we begin to study grammar. We know our native language – its lexical composition and grammatical structure – not from dictionaries and grammars but from concrete utterances that we hear and that we ourselves reproduce in live speech communication with people around us. (Bakhtin, 1986, p.78)

Language was not created from a grammatical plan: it began as utterances. People tend to use not grammatical language, but colloquial language.

It should also be noted that learning how to use language is not simply a process of developing cognitive language skills, "but also how those skills are to be used in their social context." (Besnier and Street 1992, p.17)

––Language is recognised as a personal resource, not an abstract idealisation.

––Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language. (Lewis 1997, p.iv)

A central element of language teaching is raising students' awareness of, and developing their ability to 'chunk' language successfully. (Lewis, 1997 p.vi)

It is common in Japan for a student to have learned enough language to perform a given task (shop, give directions, eat at a restaurant) and yet still be unable to actually do it. It is not enough to know words and grammar one needs to be familiar with and know how to create, and have practiced creating speech utterances commonly used in the social situation.

When we construct our speech, we are always aware of the whole of our utterance. We do not string words together smoothly and we do not proceed from word to word; rather it is as though we **fill in the whole with necessary words**. Bakhtin 1986, p.86)

"We speak in utterances and not in individual sentences, and, of course, not in individual words...when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length...and a certain compositional structure...From the very beginning we have a sense of the speech whole...if speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible." (Bakhtin, 1986, p.79)

Successful language use is determined not by accurate imitation and perfectly following

rules, but by the listener's understanding what the speaker wishes to be understood. Accurate grammar can help achieve this goal, but it is a means and not a goal in itself. It is typical to underestimate, if not altogether ignore, the communicative function of language (Baktin, 1986, p.67) As with spelling and pronunciation, grammar's purpose is to signify what one wishes to express. Uniformity and accuracy are essential for mutual understanding and communication, but it is the nature of languege to grow and change, not only through time , but from place to place and person to person. Any 'ideal' version is only one of many, and any 'authority' of a language is merely relative, not absolute.

--Task and process, rather than exercise and product are emphasized.

--The Present--Practice--Produce paradigm is rejected in favor of a paradigm based on the Observe--Hypothesize--Experiment cycle.

Culture is a process. As part of culture, language is also a process. Competence is found not in the product, but in the ability to create products. A good artist is not someone who can forge a masterpiece, but someone who can create various works of art. Likewise, a fluent speaker is not someone who can forge a masterpiece, but someone who can create communicative speech in any situation. One learns by doing. The ability to create speech in any situation will only come by being challenged to do so. Mere memorization of lexical chunks will not be much different than mere memorization of vocabulary.

Despite the methods one knows, it is up to the individual teacher to use them well. Having a great plan does not ensure it shall be used well. The Lexical Approach is not just a list of " teaching tactics." It is also a way to view language and language teaching.

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