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A Framework for Prep-free Lessons 2

Integrated Lessons Based on Teacher Talk

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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

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Introduction

A Framework for Prep-free Lessons 2 is a teaching method based on ideas about language learning that were introduced by Michael Lewis, author of *The Lexical Approach*. Lewis, in a presentation on The Lexical Approach, pointed out that the lexicon is far too vast to teach. The average educated native speaker knows about 40,000 individual words and 200,000 to 300,000 lexical chunks (collocations and expressions). At the standard rate of 10 to 15 new lexical items per lesson, it would take over 100 years to teach all those items to a student who was taking one class per day, weekends excepted. The fact that there are perhaps millions of non-native speakers who have achieved educated-native speaker proficiency in far less than 100 years is proof that most of the lexicon is not overtly taught by teachers but picked up incidentally by learners.

Michael Lewis, in his book *The Lexical Approach*, states that language teaching should focus on strategies to help students accelerate that incidental learning, which makes sense because most of the lexicon gets learned incidentally and teaching the entire native-speaker lexicon is virtually impossible. He says the strategies should help students “turn input into intake”, or, in other words, the strategies should help students **acquire** language whenever they come in contact with it. The most important strategy is raising students' awareness of structures that occur in the language and the thinking is that if they are trained to notice structures, they will acquire them more effectively. However, the students need to be made aware of the fact that the vast majority of structures in the language are made up of combinations of words and are not the standard grammatical structures we are used to. The focus on combinations of words (or lexis) is the reason for the name “The Lexical Approach”.

Putting the Teacher Back into the Classroom

Since the onset of the Communicative Approach, teachers have been told to limit their teacher talking time in the interest of giving the students more speaking time with each other. This usually relegates the teacher's spoken contribution to the class to giving instructions, explaining grammar or vocabulary, providing some error correction and giving feedback. However, conversing with other learners does not give language learners exposure to native-like speech and they will often pick up each other's errors or awkward structures. Often the only significant exposure we give students to native-like speech it to have them listen to recorded material. Yet we ignore the best source of language for the student, the teacher, whose spoken communication is unlike recorded material in that it is multi-dimensional, immediate, direct, interactive, adjustable in level, content and mood and, under ideal circumstances, something the students can relate to emotionally and intellectually. For these reasons, it makes no sense to limit teacher talking time. What teachers need to do is to make sure that their extended teacher talking time is principled, in that the students are provided

number of expressions they wrote down. The person who wrote the most would get an A+ and it would go down from there. This solved the problem. When the question and answer phase finished, I walked around the class and looked at what each student wrote and assigned them a mark, which I wrote on their paper and on my class list. Whether you actually work that mark into their final grade is not relevant as the students need only to think that their output is going to have an effect on their grade.

5. Clarification

The next phase in FPFL 2 is to elicit some structures from the students and write them up on the board. As you get them up on the board, you should make sure the students understand the meaning of the expressions. In some cases, you should clarify the form by pointing out the structure (e.g., “My grandfather passed away last year” = Subject + Verb for dying + Time expression). It’s also important to show how parts of the structure can be replaced with similar items (e.g., last year, a few years ago, in 1998, etc.). This is what’s known as showing the generative power of a structure and is a crucial part of The Lexical Approach. Sometimes the expressions the students pick out will feature traditional grammar structures (e.g., “If I could go anywhere in the world, I would...”). You can treat those the same way as lexical structures by dealing with meaning and form, but sometimes you may need to limit your explanations depending on the level of the students and their ability to grasp the grammatical concept. Besides dealing with meaning and form, you should deal with pronunciation where necessary.

6. Controlled practice

The next stage is for controlled practice. This stage is similar to the first task in that the students are required to ask each other questions about the topic. However, this time they are to use as many structures from the board as they can. This stage is important because it gives students a chance to use the expressions that they heard and it also emphasizes the link between reception and production suggesting to the students that they should always be listening for expressions they can use. An easy way to do the controlled practice is to put the students in groups of three and have two students speak while the third puts a tally mark on a piece of paper every time one of the speaker uses a structure from the board. After a few minutes, you can stop them and find out which pair used the most expressions. Then have them switch roles in each group so that the person who was counting has a chance to speak and do it again. You can get the totals again and add them to the first ones to determine a winning group. If you cannot form all groups of three, you can have a group or two of four, where two students speak and the other two are each required to listen to one particular speaker and note how many expressions he or she uses. Monitor and note any significant errors

7. Feedback

Finally, announce the winners and take up any significant errors.

Homework

At the end of the lesson, it's a good idea to give students the homework task of listening for some useful expressions on radio, on television or in real life. It's important to encourage the students to listen for useful expressions outside the class because it will lead to autonomous learning and accelerated acquisition.

Sample Student Questions

Level: Upper Intermediate

Talking about Culture

What religion do you practice?

How does marriage work in your country?

What is the typical family structure in your culture?

In your culture can you drink or smoke in front of your parents?

What is your traditional food?

Is there something special about your culture?

What is the usual age for getting married?

Does your culture practice a specific religion?

What is the most popular dish in your culture?

When do parents stop supporting the children in your country?

What is the most popular tradition in your country?

Do you have any sacred place in your country?

Which language is your official language?

What is the age of majority in your culture?

Is family important in your culture?

If your aunt or uncle asks you something, do you have to obey them?