



Live Moderated Chat Transcript

Vocabulary - Is it more than words?

This Live Chat Session took place live from the Longman Internet Café at IATEFL York, 2002.

Jeremy Harmer joined us from Cambridge, UK and **Scott Thornbury** from Barcelona, Spain.

The video link to Scott in Barcelona unfortunately failed but the chat raised some interesting discussions.

Approaches to vocabulary teaching

- <Georgina> Hi all - keep those questions coming in - Scott, can you summarize your feeling re vocab teaching?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Georgina, you want me to summarize a 200 page book in a couple of second?!!!
- <dteeler> YES!!!
- <Georgina> Yes - from everyone in the Internet Café! In 8 seconds apparently
- <Midge> Scott, in your review of Lewis' book, you weren't convinced by the lexical approach. Do you still fee the same way? Does Jeremy share your views?
- <joyful> This is my first chat thingy- I'm enjoying it (keyboard is a little odd though)
- <Scott_Thornbury> I think my criticisms of Lewis' lexical approach was perhaps a little tougher than he deserved after writing my own book on vocabulary I came increasingly closer to Michael's position although I still think it was unwise of him to dub his pedagogical recommendations an APPROACH since, as I pointed out, an approach assumes a theory of learning as well as of language and Lewis is not very clear about what his theory of learning really is learning, not leering I mean BUT his emphasis on a heavy diet of words, especially at the early stages of learning, seems well founded I am less convinced that learning lots of random collocations is entirely a good idea, though that's why I also have strong sympathy with the lexical approach advocated by Jane and Dave Willis, which is based on frequency information
- <Georgina> Jeremy - how do you feel about the lexical approach? And the rest of the audience?
- <jeremy_harmer> I agreed a lot with Scott's 'all chunks and no pineapple' view of Lewis' LA because although I am entirely convinced by the importance of chunks and vocabulary in to context and the importance of words generally that does not mean you have to change everything you do (or throw out grammar), and anyway what Lewis shows in Implementing the LA looks pretty standard, don't they?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Well, I think any recommendations for classroom practice must take into account how people LEARN
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, Scott, that's right, I'm sure.

2000 core words represent 80% of the English language!

- <Georgina> Here's a question from Joyful...
- <joyful> Does an approach really assume a theory of learning as well as of language?
- <Sneezy> What, for you, is the difference between teaching from books written from the standpoint of the lexical ""approach"" and teaching from a phrase book?
- <jeremy_harmer> The difference? Context, context, context (as Scott says in his piece at the website [<http://www.eltforum.com/vwoolf.html>]).
- <Scott_Thornbury> A phrase book has a very limited focus, traditionally at least but I would love to see publishers produce phrase books for learners, not just travellers and I don't mean collections of idioms. I've got another suggestion for publishers, too do you want to hear it?
- <jeremy_harmer> (And for writers?)
- <Midge> Is it rude?
- <bald> YES!!!
- <Georgina> Go on Scott - we know your love of publishers ;-))
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, it's this...
- <Scott_Thornbury> Here we go...!
- <Scott_Thornbury> We now know what a core vocabulary should include that is at least the first 1000 to 2000 top frequency words in the language dictionaries are now tagging word with regard to frequency but how about producing a dictionary that was JUST the top 2000 words preferably in electronic form, so that you could access it by for example, lexical field, if you wanted or alphabetical order, or even randomly and

- that it was connected to some game-type programs that you could use to revise these words in a kind of fun way
- <Georgina> That sounds like the Longman Wordwise Dictionary - there's a talk at 10.20 tomorrow! [http://www.longman.com/dictionaries/which_dict/wwise.html]
- <longmanstand> Publishers!!!! (someone on the stand, but said in a light-hearted way!)
- <Midge> An Egyptian student asked me recently why I didn't just teach them the top 2000 words of English.
- <jeremy_harmer> I have some problems with raw frequency, personally.
- <longmanstand> How would you select what went in the phrasebook?
- <Sneezy> How ""lexical"" do you think these words would be?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Well, they would be just words, but they would include their common collocations e.g. common phrasal verbs associated with the head word, e.g. ""set"" - ""set off"", ""set up"" etc from corpus data - we have this information already, but not organised as a list for learners to consult.
- <barnaby> What about the second top 2000 words where would we get those from?
- <Georgina> And related to that a question from the stand:
- <longmanstand> Wouldn't there be some restrictions and if so, what would these be?
- <Georgina> What does everyone think about the usefulness of these top 2000 words?
- <Sneezy> I reckon that ""the"" would be in the top 2000, what would be the selection for ""common collocations with this word?!?"
- <Scott_Thornbury> I'm just thinking on the basis of my learning Spanish - if someone had told me early on that the verb ""poner"" is highly frequent and very polysemous, I would have concentrated on it from day one(it means to put, basically, but has a huge range of common uses
- <jeremy_harmer> Hmm, but the problem with most frequency counts is that they tell you about a word's appearance not its different lexemes, and also the top 2000 words 'pit there' do not necessarily relate too strongly to the reality of a classroom so what I'd like to see is a kind of 'amended top 2000' for learners???
- <Scott_Thornbury> I know I know
- <longmanstand> 'poner huevos', for example
- <Scott_Thornbury> Exactly but it's a start
- <barnaby> The point for me would be to find out words that we don't know rather than those that we do hence the emphasis on the next n number of words
- <cubauk> But it doesn't mean that they are the only one

Grammar or vocabulary?

