

A Bag of Lexis: Lexical Approach in Blended Learning

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Abstract

There is always a need to put a spin on the traditional course book-led lessons for English as a foreign language. Moreover, the constant demand for adapting to the students' pace and needs as well as keeping them entertained and motivated can be challenging at best. Our project is basically a guide to travelling around the British Isles, visiting a variety of cities and places, covering everyday topics and experiences in an engaging and fun way. Being uploaded on an online platform, this can all be done without leaving the classroom. The two-year project has been developed by considering students aged between 15 and 20 years old enrolled in a vocational school for healthcare and social work and the topics required by the curriculum. Even though the research is still at an experimental stage, the outcome has been positive. This system allows the freedom to scale and add more destinations as well as to adapt to the required level of English, in our case ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate levels, and of course to apply it to any subject or field. The theory behind this idea is based on Lewis' Lexical Approach and Levine's Global Simulation, since both theories stress the idea that context makes language more meaningful. Our project gives students a context, as close to everyday situations as possible, as well as the necessary patterns of language and chunks. Don't say 'turn to page 25', do say 'Let's check the train timetable to Edinburgh'.

Keywords: Learning Environments, Blended Learning, Global Simulation, Lexical Approach, TBL

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Introduction

The evolution of course books to meet the current needs in classrooms has mainly been focusing on online versions with the addition of videos and self-studying workbooks, it was therefore time for something more dynamic and less restricted. The use of platforms has also been boosted since the outburst of the Covid pandemic but mainly as a tool for uploading material produced in a more traditional way. The idea behind the project 'A Bag of Lexis' was then to make the most of what was already available.

It would be wrong though, to see this project merely as a re-arrangement of school material. In this paper I will present the theories that are at the base of all the materials prepared for this project, but most importantly, how the whole project should work in the classroom.

A Bag of Lexis: How It Started

Teaching languages can be challenging in terms of motivation. L2 students are not always willing to learn a foreign language and for a growing number of people the language, or indeed languages spoken at home are not necessarily the official language. In Switzerland, as in the case of this study, students are required to study another national language along with English, which means they are learning at least three languages. Depending on the linguistic region, that number might even be higher. In such an environment, the status of the language and its advantages for the job market are essential components in the learning motivation.

The use of new technologies by the younger generations – and not necessarily including artificial intelligence (AI) at this point – has changed and will continue to change dramatically the skills considered important in learning a language. Teachers who are required to follow a syllabus and in the case of teachers of L2, a course book, often emphasise skills that are going to lose importance such as writing and reading. I am not claiming that these skills are not an essential part of learning and using a language, but rather that AI, apps and other devices provide their users with a finished product that requires little effort on their part. Students can easily produce a formal letter of a fairly good standard by typing in just a few details on a website or translate a long text in their native language simply by scanning the page on their mobile phone. It is no longer essential to master such skills in order to communicate with other people and teachers first, and by extension school boards and councils later, should start to acknowledge that the new reality. Speaking and listening on the other hand, are currently much more important for students. It is also possible to find apps translating simultaneously, but I believe that the social element of being able to communicate freely and independently is still a strong motivator and highly valued.

The Theories Behind the Project

The project 'A Bag of Lexis' is based on two main theories, Lewis' Lexical Approach and Levine's Global Simulation which are several decades old now but are still compellingly modern. I won't be explaining the theories in detail as most teachers would already be familiar with them, but rather highlight the main points relevant to the project.

Michael Lewis' idea of "prefabricated lexical sequences" or "chunks" as a way to gain fluency (Lewis, 1993) is the key element in creating the activities for the project. It is indeed useless to provide lists of vocabulary without context, even if they are related to the same topic (e.g. 'the environment' or 'sports'). To use a metaphor, it would be like providing a list

of ingredients without the recipe and without mentioning who is the recipe for. In an article by Scott Thornbury, Lewis' theory is divided in the following principles: firstly, fluency is both item- (chunk-) based and rule-based, so it is not a question of forgetting the rules, but basically grammar and vocabulary cannot be separated; the result being the so-called "grammaticalized lexis". However, the acquisition of syntax is fundamental; what the article suggests is that students might profit from learning a variety of fixed expressions and prefabricated language, but in order to become more proficient they need to extrapolate the rules. Secondly, language acquisition and fluency originate from usage, i.e. from real life language exposure. Thirdly, raising awareness allows the students to make predictions about the language and to memorise lexis with a better chance of making it stick and of sounding less foreign (Thornbury, 2019).