- <Scott_Thornbury> But they might be words that coursebook writers could take the responsibility of including and recycling constantly instead of the obsessive concern for grammar mcnuggets (ah I got that in!)
- <Midge> Should we even be teaching words? Would it not be better to teach how to deal with words?
- <aggie> I agree
- <jeremy_harmer> I agree with the need for c'book writers to recycle important frequent words!
- <longmanstand> Have you ever 'puest a huevo'?
- <Georgina> Ok, longman stand, enough of the huevos please ;-)
- <bald> Doesn't the whole issue of core vocabulary in some way mitigate against Jeremy's notion of vocab that is inherently more learnable than other e.g. ""cuddle"" which probably isn't in the top 2000 (I really would have no idea) but is arguably more useful and learnable than its frequency position would imply?
- <Scott_Thornbury> ""cuddle"" comes later - it's the icing on the lexical cake, as far as I'm concerned
- <longmanstand> Who would amend them and on what criteria?
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, but 'cuddle' was interesting for me because the students came across it and they kind of 'chose' it to be in their personal top 20 or top 2000!
- <Scott_Thornbury> Although I agree, you can't ignore the memorisability value of highly coloured words, emotionally speaking which is a principle that Sylvia Ashton-Warner based her ""key vocabulary"" on but what the learner needs is a critical mass of high frequency words, even in advance of grammar while going about the business of accumulating a ""personal"" lexicon more or less incidentally
- <Midge> Don't lists of Top 2000s, kind of pre-empt what the learners want to learn? Perhaps

- that's what our cuddlers are on about? After all, SAW got her lists from the learners, not from corpora, didn't she?
- <longmanstand> Isn't this moving into the realms of the vocab we learn because we want to - because we like the sound of it, for example, or the image of the word? We believe so
- <Georgina> We had a question earlier about grammar...
- <joyful> How do you distinguish precisely between vocab and grammar?
- <Scott_Thornbury> I'm not sure if you can - which is where I go along with Michael (Lewis) for example ""look forward to"" - you have to learn the associated grammar of a word like that before you can use it with confidence look, as a beginner, I'd have to be pretty perverse to say to the teacher, don't teach me words like ""way"" or ""like"" - teach me ""cuddle""
- <jeremy_harmer> Depends on your class ?:-)
- <barnaby> Or teacher?
- <longmanstand> And having said that, do you agree that you can't distinguish between vocab and grammar? Jeremy I mean...
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, but those words take care of themselves, to a certain extent. What I'm saying is that as teachers we need to be a bit more proactive when vocab is concerned.
- <Midge> SAW did point out that sex and death were popular themes with her primary students :)
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, but SAW was teaching literacy - the kids already KNEW those words - but they didn't know how to write them
- <jeremy_harmer> I agree with Scott about being proactive, also about teaching the grammar associated with look forward to of like or enjoy or any other verb, but the fact remains that old grammar teaching with slot and filler vocab was not entirely unsuccessful either and that's a puzzle in the context of this discussion, isn't it?
- <longmanstand> People at the stand are in agreement with this

Technology assisted language learning?

- <cubauk> How do you think the use of new technologies in language communication is affecting or promoting the production of vocabulary?
- <Georgina> Oops sorry that question re technologies came in by mistake, but as we are all in this online environment, what do you think? is new technology promoting vocabulary?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Do you want me to talk about technology?
- <barnaby> It seems to be having an effect on writing - today's forum for example
- <Scott_Thornbury> When the webcam AND the audio link failed, and I had gone to the trouble of ironing a shirt!!
- <Georgina> I'm sure it was a lovely shirt - if you take a picture, we'll put it on the site ;-)
- <joyful> We noticed the shirt
- <aggie> Bet you looked lovely!
- <Scott_Thornbury> Looked? I LOOK lovely.
- <jeremy_harmer> Technology is great but (a) we missed the shirt, and (b) I still can't type quickly AND accurately!
- <Georgina> J - there were a few comments on that from here, though I wasn't going to say ;-)
- <Scott_Thornbury> Technology...well ...to get back to my ""neat idea"" I don't see a great advantage in having online dictionaries (for learners I mean)
- <longmanstand> Why not?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Unless they can do things to them - like ask them to sort themselves into words relating to, say, swimming, or nuclear fission, or travel if I want to look up a word I can't understand in a text, I'm not going to go online if I can open a ""real"" dictionary look up a word, I meant
- <barnaby> To get back to the question though there are a number of consequences clearly there will be new vocabulary items that will be introduced - we know this already from SMS and these items may have a long term effect
- <cubauk> But there is a production of new symbols and words like ""U"" that existed before and now are taking more space in language production
- <barnaby> Clearly there will be new vocabulary items that will be introduced - we know this already from SMS and these items may have a long term effect