The other guidelines are inspired by the tenets of Global Simulation. The concept of Global Simulation is captivating, but at the same time quite difficult to achieve within the normal restrictions of a state school. However, it is always possible to put the students in a real-life situation with the necessary set of lexical resources, even without leaving the classroom. This is what Levine calls the "reality of function", i.e. the students immerse themselves into the situation and, with more or less guidance on the part of the teacher, they proceed from one step to the next using their background experience. The main skill involved here is verbal interaction, that implies negotiation. It is worth remembering that the "characteristic of language class simulation is that it must be fundamentally task based. Task-based instruction is important for the communicative language classroom, for it keeps the focus away from rote or mechanical practice and on meaningful interaction" (Levine, 2004).

The Bag of Lexis Corpus

The result of combining the aforementioned theories is the 'Bag of Lexis' corpus, which will be now presented in detail. In its current form this corpus is made up of nearly 60 lessons and activities designed to be used in class. However, it is important to stress the fact that the content of the lessons is less relevant to this paper than the whole structure and context in which they will be used.

The use of an online platform was inevitable, and the Swiss Cantonal Department of Education has been using Moodle for several years. Of course, any other online platform could be used instead, and Moodle can have its flaws especially when it comes to the size of files that can be uploaded. It does not offer a lot of flexibility to personalize fonts and style which can seem quite basic (see Fig. 2) and teachers do not have the possibility to create a group by themselves and must always rely on the support of the cantonal IT department.

The main frame of the project corpus is based around the British Isles and subdivided in the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland (see Fig 1). London is the arbitrary starting point of the virtual trip. The capital is an excellent reference since most students have some knowledge about the city or have already visited it. Choosing the British Isles as the framework was important for including the cultural aspect of the language as well. However, as a possible expansion of the project tailored to the needs of the senior years other destinations are going to be used, for example the US, New Zealand, Australia or South Africa.



Fig. 1: Screenshot of the destinations

Each nation has a similar introductory part, which includes reading or listening/viewing comprehensions on local characteristics and traditions and a reference to the national holiday. There is also a chat section, but this is only accessible to fellow teachers who are involved in the project; it is meant for sharing thoughts and ideas and we realised it has become a useful device for collecting opinions and critical input. Following from these starting locations, there are the different cities to choose for the course activities, with background information and references to the course books. Figure 2 shows the section on Wales. In this case Cardiff was the only city to be included, but it can help to demonstrate the way each part of the course has been structured.



Fig. 2: Screenshot of the section on Wales

The course activity related to the city of Cardiff is mainly focused on its attractions with a special section on giving directions. As with other sections, this unit includes a PowerPoint, which can also serve as a guideline for the teacher, and all the other files used for this activity with reading and listening comprehensions. Of course, all exercises are based on the principles of the Lexical Approach which include chunks, grammaticalized lexis and fixed expressions. To complete the Cardiff section there are references in the course books used by the students.

Needless to say, that because of the way this unit is constructed it is easily scalable both in level and content. The school involved in this project currently has two levels, B1 and B2 and some lessons are presented accordingly.

How to Use the Bag of Lexis Corpus

At this point it is fair to ask how this project actually works. The concept is really about travelling through the British Isles. At the beginning of the school year the students have their virtual starting point in London. After having done some activities in the city, it is time to choose the next destination. Either the choice can be left to the students, who can decide for themselves where to go next, or it is up to the teacher to decide on the destination according to the mood of the class, and without the restriction of needing to follow a course book. The open-ended approach is always very practical, so if Edinburgh is the next port of call, the class must first plan the trip. Questions like: how to travel, where to sleep and even setting a budget should all be answered and clear. This can be done by the whole class, in small groups or even individually. Once the journey has been sorted, it is possible to choose an activity; for example, in the case of Edinburgh it could 'Rugby at Murrayfield' (see Fig. 3). After Edinburgh, it could be Dublin or Manchester on the wish list and the class must again plan the journey to the new destination, using all the terms and expressions introduced before. This trip description could well take several periods in school.

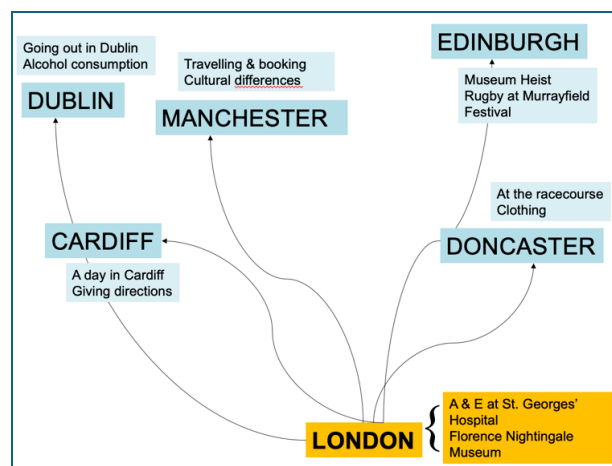


Fig. 3: Slide showing how to use the corpus

To make the experience feel as realistic as possible, an element of unpredictability was required. So, on top of the set of lessons related to each city and nation there are also 'bad cards' that can be used at any time to put a different spin on the trip. Each 'bad card' has a separate section with additional material and can be drawn by students at any moment throughout the language course (see Fig. 4). Some, like 'Not Feeling Well' can include a lot of activities, whereas 'Calling the Helpline' is a much simpler affair.



Fig. 4: The ‘bad cards’ depicting the six unpredictable situations

One final comment about the structure: This system is extremely adaptable and, because it is based on an online platform, even students who cannot be in class for various reasons can easily access the lesson and take part without fear of missing out important information.

Discussion

The project was started in the school year 2022/2023 and continued the following year. The first year was devoted to creating the material and trying it out in different classes to gauge student response. In the second year, the project was piloted in 11 classes with students aged between 15 and 19 years old, corresponding to year 11 to year 13 in the UK school system (see Table 1). The size of such classes can vary between 16 and 24 students, which often makes it difficult to give each student the time and attention needed to boost their level of English. It is still too early in the pilot stage to assess a clear improvement in student language skills over the two years of development. However, it has been noted by teachers how well the students have responded to the new system and the variety of lessons, and vice-versa how stimulated teachers have been not having to follow the plodding pace of a course book.

Class		Number of Students	Teacher
MS 2B	<i>Year 12</i>	22	Mr. Abbondio
MS 3B	<i>Year 13</i>	24	Mr. Abbondio
OSS 1B	<i>Year 12</i>	18	Mr. Abbondio
OSS 2A	<i>Year 13</i>	23	Mr. Abbondio
OSA 1B	<i>Year 12</i>	23	Ms. Martignoni Webster
OSA 1C	<i>Year 12</i>	16	Ms. Martignoni Webster
OSS 1A	<i>Year 12</i>	20	Ms. Gianinazzi Aliverti
MS 2C	<i>Year 12</i>	19	Ms. Gianinazzi Aliverti
OSS 1C	<i>Year 12</i>	19	Ms. Koley
OSS 1D	<i>Year 12</i>	18	Ms. Koley
OSS abE	<i>Year 11</i>	21	Ms. Formica Castiglioni
11 classes		223 students	

Table 1: Numbers of classes and teachers involved in the project for the school year 2023/2024.

In order to understand Table 1, it is necessary to explain the acronyms. In this vocational school for healthcare and social work care, students can choose between three main curricula:

- *MS (Maturità Specializzata)* where students attend school full-time, training to become physiotherapists, occupational therapists, nurses or working for social services and immigration centres. (3 periods of English per week)
- *OSS (Operatore Socio-Sanitario)* where students are training to become nurses and carers combining periods at school and time on placement. (3 periods of English per week in year 12)
- *OSA (Operatore Socio-Assistenziale)* where students are training to work with children or people with mental or physical disabilities, combining periods at school and time on placement. (3 periods of English per week in year 12)

Table 1 also includes the classes of two fellow teachers, Ms. Koley and Ms. Formica Castiglioni who have kindly agreed to incorporate the material of this project in their teaching.

Conclusion

The initial impression from the pilot project is that the approach is popular with students and teachers. The project facilitates a lively atmosphere and generates enthusiasm by engaging students in a fun and constructive way that draws on their own experiences and interests in the context of the English language. “In this concept, students and teachers set the pace, decide where to go, what to do and, most importantly, when to do it. [...] By using situations that are real, students are motivated and learn skills that will serve them well in life” (Abbondio et al., 2024, p. 43).

Further research and evaluation are needed and indeed necessary in order to understand the positive effects this project has had on students. The next stage of the project will be focused on collecting data and of course continue to refine the material and add new activities to the corpus. The outcome has been positive generally, and it will certainly provide some interesting results in the years to come. This project was not meant, though, simply to boost school grades. The idea was that by creating a stimulating environment students would be more inclined to engage and use English and, more importantly, participate actively and naturally in a spoken discussion in class. After all communication, or rather successful communication has always been at the heart of language teaching.

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