- <longmanstand> Isn't there a difference between an active learning tool and a more open support? If you can simply click the word for a definition surely this save time?
- <Scott_Thornbury> On the other hand, technology offers a lot of help for production -an online version of the Language activator, for example would be fabulous assuming you're already on line, lognmanstand
- <jeremy_harmer> And, crucially, it's this technology that has allowed us to understand chunks and vocab better than ever before. I think corpus access would be the greatest boon for learners if organised properly.
- <barnaby> One of the problems associated with online dictionaries is the need to be able to spell the word 'corektly'
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, but a corpus has to be mediated, or learners have to be trained to use it
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, Scott, I agree, but if you (a) organised the right kind of corpus and (b) developed the right kind of software....?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, I'd buy that
- <aggie> You don't always have to. The Longman web dictionary is available by clicking on any word. [www.Longman.com/wedictionary.html]
- <jeremy_harmer> Yours for only...
- <Georgina> It's free to use through the Longman site.Moving on, a question sent in earlier - quick responses pls, J/S
- <Midge> Should *we* buy your book? And why?
- <Scott_Thornbury> Yes, and bulk orders please
- <Scott_Thornbury> No, seriously,...
- <Georgina> And why?
- <jeremy_harmer> Buy Scott's Vocab book. It's the best How to yet (hurts to say that!)
- <longmanstand> How many shirts do you need?
- <barnaby> What's in it for us?
- <Scott_Thornbury> My book is a sampling of lots of other people's work, so I don't claim originality, but I've tried to make it accessible to practising teachers
- <jeremy_harmer> Seriously (I can say this and save Scott's modesty) How to Teach Vocab is a genuinely enlightening book...
- <Scott_Thornbury> Thank you Jeremy
- <jeremy_harmer> And as someone who reads a lot of this stuff a really good read too. Highly recommended.
- <Midge> You'll have to convince my wife. Every time I look at methodology books, a look comes over her face.
- <barnaby> Shall we award marks out of ten for spelling?
- <Scott_Thornbury> :)
- <Georgina> Please do - I promise the spelling is not normally this bad!
- <jeremy_harmer> Only if minus marks are allowed Barnaby!
- <Scott_Thornbury> Well, if you WILL read them in bed
- <aggie> No prizes here I fear
- <Midge> What are the criteria? Inventiveness or asjhdsuihsyv?
- <Georgina> And the transcripts get edited [I've now edited the typos (hopefully) from this transcript - the first five people to spot one that has been left in unintentionally can have a free month's subscription to ELT Forum! Email me through the Contact Us form on the site]
- <longmanstand> Can we read them?
- <Georgina> Longman stand - do you mean the transcripts or spelling mistakes?
- <Georgina> The transcripts are free to everyone on the site after the event usually within 24 hours...
- <jeremy_harmer> And they are edited both for spelling and with topic subheadings and things. Gerald Kelly's participation last month makes really good reading, for example.
- <cubauk> There is some good software available for practicing typing skills
- <aggie> Wow!
- <barnaby> 'asjhdsuihsyv' of course
- <Midge> Along with Scott's book...?
- <Georgina> Scott's book - you can order at the stand or buy through ELT Forum at: www.eltforum.com/buy_online.asp ;-) plus Jeremy's wonderful books!
- <barnaby> Here's the pitch
- <Georgina> Books this great need no pitch!



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- <longmanstand> Thanks to J and S from the Longman stand in the exhibition hall in York.
<aggie> Yes thanks
<Midge> ASJHDSUIHSYV= Nil points, Inventiveness: 12 points. And that concludes the voting for the York jury.
<Scott_Thornbury> tx Georgina
<Georgina> Thanks everyone
<jeremy_harmer> Hey Longmanstand, thank you all for your participation, and what a pity not to be there. But I'll have a virtual coffee if you will!
<Scott_Thornbury> Say hi to all my friends in York
<Georgina> The questions that were sent in earlier I'll put on the message board for Scott and Jeremy to respond to...
<Scott_Thornbury> Can I take my tie of now?

Georgina: The discussion then deteriorated into bad spelling puns and talk of going to the pub, not to mention Scott's shirt - we're still waiting for a photo ;-). If you would like the full version, I will email it to you! We hope to see you at the next session - and don't be put off by your typing ability!

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